

SUNRISE SERVICE

Lucas Ross was ten years old that Easter Sunday morning when he found diamonds on the highway.

“Wake up,” whispered his mother as he snuggled in his bed. “It’s near dawn. Be quiet. Let your father sleep.”

Mom padded out of his dark bedroom.

His bare feet swung around to press the gray carpet. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Shuffled into the hall. His parents’ bedroom door was closed.

He eased into the dark bathroom. Shut the door. Snapped on the light because, *well*, you have to see where you’re aiming. Barefooted his Batman-pajamaed way through the living room to the yellow-walled kitchen.

The coffee percolator vibrated on the gas stove burner’s ring of blue fire. Two breakfast places faced each other on the oval kitchen table. Glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice. White bowls for cereal. Silver metal spoons.

He sat with his back to the picture window framing their dark backyard.

Puffy-robed teenager Laura shuffled upstairs from her basement bedroom with its pink walls and *Don't touch!* rules. Settled in her chair across from Lucas.

Dad mumbled "Morning" as he appeared in the kitchen.

"*Don!*" said his wife. "I thought . . ."

"Couldn't sleep." He stared at the percolator's steam of bubbling coffee.

"Do you want the radio on?" said Mom.

"For what," grumbled Dad. "I got the real news yesterday."

But he spun a knob on that black box on the counter.

A man's voice without a body filled the family's kitchen.

"—has matched Russia rocketing into outer space with those science machines called 'satellites,' so the Soviet Communists are not ahead of us."

Yes! thought Lucas.

"Meanwhile, there are reports of violence stemming from a federal judge ordering Virginia to stop segregation in its public schools."

What's "segregation"? thought Lucas. *Does my school have it? Or schools in other towns in Montana that aren't as special as Vernon?*

"The Civil Aeronautics Board says 'pilot error' caused the Iowa plane crash on a snowy night last month that killed a teen music star and three other people."

Lucas remembered hearing Laura and her best friend Claudia play that guy's record over and over after the plane crash:

"That'll be the day, woo-hoo, that'll be the day, woo-hoo . . ."

Will the radio talk about me when I die? wondered Lucas.

"The Post Office confiscated a magazine that published excerpts from a novel called *Naked Lunch*. Sorry for dropping that on you folks here on Easter, but here on KRIP's Sunday News Corral, we don't make the news, we just wrangle it."

Wrangling, thought Lucas. *Like Grampa being a cowboy.*

“Wrangling it,” said the DJ for this local AM station. “Some days . . . Sometimes it’s too damn hard.”

Laura froze, her hand holding the spoon of milk and cornflakes.

Their parents, standing by the stove, frowned.

“Martin County residents today are waking up to news of a tragic one-car accident on the highway south of town last night that killed one local teenage boy and left another one in the hospital. Authorities identified the two boys as Hal Hemmer and Earl Klise, both juniors in Vernon High School.”

“Oh God!” Laura’s spoon clattered into her bowl.

“You know those boys, don’t you, Laura?” Mom wiped a dishrag over spilled milk. “You’re a sophomore, but everybody knows everybody in high school.”

Laura whispered: “I don’t know anything about that accident!”

Mom washed the dishrag in the kitchen sink.

Dad got the just-delivered big city newspaper from the front porch.

Laura gripped her orange juice glass like it was a carnival carousel pole.

And Lucas knew she’d lied about not knowing anything about the accident.

But he also knew Laura was not, *nope*, never had been a liar.

“Better get ready,” Mom told her. “You’ve got that God-damn church thing.”

Laura hurried downstairs.

“You better get a move on, too,” Mom told Lucas.

She’d laid out his clothes the night before. Lucas wanted white socks to match his white shirt, but black ones waited in his dress shoes.

Lucas frowned at the bathroom mirror’s reflection of his wild brown hair.

The mirror reflected the white bathtub. *What a cool idea!*

Lucas folded the bathmat onto the tub’s floor. Knelt both knees on the mat. Gripped the “C” handle. Stuck his head under the faucet. Turned the handle.

Cold waterfall tumbling over his skull: *ten, nine, seven-five-onezero!*

Lucas pulled out of the torrent.

The mirror showed victory: his hair lay flat on his head.

He marched into the gray-walled living room.

His mother's anxious voice in the kitchen stopped Lucas mid-step:

"Don't worry, Don. It was just a wedding. Just talk."

"At the reception," said Dad. "Watching him work it. Alec watching him, too, right beside me but almost like I wasn't there. Or it didn't matter if I was there."

"It was his daughter's wedding, Don. That's all. Alec had a lot on his mind. Probably a little drunk, too. I would have been. That wasn't like he ever wanted."

Dad said: "Out of nowhere, Alec says: *'I think he'll fit in just fine.'* And he's looking at that college boy who just married his daughter. Fran Marshall is now Mrs. Ben Owens. *'Fit in just fine.'* All I could do was stand there. Say nothing."

"You don't know that it means anything."

Cold cupped Lucas's groin. He looked down.

A dark half-moon of tub splash covered the crotch of his tan khakis.

Oh God, it looks like I peed my pants!

"Lucas," called his mother in the kitchen. "Come here."

Stand sideways in the kitchen doorway and—

"You look fine, dear," said Mom. "Laura! Irwin will be here any minute!"

Dad shuffled out of the kitchen. "Last thing I need now is Irwin."

"I better put something else on." Mom fingered her pink terrycloth smock as she hurried behind her husband toward their bedroom.

The hands on the clock above the kitchen sink read 6:41: 'You have to get up at six because Irwin will pick you up at a quarter to seven.'

Four minutes.

Mom and Dad in their bedroom. Laura downstairs. His crotch smeared dark, wet by *HONEST IT'S NOT PEE!*

Lucas jammed a kitchen chair against the sink. *Three minutes!* He pulled the toaster next to the sink. Climbed on the wobbly chair. Put one shoe in the sink. Spun the toaster knob to DARK. Pushed the lever down. Lowered his soaked crotch close to the two slots of glowing toaster coils.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Knocking on the front door!

“Lucas!” called his mother. “Let Irwin in!”

Aaah! Lucas fought to keep his balance. *Still dark all over my crotch and OW! The hot toaster! Get out of the sink! Off the chair! Run to the—*

NO! Get the chair back where it belongs!

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Hunch over. Keep one hand in front of your . . . Open the front door.

Red-haired, pudgy teenager Irwin stood on the front porch. His smile turned to a sneer when he saw it was just Laura’s little brother.

“Didn’t you hear me?” said Irwin as he pushed past Lucas into the house. “Aren’t you guys ready? Hi, Mrs. Ross.”

“Did you hear what happened?” said Mom as she entered the living room.

“The car wreck and Earl and Hal? Do you know which one is alive?”

“No,” said Mom. “It’s awful. Sure glad it wasn’t you or Laura.”

“That wouldn’t happen to kids like us,” said Irwin. “Bet they were drinking. They have those beer parties at the river.”

“Don’t tell me what I don’t wanna know,” said Mom.

“Bet it was that car they rebuilt. Mrs. Sweeny’s ’57 Chevy. The one that somebody sugared the gas tank. Remember they bought it off the junk heap?”

POP! *The toaster.*

Mom frowned toward her kitchen.

Laura hurried up the back stairs, through the kitchen, into the living room.

“Go,” she said. “Let’s just go.”

“You coming, Mrs. Ross?” asked Irwin. “See your kids do Sunrise Service?”

“I went to that wedding,” said Mom. “Only so much church a body can take.”

Lucas kept his back toward them as he edged toward the front door.

Irwin stood where he was. Swayed like a cobra. “What’s the guy Fran married like? Kind of . . . sudden, and on the Saturday before Easter.”

“You get married when you get married,” said Mom. “I didn’t really talk to him. We got invited because Don manages the trucking firm.”

“We’re going now,” said Laura as she hurried Lucas and Irwin outside.

Snow had been gone for a week that March day. Hills of gray dirt and last year’s yellowed weeds rose from the ruffled prairie three blocks away. Dawn pinked Montana’s big sky above the flatland valley cradling Lucas’s hometown.

“Laura!” called Mom. “Aren’t you supposed to bring music books?”

The teenage girl marched back into the house.

Irwin and Lucas waited on the lawn.

Irwin said: “Look across the street to the hospital. That’s the Hemmers’ car. And Dr. Horn’s Dodge. Don’t know the other three.”

The American flag swayed atop its steel pole in front of the hospital. The hospital staff had forgotten to lower the flag at sunset. Forgotten *again*, Lucas noted. Like I forgot to check last night so I could make things like they should be. Lower the flag without letting it touch the ground. Take it into the hospital.

“You seen your new neighbor Falk’s car?” said Irwin. “He’s a lawyer.

Has a new car. Well, not ‘this year’ new. Not a 1959. His is a ’58. Only other Cadillac that new in town belongs to your dad’s boss, Mr. Marshall.

“The Falks got a daughter younger than you,” Irwin leered. “Now she’s your Girl Next Door. The girl you’re going to marry.”

“I am not!”

Laura ran down the front steps. “Get in the car!”

Lucas dove into the backseat of Irwin’s parents’ car. Irwin ground the engine to life. Gravel crunched under tires as the car pulled away from the curb.

Lucas looked down at his khaki pants' crotch. *Still a shadow left!*

"I'm in bad trouble," whispered Laura.

She whirled to her little brother. "Don't you dare tell Mom and Dad! Hope-to-die promise me you won't tell them or anybody anything!"

"I promise!"

Laura slumped in someone else's car carrying her somewhere.

"I was there. Last night. That party by the river. With Earl and Hal."

"*What?*" yelled Irwin. "You couldn't have been! That's not what we do!"

"I know I know I know! But I did. And now one of them is dead and I, I—"

"You didn't do anything . . . *really wrong*, did you?" whispered Irwin.

"A few sips from one beer. I was careful. Held the bottle the whole time."

Lucas shouted from the backseat: "They can get your fingerprints off the beer bottle! My FBI book says so!"

The teenagers ignored him.

"Claudia took me," said Laura. "But I felt . . . weird. Then it was after ten."

"You broke curfew!" said Irwin.

The car he drove idled at the intersection where a steel girders tower rose from the fire station. The tower's whistle blew every night for that ten o'clock curfew for everybody under eighteen, plus every noon and every time it needed to summon the volunteer firemen to risk their lives fighting someone else's blaze.

"We drove home on the gravel roads and through alleys so the cops didn't catch us. I snuck in the back door."

Irwin spun the steering wheel left and drove a block to the tan stucco church where amplifiers in the belfry filled the morning with a spinning black disc on a record player turntable freeing chimes of faith.

"I saw them leave," she said as Irwin pulled to the curb. "Earl and Hal. They went to get more beer. I saw them drive away from the bonfire and the parked cars and the shadows of trees along the river and now they're dead."

“Only one,” said Irwin.

“And I’m part of that,” said Laura as they all entered the church.

Shocked teenagers from the Youth Fellowship Program who’d been volunteered by tradition to take over the Easter Morning Sunrise Service clustered by the altar with its golden cross. Their hushed voices flitted through the church sanctuary: *‘When will they say who? What’s gonna happen?’*

The three arriving souls said nothing.

Laura had volunteered Lucas after their mother asked her to *‘get him out of his books.’* YFP teenagers practiced their march-in from the side door and along the rail separating rows of pews from the pulpit with its choir benches, organ, the altar with that empty gold cross. Irwin would sit Up There. Kids who’d pass collection plates or read Bible verses would sit in a front pew with Lucas.

Laura sat at the organ. Said nothing. Stared at the black and white keys.

Tear-streaked high schoolers put Lucas in the hall by the side door leading to the sanctuary. He heard mutters and thumps on the other side of the door.

Grim-faced Chris Harvie—the junior in high school who was Claudia’s boyfriend and who’d gotten into Big Trouble two years earlier for what he did to Elvis Presley—snapped a match and put blue flame to Lucas’s candle lighter. Laura struck organ keys. Lucas followed the blue flame as he led the others into the sanctuary. Fifty-some well-dressed adults and children stood in rows of pews. Laura played the organ while they sang “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.”

Lucas lit the altar candles. Made it back down the pulpit steps to the front pew without tripping. The organ crescendoed. The congregation sang: *“Ah-ah-men.”* Minister for a Day Irwin asked everyone to sit.

Church for Lucas meant dust dancing in shafts of sunlight through color-stained glass windows. The organ vibrating heavy air. Uncomfortable clothes.

Here Lucas felt weird. While he knew that these walls were special and that Jesus was a Jew turned Catholic rightfully rebelled into a Methodist, Lucas couldn't buy that just being a church person got you into his Father's heaven.

Wish I knew what got you there, thought Lucas as the pew pressed against his spine. *That must be one of the things I'll find out when I'm grown up.*

But right now, he needed to stay awake.

Which would have been hard if he'd paid attention to Irwin's big sentences about "*youth today who will become our leaders well into the twenty-first century.*"

Lucas let his mind run like wild horses.

His sister's hands crashed down for the organ's final *Amen!* that freed Lucas to the sunlit Fellowship Hall. The Ladies Auxiliary chattered in the kitchen with its steaming cocoa and gurgling coffee. Lucas spotted trays of donuts on the refreshments table. Parishioners shuffled into the big hall. Lucas grabbed a chocolate donut. Slid through the crowd.

There was Mom's sister Aunt Dory with her curls of hay-colored hair and quick smile, in from the farm with Uncle Paul, who looked like a cowboy movie hero, a toothpick in his smile and all dressed up in his Sunday sport coat.

There was another farm family, Mr. and Mrs. Herbst with their two kids who went to a one-room country school. Mr. Herbst was bald.

Lucas saw Irwin buttering up a suit and tie boss for the power company. Saw—

"Got you!" A claw grabbed Lucas's arm. Pulled him closer to her.

Humpbacked and twisted. A black veiled bonnet. A snow of rose-scented powder covering her hatchet face. She opened the maw inside her ring of ruby lipstick and yellow teeth to expel vapors of dead cigarettes.

"Praise be, we got you now, little man!"

"I didn't do anything, Mrs. Sweeny! Honest!"

"You got a guilty conscience?" The claw trembled his arm.

“No, ma’am, I—”

“You belong to a Conner girl.”

“My grandma is Meg Conner. I’m—”

“Cora’s boy. Married that Ross man who came to town.”

The claw shook him.

“Maybe you’re one of the good Conners. Like your Aunt Dory and her Paul. I let them farm my land. They come to church. Not like others in Meg Conner’s family. Heard she’s in the hospital. Good thing we got you churchin’. You need it, what with your uncle the *Eye-talian* papist and that evil red house on the hill. Plus, your Aunt Iona’s husband worked for that thieving slanter McDewel.”

“But I don’t know about papes or slanting!”

“Don’t know much, do you? Got a mind to write a letter about that. The schools have gotten shameful. A town like this is a curse for the virtuous.”

Bald farmer Herbst ambled toward the boy in the clutch of an old crone.

Mrs. Sweeny’s rancid breath bathed Lucas. “You *sure* you’re a good boy?”

“I promise I try!”

“Not like those two I just heard about,” she hissed. “You hear they wrecked my car I sold them? You know what I think?”

“Honest, I don’t!”

“I think they were who sugared my gas tank in the first place. Broke the car. Then tricked me into selling to them dirt cheap. But God showed them, didn’t he? You remember that. God gets them that does wrong. Everybody pays.”

Then bald farmer Herbst was there. “Happy Easter to you, Mrs. Sweeny!”

The crone had to free Lucas to shake his rescuer’s hand.

Herbst winked at the liberated boy.

Lucas dodged through the crowd. *Where’s Laura?*

Aunt Dory gave him one of her thousand-watt smiles. “Did you have a good chat with Mrs. Sweeny? Paul can listen to her for hours. Don’t know how he does it.”

"I'm a helluva guy," said Uncle Paul with the cowboy hero looks. "Mrs. Sweeny won't write no letters complaining about me. Remember when she was on her high horse about the city road crew?"

"Have you seen Laura?" asked Lucas.

"Just talked to her," said Uncle Paul. "Damn shame about those boys. We stopped for coffee out' the truck stop. Ran into Sheriff Wood. He said their car rolled a half dozen times. Threw 'em both out."

"Which . . . Which one . . ."

"Was the Klise boy who died: Earl. That Hal Hemmer—nice kid—he's banged up, concussion. Woke up lying on the highway, red lights whirling. Like I told Laura, damn shame that ain't the all of it. Both kids was beered up. Whichever one was driving'd be up for a hard charge."

"Who was it?"

"Nobody knows. Hal can't remember diddly from all yesterday. Doc Horn thinks he never will. Could have been either one of them behind the wheel. The hell of it is, the law's gotta balance it out."

"Mrs. Sweeny says they did that sugar thing to her car so they could—"

"Weren't those kids. Wish it was poor dead Earl Klise who was driving for sure. Wouldn't make it any better, but then it won't get no worse."

Lucas scanned the crowd. "Where's Laura?"

She was outside. Alone in the passenger seat of the parked blue car.

Rolled the window down. "Find Irwin. We've got to get out of here."

Irwin drove them away.

"Not home!" said Laura. "I can't go there."

Irwin headed up the long slope of Knob Hill.

"What were you thinking?" said Irwin. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I could! Because I had a chance to!" Laura shook her head.

"Claudia picked me up after the wedding. Rode around with her. Cruising Main Street. Going nowhere. Like always. Claudia said she knew about a party. She was mad at Chris. I sat there in the front seat. Sat there like I am now, only . . .

“Only I’d just sat through that wedding. Fran graduated from high school when we were in junior high. Now there she was, standing up in front of everybody, wearing a white dress that I know is a lie.”

Lucas frowned. “How can a dress lie?”

“Shut up, Lucas!” said the teenagers.

“She got married,” said Laura. “*Bingo!* She wasn’t Fran Marshall anymore. I didn’t know who she was. *She* didn’t know who she was. But it was over. She walked down that aisle and all of a sudden, she was just like her mother. And mine. And I just . . . I said: ‘*Yeah, I’ll go to the party.*’”

“You know what this means?”

“The National Honor Society.”

Lucas said: “Were they there?”

“Be quiet, Lucas!” said Irwin.

“But that’s the point,” said Laura. “They weren’t there. It’s not enough to keep a B+ average. Oh no, you’ve got to keep the pledge.”

“That was going to be so easy for us! That’s the kind of kids we are!”

“Sure, everybody knows who we are. This town has you pegged the day you’re born. You, me. Get in the Honor Society. Pledge no drinking. No lawbreaking. Or they kick you out.”

“That’s the smart thing to do,” said Irwin. “Especially for you!”

“*Lau-ra’s smar-ter than you are!*” teased Lucas.

“Not anymore,” she whispered.

“We got in this year,” said Irwin. “As sophomores—first time we were eligible! In a month, they’ll announce the scholarships old man Fruen set up with his oil money. A thousand dollars each for a senior boy and girl in the Honor Society. Was nice of Fruen to include girls even though they’re . . . You’re the smartest girl in our class. Smarter than most of the boys—”

Smarter than you, thought Lucas in the backseat.

“—but you’ve got to be *in* the Society! A whole thousand dollars is waiting for you in two years and you . . . you . . . !”

They crested Knob Hill. Vernon spread out below them. The car turned around. The road swept down the hill past weathered houses. Past the tan brick high school and Lucas's Blackhawk Elementary School. The street dead-ended at the east-west highway, and beyond that, the railroad tracks.

Three indigo crags chiseled from the vast blue sky ruled the northern horizon: the Buffalo Hills, geologies too slight to be called mountains in this vast geography where sixty miles away, the sawtooth peaks of the Rocky Mountains cut the western skyline. The Buffalo Hills sat almost thirty miles beyond the town. Another ten miles of prairie behind them waited Canada.

West Buffalo looked like the number 9 on its back and was Lucas's favorite. Middle Buffalo rose like a pair of praying hands. East Buffalo stretched across the horizon like a pile of crumpled socks.

Irwin rode the brake down Knob Hill's road.

"You'll need that money," Irwin told Laura. "I'm lucky, we own the bank. You keep saying that scholarship is your only ticket out of this town. How it will let you go out of state to college, not just to Montana U. Fran went to the U and look where she is today! And last night . . . You blew it!"

His sister choked a sob in the same instant that Lucas yelled: "Look!"

A maroon Mercury coupe sat face-out on the sidewalk of a brown house. A two-wheel haul box rode the coupe's rear bumper. Slid out of the haul box doors and onto the lawn was an upright, saloon-style black piano.

"Who's moving here?" asked Lucas.

"Your new teacher, dummy," snapped Irwin. "Forget about that."

Irwin's words to Laura were soft: "What are you going to do?"

She shook her head. Shrugged. Refused to let tears win.

They rolled past the brown-brick high school.

Lucas looked out of the car as they rolled past his school. His old teacher Mrs. Bemiller broke her hip. His new teacher had a black piano.

"What's that?" said Lucas when they reached the two-lane highway.

Way down toward the corner to Main Street: a . . . a *jumble* across the road at the Texaco gas station.

“How come your brother squints all the time?”

Laura waved that away as Irwin turned their vehicle toward the *jumble*.

“Oh God!” said Laura. “It’s the car.”

Three men stood near the wreck. One wore a hat.

The charred Chevy’s roof dangled from the frame on the passenger side. None of the windows had glass. One wheel was gone; the other tires were blown. The driver’s door hung open. A hydraulic lift jacked-up the car’s rear end.

Irwin drove into the Safeway supermarket parking lot, the west end turnaround for teenagers who’d loop back down to Main Street to the east end of town’s railroad crossing, then circle back: “*dragging Main.*”

A rusted station wagon skidded to a stop at the Texaco. Out of it staggered Jim Klise dressed in a polka-dotted pajama top and baggy pants, a work boot on his right foot while his left foot wore a black slipper. That one-kid dad stumbled to the wrecked car his dead son loved. The three men standing there started toward Klise. His waving arms shooed them away.

His eyes locked on the mangled Chevy. His jaw hung open like the battered driver’s door. He circled around the front bumper arrowed-up between the heap’s hollow eyes. Around the crunched passenger side door to the jacked-up back end.

A meadowlark chirped.

A freight train clattered into town.

Klise jerked the long pipe handle out of the hydraulic jack. BAM! He crashed the pipe down on the Chevy’s sprung trunk. BAM! The freight train blew its whistle as it rumbled past. BAM! Round and round the mangled car charged Klise. BAM! BAM! On the roof. The hood. The glass-gone windshield. BAM! BAM! BAM! Over and over until Klise’s face melted. The pipe fell from his hands. Clattered on the pavement. He dropped to his knees.

Irwin nudged their car to the highway out of town. Stared at the windshield. Laura didn't look back. Lucas's backseat eyes bounced to the rearview mirror and a shrinking glimpse of a man crumpled by a wreckage.

"You know where we have to go," said Laura.

Irwin steered the car onto the two-lane blacktop out of town to the river. Their lone car followed the two-lane highway south through a gold and brown chessboard of farmland. They drove past a gravel road leading from the highway through wheat fields to a barbed-wire-topped chain-link fence that caged huge bulldozers, backhoes, and cranes beside a hill of excavated earth.

One of the new missile sites, thought Lucas. The Russians will shoot their missiles and send their bombers across Canada. Our radar will spot them. In secret places where wise men rule America, our guys will push buttons and whoosh! Mushroom A-bomb clouds will spike up all over our blue globe. Even where cities aren't blasted into holes, firestorms or radiation will kill everybody. But the Russians won't win. And the Wow! thing is that in Vernon, we'll see the missiles roar up from our golden wheat fields, streak white contrails across our big blue sky. We'll be the first regular people to know It's All Over.

Irwin told Laura: "Nobody knows you were there."

"Claudia and the other kids who were there, they know. And Hal—"

"Your uncle said Hal can't remember. Claudia and the others: you think they'll tell the cops that they were there? As long as you don't say anything—"

"Somebody will."

"Somebody *might*. But—"

"But it's an *honor* code. I'm supposed to tell. Not lie about it."

"You made one lousy stupid mistake. It wasn't really that bad! Don't ruin your only sure thing to get what you want and deserve for your whole damn life!"

"Earl's dead."

"And you confessing does *what* to help him?"

“One moment,” said Laura. “That’s all it takes. You do some little thing. Suddenly the whole world changes.”

Lucas squinted. Saw only the farm fields. Mountains. Sky. Blurry road.

“What about Hal?” said Laura. “My uncle told me the police need to know if he was driving. Then it’s more than just drinking. Then it’s a kind of murder.”

Irwin shook his head. “Hal got punished enough for a lifetime last night. Waking up on the road like—”

He shot his finger at the windshield. “There!”

A black tire propped up by its sheared axle lay on the road’s shoulder.

Irwin parked the car on the edge of the highway beside the broken axle. They stepped into the cool air. Blacktop crunched under church-shined shoes.

“There’s no cars!” Lucas stood tall on the two-lane highway. Wild! Free!

“It’s early,” said Irwin. “Everybody will come see before dark.”

“Look.” He pointed down the road toward the river’s canyon. “Skid marks. Then that big paint scrape. Middle of the night, black as hell. The driver’s drunk. Swerves. Loses control. The car flips. Rolls over and over.”

Lucas frowned. *What is that sparkling?*

“I can’t do this,” said Laura.

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Irwin told her. “You can’t.”

A ten-year-old boy walked heel-to-toe along the dashes of white-line center stripes on the highway like Batman on a steel girder atop Gotham City.

“I can’t be trapped out here,” said his sister.

Lucas *heel-toed, heel-toed* ever closer to the gray highway’s sparkles.

“I’ve got to go home,” said Laura. “Tell my folks. Tell . . . *whoever*, too.”

“*What?*” yelled Irwin. “Are you crazy? Get kicked out of—That won’t do any good! That’s like . . . like Mr. Klise beating a wrecked car! Didn’t change a thing!”

“But it was real. And so is something I can do.”

“It’ll sure as hell hurt you. Will it help anybody? Will it help Hal?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, great! You’re going to do something just because you can!”

“I’ve got no choice. Whatever I do, I do something.”

“This isn’t about you!”

“It is now. I didn’t want any of it. But I was there, so now it’s about me, too. I can’t forget that. Wait. Hope. Pretend. If I do, then I’m stuck on this road forever.”

“Guys!” yelled Lucas. “Hey, guys! Come here, quick! Look!” “On the road! Sparkles like diamonds!”

Irwin shoved Lucas. “That’s beads of glass! Busted glass from a wrecked car. There’s a dead guy just like us on a slab in the undertaker’s parlor. Your sister’s going to screw herself. And you see damn diamonds on the highway!”

Irwin sneered: “You don’t see what’s there. She wants to throw it away.”

They got in his car.

Stone-faced Irwin drove fast and hard.

Laura sat straight and silent in the front seat.

Lucas rode behind them.

Stared out the windshield at the highway rumbling beneath the wheels.