

The Man Who Looked Like Perry Smith

Whenever Aaron, during his growing up years, happened to be in his father's auto parts store, Ray would be seated on a stool at the far end of the counter, taking orders. He made no impression on the boy — just a voice talking into a phone. Then one day, as Aaron stood next to his father at the cash register, he heard that voice announce "Time for my lunch" and turned to see Ray slide from the stool. But he didn't rise. Off the stool he was shorter than when he was on it. It was his legs — stunted, not the length of the top part of him. Actually, the torso was bigger than a normal man's; his tight, black T-shirt hugged a weightlifter's chest and shoulders, which made the lower part of his body seem even more out of proportion. His jeans fit loosely, the bottoms rolled into thick cuffs, and emerging from the cuffs were pointed boots. As he walked his whole body listed slightly from side to side, one shoulder moving forward with the same side leg. A kind of swagger. He came up beside Aaron, his eyes level with the nine-year-old boy's.

"What you looking at?" he asked, with a mean grin.

Aaron pressed close to his father and heard him murmur "Now, Ray," in a tone one might use on a recalcitrant stallion.

Ray would not again acknowledge Aaron's existence until the summer after Aaron's first year of college. During the span of almost a decade the only thing that Aaron saw change on Ray was his gnome-like face, becoming more wizened, a plum turning into a prune. The Indian-straight hair, slicked back, retained its shoe polish blackness, the torso stayed pumped up. The T-shirts were black and tight, a pack of cigarettes tucked under the fold of the right sleeve, above the bulging, tattooed biceps. The voice talked into the phone, as it had done before Aaron was born, speaking of cam shafts and master cylinders.

The silence between the two wasn't caused by a lack of proximity. All through high school Aaron was required by his father to work in the store, to learn the business. Aaron began by cleaning up — sweeping, dusting, doing all the dirty, futile jobs. Later he unpacked boxes, shelved, filled orders, made deliveries, took inventory. First in one store, then in two others, as his father expanded his car parts empire. Not that Aaron received any benefits from being a wealthy man's son. Not even a salary; room and board were not, in his father's view, to be handed out free to an able-bodied teenager. And there was no appeal, for his father — the "sir" of Aaron's life — took pride in being a hard man. He expected his son and wife and employees to bow to his just dictates with unquestioning obedience. Strange, then, that Ray treated his boss with the same slightly contemptuous indifference that he did everyone. Never a "sir" passed his lips. When Aaron asked his father about this he answered that he and Ray went back quite a few years. "Anyway, what matters is that the man knows cars inside out" — the highest praise that Aaron's father could bestow.

A similar evaluation he could not give about his son, who was interested not in parts but in the arts. Aaron's obsession with movies and novels and plays made absolutely no sense to him. How the hell could you make a living in the arts? "Lots of fags in show biz, son. Want to be around fags?"

So when Aaron got his way, leaving Minnesota for the University of Southern California, it was no small triumph. Although ostensibly planning to be a business major, all the electives Aaron took were in the liberal arts. He achieved a 3.75 GPA, which got no response from his

father. Back in St. Paul for the summer, he was put on the payroll. His salary was ominously generous. “A man’s wages,” his father announced grimly. “Time you started acting like one.”

But California’s golden sun had kissed Aaron more deeply than his father could imagine. He *was* a man, he had proven that, and all the automobiles in St. Paul lined up in a row could never mean as much as Cabiria’s final smile in the Fellini film. Aaron’s life aspiration was fixed: To create a meaningful work of art.

During that summer Aaron did his assigned tasks, but in a desultory fashion. He stayed apart from the other employees, eating lunch at the receiving desk in the back. One Monday he glanced up from a book to see Ray swaggering down the aisle toward him.

“What you reading?” Ray asked, his voice hearty and aggressive. Aaron smiled, remembering the “What you looking at?” of nine years ago.

He held up a paperback copy of *The Member of the Wedding*, the play version. On the cover was a photo of the three principals from the Broadway show sitting at the eternal kitchen table.

Ray lowered himself on a box. He gestured toward the book.

“I remember seeing that on TV when I was a kid. Same three people. That little dude, he’s dead.”

“Brandon de Wilde.”

“Yeah, that was his name. He couldn’t have been much younger than me when I saw that show. Now he’s long gone. Brandon de Wilde . . . He was in a movie with Paul Newman.”

“*Hud*.”

“*Hud*. Right. Where Newman tries to stick it to that gal who works for them.”

“Patricia Neal.”

“Right. I read that she had something wrong with her. Brain tumor or something. She dead too?” Ray reached for his pack of cigarettes, extracted it with expertise from his shirt sleeve. “And Newman, he was young, a real dreamboat in that movie, but then he turned into an old turkey-necked geezer. Movies show you how damn fast time passes. We’re in our glory for a moment — at least some are — then old, then gone, just like that.”

Seated on the edge of the low box, little legs splayed apart, pointed boots pointing outward, Ray raised a hand to the side of his head and snapped his fingers; a flame appeared. He drew a shiny metal lighter toward the cigarette in his lips.

“Do you ever think about that?” he asked. “Time passing? Or are you too young?”

“Oh, I think about it.”

“Were you in your glory out there in sunny Cal?”

“Something like that.”

“I’ll bet, what with your interests. Yesterday I overheard your father telling Mildred about you wanting to make movies.”

“What’d he say about it?”

“That you were nuts. What you expect him to say? Anyhow, it got me to thinking. Since you know all about movies, I have a question for you. Who am I?”

“Who?” Aaron laughed. “You’re Ray.”

The laugh was a mistake. Ray’s eyes narrowed, his smile took on a mean twist.

“Ray? The Ray who works for your dad? Sells auto parts? Now why the fuck would I ask you *that*? What I mean is, I was almost in a movie. A big time movie. I’m asking you who it was I almost played.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know and you don’t care, huh? Well, I’ll bring you something tomorrow. Then you’ll understand. Cause for all you know, you don’t know shit. Not about me, you don’t.”

Ray rose, turned and walked off, his departing figure shifting from side to side. Then came a plaintive cry, one uncannily like a boy’s.

“Shane! Don’t go! Come back, Shane.”

The figure disappeared into the shadows.

That’s how he would direct it, Aaron thought, many years later. Always have Ray merge into and emerge out of darkness.

The little man briskly materialized the next day, tossing a battered paperback book on Aaron’s desk.

“Ever read that?” He took his place on the low box. The book was *In Cold Blood*.

“No.”

“You should. It’s pretty good. Know the story?”

“Two guys murdered this family.”

“Yeah. Four people killed. The Clutter family. So you didn’t see the movie? I mean the first one, the one they did in the 60s. They made a TV version not too long ago.”

“No. Haven’t seen either of them.” Aaron picked up the book. On a corner of the cover was a splatter of blood in which was written “over 3,500,000 copies sold!”

Ray removed his cigarettes from his sleeve.

“See those two pieces of paper I stuck in there? Read where I marked.”

Aaron read the sections, both descriptions, then his eyes rose to observe Ray.

Ray grinned. “Know who I am now?”

“You’re this guy. You’re Perry.”

“Yeah. Perry Smith. One of the murderers. We’re a match, ain’t we? His legs got fucked up in a motorcycle accident, I was born this way, but it all amounts to the same thing. Both of us crips. And the hair, the build — the two of us dead ringers. We even both have Indian blood. Anyway, when they were gonna make a movie of the book I was living in New York, trying to be a movie star. Yeah, me. I was twenty-five, twenty-six. So they announced open auditions, big ads in *Variety* calling for two guys to play the killers. Claimed they weren’t interested in using well-known actors. So naturally I tried out. I’ll tell you all about it — starting tomorrow, a story while you eat your lunch, OK? The thing is, I was certain I’d get the part. See, I believed what they were saying to me. But one day I picked up *Variety* and read that Robert Blake got my part. Hell, he’s just *short*. And he was never at those auditions. Those auditions, they were just a publicity stunt. A freak show. Robert Blake — Little Beaver in the fucking Red Ryder movies, he’d been in movies all his life. No, they never wanted the real thing. You should rent the movie. A fucking mess. But what can you expect from something that started out as a lie? So, anyway, a few weeks after Little Beaver got my part I came back to St. Paul. . . .” Ray paused, smiled. “You having a problem with this, kid? Seeing me as an aspiring actor in the Village? That’s the trouble

with how the young think about old people. You see me a certain way and can't imagine me any different, because it's over for me. But you don't have trouble imagining yourself being some genius director. Another Orson Welles. For you that's a sure thing. But is it, really? Cause here we are, the two of us, both working in your dad's store. That's the only thing that's a fact. You and me together." He rose, started off, then turned. "I'm lending you that book. Same copy I had in New York. So take care of it. And don't advertise it to the world. *Comprende?*"

When Aaron looked back on that summer he had to admit that he did understand something, even the second time they met. He kept the book hidden from the eyes of all others.

Over the next three days — only three days, a fact that would forever amaze Aaron — Ray visited him at lunch, told him his story. Not artfully, but Aaron could shape the screenplay into a narrative flow, one that had a beginning and an end, with the crucial point being the question that Ray would ask on their final day. In filming it Aaron would have Ray tell some of his story in a long monologue, like the one Bergman used in *Persona*. Ray would be seated on the low box, the black hair and black T-shirt blending into his recurring motif, darkness. The swarthy face, the smile, the moist eyes, the tendrils of smoke about his head, the powerful arms crossed over his chest.

"Yeah, I was born this way, one of the cards I got dealt — that I'd have to toddle along on these two twisted little bastards all my life. But growing up, in my teens, I was one of those types who overcome their disability. I was the life of the party, even when there wasn't no party. Loudmouthed, always dressed up in weird outfits, the class clown. Acting like everything was hunky-dory. Oh, I had a lot of acting experience before I ever set foot on a stage. And from the first time I was on a stage it felt like where I belonged. Getting lost up there in a part. All through high school I was in most every play, they'd find a place for me. I had some big roles too — the Stage Manager in *Our Town* and Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Back then I hammed it up, that's what people expected of me — to be like some toy poodle, wearing a funny hat, dancing on his hind legs. But in a way I didn't care, not then.

"That changed after high school — and, hey, kid, think about it, that makes me your age. And you know, I see a lot about us, me then and you now, that's alike. Sure, you're put together real nice, but I'm talking about other things. Like you wanting to be a director, me an actor. Same thing, basically. Now, I don't know how bad you want it, but for me it was like this big craving. Me five foot two, and I had this seven foot appetite. Course, I didn't have no USC to go to. I worked at my brother's garage — that was another place where I could get lost, under the hood of a car, or lifting weights — but every night I was at one community playhouse or another. No more clowning. I got serious and people took me serious. I played Nicely-Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*. I could sing pretty good — so could Perry Smith, you know — and every night I brought down the house with "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat." I got raves as Leroy in *The Bad Seed*. For other roles too. I'll bring in the newspaper clippings tomorrow, you can read what the reviewers said about me. But St. Paul and audiences of seventy-five people wasn't enough for me. So I saved my money till I had a sizable stash and then upped and went to New York.

"The Big Apple . . . Oh, I got taught a lesson in how little I really was — that I was no higher than a pile of dog shit in the eyes of the bastards who make decisions. Though I did find a home for my talents. What they called the experimental theater scene — La Mama, places like

that. Lot of queers, they took a liking to me, oohing and aahing over Little Ray. I guess they saw me as a fellow outcast. Anyway, there I was living in the East Village, acting in absolute junk. Hamming it up, the weird outfits again, dying my hair a different color every week. It was like high school — parties, being the clown on and off the stage. And I tell you, after two years I was getting eaten up inside. It felt like being trapped in this place you have to get out of, but there's no way out. One of those searching nightmares.

“Then one night I was at a party and this queen I knew rushes in and starts shrieking ‘Ray, where’s Ray?’ and waving a book around. ‘Where’s Ray, I *must* see Ray this very instant!’ And talking about open auditions.

“You know what the book was. I took it home and got to the page where Perry is first described, and after that my whole world concentrated on one person, on Perry Smith. He was me, I was him. I could understand him in a way others couldn’t. Like where he says how it is with us, how one hurt gets piled on top of another til somebody else has to take on some of the load. Which is what happened when he found himself in the Clutter house. It was those four people who took on a good part of his hurt. But an important thing is that if he hadn’t been there he might have lived his whole life without hurting nobody. That’s how it works — all it takes is the right situation to come along. Looking at it that way, and knowing how it turned out, it wasn’t only the Clutters who got murdered that night. Perry Smith and Dick Hitchcock did too. That’s how the movie played it, all teary-eyed for the executed killers. Which is wrong. Because you can understand all you want, but you can’t have sympathy for those two. Because the truth is, people like them ain’t so nice.

“I kept thinking about how I could show it all, practicing reading his lines over and over. Course, I also knew that this was my chance at fame. This time my disadvantage was my advantage. How can I say it all? It was a lot of things wrapped up together.

“I took to making myself look more like Perry Smith.”

Here, Aaron decided, he would end the monologue. It would be better to show the young Ray going through the transformation. The bright, showy clothes replaced by the stark black T-shirt, brown leather windbreaker, pointed boots. Black hair growing in, supplanting the blue. Long sideburns. A snarling, orange-eyed tiger being pricked into the skin of his left biceps. Ray moving with purpose through the streets of the East Village.

But at this point there came an interruption of Ray’s story. On Thursday, when he took his seat on the box, he looked at Aaron’s haggard face and let out a low whistle.

“What’s that I saw going on between you and your dad? After work yesterday? You jawing away at him in the car.”

Aaron’s story, neatly curling itself inside Ray’s, to live and feed there like a parasite.

At the beginning of the summer, on their rides to and from the store, Aaron had spoken to his father about his life at USC. Looking back, he understood that he was asking for approval from the man, still trying to earn his respect. So he casually mentioned the girl, Samantha, and how he had helped her edit a short documentary film, a film that might be shown at the next Sundance Festival. How he had a real talent for editing. How USC had one of the best film schools in the country. How, already, through Sam, he had met important people . . .

But his father had not responded in any way. Aaron too lapsed into silence. At least he had offered up the truth. If his father's attitude signified a disappointed resignation regarding his only child, Aaron could accept that. Gladly. He gazed stolidly out the window, turning his thoughts toward USC: the vital, creative friends there; L.A.'s nightly panoply of lights; the expectant darkness of a theater. Back at USC, he would declare his major. "Declare." What a liberating word.

Then came the afternoon when he got into the car and his father passed some papers to Aaron, telling him to sign them.

"They're to transfer you to the University of Minnesota. What I'll never understand is how the hell I ever let you and your mother talk me into this California crap. Cost me an arm and a leg, and for what? Sundance Festival, for Christ's sake. Well, son, I do occasionally make mistakes, but I never let them compound themselves. Come on, let's get this done, I want to drop it in the mailbox."

Aaron had never spoken to his father so bitterly. But it gave him no satisfaction. He soon found himself reverting to childishness, even demanding, shrilly, that he be given wages for all the years he had worked without any. His father laughed.

"My father — the drill sergeant! You don't build character, you destroy it! What you want is for people to be your puppets. That's the reason Mom divorced you!"

Wincing in mock pain, his father put his hands over his ears. "Son. Please. Not in an enclosed space. This shrieking — either bring your tone of voice down to the level of a man's or get out of the car."

Aaron began to open the door, but his father grabbed his arm. His face and grip were stony, his voice low.

"Yes, your noble mother. She's free as a bird now. Flown the coop, hasn't she? And seems she's left you behind. Those papers will be on your dresser when you get home. Either have them signed by tomorrow morning or you're not going anywhere. Hear? Not one penny from me."

That night Aaron signed.

Ray nodded.

"If your father says something, he means it. Go to UM. Better than nothing." Ray lit a cigarette, leaned back, observing Aaron through narrowed eyes. "Remember how I said that we were alike? I was thinking of family life too. Me, I grew up in a nuthouse, got nothing but these legs from my parents. But you ain't had it so easy. I been knowing your father longer than you have. I've seen how he's treated you, at least since you was a teenager. Oh, we're not so different. With me it was my legs. But long as your father controls the purse strings, you're stuck too. That's *your* trap, kiddo. Another thing — your father's not going to accept you the way you are, and that's kinda like how it was with me, how I wanted the Perry Smith role, but, hey, the world told me to fuck off. That's the last time I asked anybody for anything. Every night when I turn off the light I say "Fuck you, world," and every day when I wake up I say the same thing. Keeps me strong, in some way. Been doing it for over thirty years. Ever since the audition."

A decade later, when Ray was dead (a cancer of the esophagus took him; Aaron, living in Chicago, kept in correspondence with Mildred to learn such news), Aaron began to contemplate

the idea for a movie. Although ostensibly about Ray, it would also be the story of Aaron's life, spanning three decades — from “What you looking at?” to “What you reading?” to the deathbed line Aaron would give to Ray: “Fuck you, world.” The movie would radiate out like jagged spokes from that week of lunchtime talks.

But Aaron found that he was hazy on the details of the auditions, which he planned to have as the swirling centerpiece of his film. Maybe the haziness was due to time, but more likely Aaron had not listened so intently to Ray's story on that particular day. Instead he had been mentally pacing the cage his father had built for him, called the University of Minnesota. Searching for a way out.

So, to learn about the auditions, Aaron turned to the Internet. But nothing was forthcoming; he soon switched off the computer, lay back in bed and lapsed into his typical inertia. His life was idle, impractical, unmotivated — perhaps his father had been right about him all along. Well, anyway, a director could hire people to find out about the auditions — the where, when, how.

For the time being Aaron could imagine them, in broad strokes. The scene is a gathering outside a theater at the appointed hour, the sidewalks crowded with would-be Perry Smiths, almost all properly attired in leather jackets and jeans, dangerous scowls in place. A lot of shorties, a few dwarfs, some tall fellows in creative slouches. Bottles of black hair dye had been applied, with varying degrees of skill. Some of the men carried guitars. Many eyes lingered uneasily on the person of Ray, the obvious king of this hill.

Mixed in with the Perrys were the dingy-blond Dick Hitchcocks. The other murderer, another odd-looking bird, also the victim of a vehicular accident. His face had been knocked askew, the left side being a shade lower than the right. Eyes, nose, mouth — mismatched. Could the world cough up a replica of him too?

All shuffling in when the door opened, listening to directions from a young man with a clipboard and the haughty, impatient demeanor of an underling in charge. Filling out cards, waiting for their chances to cross the stage to the microphone and speak a few words to the three shadowy figures in the third row. Everybody knew what was going on this day — it was a weeding out. Ray's card was placed on a slim stack.

What cinematic style to use? Make it a crowded, rococo canvas or take a documentary approach? Whatever, it would play as a comedy. A grotesquerie, with naked ambition as the driving force. A ludicrous contrast was that the auditions were to find two men most convincing as lifetime losers turned cold-blooded killers, but those doing the selecting were people intensely concerned about getting a prominent table at the latest trendy restaurant. This Big Moment in Ray's life was, as he said, a lie, a freak show. But at the time he not only believed in it, he felt his life aspiration come closer and closer to fulfillment as, over the next month, he moved upward in a progression of steps. He did readings, he saw his competition dwindle to a few Perrys, none of whom were as right as he was. (“This one guy, he was good, he had the legs, but he was at least forty, and Perry was ten years younger than that when he murdered those people.”) Aaron would depict it all, and he'd also show Ray at the East Village parties, the center of attention, fawned over as a soon-to-be star. Aaron recalled Ray telling about a moment late in the game when he sat with the casting director at a conference table in an uptown office, and the man talked about

the director's vision for the film, asking Ray if he saw his part in the same light. Though the man did not speak the final words, Ray left that day believing that he had the role of Perry Smith.

Back to the stock room of an auto parts store. Friday, their last day together. A smile on Ray's sixty-year-old face. He had smiled throughout his story and he would smile to the end.

"They'd always wind up with 'We'll keep in touch,' but then came the time when they didn't. My phone just sat there. So after two weeks I started calling them, but everybody was always unavailable — in an all-day meeting or in L.A. or someplace. I kept giving the secretary, this oriental gal, the same message, for someone to call me. But nobody did. I knew what was up. I been feeling it grow in my stomach, so it wasn't that much of a surprise when I opened *Variety* one day and saw that Robert Blake got the part."

Aaron would show Ray stopping at a kiosk, buying the paper, opening it . . .

This part of Ray's account Aaron remembered well. Maybe it was his own recent defeat that caused the words Ray spoke to carry special significance.

"It was over, just like that. No explanation, nothing. All next week I'm in my room or walking the streets, thinking. Then I decide to pay a visit to the office. I ask, nice and polite, to see the casting director — Bruce Sutherland, I can still remember his name — and Tokyo Rose says that he's out for the rest of the week. So I'm back next Monday morning, all smiles, and she says that he's in a meeting, and I say I'll wait, and she says it's at another location and he won't be in this office again today. But can I leave a message? And I say no, I'd like to talk to him. I even hang around outside the building. The next day when I go up there, to the eighth floor, she has an envelope for me, my name typed on it. Inside is an index card. I remember the exact words: 'Some really fine work, Ray, but, ultimately, we were left unconvinced. What we found lacking was an underlying sense of menace, something which is vital for carrying this film. But we sincerely wish you the best in your career.'

"So I read it a couple times, standing there, wondering what Brucie Boy knew about menace, and then I told the secretary that I'd still like to talk to Mr. Sutherland, and she asks why, and I tell her that I want to see how far I can make his tongue stick out of his mouth when I get my hands around his neck. It wasn't five minutes later that two guys from Security are there, to escort me out. Both six-footers, we must've made quite a sight, each of them holding onto one of my arms. In the elevator I clown around, asking how I could get a job like theirs, and if they're going to boot me into the gutter when we get outside, like in the wild west movies, when they throw someone out of the saloon. And this one guy says, no, they're going to treat me like the gentleman I am, but that if I come back they'd have to hold me for the police. I say that I won't be back, that I'm through with show biz, and we all shake hands in the lobby. Two days later, on the train to St. Paul, I reached a way to see it. When they rejected me, Ray, they had really rejected Perry Smith. So it was only fitting."

Ray lit another cigarette, crossed his legs, gazed reflectively at Aaron.

"Never told that story before. Just to you, kid. . . . Well, I suppose the only thing left to tell is how I got here, in this store. Not that it matters, but when I was back in St. Paul I started working again at my brother's garage. He was heavy into drugs, basically trying to kill himself. Which he eventually did, and then I ran the place myself, for years, but there were a couple of incidents with dissatisfied customers where it came down to me putting my hands on people. The

police were called, that whole scene. So I decided maybe I needed another type of job, one where there wouldn't be nobody getting in my face. I saw an ad and came to this auto parts store — this very one. It wasn't open yet, your father was unpacking stock, shelving it, and I could see right off that he didn't know shit. I mean, there's a certain way to organize things. So I just started in helping him. That's how I first met your father. A young man back then, in his twenties, not married yet. Kind of a pretty boy, like you. I showed him how to set things up, plus I knew a lot of mechanics around town. Yeah, I helped him get the business up and running. Not that he'll give me any credit for it, not your father. And not that I care. This is just a place I come to get a paycheck. I don't give a damn about this place.

“So that's it. Story time is over. Oh — you may be wondering about the acting. I never did one bit of it, never again.”

But it was not over, not for Aaron. Ray had a question for him.

For this moment Aaron would have the lights dimmed even more. He would have Ray take a long pause — smiling, contemplating the boy before him, carefully choosing the words he would speak.

“So, listen, kid, I got one question for you. Seeing as how you're a director — or at least you want to be one. Sure, you've run into a snag, but it could be temporary, this setback to your plans. Not like it was with me. So, anyway, they said I wasn't convincing enough to play Perry Smith. Meaning that I couldn't have killed those people. But what do you think? You as a director? Do you think I could do it — kill somebody?”

Aaron would also pause. A long, damning pause. How difficult it was, ten years later, to say how calculated his answer was. But even if there was a possibility of something between them, the most plausible interpretation of Ray's question was that it had no deeper meaning. Only innocent words were being exchanged. So even if Aaron did speak with bitter intent, it was done frivolously.

The extent of his complicity would forever be unclear to Aaron.

“Yes,” he said, looking directly into Ray's eyes. “You could do it. You'd be my Perry Smith.”

Ray nodded, his smile widening into a grin. He clapped his hands on his knees with finality. He rose and stretched, his big arms flexing voluptuously, then he was gone.

He did not return. For the rest of the summer he never acknowledged Aaron's existence. The two would never again speak.

Yet at the moment when Ray stretched and then moved into darkness Aaron felt a fearful expectancy descend upon him. He wanted to call Ray back — but why, to say what?

In dreams Aaron would call out to Ray, but no sound would come from his straining mouth.

The uneasy fear and expectation was like a dark clot inside Aaron as he spent his days at the University of Minnesota, not attending classes, dissipating, watching movies. For weeks he could forget it, or ignore it — afraid of what? waiting for what? — but Ray's face would sometimes rise unexpectedly before him, like a smiling genie emerging in smoke.

On a November day, a cold rain falling, Aaron returned to his rooming house to find a message waiting for him. There was a number for him to call, an unfamiliar one, and underneath were scribbled words: “Said it was urgent.”

As he tapped out the eleven digits, hand trembling, he already anticipated where the phone would ring, what the voice would tell him. He even knew the one word he would utter in response: “No.” He wondered if the sound he would make would be convincing, expressing the proper shock and denial. That word — he had tried to call it out again and again, in his dreams, to Ray’s departing figure.

Someone picked up the phone. “Detective Lambert.”

It had indeed been a conspiracy that Aaron had entered into on that Friday. And though it was one unfairly thrust on a boy, he’d have to live the rest of his life with the knowledge of his part in it. Time does not heal all things. Perhaps he was weak, as his father had believed. At any rate, he never recovered enough to become anything, to do anything — nor, with the money he inherited, was there any need to. Even the whole idea for a movie about Ray was just another idle reverie. For one thing, it would be impossible to make, for it would expose things that must remain forever hidden.

There would be no “meaningful work of art” of any kind from Aaron. He wasn’t like Ray, who was ambitious to the end. Just to look at the man, at sixty. Hair still black, body pumped up. Still waiting to play Perry Smith! And he had, not in the Clutter house but in the house that Aaron had grown up in. Sometimes Aaron imagined his father’s words, in his last moments. Always the same words, the ones he had used the first time Ray had looked into his son’s eyes, as the nine-year-old Aaron pressed against his side. But now his father spoke them in rising panic and disbelief.

“Now, Ray!”

Though the reality of those moments had been more mundane. Apparently Ray had acted with workmanlike efficiency. The police commented to Aaron on the lack of clues. Though cash had been taken, there were no indications of a forced entry. There were also no signs of a struggle. The victim had been struck on the back of the head by a blunt instrument, but the actual cause of death was asphyxia.

“Asphyxia?” said Aaron, his lips moving numbly.

“Well . . . Strangulation, actually.”

So Ray had fulfilled his director’s confidence in him. The case moved from “following some promising leads” to “asking the public for any information” to “still under investigation.” Then silence. And Ray never asked for anything in return. He said he never asked anybody for anything. Maybe the role he had gotten to play, at long last, had been enough.