

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

---

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 2

---

June 2009

## Derrin of the North

Jesse Goolsby

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

---

### Recommended Citation

Goolsby, Jesse (2009) "Derrin of the North," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*. Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss1/2>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).

WINNER

DERRIN OF THE NORTH

Jesse Goolsby

I'm thinking about my lungs, how they open and close and open and close, and the closest thing I can imagine are two little paper bags stuck deep in my chest. While I know it's not a perfect image, I think about the bags and how they have my name printed on them, right on the front in black ink; they both read *property of Thomas Kelvin*. My lungs are twenty-nine years old, a healthy pale pink with the possibility of a gentle smudge from a poorly smoked cigar or the pneumonia I hacked through in middle school. I expect my lungs to work for me for the rest of my life and, except for tonight, I haven't given them much thought; but, like most things that make us remember we're a collection of well placed matter, there's a good reason for my introspection. And, yes, pondering the inevitability of death is a part of it, but that's not all; there are also five cartons of eggs.

Derrin Dune would do anything for me because I had sworn to keep his secret safe. The secret wasn't much of one because everyone knew he was sick. All you had to do was glance at his frame, how I towered over him, how his blonde head bobbed wide and heavy on those frail shoulders; he looked two grades behind by the time we entered high school. I still remember the eyes of my mother when he first said his age at our dining table. How many times had he seen those eyes? Derrin was brilliant and shy, but socially oblivious, and, as fourteen year olds, he told me he had a secret for me, one I could never share.

It was Halloween, at dusk, and we were in my backyard with five cartons of eggs. I'd hid them underneath a hollowed out part of our woodstack. We had to space out the purchase of each carton because the stores got suspicious if you showed up at the register with them within two weeks of Halloween. The last orange was flicking at the clouds, and we sat there dressed in

black waiting for the sky to follow. We'd discussed our plan for the evening: meeting with the crew, a couple teachers' houses and cars across town, escape routes, what to do if we ran into other groups, cops. Derrin was into it big time, his hands wringing together. There was silence as we psyched ourselves up and then, suddenly, he prepared me for his secret, because, as he said, he wanted me to understand it. He didn't know why he had to tell me just then on the grass by the stacked pine chunks, but according to him there was no other way. It was "imperative," he said with his well developed vocabulary, that this stay between us as it could cause "irreparable damage." With his transition, I was expecting something heavy: he was into drugs, his parents hit each other, he was running away, something, actually anything, but what came from his mouth.

"I'll make this short," he said. "I'm sick."

I would've laughed, but I could still see him, even if it was getting more difficult. He couldn't actually believe that people didn't know, and yet there he was, in earnest. I didn't know what to say; of course he was sick.

"The doctor says I'll live until thirty if I'm lucky, so I'm marking the date. I'm telling you this because you are my best friend, and I want you to know what it means."

And then he told me the name of his disease, and I wondered how many times he'd said it before that time because, as it rolled out into the gray air, it seemed new and uncertain, as if diagnosed for the very first time.

But how could I ever begin to appreciate the secret? Derrin wasn't one of my best friends, even if I was his. Ours was a friendship based on proximity: he lived four houses down, and my city councilman father instigated our relationship, no doubt hearing the secret from Derrin's parents as he gave them a hand moving in. My father had been trying to be proud of me since I was born, and Derrin was his deepest investment in creating an honorable son. I must have sensed this somehow and wanted to do something about it because, although he embarrassed me, I allowed Derrin to tag along with my group of friends as long

as he kept quiet. I called him “kid,” and turned to him only in times of assignment due dates. Occasionally, my father would set something up with Derrin and his father, and, even more rarely, Derrin and I would do something, just the two of us, and when we did I made sure my father knew about it. But I did use his loyalty as an advantage: when I really wanted to look good or powerful or popular through my teen years, I’d show up with him and it’d do the trick straight away.

After he told me his secret that night, we got back to the business of eggs. I allowed his confession to stay with me only a moment before it lifted and moved away. It had nothing to do with me and meant less than the shape of the eggs and how I would hold them in my hand to get maximum distance. But he never guessed, and, because I took a minute before I said anything and stared right back at him, he felt I’d understood what he wanted me to and considered the promise forged. He would, from that moment on, be under my control.

Later that night, we met up with the rest of my buddies and went out on our mission. We’d forgotten about the street lights on Mr. Tuck’s avenue and had to stay back because no one had the gumption to walk right up to the front. A couple bushes a strong throw away provided our cover, and when I mouthed “Go,” we stood up and chunked those eggs as hard as we could at the defenseless house and parked car. Our bodies flooded with adrenaline as the eggs disappeared from our surging arms. It was impossible to tell where they landed in the dark, and we squinted and each knew we’d been the first to hit the house, the very window to Mr. Tuck’s room. Under the streetlight, ten yards short of the target, three eggs lay splattered. I knew who it was, and I didn’t spare him, not even that night as we jogged away in the dark; I wanted all of them to hear it.

“Don’t take the damn eggs if you can’t hack it, kid.”

Even then I thought of stopping the group to make Derrin return and go up to the front walk to throw one at the door. I’d been imbued with power, and it mixed into me quickly.



I started off small, getting a feel for command. Initially, there was resistance. When I made him take off his shirt—the first time we saw his pure white ribs—for the skins side in basketball, he considered leaving until I whispered our secret in his ear. When I made him touch Jenny Smith’s ass, the first girl to develop breasts, he made me repeat my threat three times before walking up to her with his head lowered. In history class, I had to say “secret” and tap my temple before he asked if John Hancock’s uncle was Don Keydick. I was lazy and indifferent in school, but I was dedicated to Derrin’s tasks; they were something I was good at, and I pushed him harder and harder: dumping lawn shavings into unlocked cars, stealing a sixer of Coors from the corner store, phoning in a bomb threat the morning of the Algebra final. There were many more dares, each one more creative than the last, and as we progressed through them over our high school years, his resistance turned into acceptance and, unexpectedly, thankfulness. He eventually found a niche in our group, the one who would do anything, and it gave him a subtle reputation independent of us. Pity was always a part of it, and people wondered how the kid who dominated academics could be the focus of so many rumors. The wise cracks in class, the unparalleled nerve to talk to anyone, including Jenny Smith, brought him recognition which he digested into happiness. It got to a point where he’d ask me what he should do next.



About the time my impatience with his social ascent peaked, my father planned a deer hunting trip with Derrin and his father. My dad tried this father-son link with Derrin’s family about twice a year, and, if it hadn’t been the fall of our senior year, I’d have protested more vehemently, but the end was near. My dad knew my feelings for Derrin but pacified me, trying his hardest

to make me think of the days after high school, how the labels and groups would dissipate and form afresh with strangers, and wouldn't it feel great if I could look back at my youth and smile with memories of kindness? I am an only child, and my dad spoke to me like we were in a movie, and besides, talking to a high schooler about anything past the next Friday night is pointless. But I respected my father and even in my most deplorable angst I secretly wanted to please him, which I tried the only way I knew how: angering him. Thus I pouted about our hunting trip, but only long enough for him to notice my superiority over the company we would keep, until he added, "You just don't understand how much it means to Derrin."

I hate the cold, and during those three days it was freezing and miserable. The second morning, Derrin and I struck out on our own in ski masks. We knew the area well, and the rifles slung over our shoulders, pointing at the weak sun. It was too cold to talk and too cold to look up, but a pack of deer strutted right in front of us and settled in the sun fifty yards out. I didn't care much for hunting and thought of working in the cold, gutting the deer, the blood freezing to my gloves, having to take off the gloves and my fingers smoking, frozen. I glanced back at Derrin, hoping he had the same thoughts; we could simply say we didn't see anything and avoid hours of work. All it would take was a nod to each other. But his gun was up without asking me, and it seemed huge on him; I reminded myself it was only a .243 Winchester, a baby's gun. He glared into the scope, and, when he shot, it popped short like a toy, but it was massive against his shoulder. He'd become fierce clandestinely, and I was scrambling to place the fact on the invisible link between us. He pulled the gun down and gave me a thumbs-up as his breath punched out in tiny white puffs. I shook away and ran down the pine and bare aspen-filled embankment to the bottom of the gulley where the deer folded up, twitching the nerves away. I didn't wait for Derrin, and, when he came wheezing up from behind me, I already knew what he would do next. It had just come to me, from where in my consciousness I still don't know. I kicked

the deer to see if I had it in me, and the resulting jolt made me shudder. Derrin said something about the horns, but I was studying the thin face below them. The eyeball was uncovered and murky brown. I gave him an out when I suggested we radio the dads, but he was already on his knees with his blade near the belly. The long gash released a plume of stench that clouded up around us. I helped hold it open while he worked feverishly to disembowel the animal, making off-comments when he ran into something he thought was interesting. "I think they call this chyme," he said, showing me his glove smeared in greenish brown goop, and holding up the bladder full of piss before tossing it to the side. "He had to go." I felt the cold every second of that morning, and the corners of my ski mask holes were caked with spit and mucus. It'd taken a half hour for my plan to reach my lips, and when it did it took the form of a question.

"Will you eat the eyeball?" I asked. The form surprised me because I was not in the habit of asking Derrin for anything, and I felt the rise in my tone at the end of the question. There in the freezing shallow I'd asked him like he had a choice. Trying to recover, I told him the secret was safe, but he seemed to ignore this as he pulled the buck's horns around to his kneeling position. He dipped his shoulder hard as he dug, and I had to look above it. He held it aloft, inches from his mouth, the tentacles of wet ligaments spiraling down. He waited until my eyes met his. "To us," he said.



I dated Samantha Tiller my last semester at Chico High School, and she thought Derrin was cute to have around, so she'd ask him to come along if we were going out with her sister, who was a couple years younger. I could tell it made her feel even more Christian—her term for moral—to befriend him, though she never said as much; she was always motherly to him, asking if he was okay, did he need something, what were his plans. And

while she did this, she'd squeeze my hand in the front seat like we were married, talking to a child, but she had a body that re-routed my entire vascular system, so I let it fly as long as she let me in when I wanted. And she did. Often, I'd simply lie there as she exploded up and down over me, becoming another person, a woman on fire, and she'd fix on a space over her head, and she would preach to it, and she would bound on me and rejoice and use me. I had no idea what I was doing, so I'd look through the dim lamplight up at her breasts and bare throat half terrified that my firewoman would break me; sometimes it was like I wasn't even there, and that's when I liked it best, just watching and feeling helpless. When she'd finish, she'd tell me how wonderful I was, how good I was, how I satisfied her more than anyone could ever, and then slowly she'd shrink back into Samantha with each layer of clothing. Once, while my parents were away, she came over, and we showered together. The water was hot on us, and I wanted it cooler, but she said no; she let me keep the main lights on, and we washed each other with soap. She washed me from behind with her hands. She moved the suds across my stomach, and her breasts pressed against my back, and the smell was clean.



I never saw Derrin make a move for Samantha's sister and early on in our relationship that may have even been a dare, but by that point I'd stopped provoking him altogether. I'd tried ignoring him after our hunting trip didn't beat the "best friend" stuff out of him, but between my dad's urging and Samantha's Christian good-deed tally, I found myself resigned to wait for graduation. There were times when Samantha was over, and we'd be watching television or preparing to fool around upstairs, and I'd see Derrin walking up and down the street—a dead end—and could tell he was trying to hide the fact that he was looking inside, that he was hoping we'd see and invite him in. She did notice him



one time that spring and used the word *meek*—who uses that word?—as in, *the meek will inherit the earth*. Yes, I told her, we will all sit in judgment, kneeled at the feet of Derrin Dune, and may he be forgiving.

“Jesus appeared as a humble carpenter,” she said. “And he was thin.”

My parents were honest and fair and prepared me for the reception that awaited my poor grades post-graduation. I thought about joining the service after I realized I had no desire to become anything, so I let the Air Force pick my career for me. Three months out of high school, I left my neighborhood and trained as a fuel-cell maintainer on air tankers. I learned how to bend my body into holes no bigger than a basketball and deal with jet fuel on my skin and hair, and how it never really leaves. I was eighteen, stationed in Southwest England, in the farmlands above Cambridge, supposedly the driest place in the UK, and yet it rained most days. I stayed on base, avoiding fights and awaiting paychecks to blow on local British girls who didn't know the difference among the ranks.

My father had not given up on Derrin and thankfully had at least refused to give him my number, but he'd give me updates: Derrin says hi, saw Derrin the other day. My father told me that his health was steadily declining, that he had stayed around and took a year of community college before relenting to his body and going to work for his dad at the pharmacy. His parents let him live alone, but he was on a special machine three times a week, so his parents stopped by his apartment every other day. He sent me letters that I didn't read and e-mail that I didn't open. What my father didn't tell me at the time was Derrin was calling my parents' house three times a week for updates on me, and that my father refused to let my mother do anything about it.

I embellished my role in the service to my father. How could I not? And he was excited at how I was saving the world filling up aircraft at twenty-thousand feet. Unfortunately, his visions were wrong, and the longer we spoke the truth came out; I never left the ground. Instead, I worked at patching up the massive fuel bladders

inside the narrow wings or on the floor of the shop. He gradually stopped asking about my job and focused our discussions on what I was seeing in Europe. He pleaded with me to get out, to find something that interested me. What about the cathedrals? The battle grounds? "There's so much history," he said. After seeing a pamphlet on base about cathedrals I went down to London—the farthest out I went—and saw St. Peter's, but felt no connection; the cathedrals local to the base—in Cambridge, Ely, Bury St. Edmunds, and Norwich—merged into one another, each cold rock building highlighting itself more than any belief. I couldn't help but hear Samantha's words, a 'humble carpenter,' when confronted with another spiral monstrosity. It's not that I believed her or thought about Jesus at all, but I still imagined He'd get a kick out of some of the dizzying stained glass. I feigned interest when I spoke to my father about it, and I could tell by his voice that he wanted to be proud, but what the hell was I going to do with cathedrals?

I didn't realize it then, but I was searching for something I wanted to be good at: anything to define myself besides my memories of my hometown, my childhood bedroom and now, black fuel containers. I was beginning to comprehend the fact that the past is all there is: you are what you were, not what you want to be, and I was a repairman of rubber fuel cells for aircraft that took off and flew circles in the sky. There wasn't a war on, and when my time was up I decided to return to California. I arrived from England on a Thursday, and Derrin was there at my front door as I put my large bag down. He looked the same, maybe a little taller, and, even though I knew I shouldn't, I let him hug me; I'd remained his best friend, although the sentiment was never reciprocated.

It took me two months to get out of the house. My parents, so excited upon my arrival back home, turned on me a month into my stay and my empty statement: "Who ever knows what they want?" was met with disdain and sarcasm: "People with jobs." I overheard my father on the phone say that the service didn't turn them out like it used to. I'd learned discipline all right, but not motivation, because that can't be taught.

During my time in my parents' house, Derrin began a series of bizarre events that began with him keeping his apartment but sleeping at his parents' place. At first, we thought it was due to his health, but then he started coming around every day, calling on the days we didn't meet up and barraging me with messages. Even my father admitted enough was enough. He called up Derrin's father, and they had a talk about it. It sounds funny to me now because Derrin and I were in our twenties and still our fathers were clearing things up. But things didn't clear up. Derrin continued his assault on me, and the phone rang, and he'd show up at restaurants where we went to eat and movies that we saw, enough so that finally my mother yelled at my father and gave it to him good, and he took it right there in our living room as our caller ID flashed "Derrin Dune."

My father went over to their house the next day and stayed an hour. When he returned he looked defeated, a look that can only be detected by the whole stance, and, in a way, he really was and deserved to be. The project of healing Derrin with friendship had backfired, and I learned later that my father and Mr. Dune got into it heavy, and words were said that took back years of loyalty. But my father didn't talk about any of that when he arrived. With a slight nod to my mother, he sat down on the sofa. He told us that Derrin wouldn't be calling us anymore, and that he hoped we were happy with ourselves. He told us Derrin needed a lung transplant and that he was against the ropes and fighting a losing battle. Derrin was twenty-first in line, and it could be years before a donor was found; they gave him until he was thirty. I thought, At least the doctors are consistent.



I enrolled in a dental assistant program down in San Jose and passed the two years away just getting by. It wasn't anything I'd ever dreamt about, but my father had a connection in the school and the starting pay wasn't bad. After school, I settled in Vacaville, assisting in a little

office. I made new friends who couldn't decide what they wanted to be, and we spent some time in Napa, and I dated and bought a condo. I had a little Honda that got good gas mileage, and, before I knew it, I had a life; it may have been typical and boring, but it was mine. The job was fine even if people came in with their disgusting mouths; I could suction well enough, handed the correct tools when required, and showed up on time.

Derrin still wrote me, and he'd call and leave messages. Every day, I'd get home and have at least two, three on the weekends, and sometimes, if I was curious, I'd skip the delete button once his voice arose, and I'd listen to him drone on about what had become disjointed blather: his favorite elements on the periodic table, the next eclipse, his favorite pair of shoes. This went on for about three years, and, when I visited home, he'd walk the street in front of our house, back and forth and back and forth, and he'd still not look at it. His arms thinned out, and his hair gradually turned white. His limbs hung from him, and it seemed as though the stretched ligaments were the only thing holding them on. His upper back arched noticeably right underneath the base of his neck, and he'd cough on his walks. It broke my father's heart, but what could I do? I could not save him and live my own life.

Then one day, having returned to the condo from an especially trying day—four root canals—I found the message machine empty. I stood beside it with an outstretched finger over the delete button, but there was nothing more to delete. I waited and thought of calling home; I tried to remain calm, tried to convince myself that this was the state of living I'd always wanted, peace finally, and yet the line of reasoning failed me, and I dialed my parents. They knew nothing. That night I waited. I waited for the phone call that I knew was coming. He had just wanted to talk to me directly, and yet, as I rested on my bed, the phone stayed silent. The next day the same thing happened. After the third day, I had to know. I dialed his number, and as I did I knew that the course of abstinence I'd worked so hard for had vanished and could never be recovered. I left a message: Just call me and let me know you're okay.

He got the message and called me back that evening. The first thing he said was, "It feels good to be wanted, doesn't it?"

We talked for a week straight; he was number ten on the list for new lungs, writing a science fiction screenplay, and down to a hundred pounds. But he didn't sound like he was dying, and that wasn't as exciting to me because I couldn't feel sorry for him unless he was on the edge; his diatribes on prepositions and meteors had me convinced that he was losing his mind, and the last night I told him not to call again, ever, that I'd made a huge mistake. He told me I'd call him again; he knew I would. His confidence scared me. I changed my number and started the process all over again. It lasted a year.



The ringing snapped my dream in half. I stole a glance at the clock before picking up. Midnight. I grabbed the receiver and closed my eyes.

"Somebody better be dying," I said.

"Tom?"

"Derrin? Is that you? How did you get this number?"

"Yeah, Tom. Well, you got it right."

"What? What's that? Hold on."

"You're right. I'm dying."

I sat up and flicked on the reading lamp on the side table. The light struck my eyes hard and bright. There was no one to wake up.

"Wait. Derrin, where are you? What's going on?"

"I'm at home," he said.

"Okay, what else? Are you having an emergency?"

"Oh no, I feel... I feel okay, buddy."

"To hell with you."

"No, no, no. How dare you. What I mean is that I am dying, but we're all dying aren't we? We are."

"So you're fine?"

"Sure. I even got moved up to number two on the list."

This was the chance to end it. I'd always been cordial, and my mind raced to say something definite.

"Screw you, Derrin. I mean that. This is a bullshit prank, and I don't know how you found me, but you have to stop for good." And, instead of hanging up, I caught myself stalling. "Have I not been clear enough?"

"Hey. Hold on, buddy. Buddy, let's talk. T-man, I called you, okay. There's a reason. I wouldn't call without a reason."

"You're not funny. I have to get up in the morning. I have a life!"

"But listen. Since I'm dying and going to be dying before you, I thought we could talk. I'm on the clock, man. I know we can talk during daylight hours, but there's something special about tonight. Electricity in the air. Wouldn't you agree? Makes us feel human."

"Sure, Derrin. Now it's crazy time."

"Well, I was lying here hooked up to the machine thinking about Little Chico Creek. The two have nothing to do with one another except the machine kind of makes the sound of a creek, maybe a perfectly timed, never-ending creek, but anyway. The time we took the Tiller sisters out there. You remember that? Damn, Tommy, I would've never thought to crouch down in the middle like it was deep. There was no way they'd have come in if they knew, and the bodies on 'em. Damn, Tommy."

There was sadness in his voice, and it sounded as if he might cry. I wondered if it was a ploy to keep me on, but, with all the crap we'd been through, he'd never cried in front of me. I wiped at my eyes, knowing it wouldn't help. And I remembered that night with the Tiller sisters, looking at Derrin's thin arms as we entered the water first, at how they helped me. The girls emerged from the trees, and we watched their toned bodies tighten as they walked out to the middle of the cool river. The faint moonlight covered the water, and we squinted and saw them rushing in, trying to submerge themselves as quick as possible. When they reached us and realized we were sitting on

our butts, faking treading water they ran out, and we howled and splashed and called to them to return. The girls changed into their underwear and came to the bank and threw rocks near us before walking away. Derrin and I stayed in for a little while, and after a minute we calmed down and listened to the sound of the water. Downstream, the girls' voices reached us as a whisper. "Tommy," Derrin had said with wet hair, "I need to tell you something." He looked somber, and I knew he would ruin the moment, but he shot up to this feat with arms outstretched to the sky screaming, "I am Derrin of the North, Lord of Shallow Rivers and Naked Women! Thank you, Jesus!"

"Yes. That was a nice night, Derrin. One of my best as well, but what's going on here? There's something you're not telling me, and if you don't tell me I'm hanging up on your ass."

"I want to tell you something embarrassing." He waited a moment. "I remember the colors of their bras and panties. You know why? You know, it's because it was the only time I've seen some. How's that? Did you know that?" His pace picked up, and I could tell he was going somewhere else.

"Yes?" I questioned. "What else? So you've only seen a couple chicks before. You're not the only one, but if you want me to say sorry, then sorry. Enough?"

I was two hours away from Derrin, in a one-bedroom condo, next to the outlet mall of Vacaville, and I had no intention of doing a thing about it.

"We're in our late twenties, Tommy. What does that tell you?"

"It tells me nothing, Derrin. It tells me nothing. It tells me that you're lonely and that you have no friends because you keep on calling me and not someone else, and we're not even that close anymore. It's been years since high school. As I've told you since then, it's time to move on. Now, please, leave me alone. It should be implied in my tone that I don't want to talk to you. And, if you're throwing yourself a pity party, then you deserve it. You got screwed. I'm sorry. My family is sorry. Everyone is sorry. And I'm sorry to say it, but they know. They've always known. Your

secret, all that bullshit, it's nothing, it's no secret. Everyone knows you're sick, that you were sick in school, and will be sick till you die. They feel sorry for you and pity you and want to make you happy, but the fact is no one knows how to make a person whose lungs are folding up happy. And, to be perfectly honest, we don't care if you're happy because it takes too much out of us. It takes too much out of me. I should've been this direct with you, and I deserve your psycho attention because I treated you badly in school, but hear me now. It doesn't matter. It's over."

"But you always pick up and talk to me. You tell me not to call, and yet here we are once again, talking like old friends. I don't call that often anymore. You told me to cut it down, and what did I do?"

"Are you listening to me? I'm done here. Good night."

Silence filled the line, and, while I couldn't hear his breathing, the rhythmic turn and puff of his machine played into my ear. I was sweating, and my chest felt cold. It stayed this way for a minute, and I knew I was losing a chance to make a point, to slam the receiver down and cut the connection.

"Derrin? Do you understand?"

"Just know one thing," Derrin said. "I went and bought a gun, and it's in my dresser."

I didn't believe him. He was desperate. I thought about saying "Use it." I thought of saying "Good." Those were my first thoughts, and I wondered what would happen if I said them aloud. But I said, "Derrin."

"It's black. The smell of it reminds me of hunting and gunpowder. It's as if all the decisions in my life have been made for me when I hold it. Do you know what I mean? Maybe you don't, but I do. I thank God for the simple things, blood and shit and water. Now there's something to celebrate. Something you know will be there, no matter what."

"You're talking nonsense. Please. What are you trying to do here? What can I possibly do?"

"You? You can do nothing. You've done nothing. I'm going to die anyway, Tommy, probably tomorrow. It's my birthday today."



Yeah, I've reached my maximum age. I'd like to see you."

The shift caught me by surprise, and I was still digesting the birthday comment. Was it really today? I went over the route to him in my head.

"You just told me there's nothing I can do."

"I'm still in Chico, at the same apartment."

"I have to come tonight or you're shooting yourself? Is this what you are saying? Jesus, Derrin. I'm calling the cops. This is the easy answer. I'm tired, and I don't know if I even believe you."

"Do you want me to read you the serial number?"

"Yes," I said.

He gave me some letters and numbers, and I used the time to consider my options and finally to ask myself, If he were telling the truth, could I live with it?



It was foggy and dark, and the orange glow from the dash bothered me. I-5 at 4:30 A.M. was straight as ever, and I drove home past the city limit signs that hadn't been altered in years. I passed through Williams, turned off at Orland on Highway 32 with its flanking orchards, and passed over the Sacramento River.

On the drive, I thought of saving Derrin and calling my father and telling him what I'd done, how I'd entered his apartment and soothed his nerves and removed the gun because I'd dared him to. How I'd stroked him calm, reliving the Tiller sisters, and the father-son camp-outs. I'd give my dad some credit for keeping after me and he'd say, "This is what I was talking about all those years, son. This is when you show your true colors as a man." He'd tell me he loved me, and as I sat there in the car, lighted from the speedometer, I wondered if I lived for my father's accepting voice, and how it would be okay if it were true.

The street lights spaced out evenly along his busy street, and

all the parking on the road was taken. I considered blocking someone in, but I thought I could be in there for a while. I circled around like normal, but it was the middle of the night, and no one was moving any time soon. I parked two blocks away and got out. I'd forgotten a coat and thought of jogging but walked instead, feeling the cold. The night exuded a surreal energy, and the clouds were still a blanket around the sky, reflecting the shine of the city. The sidewalk was crumbling in parts, and for the first time, the night felt real.

A black seventeen hung from the red door. I decided to knock instead of pushing the doorbell. The door opened an inch and stopped. I spoke his name, and he called to me to come in.

Derrin stood on a silver rug in the middle of the floor. There was no furniture, save an overstuffed chair and his machine. As I took my first steps in, I looked for the gun. In his hand? On the chair? And I asked him where it was. I had a plan, rehearsed for the last half hour of the drive, and it required a commanding presence.

"Where's the gun, Derrin?"

He was dressed in all white, and his skin and hair were white, as bright as the clothes that enveloped him. I closed the door behind me, but I didn't take my eyes off him.

"You're here," he said shakily. "I knew it would happen when you decided to come." I was scanning for the gun but saw nothing, and there were no hiding places. I could tell he was scared of me because he trembled. When I took a step toward him, he took one step back, staggering on his legs.

"Where's the gun?"

He shook his head as if it were the dumbest question I could ask.

"Are you listening to me? I knew it would happen when you decided to come."

"You haven't told me a thing. But listen, I'm here to help. And while I meant what I said on the phone, I never said I wanted you to die."

"Are you listening to me? I got the call."

"You got the call? What does that even mean?"

"It means you saved me. It means that someone has died tonight that I might live. I got the call while you were on your way. I want you to take me to the hospital."

I couldn't move my mind, and, when I finally came to, Derrin was standing there on his rug in white, and he cried and he shook and he sung a whispering version of 'Happy Birthday' to himself. It was eerie, and I asked about his parents; shouldn't they be the ones to take him? No, he'd phoned them already. They would meet us there. His bags were packed.

On the way, I asked him about his new lungs and what they would do: "They'll take the disease away from me." And what would he do now that he didn't have the disease: "I'll gain weight and run and tan in the sun." But he cut me off five minutes into it. He burst forth with energy, and he reached out and touched my glove compartment, the fabric on the roof, the door armrest, and the shifter. He was going to live, and the joy was too much.

"Tell me about England," he said. "I want to know all about your time there. What did you see? What did you do?"

"Derrin, my God, you're getting new lungs in an hour, and you want to know about my time in England? What about you? Holy shit, I can't even think straight."

"Please, Tommy. What did you do? Well, I know you repaired fuel cells; your dad told me that. He said it was the toughest job out there and that it must have been hard on you."

"It was okay. I did have to squeeze into some tight places."

His face remained lit as I talked about England and the base and the few cathedrals I'd seen. He wanted to know everything: what was my place like? Was base housing nice? Did we have a BX? Did people watch the planes land from beyond the fences? Did it rain? And on and on he went, the most banal questions, one after another, and he hung on my every response. His enthusiasm drove me hard into memory, and, when that failed, I made things up: my co-workers locked me in the wing for twenty-four hours. Yeah, it was tough, but I knew I could get

through it. I slept with the major in charge of the squadron; she wanted me from day one, so it was no surprise when she showed up at my dorm room with a bottle of scotch. I saved two people from choking to death in the cafeteria because of my training. Thank God I was there. As I spoke the made-up stories, they sounded convincing, and I realized that I'd thought of them long before this. Derrin would never know the difference, and the truth would never matter. To him, I lived that life, and so I did.

My stories lifted us right up to the hospital entrance in Davis, and as I put the car in Park, I wondered if this was all he ever wanted. We were men now, and he would be made anew, just inside the doors, with someone else's lungs tied to his body.

I accompanied him to the front desk, and his parents stood up and greeted me coldly, so I waited by the entrance. I didn't know if I should stay or go, but Derrin looked over and gave me a signal to wait as he and his parents listened to the receptionist, who was pointing to a red piece of paper. After they broke away, Derrin came over and apologized for his parents. He thanked me for the trip and wrapped his arms around me, and I held his head to my chest with one hand and pulled at his back with the other. I felt the bony vertebrae, and I thought I might crush him, but he held on, and the guilt rushed at me there in the white lobby and overtook me.

As he let go, he said, "Yes."

He disappeared behind the double doors with his parents, and I bent over to my knees in exhaustion. I stayed for an hour and fell asleep on the padded chairs. He hadn't asked me to stay, and, when I woke up, I felt that it would be inappropriate for me to be there when he woke up. Family would be flying in from everywhere to greet him.

I drove back to my parents' place, and, when I walked through the door, I felt like a child again. My father and mother were finishing up their breakfast and rushed to me at the entrance. I told them the story the best I could, and I must have hit the right notes because they were both in tears by the end. They

asked me to stay for a day or two, so I called my work and lied. When I woke up, my father told me he'd called Mr. Dune and that Derrin was having some complications, that they wouldn't know for another twelve hours.



I sit on my childhood bed thinking about my lungs. I think of my name imprinted on them, and I think of Derrin and wonder what name is on his lungs. I recall five cartons of eggs and Samantha Tiller at eighteen. I remember her saying 'meek' as Derrin paced up and down our street, waiting patiently.