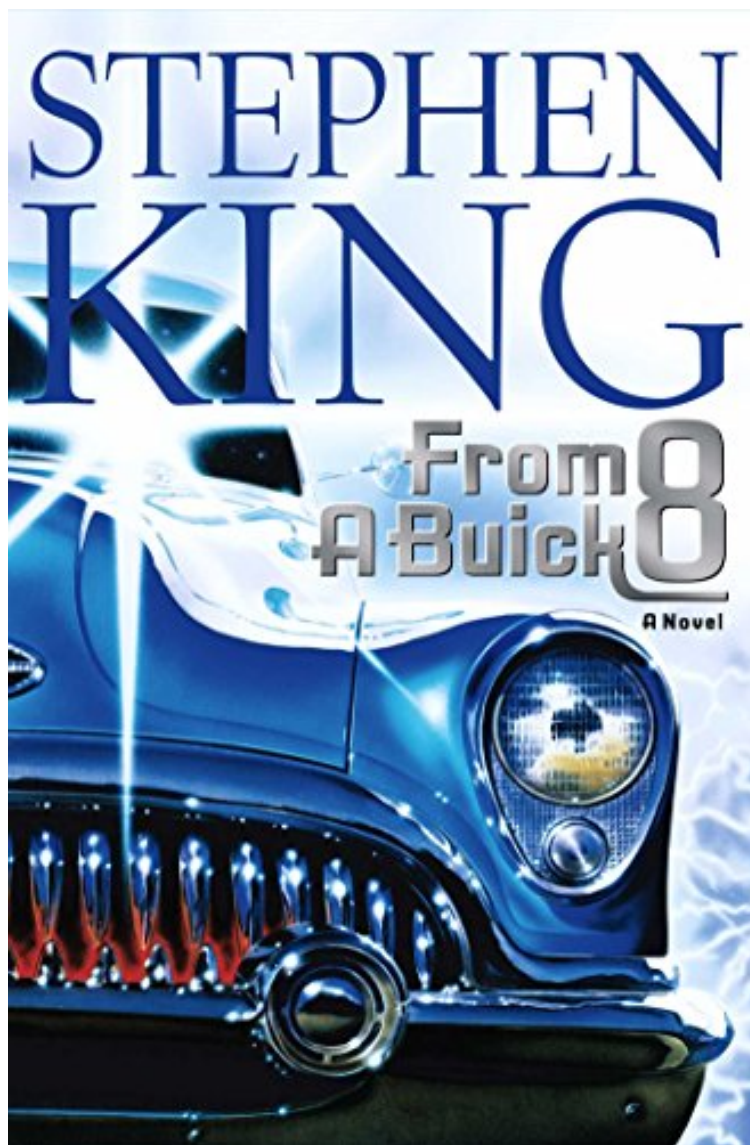


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From a Buick 8: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe state police of Troop D in rural Pennsylvania have kept a secret in Shed B out back of the barracks ever since 1979, when Troopers Ennis Rafferty and Curtis Wilcox answered a call from a gas station just down the road and came back with an abandoned Buick Roadmaster. Curt Wilcox knew old cars, and he knew immediately that this one was...wrong, just wrong. A few hours later, when Rafferty vanished, Wilcox and his fellow troopers knew the car was worse than dangerous -- and that it would be better if John Q. Public never found out about it. Curt's avid curiosity taking the lead, they investigated as best they could, as much as they dared. Over the years the troop absorbed the mystery as part of the background to their work, the Buick 8 sitting out there like a still life painting that breathes -- inhaling a little bit of this world, exhaling a little bit of whatever world it came from. In the fall of 2001, a few months after

Curt Wilcox is killed in a gruesome auto accident, his 18-year-old boy Ned starts coming by the barracks, mowing the lawn, washing windows, shoveling snow. Sandy Dearborn, Sergeant Commanding, knows it's the boy's way of holding onto his father, and Ned is allowed to become part of the Troop D family. One day he looks in the window of Shed B and discovers the family secret. Like his father, Ned wants answers, and the secret begins to stir, not only in the minds and hearts of the veteran troopers who surround him, but in Shed B as well.... From a Buick 8 is a novel about our fascination with deadly things, about our insistence on answers when there are none, about terror and courage in the face of the unknowable..comStephen King, an evil car, and a teenage boy coming to terms with the fragility and randomness of life.... Wait, haven't we read this before? Diehard King fans, worry not. Aside from the titular car playing a main role in the story, From a Buick 8 could not be less like King's 1983 masterpiece, Christine. If anything, this story resembles King's serial novel The Green Mile, with reminiscing police characters flashing back on bizarre events that took place decades earlier. The book's intriguing plot revolves around the troopers of Pennsylvania State Patrol Troop D, who come into possession of what at first appears to be a vintage automobile. Closer inspection and experimentation conducted by the troopers reveal that this car's doors (and trunk) sometimes open to another dimension populated by gross-out creatures straight out of ... well, a Stephen King novel. As the plot progresses, the veteran troopers' tales of these visits from interdimensional nasties, and the occasional "lightquakes" put on by the car, are passed on to the son of a fallen comrade whose fascination with the car bordered on dangerous obsession. Unlike earlier King works, there is no active threat here; no monster is stalking the heroes of the story, unless you count the characters' own curiosity. In past books, King has terrorized readers with vampires, werewolves, a killer clown, ghosts, and aliens, but this time around, the bogeyman is a more passive, cerebral threat, and one for which they don't make a ready-to-wear Halloween costume--man's fascination with and fear of the unknown. While some readers may find this tale less exciting than the horror master's earlier works, From a Buick 8 is a wonderful example of how much King's plotting skills and literary finesse have matured over his long career. And, most of all, it's a darn creepy book. --Benjamin Reese

ExtraitFrom a Buick 8 Now: Sandy Curt Wilcox's boy came around the barracks a lot the year after his father died, I mean a lot, but nobody ever told him get out the way or asked him what in hail he was doing there again. We understood what he was doing: trying to hold onto the memory of his father. Cops know a lot about the psychology of grief; most of us know more about it than we want to. That was Ned Wilcox's senior year at Statler High. He must have quit off the football team; when it came time for choosing, he picked D Troop instead. Hard to imagine a kid doing that, choosing unpaid choring over all those Friday night games and Saturday night parties, but that's what he did. I don't think any of us talked to him about that choice, but we respected him for it. He had decided the time had come to put the games away, that's all. Grown men are frequently incapable of making such decisions; Ned made his at an age when he still couldn't buy a legal drink. Or a legal pack of smokes, for that matter. I think his Dad would have been proud. Know it, actually. Given how much the boy was around, I suppose it was inevitable he'd see what was out in Shed B, and ask someone what it was and what it was doing there. I was the one he was most likely to ask, because I'd been his father's closest friend. Closest one that was still a Trooper, at least. I think maybe I wanted it to happen. Kill or cure, the oldtimers used to say. Give that curious cat a serious dose of satisfaction. *** What happened to Curtis Wilcox was simple. A veteran county drunk, one Curt himself knew well and had arrested six or eight times, took his life. The drunk, Bradley Roach, didn't mean to hurt anyone; drunks so rarely do. That doesn't keep you from wanting to kick their numb asses all the way to Rocksburg, of course. Toward the end of a hot July afternoon in the year oh-one, Curtis pulled over one of those big sixteen-wheelers, an interstate landcruiser that had left the fourlane because its driver was hoping for a home-cooked meal instead of just another dose of I-87 Burger King or Taco Bell. Curt was parked on the tarmac of the abandoned Jenny station at the intersection of Pennsylvania State Road 32 and the Humboldt Roadthe very place, in other words, where that damned old Buick Roadmaster showed up in our part of the known universe all those years ago. You can call that a coincidence if you want to, but I'm a cop and don't believe in coincidences, only chains of event which grow longer and ever more fragile until either bad luck or plain old human mean-heartedness breaks them. Ned's father took out after that semi because it had a flapper. When it went by he saw rubber spinning out from one of the rear tires like a big black pinwheel. A lot of independents run on recaps, with the price of diesel so high they just about have to, and sometimes the tread peels loose. You see curls and hunks of it on the interstate all the time, lying on the highway or pushed off into the breakdown lane like the shed skins of giant blacksnakes. It's dangerous to be behind a flapper, especially on a twolane like SR 32, a pretty but neglected stretch of state highway running

between Rocksburg and Statler. A big enough chunk might break some unlucky follow-drivers windshield.

Even if it didnt, it could startle the operator into the ditch, or a tree, or over the embankment and into Redfern Stream, which matches 32 twist for twist over a distance of nearly six miles. Curt lit his bar lights, and the trucker pulled over like a good boy. Curt pulled over right behind him, first calling in his 20 and the nature of his stop and waiting for Shirley to acknowledge. With that done, he got out and walked toward the truck. If hed gone directly to where the driver was leaning out and looking back at him, he might still be on Planet Earth today. But he stopped to examine the flapper on the rear outside tire, even gave it a good yank to see if he could pull it off. The trucker saw all of it, and testified to it in court. Curt stopping to do that was the last link save one in the chain that brought his boy to Troop D and eventually made him a part of what we are. The very last link, Id say, was Bradley Roach leaning over to get another brewski out of the six-pack sitting on the floor in the passenger footwell of his old Buick Regal (not the Buick, but another Buick, yesits

funny how, when you look back on disasters and love affairs, things seem to line up like planets on an astrologers chart). Less than a minute later, Ned Wilcox and his sisters were short a daddy and Michelle Wilcox was short a husband. *** Not very long after the funeral, Curts boy started showing up at the Troop

D House. Id come in for the three-to-eleven that fall (or maybe just to check on things; when youre the wheeldog, its hard to stay away) and see the boy before I saw anyone else, like as not. While his friends were over at Floyd B. Clouse Field behind the high school, running plays and hitting the tackling dummies and giving each other high-fives, Ned would be out on the front lawn of the barracks by himself, bundled up in his green and gold high school jacket, making big piles of fallen leaves. Hed give me a wave and Id return it: right back atcha, kid. Sometimes after I parked, Id come out front and shoot the shit with him. Hed tell me about the foolishness his sisters were up to just lately, maybe, and laugh, but you could see his love for them even when he was laughing at them. Sometimes Id just go in the back way and ask Shirley what was up.

Law enforcement in western Pennsylvania would fall apart without Shirley Pasternak, and you can take that to the bank. Come winter, Ned was apt to be around back in the parking lot, where the Troopers keep their personal vehicles, running the snowblower. The Dadier brothers, two local wide boys, are responsible for our lot, but Troop D sits in the Amish country on the edge of the Short Hills, and when theres a big storm the

wind blows drifts across the lot again almost as soon as the plow leaves. Those drifts look to me like an enormous white ribcage. Ned was a match for them, though. There hed be, even if it was only eight degrees and the wind still blowing a gale across the hills, dressed in a snowmobile suit with his green and gold jacket pulled over the top of it, leather-lined police-issue gloves on his hands and a ski-mask pulled down over his face. Id wave. Hed give me a little right-back-atcha, then go on gobbling up the drifts with the snowblower. Later he might come in for coffee, or maybe a cup of hot chocolate. Folks would drift over and talk to him, ask him about school, ask him if he was keeping the twins in line (the girls were ten in the winter of oh-one, I think). Theyd ask if his Mom needed anything. Sometimes that would include me, if no one was hollering too loud or if the paperwork wasnt too heavy. None of the talk was about his father; all of the talk was about his father. You understand. Raking leaves and making sure the drifts didnt take hold out there in the parking lot was really Arky Arkanians responsibility. Arky was the custodian. He was one of us as well, though, and

he never got shirty or went territorial about his job. Hell, when it came to snowblowing the drifts, Ill bet Arky just about got down on his knees and thanked God for the kid. Arky was sixty by then, had to have been, and his own football-playing days were long behind him. So were the ones when he could spend an hour and a half outside in ten-degree temperatures (twenty-five below, if you factored in the wind chill) and hardly feel it. And then the kid started in with Shirley, technically Police Communications Officer Pasternak.

By the time spring rolled around, Ned was spending more and more time with her in her little dispatch cubicle with the phones, the TDD (telephonic device for the deaf), the Trooper Location Board (also known as the D-map), and the computer console thats the hot center of that high-pressure little world. She showed him the bank of phones (the most important is the red one, which is our end of 911). She explained about how the traceback equipment had to be tested once a week, and how it was done, and how you had to confirm the duty-roster daily, so youd know who was out patrolling the roads of Statler, Lassburg, and Pogus City, and who was due in court or off-duty. My nightmare is losing an officer without knowing hes lost, I overheard her telling Ned one day. Has that ever happened? Ned asked. Just... losing a guy? Once, she said. Before my time. Look here, Ned, I made you a copy of the call-codes. We dont have to use them anymore, but all the Troopers still do. If you want to run dispatch, you have to know these. Then she went back to the four basics of the job, running them past him yet again: know the location, know the nature of the incident, know what the injuries are, if any, and know the closest available unit. Location, incident,

injuries, CAU, that was her mantra. I thought: Hell be running it next. She means to have him running it. Never mind that if Colonel Teague or someone from Scranton comes in and sees him doing it shed lose her job, she means to have him running it. And by the good goddam, there he was a week later, sitting at PCO Pasternaks desk in the dispatch cubicle, at first only while she ran to the bathroom but then for longer and longer periods while she went across the room for coffee or even out back for a smoke. The first time the boy saw me seeing him in there all alone, he jumped and then gave a great big guilty smile, like a kid who is surprised in the rumpus room by his mother while hes still got his hand on his girlfriends tit. I gave him a nod and went right on about my beeswax. Never thought twice about it, either. Shirley had turned over the dispatch operation of Statler Troop D to a kid who still only needed to shave three times a week, almost a dozen Troopers were out there at the other end of the gear in that cubicle, but I didnt even slow my stride. We were still talking about his father, you see. Shirley and Arky as well as me and the other uniforms Curtis Wilcox had served with for over twenty years. You dont always talk with your mouth. Sometimes what you say with your mouth hardly matters at all. You have to signify. When I was out of his sightline, though, I stopped. Stood there. Listened. Across the room, in front of the highway-side windows, Shirley Pasternak stood looking back at me with a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her hand. Next to her was Phil Candleton, who had just clocked off and was once more dressed in his civvies; he was also staring in my direction. In the dispatch cubicle, the radio crackled. Statler, this is 12, a voice said. Radio distorts, but I still knew all of my men. That was Eddie Jacubois. This is Statler, go ahead, Ned replied. Perfectly calm. If he was afraid of fucking up, he was keeping it out of his voice. Statler, I have a Volkswagen Jetta, tag is 14-0-7-3-9 Foxtrot, thats P-A, stopped County Road 99. I need a 10-28, come back? Shirley started across the floor, moving fast. A little coffee sloshed over the rim of the Styrofoam cup in her hand. I took her by the elbow, stopping her. Eddie Jacubois was out there on a county road, hed just stopped a Jetta for some violations speeding was the logical assumption and he wanted to know if there were any red flags on the plate or the plateholder. He wanted to know because he was going to get out of his cruiser and approach the Jetta. He wanted to know because he was going to put his ass out on the line, same today as every day. Was the Jetta maybe stolen? Had it been involved in an accident at any time during the last six months? Had its owner been in court on charges of spousal abuse? Had he shot anyone? Robbed or raped anyone? Were there even outstanding parking tickets? Eddie had a right to know these things, if they were in the database. But Eddie also had a right to know why it was a high school kid who had just told him This is Statler, go ahead. I thought it was Eddies call. If he came back with Where the hell is Shirley, Id let go of her arm. And if Eddie rolled with it, I wanted to see what the kid would do. How the kid would do. Unit 12, hold for reply. If Ned was popping a sweat, it still didnt show in his voice. He turned to the computer monitor and keyed in Uniscope, the search engine used by the Pennsylvania State Police. He hit the keys rapidly but cleanly, then punched ENTER. There followed a moment of silence in which Shirley and I stood side by side, saying nothing and hoping in perfect unison. Hoping that the kid wouldnt freeze, hoping that he wouldnt suddenly push back the chair and bolt for the door, hoping most of all that he had sent the right code to the right place. It seemed like a long moment. I remember I heard a bird calling outside and, very distant, the drone of a plane. There was time to think about those chains of event some people insist on calling coincidence. One of those chains had broken when Neds father died on Route 32; here was another, just beginning to form. Eddie Jacubois never the sharpest knife in the drawer, Im afraid was now joined to Ned Wilcox. Beyond him, one link further down the new chain, was a Volkswagen Jetta. And whoever was driving it. Then: 12, this is Statler. 12. Jetta is registered to William Kirk Frady of Pittsburgh. He is previous... uh... wait... It was his only pause, and I could hear the hurried ruffle of paper as he looked for the card Shirley had given him, the one with the call-codes on it. He found it, looked at it, tossed it aside with an impatient little grunt. Through all this, Eddie waited patiently in his cruiser twelve miles west. He would be looking at Amish buggies, maybe, or a farmhouse with the curtain in one of the front windows pulled aslant, indicating that the Amish family living inside included a daughter of marriageable age, or over the hazy hills to Ohio. Only he wouldnt really be seeing any of those things. The only thing Eddie was seeing at that moment seeing clearly was the Jetta parked on the shoulder in front of him, the driver nothing but a silhouette behind the wheel. And what was he, that driver? Rich man? Poor man? Beggarman? Thief? Finally Ned just said it, which was exactly the right choice. 12, Frady is DUI times three, do you copy? Drunk man, thats what the Jettas driver was. Maybe not right now, but if he had been speeding, the likelihood was high. Copy, Statler. Perfectly laconic. Got a current laminate? Wanting to know if Fradys license to drive was currently valid. Ah... Ned peered frantically at the white letters on the blue screen. Right in front of you, kiddo, dont you see it? I held my

breath. Then: Affirmative, 12, he got it back three months ago. I let go of my breath. Beside me, Shirley let go of hers. This was good news for Eddie, too. Frady was legal, and thus less likely to be crazy. That was the rule of thumb, anyway. 12 on approach, Eddie sent. Copy that? Copy, 12 on approach, standing by, Ned replied. I heard a click and then a large, unsteady sigh. I nodded to Shirley, who got moving again. Then I reached up and wiped my brow, not exactly surprised to find it was wet with sweat. Hows everything going? Shirley asked. Voice even and normal, saying that, as far as she was concerned, all was quiet on the western front. Eddie Jacobois called in, Ned told her. Hes 10-27. Thats an operator check, in plain English. If youre a Trooper, you know that it also means citing the operator for some sort of violation, in nine cases out of ten. Now Neds voice wasnt quite steady, but so what? Now it was all right for it to jig and and jag a little. Hes got a guy in a Jetta out on Highway 99. I handled it. Tell me how, Shirley said. Go through your procedure. Every step, Ned. Quicks you can. I went on my way. Phil Candleton intercepted me at the door to my office. He nodded toward the dispatch cubicle. Howd the kid do? Did all right, I said, and stepped past him into my own cubicle. I didnt realize my legs had gone rubbery until I sat down and felt them trembling. *** His sisters, Joan and Janet, were identicals. They had each other, and their mother had a little bit of her gone man in them: Curtiss blue, slightly uptilted eyes, his blonde hair, his full lips (the nickname in Curts yearbook, under his name, had been Elvis). Michelle had her man in her son, as well, where the resemblance was even more striking. Add a few crows-feet around the eyes and Ned could have been his own father when Curtis first came on the cops. Thats what they had. What Ned had was us. *** One day in April he came into the barracks with a great big sunny smile on his face. It made him look younger and sweeter. But, I remember thinking, we all of us look younger and sweeter when we smile our real smilethe ones that come when we are genuinely happy and not just trying to play some dumb social game. It struck me fresh that day because Ned didnt smile much. Certainly not big. I dont think I realized it until that day because he was polite and responsive and quickwitted. A pleasure to have around, in other words. You didnt notice how grave he was until that rare day when you saw him brighten up and shine. He came to the center of the room, and all the little conversations stopped. He had a paper in his hand. There was a complicated-looking gold seal at the top. Pitt! he said, holding the paper up in both hands like an Olympic judges scorecard. I got into Pitt, you guys! And they gave me a scholarship! Almost a full boat! Everyone applauded. Shirley kissed him smack on the mouth, and the kid blushed all the way down to his collar. Huddie Royer, who was off-duty that day and just hanging around, stewing about some case in which he had to testify, went out and came back with a bag of Lil Debbie cakes. Arky used his key to open the soda machine, and we had a party. Half an hour or so, no more, but it was good while it lasted. Everyone shook Neds hand, the acceptance letter from Pitt made its way around the room (twice, I think), and a couple of cops whod been at home dropped by just to talk to him and pass along their congrats. Then, of course, the real world got back into the act. Its quiet over here in western Pennsylvania, but not dead. There was a farmhouse fire in Pogus City (which is a city about as much as Im the Archduke Ferdinand), and an overturned Amish buggy on Highway 20. The Amish keep to themselves, but theyll gladly take a little outside help in a case like that. The horse was okay, which was the big thing. The worst buggy fuckups happen on Friday and Saturday nights, when the younger bucks in black have a tendency to get drunk out behind the barn. Sometimes they get a worldly person to buy them a bottle or a case of Iron City beer, and sometimes they drink their own stuff, a really murderous corn shine you wouldnt wish on your worst enemy. Its just part of the scene; its our world, and mostly we like it, including the Amish with their big neat farms and the orange triangles on the backs of their small neat buggies. And theres always paperwork, the usual stacks of duplicate and triplicate in my office. It gets worse every year. Why I ever wanted to be the guy in charge is beyond me now. I took the test that qualified me for Sergeant Commanding when Tony Schoondist suggested it, so I must have had a reason back then, but these days it seems to elude me. Around six oclock I went out back to have a smoke. We have a bench there facing the parking lot. Beyond it is a very pretty western view. Ned Wilcox was sitting on the bench with his acceptance letter from Pitt in one hand and tears rolling down his face. He glanced at me, then looked away, scrubbing his eyes with the palm of his hand. I sat down beside him, thought about putting my arm around his shoulder, didnt do it. If you have to think about a thing like that, doing it usually feels phony. I guess, anyway. I have never married, and what I know about fathering you could write on the head of a pin with room left over for the Lords Prayer. I lit a cigarette and smoked it awhile. Its all right, Ned, I said eventually. It was the only thing I could think of, and I had no idea what it meant. I know, he replied at once in a muffled, trying-not-to-cry voice, and then, almost as if it was part of the same sentence, a continuation of the same thought: No it aint. Hearing him use that word, that aint, made me realize how bad he was hurt.

Something had gored him in the stomach. It was the sort of word he would have trained himself out of long ago, just so he wouldn't be lumped with the rest of the Statler County hicks, the pickup-truck-n-snowmobile gomers from towns like Patchin and Pogus City. Even his sisters, eight years younger than he was, had probably given up aint by then, and for much the same reasons. Don't say aint or your mother will faint and your father will fall in a bucket of paint. Yeah, what father? I smoked and said nothing. On the far side of the parking lot by one of the county roadsalt piles was a cluster of wooden buildings that needed either sprucing up or tearing down. They were the old Motor Pool buildings. Statler County had moved its plows, graders, dozers, and asphalt rollers a mile or so down the road ten years before, into a new brick facility that looked like a prison lockdown unit. All that remained here was the one big pile of salt (which we were using ourselves, little by little once upon a time, that pile had been a mountain) and a few ramshackle wooden buildings. One of them was Shed B. The black-paint letters over the door one of those wide garage doors that run up on rails were faded but still legible. Was I thinking about the Buick Roadmaster inside as I sat there next to the crying boy, wanting to put my arm around him and not knowing how? I don't know. I guess I might have been, but I don't think we know all the things we're thinking. Freud might have been full of shit about a lot of things, but not that one. I don't know about a subconscious, but there's a pulse in our heads, all right, same as there's one in our chests, and it carries unformed, no-language thoughts that most times we can't even read, and they are usually the important ones. Ned rattled the letter. He's the one I really want to show this to. He's the one who wanted to go to Pitt when he was a kid but couldn't afford it. He's the reason I applied, for God's sake. A pause; then, almost too low to hear: This is fucked up, Sandy. What did your mother say when you showed her? That got a laugh, watery but genuine. She didn't say. She screamed like a lady who just won a trip to Bermuda on a gameshow. Then she cried. Ned turned to me. His own tears had stopped, but his eyes were red and swollen. He looked a hell of a lot younger than eighteen just then. The sweet smile resurfaced for a moment. Basically, she was great about it. Even the Little Js were great about it. Like you guys. Shirley kissing me... man, I got goosebumps. I laughed, thinking that Shirley might have raised a few goose-bumps of her own. She liked him, he was a handsome kid, and the idea of playing Mrs. Robinson might have crossed her mind. Probably not, but it wasn't impossible. Her husband had been out of the picture almost twenty years by then. Ned's smile faded. He rattled the acceptance letter again. I knew this was yes as soon as I took it out of the mailbox. I could just tell, somehow. And I started missing him all over again. I mean fierce. I know, I said, but of course I didn't. My own father was still alive, a hale and genially profane man of seventy-four. At seventy, my mother was all that and a bag of chips. Ned sighed, looking off at the hills. How he went out is just so dumb, he said. I can't even tell my kids, if I ever have any, that Grampy went down in a hail of bullets while foiling the bank robbers or the militia guys who were trying to put a bomb in the county courthouse. Nothing like that. No, I agreed, nothing like that. I can't even say it was because he was careless. He was just... a drunk just came along and just... He bent over, wheezing like an old man with a cramp in his belly, and this time I at least put my hand on his back. He was trying so hard not to cry, that's what got to me. Trying so hard to be a man, whatever that means to an eighteen-year-old boy. Ned. It's all right. He shook his head violently. If there was a God, there'd be a reason, he said. He was looking down at the ground. My hand was still on his back, and I could feel it heaving up and down, like he'd just run a race. If there was a God, there'd be some kind of thread running through it. But there isn't. Not that I can see. If you have kids, Ned, tell them their grandfather died in the line of duty. Then take them here and show them his name on the plaque, with all the others. He didn't seem to hear me. I have this dream. It's a bad one. He paused, thinking how to say it, then just plunged ahead. I dream it was all a dream. Do you know what I'm saying? I nodded. I wake up crying, and I look around my room, and it's sunny. Birds are singing. It's morning. I can smell coffee downstairs and I think, He's okay. Jesus and thank you God, the old man's okay. I don't hear him talking or anything, but I just know. And I think what a stupid idea it was, that he could be walking up the side of some guys' rig to give him a warning about a flapper and just get creamed by a drunk, the sort of idea you could only have in a stupid dream where everything seems so real... and I start to swing my legs out of bed... sometimes I see my ankles go into a patch of sun... it even feels warm... and then I wake up for real, and it's dark, and I've got the blankets pulled up around me but I'm still cold, shivering and cold, and I know that the dream was a dream. That's awful, I said, remembering that as a boy I'd had my own version of the same dream. It was about my dog. I thought to tell him that, then didn't. Grief is grief, but a dog is not a father. It wouldn't be so bad if I had it every night. Then I think I'd know, even while I was asleep, that there's no smell of coffee, that it's not even morning. But it doesn't come... doesn't come... and then when it finally does, I get fooled again. I'm so happy and relieved, I even think of something nice I'll do for

him, like buy him that five-iron he wanted for his birthday... and then I wake up. I get fooled all over again. Maybe it was the thought of his fathers birthday, not celebrated this year and never to be celebrated again, that started fresh tears running down his cheeks. I just hate getting fooled. Its like when Mr. Jones came down and got me out of World History class to tell me, but even worse. Because Im alone when I wake up in the dark. Mr. Grenvillehes the guidance counselor at schoolsays time heals all wounds, but its been almost a year and Im still having that dream. I nodded. I was remembering Ten-Pound, shot by a hunter one November, growing stiff in his own blood under a white sky when I found him. A white sky promising a winters worth of snow. In my dream it was always another dog when I got close enough to see, not Ten-Pound at all, and I felt that same relief. Until I woke up, at least. And thinking of Ten-Pound made me think, for a moment, of our barracks mascot back in the old days. Mister Dillon, his name had been, after the TV sheriff played by James Arness. A good dog. I know that feeling, Ned. Do you? He looked at me hopefully. Yes. And it gets better. Believe me, it does. But he was your Dad, not a schoolmate or a neighbor from down the road. You may still be having that dream next year at this time. You may even be having it ten years on, every once in awhile. Thats horrible. No, I said. Thats memory. If there was a reason. He was looking at me earnestly. A damn reason. Do you get that? Of course I do. Is there one, do you think? I thought of telling him I didnt know about reasons, only about chainshow they form themselves, link by link, out of nothing; how they knit themselves into the world. Sometimes you can grab a chain and use it to pull yourself out of a dark place. Mostly, though, I think you get wrapped up in them. Just caught, if youre lucky. Fucking strangled, if youre not. I found myself gazing across the parking lot at Shed B again. Looking at it, I thought that if I could get used to what was stored in its dark interior, Ned Wilcox could get used to living a fatherless life. People can get used to just about anything. Thats the best of our lives, I guess. Of course, its the horror of them, too. Sandy? What do you think? I think that youre asking the wrong guy. I know about work, and hope, and putting a nut away for the GDR. He grinned. In Troop D, everyone talked very seriously about the GDR, as though it were some complicated subdivision of law enforcement. It actually stood for golden days of retirement. I think it might have been Huddie Royer who first started talking about the GDR. I also know about preserving the chain of evidence so no smart defense attorney can kick your legs out from under you in court and make you look like a fool. Beyond that, Im just another confused American male. At least youre honest, he said. But was I? Or was I begging the goddam question? I didnt feel particularly honest right then; I felt like a man who cant swim looking at a boy who is floundering in deep water. And once again Shed B caught my eye. Is it cold in here? this boys father had asked, back in the once-upon-a-time, back in the day. Is it cold in here, or is it just me? No, it hadnt been just him. What are you thinking about, Sandy? Nothing worth repeating, I said. What are you doing this summer? Huh? What are you doing this summer? It wouldnt be golfing in Maine or boating on Lake Tahoe, that was for sure; scholarship or no scholarship, Ned was going to need all of the old folding green he could get. County Parks and Rec again, I suppose, he said with a marked lack of enthusiasm. I worked there last summer until... you know. Until his Dad. I nodded. I got a letter from Tom McClannahan last week, saying he was holding a place open for me. He mentioned coaching Little League, but thats just the carrot on the end of the stick. Mostly itll be swinging a spade and setting out sprinklers, just like last year. I can swing a spade, and Im not afraid of getting my hands dirty. But Tom... He shrugged instead of finishing. I knew what Ned was too discreet to say. There are two kinds of work-functional alcoholics, those who are just too fucking mean to fall down and those so sweet that other people go on covering for them way past the point of insanity. Tom was one of the mean ones, the last sprig on a family tree full of plump county hacks going back to the nineteenth century. The McClannahans had fielded a Senator, two members of the House of Representatives, half a dozen Pennsylvania Representatives, and Statler County trough-hogs beyond counting. Tom was, by all accounts, a mean boss with no ambition to climb the political totem pole. What he liked was telling kids like Ned, the ones who had been raised to be quiet and respectful, where to squat and push. And of course for Tom, they never squatted deep enough or pushed hard enough. Dont answer that letter yet, I said. I want to make a call before you do. I thought hed be curious, but he only nodded his head. I looked at him sitting there, holding the letter on his lap, and thought that he looked like a boy who has been denied a place in the college of his choice instead of being offered a fat scholarship incentive to go there. Then I thought again. Not just denied a place in college, maybe, but in life itself. That wasnt true the letter hed gotten from Pitt was only one of the things that proved itbut Ive no doubt he felt that way just then. I dont know why success often leaves us feeling lower-spirited than failure, but I know its true. And remember that he was just eighteen, a Hamlet age if there ever was one. I looked across the parking lot again at Shed B, thinking about

what was inside. Not that any of us really knew. *** My call the following morning was to Colonel Teague in Butler, which is our regional headquarters. I explained the situation, and waited while he made a call, presumably to Scranton, where the big boys hang their hats. It didnt take long for Teague to get back to me, and the news was good. I then spoke to Shirley, although that was little more than a formality; she had liked the father well enough, but outright doted on the son. When Ned came in that afternoon after school, I asked him if hed like to spend the summer learning dispatch and getting paid for it instead of listening to Tom McClannahan bitch and moan down at Parks and Rec. For a moment he looked stunned... hammered, almost. Then he broke out in an enormous delighted grin. I thought he was going to hug me. If Id actually put my arm around him the previous evening instead of just thinking about it, he probably wouldve. As it was, he settled for clenching his hands into fists, raising them to the sides of his face, and hissing Yesssss! Shirleys agreed to take you on as prentice, and youve got the official okay from Butler. It aint swinging a shovel for McClannahan, of course, but This time he did hug me, laughing as he did it, and I liked it just fine. I could get used to something like that. When he turned around, Shirley was standing there with two Troopers flanking her: Huddie Royer and George Stankowski. All of them looking as serious as a heart attack in their gray uniforms. Huddie and George were wearing their lids, making them look approximately nine feet tall. You dont mind? Ned asked Shirley. Really? Ill teach you everything I know, Shirley said. Yeah? Huddie asked. Whats he going to do after the first week? Shirley threw him an elbow; it went in just above the butt of his Beretta and landed on target. Huddie gave an exaggerated oof! sound and staggered. Got something for you, kid, George said. He spoke quietly and gave Ned his best you-were-doing-sixty-in-a-hospital-zone stare. One hand was behind his back. What? Ned asked, sounding a little nervous in spite of his obvious happiness. Behind George, Shirley, and Huddie, a bunch of other Troop Ds had gathered. Dont you ever lose it, Huddie said. Also quietly and seriously. What, you guys, what? More uneasy than ever. From behind his back, George produced a small white box. He gave it to the boy. Ned looked at it, looked at the Troopers gathered around him, then opened the box. Inside was a big plastic star with the words DEPUTY DAWG printed on it. Welcome to Troop D, Ned, George said. He tried to hold onto his solemn face and couldnt. He started to guffaw, and pretty soon they were all laughing and crowding around to shake Neds hand. Pretty funny, you guys, he said, a real belly-buster. He was smiling, but I thought he was on the verge of tears again. It was nothing you could see, but it was there. I think Shirley Pasternak sensed it, too. And when the kid excused himself to go to the head, I guessed he was going there to regain his composure, or to assure himself he wasnt dreaming again, or both. Sometimes when things go wrong, we get more help than we ever expected. And sometimes its still not enough. *** It was great having Ned around that summer.

Everyone liked him, and he liked being there. He particularly liked the hours he spent in dispatch with Shirley. Some of it was going over codes, but mostly it was learning the right responses and how to juggle multiple calls. He got good at it fast, shooting back requested information to the road units, playing the computer keys like it was a barrelhouse piano, liaising with other Troops when it was necessary, as it was after a series of violent thunderstorms whipped through western PA one evening toward the end of June. There were no tornadoes, thank God, but there were high winds, hail, and lightning. The only time he came close to panic was a day or two later, when a guy taken before the Statler County magistrate suddenly went nuts and started running all over the place, pulling off his clothes and yelling about Jesus Penis. Thats what the guy called him; Ive got it in a report somewhere. About four different Troopers called in, a couple who were on-scene, a couple who were busting ass to get there. While Ned was trying to figure out how to deal with this, a Trooper from Butler called in, saying he was out on 99, in high-speed pursuit of... blurk! Transmission ceased. Ned presumed the guy had rolled his cruiser, and he presumed right (the Butler Troop, a rookie, came out all right, but his ride was totaled and the suspect he was chasing got away clean). Ned bawled for Shirley, backing away from the computer, the phones, and the mike as if they had suddenly gotten hot. She took over fast, but still took time to give him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek before slipping into the seat he had vacated. Nobody was killed or even hurt badly, and Mr. Jesus Penis went to Statler Memorial for observation. It was the only time I saw Ned flustered, but he shook it off. And learned from it. On the whole, I was impressed. Shirley loved teaching him, too. That was no real surprise; shed already demonstrated a willingness to risk her job by doing it without official sanction. She did know we all did that Ned had no intention of making police work his career, he never gave us so much as a hint of that, but it made no difference to Shirley. And he liked being around. We knew that, too. He liked the pressure and the tension, fed on it. There was that one lapse, true, but I was actually glad to see it. It was good to know it wasnt just a computer-game to him; he understood that he was moving real people around on his

electronic chessboard. And if Pitt didnt work out, who knew? He was already better than Matt Babicki, Shirleys predecessor. *** In early July it could have been a year to the day since his father had been killed, for all I know the kid came to me about Shed B. There was a rap on the side of my door, which I mostly leave open, and when I looked up he was standing there in a sleeveless Steelers T-shirt and old blue jeans, a cleaning rag dangling out of each rear pocket. I knew what it was about right away. Maybe it was the rags, or maybe it was something in his eyes. Thought it was your day off, Ned. Yeah, he said, then shrugged. There were just some chores Id been meaning to do. And... well... when you come out for a smoke, theres something I want to ask you about. Pretty excited, by the sound of him. No time like the present, I said, getting up. You sure? I mean, if youre busy Im not busy, I said, though I was. Lets go. *** It was early afternoon on the sort of day thats common enough in the Short Hills Amish country during midsummer: overcast and hot, the heat magnified by a syrupy humidity that hazed the horizon and made our part of the world, which usually looks big and generous to me, appear small and faded instead, like an old snapshot thats lost most of its color. From the west came the sound of unfocused thunder. By suppertime there might be more storms wed been having them three days a week since the middle of June, it seemed but now there was only the heat and the humidity, wringing the sweat from you as soon as you stepped out of the air conditioning. Two rubber pails stood in front of the Shed B door, a bucket of suds and a bucket of rinse. Sticking out of one was the handle of a squeegee. Curts boy was a neat worker. Phil Candleton was currently sitting on the smokers bench, and he gave me a wise glance as we passed him and walked across the parking lot. I was doing the barracks windows, Ned was explaining, and when I finished, I took the buckets over there to dump. He pointed at the waste ground between Shed B and Shed C, where there were a couple of rusting plow blades, a couple of old tractor tires, and a lot of weeds. Then I decided what the heck, Ill give those shed windows a quick once-over before I toss the water. The ones on Shed C were filthy, but the ones on B were actually pretty clean. That didnt surprise me. The small windows running across the front of Shed B had been looked through by two (perhaps even three) generations of Troopers, from Jackie OHara to Eddie Jacobois. I could remember guys standing at those roll-up doors like kids at some scary sideshow exhibit. Shirley had taken her turns, as had her predecessor, Matt Babicki; come close, darlings, and see the living crocodile. Observe his teeth, how they shine. Neds Dad had once gone inside with a rope around his waist. Id been in there. Huddie, of course, and Tony Schoondist, the old Sergeant Commanding. Tony, whose last name no one could spell on account of the strange way it was pronounced (Shane-dinks), was four years in an assisted living institution by the time Ned officially came to work at the barracks. A lot of us had been in Shed B. Not because we wanted to but because from time to time we had to. Curtis Wilcox and Tony Schoondist became scholars (Roadmaster instead of Rhodes), and it was Curt who hung the round thermometer with the big numbers you could read from outside. To see it, all you had to do was lean your brow against one of the glass panes which ran along the roll-up door at a height of about five and a half feet, then cup your hands to the sides of your face to cut the glare. That was the only cleaning those windows would have gotten before Curts boy showed up; the occasional polishing by the foreheads of those who had come to see the living crocodile. Or, if you want to be literal, the shrouded shape of something that almost looked like a Buick 8-cylinder. It was shrouded because we threw a tarpaulin over it, like a sheet over the body of a corpse. Only every now and then the tarp would slide off. There was no reason for that to happen, but from time to time it did. That was no corpse in there. Look at it! Ned said when we got there. He ran the words all together, like an enthusiastic little kid. What a neat old car, huh? Even better than my Dads Bel Air! Its a Buick, I can tell that much by the portholes and the grille. Must be from the mid-fifties, wouldnt you say? Actually it was a 54, according to Tony Schoondist, Curtis Wilcox, and Ennis Rafferty. Sort of a 54. When you got right down to it, it wasnt a 1954 at all. Or a Buick. Or even a car. It was something else, as we used to say in the days of my misspent youth. Meanwhile, Ned was going on, almost babbling. But its in cherry condition, you can see that from here. It was so weird, Sandy! I looked in and at first all I saw was this hump. Because the tarp was on it. I started to wash the windows... Only what he actually said was warsh the windas, because thats how we say it in this part of the world, where the Giant Eagle supermarket becomes Jaunt Iggle. ... and there was this sound, or two sounds, really, a wissssh and then a thump. The tarp slid off the car while I was washing the windows! Like it wanted me to see it, or something! Now is that weird or is that weird? Thats pretty weird, all right, I said. I leaned my forehead against the glass (as I had done many times before) and cupped my hands to the sides of my face, eliminating what reflection there was on this dirty day. Yes, it looked like an old Buick, all right, but almost cherry, just as the kid had said. That distinctive fifties Buick grille, which looked to me like the mouth of a chrome crocodile. Whitewall tires.

Fenderskirts in the backyow, baby, we used to say, too cool for school. Looking into the gloom of Shed B, you probably would have called it black. It was actually midnight blue. Buick did make a 1954 Roadmaster in midnight blue Schoondist checked but never one of that particular type. The paint had a kind of textured flaky look, like a kids duded-up streetrod. Thats earthquake country in there, Curtis Wilcox said. I jumped back. Dead a year or not, he spoke directly into my left ear. Or something did. Whats wrong? Ned asked.

You look like you saw a ghost. Heard one, I almost said. What I did say was Nothing. You sure? You jumped. Goose walked over my grave, I guess. Im okay. So whats the story on the car? Who owns it? What a question that was. I dont know, I said. Well, whats it doing just sitting there in the dark? Man, if I had a nice-looking street-custom like that and vintage! Id never keep it sitting in a dirty old shed. Then an idea hit him. Is it, like, some criminals car? Evidence in a case? Call it a repo, if you want. Theft of services. Its what wed called it. Not much, but as Curtis himself had once said, you only need one nail to hang your hat on.

What services? Seven dollars worth of gas. I couldnt quite bring myself to tell him who had pumped it. Seven dollars? Thats all? Well, I said, you only need one nail to hang your hat on. He looked at me, puzzled. I looked back at him, saying nothing. Can we go in? he asked finally. Take a closer look? I put my forehead back against the glass and read the thermometer hanging from the beam, as round and bland as the face of the moon. Tony Schoondist had bought it at the Tru-Value in Statler, paying for it out of his own pocket instead of Troop D petty cash. And Neds father had hung it from the beam. Like a hat on a nail. Although the temperature out where we were standing had to be at least eighty-five, and everyone knows heat builds up even higher in poorly ventilated sheds and barns, the thermometers big red needle stood spang between the fives of 55. Not just now, I said. Why not? And then, as if he realized that sounded impolite, perhaps even impudent: Whats wrong with it? Right now its not safe. He studied me for several seconds. The interest and lively curiosity drained out of his face as he did, and he once more became the boy I had seen so often since he started coming by the barracks, the one Id seen most clearly on the day hed been accepted at Pitt. The boy sitting on the smokers bench with tears rolling down his cheeks, wanting to know what every kid in history wants to know when someone they love is suddenly yanked off the stage: why does it happen, why did it happen to me, is there a reason or is it all just some crazy roulette wheel? If it means something, what do I do about it? And if it means nothing, how do I bear it? Is this about my father? he asked. Was that my Dads car? His intuition was scary. No, it hadnt been his fathers car... how could it be, when it wasnt really a car at all? Yes, it had been his fathers car. And mine... Huddie Royers... Tony Schoondists... Ennis Raffertys. Enniss most of all, maybe. Enniss in a way the rest of us could never equal. Never wanted to equal. Ned had asked who the car belonged to, and I supposed the real answer was Troop D, Pennsylvania State Police. It belonged to all the Troopers, past and present, who had ever known what we were keeping out in Shed B. But for most of the years it had spent in our custody, the Buick had been the special property of Tony and Neds Dad. They were its curators, its Roadmaster Scholars. Not exactly your Dads, I said, knowing Id hesitated too long. But he knew about it. Whats to know? And did my Mom know, too? Nobody knows these days except for us, I said. Troop D, you mean. Yes. And thats how its going to stay. There was a cigarette in my hand that I barely remembered lighting. I dropped it to the macadam and crushed it out. Its our business. I took a deep breath. But if you really want to know, Ill tell you. Youre one of us now... close enough for government work, anyway. His father used to say that, too all the time, and things like that have a way of sticking. You can even go in there and look. When? When the temperature goes up. I dont get you.

Whats the temperature in there got to do with anything? I get off at three today, I said, and pointed at the bench. Meet me there, if the rain holds off. If it doesnt, well go upstairs or down to the Country Way Diner, if youre hungry. I expect your father would want you to know. Was that true? I actually had no idea. Yet my impulse to tell him seemed strong enough to qualify as an intuition, maybe even a direct order from beyond. Im not a religious man, but I sort of believe in such things. And I thought about the oldtimers saying kill or cure, give that curious cat a dose of satisfaction. Does knowing really satisfy? Rarely, in my experience. But I didnt want Ned leaving for Pitt in September the way he was in July, with his usual sunny nature flickering on and off like a lightbulb that isnt screwed all the way in. I thought he had a right to some answers.

Sometimes there are none, I know that, but I felt like trying. Felt I had to try, in spite of the risks. Earthquake country, Curtis Wilcox said in my ear. Thats earthquake country in there, so be careful. Goose walk over your grave again, Sandy? the boy asked me. I guess it wasnt a goose, after all, I said. But it was something. *** The rain held off. When I went out to join Ned on the bench which faces Shed B across the parking lot, Arky Arkanian was there, smoking a cigarette and talking Pirate baseball with the kid. Arky made as if to leave when I showed up, but I told him to stay put. Im going to tell Ned about the Buick we keep over there,

I said, nodding toward the shed across the way. If he decides to call for the men in the white coats because the Troop D Sergeant Commanding has lost his shit, you can back me up. After all, you were here. Arkys smile faded. His iron-gray hair fluffed around his head in the limp, hot breeze that had sprung up. You sure dat a good idear, Sarge? Curiosity killed the cat, I said, but satisfaction brought him back, Shirley finished from behind me. A great big dose of it, is what Trooper Curtis Wilcox used to say. Can I join you? Or is this the Boys Club today? No sex discrimination on the smokers bench, I said. Join us, please. Like me, Shirley had just finished her shift and Steff Colucci had taken her place at dispatch. She sat next to Ned, gave him a smile, and brought a pack of Parliaments out of her purse. It was two-double-oh-two, we all knew better, had for years, and we went right on killing ourselves. Amazing. Or maybe, considering we live in a world where drunks can crush State Troopers against the sides of eighteen-wheelers and where make-believe Buicks show up from time to time at real gas stations, not so amazing. Anyway, it was nothing to me right then.

Right then I had a story to tell.