

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER ONE - POOLNAPPING

'To be embraced and sustained by the light green water'
-- John Cheever, "The Swimmer"

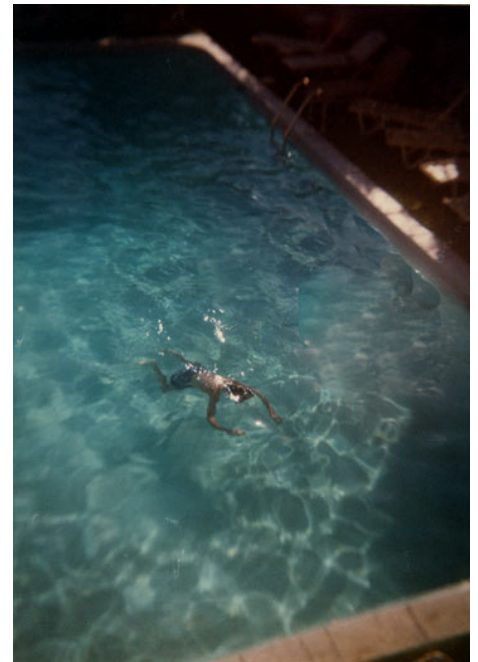
(West Vancouver, July 1966)

At midnight Leo is up on the roof beneath a full moon, his skinny butt planted on the ridgeline. Looking south across the inlet at the lights on the Vancouver side, he puffs on a Tiparillo discovered last Sunday while vacuuming his dad's Volvo. He does not inhale.

The night is warm, as balmy as the nights back in California. The tide is down, the foreshore smell strong. He is shirtless and barefoot, and a breeze off the water runs soothing ghostly fingers over his sunburnt shoulders and through his hair, which is stiff with salt from the day's swimming.

To the west, a few miles upshore, the lighthouse beacon at Point Atkinson flashes at five-second intervals.

A pair of binoculars hangs round his neck. Tucked in his right ear is a soft plastic tube attached by a wire to a six-transistor radio jammed in the waistband of his cut-off Levis. 'Monday Monday' fades now, is succeeded by Boss Jock jabber then the ad for Thunderball at the drive-ins. He clicks off the radio, takes a last drag on his Tiparillo and butts it on a shingle, then listens to the night: the light slap of waves on the beach; the whoosh of a car east-bound on Marine Drive; the low jazz and conversational murmur drifting up from the open patio doors two floors below.



A gust of hilarity rises from the company downstairs. It's Saturday night in West Van, a fine summer's eve and dinner parties are legion, like tennis lessons in May, like Hawaiian vacations at Christmas. The local babysitters are all booked, have been since Wednesday. From one end to the other of this green, prosperous, ocean-hugging suburb the grown-ups have entrusted their children to the care of teenage girls and gathered together in one another's living rooms, on one another's lawns and patios. Life, they say, begins at forty -- an amazing claim if ever Leo has heard one.

The party below consists of his parents' usual mix of professional and academic couples, the former drawn from the neighbourhood mostly, the latter imported from the new university atop the mountain to the east where his father has worked for the past couple years, since shortly after their move north.

Leo has said his goodnights an hour ago. He is grounded tonight, the consequence of his involvement in a recent, unfortunate incident involving the detonation of a beer-bottle Molotov cocktail on the beach in proximity to a small, duck-like bird identified at a subsequent SPCA inquest as a female baldpate widgeon. Though he had been a mere onlooker -- the bomber was in fact his brother (step-brother, to be exact) -- it was Leo's bad luck to be the one seen fleeing the scene by a neighbour; and, since he denied accomplices, the ensuing sanctions had fallen upon him alone -- fallen despite his protestations that the bird had strayed unobserved onto ground zero, that its incineration was not intentional, and that the firebombing had been carried out in a spirit of scientific inquiry. Consequently it is he who is grounded tonight, while Russ remains at liberty to enjoy his Saturday night, unpunished and scot-free.

An injustice not unprecedented in the history of their fraternal or semi-fraternal relationship...

From his present vantage point Leo can see three gatherings similar to the one downstairs strung out along the curve of the eastern shore. He raises his binoculars and zeroes in on the most distant of these, which also is operating on the grandest scale. Adjusting focus, he pans over the exterior of an imposingly large house, a mansion. It's a real cliff-hanger, a gravity-defying four stories of West Coast Modern spilling down the sheer rock face of the point at the end of the bay: open plan, cedar post-and-beam, lots of glass -- in fact mostly glass from this angle, facing him across the water at a distance of perhaps half a mile.

The place belongs to Nick DiPuma, the Realtor King, subject last year of a series of newspaper exposés linking him to organized crime, a series much discussed round Leo's dinner table and recently ruled libelous on appeal.

In a community noted for its grand residences the DiPuma house is one of the grandest. More importantly, it is accessorized by the biggest swimming pool around and for this reason has been targeted for tonight's poolnapping excursion scheduled to get underway in about two hours. The fact that the house is presently teeming with guests does not particularly surprise or worry Leo. The DiPumas entertain most weekends in the summer and can be trusted to wind up reasonably early.

His view of the action couldn't be better. All the drapes are open and the place is radiant with electric light. Swarms of muddled moths mill around in front of the windows. Though there is activity on three of the four floors, the second one down is clearly the focus. Through the department-store-sized picture windows he can see

clusters of adults in evening dress, some of them seated, most on their feet. It's like a movie without a sound track. Mutely, they move their lips, contort their faces, gesticulate, raise glasses and cigarettes to their mouths. On the far side of the room, up close to the glass, a few couples are performing restrained, adult versions of what they probably believe to be the Frug.

Grown-ups à go go. Leo blows a contemptuous little gust of air down his nostrils and lowers his surveillance to sea level. Below the house and just above the beach lies a patio slightly smaller than a football field, a halfmoon affair dominated by an amoeboid hotel-sized pool. The area is lit by big orange Chinese lanterns strung like luminous basketballs along the eastern end, and by the pool's underwater lights, which throw a wavering yellow-green lustre across the lower face of the house and silhouette the figures of several stray guests who have draped themselves over the perimeter railing to take in the view. Nearby, a large, tripod-mounted telescope is aimed like a mortar at the moon.

He tilts back up past Party Central till he comes to a top-floor window giving on a salmon-pink interior, the scene three months ago of an exquisitely tormenting vision. On a night when he had been routinely scanning the eastern shore from his bedroom window, his binoculars chanced to settle on this same interior just as a striking older woman -- thirty, at least -- strode into view from stage right. Mrs. DiPuma presumably, who, according to a subsequent none-too-reliable source (his brother) had been either a Vegas showgirl or a Playboy Girl of the West -- or both -- in the Fifties.

He shuts his eyes and reviews the scene in memory for the umpteenth time. Once again she stood in profile, looking at something out of the frame; then bowed her head,

reached up, and undid her hairdo -- a bouffant affair à la Brigitte Bardot. With a flick of the fingers and a toss of the head she flipped the blonde mane back over her shoulders, swiped a brush through it a few times; then reached back, unzipped her dress, and shrugged it off. It slipped to the floor like the unveiling of some spectacular venerean statue. His hands were shaking so badly it was all he could do to keep his glasses on target. Down now to the most minimal of foundations -- black bikini brassiere and panties -- she hunched forward her bare tan shoulders and again reached back with both hands to unhook the bra. Then--

Then hesitated. Turned her face to the naked window. Stared across half a mile of black water into his pleading eyes. Moved to the window and reached up to one side, the curtains rushing together across the glass like heaven's gates crashing shut before the hopeless sinner...

He reopens his eyes, locks back on target, fine-tunes the focus. The bedroom is exposed tonight -- as it has not been since the night of his vision -- but it is empty. He lowers the binoculars, sighs, adjusts his cut-offs to accommodate an insistent fleshly expansion.

A flock of mosquitoes has discovered his position and is mounting an offensive. He bats the air around his head and prepares to retreat. Palms planted on the shingles, he elevates his rear and crabwalks down the sloping roof to his bedroom dormer. Once inside the room he hangs the binoculars on a wall hook between a Batman poster and a smudgy pencil tracing -- his own -- of Sandy Koufax, then goes to the door. Cautiously he pulls it open, tiptoes down the hall to the stairs, and -- avoiding squeakers --

descends to the second-floor landing outside his sisters' room. He squats by the newel-post and listens in on the party below, which, judging from the babble, has fragmented into small clusters and tête-à-têtes. Behind the voices he can hear the hi-fi softly playing, a breathy tenor sax and a lightly accented little-girl voice belonging (he mistakenly believes) to a singer named Gretchen Gilberto. He rises and retreats, having satisfied himself that the grown-ups will be at it for another hour or so.

Back in his room he stretches out on the lower bunk, temporarily his own what with Russ over at their cousin Kenny's place tonight. He leaves the lights off and watches the paired beams from the lighthouse rush around the walls and ceiling, playing over a large collection of felt pennants bearing the names of cities and teams. Nearly two hours yet till it is time to meet Russ and Kenny. He can feel the cool breeze from the window wash over his bare feet. Drowsing, he lets his eyelids droop shut...

He wakes to the sound of cars starting up in the driveway. Disoriented, he consults the clock on his night table. The pale green numerals float in the murk, a ghostly arithmetic vision. 1:45. The party must have been a success. He listens to the crunch of tires biting into gravel as he looks up at the moonlit squadron of model airplanes hanging by fish-line from the ceiling along with a Big Daddy Roth deuce coupe piloted by a grinning monster. Outside, a horn softly toots the first five notes of 'Shave and a Haircut'. Another – louder -- supplies the two-note coda.

He remembers his mission now and comes fully awake, his stomach tightening with anticipation. Thirty minutes till zero hour. He senses the front door shutting downstairs, a slight change in the air pressure made visible in the tremor of his curtains.

For the next quarter hour low voices can be heard moving around below, his parents debriefing one another as they tidy up. And arguing a bit, by the sound of it. The vacuum drones in the living room, the fridge door thumps, the pipes groan as the dishwasher goes into action. His curtains tremble again as the back door is opened and Mungo, mewing reproachfully, is expelled for the night. The stairs creak, water runs in the bathroom, the toilet rumbles, slippers shuffle, a door clicks shut.

Now the house is quiet.

Leo swings his legs to the floor and reaches for the lamp. Squinting against the sudden light, he looks round the room, which is an overwhelming Fiesta Orange, having been painted that colour -- including the overhead bulb and portions of the floor -- recently by his brother.

Again he checks the time. 2:05. Russ and Kenny are due along in ten minutes. He kneels on the floor and reaches under the lower bunk and brings forth sundry objects: Russ's clarinet case and ski boots, his own baseball glove and skateboard and, finally, what he's looking for, his new wetsuit -- gift from his parents on his thirteenth birthday. He throws the suit up on the bed and pushes the rest of the stuff back underneath, then moves round the room gathering various shirts and towels, his grass-stained baseball uniform, and several magazines. He stuffs the right leg of the wetsuit with two rolled Mads, the left with a Sports Illustrated and a Life. The latter's cover story, recommended by Russ but as yet unread, concerns something called 'LSD -- The Exploding Threat of the Mind Drug That Got Out of Control'.

The towels and clothes go to fill out the torso and arms. He zips the thing up from crotch to neck and folds the black rubber arms over the chest, then rolls it on its side

facing the wall and manipulates it into a fetal curl. His football makes a plausible head when positioned on the pillow and covered with a bedsheet. Even in the bright moonlight the dummy is remarkably lifelike, certainly convincing enough to pass a bed check if necessary. He makes a couple final adjustments to the sheet, then pulls on his old bleeding-madras shirt, laces up his Converse, and slips feet first out the dormer, drawing the window down behind him.

At the western edge of the roof is the ladder left by the roofers, who for the past several days have been replacing the old asphalt shingles with new cedar. He descends, pausing halfway to stifle a sneeze as a whiff of smoke from somewhere tickles his nostrils; then down past the window of the study to the lawn below.

A lone figure is waiting in the shadows below the seawall. His brother. He sits hunched forward on a log, elbows on knees, flicking the striker wheel of his Zippo over and over again, producing each time a white spark but no flame. There is no sign of their cousin. The smell of lighter fluid is strong as Leo approaches across the rocky beach.

"Useless fuckin' thing's had the bun," grumbles Russ. "Fell in my fuckin' chocolate milk." The lighter promptly proves him wrong with a spurt of yellow flame. He grunts in mild surprise, raises it to the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, then snaps the brushed-chrome cap down on the flame and blows smoke Leo's way, looking past him back toward the sleeping house.

Leo peers down the beach toward their cousin's place three doors down. "So where's Kenny?"

Russ grimaces, drags on his Export 'A', then lets out a long, exasperated plume of smoke. "Fuckin' guy."

"He's not coming?"

"We had this mickey, this mickey of rye, and he drinks maybe a third of it but he'd already had some wine and he feels sick and goes and flakes out and then later when I wake him up and tell him it's time to go he goes running into the can and barfs and says he's too sick, he just wants to sleep. What a wimp!" Russ hawks and spits. "So I guess it's just you and me, Lee." Clearly this prospect does not thrill him. He makes no attempt to hide the lack of enthusiasm in his voice, which issues as a hoarse stage whisper only marginally less audible than his usual well-projected tenor. "Less Phil and Bobby show up."

"Keep it down, would you." Leo glances over his shoulder at the house behind them, then back at his brother: "Actually Phil called. He said to tell you they might be coming, he's not sure... They were going to see Thunderball again. Him and Carol and Bobby and what's-her-face, Darlene. At the drive-in."

"Yeah?" Russ scowls. Carol Thompson was his girlfriend briefly last year before he took up with Barb Goodman. The fact that it was he who dropped her does not seem to mitigate his annoyance at Phil's going out with her recently. He smiles falsely and shoots his eyebrows up and down in the suggestive manner of Groucho Marx.

"Thunderball at the drive-in, huh?" He thrusts out a longer than average tongue and waggles it obscenely. "Carol better watch out or he'll be chewing on her foot in the back seat like 007 on that frogman dame. How many times is that, anyhow?"

Leo looks down at the black pebbles at his feet, unnerved. He was himself much affected by the scene to which Russ alludes, the one where James Bond sucks deadly sea urchin spines from the delectable heel of the minimally bikinied Domino. He has in fact redreamt the episode on several occasions with himself standing in for Sean Connery as 007.

Russ is looking at him expectantly. "How many?"

"How many what?"

"Thunderball, dummy. Phil's seen it what, four times?"

"Three. That's nothing, though. Roachfart saw Sound of Music fourteen."

"Yeah. No wonder he's out of his fuckin' mind." Russ snorts dual jets of silverblue smoke. Roachfart is their French teacher and also Russ's band instructor, M. André Rochefort, a hyper-fastidious Montréalais; passionate proponent of the Flutophone; traducer of the music, hair, and lips of 'Meek Shag-air' and the Rolling 'Stuns'. Also Russ's bitter enemy ever since last Halloween, when a burning Safeway bag was deposited on the doorstep chez Rochefort by persons unknown (unseen, at least) and the doorbell rung. The bag's contents -- balled-up sheets of newsprint doused with lighter fluid and laid atop a sizeable collection of dog turds -- were only discovered in the process of stamping out the blaze. Or so legend has it.

(The fact that Russ excels both in band and French, as seemingly without effort he does in all his classes -- and indeed in most fields of endeavour generally -- pains Roachfart sorely. Leo likewise.)

Russ drags on his Export 'A' and French-inhales expertly, the smoke streaming in a smooth silver band from his mouth back up through his nostrils. He blows it out again

through pursed lips, passes the cigarette to Leo. "So. Did the Nutty Professor say you're still grounded?"

"Yup."

"Fuckin' bird."

A widgeon-ruing silence descends. When the cigarette is finished, they move off up the beach past dark waterfront houses, beneath the pier and past the marina, then past more houses until they reach the public beach half a mile along. A fire burns at the western edge under the cliffs. Silhouetted figures lounge on the surrounding logs. A bottle smashes, a girl laughs, a radio blares "Paint It Black". They listen to the voices long enough to determine that the people are unknown to them, then skirt the gathering and move past a cinderblock changing hut up to a chain-link fence. Three PRIVATE BEACH signs are prominently affixed to it, mocked by an equal number of gaping holes torn in the wire fabric. They duck through the nearest of these.

The DiPuma place is the fifth property past the fence. At the western end of its retaining wall a concrete staircase leads up to the patio. Russ climbs the steps and peers over the waist-high wrought-iron gate at top, then comes back down, shaking his head. "Nope. Nobody."

Leo sits down on the bottom step. "Maybe they'll be along in a few minutes."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Actually Phil said they might go over to Carol's place instead. He said her parents are out of town, in Mexico or somewhere."

"Christ, Lee! Why didn't you say so? No way they're gonna want to go swimming if they can be over at Carol's getting some nooky!" Even so they wait a few minutes,

sharing another of Russ's Export 'A's. When the cigarette is finished they give up and ascend the stairs cautiously, Leo feeling rather like 007 sneaking into the villainous Largo's Bahamian estate under cover of darkness in Thunderball.

The gate at the top is unlocked. They pass through it and find themselves standing next to a bathhouse at the deep end of the pool. The Chinese lanterns are extinguished now and the patio is dark, but the pool itself is luminous, lit from within by underwater lights. The water gradates from a pale aquamarine -- more green than blue -- at the shallow end, through intermediate greens to a vibrant turquoise in front of the curving fiberglass slide at the deep end. A single sodium vapour lamp burns a little way back of the slide, lighting the path up to the house and casting an intricate trembling net of orange light across the breeze-ruffled water.

They stand in silence a moment, entranced. Russ breaks the spell with a low, appreciative whistle, then walks over to a canopied glass-topped table near the bathhouse. Atop it are a white Princess phone, two champagne glasses, a snorkel and a face mask. He eases down into a beige canvas director's chair adjoining the table and picks up one of the glasses and sniffs at it, drains the dregs. Then picks up the handset and waves Leo over and begins dialing a number. "Lee, I need you to do the open party thing on Carol, she doesn't know your voice. You know that one, right? 'We heard there was a party...?'" He holds out the handset.

Leo backs away, showing him his palms: "No way."

"YES way. Don't be such a wuss, man... just do it. You owe me for doing the lawn last week."

"Yeah but I washed the--"

"Here, it's ringing. Do it." He thrusts the instrument into Leo's hand.

Leo stares at it askance, then slowly raises it to his ear. "Hello? ... Carol? Is that Carol? ... Uh hi Carol, you don't know me but I heard, like me and my friends heard that there was a party over at your--"

Russ leans forward, hisses: "From Phil Macdonald."

"Uh we were talking to Phil Macdonald, me and these friends of mine, and he said there was a party happening over at your place, Phil did ... and that everyone was welcome and he gave us your number so uh I'm calling to see if it's okay to come by and also to get the address, okay? ... No? ... No? ... Phil did, Phil Macdonald... There's not? No? ... Okay, sorry ... Okay, I won't ... I promise ... Okay, bye."

Russ smiles and puts his finger down on the plunger. "Excellent. Phil's gonna have some 'splanin' to do." He takes back the handset and dials another number. Receiver to ear, he waves Leo over and mouths the word 'Roachfart'.

Leo looks around uneasily. "Is that a good idea?"

"It's an excellent idea, Lee... fantastic idea."

Leo leans down and hears a curt accented voice answer on the sixth ring. His brother sits up straight and launches into his Maurice Chevalier impression.

"Ah, bonsoir monsieur. Ici est ze téléphone com-pan-ee. We are checking ze lines in your ex-shange and we very ap-pree-zee-ate you for to stand fifteen feet back from vôtre téléphone and for to shout very very loud -- une voix forte, s'il vous plaît -- zo zat we can test ze volume of ze... Sacré bleu, monsieur! You cannot address me in such a manner!... Ah, but zat ees jus' a guess, monsieur... And a grosse merde on you aussi,

monsieur!" He replaces the handset and stands up, looking thoughtful. "Fucker knew it was me. Said he'd see me in September."

They strip down to their shorts, leaving the rest of their clothing at the head of the stairs. On their way to the pool they stop to look at a sign on the bathhouse wall. A cartoon character resembling Fred Flintstone peeps sheepishly out of a toilet bowl. He is wearing a snorkel. Below: 'I don't swim in your toilet so please don't pee in my pool.'

"Yabba-dabba-do," observes Russ and moves ahead. Following him, Leo realizes that his own bladder is feeling tight.

They walk down to the shallow end and wade in, Russ forgoing his usual full-tilt entry in the interest of stealth. The green water is wonderful, warmer than the night air. Steam wisps up from the surface; the smell of chlorine is strong. Leo wades out until he is navel-deep, then plunges forward and glides to mid-pool. He duck-dives for bottom and follows the sloping tile floor down till he runs into the turning wall at the deep end. When he comes up Russ is treading water at mid-pool, waving something over his head. His trunks. He lobs them down to the shallow end. This seems an excellent idea and Leo adopts it, shedding his cut-offs and tossing them up on the concrete near the chrome ladder on the ocean side of the pool.

He shoves off the wall, rolls over, and floats blissfully on his back. Above, the full moon brightens the cloudless blue-black sky. As he watches the red and green running lights of a single-engine plane drift south toward the airport, his thoughts turn to the astronauts. He imagines them out there in space in their cramped capsule, sipping Tang Instant Breakfast Drink through special NASA straws and somehow negotiating the hazards of zero-gravity elimination.

Again, his bladder asserts itself with a little pang of discomfort.

Closing his eyes, he lets himself drift until the boundaries between his body and the warm green water begin to blur, then rolls over and does some slow laps, alternating between crawl and backstroke. After five lengths he stops and rests on the submerged steps at the shallow end. As he examines his white, wrinkled hands, Russ pops up beside him and spouts water like a fountain figure and says he is going to fetch the snorkel. He climbs out and strides across the concrete, water streaming in a glossy black trail behind him.

Leo moves down off the steps, squats in the shallow water, and -- with a furtive glance up at the house -- surrenders to the imperatives of his bladder. When he is done he moves away from the warm spot, plunges forward and down, determined to match his brother's feat of a length and a half underwater. In the instant between launch and entry he senses a flurry of peripheral motion, registers a fleeting impression of Russ standing at the side of the pool doing something kinetic with his arms.

When he surfaces at the deep end -- well shy of the record -- and looks back, Russ has vanished. Something has changed while he was underwater, but he can't immediately put his finger on what it might be. Another instant and he's got it: the patio lights have come on. The realization coincides with a voice directly behind him.

"I dreamed I caught some l'il dipshit swimmin' bareass in my pool in my Maidenform bra... like, me in the Maidenform bra, not the dipshit."

The voice is female and harsh and slurred. Leo whirls round in the water and stares up at a woman standing by the pool-slide not ten feet away. The shame of his

nakedness is suddenly revealed to him, as to Adam post-apple. He shields his groin with both hands; then, sinking, releases the right to tread water.

The woman is blonde and beehived and statuesque. She appears at first to be as naked as he himself but after a moment he realizes that in fact she is wearing a fleshtone bra and panties. Though she looks older up close than through his binoculars, she is without doubt the same woman viewed in a similar state of undress three months ago, and in subsequent dreams. There is a strange, tremulous smile on her face but it vanishes as soon as their eyes meet. Her mouth flies open; she gasps and looks down at him in amazement, her eyes bewildered and anguished. She starts to say something, then stops; her eyes narrow and suddenly she is very angry: "You l'il bastards just can't keep away, can you? Third time this month. I keep telling Nick we should just leave the goddamn thing empty! I keep telling him!"

Leo peers up at her anxiously. In one hand she is holding a cigarette fitted into a long black holder. In the other, a bottle, a big twenty-sixer. She is swaying back and forth noticeably and is, he now sees, quite dishevelled: lipstick and mascara smeared, hair a mess. "Did you have to pee in it? Didn't you see my dear hubby's droll little sign?"

Leo gapes. How could she know?

"No, honey, I'm not psychic. Look behind you." She stabs her cigarette at the shallow end. He cranes and sees that the water near the steps is clouded, a dull rust colour, as if someone had bled in it. His face flushes a comparable shade, chameleon fashion.

"It's called Aquaguard. Some kind of chemical... turns the water red if you make weewee. My husband's obsessed. Last one we caught was the au pair. Sent the little bitch back to Stuttgart." She laughs hoarsely and swigs from her bottle. It occurs to Leo that she may be drunk. He regards the depleted bottle in her hand and recognizes the red and white Smirnoff crest, familiar to him from his father's liquor cabinet, oft scrutinized.

"You little Pepsi Generation jerks really burn me. You think it's a goddamn toilet. Last Sunday morning my Jap gardener's little girl comes up, says there's a jellyfish in the pool so I go down and look and it turns out it's a goddamn rubber!" Her tone has modulated from weary sarcasm through indignation all the way up to screaming outrage. Leo stares up at her, alarmed and baffled, having misconstrued 'rubber'. Why would an overshoe in the pool bother her so much? How could anybody mistake one for a jellyfish?

Now he remembers the homonym, added just recently to his vocabulary, and takes her meaning. Again he reddens, recalling the proudly displayed bulge in Russ's wallet and its thrilling, barely imaginable function; recalling, too, the pale translucent bags bobbing in the sea; knotted, some of them, and revoltingly ballasted.

The woman's right hand makes a sudden movement and there's a short hiss near his left ear. He looks over and sees a cigarette butt floating on the surface of the water a foot away. The black holder cartwheels lazily down through the blue-green water and disappears. It takes him a moment to understand that she has snapped the thing at him.

When he looks up again she has turned away and is walking around the end of the pool. Unsteadily she makes her way over to the pool ladder on his right -- the ocean side -- and eases down between the gleaming chrome tubes, letting her bare feet dangle in the water. She stares at him strangely, then smiles with apparent warmth, her eyes bright. Leo begins to see that there is something wrong with her, something beyond drink and the wrath of the aggrieved property owner. When she speaks again her voice is slurred but surprisingly tender.

"D'you live aroun' here? You remin' me of my son... you've got his eyes... He would've been 'bout your age... His name was Jason." Her lips tremble, her face twists and she begins to weep.

Leo treads water, filled with fear and pity and near tears himself, experiencing as well a pang of sorrow as he thought of his own mother; that is, his real mother, blood mother, now as lost to him almost as surely as this woman's son was lost to her. He wondered sometimes if it might not have been easier to accept Karen's dying than her leaving, her inexplicable abandonment of his father and his infant self for an inexplicable new life and new family on the other side of the continent...

He looks over toward the stairs leading down to the beach and wonders what has become of Russ. Their shirts and sneakers are no longer on the top step. An excruciating minute crawls by, at the end of which he hears sirens approaching from the east. As their wailing mounts, the woman's sobbing eases. She looks up toward Marine Drive as three fire trucks howl by, their red mars lights sweeping three times across her agonized, suddenly ancient face.

When she looks back she seems startled, as if she had forgotten he were there. Then her eyes narrow, the vulnerability is gone and she is angry again. Holding his gaze, she swigs from the vodka bottle and glares at him till he flusters and has to look away.

"You're not by any chance that I'll peeper I see checking out the bedroom windows every time I sit down with my telescope, are you? Kid up in the orange room, looks like the inside of a jack-o'-lantern? You are, aren't you? Ha! Maybe you oughtta try turning your light off next time. That's what I do. You don't want the cops dropping by to take your binocs away, do you?" She laughs her harsh laugh and looks away, her glance falling on his cut-offs at the edge of the pool about a foot east of her thigh. Slipping a finger through a belt loop, she hoists them dripping aloft, and scowls at them as though they were no less offensive than the 'jellyfish'.

"These yours?"

"Yes. Please, may I go now?"

"He can talk! Fabulous!... Sure, you can go." She smiles brightly, struggles to her feet and wobbles over to the glass-top table, taking his cut-offs with her. Tossing them up on the table, she drops heavily into a chair, after first bumping into and knocking over the one Russ was sitting in earlier. She reaches for one of the champagne glasses and proceeds to slosh the last half-inch of vodka into it. Leo notices that the overturned chair has the name 'NICK' stencilled across the canvas crosspiece serving as its back. He tries again: "Could you throw me my shorts, please?"

She looks up, arches an eyebrow, and sweeps the cut-offs from the table, along with the other champagne glass. The wet denim smacks the concrete between the table and the edge of the pool; the glass shatters nearby.

"Come get 'em." She laughs raggedly, a laugh that turns into a smoker's hack. Leo stays put, fighting down panic, prisoner in a watery dungeon.

When she stops coughing the woman regards him with bleary amusement for a long moment, then reaches for the phone. "I'm calling the cops now. There's your shorts if you want to leave." Her voice is suddenly brisk and business-like, her enunciation much improved. As she releases the fourth digit -- a long one, a 9 or 0 -- a strange, disembodied voice issues from a position near the stairs.

"Mother... Mother dearest."

Leo's scalp crawls and he shudders -- despite the fact that the soft, creepy voice is unmistakably that of Peter Lorre as impersonated by Russ.

The woman jumps out of her chair, dropping the phone and overturning the remaining champagne glass.

"Mother... be not afraid... It is I... your long-lost son... Jason."

The woman's face is a mask of rage. She snatches up the Smirnoff bottle and lurches to the head of the stairs and hurls it down into the darkness.

"Bastards! Heartless little bastards!" Gasping, she sinks to the cement.

Leo, terrified, thrashes over to the side of the pool and heaves himself up on the concrete. Sidestepping broken glass, he snatches up his cut-offs and sprints to the perimeter of the patio. He vaults the railing, slips over the lip of the retaining wall, drops six or seven feet to the beach below. As he picks himself up, a figure -- his brother --

rushes by. He follows, running west down the dark beach, heedless of the rocks and broken shells cutting into his feet.

Russ is waiting for him on the public-beach side of the chain-link fence, Leo's shirt and shoes in his hand. As their eyes meet they break up, laughing helplessly till the tears come. Leo sobers momentarily, a twinge of conscience as he considers the woman's loss; then he remembers Russ's goofy Lorre voice and is off again, laughing till his stomach threatens to flip.

When the fit has run its course he wipes away the tears, pulls on his clothes, steps into his sneakers. He knots the laces, then glances over at his brother, who is looking west, his expression suddenly grave.

"Uh-oh. Whose place is that?" Russ's voice is strained, uncharacteristically anxious.

Leo follows his gaze downshore to a house on the waterfront not far from their own. The place is backlit by flashing red lights and there is a flickering orange glow on the roof. Embers leap into the night sky like burning widgeons taking wing. Above, a column of smoke stands black against the horizon.

His stomach tightens as he realizes that his parents will be up, his dummy double possibly unmasked. If so, he can only hope it's his father who pulls back the sheet. He's more likely to have some slight sense of humour about the deception. His step-mother he can see screaming.

He counts the houses between the fire and the marina to the east. Six. He counts again, his heartbeat accelerating in response to certain fear-triggered chemicals. Again he comes up with six.

Which would make it their house.

An involuntary high-pitched sound escapes him, coincident with a groan from his brother, and they begin to run -- past the changing hut, past the smoldering remains of the bonfire, past the rocks where the widgeon met its end, and on down the beach toward their burning home.

Halfway back Leo loses his footing on a slick rock and goes down on his hands and knees. As he picks himself up, a scene enacted earlier in the night returns to him. He sees himself again perched on the rooftop, again taking a final drag on the Tiparillo, grinding it distractedly into the new cedar roof. He feels bleakly certain of what must have followed: the broken but still-smoldering cigar end; an ember invigorated by the breeze; rolling, perhaps, into a crack between two dry shingles...

More sirens are wailing up on Marine now, one of them an ambulance by the sound of it. He starts running again, with Russ at his side. They pick up the pace for the final quarter mile, then slow to a walk as they draw near the house. He can smell the smoke now, the same smell he noticed a couple of hours ago as he traversed the roof on his way out to meet Russ. Blowing air across his stinging palms, he peers over the seawall from the beach side.

The neighbours are gathered on the back lawn, some of them dressed, others in bathrobes over pajamas. They cluster in pairs and trios, arms folded on their chests, murmuring to one another in funeral tones as they watch two firemen in black helmets and olive turnouts guide an arching jet of water up between the smoking exposed ribs of the roof. The rest of them, Leo supposes, must be round front with the trucks.

The fire looks to be well under control, if not extinguished, and seems to have been confined to the top floor -- the roof and the orange bedroom.

Briefly he mourns his incinerated possessions.

Two small, nightgown-clad figures are huddled together at the far end of the property by the seawall. His sisters. Their faces are distraught. A plump woman in a white terrycloth bathrobe is kneeling on the lawn beside them, an arm round each thin pair of shoulders. Kenny's mother, their Aunt Judy. Behind her, looking pale and pensive, stands Kenny. When he sees Leo and Russ he smiles ruefully and gives them a furtive little wave, then raises a finger to his throat and draws it across his throat.

Leo glances over at Russ, who looks a bit daunted for once, then scrambles over the seawall and makes his way across the lawn toward the twins and his aunt and cousin. Russ stays put for the time being.

When Judy catches sight of him she gasps and jumps to her feet and hurries to meet him. She catches his wrist and stares into his eyes. "Leo, thank God! Is Russell with you?" Her grip is tight, her voice quiet and urgent. Her intensity, and the complete absence of rebuke in her manner alarms him. He turns and points back to the seawall, and Russ. "Thank God," she murmurs again, then bursts into tears and turns and runs off across the lawn toward the front of the house. Leo begins to see a possibility he had not yet considered. His stomach tightens another turn and his head begins to wobble on the thin stalk of his neck. Until now the thing he had been fearing was the discovery of his absence.

The neighbours have spotted them now and are closing in. Leo staggers backwards as Claire and Alison swarm him, hugging and crying and jabbering away.

"Leo, Leo, where were you?"

"Daddy thought you were burnt up!"

"He thought he saw you in your bed..."

"But he couldn't get through the fire!"

"He burnt himself!"

"He burnt his hands!"

Leo looks up. His father is sprinting toward him across the lawn. When he reaches Leo he crushes him in a bear hug, then draws back and seizes his shoulders. His hands are wrapped in white gauze and his face is dark with soot.

"Leo, who's that in your bed? Is it Russ? Who the hell is it?"

His grip is painful, his face anguished. Leo opens his mouth to reply but the words won't come. Julie, his step-mother is running toward him now, he can see her over his father's shoulder. She is in her nightgown, barefoot. With her hair loose she looks like a young girl. Her eyes are strange, and on her face is an expression that makes him think of the woman at the pool. He wonders now how her son died.

He looks back into his father's fierce face and wonders if he is going to hit him. He wonders if he should mention the Tiparillo. He wonders if this means he will be grounded again next weekend. The smell of burnt wood is in his nostrils. He clears his throat and tries again to answer his father's question.

*