I rode in the back seat and gazed out the window to keep my mind off Tommy’s driving. Up front, riding shotgun, Richie was busy rolling a joint. He had a little pile of crumbled weed in a Frisbee on his lap. He hunched over it, bobbing his head to Frank Zappa’s Sheik Yerbouti. We were on Highway 37, which runs north across the river into Oklahoma, then cuts due east toward Idabel. It’s kind of a dangerous road because you can’t see far ahead of you, a windy two-lane. Right on the edge of the piney woods, curving and dipping, it disappears into the trees. Our big plan, the grand scheme, was to stop at the first liquor store on the Oklahoma side of the river, get some beer, cruise around for awhile while we drank it, then start hitting the bars and dance clubs on the strip. Main Street, Idabel, Oklahoma. If we were lucky we’d see some action. A fistfight perhaps. A drunken melee. It was part of my family’s lore that my parents had seen one once, in a beer joint on the outskirts of town. A guy heard his ex-wife was in there dancing with some dude and came in firing his pistol. Shots rang out, as they say. Bang bang. Boom. Pow. People running for the door. It made for a good story. I needed a good story,
having come from a boring little used-up town like Clarksville, Texas.
Boring. I was just killing time before I graduated from high school
and went off to college. Did I mention it was boring? My parents, at
that particular moment, thought we were going on an overnight
camping trip. They didn’t ask why we were going in Tommy’s
Firebird. Parents.

So we had no reason to hurry, but Tommy kept the traffic behind
us, kept racing right up to the bumper of the next car in front, hang¬
ing just off its left flank, swinging into the on-coming lane, around,
back in, stamping that big-block V8, rattling the pipes. Then a pick¬
up or semi would rip by going the other way and I’d know how close
we’d come to getting pasted.

Fuck, I’d think. But, hey, spending my Saturday nights in the living
room watching television was another kind of death. A guy’s got to
accept some risk.

We raced along, the gray airy sky hanging over us like a partly
erased chalkboard, a short break between spring storms. The ground
was already soaked, and in the black gummy cotton fields water stood
between the rows like strips of plate glass. More rain was coming.
When the thick wall of trees alongside the road broke and the sky
opened over a cow pasture you could see a thunderhead boiling
toward us out of the west, rolling over the treetops.

We barrelled onto the old concrete-railed Red River bridge at about
75. I was looking out the window on my side of the car, the passenger
side. Just then, I saw a pair of white egrets flying up the river chan-
nel, as if they’d emerged from under the bridge, pumping their lanky wings in unison, cruising side-by-side about ten feet over the water. Richie had turned that direction, too, as he brought the joint to his mouth to lick the paper, and out of the corner of my eye I could see he was also watching those two birds, stark white against the dull reddish brown of the river. Your eye was just drawn to them. Beautiful. An absolutely beautiful sight like you’re not used to seeing in that part of the world.

Then, suddenly, as we reached the end of the bridge, Tommy jerked us back to reality. Whaaaaaa! He slung the car off the road, onto the gravel shoulder, then hooked it around in a squall of tires and floored it going back the other way. Richie and I turned to look at him and I think Richie might have yelled something like, “What the fuck?” But Tommy didn’t answer, just kept his eyes straight ahead, his foot on the accelerator. And then I looked out the window at the opposite side of the bridge, and right away you could see that something had happened. Down on the bank, in a place where fishermen put their flatbottoms in the water, a group of people were milling around the sheriff’s cruiser. I knew what Tommy was thinking, what this might be about, because the river itself was as notorious as Idabel. It was a good river to drown in was the way people thought of it. Whirlpools. Suck holes.

Richie and I sat forward on our seats, looking down at the scene on the bank as we charged back across the bridge. After the heavy rain-
fall the river was up, seething and churning. Water puddles spotted
the muddy bank and it was streaked with fresh tire ruts from the fish¬
ermen's pickups and boat trailers. The fishermen themselves wore
rubber boots and bright slickers or plastic bib overalls so that it was a
big jumble of neon orange and olive drab down there. They were
stirred up over something. The closer we got the more you could tell
it. We were already looking for a body, and although we couldn't see
one yet, there was a blue tarp on the ground near where the people
stood and a weird feeling in the air, even in Tommy's car. Richie
punched the tape out, killed the music, and all you could hear then
was the deep, sucking sound of that Firebird's big carburetor.

We parked at the end of the bridge, jumped out, and started walk¬
ing down the sloping mud road that led to the bank when we met a
fisherman trudging up the hill. Big guy, all his weight in his upper
body, with a wiry, reddish-colored beard, a tackle box and a pair of
fishing rods in one hand and an aluminum fish bucket in the other.

“What happened?” Tommy asked him.

The fisherman nodded toward the river. “Drowned,” he said.
Matter of fact. Almost like he was disgusted having to report it.

Another fucking idiot. Some damn fool.

“Let me guess,” Richie said. “He got sucked in a whirlpool.”

“Yes.” The guy nodded, stopped walking. “Not twenty minutes
ago. Two of 'em.” He turned part way toward the water, lifted the
minnow bucket enough to point upriver, where you could see a home-
made quilt spread out on the mud bank, beside a little scrubby willow
tree. A pitiful looking scene. Tawdry.

And the story itself. The guy was fishing in a flatbottom while his wife—or girlfriend or whatever; the fisherman wasn’t sure, didn’t care—lay on her quilt on the bank. Reading, the fisherman said, as odd as that sounds. Then there was a commotion, hollering, and everyone around looked up to see that the guy had drifted into a giant whirlpool, his boat keeled over, he fell in. And then this shocking development: the woman slung off the bank after him. She jumped in.

“I guess she thought she was going to save him,” the fisherman said, shaking his head, disgusted.

They got the two of them out by dragging for them with snag lines. Too late, though. Their bodies were under the blue tarp.

We stood silently listening to this, and then all three of us, at once, looked past the fisherman and past the group huddled around the sheriff, eight or ten people in all, to the tarp on the ground. It was just one of those cheap discount-store tarps, something you’d tie down over a load in the back of a pickup to keep it out of the rain.

“They’re waiting on the coroner right now,” the fisherman said. He spat and started on his way, up the steep incline.

When we reached the other fishermen they were busy trading versions of the story. The sheriff stood in the middle of them, his khaki shirt straining at the buttons where it was pulled tight over his belly. He was smoking a cigarette—which he held down low, at arm’s length—and rocking on his heels, listening politely, like he had heard
this kind of story before and knew the details weren't going to be that important. They drowned. End of story. Several of the fishermen, as they gave their versions, pointed to a spot on the river, made gestures with their hands. One of them raised an arm and did a little pirouette. I guess he was supposed to be imitating what a man looks like drowning in a whirlpool. I don't know. The whole group had its back to the tarp lying on the ground, but occasionally someone would glance at it, then look away. Just beyond it, the drowned fisherman's flatbottom lay upside-down on the bank, its small outboard motor resting neatly on top.

I had a hard time paying attention to what these guys were saying. It was more of the same. No new details, not significant ones anyway. I kept stealing glances at the tarp. It lay almost flat, a slight bulge in the middle. If you didn't know what was supposed to be under there, it could have been anything. Or could it? I thought about that. If you just happened on a tarp covering two dead bodies, would you know, would you have the same feeling in your gut I had right then looking at it and knowing what was underneath? You could just make out that there were two of them. The bulge had a sort of double hump. Almost indistinguishable. The tarp's blue nylon made a stark contrast against the dull reddish earth. It was frayed on one corner, showing that it had in fact been used for covering a load in a pickup, or something like that, its usual purpose.

And just after I noticed that last detail I felt my face go flush, all of
a sudden, a flash of heat. And then I thought for sure I was about to puke.

So I walked away, left Richie and Tommy there among the fishermen. I went down to the water's edge and stood there a minute until I had calmed myself enough to guarantee I wasn't going to toss cookies, watching the river flow past. It just kept sliding. Then I walked along the bank, upriver, with the water on my right and the current moving in the opposite direction. The river made a sort of sucking noise.

In a moment, without meaning to, I had reached the flowery quilt left there on the muddy ground by the woman who had just jumped in the river to try and save her man's life and had wound up drowning herself. There was a Schlitz styrofoam ice chest sitting on it, an open can of Pepsi, some pimento-cheese sandwiches in plastic wrap. And a paperback novel. The cover illustration showed a big-breasted woman in a low-cut dress being kissed on the neck by a long-haired, bare-chested young stud. I picked it up and started reading the last bent-back page, the page she had been on, I could tell, when she flung the book down to dive into the river. It was the middle of a sex scene. In the words of the book: “Roger pulled Melanie closer. She thrust her pelvis against his muscular thigh and ran one long fingernail over the deep cleft in his chin. ‘Roger,’ she said, ‘This is it. You know it? This is the only thing worth caring about. This is the only thing in the world, Roger.’ Roger moaned in her ear and nibbled briefly on her earlobe before running his tongue down her neck, slow-
ly lowering her to the bed.”

I dropped the book on the quilt. Just let it sort of tumble out of my hands. Then I stood looking at it. Like I had been slugged in the head. Like that moment after you’ve been hit in the head and see stars before your eyes and the world is present all around you but you’re not quite keeping up with it, you’re a few rotations behind. And I was sick to my stomach again. I could feel it coming on like that thunderhead, which was suddenly right over the top of us. The sky got dark. Peels of thunder rolled down the river channel.

Just then Tommy yelled and I looked up to see that he had walked a little ways toward me along the riverbank. He motioned for me to come on, sort of with that same disgusted look on his face that the fisherman had when he told us the story. Bile shot into the back of my throat. A burning sensation, a taste like battery acid. I bent over and got ready to heave, and thought, Oh, Melanie. Oh, Melanie.