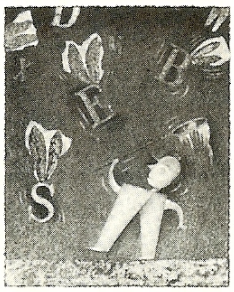
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The man who couldn't READ

Slowly, so the bed wouldn't creak, the millionaire who couldn't sleep rose and walked barefoot to the bookshelves. "Tonight," he whispered to himself. "Please let it happen tonight." ■ He turned on the lamp. His eyes moved past the two framed rectangles of glass on the wall—past his college diploma, past his teaching certificate—and fell upon the book cover, the one filled by the angry black face. He stared into the rage and hurt in the author's eyes. He moved his fingers across the title, *Soul on Ice*. This man understands, the millionaire thought. This man, too, is a prisoner, an outsider; maybe this man will help me tonight. ■ His thumb riffled the pages. Don't force it, he told himself. This man is screaming,

HE GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE AND TAUGHT HIGH SCHOOL. HE MADE MILLIONS IN REAL ESTATE. AND HE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DECIPHER A WORD ON THIS PAGE



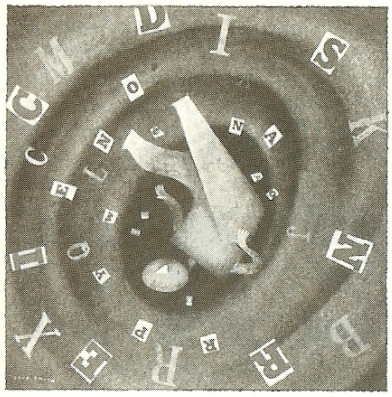
this man writes words that jump into your ears and eyes; just stand here, very calmly, and let them come in.... ■ All his life? Is that how long he would have to play this game? He lay back down in bed and looked at his wife. No one else knew his secret. Not his two children, not his friends. Not his old college professors, not the high school students he had taught for eighteen years, not the business associates in his multimillion-dollar real-estate-development company in southern California. Only Kathy knew. They would take everything if

BY GARY SMITH

LANE SMITH

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IN THIRD GRADE, WHEN HE REFUSED TO READ, THE NUN HANDED A YARDSTICK TO THE CHILDREN AND LET EACH ONE HAVE A CRACK.



they found out—the diploma and teaching certificate, the apartment complexes and shopping centers and rental properties, the Mercedes and the big house overlooking the ocean. Or they'd refuse to believe his secret, insist he was playing them for fools.

None of them understood what night sweat could do to a man. If he needed one badly enough, was there *any* charade a man couldn't play? John remembered a spring day back in fourth grade, back when the realization that he would be forever different from everyone else had begun to come over him. He had run out of class at 3:00 P.M., aching for some arena in which to prove he wasn't really the boy who sat at his desk, stupid and silent as a stone, and then had felt his legs moving toward the school's ball field, even though he was too young to play. Standing behind the batting cage with his glove on his hand, he watched the game with hungry eyes, noticing that neither team wore uniforms and there was no outfield fence, and how the big kid on the other school's team belted the ball over the right fielder's head his first two times up. Now there were two outs, the bases loaded, the big kid at the plate again, and John felt himself moving slowly, silently, out to deep right field. Then—*crack!*—the ball was arcing across the sky, and boys all over the field were shouting and running...and suddenly John Corcoran could feel it, snug and stinging inside the glove on his left hand! And the umpire signaled *out!* and all the players on his school's team were racing toward the bench and he was racing with them, heart thumping with excitement and fright—he was *in* the game now, how could he possibly get out? He kept stealing looks at the manager and the boys, waiting for them to call his bluff, to send him home. "You bat third this inning," barked the manager; he walked to the plate as if in a dream. Three fastballs hissed by him—"*Strike three!*" roared the ump—yes, there it was, the story of John Corcoran's life. He could play the part, trick the enemy, infiltrate the game. But at midnight, the moment of truth—when the millionaire stood alone in his pajamas with a book in his hands....

WHY HADN'T HE just refused to play? Why hadn't he just shoved away their books and diplomas and white-collar, upper-class dreams? Even now, at fifty-two, he couldn't quite understand why he had stayed in a classroom for *thirty-five* years, why he had gone back for eighty more credits *after* he had graduated college; why he hadn't fled academia the moment he had stolen his passport, received his degree. Like a Jew in Nazi Germany, he'd say, who gets off of a boxcar heading for the concentration camp—*and then gets back on.* Crazy, he'd say, shaking his head. An absolutely crazy thing to do for a man who couldn't read or write.

That's how he spoke and thought, all analogy and metaphor, all intuition and unfinished sentences, sometimes bewildering, sometimes brilliant; the left side of his brain, the cool, logical lobe a man uses to arrange symbols in a sequence, had always seemed to misfire. Some words, in an obvious context, he had learned to memorize and master—STOP on a street sign, EXIT over a doorway—but tuck them into the middle of a sentence and they mocked him. Letters traded places, vowel sounds lost themselves in the tunnel of his ears...and yet....His blue eyes fill with tears and his Adam's apple climbs up his throat a lot these days. If only someone had sat next to that little boy, put an arm around his shoulder, and said, "I know you can't read, John. It won't be easy, but I'll help you. Don't be scared, it's going to be okay"—then he could have learned.

Instead, in second grade, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, they put him in the dumb row. Stubborn little brat. Just sits there when you ask him to read or write a sentence. We'll cure that. Open your hands, John. Open your hands! The ruler smacked against his palms. That'll teach him to read. His third-grade nun handed a yardstick to the children when John refused to read or write, ordered him to roll up his pants, and let each student in his row have a crack.

Which was worse, he wonders now sometimes, the stinging flesh...or the never-ending silence? That was how his fourth-grade teacher had tried to cure him, by asking him to read and then letting one minute of quiet pile upon the next and the next until the little boy thought he must suffocate. And then passed him on to the next grade, and to the next teacher. John Corcoran never failed a year in his life.

His parents? Perhaps they wondered why their son would arrange to have one of his sisters read the Community Chest cards in Monopoly. Or maybe his parents' search for a place to belong sucked all the time and energy for wondering out of them. Somewhere, they would find it, somewhere these two orphans who had married would find home. Somewhere, somehow, in St. Louis or Springfield or Santa Fe, in Amarillo or Abilene or Albuquerque, in Los Alamos or Roswell or Ajo or Parker or Blythe or Encinitas or just by moving to the other side of town, they would re-find the magic of the days when they dated, back when he was a center for the Minneapolis Red Jackets professional football team and she was a Chicago fashion model. Pack up the six kids. Pack up the U-Haul trailer. The world would be a better place in the next town,

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LANE SMITH

WHICH TEACHERS TO TALK SPORTS WITH? WHICH TO ACT SO CRAZED IN FRONT OF THAT THEY'D BE AFRAID TO CALL HIS NAME?

and the next, and the next. By the time he graduated high school, John had lived in thirty-five houses and attended seventeen schools.

His dad was a teacher and a coach. He consumed words as if they were food: two newspapers a day, and *Gone with the Wind* in a single sitting one night. How could a boy explain to a dad like him his nausea each Friday morning before the weekly spelling test, how could he say to him, "Dad, I can't read"? His father was always on the run, coming home at 6:00 P.M. from football or baseball practice, scrambling up some eggs for his five girls and little boy, running off to a second job teaching night school or selling cars or insurance. His mom had an asthmatic daughter on her mind or on her knee half the day, then rushed off at 3:00 to work the late shift at the local drugstore. They would go without furniture or new clothes or a Christmas tree, then rent a house for twice what they could afford, so that their children would grow up in the right neighborhoods, so that their dream, at least, would have the proper shingles and floorboards and beams.

That was the gift, and the curse, they gave to their little boy who couldn't read. An injustice? A lousy paycheck? Don't sit there. Take a night course. Reach for the stars. Head west. The Corcorans are winners, the Corcorans don't settle for second best. You break the news to your mother this time, John—it's a much better job, no way a man can turn it down. God knows, nobody wanted her to feel the way she did that day back in '45, when John was eight. That day Franklin Roosevelt died, and she looked around and saw her life once more packed up in cardboard boxes, and she cried, "Why don't we just turn on the gas?"

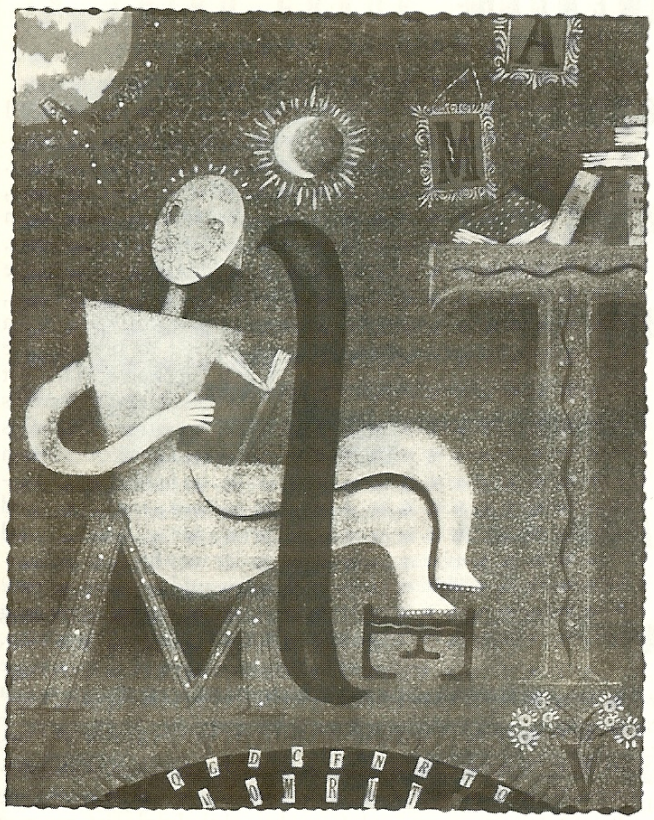
Sometimes, when the car was loaded and the kids were wedged in and another town was receding behind them, his sisters laughed and called themselves Irish Okies. Sometimes they cried. Not John, though. Each town was a new place to start over, to infiltrate the game. Who knew? Maybe the light would be different in Albuquerque or Los Alamos, maybe the letters wouldn't switch places and swim. Maybe he could stop beating his head against his pillow at night and promising to say a rosary to God every day from now to kingdom come in exchange for a miracle; maybe in the next town he could *read*.

He entered junior high. It was no longer a game. Now it was war, John Corcoran against the literate world. Now he had to change classes for each subject, to hide his secret from six teachers instead of one. All those dumb rows and yardsticks and awful silences, all those moves from town to town had taught him a few tricks, of course. How to read a human being and smell warmth or danger, how an illiterate with two good fists, a quick wit, and a handsome smile could adapt and survive. No longer could he sit at his desk and wait for the humiliation to come—the stakes had grown too high now, the shame too steep. He had to walk into a classroom and size it up in a heartbeat, he had to somehow *influence* the people and the atmosphere inside it, he had to take control. *This* teacher, *this* subject, *this* school, what strategy would work best? Sit in the front row, clean the erasers, become the teacher's pet? Slink toward the back of the room and look for someone wearing glasses to cheat off? Or choose a seat in the middle, remain pleasant, silent, become the invisible man? Quickly, John, make a decision. Which teachers to talk sports with, which to stare down, which to act so goddamn crazed in front of that they would be afraid to call his name. "Don't laugh at John," a ninth-grade teacher ordered her class. "There's something wrong with him." *Yes, there is, there is!* he wanted to scream. Instead, he stood and walked like a spastic across the room, threw them far off the scent, grinned as everyone roared. Couldn't any of them *see*? He yearned to be his church's altar boy but he couldn't read the prayers; he longed to be his school's crossing guard but they dismissed him for poor grades; he ached to be the all-American boy, not the class clown or the discipline problem. But *any* label was better than the dreaded one, the unspeakable one: *He can't even read!*

Manipulate. He never liked that word. It sounded cruel, it sounded evil—my God, he was just a frightened teenager with raging hormones trying to get by. *Orchestrate.* That was better. Orchestrating girls to help him write essays. Orchestrating pals to read him the math problem or whisper the instructions for the next assignment in typing class. What's wrong, Corky, can't you read? they would ask in jest now and then. *Duhhhhh*...no...I can't read, he would say, his jaw hanging stupidly, making them laugh. His senior year of high school, he would be voted homecoming king, go steady with the valedictorian, and star on a basketball team en route to the state championship game...only to have to move sixty miles away at midseason.

He would never say, "Read this for me," when he needed to know what was written on a page. "What does this mean to you?" he would say, or "What do they want here?" He wouldn't say, "Write this for me," when he needed to turn in a paper. He'd say, "Let's work on this together," start pacing and thinking out loud, leave his buddy sitting there with the paper and the pen. No one felt orchestrated by John. No one felt used. He would pick you to play on his team even if everyone knew you were a clod, present your case to a pretty girl, stand by your side in a fight. And before you knew him well enough to catch the fear in his eyes, he was packed and gone.

In tenth grade, he made the conscious decision. He would bury his shame forever, play out the masquerade, never let down his guard. Keep watching from the edge of his eye when the others were reading silently in class, to see when he should turn the page. Scribble something, *anything,* inside his notebook when the others were taking notes, mimic even their facial expressions, then cover his page so no one would see. Stare down at his right hand,



make sure again and again he hadn't fallen back into his bad habit of holding his pen between his third and fourth fingers. One mistake could be fatal. Any moment, any corner he turned, who knew what threat might arise? "Try again, John. You're sure you can't see that letter on the screen?" the eye doctor asked when he was in eleventh grade.

(Yes, of course *I can see it, I just don't know what letter it is!)* "Uh...no sir, I'm sorry...I can't." That was how John got his first pair of glasses.

HIS MOM KISSED HIM when he graduated. And kept talking about college. His fifty-two-year-old dad took a job as a hotel night clerk in order to attend summer school for a California teaching credential; morning sessions at San Diego State, afternoons at the University of San Diego. Well, why not, John? Reach for the stars, son, you can be anything you want; education, that's the key. These were his role models, people who never doubted the American Dream, no matter how deftly it dodged them—it was always just a few more credits or miles away.

But...*college*? March right into the belly of the beast? He was six four, could dunk a basketball, had been selected All-Conference and offered a scholarship by the University of Wyoming—but no, it would be *insane* to consider, pure suicide.

But...what about junior college? He spent a year and a half at Riverside Community College, in California; then one semester at Palos Verdes, sat next to the right girls, stole the right answers, smiled the right smiles, and somehow survived. Cheating? Was it really cheating? His mind grasped concepts quickly, understood math intuitively; he was smarter than half the damn kids in the room, willing to work twice as hard—should he be shut out just because a couple of wires in his brain were crossed? The University of Texas at El Paso (then Texas Western) offered him a basketball scholarship. His spirits soared. His heart sank. He was *in* the game now, how could he possibly get out?

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes...and recrossed enemy lines. Welcome to campus, John—how 'bout a beer? He would take the can, walk into the bathroom, empty it in the sink, and refill it with water. No, the stakes were too high now, not even a sip, not even for a second could he afford to lose control. His eyes roamed every room he entered, searching for the newspaper or magazine or pen that could betray him, the nitpicker that could trip him up, the escape hatch he could use to slip away. He quizzed each new friend: Which teachers required papers, which gave essay tests, which gave multiple choice? He studied the seating configurations and the faces in every classroom: Which students might slip him an answer, which might squeal? (Wrinkles, always sit behind people with wrinkles—older students were most likely to rat.) He registered for seven classes a semester, dropped the two most difficult during the six-week grace period. The minute he stepped out of a class, he tore the pages of scribble from his notebook, in case anyone asked to see his notes, returned to his room, and shredded them. He stared at thick textbooks in the evening so his dormitory roommate wouldn't doubt, then joined a fraternity, drank can after can of water in order to tap the treasure chest of old term papers and old tests, in order to feel as if he finally belonged. He watched classmates in chemistry memorize the element chart in an hour; it took him fifteen.

And he lay in bed, listening to the clock chew away the night, exhausted but unable to sleep, unable to make his whirring mind let go. Thirty straight days, God. Thirty straight days he'd go to mass, crack of dawn, he *promised,* if only God would let him get this degree....

U.S. Government 101-102. Two-semester class, four essay tests, *required* for graduation: the Monster. No way to use the finger signals from his buddy that he had used to get through Educational Statistics. No cheat sheets on narrow adding-machine paper scrolled up his long-sleeved shirt this time, no old tests, no clue what the questions would be.

He took a seat in the back, slid against the wall with the open window. Carefully, with no idea what he was writing, he copied the questions from the blackboard into his blue book. His eyes stole around the room. Silently...slowly...his hand moved toward the window. The blue book fell to the grass. The smart, skinny kid, the one John was setting up a date for, scooped it up, sat beneath a tree, and began writing. John began scribbling in a second blue book, watching the clock, the teacher, the window, the other students, sweat running down his ribs. The book slid back in the window. Bingo! Four times, never caught! Thirty straight days, God, that's a promise! No, that's *not* cheating, not when you don't have any choice, that's *not* a sin...is it?...Is it?

He staggered into the doctor's office one day, a bundle of frayed nerves. "Tension," the doctor diagnosed. "Not enough sleep." For his cure, the doctor laid in John's hands a book on how to handle stress.

"Read it," the doctor said.

AN ODD THING happened. He got the diploma. He gave God His thirty days of mass.

LANE SMITH

THIS WAS THE HORROR: THE WEALTHIER AND MORE SUCCESSFUL HE BECAME, THE MORE HE HAD TO LEAN ON *THEM*, THE LITERATES.

Now what, John, now what? Maybe he was addicted to the edge, maybe he was panting too hard for his father's love, maybe the thing he felt the most insecure about—his mind—was the thing he needed most to have admired. Maybe that's why, in 1961, John became a teacher.

A teacher. The perfect inconceivability for an illiterate. The perfect cover. He called his father from El Paso. Dad, he said, I had the application sent to your house, but I don't know if I'll be home in time to turn it in. Think you could fill it out? Thanks!

He taught world history for two years at Carlsbad High in California and then for one at Corcoran High; he had Robert Martinez, the only student in class he could depend on to recognize every word, stand each day and read the textbook to the class. "Again?" Robert finally complained. "Can't anybody else here read? I don't even think the teacher can!" "Ha-ha, Robert. Very funny."

He gave the students standardized tests, used a form with a hole punched next to each correct answer, and laid it right over the students' exams; any dolt could do it. He lay in bed for hours on weekend mornings and wondered why he felt depressed.

He met a woman. A woman who had lived in the same town in California all her life, gone to the same high school as her mother had, grown up in a house with four generations of her Portuguese-Azorean family. A straight-A student, a nurse. Not a leaf, like John. A rock. "There's something I have to tell you, Kathy," he said one night in 1965 before their marriage.

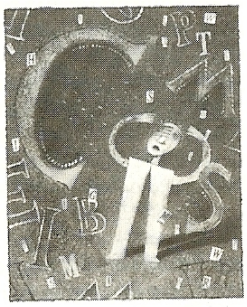
"There's something I have to tell you, too," she said.

"Kathy, I...I can't read...."

He's a *teacher,* she thought. He must mean he can't read *well.* "Well," said Kathy. "I am Rh-negative."

The subject was dropped, the two secrets dismissed. John didn't understand Kathy's until five years later, when their day-old baby died. Kathy didn't understand John's until two and a half years later, when she overheard him struggling to read a children's book to their eighteen-month-old daughter.

He began teaching social studies and sociology. He began to turn the old rules upside down. All his tests were oral, he brought in films and videos and guest speakers by the score. Let's move our desks into a circle, he told his students. Let's talk about ourselves and each other, about how we feel. Or he'd douse the lights, put a match to a candle, have everyone huddle around him, and pretend they were in a cave on the verge of collapsing (oh, if only they knew!). Then say: Maybe one or two of you can make it out. Who should go? Convince us, tell us why.



He became known as an innovator. His timing—the late '60s and the '70s, when the humanities were flowering in American high schools—was perfect. His state—California, that lover of the latest trend—was perfect, too. Besides, how could the administration question him? He volunteered to take on the school's toughest kids and slowest learners, the Mexicans and Samoans and blacks whom traditional methods had failed. And he broke through those kids' walls, he fired their curiosity, he honest-to-God cared. He could reach a teenager's anger and hurt...because it was *his.*

But his vigil, would it ever, ever end? That book you've been carrying around all week, Mr. Corcoran, what's it about? Here, read it, tell me what you think. He was a spy with phony papers, an actor on a rickety stage.... While I've got you here in the office, Mr. Corcoran, can you fill in this employee insurance form? Sorry, have to take it home with me, got a conference with a parent in two minutes. Here, John, can you read this mimeograph and give me some feedback? Sorry, just got back from the ophthalmologist, my eyes are dilated, can't. Always in a hurry, always a little distracted, always forgot his glasses, always burying pens under paper so the moment wouldn't come. Always tossing a dictionary at students who were stuck on a word. Funny, not just one dictionary in Mr. Corcoran's room, but twenty or thirty, in case, somehow, one day, *everyone* got stuck on a word.

The morning bulletin? He let a student read it. A discipline problem? He handled it himself—if it went to the principal, he'd have to write a report. A stomachache, a fever? He went to school anyway, so he wouldn't have to write the substitute a lesson plan. He arrived early, stayed late, hung out in the library more than any other teacher, hauled in boxes of secondhand books he had bought at flea markets, and dispensed them to the kids—my God, who could ever even remotely consider that...?

It was all in the air he gave off, as if reading a birthday card out loud at a family gathering, glancing at a menu, or filling in his medical history at the doctor's were a little beneath him. How coolly he could hand them to his wife, pick up a magazine, and leaf through it. Kathy was a good girl, she filled out his forms, read and wrote his letters.

Why, then, people would ask years later when his long ruse was finished, why didn't he simply ask *her* to teach him to read and write? No! He couldn't humble himself before her that way, he couldn't truly believe that anyone could teach him that. Why didn't she simply insist? No! He could be a powerful, dominating man, a master of orchestration—maybe, almost subconsciously, she needed to hold that one thing over him, to keep the scales of their marriage from tipping. And if that moment ever came, that nightmare when the literates locked the door, encircled him, stuck a book before him, and screamed, *Read!* John Corcoran had a

contingency plan even for that: Fake a heart attack. A stroke. That's how much the masquerade meant.

And he was pulling it off, he had it almost down to a science... so *why?* he wonders sometimes now. Why was he still starved for something more tangible to assure him he was okay? At age twenty-eight, he borrowed $2,500, bought a second house, fixed it up, and rented it. Bought and rented another and another. Purchased some land, had a few houses built, started visualizing things that men who used the other half of their brains couldn't see. He worked harder and harder, his business got bigger and bigger, until he needed a full-time secretary to read him his correspondence, a full-time lawyer to read his contracts, a partner—his wife's brother—to oversee the office. And then one day his accountant told him he was a millionaire. Damn, his teaching colleagues said, never realized Corcoran could be so shrewd, so good at taking risks—how'd that ever happen?

A millionaire. Perfect. Who'd notice that a millionaire always pulled on the doors that said PUSH, or paused before entering public bathrooms, waiting to see from which one the men walked out? Who'd notice that he got lost when you gave him directions, that he had his subcontractors write in their own names when he issued checks, that he hardly had any *close* friends?

He quit teaching in 1979. His staff grew to twenty people. Taiwanese-American investors began to back him, twenty-five limited partnerships joined his stable. He deserved this... didn't he? Hadn't he overcome twice as many obstacles, hyperventilated twice as hard as anyone else? Wasn't he hyperventilating still? Yes, this was the horror: The more land he bought, the more apartments and motels and housing developments he built, the more construction loans he signed his name to, the wealthier and more successful he became... the more and more the man who couldn't read had to lean upon *them,* the literates. The ones he had never really trusted, the ones who had smacked his palms, whipped his calves, condemned him to the dumb row.

But he was home free—why'd he feel more and more scared? The walls of each room in his house began to vanish, covered by shelf after shelf of books. He spent hours during vacations sitting in a bookstore in a stuffed chair by the fireplace, gazing at pages. He stared at two or three network-news programs each evening and then down at his newspaper, hoping, *please,* to connect the words he heard with the hieroglyphics. He went to two classes of a speed-reading course, a desperate lunge for magic. Magic or miracle—he was convinced now that it would take something superhuman to solder the short circuit in his head. The Bible! he thought on some nights. Wouldn't a *just* God let him read the Bible? He grabbed the book, opened it to the first page—no? Well, then, he'd punish God, refuse to believe in him, erase him from the cosmos. And then come yo-yoing back in a cold sheen of Irish-Catholic sweat....

STOP. UP WITH THE HOUSELIGHTS. Move to the back of the theater now, stand behind the very last row. From here you can see it, see all that the award-winning actor cannot see. The deepening resentment of the wife. The growing tension of the overworked father. The gradual erosion of family life. The mounting anxiety of his partner, Kathy's brother, because John can't seem to stop risking, expanding. The inevitable screech of the national economy and the California real estate market....

In 1982 the bottom began to fall out, the charade to shatter. His properties began to sit empty, his creditors to call, his financial backers to evaporate. Sell, John, his wife's brother urged. Take a loss, sell *now.* Impossible, he couldn't. He began laying off employees so he could pay the interest on his loans, whittling his staff from twenty to three, working sixteen hours a day to compensate. The Taiwanese-Americans pulled out. A zillion documents were piling on his desk, nearly all the front men he had gathered around himself to intercept them were gone, threats of foreclosures and lawsuits began tumbling out of envelopes. File bankruptcy, his wife's brother urged, go Chapter 11, *now.*

No. Never. Please, Kathy, did he have to get down on his knees and beg? He needed her more and more to write and read letters for him, but she was working long hours with terminal-cancer patients at a clinic and had nothing left, at 9:00 P.M., to give. His son's grades went to hell all at once—my God, what if the boy can't read, what if John had passed it along in his blood? His driver's license was about to expire again—who had time anymore to memorize which box to check for twenty-five questions on *each* of the written test's five possible versions? Every waking moment, it seemed, he was pleading with bankers to extend his loans, coaxing builders to stay on the job, negotiating with lawyers to settle out of court, trying to make sense of the pyramid of paper. His wife's brother walked away, sued him for $10 million; Kathy got ripped this way and that. Another man sued him, then another and another; his shoulder and neck muscles bunched up like fists. He couldn't sleep; he lay on the floor some nights, spread his arms, and begged God to save him. They were ganging up on him, the bastards, they were tearing down the facade plank by plank. And they wouldn't stop until he was alone and penniless and they had him on the witness stand, sworn to the truth under threat of perjury, and the man in black robes said: The truth, John Corcoran. Can you not even read?

IN THE FALL OF 1986, at the age of forty-eight, he did two things he swore he never would. He put up his house as collateral, to obtain one last construction loan. And he walked into the Carlsbad Library and told the woman in charge of the tutoring program, "I can't read."

He cried. He filled with dread. He was certain it was hopeless.

He was placed with a sixty-five-year-old grandmother named Eleanor Condit. Strange, how she didn't seem horrified by his true face. Strange, how she just encouraged him to go on. She sat with him through a TV series on how words came to be, on the history of the English language, and the Monster began losing its snarl. And painstakingly—letter by letter, phonic by phonic, the way it might have been done forty years ago—she began teaching him to tame it. Within fourteen months, John Corcoran's land-development company began to revive. And John Corcoran could read.

The next step was confession, a speech before two hundred stunned businessmen in San Diego. To heal he had to come clean, he had to give all those years of pain a *reason.* He was placed on the board of directors of the San Diego Council on Literacy, began traveling across the country to give speeches and lobby legislators on the need to attack America's invisible epidemic, the one that afflicts a staggering 85 percent of its juvenile delinquents, 75 percent of its citizens without jobs. "Illiteracy is a form of slavery," he would cry. "A form of child neglect, child abuse. We can't waste time blaming anyone. As a country, we need to become *obsessed* with teaching people to read, *now*!"

He could sleep, now that each next minute of his life didn't need to be controlled. He read every book or magazine he could get his hands on, every road sign he passed, out loud as long as Kathy could bear it—it was glorious, it was like singing!

And then one day it occurred to him, one more thing he could finally do. Yes, that dusty box in his office, that sheaf of papers bound by ribbon.... A quarter century later, John Corcoran could read his wife's love letters. ◘