From the top of the empty building the river cannot be seen, but its presence seeps through the air like a sense of winter on the northern wind. Blood swells around the wire binding the muscular man’s wrists, and his long blond hair is matted with more blood, just now coagulating in streaks across the duct tape sealing his mouth and muffling his periodic cries. Able to see little more than a red mist through his swollen eye sockets, he flinches away as something round and hard, a thick dowel perhaps, leaves stinging stripes across his back and thighs. Thick hands clutch at his shredded clothing.

Not yet in shock and with his lungs straining to somehow split the tape, he senses a void at the edge of his consciousness, pebbles on the brittle tar spraying and clattering as in agony he is forced to shuffle forward, shoeless but not feeling the frozen roof.
1972 · · ·

1.

A pounding on the thin panels of the dorm-room door invaded the young man’s sleep. He dreamt briefly of the caissons being driven for the Hancock Center construction when he and his father and older brother visited the site in Chicago in 1968, but the banging woke him in time to hear the door opening. What he saw first against the weak early-spring light from the windows was a tall, disheveled, middle-aged man with short salt-and-pepper hair wearing an inexpensive suit. Cop? was his first thought. The man glanced around the messy room, then stared down at the student as another heavier officer moved through the entranceway, holding aside a burlap screen the young man’s roommate had hung between the room and the closets. Finally a remotely familiar short bald man with a beard entered quickly, looked down at the young man and said, “That’s him.” The bald man pivoted and disappeared. The young man thought he recognized the beard, but not the bald head or the tie.

“What?” the young man breathed as the heavier cop twitched away his blanket and with an air of perfunctory finality clutched his upper arm, pulled him upright, turned him toward the windows and clipped handcuffs around his wrists. His rights were a blur. Salt-and-pepper rummaged through the top drawer of his desk and pulled out his checkbook. The young man sat naked on the bed with his hands cuffed behind his hips.

The heavier cop stared down at him, then seemed to relent
and said, “You’re under arrest.” An inane idea entered the young man’s mind—he thought it was an April Fool’s joke. The door to his room stood open, and he could hear activity down the hall, more pounding on doors.

Salt-and-pepper opened the checkbook and said, “Michael J. Pollitz. That you?”

“You don’t know who I am?” Michael felt a rush of sleepy terror. His narrow face reddened.

“We know,” said the heavy cop. Both men moved around the room, opening drawers in the desks and small dressers. They walked across his clothing. The heavy cop kicked aside some junk food wrappers on the floor and used his foot to rearrange a pile of papers and books. Salt-and-pepper opened one of the closets, looked down at the pile of clothing, luggage, books and trash, and shut the door again. It occurred to Michael that they weren’t searching for anything, their indifferent examination a matter of going through the motions. Both seemed bored.

“Can I put on some clothes?” Michael asked. He was well-muscled in a way that echoed high school athletics, but he was small and felt shriveled and unbearably vulnerable, nude and handcuffed. His nineteen-year-old mind flashed a brief homophobic panic, even though he knew he was dealing with police. The freeze-dried fantasy included a grisly murder. The heavy cop exchanged a look with salt-and-pepper, then nodded. Michael stood and turned, and the detective removed the cuffs. Michael self-consciously shifted his body as he grabbed a pair of threadbare blue-and-white-striped bell bottom pants from the floor and pulled them on. He picked up a wrinkled blue work shirt and buttoned it, and he tied his tennis shoes without sitting. He combed his long hair away from his face with his fingers before the detective replaced the handcuffs, and Michael sat again.

“Feel better?” salt-and-pepper asked with an ironic smile.
Then he left the room. The heavy cop positioned himself in the entrance, in front of the flimsy curtain, and stared impassively. Michael looked at the windows, brighter now as dawn filled the sky. Almost to himself, he said, “What is this?”

“You’re under arrest,” the detective repeated.

“Why?”

The detective didn’t answer, and Michael wasn’t able to endure his stare. He looked through the windows again. His room was at the end of a long hall on the top floor in one of the older dormitories on the small campus, a three-story building with just two floors of rooms, the building shaped like a T with a central staircase that led down to the Student Union. The noises from the hall had died down, but he could hear voices. Still bleary, he couldn’t sort out his thoughts. Why was he being arrested? He hadn’t done anything. It was something with the bald guy, but he couldn’t fill in the blanks.

His friend John Calabria’s father came into his mind. He was suddenly overcome with a desire to be sitting in the office at Dominick Calabria’s farm northwest of Chicago, untouchable, waiting for the man’s sharp smile to fade as he offered a serious solution. What would Dominick Calabria do? Nothing. He would say nothing at all and wait for his lawyer. Lawyers. An army of lawyers.

“Can’t you tell me what’s going on?” Michael asked, overcome by confusion and anxiety. The heavy detective’s expression didn’t change even as salt-and-pepper returned.

“Set?” the heavy detective asked.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” Both cops stepped to the bed and raised the young man by his arms.

As they walked down the hall, Michael said, “I need to piss,” nodding toward the common bathroom. The cops followed him to the urinals, and the heavy detective removed the handcuffs. When Michael finished, they didn’t replace the restraint. The young man felt a childish flush of relief that
was almost pride for the miniscule favor: He was trustworthy, they could see that. And this added an absurd hope that the arrest was a mistake that would soon be clarified.

Outside, a friend from the sophomore class, Pat Kinnealy, whose room was down the hall from Michael’s, stood in handcuffs near an unmarked car in the small parking area next to the dorm. It was brightening into a lovely day. Michael glanced up at the sky, then back toward the parking spaces. Behind the unmarked car were one local squad car and three state cruisers. State troopers stood near their cars. Strangers were seated in the backseats of two of the state vehicles. He could see another acquaintance, a man two years older who lived in an apartment in town, with another stranger in the backseat of the local car. Both sat with the awkward tilt of handcuffed prisoners. Two freshmen from the floor below Michael’s stood in the parking area, also with their hands manacled behind their backs, and a small comprehension formed: The two roommates sold reefer, LSD, mescaline and amphetamines in small quantities from their room—he had purchased from them. Michael suddenly felt conspicuous without handcuffs, caught somewhere in the hostile twilight between Us and Them.

He and Pat were ushered into the backseat of the unmarked car. The two freshmen were placed in one of the state cruisers. “Why aren’t you handcuffed?” Pat asked. Beneath a taut strain of somnolent shock, his pallid face was a mixture of relief and accusation.

“They took them off when I peed,” Michael said. “They didn’t put them back on.” The cops were talking outside the cars.

“Did you recognize the bald guy?” Pat asked.

“No really.”

“I think I sold him some white cross last fall,” Pat said mournfully. “Dan brought him over with another guy,” nodding toward their friend in the local squad car. “I think he
was wearing a stocking cap, but I recognize the beard.” Pat seemed on the verge of tears, the skin pale around his eyes.

“I never sold him anything,” Michael mused, feeling relieved and silently reassuring himself that a mistake was being made. His roommate had from time to time sold an ounce or two of excess grass; they must have intended to arrest him instead. A straw to grasp. He didn’t know about the strangers in the state cars, but even though the two freshmen usually had hallucinogens or speed to sell, they weren’t serious dealers, and he, Pat and Dan weren’t dealers at all. Not in the sense of buying quantities and selling again for a profit or even for a supply of free drugs. But he had an uneasy feeling. He thought he recognized the bearded bald man as well, and Pat confirmed it. He thought he had met him once, when Dan brought him to his room in search of drugs. Michael had shown him to the freshmen’s room several months earlier, before Thanksgiving. Could that be it? It seemed too inconsequential to be real.

2.

The young man’s college was located in a small city in central Illinois, its population only about 35,000, even though it was a county seat. The college was also small, with just some 1,300 students enrolled in 1972, but even this comparatively insignificant student body had managed to enrage the surrounding voters with miniature demonstrations against the Vietnam War and a one-night occupation of a historic campus building in 1970—the little liberal arts school’s reaction to the Kent State shootings in May. The great majority of students were drawn from affluent suburbs of Chicago, often