I was unafraid of falling as I leapt from rock to rock along the quarry rim in an acid January wind; our hike had taken us along the track of a shallow, rocky stream—rather, it had taken me down the middle of the stream, by whatever dry protrusions would support my seven-year-old frame. I was proven; I was sure-footed. I knew the place of each of my limbs and kept my balance.

For the others, the footpath sufficed. My mother and father climbed with considerable effort; Greg Waugh, my godfather, led his wife Susan and sons, Daniel and Stuart, with an energy near my own. He was tall, seemingly one among the trees; the depth of the woods reflected his narrow form, but for a grey leather jacket and fading jeans, in a few thousand sapling pines and leafless oaks. He spoke deliberately, with a rasp in his voice. His force of being pulled the rest along.

He and my parents had, according to family legend, travelled across the country together during their college years with very little money. My experience of Greg and his relationship to my parents will never be complete; in fact, such tales of adventure predating me were the first and most obvious evidence that the beginning of the world had not coincided with my birth.

Greg was a psychiatrist who helped to administrate the small psychiatric hospital in Cullman, Alabama. He knew people; he knew how and why they acted, I thought. To what extent this profession influenced his rearing of two sons who were anything but normal, I can only guess. As the situation was, Daniel defied his parents whenever the opportunity arose; Stuart spoke always loudly enough to be heard above a crowd, though the volume of our conversation rarely required it.

Greg was otherwise a man of fascinating, if trivial knowledge: it was he who pointed out the persimmon seeds in fox droppings which he said could only grow after having undergone the fox’s digestive processes. It was Greg who taught me how to whistle, piercingly, with an acorn’s top. Greg looked on, without speaking, while his wife grew frantic as she repeatedly had to call Daniel down from the rock ledge overlooking the quarry. Daniel had adopted my example and was following me along the rim, much to his mother’s worry. Greg was like my mother, unconcerned by Daniel’s and my antics. It was Greg who would bring Daniel and me again to the quarry for a demonstration by the bomb squad. It was Greg who, when Stuart could no longer stand the pain in his feet, carried him back along the path towards home.
In seven years, though, Greg would be dead. By his own willing.

I had never seen my parents as I saw them one afternoon in September. I was walking to the car after school and was struck, to see them standing away from the car, both staring pensively into the sky. My only evidence that something was afloat was my mother’s biting her lip and returning to the car when she saw me approach.

I know now the uncertainty they must have felt, the cruelty to which they must have known they would have to expose me. It was not, however, their fault that they harbored news of Greg’s death. “We’ve got some terrible news.”

A glance between them.

“Greg died yesterday.”

His hospital had been audited; the great secret—that it was run on a shoestring—was about to be discovered. Greg had been fired, chosen arbitrarily from a handful of administrators to represent for the auditors the “restructuring” that would make the hospital financially solvent. A lie. It was not any guilt on Greg’s part that drove him to suicide. It was, I am now convinced, the disintegration of his life’s work, the seeming hopelessness of his position after the loss of his job, that robbed him of reason and clouded his hope.

In my experience, those who understand the processes of the mind and of typical behavior are more able than most to dissemble their own problems. Who better, then, than Greg, to appear sane and collected but in fact be tormented inside?

As children we trust the stability and guidance of adults. For the first time, I knew that trust to be unfounded.

... ...

“The Japanese consider suicide honorable in order to save one’s family.”

Greg’s note made as much sense as his suicide: none, whatsoever. Whose family was he saving? Certainly not his own. Who did the Japanese think they were, to sponsor the deliberate shattering of a family unit?

And, as it were, Susan, Daniel, and Stuart had been forced as persimmon seeds through the bowels of a fox, each having lost a portion of themselves in the process—Susan, her husband of twenty-three years; Daniel, the man who would have watched his graduation from high school a
year later; Stuart, a much needed source of stability. Daniel had lost the person who could help him ground and focus his scattered energies, Stuart the father who could channel his eccentricity into likable individualism. No longer was either possible.

Food follows funeral.

Tongues are liberated to speak as easily as ever about matters of little consequence after a death. Grief is kept at arm’s length. Over country ham biscuits, mashed potatoes, and other ‘bests’ of the kitchens of those who had attended the funeral, Daniel and I endured a twenty-minute, repetitive discourse regarding “The Exorcist” as the most frightening movie ever made.

“My date—this was back when it first came out; I was in college—couldn’t watch. I told her that was ‘okay,’ that she could go wait outside the theater. I like scary movies, see. And boy was it!”

I don’t know how emphatically this particular individual whom I’d never met was accustomed to speaking, but he was certainly adamant about “The Exorcist.” I appreciated his talk.

I think I know why Daniel doesn’t wear a seat-belt. If Greg had not been above dying, neither then should Daniel be particularly concerned for his own safety. Daniel needed something to trust, and a friend’s driving ability would suit that need.

He and I rode with a friend of his, Sparky, to a veritable mansion, situated on several acres of grass cut by gravel driveway, the house and lot clearly the estate of a wealthy family, though drastically undervalued only because they sat in Cullman, Alabama. The music turned as high as I could tolerate—I was sitting in the back seat of a car in which had recently been installed a new sound system—we drove down the middle of dirt roads to reach the house; we rattled across the lawn to park along the driveway when we’d arrived. Daniel’s friends from school, the most significant reason he has endured life without Greg so much better than his brother, had come to watch movies, to play pool. Daniel was beside himself—though understandably—to the point of worrying his friends. Their concern seemed a great consolation to him.

But after a few hours of escape from the household neither of us could dissociate from the memory of Greg, we returned to it.
Daniel and I didn’t go to sleep until well after two o’clock, though we were tired. Instead, we sat and talked. Daniel explained to me how things had seemed from his perspective during the days immediately before Greg’s death.

“I—I thought the night before, that he might do it, or something.”

I wanted, tried to tell Daniel that he hadn’t, couldn’t have known. No one could have expected suicide from Greg. Certainly not his son. Just days before being fired, Greg had talked with Susan about moving, finding another job. For some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to leave, and didn’t remember the discussion long enough to see a way out, to see that at least in a sense, being fired from his job might have been the best chance he’d have to seek out a new life.

I made a synopsis of the plot of Red Sky at Morning; there seemed to be a parallel experience between Daniel’s ordeal and the character Josh’s loss of a father. I was reaching. It was contrived, probably meaningless.

We fell asleep.

... ...

I’d like to think that having run the course of a foxes’ gut, persimmon seeds would invariably take root, have new life. The more I’ve returned to Cullman, and the more times I’ve had a view to a single frame of the Waugh family progress, the more I’ve realized:

These seeds have fallen on rocks. They cry for the wash of a swift storm to find their way to soil; life must progress a bit further that they may grow again.