

Jared
(from *Rearranging and Other Stories*)

Early for his appointment, Jared walked the paved trail beside the converted house that was the clinic. Normally the parklike setting with its bank of alders and tiny creek below helped him to relax before going in. But today even the playful antics of a pair of ducks couldn't take his mind off the slip of paper in his pocket. He wished Ryan hadn't given him the paper...hadn't clapped him on the back and said, "She's all yours," with that knowing wink. Ryan was supposed to be his friend. You'd think the big jerk would know better. Know that the mere thought of meeting girls made Jared feel as if he were hanging from some window ledge---forty stories up---fingers already starting their slide.

"Jesus, Ryan," he breathed, his face beginning to throb with the pain that was always just below the surface now. Reaching up, he doffed the floppy-brimmed felt hat that had become his protection from the eyes of the world and wiped the wet from his forehead. He was at the place where the path became dirt, curving to the footbridge that led to the apartments across the way. He didn't hear the woman and the little girl who rounded the curve together. His eyes met the woman's for only an instant before veering down to the girl's. He could see the girl's lips...how they'd already begun to shape themselves into a *Hello*. Then stopped. He turned abruptly, jamming the hat back on and looking to where the ducks were spinning and bobbing like well-oiled wind-up toys. Behind him he could hear the woman's soft hushing. Footsteps moving away with increased speed. The little girl's voice was all the louder for the quiet of the trees.

"But, Mommy, what happened to that boy's face?"