'Gretna Jewels,' Vern said, and snickered. Chris gave him a black look.

'And then there's this guy who's a disc jockey at a radio station up in Lewiston, he ain't exactly fat but he's sorta chubby, you know. And the last guy was Hubert Gretna the Third, who was the principal of Lard Ass Hogan's school.'

'He was eatin' against his own principal!' Teddy asked.

Chris clutched his knees and rocked back and forth joyfully. 'Ain't that great! Go on, Gordie!'

I had them now. They were all leaning forward. I felt an intoxicating sense of power. I tossed my empty Coke bottle into the woods and scrunched around a little bit to get comfortable. I remember hearing the chickadee again, off in the woods, farther away now, lifting its monotonous, endless call into the sky: dee-dee-dee dee ...

'So he gets this idea,' I said. The greatest revenge idea a kid ever had. The big night comes - the end of Pioneer Days. The pie-eating contest comes just before the fireworks. The Main Street of Gretna has been closed off so people can walk around in it, and there's this big platform set up right in the street. There's bunting hanging down and a big crowd in front. There's also a photographer from the paper, to get a picture of the winner with blueberries all over his face, because it turned out to be blueberry pies that year. Also, I almost forgot to tell you this, they had to eat the pies with their hands tied behind their backs. So, dig it, they come up onto the platform...'

There were muffled shrieks of laughter, running footsteps, a few shadows that no one could (or would) identify, some nervous laughter, some judicial frowns (the largest from Hizzoner Charbonneau, the most visible figure of authority). Lard Ass himself appeared to not even notice. The small smile greasing his thick lips and creasing his thick chops did not change as the Mayor, still frowning largely, tied his bib around his neck and told him not to pay any attention to fools in the audience (as if the Mayor had even the faintest inkling of what monstrous fools Lard Ass Hogan had suffered and would continue to suffer as he rumbled through life like a Nazi Tiger Tank). The Mayor's breath was warm and smelled of beer.

The last contestant to mount the bunting-decorated stage drew the loudest and most sustained applause; this was the legendary Bill Travis, six feet five inches tall, gangling, voracious. Travis was a mechanic at the local Amoco station down by the railyard, a likeable fellow if there ever was one.

It was common knowledge around town that there was more involved in the Great Gretna Pie-Eat than a mere five dollars - at least, for Bill Travis there was. There were two reasons for this. First, people always came by the station to congratulate Bill after he won the contest, and most everyone who came to congratulate stayed to get his gas-tank filled. And the two garage-bays were sometimes booked up for a solid month after the contest. Folks would come in to get a muffler replaced or their wheel-bearings greased, and would sit in the theatre chairs ranged along one wall (Jerry Mating, who owned the Amoco, had salvaged them from the old Gem Theatre when it was torn down in 1957), drinking Cokes and Moxies from out of the machine and gassing with Bill about the contest as he changed sparkplugs or rolled around on a crawlie-wheelie under someone's International Harvester pickup, looking for holes in the exhaust system. Bill always seemed willing to talk, which was one of the reasons he was so well-liked in Gretna.

There was some dispute around town as to whether Jerry Maling gave Bill a flat bonus for the extra business his yearly feat (or yearly eat, if you prefer) brought in, or if he got an out-and-out raise. Whatever way it was, there could be no doubt that Travis did much better than most small-town wrench jokeys. He had a nice-looking two-storey ranch out on the Sabbatus Road, and certain snide people referred to it as 'the house that pies built'. That was probably an exaggeration, but Bill had it coming another way ... which brings us to the second reason there was more in it for Travis than just five dollars.

The pie-eat was a hot wagering event in Gretna. Perhaps most people only came to laugh, but a goodly minority also came to lay their money down. Contestants were observed and discussed by these betters as ardently as thoroughbreds are observed and discussed by racing touts. The wagerers accosted contestants' friends, relatives, even mere acquaintances. They pried out any and all details concerning the contestants' eating habits. There was always a lot of discussion about that year's official pie - apple was considered a 'heavy' pie, apricot a 'light' one (although a contestant had to resign himself to a day or two of the trots after downing three or four apricot pies). That year's official pie, blueberry, was considered a happy medium. Betters, of course, were particularly interested in their man's stomach for blueberry dishes. How did he do on blueberry buckle? Did he favour blueberry jam over strawberry preserve? Had he been known to sprinkle blueberries on his breakfast cereal, or was he strictly a bananas-and-cream sort of fellow?

There were other questions of some moment. Was he a fast eater who slowed down or a slow eater who started to speed up as things got serious or just a good steady all-around trencher-man? How many hot dogs could he put away while watching a Babe Ruth League game down at the St Dom's baseball field? Was he much of a beer-drinker, and, if so, how many bottles did he usually put away in the course of an evening? Was he a belcher? It was believed that a good belcher was a bit tougher to beat over the long haul.

All of this and other information was sifted, the odds laid, the bets made. How much money actually changed hands during the week or so following pie-night I have no way of knowing, but if you held a gun to my head and forced me to guess, I'd put it at close to a thousand dollars - that probably sounds like a pretty paltry figure, but it was a lot of
money to be passing around in such a small town fifteen years ago.

And because the contest was honest and a strict time-limit of ten minutes was observed, no one objected to a competitor betting on himself, and Bill Travis did so every year. Talk was, as he nodded, smiling, to his audience on that summer night in 1960, that he had bet a substantial amount on himself again, and that the best he had been able to do this year was one-for-five odds. If you're not the betting type, let me explain it this way: he'd have to put two hundred and fifty dollars at risk to win fifty. Not a good deal at all, but it was the price of success - and as he stood there, soaking up the applause and smiling easy, he didn't look too worried about it.

'And the defending champion,' Mayor Charbonneau trumpeted, 'Gretna's own Bill Travis!'

'Hoo, Bill!'

'How many you goin' through tonight, Bill?'

'You goin' for ten, Billy-boy?'

'I got a two-spot on you, Bill! Don't let me down, boy!'

'Save me one of those pies, Trav!'

Nodding and smiling with all proper modesty, Bill Travis allowed the Mayor to tie his bib around his neck. Then he sat down at the far right end of the table, near the place where Mayor Charbonneau would stand during the contest. From right to left, then, the eaters were Bill Travis, David 'Lard Ass' Hogan, Bob Cormier, principal John Wiggins, and Calvin Spier holding down the stool on the far left.

Mayor Charbonneau introduced Sylvia Dodge, who was even more of a contest figure than Bill Travis himself. She had been President of the Gretna Ladies' Auxiliary for years beyond telling (since the First Manassas, according to some town wits), and it was she who oversaw the baking of each year's pies, strictly subjecting each to her own rigorous quality control, which included a weigh-in ceremony on Mr Bancichek's butcher's scales down at the Freedom Market -this to make sure that each pie weighed within an ounce of the others.

Sylvia smiled regally down at the crowd, her blue hair twinkling under the heat glow of the light-bulbs. She made a short speech about how glad she was that so much of the town had turned out to celebrate their hardy pioneer forebears, the people who made this country great, for it was great, not only on the grassroots level where Mayor Charbonneau would be leading the local Republicans to the hallowed seats of town government again in November, but on the national level where the team of Nixon and Lodge would take the torch of freedom from Our Great and Beloved General and hold it high for -

Calvin Spier's belly rumbled noisily - Goinnnng! There was laughter and even some applause. Sylvia Dodge, who knew perfectly well that Calvin was both a Democrat and a Catholic (either would have been forgivable alone, but the two combined, never), managed to blush, smile, and look furious all at the same time. She cleared her throat and wound up with a ringing exhortation to every boy and girl in the audience, telling them to always hold the red, white, and blue high, both in their hands and in their hearts, and to remember that smoking was a dirty, evil habit which made you cough. The boys and girls in the audience, most of whom would be wearing peace medallions and smoking not Camels but marijuana in another eight years, shuffled their feet and waited for the action to begin.

'Less talk, more eatin'!' someone in the back row called, and there was another burst of applause - it was heartier this time.

Mayor Charbonneau handed Sylvia a stopwatch and a silver police whistle, which she would blow at the end of the ten minutes of all-out pie-eating. Mayor Charbonneau would then step forward and hold up the hand of the winner.

'Are you ready??' Hizzoner's voice rolled triumphantly through the Great Day PA and
off down Main Street.

The five pie-eaters declared they were ready.

'Are you SET??' Hizzoner enquired further.

The eaters growled that they were indeed set. Downstreet, a boy set off a rattling skein of firecrackers.

Mayor Charbonneau raised one pudgy hand and then dropped it 'GO!!'

Five heads dropped into five pie-plates. The sound was like five large feet stamping firmly into mud. Wet chomping noises rose on the mild night air and then were blotted out as the betters and partisans in the crowd began to cheer on their favourites. And no more than the first pie had been demolished before most people realised that a possible upset was in the making.

Lard Ass Hogan, a seven-to-one underdog because of his age and inexperience, was eating like a boy possessed. His jaws machine-gunned up crust (the contest rules required that only the top crust of the pie be eaten, not the bottom), and when that had disappeared, a huge sucking sound issued from between his lips. It was like the sound of an industrial vacuum cleaner going to work. Moments later his whole head disappeared into the pie-plate. He raised it fifteen seconds later to indicate he was done. His cheeks and forehead were smeared with blueberry juice, and he looked like an extra in a minstrel show. He was done - done before the legendary Bill Travis had finished hay of his first pie.

Startled applause went up as the Major examined Lard Ass's pie-plate and pronounced it clean enough. He whipped a second pie into place before the pace-maker. Lard Ass had gobbled a regulation-size pie in just forty-two seconds. It was a contest record.

He went at the second pie even more furiously yet, his head bobbing and smooching in the soft blueberry filling, and Bill Travis threw him a worried glance as he called for his second blueberry pie. As he told friends later, he felt he was in a real contest for the first time since 1957, when George Gamache gobbled three pies in four minutes and then fainted dead away. He had to wonder, he said, if he was up against a boy or a demon. He thought of the money he had riding on this and redoubled his efforts.

But if Travis had redoubled, Lard Ass had trebled. Blueberries flew from his second pie-dish, staining the tablecloth around him like a Jackson Pollock painting. There were blueberries in his hair, blueberries in his bib, blueberries standing out on his forehead as if, in an agony of concentration, he had actually begun to sweat blueberries.

'Doner he cried, lifting his head from his second pie dish before Bill Travis had even consumed the crust on his new pie.

'Better slow down, boy,' Hizzoner murmured. Charbonneau himself had ten dollars riding on Bill Travis. 'You got to pace yourself if you want to hold out.'

It was as if Lard Ass hadn't heard. He tore into his third pie with lunatic speed, jaws moving with lightning rapidity. And then —

But I must interrupt for a moment to tell you that there was an empty bottle in the medicine cabinet at Lard Ass Hogan's house. Earlier, that bottle had been three-quarters full of pearl-yellow castor oil, perhaps the most noxious fluid that the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, ever allowed upon or beneath the face of the earth. Lard Ass had emptied that bottle himself, drinking every last drop and then licking the rim, his mouth twisting, his belly gagging sourly, his brain filled with thoughts of sweet revenge.

And as he rapidly worked his way through his third pie Calvin Spier, dead last as predicted, had not yet finished his first), Lard Ass began to deliberately torture himself with grisly fantasies. He was not eatin' pies at all; he was eating cowflops. He was eating great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher-guts. He was eating diced-up woodchuck intestines with blueberry sauce poured over them. Rancid blueberry sauce.

He finished his third pie and called for his fourth, now one full pie ahead of the legendary Bill Travis. The fickle crowd, sensing a new and unexpected champ in the
making, began to cheer him on lustily.

But Lard Ass had no hope or intention of winning. He could not have continued at the pace he was currently setting if his own mother's life had been the prize. And besides, winning for him was losing; revenge was the only blue ribbon he sought. His belly groaning with castor oil, his throat opening and closing sickly, he finished his fourth pie and called for his fifth, the Ultimate Pie - Blueberries Become Electra, so to speak. He dropped his head into the dish, breaking the crust, and snuffled blueberries up his nose. Blueberries went down his shirt. The contents of his stomach seemed to suddenly gain weight. He chewed up pastry crust and swallowed it. He inhaled blueberries.

And suddenly the moment of revenge was at hand. His stomach, loaded beyond endurance, revolted. It clenched like a strong hand encased in a slick rubber glove. His throat opened.

Lard Ass raised his head.

He grinned at Bill Travis with blue teeth.

Puke rumbled up his throat like a six-ton Peterbilt shooting through a tunnel.

It roared out of his mouth in a huge blue-and-yellow glurt, warm and gaily steaming. It covered Bill Travis, who only had time to utter one nonsense syllable — ‘Góogr was what it sounded like. Women in the audience screamed. Calvin Spier, who had watched this unannounced event with a numb and surprised expression on his face, leaned conversationally over the table as if to explain to the gaping audience just what was happening, and puked on the head of Marguerite Charbonneau, the Mayor's wife. She screamed and backed away, pawing futilely at her hair, which was now covered with a mixture of crushed berries, baked beans, and partially digested frankfurters (the latter two had been Cal Spier's dinner). She turned to her good friend Maria Lavin and threw up on the front of Maria's buckskin jacket.

In rapid succession, like a replay of the firecrackers:

Bill Travis blew a great - and seemingly supercharged -jet of vomit out over the first two rows of spectators, his stunned face proclaiming to one and all, Man, I just can't believe I'm doing this;

Chuck Day, who had received a generous portion of Bill Travis's surprise gift, threw up on his Hush Puppies and then blinked at them wonderingly, knowing full well that stuff would never come off suede;

John Wiggins, principal of Gretna Elementary, opened his blue-lined mouth and said reprovingly: 'Really, this has ... YURRRK!' As befitted a man of his breeding and position, he did it in his own pie-plate;

Hizzoner Charbonneau, who found himself suddenly presiding over what must have seemed more like a stomach-flu hospital ward than a pie-eating contest, opened his mouth to call the whole thing off and upchucked all over the microphone.

'Jesus save us!' moaned Sylvia Dodge, and then her outraged supper - fried clams, cole slaw, butter-and-sugar corn (two ears' worth), and a generous helping of Muriel Harrington's Bosco chocolate cake - bolted out the emergency exit and landed with a large wet splash on the back of the Mayor's Robert Hall suitcoat.

Lard Ass Hogan, now at the absolute apogee of his young life, beamed happily out over the audience. Puke was everywhere. People staggered around in drunken circles, holding their throats and making weak cawing noises. Somebody's pet Pekinese ran past the stage, yapping crazily, and a man wearing jeans and a Western-style silk shirt threw up on it, nearly drowning it. Mrs Brockway, the Methodist minister's wife, made a long, basso belching noise which was followed by a gusher of degenerated roast beef and mashed potatoes and apple cobbler. The cobbler looked as if it might have been quite good when it first went down. Jerry Maling, who had come to see his pet mechanic walk away with all the marbles again, decided to get the righteous fuck out of this madhouse. He got about fifteen yards before tripping over a kid's little red wagon and realizing he
had landed in a puddle of warm bile, Jerry tossed his cookies in his own lap and told folks later he only thanked Providence he had been wearing his coveralls. And Miss Norman, who taught Latin and English Fundamentals at the Gretna Consolidated High School, vomited into her own purse in an agony of propriety.

Lard Ass Hogan watched it all, his large face calm and beaming, his stomach suddenly sweet and steady with a warm balm it might never know again - that balm was a feeling of utter and complete satisfaction. He stood up, took the slightly tacky microphone from the trembling hand of Mayor Charbonneau, and said ...

"I declare this contest a draw." Then he puts the mike down, walks off the back of the platform, and goes straight home. His mother's there, on account of she couldn't get a babysitter for Lard Ass's little sister, who was only two. And as soon as he comes in, all covered with puke and pie drool, still wearin' his bib, she says, 'Davie, did you win?' But he doesn't say a fuckin' word, you know. Just goes upstairs to his room, locks the door, and lays down on his bed.'

'I downed the last swallow in Chris's Coke and tossed it into the woods.
'Yeah, that's cool, then what happened?' Teddy asked eagerly.
'I don't know.'
'What do you mean, you don't know?' Teddy asked.
'It means it's the end. When you don't know what happens next, that's the end.'
•Whaaat? Vern cried. There was an upset, suspicious look on his face, like he thought maybe he'd just gotten rooked playing penny-up Bingo at the Topsham Fair.
'What's all this happy crappy? How'd it come out?'
'You have to use your imagination,' Chris said patiently.
'No, I ain't!' Vern said angrily. 'He's supposed to use his imagination! He made up the fuckin' story!'
'Yeah, what happened to the cat?' Teddy persisted. 'Come on, Gordie, tell us.'
'I think his dad was at the Pie-Eat and when he came home he beat the living crap out of Lard Ass.'
'Yeah, right,' Chris said. 'I bet that's just what happened.'
'And,' I said, 'the kids went right on calling him Lard Ass. Except that maybe some of them started calling him Puke-Yer-Guts, too.'
'That ending sucks,' Teddy said sadly.
'That's why I didn't want to tell it.'
'You could have made it so he shot his father and ran away and joined the Texas Rangers,' Teddy said. 'How about that?'

Chris and I exchanged a glance. Chris raised one shoulder in a barely perceptible shrug.
'I guess so,' I said.
'Hey, you got any new Le Dio stories, Gordie?'
'Not just now. Maybe I'll think of some.' I didn't want to upset Teddy, but I wasn't very