

TM

George and Elena were strongwilled and conservative, and they were not poor: Elena was a dental hygienist and George was an office manager at an import/export company. And so it baffled their friends, but amused them also, when they took \$10,000 from an internet company to name their son after it: Iblm. \$5,000 for the birth certificate, \$5,000 more if the kid was still being called Iblm ten years later. The company would verify this by secret methods.

Iblm was one of ten Iblms across the country, one of three from the state of Texas. His birth was covered on the front page of the Local Happenings section of the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, in addition to the Births page. There was a picture of the two parents holding their baby between them, smiling into the camera.

* * *

George and Elena were interviewed on KLBK AM. They took the baby with them to the interview.

"I have to admit, that sure is an unusual name!" said Jeremy Steele, the DJ.

"We agree with you, Jeremy," Elena said.

"Let me ask you: is that the kind of name that draws a lot of funny looks?"

"When people hear it said: yes it is."

"Pronounce it for me. Iblm."

"Iblm."

"Iblm! I bet you'd have a hard time finding that name in a book of baby names!"

"Sir, we never even looked!"

"Iblm!"

George and Elena had a tremendous time at the radio station. Who could've been listening? They had to confess it was not a station they ordinarily listened to themselves, and they hadn't told a lot of people about it beforehand. Next time, they would do better, they would plan in advance. What a blast that was! And objective listeners would have to admit: the two of them really had a flair for it.

* * *

The next logical place to take Iblm was television. First Elena called up Rich Huerring, who worked on the local wakeup show Good Morning on the NBC affiliate, and whom she knew a little because he got his teeth cleaned at her office. He told her Good Morning probably wouldn't be interested in just a baby whose name's got a story behind it, but maybe if she could come up with an angle in addition to that, the show might be interested. So she went home and discussed it with her

husband and the next day called back Rich: the show would bring together all the Iblms in America for a reunion.

But Rich said that Good Morning didn't have the budget to make a reunion like that happen, but it was a good idea as far as he was concerned, maybe they'd have more luck pitching it with another venue. And so Elena pressured him until he gave up the number of the Maury Povich show, not just the number that they give you at the end of the show to call if you potentially qualify for being the subject a future show, the *real* number, which she called right away, but she got turned down there also, this time being told that it was too soon for a reunion, none of the Iblms were even old enough at this point to talk, which as a rule makes for lousy television.

* * *

They needed a holistic strategy. And this time it was George who came up with it: they'd make an Iblm website. It would be an intermediate step: the website would stir up some talk, which would entice the real media to be interested. So they asked the teenage son of some friends to assist. George and Elena wanted Iblm.com, but the kid checked it out and found that that already belonged to the company that had sponsored Iblm's name.

"What about *I'm Iblm dot com?* Would that work?" said Elena.

"You can't have apostrophes in the name," said the kid.

"Plus that's stupid," said George. "What about *Texas Iblm?*"

"That might be okay. It'd have to be one word, *texasiblm.*"

"I don't like *Texas Iblm,*" said Elena. George looked at her like she was being contrary with him just because he'd been contrary with her. She said "So? That sounds stupid too."

But George worked on her and she agreed finally to *texasiblm.com*. The kid set it up: it had a timeline (with at this point only IBLM'S BIRTH and IBLM's WEBSITE LAUNCHED), a section of baby pictures, and a way to send George and Elena an email about it. They thought about featuring a link to the IBLM corporate website, but that didn't seem right so they left it off. Instead they put a link to the import/export business George worked at. They paid the kid two hundred bucks.

At first the Iblm emails came in at a pretty good clip: *Great pictures! I can't wait to see the timeline fill up with events! -- Barbara :)* and *I can't make the pictures work, but I love the sight! Love Mom.* But every email they got was from a person they already knew, and soon the flow of emails dried up. The website was not making the impact they'd counted on.

* * *

"Maybe we need more sensational pictures on the website," offered George.

"I don't think that's what it is," said Elena.

"He could turn out to be a genius, and we'd send him to a special school for geniuses, we won't know that until he can talk."

"I guess," said Elena. She sighed.

"We just can't know at this point where his potential is."

"Maybe this whole thing is just useless," said Elena.

"Maybe he's a sports prodigy at for instance golf or tennis, and it's just a matter of figuring out which sport it is."

"BE REALISTIC!" she yelled. George was taken aback by the force of this.

But Elena's anger dissolved and then she looked despondent. She walked out of the room. Then she walked back in.

"What does it take to be a baby model? He's as cute as any other baby."

"Lots of babies do that!" said George.

"Thank god!"

The next day they took him to the only modeling agency in the phonebook. The agency wasn't at present looking for baby models, but they did manage to set up Iblm with one shoot, at a furniture store. They wanted Iblm to pose on all the furniture.

They took him to the furniture store. The photographer was one of the store's owners, Janet Haas. She had a pink shirt with HAAS FURNITURE written on it that she wanted Iblm to wear.

"What is Iblm? A boy or a girl?"

"He's a boy," said Elena.

"I thought this was going to be on television," said George.

"Ha ha!" said James Haas, the other owner, putting an arm around him. "Not yet!"

The shirt was too big for Iblm: it was a kid's shirt, not a baby's; Iblm's arm didn't make it out of the sleeves. He posed on sofas and chairs and on dressers.

"This should be ready for the Sunday Circular three Sundays from now," Janet Haas told George and Elena, packing up her camera.

"That's tremendous," said Elena. "We're so excited!"

"I've got a proposition for you Mrs Haas," George said to her. "What do you say you consider making Iblm the official mascot of Haas' furniture?"

"What?" said Elena.

"Well," said Janet Haas.

"This idea just came into my mind. It would mean basically having Iblm appear in all the advertisements, like the Energizer bunny does for Energizer. He could also appear in public wearing a Haas Furniture shirt, or maybe a costume designed with the theme of Haas Furniture. It wouldn't be expensive at all. And the advantage is, it might stir up some public interest. We could even put it on the website," said George.

"What website?" said James Haas.

George told them about Iblm's website. James told him that he would need to talk it over with his wife.

* * *

On the drive home Elena expressed some reservations, but mostly the both of them were excited about the idea. They were looking at a potential stepping stone, is how George thought of it.

The Haases called them up the next day: they liked the idea. But there were some stipulations.

"He's got to wear the shirt at all times, because he could be in someone's presence unexpectedly," said James Haas. "He's a constant advertisement, remember."

"But we will supply you with two shirts, for when one gets dirty," said Janet Haas.

"But that's only half," James Haas continued. "He's got to be taken to prominent places: to malls and outdoors to busy intersections, for example, or to various kinds of functions and ceremonies."

"Anyplace people are is a good place for him to be," said Janet Haas.

Haas furniture would pay them \$500 a month, which was fine by George and Elena. They called up their friends' kid and told them to overhaul the website so as to emphasize Iblm's new status. The website now said, "WELCOME TO TEXASIBLM.COM, HOME OF HAAS FURNITURE SPOKESPERSON IBLM." Also it now had a link to Haas Furniture's website.

Every weekend George or Elena or both took Iblm to the Lubbock Mall. At first they brought a stroller, but the stroller was too confined to really showcase the t-shirt, so they had to carry him around the mall. Because the shirt only said HAAS FURNITURE on the front, they also had carry him facing forward, unless he started crying at it, at which times they reversed the shirt and carried him the regular way. They also brought him to Lubbock High School football games, basketball games, softball and baseball games, to the Buddy Holly Parade, and the openings of the new Safeway and United Artists 24. Plus there was still the weekly photo shoots with Janet for the Sunday Circulars.

At one photo shoot James Haas took George aside and introduced the idea of calling Iblm "Haas Haas B'Gosh" on the advertisements, but George had to decline, because it might void the second half of their contract with IBLM, he didn't want to test it.

* * *

By the time Iblm turned thirteen the Haases were pretty much like his aunt and uncle. Iblm and George and Elena had dinner over at their house at least twice a month, and James Haas attended all of Iblm's sports games: pee-wee football, little league. He'd been doing tv work for them for five years, the last four of which he'd had speaking parts. At first, his part had been small: the commercial would do its business, then Iblm, sitting on some piece of furniture, would add: "down at Haas Furniture!" Then he was in every shot: silent until he closed the commercial with "down at Haas Furniture!" Then he was announcing it: check out this sofa folks, this bureau's fine enough to be married in, you're going to need the chair I'm sitting in when you hear how low the

price is on it... down at Haas Furniture! People he knew and people he didn't would say it to him and expect him to say it back.

He would still wear his HAAS FURNITURE shirt around: now he had over twenty different varieties, all designed and decorated uniquely. He was recognized at the Texas Tech games, he was like their second mascot.

* * *

The Haases were over for Sunday dinner.

"Look at this!" Iblm rolled up the sleeve on his right arm. It was a tattoo: it said: HAAS FURNITURE.

"How about that!" said James Haas.

"Oh," said his mother.

"How'd you get that?" his father asked.

"There's a place in the mall," Iblm said.

"Did it hurt?" asked his mother.

"How much was it?" asked his father

"Is it legal for you to have that?" asked his mother.

"I think it's great," said Janet Haas.

"You just have to be 15," said Iblm.

"But you're 14," said his mother.

"All right," said James Haas. "I got something. You display that tattoo in public on a regular basis, and I'll pay you another two hundred bucks a month." At this point Iblm was being paid \$2000 a month.

"Oh," said Iblm's mother.

"How about three hundred," said Janet Haas.

"Three hundred," said Iblm's father.

"No: another five hundred dollars!" said Janet Haas.

"What do you say," said James Haas.

"It's already on your arm," said Janet Haas, "it wouldn't be much work on your part, if you look at it that way."

Iblm was smiling, looking at his tattoo. "I'll do it." He flexed his arm.

"All right!" said James Haas, shaking hands with George.

* * *

Later that night George and Elena discussed the tattoo.

"What's your opinion?" Elena asked her husband.

"I'm a little surprised at it."

“Do you think it’s right?”

“I personally have no problem with it at all. I think we’ve got to respect his decision, is the ultimate thing.”

Elena told him she agreed with that attitude.

* * *

Iblm cut all the sleeves off all his Haas Furniture t shirts. The tv ads had a new ending: a closeup shot of his tattoo: his flexing arm would mime *Down at Haas Furniture!* People wanted to see the tattoo, touch it, wanted to watch Iblm make it speak. He started keeping a journal: his first entry began, *My life has filled me with surprises at every corner.* He slept with his first girl, a twenty five year old teachers-aide from his history class.

* * *

Iblm was interviewed on the radio. His parents brought him to the interview but they had to wait in the reception area and listen to it over the office speakers.

“Who came up with ‘Down at Haas Furniture?’”

“It was Janet Haas. She’s the brains of the operation. But I like to think that I’ve made it my own.”

Elena turned to George but George shushed her before she could make her comment. She stared at the speakers. Who was this? This did not sound like Iblm. It was certainly not a voice Elena could have taught him.

“Do a lot of people ask you to say it?”

“All the time, Jeremy.”

“Okay then. Lay it on me.”

“This is Iblm from Haas Furniture telling you that you’re listening to KLBK... down at Haas Furniture!”

“Ha! Fantastic!”

George and Iblm reenacted the interview on the drive home, adding commentary. Elena didn’t want to speak.

* * *

Jerry Häagblom ran the local Coca Cola distributorship. He called up George with a proposition: what would Iblm say to having a Coca Cola insignia tattooed on Iblm’s open arm? He wouldn’t have to even actively promote the product, he’d just have to agree to drink Coke products to the exclusion of all other sodas. Payment would come primarily in a lump sum for the tattoo work, but Jerry Häagblom would see to it that there’d be a regular pension for holding to the

agreement. And this would be a clandestine arrangement. This sort of thing is definitely not endorsed by the suits in Atlanta.

“Do you guys make Dr Pepper?” George asked him. “Iblm really loves drinking Dr Pepper.”

“Dr Pepper is independent of Coke. But I don’t see anything wrong with him drinking it if it’s in private, number one, and number two, if he pours it into a glass and throws away the Dr Pepper bottle and has an empty can of a Coca Cola product standing next to the glass, just in case someone sees him, if you know what I’m getting at. Or lets say he buys a two liter bottle of Coke and dumps it out and refills it with the Dr Pepper from a two liter bottle of Dr Pepper, and then takes steps to see that no one accidentally tastes what’s in the bottle. Reconstituting the soda, so to speak. I don’t see having a problem with that.”

George ran it by James and Janet Haas, who said they had no problem with it as long as Iblm didn’t deviate from wearing the Haas Furniture shirts. Hell, they themselves enjoyed Coca Cola: who didn’t? And maybe interest in Iblm would be stirred up in a new area, which would consequently spill over onto Haas Furniture. Elena wondered if so much Coke might pose adverse potentialities for his health. Iblm was one hundred percent in favor of it.

* * *

The more companies that came to Iblm with tattoo propositions, the more companies were interested in tattooing Iblm. It was like a gravitational law: the attention Iblm was attracting was attracting attention. It was feeding on itself, and growing large. Companies like: Rubbermaid, Phillips, CMGI, Brown and Williamson, Abercrombe and Fitch, Hershey’s, Miramax, Subway, Safeway, 3COM, Staples, Citicorp, Toyota, Sega, along with nonprofits like Oxfam and People for the American Way. Iblm was a millionaire. He went on talk shows: Maury Povich, Conan O’Brien, Live with Regis and Kelly, Howard Stern. He had cameos in tv shows and movies. Nastysluts.com offered Iblm one million dollars to put their name on his penis, and a webcast of Iblm getting Johnson & Johnson on his back drew half a million visitors.

* * *

George was discussing a new tattoo for Iblm with a woman from Tommy Hilfiger:

“Is there any outstanding talent he’s got? For instance football: do you think he’s got the potential to be a star at football? Because I know with certainty that if he were an athlete of some standing, people would want to emulate his activities. People would take our body advertisement more seriously.”

“Those kinds of talents are not relevant. You know exactly what kind of one-of-a-kind talents you’re getting with Iblm. If you want a superstar, go ask Tiger Woods.”

“George, look,” said the Tommy Hilfiger woman.

“Ask Tiger Woods to put your corporate logo on his body.”

“George,”

“And then display it in front of cameras, at golf tournaments. See what he says to you.”

* * *

One afternoon Elena fielded a phone call:

“The reason I’m calling you, Elena, is because I am with AOL Time Warner, the parent company of IBLM, and here at AOL Time Warner IBLM we’ve noticed the great interest surrounding your son, and we’ve got concerns about it, I’ll be frank. He is receiving huge corporate attention, and since your son has the name of one of our subsidiaries, by design, we naturally have concerns about the problematic ways this attention might influence our reputation, being that this affiliates us by implication with companies that we really have no business with at all and could potentially be our rivals.”

“Well, I,” Elena started.

“Listen to me right now,” said George, who had picked up an extension and was listening silently, “you’ve got no claim on our son. No claim in any way. Our business was settled six years ago when you signed over that second \$5,000. Which was a bargain as far as I’m concerned. You know how much attention that boy has got you. You’d pay him \$5,000 every day of his life if you had any sense of fairness in your bones.”

“We at AOL Time Warner IBLM are just concerned at the proliferation of corporate sponsorships, the conflicting corporate sponsorships that--”

“They’re not sponsorships. That’s not the word for them,” said George, huffing.

“You have no say over how his life can go,” said Elena, almost crying.

“Now look, Elena, George--”

“He is his own man, apart from you,” said Elena.

“Now look, folks, now, I didn’t want to bring up the issue copyright infringement, the issue of who’s got proprietary ownership of the name IBLM, but if certain--”

“No you look mister,” said George, holding the phone so that he was staring at its earpiece in front of him. “You know how much water that threat is going to hold in court, absolutely zero and we both know it. We’ve still got our copy of the contract, and there’s nothing you can do about that. Now my wife and I are going to hang up the phone and I suggest that this be the last thing we ever hear from you people. Now goodbye,” he shouted.

* * *

Iblm put some of his journal entries on the website in a section called IBLM’S DIARY. It was his idea. He would write it and give it to his father to proofread and his father would give it to the webmaster.

He wrote, *The most often question I get asked, is does tattooing hurt. Yes it does! but you think about others things during it. The best part is, it's a way of expressing yourself in addition to regular ways. You get to say something without even using your mouth, it's a voice!*

He wrote, *Today I was recognized at Foot Locker. The man asked me why don't I have Foot Locker anywhere on me? Then, we laughed about it.*

He wrote, *I wouldn't recommend going my route to everybody, it's something I lucked into and stuck with. One example is my friends, when you've got a lot of people interested in you, it's harder to stick with real friends, I haven't spoken to Eugene Thomlinson in a year, and he was my best friend until age 11, though now he goes to Monterey and I go to Coronado. Things just work out in a particular way is all. If you're reading this Eugene send a line, okay?*

* * *

His father was trying to secure him a book contract, but the book people were refusing to budge on their unfavorable terms.

"He is a one of a kind article, which people have proven to have an interest in, judging by all the talk shows and television programs and exposure of other kinds that he has received since he was born. He is the definition of famous. Plus his life is an inspiration to many people."

"That's not being disputed here," said the book man.

"And I don't think I need to remind you that he's got a Viacom sponsorship on his calf, a six incher, among the biggest on his body."

The book man said, after a pause, "That is not how things work in this business, sir."

"Don't get ruffled. I'm just saying, is all I'm saying."

"Well I don't appreciate it."

"We've got a desirable product, and you've got a means of delivering that product, and I think it is in our mutual interests to come to an agreement on this, is all my point was."

"Well you've got our offer." The book man hung up.

* * *

Iblm slept with a different woman every night. He would go to Skooners, which usually had a wide selection of college girls, and if nothing developed after an hour, he would try Wolfy's and then Boss Office and then The Exitos. The bouncers and bartenders were all friendly with him. He catalogued the women in the back of his journal and when he didn't know their name he would enter a physical description.

* * *

James Haas met George for lunch. Iblm only did ads for Haas Furniture a couple times a year, and George considered them a favor to Janet and James Haas.

"I know we're no longer top priority on Iblm's list," said James. "But I have to tell you, I feel that Haas Furniture is becoming a nonentity in Iblm's life."

"Iblm realizes that you and Janet are largely responsible for giving Iblm that initial opportunity to showcase his talents. You took a chance on him when nobody else would. He is tremendously grateful."

"I'm going to be direct, George: I'm not seeing any manifestations of his loyalty these days."

"He's very busy, with his commitments."

"We've still got a contract with him."

"I know this James."

"A contract Janet and I intend for him to honor."

"I wouldn't take that tone with me if I were you."

"Because we could do our communicating in the courts, if that's how you'd prefer it."

"We've got some very sympathetic and powerful people in various positions, James. I'm warning you of this as a friend, okay?"

"Well I hope one of them is a lawyer," said James, who got up and left the restaurant.

* * *

Iblm asked his father if he could get a tattoo of his own name on the space left on his lower calf: a special personal tattoo for himself. He had drawn up what it would look like, straight roman letters resting between thick horizontal lines, like superbowl numerals. Maybe there could be some ivy growing around the letters. His father said it was a terrific idea, he loved it, but space was right now at such a premium that if they allowed themselves to indulge in this little bit of sentimentality it was going to cost them tens of thousands of dollars, conservatively, and he wanted to know if Iblm was sure it was an indulgence he was comfortable being responsible for.

Iblm said he didn't. He wrote in IBLM'S DIARY, *I've learned a lot as part of my experiences, one of them is, part of being an adult is compromising, you have to accept things and be smart about them, even if it's not your number one choice.*

* * *

It was becoming clear: Iblm was running out of skin space. Parts of the middle of his back were clear, along with some space on his legs and the back of his hand. Plus he still had clean skin on the bottom of his feet and on his private part, and he still had hair, so that was one more potential open area, if it came to that. His face was mostly clear, from the lower cheeks up. Coverage ran about 80%.

"How effective are tattoo removal procedures?" George was asking the doctor. "The ones with lasers?"

"Pretty effective, overall. The ink never completely leaves the skin, so the result is a kind of permanent, faded bruise where the tattoo was. But you won't be able to recognize the design that used to be there."

"And you can do this selectively, keep one tattoo while eliminating the one right next to it, say?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you then tattoo over the removed tattoo?"

"Not advised. The skin is prone to get infected. Plus the tattoo looks blurry."

George banged the steering wheel on the way home. He honked the horn. "God damn it!" he shouted at the windshield.

* * *

"What about your face?" George asked Iblm.

"That's not up for discussion," said Elena.

"It's not your face, I'm not asking you."

"I don't care who you're asking. I'm not letting my baby's face get covered."

"I'm not a baby."

"You don't understand, Elena!"

"This is not up for discussion! This discussion is over!"

* * *

Thanks to heavy lobbying from IBLM, the Texas legislature passed a law determining how much bodyspace could be devoted to advertisements: fifty percent. But thanks to the effort of a number of other corporations (which had not yet staked themselves on Iblm), a rider was attached to the bill exempting any person already corporately tattooed at the time of the bill's passage.

* * *

Iblm himself came up with a solution: he would increase the space he had left.

"If I can get to 350, I figure I can get 40% more out of the remaining spaces."

"Then what?" said his mother.

"Then there'd be 40% more space to fill up."

"Then what, Iblm? Once it's all filled? Then you're a 350 pound fatty with no space left and nothing to offer!"

“But we can charge more as the space gets filled up. It’d be more at a premium, because there’d be less of it. It’s like oil prices, with the using-up of a natural resource.”

George laughed.

“This isn’t funny George! He’s talking about ballooning himself up to obesity! It’s short sighted. And it’s not healthy. And he’ll look like a freak!”

George said, “he can lose the weight after. The tattoos will just shrink down in size.”

“And the corporations will be none the wiser,” said Iblm, and George laughed again.

Elena shrieked and left the house and went for a long drive in her car.

* * *

George joked that Iblm’s real talent was gaining weight: Iblm put on a hundred pounds in three and half months. Elena had moved out temporarily, so every meal George was bringing fast food from chains that had sponsored Iblm: McDonalds, KFC, Taco Bell, DQ.

Iblm grew a beard to camouflage his new fatness, but Toys ‘R Us, which had a spot on his neck, complained that it obscured Jeffery Giraffe. Iblm bought a golf cart to help get around and sold corporate spots on it. In private he walked with a cane.

He told his father, “I’d really like to sell the remaining spots so I can start to lose the weight.”

“We’re very close. We’ve just got a couple holdouts on finalizing the terms.”

“I’d even be willing to take a reduction in price in exchange for speeding things along.”

“All right son, I’ll see what I can do.”

* * *

His mother came by to see him.

“Jesus, you must weigh 400 pounds. Can you even sit up on your own?”

“Mom, I’m aiming to lose the weight,” he started to say

“I wanted to name you Christian! Or Daniel!”

“I’m proud to be,” Iblm started to say.

“Listen to me Iblm.” She looked at her hands in her lap, then at Iblm. “I’m moving to Abilene with your aunt Judy. You’re going to come with me and we’re going to fix it so that you can lose this weight and normalize yourself again. So you can get your respect back.”

“Mom, I can’t move to Abilene. There’s too much preventing me! Why can’t you stay here?”

Elena stood up.

“When people ask me if I’m the mother of you, I lie and tell them no, and it breaks my heart every day.” She left.

* * *

Iblm was having trouble losing the weight. He couldn't seem to crack 300 pounds.

"What about exploring the avenue of liposuction?" he asked his father in a low tone.

"See the problem with that is, is that liposuction leaves a scar, and there aren't any places in the liposuction region that it would be possible contractually to scar up. We could hire you a personal trainer, though."

"Yeah," said Iblm.

* * *

A number of corporations joined in a breach of contract suit against Iblm. His obesity lay him up in bed too much of the time; he couldn't fulfill minimum public exposure levels as stipulated in his agreements. His legal strategy was to argue that the 24 hour webcam in his bedroom rendered all that irrelevant legally; the way his life was set up, it was impossible to remove himself from the public's attention. A court date was set.

* * *

Iblm was visiting his physician for a check up.

"The first thing is of course drop some weight, because frankly being as heavy as you are is going to usher in any number of health problems, the first of which is heart failure and death. The second thing is, I'd like to run some blood tests."

The doctor summoned Iblm and his father to his office a few days later. The blood tests revealed that somehow the ink from his tattoos was leaking through his skin into his bloodstream. This posed grave and immediate risks to his life.

"I want to know," Iblm's father asked the doctor, "number one how such a thing is possible, number two why nobody told us this was possible, and number three what kind of immediate steps we can take to stop the leakage."

The doctor told him that he didn't know any of the answers. He'd never heard of anything like this before, but Iblm was a rare person. It was the doctor's inclination to bring Iblm in to be studied, but he would understand one hundred percent if Iblm was against it.

"What about removing the tattoos with lasers?" asked Iblm.

"There's got to be a better solution than that," said his father.

"But would it work?" Iblm persisted.

The doctor said, "In theory, it might, although--"

"How long will it take to find an alternative solution? I mean, doctor, how pressing is the issue of leakage? Is it an any-minute kind of danger, or do we have a little time to work with here?"

"I really have no way of determining."

Iblm and his father discussed it on the way home. His father was fixedly against the lasers. They noticeably alter the nature of your skin in irreversible ways, number one, and number two, they're an unproven technology which, who knows, could be lethally dangerous.

Iblm didn't say anything. Then he whispered, "I'm scared for my life."

"What was that?" said his father. "Look, don't worry, something will be figured out by somebody, there is absolutely no question about that."

* * *

Iblm was not eligible for cosmetic surgery, such as laser tattoo removal, unless he had the consent of a parent or guardian. His mother lived in Abilene and hadn't spoken with him in two months. He called the Haases, but they didn't want to hear his perfidious voice, unless it was on the legal witness stand. He went to some of the less popular bars, Otto's and Happy Trails, to try to pick up an older woman whom he could sleep with and then ask to pose as his legal guardian, but his obesity made seducing women a joke. He looked for a prostitute and couldn't find one.

* * *

Iblm removed all the towels and toilet paper from the bathroom, plus all the aerosol cans, then turned on the shower. He had a can of motor oil and a lighter and he was going to light his body on fire. After five minutes he was going to put himself out in the shower. He had an alarm clock to time the five minutes: he wanted to make sure that the fire did its job, and he wasn't sure he could trust himself to gauge time accurately in such discomfort. He covered his face and head in Vaseline, which he assumed to be flame retardant.

He poured the motor oil over his chest and shoulders and watched it in the mirror drip slowly over itself down to his legs. He was disgustingly fat. He remembered he should lock the door, because his father was at home in the basement and he was afraid he'd interfere, but his hands were slick with motor oil and there were no towels to mediate the slickness, and he had to do it with his teeth.

He watched the motor oil catch: a tight simmering flame that spread fast but did not grow large. For a few seconds, nothing. Then, pain: worse than anything, a million times worse than the worst pain he'd ever felt, a million infected tattoo needles stabbing into his skin and ripping it in every direction at once.

He screamed. Maybe ten seconds had passed.

He ran into the shower. The water wasn't putting out the fire. He tried to wipe the motor oil off his body with his hands. Vaseline was getting in his eyes.

"What is it!" his father yelled into the bathroom. "What are you screaming about! Are you on fire! I'm smelling fire!"

"Open the door!" Iblm yelled.

"It's locked!" Iblm's father shook the door handle, then launched into with his shoulder. Iblm battered it from the inside, but he couldn't get traction with his feet wet and greased up, and he kept slipping to the floor.

"Don't move! I'm going for the axe!"

George ran to the garage but couldn't locate the axe so he ran back with a softball bat. He hit the door what seemed like a hundred times. Then, finally he splintered open a serviceable crack and worked it wide enough to slip his hand through and try to undo the lock.

"I'm coming through!"

But the lock on the inside too was slippery to maneuver and plus the lock's metal was too hot to hold: the door had caught fire. George took off his shirt for a potholder and reached through and twisted the lock open. But the door was still stuck: Iblm had collapsed in its path. George forced it open.

His son was passed out on his back. His body was dark and slow burning like a briquette. Fire was spreading from the door to the wallpaper.

"Iblm! Wake up!" He kicked Iblm's face and it flopped one way then back into place.

"Iblm!"

He ran to call the fire department. He ran back and tried to drag Iblm from the bathroom: his body was too hot to touch so he took off his jeans and hooked Iblm's neck and tried to pull, but Iblm was too heavy to move. He wet the jeans in the shower and tried to dab out the fire on Iblm. His skin was bubbling up colors, deep blues, like budding prunes. Skin adhered to the jeans where they touched. Then the smoke got too bad and George had to leave to wait outside the house for the fire trucks to arrive.