

The Shore: Stories

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2012

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English - Creative Writing

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Though I spake with the tongues of men and angels, and yet had no love, I were even as a sounding brass: or as a tinkling cymbal. And though I could prophesy, and understood all secrets, and all knowledge: yea, if I had all faith so that I could move mountains out of their places, and yet had no love, I were nothing.

1 Corinthians 13

The Shore

I

Sam and his father ate breakfast quietly, speaking only to ask that the other pass the orange juice, or syrup, or pepper across the little table. The steam lifting off the eggs was caught in the new sunlight and twisted lazily there, unspooling itself into nothing, though there was, Sam decided, a kind of order in its movement. From their seats at the breakfast table they could look out over the lake. The sun etched the line of the mountains onto the water; as it rose higher, it began to burn the mist away. The silence was familiar, almost comfortable. It was their fourth morning at the cabin, and Sam had begun to feel at ease around his father again.

He wasn't sure when exactly he had forgotten how to act around his parents, but in the last weeks it had become worse and worse for him. He could find no words. He thought that finishing school for the year would help; he would be away from his tormentors for months, and even when he had to go back again in the fall they would be in different schools. But the first day of vacation he went online and saw that they were still talking about him, and he hadn't been able to sleep that night or the one after. Finally he left the house in the dark and walked the neighborhood. There had just been a rain, and the asphalt felt cold and gritty under his bare feet. He took his bat with him, and when he got to their houses he urinated on the mailboxes, then smashed them. It took more swings than he anticipated, and they almost caught him at the last one.

"The grass looks good," his father said. "You did a good job there."

"Thanks," said Sam. He felt proud as he took a bite of his eggs. "The trimmer ran out of gas. I almost couldn't finish."

"Well. It looks good."

The first nights away, Sam had not gone far from the cabin. He did not sleep well, but remembered no dreams. He spent the days selecting chunks of pine from the sprawling woodpile, then splitting and stacking them neatly in the woodshed at the back. He took his time. He cradled the maul. He loved the heft of it on his shoulder, the power of the swing as he brought it overhead, the sudden, clean way it popped the dry wood apart. He spent a long time fitting the split pieces together. He fit them tight as masonry, as if he were building a wall.

He knew that his father had brought him to the cabin because he wanted to put things right, and Sam wanted to help him. When the trimmer ran out of gas he had nearly panicked before he remembered the extra fuel they always kept in the shed. The thought of leaving the job unfinished had been momentarily too much to bear.

But he was better now. Leaving the house had been the hardest part, he thought. But you had to push your way through the hard stuff, through the way you felt confused, how the familiar things – your bed, your books, even your hands – seemed strange and distant, the way you woke up in the night and did not know where you were. You pushed through that, and it took a few days, but then you would be fine. He knew that his father had been watching him, but he had not said anything, and Sam felt proud of himself now that he had not needed to.

His father soaped and rinsed the dishes, handing each as he finished with it to Sam for drying.

“I don’t want you going further than the thumb,” his father said. “There’s plenty of fish in close there.”

“Yes sir,” Sam said.

“That canoe won’t take a lot of water. It’s not built for it. If it gets rough, you’ll have problems.” He handed Sam a plate.

“Yes sir.” He knew that his father was nervous. The day before somebody had broken the locks on two of the cabins down the road, empty still this early in the season. Whoever it was pulled all the bedclothes from the closets and scattered them through the woods, where Sam and his father found them while walking the dog after a rain.

The dog was rushing back and forth among the lodgepole pine, barking, the squirrels she chased always just out of reach, when, suddenly it seemed, she held in her mouth a blue polka dotted pillowcase. They continued and found more polka dotted sheets, and some of pale yellow, these draped over wet black stumps. Some sheets were hung from branches, others had been left in careless piles. Those hanging looked nothing like ghosts, but sagged with rainwater, leaning against the trees as old men might.

They gathered the sheets, heaping them into one large pile because they did not know which cabin each belonged to.

"Probably just a bum," his father said. "Some kind of hippie. They make it up to Seeley Lake sometimes, and that's not far from here." Pine needles and dirt stuck to the wet sheets so that the pile they made was speckled in brown. "Could have been a hiker," his father said. "People get lost sometimes." He was distracted, and Sam knew he wasn't really thinking about the sheets.

"How do you deal with chop?"

"Quarter into it," Sam said.

"What do you do if you tip the boat?"

"Stay with it," Sam said.

"That's right." His father handed him a bowl. "It'll float even if it's full of water. You just scoot yourself up on it and hang tight."

When they finished with the dishes, Sam and his father carried the canoe down the hill from the cabin and slid it gently into the water. The canoe, bright red, looked very cheerful beside the dock. They had to make several trips back up to the cabin

before Sam had everything he needed – his father kept remembering something new to send with him, an extra fleece coat, a bar of chocolate from the back of the cupboard, and finally a fresh thermos of coffee. Sam tried not to let his impatience show.

When finally he climbed into the canoe, the motion was still unfamiliar enough to feel awkward.

“Don’t lean over like that, Sam,” his father said. “You’re going to tip.”

“I’m fine,” Sam said.

“You’re jerking all over the place.” His father squatted on the dock, resting easily on the balls of his feet. He had his hand on the gunwale and he kept it there, holding the canoe steady.

“Lean gently,” he said. “Think about how you’re going to move before you move.”

Sam sat very still on the wicker seat and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his father was standing again, and the canoe floated freely. Sam took up the paddle, the varnished oak feeling smooth and solid in his hands, and pushed away from the dock. The water was very still and he could see deeply into it, all the way to the bottom, and with his eyes follow the silt down there until it slipped away into the darkness of the still deeper water.

“We don’t tell your mother about this.”

“No sir,” Sam said.

“This is not the kind of thing your mother understands. But you’re sixteen. I still remember how that feels.”

Sam made the first stroke with the paddle, the noise of the water loud against the blade. The canoe slowed and then, reluctantly, reversed direction. He sculled backward and the bow swung round toward the open water of the lake.

Across the bay the pines were clear and very distinct in the morning air; at one end, blue woodsmoke from the Forest Service campground drifted out over the water. At night you could sometimes see the flitting orange of campfires there; on the weekends, when the crowds from Missoula came up, you might hear shouts and singing, even a gunshot or two.

He was still very close to the dock. "I'm going into town," his father said. "I want to pick up a lock for the shed, and I need to make some phone calls." Sam knew that meant calls to his mother, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Catch a bunch. Bring them back and we'll have a fish fry tonight."

"Bring your appetite," Sam said. The fish, which he had not thought about before, seemed suddenly close at hand, and he grinned up at his father.

"Try the little inlet by the old cabin. They'll be starting to spawn in there. Try an egg."

The dock receded gently behind him. His father's voice came again, clear as if he too were in the boat: "Watch the weather. Don't get too far from shore." Sam dug deep with the paddle, then swung it around and dug again on the other side. As he swung the paddle, the water ran smoothly off the edge of the blade, wetting his lap. He slipped his sandals off and braced his feet against the floor of the canoe. When he looked back his father was a small figure on the end of the dock. He raised his hand in

farewell, and Sam raised his paddle, and let out a war whoop that echoed back at him from the fastness of the trees. His father stood a moment more, then turned back up the hill. Sam, paddling again, happy to be finally alone on the water, did not see him go. When he looked back again, even the cabin was hidden by the trees.

As he fished his way down the lake, the day was already beginning to be hot. He liked to stop in one place for a little while and cast along the seam where the bottom dropped steeply away. He caught the first trout that way, twitching his fly above the deep water until a dark shape detached itself from the gloom and planed suddenly up to snatch it. The sudden movement was so startling that he nearly pulled the fly away before the fish could take it. He reminded himself to be calm.

Twice he found himself over schools of feeding fish and caught several in rapid succession. The trout followed oddly straight lines when they surfaced, sipping the small black gnats two or three in a row before they angled back into deeper water. If he put his fly on the water on one of these lines, he almost always caught a fish.

He loved the way casting made him feel, how the rhythm took hold of his head and his arm and he could think about only it and where he wanted his fly to land, and if a fish might be there, while all other thoughts evaporated. He forgot the arrangement of the woodpile, and mowing the lawn, and his fear of school, and his mother, and his

father, and finally he forgot about time itself, marking it only in fish caught, rapped over the head, and threaded onto the stringer tied at canoe's stern.

Then came the biggest fish he had ever seen. Its shape, when it detached itself from the dark water, was so large that he almost didn't believe it. But when he set the hook, and the fish bolted first down and then cut violently up into the air, he began to believe in it. He wanted to believe in it more than anything he had before.

"Oh you son of a bitch," he said, half silently. "Oh you son of a bitch."

The fish went deep again and Sam felt in the rod the fluttering, tugging power of its underwater battle. He raised his rod hand over his head and stripped in line with the other; he was terrified the fish would shake the hook loose down there.

"You son of a bitch," he said again. It was like a prayer. He said it quietly, reverentially, and he repeated it again while through the animated rod he lived and died moment by moment deep in the lake. Then, as if summoned, the fish jumped again, arcing its silver sides to throw the wild drops it brought with it toward the sky. Sam saw for the first time the iridescent pink and green of its sides, and then the lake took the fish back into itself and the life that had suddenly erupted against his hand vanished as quickly as it had come.

Sam sat. The rod felt dead in his hand and he placed it carefully between his feet. He was breathing hard, and his hands felt shaky; he thought someone spoke to him, but realized it was his own voice he heard, shaky, not recognizable. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch." He was sick with leftover excitement.

Then he felt the excitement turning over in his stomach, and then the excitement was gone and he just felt sick. He bounced the balls of his feet against the canoe; they made a light thumping noise, like a heartbeat. His stomach hurt as if it had been punched. It was the same feeling he got sometimes at night when he couldn't sleep and would stare at one spot on the ceiling until his eyes hurt, wanting to sleep and still not sleeping. All the things that fishing had put out of his mind now crept back in. Those mailboxes had crumpled beneath his bat. It felt good to smash them. There was a dog, too. The Wagners owned a dog, and it had come after him and the only thing he could do was to hit it. The bat caught it across the foreleg; Sam remembered the wet cracking noise it made, and how the dog dropped and whined and squirmed away. He felt sick about it.

So now he felt sick and sorrowful, and he felt a fear that he had lost all the work he had done since arriving at the cabin. He could hear the sound the dog made. He should have kept the fish tight on the line, even as it jumped. It was a stupid, beginner mistake, and he was not a beginner. The dog squirmed on the ground. He couldn't look at it. He ran away.

He was far out into open water before he realized what he was doing. The far shore seemed no closer, but behind him the trees had diminished to broken green triangles he could hide with the palm of his hand. He laid the paddle inside the canoe and rubbed his hands against his legs – his fingers were hooked in the shape of the handle; he had to force them straight. His head ached where his sunglasses pinched at

the temples, but when he took the glasses off the glare of the sun on the water was too much.

He stopped four times more, and at each rest he took longer than the last to rub the cramps from his hands and rest his aching head. Once he took a drink of chocolate milk from the thermos, but when he started to paddle again he felt as if he might throw up. He had blisters between the thumb and first finger of each hand.

He wanted to paddle slower, but he couldn't make himself slow down. He paddled as hard as he could until he couldn't paddle any longer, and then he rested for a little while, and then he paddled as hard as he could once more. His t-shirt was wet and stuck to his back. He did not stop to ask himself where he was going, or why he was going there; it was only in the movements of his shoulders and his arms that any decision had been made.

He knew that it was impossible not to be yourself, but that was what he wanted. Sometimes he felt as if he were only a step short of leaving his body behind; fishing had brought him closest, but he could not fish forever. But maybe he would find another way to escape.

The breeze, when it began to pick up, came so gently that he might not have noticed but for the sudden coolness on his back, a gentleness he relaxed against. He splashed lakewater against his face and stretched his hands above his head. He was

alone in the middle of the lake, no other boat in sight, only dark water and, far off, clouds like cream above the trees. The sun burned the sky pale, then white.

Suddenly Sam felt joy. It was as if some switch had been flipped inside of him; he felt a physical rush of happiness, starting in his belly and spreading so quickly outwards, tingling down each limb, up and out through the top of his head. It was the joy of being alone and knowing that, even if they wanted to, nobody could find him now. His father would think that he was still in the shallow water. He did not have to be back in school for months. His mother would have no idea at all.

In the middle of the lake he watched as all his problems receded into the far distance. Each problem was like a spider, and each spider scuttled rapidly side-to-side, confused, fearful; Sam was the giant hand that batted them about, never smashing, no, always restraining himself, but harrowing them before him with infinite wrath, infinite power.

With the wind behind him, paddling was a pleasure. His hands felt stronger and for the first time he relaxed the pace of his strokes. Before him the bow of the canoe lifted slightly with each wave, settled gently into the next small trough. Riding the canoe was like riding the back of a bird, a swan or a goose that cut the water as easily as it might part the skies. He forgot about the fish, and the dog, and the noises the dog had made; all that mattered was the fresh feeling of each paddle stroke, the steadily approaching shore. He forgot about the cabin, and his father, and his mother, and the sheets strung between damp tree trunks. He forgot himself and all his mysteries and simply paddled.

At the very last the wind shifted against him, but even that did not disturb his happiness. The waves beat staccato against the canoe while the wind peeled water from their tops and sprayed it against his legs. He paddled hard, his hands threatening to cramp again, and managed to pull behind a small point, where the trees took the brunt of the wind. The canoe thunked against the rocks and Sam climbed out, feeling the cold of the water on his feet, and the smooth, pinching stones on the bottom. His fish were somehow all still on the stringer.

His legs trembled as he climbed out, feeling the cold of the water on his feet, and the smooth, pinching stones of the bottom. He slipped as he dragged the canoe up, went down hard on one knee, came up again with a shout and saw that he was bleeding a little where he had clipped the rock. He needed to sit. The surface of the lake was wrinkled by the furling crests of little whitecaps. They looked almost delicate from land.

Sam found a smooth patch of grass nearby, lay down in it, and watched the clouds moving quickly behind the green pines and then appearing again in another clear patch of blue. Gradually his back began to relax. His hands throbbed at the blistered spots, and the backs of his arms ached as if he had been beaten there with a stick.

"I am not afraid," he said at the sky. "I am not afraid of anything."

Then in his mind the lake appeared suddenly, darker and more threatening than the sky above him, and on it what had been the little whitecaps were deep-troughed waves, the water in them smoothly heavy as they crashed against the shore with deep, guttural voices.

“I am not afraid of you,” he said. The vision passed. The sky was quiet, the in and out of the waves gentle against the smooth rocks. Sam closed his eyes and waited with what he knew was unaccustomed patience until in the warm darkness he fell finally asleep.

The dream that woke him so disoriented him that for a moment he did not know where he was. He had a tremendous hard-on that stuck up painfully against his shorts, and he was embarrassed, terribly embarrassed that somebody might see. Then he heard the waves and remembered.

Hunger was savage in his belly, but he had somehow left the plastic bag of sandwiches out in the sun instead of in the safety of the cooler bag. The bread was soggy and stuck to the plastic like dough, so he ate the cookies instead, and then because he was still hungry ate the parts of the sandwiches that weren't as ruined as the others, and threw the rest long-arm out onto the water where after splashing down they floated for a moment, white as fish bellies, and sank out of sight.

He pulled his shirt over his head, and slipped out of his pants and his underwear. There was nobody around to see. Little dark hairs were beginning to grow around his belly button and they ran down to more dark hair at his crotch. His brain felt fuzzy and overheated; sleep was slow in leaving and he had eaten too quickly and too much. The edges of the lake seemed to go on forever in either direction, a clean line interrupted only where the occasional tree, its roots undercut by erosion, had fallen into the water.

The dream had been strange. It was coming back to him now. In the beginning it had all been dark and he knew it was cold but did not mind the cold, and then something caught his eye in the light above and he found himself hurtling upwards and knew with a kind of baffled joy that he was a fish. But when he reached the surface the fly had caught in his mouth and he had had to fight against it, and he dove back deep into the dark water, and jumped high in the air, until he could fight no more and he saw the net coming for him. Just as it was about to take him, that dream ended, and he was himself again, with the fish at his side, carrying it up the hill to show everyone what he had caught.

But when he opened the door, he was not in the cabin at all. There was a chart on the wall that showed different exercise positions, and a purple mat rolled up in the corner, and he realized he was at Seth's house, and then the door opened again behind him and Seth's mother came. She did not seem to see him, but went to the mat and unrolled it and began to bend and flex upon it. She was naked and the color of almonds. In the soft light of the room her body seemed to glow. Then Sam realized

that he, too, was naked, his penis sticking out like a flagpole. He felt a momentary panic when she looked up at him, but she was not angry at all, and took his erection, which was enormous, like a sausage, in both of her hands.

Oh my, she said. You special thing. You special, special thing.

She had been about to start something with her hands when Sam woke up. Having remembered, he now felt cheated.

The smooth rocks, warm in the sun, tickled the arches of his feet and he felt his hard-on coming back. He wanted to jack off, but he was afraid to do it in the open, even though he knew he was alone. He walked back to the trees, wincing as his feet met the fallen pine needles, found a place that seemed hidden, and did it there. At the end he closed his eyes, and he was back in the dream with her face looking down at him, her body monumental and contorted, the breasts large and soft as pillows, the taut lines of her ribs like ropes under her skin, but the belly smooth and inviting, and underneath something else, some mystery closed to him, but opening, yes opening, oh so slowly, he could almost see it, there!

He opened his eyes and all around him were the trees and the sound of the wind blowing through their tops, the creaking they made as they swayed gentle to his ear as a caress. He let his head fall forward until it met the pine he sagged against, and for a moment stood like that, pressing his forehead against the rough bark.

In his mind came again the image of the lake in a storm, the waves dark and hard-edged, the foam that rode atop them rough as boulders. It seemed to Sam that he

could hear a voice calling out over the water, but the words were strange and he did not understand. Stop it, he thought. Just stop.

As he walked back to the lake he was no longer embarrassed to be naked. It was good to be alone, and already he was getting hungry again. The waves were up, but that did not matter. He could wait them out, and if they did not go away he would cross the lake still. Anyway, he would fish now and forget about them, and he would catch some big fish. Lake trout. Rainbows.

Before he began, he went to the lake and, without giving himself time to think how cold it might be, dove in. He tried to shout as he came up, but the water was so cold it caught the breath from his chest and what came out sounded like a squeal. He tried a crawl stroke, but the water was too cold even to keep his face under, so he rolled to his side and swam in a half circle that way, breathing quickly because of the chill. He was out in the deeper water now, and tried not to think about what might be underneath him. It always made him nervous, swimming in deep water. The sore places, his arms, his back, his hands: all felt stiff, as if ready to quit. He turned back.

A man stood there. He was maybe twenty yards down the shore.

He stood tall and lean and even from this distance Sam could see the bright red of sunburn on his face, the black stubble on his cheeks. He was wrapped in something flowing and dirty-white, his chest paler still beneath it, and he was looking right at Sam.

They stared at each other. Then the man started walking again, faster, heading for the canoe.

Sam choked, made a strangled gasp, felt himself choking again. He didn't know how it happened, only that suddenly his mouth was full of water and he was coughing, coughing as his eyes filled with tears and the world blurred. In the blurriness he heard the man's voice.

"Boy," he called. "Boy, I need to talk to you."

Sam was treading water, trying with one hand to wipe the tears from his eyes, sculling frantically with the other to keep from going under. When he could look again, he saw that the man was closer but that he had stopped, as if content to wait until Sam should decide to finish fooling around out there in the water and come to shore as was sensible. The breeze off the lake seemed to affect the man's balance, so unsteady did he look on his thin, white legs.

Sam kicked hard. His chest was burning and his sore arms were like wet logs in the water, dead weights that attached to his shoulders as anchors would attach to a ship. He kicked harder and suddenly his arms were *moving*, Jesus they *hurt*, but they were moving and his hands by instinct cupped the water, pushing his body through. Then he put his head down and the world became a silent roar against his ears and he hoped that he would swim straight and in the right direction.

He didn't dare stop to breathe, and his chest began to burn. He opened his eyes and could see only green, and the burning was almost too much, he had to stop, when his right hand smashed into the canoe just as his knees caught the rocks, and he came

up out of the water with a breath like a roar. He stood, the water streaming from him, and looked for the man. So close now, maybe thirty feet, but still not moving, just looking at him and saying something again that Sam couldn't catch. The blood thumped in his ears.

"Boy, what's the rush?" the man asked. His hands were at his sides, palms out. "I just want to talk, just want to rap with you. What say we talk about this a little while?" The man took a step toward Sam, tripped, and fell heavily, his hands by his sides all the while as if it did not occur to him to break his fall. But it seemed that he had no sooner fallen than he was on his feet again, a smear of blood at his temple.

"Oh geez," he said. "Where did that come from?" He turned a circle, looking at his feet. The bed sheet, for Sam realized now that it was a bed sheet, trailed him like a dress. Sam reached down, fishing through the pile of his clothes without ever taking his eyes from the man. When he found his shorts he pulled them on, balancing delicately one foot to the other, not once relaxing his gaze.

"Hey, you don't say a lot, do you?" The man had stopped spinning. The bed sheet was twisted around his legs like a vine. "What are you doing way out here?"

"Fishing," Sam said. He was loading everything into the canoe. The cooler was between him and the man but he did not want to get any closer to him. He would leave it – he could tell his father it had fallen out of the canoe. He picked his shoes up and tossed them to the stern. That was all of it.

"Fishing," the man said, if he had never heard of it. "Like with a pole?"

"Yes," Sam said. "Like that." He was in the water now, alongside the canoe, his eyes down so he could see where he was wading. When he looked up the man was suddenly closer, though he hadn't heard him move. "I'm looking for some friends of mine," the man said. "Have you seen anybody?" He seemed to look through Sam and on out onto the lake, or into the water, as if Sam wasn't really there, or wasn't what he was addressing.

"No," Sam said. There's nobody out here, he thought. You're not supposed to be out here. I was supposed to be alone. Why are you out here?

"Probably in the bushes," the man said. "You know all about that, I guess. Hiding out in the bushes, fooling around." He paused and Sam felt bile rise in his throat.

"But hey," the man said, "that's a nice boat you got. Nice red boat. How about a ride? I gotta get back, you know. Can't stay out here another night. We were only supposed to be out two nights and now I don't know how long it's been."

Sam climbed aboard the canoe, pushing against the rocks as he did so, and the boat began to move. The noise of footsteps and showering stones came from behind him, and then the sound of splashing. The canoe bellied slowly out into the water, oh, so slowly.

"Kid, I said how about a ride. Kid. Kid!" Sam scrambled for the paddle and found it and dropped it and found it again; he didn't look back, wouldn't look back. Then the thumping sound of legs kicking in deeper water and he looked back and saw the man swimming after him. He seemed to swim as awkwardly and as quickly as he

had walked, and he continued to talk as he swam. "I can take the paddle," he said.

"Just give me the paddle."

Then almost before Sam was aware of it, the man had a hand on the canoe. Sam dug hard with the paddle, but the canoe felt stalled, felt like a whale, felt as slow and dead in the water as you felt sometimes in a nightmare when you tried to run but your legs were trapped in cement.

"We just need to talk," the man said, and pulled himself closer. "Talk. That's all. I need to ask you some questions." He spoke like a man Sam had seen once on a street corner with a busted up guitar and a spotted dog on a rope.

The thing in Sam that had been near to breaking for weeks, and that had seemed to go away at the cabin but had never really gone away at all, only pretended to disappear while Sam worked and paddled and fished, now snapped. He brought the paddle down on the man's hand.

The man howled, his mouth stretched wide like the mouth of a cat. But in an instant his hand was back on the canoe, closer than before. He moved so quickly. Sam swung at him again, but the man was too fast and pulled his hand back so that the paddle bounced crazily from the gunwale and Sam nearly lost his grip on it.

"Fool me once, you little son of a bitch. You aren't going to leave me here." The sheet around his neck trailed out in the water behind him like some kind of bridal gown. A fire had begun to burn inside of Sam, a deep, hate-filled fire; he wanted to kill the man. But greater than anger was his fear, his terror of what would happen if the man got him.

Then the canoe lurched heavily as the man heaved himself up into it, nearly tipping them both, and the lifejacket tumbled out lightly onto the water, followed by the splash of the thermos. For the first time, the man hesitated. Halfway in, he seemed uncertain about what he should do next.

A sudden sense of clarity came upon Sam. The world receded far into the distance until he knew only the sound of his breath and the sight of the man laid out before him. There was a feeling of calm, almost of peace, in knowing what he had to do, and then he raised the paddle high and brought it down on the soft place where the man's neck joined his head.

The man stiffened suddenly and made a coughing sound; his legs churned the water. "Oh geez," Sam thought he heard. It seemed to him that he only watched himself as he hit the man once again, in the same soft place; he felt a long way away from his body. The coughing sound stopped, and the legs in the water grew still.

"Talk. Talk, we'll talk, oh you talk now, talk, talk, talk." His voice cracked.

The canoe rocked back and forth. The man's hands twitched at the wrists, as if he were trying to sign something that would explain all of this; there was a slow, hiccupping noise and the twitching stopped. The man lay limp, half in, half out of the canoe. From his neck blood dripped into the bottom of the boat where it blossomed in the water puddle there, looking like pale pink flowers, like the gentle unfurling of smoke. Sam threw up.

II

Sam sat in the canoe, lap warm and then cooling quickly as the contents of his stomach cooled. The man lay still. He was draped like a rug over the side, his arms out and in front of him like he was readying himself for a dive. Then his back arched suddenly, his arms shot out to the sides, and Sam was staring into his face. The eyes opened, blank and far away, and Sam registered dully the paleness of that blue, and then they closed as the seizure slackened and the man slid smoothly, liquidly, back into the lake.

He floated cruciform, in the barrel-float Sam recognized from swimming lessons. It was the way you were supposed to float if you were lost at sea, lifting your head only briefly to catch a small breath, then settling it again in the water so you could conserve

your energy. Sam waited for the man to raise his head and take a breath. A stream of bubbles broke the surface next to the man's ear. Then the bubbles stopped and for a long moment Sam could only sit. In his chest he felt a sudden empty coldness that overwhelmed his rage.

He reached forward, gripped the man's shoulder, and rolled him onto his back; as he pulled on the man's shoulder, he overbalanced and nearly toppled out of the canoe. Sweat beaded on his temples, rolled from beneath his arms down his sides. From the man's open mouth, gargling, choking sounds came wetly forth.

From a long way off he heard a quiet, slow voice. Sam. Listen. You need to get this under control. Don't cry. Sam had not realized he was crying, but now, wiping at his cheeks, his hand came away wet.

He felt it coming, and tried to hold it down, then threw up again, over the side of the canoe. His stomach felt wrung, and there wasn't much left, just mucus and acid. He spit again, and rinsed his mouth with lakewater, and spit that out, too. The spit bubbles ringed each other on the surface of the lake.

The sound of ragged breathing was in his ears. The arm that held the man tired quickly, but he would not let the man go, would not let him die. He was trapped: wanting the man to vanish, wanting him to disappear, but afraid to let him drown. No drowning. Maybe someone else would step out of the woods, saying let me help you son, let me take care of this, saying we will figure this right out.

No. Nothing there. Only himself and the canoe and the man, and the man's weight pulling him slowly from the canoe, threatening to drown them both. Then he heard the voice again. It was familiar. It was his father's voice.

How are your hands, Sam? Your hands are okay, aren't they? They still work. They're not broken.

He caught the sheet in his free hand and wrapped the corner through the stern handle and knotted it off. When he let go, the man's head still bobbed above the surface. Sam could see red bug bites on the man's arms and face. When he began to tow him to shore, though, the head dipped under and water ran into his mouth. Sam stopped and raised the man's head again, draining the water, and adjusted the sheet so that it cradled the man's head. In this way, stopping each time the water threatened to run into the man's mouth again, he pulled him to shore. He beached the canoe, straddled the man's head and shoulders, tugged him up onto the sandy spit. The man did not open his eyes.

Sam's shirt was still in the canoe. He pulled it on. The cooler bag was empty and half sunk, but he pulled it out and drained it and tossed it in. Far down the shore he saw the whiteness of the plastic bag. Always he watched the man.

He found that his father's voice had gone, and the old familiar one had taken its place. Whatever spoke stayed just out of his vision, but sometimes he thought he caught a flash of it, moving quickly in the shadows of the trees.

What if he comes after you?

I could hit him again. I would hit him again.

He almost got you last time.

He didn't get me.

Why did you hit him?

He tried to kill me.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Why did you hit him again?

I didn't think about it.

Are you going to leave him here?

Yes.

What if a bear comes?

That's not my fault.

They'll eat him up.

So what.

People will blame you.

Nobody will know.

Everyone will know.

Nobody comes here.

You came here. So did he.

Sam walked back to where the man lay on the sand. The man's chest rose and fell steadily; otherwise he did not move. Sam toed him. His body was as heavy and unresisting as the sand underneath.

“Hey. Hey you!”

The man was silent.

“I’m going to leave you here. I’m going to leave you here all alone, and you’ll freeze tonight.”

The man only lay there.

Feeling as if he might cry again, Sam turned away. His stomach cramped and relaxed, then cramped again. The thought came that he should simply have left the man in the water, that that would have solved his problem. He pushed it away.

He took his backpack from the canoe and found the knife he kept for cleaning the fish. It had a wooden blade that smelled like fishguts. He stood over the man again for a long time, then bent suddenly and began to cut the sheet away from the man’s neck. The man’s head jogged back and forth with the sawing motions, his jaw slack and loose. He didn’t smell bad. He smelled like a tourist. Even after the lake, he smelled like sunscreen and woodsmoke, and something else, a sweetness on his breath that Sam could not identify. There was the sudden memory of evenings on the river with his parents, his mother calling out to him that he needed to cover up, the smell of roasted chicken and garlic from the picnic dinner, the cold, bitter taste of beer his father had let him try.

He had to tug hard to get the wet sheet out from beneath the man’s body, but eventually it came free. The man wore an expensive-looking pair of hiking boots, the laces trailing and full of knots; his jeans were a dark, soaked blue; he wore no shirt. Sam cut the sheet several times along one edge, making the cuts about two inches apart.

When he tried to rip the strips free, though, he found that he did not have the strength in his hands to hold the small bands, so he made another, wider set of cuts, and these he could tear with relative ease.

Always he watched the man, who lay still as ever on his back. The cut on his face had scabbed over now, and were gummy tracks of blood down his temple.

When Sam had as many strips as he thought he would need, he brought the canoe onto shore, alongside the man.

You don't have to do this.

Yes I do.

What if he wakes up?

He's not going to wake up.

He'll get you.

Sam knelt behind the man, canoe in front of them. He worked his arms under the man's back and, back straining suddenly, pushed from his knees. The man moved slackly, but Sam couldn't lift him. It felt like trying to lift a sack half-full of flour, or loose sand. The man's body simply shifted limply away.

It would be easier to leave him.

I can't leave him now.

He's going to slow you down. You're going to have to fight the wind the whole way across, and his weight will make it harder for you. You're already tired and you can't do this. You made a mistake but the mistake will go away if you just leave him here.

“Shut up,” Sam said. “Shut up, shut up!” He was startled to have spoken aloud, and frightened by the thinness, the helplessness of his voice.

He pulled his arms free and rocked rearwards on his heels. Then he stood and walked back around the canoe and pushed it until the bow floated in the water. Taking the man by the armpits, he dragged him down to the water, wading until he felt the buoyancy take some of the weight from him. Kneeling again, hating the cold water, the hard stones against his bare knees, the smell of the man thick in his nose, he heaved.

The canoe rolled, nearly disastrously, but Sam found his footing and pushed again. Water sloshed, but the man was halfway in now, though Sam’s strength was waning fast, and he lacked the force of arm to push the man over and in. The canoe danced away from him in the water, pivoting mischievously around its beached bow. Just as he felt that he must again lose his grip, it bumped bottom, and he expended the last of his energy pouring the rest of his burden inside. Between a rock and a hard place, he suddenly thought. You are caught between a rock and a hard place.

His legs and feet sported new blue bruises that he saw but did not feel as he sat on the sand to recapture his breath. The newly-laden canoe bobbed a little lower in the waves. The wind had shifted and came around the point now, forming a small chop in the little inlet. He realized he should have tied the man while he was in the water, when passing the strips of cloth around his body would have been easy. The sharp, panicky fear that he had felt was easing away now, and replacing was a darker, heavier, warier fear, fear like a deer might feel coming across old grizzly bear dung, a reminder of an ever-present threat.

You need to tie him. Tie him tight.

It required several minutes of moving the man's body, and weaving the cloth, until Sam was satisfied. He ran two of the bands underneath him and then back around, binding the arms at the sides, and did the same with another band around the legs. He tied the sheets off with surgeon's knots and half squares. With another strip he looped through the bands, and tied the ends to the seat supports. The surgeon's knot and the square knot were the only ones he could remember and he did not trust that they would hold, so he piled them on, one atop the other, until no more sheet remained to tie.

Now Sam began to move very quickly, stumbling to collect the belongings that remained on the shore: one sandal, the plastic bag, the silver thermos that had drifted in after it was spilled. The fly rod had disappeared, and though he scoured the rocks up and down he could not find it, nor remember the last time it had been in his hands. When he tried to picture what he might have done it was like looking at a blank wall. On the wall was the picture of the man, and nothing else.

After three attempts to leave the sheltered bay, Sam gave up. Each time the canoe began to bounce and heave in the waves he felt sharp pangs of fear. The wind slung water across his lap, soon soaking him; in front, the man's head lolled from side to side in the spray. The third time out he nearly rolled the canoe, leaning forward with

the paddle just as a wave lifted him, so that when he dug he felt not the full resistance of the water but only a sudden and unexpected skittering across its surface, and he lurched forward, lunged back, the balance of the canoe slippery beneath him. He turned tail for the shore.

Once out of the worst of the waves, Sam cupped his hands to scoop as much of the water out of the boat as he could. Then he simply sat, feeling the sun on the back of his neck. His headache had returned. He was thirsty, his throat dry to the point of pain, the thirst making his head pound. The water bottle was empty, though, and the lakewater would probably make him sick. Giardia. Little bugs too small to see. If you drank them you would be fine for a while, for a few weeks even, but then you would spend a long time shitting your brains out. He considered this, then dipped the water bottle into the lake and drank. The water tasted green, but it was cold, and he drank himself to belly distended fullness. When he finished he belched loudly.

“Ah,” he said. “Ah.” The water left a funny taste in his mouth.

He was going to have to go around the lake, along the edge, into the wind. It was too dangerous to cross, but if he stayed near the shore he would be safe. It would be slow going, but there would be no danger of drowning. When he got thirsty, he would have plenty of water to drink. He would be hungry, but that was not as bad as being thirsty. Drinking had sated both hunger and thirst, and he could not remember what either felt like. It would take a long time to get back, it might even take all night, but Sam knew that he could do it. If the clouds didn't get too thick, there might even be

a moon. When he got back, there would be help. He would be able to explain everything.

He did not worry about explaining the man. He would tell his father what had happened, how he had come after him down the embankment and into the lake, how quickly he had moved and the things that he had said. His father would understand that Sam had had no other choice. Toward the man he felt a strange kind of protectiveness, almost a responsibility. The pangs of fear he had felt just now were not only for himself, he realized, but also for his passenger. He did not want the man to die.

Paddling slowly, the man's head swaying gently before him, Sam kept a measured cadence. He hummed to himself. In First Aid they taught him that, if you needed to give somebody CPR, you should sing "Staying Alive" to yourself as you compressed the chest; that way you wouldn't go too fast or too slow, and the blood that you moved through the person's body had a good chance of keeping them alive. Occasionally he stopped paddling and listened for the man's breathing, but the noise of the water was too much. Once he climbed gingerly forward until he was nearly at the man's head, and then he heard the rasping breath. After that he did not worry about the breathing.

Dig and two and three.

Dig and two and three.

Dig and two and three.

rest seven eight.

Dig and two and three...

...and on and on. He squinted into the sun.

Sam remembered waking up one morning to find his mother asleep on the floor next to his bed. She had wrapped herself in the afghan that usually draped the living room couch, and slept so soundly that even when he stood out of bed and walked by her she did not move. Not even when he stomped his feet. He remembered how her mouth was slightly open as she slept, and on the floor there was a wet spot where she drooled.

He went to the shower and shampooed his hair three times, and when he came back she was gone, and the afghan and the drool spot with her. When he went downstairs for breakfast she was there, frying eggs as she usually did. She asked him if he wanted toast, and he did not ask her why she had been sleeping on the floor in his room, when her bed was only twenty feet away, just across the hallway, and his father was in it. She never explained it to him. She had not mentioned it at all. Sam had eaten his breakfast and gone off to school and it was as a secret between them that neither knew how to acknowledge. That night he had gone out after the mailboxes. Smashed them down and pissed all over them.

His arms hurt. The blisters on his hands were rubbed rawly open; he dipped each hand into the water and winced at the sting. Ahead a series of dark boulders rose abruptly out of the clear water. They had rings that showed where the level of the lake had been highest. Underneath them were the moving shadow shapes of fish, clearly visible in the late afternoon sun. When he looked back the little bay still seemed very

close, and ahead the far end of the lake was not yet in sight. Once he got there he would still have to come back nearly as far on the opposite shore as where he sat now. His hopeful feeling was fading away.

The dog made the worst noise Sam had ever heard. Thinking about it made him want to cry. The lights had come on in the houses all down the street, and he had been too afraid to chase it, make sure it was okay. He was too afraid of being caught. He saw the dog coming at him again, jaws open in a snarl, or maybe it wasn't a snarl, maybe it had just wanted to play, maybe it thought he had a ball or something good to eat.

Sam sat up with a start. The shadows cast by the boulders seemed longer than before. The man had not moved.

He fell asleep again with his head in his hands, and when he woke up the shadows of the boulders stretched much farther, and the shadows of the trees had slipped out from shore to taken the canoe in their arms. The canoe was pushed against the boulders, out of the wind. He was cold, and he began to paddle again, faster than before. He felt the same sudden urgency that he had felt when he decided to cross the lake that morning. His body had stiffened as he slept. Paddling hurt, but the wind had died and the lake looked calmer than it had all afternoon.

When he began again he was so tired that he felt his arms shaking. His heart fluttered in his chest, and his head felt light; he was not in control of his body. He tried not to think about what it would be like out on the lake in the dark, and then that was all he could think about. It was clear to him now that he had been too optimistic before

about paddling the shore. The effort was too much. As if he had the body of a bird, he saw what he had to do from a long way off. There were miles of slow paddling along the wiggling shore, then miles of paddling back; against those miles was the hard sprint across the open water. The waves that from his bird's view looked like white wrinkles were smaller than before, and soaring as a bird he felt how the wind was dying, how soon it seemed the air would be nearly still.

His arms shook with fatigue. Just do it, he thought. Just do it, just do it, do it. He felt himself swing the bow of the canoe around and start out.

He tried to distract himself from how tired he was by imagining what he would do when he got back to the cabin. The first thing would be to change his clothes. No, that wasn't the first thing. The very first thing would be the hot shower. Then his clean clothes and downstairs to the kitchen, where he would march directly to the fridge and make himself a sandwich. A huge fucking sandwich, he thought, taking pleasure in the profanity; with roast beef and pickle, tomato, onion, lots of mayonnaise and just a little bit of mustard. Minutes passed as he imagined all the different ways he could arrange his toppings. Then sandwich sat before him, overwhelming the plate. It weighed several pounds. Lifting it to his mouth made his tired arms twinge.

He was lightheaded, and the sun dancing over the water reflected his image back to him at a hundred different angles. Looking into the water, he could not tell which face was actually his and which faces were illusions.

From his seat it seemed to Sam as if the man leered at him. The man's face was pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. In his lightheadedness, Sam thought the man spoke.

What will you tell them? asked the man.

What happened.

But what happened, Sam? Can you remember?

How do you know my name?

You told me, Sam. Can you remember what happened?

Yes. Yes, I remember.

Then why won't you say?

Sam tried to block him out. "One and one is two," he said. "Two and two is four. Four and four is eight. Two times four is eight. Eight times four is thirty-two. Thirty-two and two is thirty-four."

"I need help," he said. "I need something to eat." Around him the quiet whine of mosquitoes on the still water. "I need help and something to eat and I have this with me." He meant to say 'this man,' but he could not bring himself to say this man' aloud.

He paddled again, but he had to stop when the lightheadedness hit. Focus slipped in and out of the world.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "Jesus, Jesus."

He had never said 'Jesus Christ' outside of the church. It made the loneliness worse. He thought about the sermons. He felt the hard pew underneath him and around him heard the slow sighing of the sanctuary, the shuffling of feet, felt the

delicate, stiff scrape of the shirt collar against his neck. At the pulpit, the minister droned on and on about love and forgiveness, but Sam ignored him as he always did. He leafed through the Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. He flipped further. Job, Psalms, Proverbs. Yea though I walk through the valley. Valley of the Shadow of Death. Shadow and Death. Content that I am dust. Content that I in the Valley of the Shadow of Death am Dust. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God. In the beginning was the Valley of the Shadow of God, the daily bread of content that I am dust of the Word of God, the Valley of the Word of the Shadow of God. Give us this day our daily bread, forever and ever, in Jesus' name we pray in the valley of death, amen.

Then he was playing with the little car, the black Mustang with red racing stripes, rumbling, gunning the engine as he drove along his thigh. One of the heads in front of him turning ponderously, its thin neck twisting, revealing the shriveled apple face. *Little boy*, the head talking, the mouth gashed open like wrinkled fruit, *little boy, be quiet.*

Sam jerked away from the head and nearly rolled out of the boat. He was moaning, casting about for something to hold on to, afraid to open his eyes and see that the head had followed him back here to the lake. He fumbled for the paddle, couldn't find it, forced his eyes open and saw that it was no longer in the boat. When he looked back he saw only the dark water and the sun getting lower on the horizon and far away the shore and the green, empty trees.

"Oh shit," he said. "Oh shit, oh shit."

The man was silent, face still gray and wet with sweat, mouth loose, the black stubble on the cheeks obscene somehow, too vivid, the eyes still closed though Sam knew intimately the color of that blue.

It had to float. He knew it had to float, they made them that way so if you dropped it you wouldn't lose it. Well then, where was it? If it had to float, where was it?

Something in the water over there, but he couldn't tell if it was the paddle or not. It looked like the paddle. It had to be the paddle. It was floating.

It was getting dark now. He bent low and stroked his hands into the water. The canoe moved slowly, reluctantly. His hands were poor paddles, but they were all that he had, and he kept on.

But it was getting dark now. As he sculled he had to turn his back to the paddle, and now, when he looked for it in the dusk, it seemed to have disappeared. It made no sense that it should already be getting dark. The evening should go on and on, with plenty of light, but here it was getting dark so soon.

He fumbled for the first aid kit, pulled it from the backpack, rifled through it until he found the headlamp inside. He pushed the button once and the light came on, very bright, cutting a wide swathe of white across the lake. The brightness calmed him a little. He remembered his father telling him about the headlamp. They were sitting at the kitchen table, and his father had spread the first aid kit in front of them.

You have a couple different settings, here, Sam. The first one is the brightest. That's the one you want to use if you need to see a long way, but you won't usually need it. Sam nodded. He clicked the button again.

There. See how it dims? That's the setting you want to use most of the time, and around camp especially. This thing eats batteries, so you want to save the bright light for when you really need it.

Sam clicked the button once more and the light changed from white to red.

This is the map setting, his father said. You want to use this one if you need to read something in the dark but you don't want to lose your night vision.

The red light rendered everything surreal. He clicked it twice more and the bright light came back on.

In an emergency, stay calm. Don't panic.

"I will be calm," Sam said. "I will not panic."

Slipping the light onto his head, he began to search the water and in a moment saw the paddle floating just at the edge of the darkness. There was no mistaking now that the paddle was drifting away from him. No, that was silly. The breeze was pushing him away from the paddle.

Again he leaned down and scooped the dark water, panic creeping in. If he dipped his hands deeper in the water he could get a better push, but he had to hunch his back and could only manage seven or eight strokes before his shoulders began to cramp.

It was at his toes that the panic began this time, and then it crawled up his legs and into his stomach, where it settled and began quite happily gnawing away at his insides. Panic looked like a dog, like the dog he had hit the night of the mailboxes. Its mouth was red and its eyes glittered black.

If you begin to panic, his father said, try to think of something else.

Panic eyed him with hunger. "I already thought of something else," Sam said. It was an effort to talk.

That's good.

Then you lost the paddle, Panic said. The voice of Panic was like a chained dog howling at the moon.

His father didn't say anything. Fingers growing numb, Sam sculled on. He waited for his father to return and speak with him; he paused to stretch his back, then paddled again, and paused and stretched once more, and still his father did not return. All the while, Panic watched him with his black dog's eyes. It seemed to regard him as a longtime companion, and was therefore comfortable enough in his presence to remain silent.

He looked again over his shoulder, and there was the paddle, much closer than before.

He forgot about everything else and paddled as hard as he could, ten strokes, fifteen, twenty. His shoulders burned, he could no longer feel his fingers at all. Just as he felt he could take the strain no longer, that they were ready to seize, he straightened his back and took deep breaths. The canoe glided forward.

The paddle was only twenty feet away now. He rested and watched the paddle come nearer to him. The lake was dead calm once more, and his last burst was enough to propel him alongside the paddle; he stroked again with his left hand to guide himself in, and then he leaned out and scooped it up. It was cold and very solid against his palms. As he held the paddle to his chest his fingers began to burn with the returning blood.

The clouds that had been coming up from the east that evening were now solid across the sky. Not a star was visible. Sam sat in the canoe and felt it slowly rotate with the last of the momentum of his paddling. He was sweating a little, and, in the rapid cooling of the night air, he knew that soon he would be cold. He needed to keep moving, but he was so tired now. All he wanted was another few minutes.

Sam.

"Leave me alone."

Where are you?

"I'm on the lake. I'm in the canoe."

But where are you?

Sam opened his eyes. He had not turned the headlamp off as he should have, and his whole world was confined to the white beam that cut back and forth with the movement of his head. The water swallowed the light abruptly – Sam saw how, once in the water, the light separated into beams, which themselves forked again, until all the light vanished.

He gripped the paddle. *"I'm going to shore."*

Which shore? Panic asked.

"I'm going back to the cabin." His voice was small.

Which way will you go? Panic peered up at him, smiling toothily.

His light reached nowhere near shore, and Sam realized that he was not sure which was which anymore. In rushing after the lost paddle he had lost track of his orientation, and the clouds that covered the sky meant he could not take a bearing, nor navigate by the light of the moon. He didn't know how to take a bearing and anyway there was some kind of equipment you needed that he didn't have.

How does it feel? Panic was nearer now, its breath hot on his neck.

"I'm not listening."

To be lost. How does it feel to be lost?

Sam saw it coming for him from a long way off, the mouth getting wider and wider, the breath stinking in his face. It came for him in slow motion, confident that it had him now, that there was nowhere left for him to go. Its wet tongue dripped foam.

"Go away," Sam shouted. "Leave me alone."

But you are such an interesting boy. The dog's voice was a growing whine, louder, hungry, as sharp and merciless as broken glass.

III

A face. There was a face above him. There was a face above him in the gloom. His neck, bent awkwardly, ached, and when he blinked it felt as if the inside of his eyelids had been scoured away and replaced with sandpaper. When he looked again the face had vanished. The darkness was nearly complete, but he saw that he was still in the canoe, and at the bow was the slumped bulk of the man in the sheet.

He sat up. In the darkness he heard the sound of water lapping against the edge of the canoe. He found the headlamp at his feet, and flicked it on. There was no shore in sight. He turned it off again and waited for his eyes to adjust.

He could make out a deeper darkness at the edge of what was visible, and he thought that the deeper darkness might be the shore. But he could not recognize the contours of the trees, or the mountains that would have told him which side of the lake he faced. There were no stars. He pictured how the mountains – the Missions if he were facing west, the Swans if he faced east – would have looked in the moonlight. The snow on the high peaks would glow, and the lunar glow would soften the jagged edges of the mountains so you might not realize how sharply broken were the peaks. They would have the whiteness of mountain goats, or of swans.

Sam turned the canoe toward the deeper darkness and began to paddle again. By prolonging the length of each stroke, and making the paddle into a rudder, he tried to keep the canoe tracking in a straight line. But it was tricky and, without reference in the dark, he worried he might be simply going in circles. Gradually the darkness seemed to split itself into two darknesses along a ragged line. Then the split itself divided into different shapes, tall, thin triangles with rough, uneven edges. Finally the triangles revealed themselves as trees that loomed out of the darkness as the bow bumped gently against the rocks.

He shined the headlamp into the trees. He hoped he would recognize the place, but he did not expect to, and tried to keep the hope down in his chest so if he did not recognize the place he would not feel crushed.

He did not recognize anything, and he still felt crushed. Thick stands of lodgepole pine marched in staggered lines away from the lake, and the light broke up and was lost among them. In the immediate vicinity several large trees lay crisscrossed

where the wind had blown them down. The bark was shearing off of them, and the light cast strange dark shadows against the farther trees.

By the light of the headlamp he examined the man in the sheet. Part of Sam was surprised to find that the man still existed. It felt to him that his own existence had been for so long purely of the canoe and the lake and of his fatigue, that to find another being within this sphere was nearly a surprise. The man did not seem to have moved. His jaw was still slack, his eyes shut.

Trying not to think about how cold the water was, Sam waded the few steps to shore. He had to pass close by the man, and he paused to listen for the man's breathing. It was slow and shallow, but it was there.

Sam felt a sudden sympathy for the man and an intense regret for what he had done to him. He would have given anything to go back to that afternoon and simply abandon the canoe to him. He could have walked along the shore and let the man have everything. He remembered the sound the paddle had made against the back of the man's neck, and for a moment he wanted to be sick again. That damp thud.

Then Sam smelled the man and realized that he must have shit his pants. The smell stung his eyes, made him gag, and he had to step back to get a breath. It was disgusting. He couldn't bear to be near him.

He needed a place to sleep. He looked very quickly and tried to move his body as much as possible to fight the fear that was rising up in him. By moving quickly he hoped to stay in control of himself. He did not know where the panic dog had gone,

and he did not want it to come back. Nor did he want to think about the night ahead, but he couldn't stop himself from thinking about it.

It was going to get colder, but he hoped that all the clouds meant not too cold. He hoped too that, because it was early summer, there would be no thunderstorms, or at least no rain, in the night. It was unreasonable, because he knew how hot the day had been, and he remembered the shambling towers of cloud that had built up along the western edge of the horizon as the afternoon wore on. Still, he hoped there would be no rain.

He went back to the canoe and pulled it as far up on the shore as he could. He wanted to get the man away from the water; the air would be colder down there, and the air would be thick with dew. Already when he brushed through the tall patches of beargrass his feet and legs came away wet.

The smell of shit was very strong about the man. Sam had to put his head close to him when he pulled the canoe onto the shore, and there the smell was nauseating. His cheek brushed against the top of the man's head and came away wet with cold sweat.

"What is wrong with you?" Sam said. "Are you sick?"

The man didn't say anything. Sam touched his neck and wanted to jerk his hand away, so cold and clammy was the skin.

Check his pulse, his father said. Take your two fingers, like this. Sam held his middle and pointer fingers together.

Good, his father said. Now slide those along the jawline until you feel the carotid artery.

Sam did it, feeling again how cold was the man's skin, how rough. The pulse was very faint, but it seemed regular to him. He held his hand there at the man's neck, counting.

He said aloud the beats per minute.

Okay, said his father. That's not ideal, but we can work with it. It's reasonable, given the circumstances.

Sam asked him what he should do next, but his father did not explain what working with it was supposed to mean. It was too vague to be helpful. He was still very near the man, but as he grew accustomed to the smell it seemed less bad to him.

A sound came faintly from the man's throat, a kind of moaning. He moaned with each breath he released, so regularly that Sam wondered why he hadn't noticed the noises before. Maybe he had not paid enough attention.

"Don't worry," Sam told him. "I'm going to get you out of here."

There was no response.

It felt strange not to know the man's name. It was strange to spend so much time with somebody, even to cry in front of them, and not to know their name. There was a thought growing in his mind that if he named the man that would somehow help him to wake up and keep Sam company. He did not want to be alone.

"I'm going to call you Jim," Sam said. "Is that okay, Jim?"

He left Jim in the canoe and walked back a little ways into the woods, looking for a flat spot where he might spread a few branches and sleep. He had never actually slept out like this before – when he was camping he always had a sleeping bag, and extra clothes – warm clothes – and a backpacking stove, and usually a tent. Food, too. They always brought lots of food with them, more than they needed.

It struck him now what a waste all that extra food had been, or rather, how he had wasted it. The two or three Snickers bars they kept ‘in case of emergencies.’ The cocoa packets for hot drinks at the end of the night. Dehydrated mashed potatoes that you poured boiling water into and watched swell up and glop together like salty Elmer’s glue. A bar of milk chocolate. He could catalogue each of these things and remember all the times he had been camping and had not eaten them. He remembered acutely not eating all the food he did not have with him now.

He remembered how good it felt to slip into his down bag at the end of the day. He would always start out with the bag open, and then, as the night grew colder, would wake up at intervals and zip the bag closer about himself, until in the morning he woke up in a warm, downy cocoon. The sleeping bag smelled of the basement shelf where it was stored, and of woodsmoke.

Well, there would be no bag tonight. No food, either.

Here was a smooth spot. Sam kicked at a rock half-buried in pine needles and dirt, and it rolled out and into the darkness, leaving a clean, straight-edged hole behind. He scuffed his feet around some more, until he was satisfied he had made the ground as comfortable as it was going to get. He searched for fir trees. He didn’t want to use pine

branches as a mattress because the needles were shorter and sharper; firs had longer, softer needles and would make a better resting place.

But he could find no fir trees, and the branches of the lodgepole pine were too far overhead for him to reach. Finally he gathered armfuls of beargrass and heaped it in a long, mattress-shaped pile in the middle of the flat spot. The grass was wet, but he hoped it would be soft. Once, he lost track of where his sleeping place was, but he made circles through the trees and in a few minutes he found it again. As he searched he noticed that the dog was trailing him again, but he pretended not to see.

When he got back to the canoe he thought for a second that Jim had shifted his position while he was away. Jim's head looked different than before, leaning to the left instead of the right, but he wasn't sure if that was the way it had been before, or if it had changed. He walked as quietly as he could until he was just behind him, and listened for the moaning noise. There it was, the same as it had been before he'd left. The smell was there, too, just as awful as it had been.

Sam, Jim said, can you let me go? For friendship's sake?

"I can't untie you," Sam said. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

I won't hurt you.

"It's not even going to get that cold tonight," Sam said. "See how cloudy it is? That means it can't get that cold."

I can't feel my hands anymore.

"I had to do it," Sam said. He touched Jim's left hand and felt how cold it was, as if the blood inside was itself cooling down. The breath-moan went in and out of his throat. His eyes were closed.

I thought you wanted company, Jim said. I'm afraid to die out here. Why won't you let me go?

The words tickled at Sam's ear. It was as if by naming him, Sam had unleashed a flood of words.

"You're not going to die," Sam said.

I think you broke something.

"I didn't mean to. You made me do it."

I just needed help. I was lost. I only wanted you to help me.

"You're lying."

You could at least clean me up, Jim said. Don't you smell that?

"Yes."

It feels worse. I'm all gummed up down there.

"I'm sorry."

This is all your fault. Don't you feel bad?

"I told you I was sorry."

The space blanket was one of the things that had not been lost when the backpack fell into the water. Sam tore the package and pulled it out. The silver surface

of the blanket reflected the light back into his eyes. When he unfolded it, it made a crinkling sound like a Lays potato chip bag. Everything reminded him of food.

“You can have this for tonight.” He lofted the blanket out in front of himself as if waving a cape, then settled it slowly over Jim’s body. It billowed and crackled as it fell. He felt, as he tucked the edges of the blanket around the body, as if he were preparing the man for an appointment with a barber. He wasn’t sure if he should cover his head or not—you lost most of your body heat through your head, but he worried that if he stuck the whole head under the blanket Jim might suffocate. Finally he wrapped some of the sheet, gray with dirt, around the head like a turban.

“That’s the best I can do,” he said.

It didn’t look that bad. It actually looked almost cozy, and the silver sheet of the space blanket hid from view the odd angles of the body, and how it was wrapped around with strips of bed sheet, and tied like a prisoner to the stays of the canoe. It also kept the worst of the smell down.

Sam took everything he had back to the flat spot. He put on every piece of clothing he had, and when he lay down he stuffed his feet inside the backpack. If he curled into a fetal position he found that most of his legs were covered—the bottom half in the backpack, and his thighs tucked in against the warmth of his body. He made sure the paddle was within reach of his right hand. The beargrass was wetter than he thought, and in a few minutes the water had soaked his cotton shorts and shirt.

He did not want to turn the headlamp off. He lay like that for a long time before he could make himself click the button – first to dim the light, then to turn it red, then to turn it, finally, off.

In the dark he could not stop himself from thinking.

He wondered if his father was out searching for him in the dark. He thought that probably he was, and that he would have called the sheriff and the Search and Rescue, too. His father knew some of the Search and Rescue volunteers, had worked with them occasionally. There was probably a whole group of them out on the lake now, looking for him.

In the stillness he lay and listened to his breathing. It seemed very loud to him, but also very far away. A whistling noise came out of his nose each time he exhaled. In the trees, the sound of the wind ebbed and flowed like the sound of waves on a beach.

He shifted uncomfortably on the ground. His side ached. The beargrass had smashed flat beneath his weight and offered no padding at all. Out of the darkness a scene began to emerge. He saw himself and his father in the kitchen of the Missoula house.

“Your mother’s going away for a little while,” his father said. They were sitting at the table. A cup of coffee steamed near his father’s hands. In the winter the house was always cold.

“She’s going to stay with her mother. Your grandmother is getting old and she needs the help.”

If it was a memory, Sam could not place it. He watched from his beargrass bed.

“I wish I could tell you that it’s a natural thing. I guess it happens to a lot of people.” Sam listened. “It sure as hell doesn’t feel natural.” His father placed his hands palm down on his knees and held them there.

Sam didn’t know what to say. He nodded at his father.

“The thing is she’s getting frail,” his father continued. “She can’t cook for herself very well anymore. I guess you probably noticed that.”

Sam had not noticed. He had the idea that his father meant more than he said, and he felt a sudden ache in his chest.

“Like I said, Sam, it’s only for a little while. Just enough time for all of us to get back on our feet.” His father’s flat hands slid off the table onto his lap, where the fingers drummed out an uneven rhythm.

“I can’t figure out when I made the choice,” his father said. “It doesn’t seem like I ever made a choice about her. It’s like it just happened and I let it happen.” He did not look at Sam. “Suddenly you’re married,” he said. “You’re a father. A miracle. Best thing that ever happened. But so sudden. You begin with passion and think that will last forever. Hell, you’re twenty, so anything seems like it could last forever. But you pay, Sam. You pay for the decisions you make.”

Sam wanted to ask what the choice was, but his father talked on.

"Her mother never liked me much, you know. Didn't think much of my family, either. That is a stubborn woman, that one. A bitch, really."

His father looked at him and stopped. Watching his own face from the cold beargrass bed, Sam knew why his father stopped. He looked terrified.

"Don't listen to me, Sam," he said. "It's just talk."

"I know," Sam said. His chest still hurt.

"What do you want?" his father asked. "For yourself."

Sam thought. "I don't know," he said. "To be happy, I guess." It wasn't something he had thought much about. Life seemed simply to move along, one step to the next. "To have a good job," he said.

His father pushed back in his chair. "Those are the things you're supposed to say," said his father. "Those are the things that people want to hear from you because it helps them feel like they're doing something right."

Sam looked at the table, where his hands lay palm-down as if ready to push him up and away from there. He drummed his fingers.

"What if we went somewhere?" his father asked. "You and your mom and me. Away from Missoula for a while."

"I don't know," Sam said. It was also not something he had thought about. In general he liked living where they lived. Only recently had school become difficult; he had not yet smashed mailboxes, or killed a dog. From his dark future, Sam wanted to cry a warning to himself, but he was mute.

"I want to see something different," Sam said.

His father was quiet.

"I want to speak a different language," Sam said. "Russian. Chinese, maybe."

"That might be a stretch," said his father. "I don't know if we can go that far. I was thinking more that we'd go someplace in the states. A city, maybe."

"You hate the city," Sam said.

"When did I say that?"

"To Mom," Sam said. "I heard you."

His father chuckled. "Old dogs and new tricks."

"You're not old."

"No? I guess not. But I feel old sometimes. When you're young you have all the choices in the world. You can do whatever you want. I used to imagine all sorts of things for my life." His father was quiet, and Sam saw that he was crying. He didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything. The crying only lasted for a few seconds; then his father was clearing his throat and carrying the empty mug to the coffeemaker.

"I don't want to work," Sam said. "I know I said that before, but I don't really think I do. I can't think of any job that I want to do."

His father laughed. "At least you're honest," he said. He sat back down and took a sip of the coffee. He sucked air between his teeth and lower lip so that it made a squeaking noise. "Needs sugar," he said.

He spooned sugar into the coffee and stirred it slowly, then quickly, the spoon clinking brightly against the cup. Sam was embarrassed, as if he had seen his father naked and his father hadn't known he was there.

“Things are going to work out, Sam.”

Sam had felt a cold fear in his stomach, as if he were in a dream, facing some kind of monster. Even when things had worked out, and they took the trip to Seattle, and Portland, and San Francisco, and his mother did not reappear at the foot of his bed; even then the coldness of that fear did not go away. He could not forget the way his father’s face had disappeared, and the face that he had seen in its place. It reminded him of a boy on the playground who’d fallen and hit his head, and then couldn’t remember what had happened. He staggered around and three little girls screamed. There was blood on the boy’s brow, and his eyes looked empty and far away.

At first Sam thought it was the shivering that woke him. His whole body felt like it was jumping around, like someone was jerking at strings attached to his ankles and knees and elbows. When he tried to pull the backpack up again to his knees his hands fumbled and could not get a good grip on the straps. He had to try three times before his fingers did what he wanted them to do.

Then lightning split the darkness open around him, and for an instant he saw his little campsite clearly, black and white, as if in a photographic exposure; the flatness of the earth broken by the stands of beargrass, the small rocks, the scattered pine needles, and all of it ringed by the straight trunks of the trees and the shadows they threw. Then

it was dark again and silent for the moment it took Sam to draw a breath, and then the thunder so loud it hurt his ears.

As the first crashing guttered out above him, rumbling, dropping octaves, then growing fainter, Sam felt the rain. He rolled himself out of the grass bed and tried to stand, but his legs were cramped from having been hugged to his chest as he slept, and he tripped over the backpack and sprawled out headlong on the dirt. The fall knocked the wind out of him.

Again the lightning, then the thunder, almost at the same instant, shaking the trees around him. He felt the rain soak through his shirt and begin to collect in the hollows of his back. It was raining so hard that the water splashed against his face as it rebounded from the ground. He got his breath back and kicked the backpack away. His legs cramped again, but he could move them enough to hobble to the closest tree, where the branches offered a little protection.

From his meager shelter he looked out onto a world transformed. His bed, visible in the lightning flashes, was a dark pool of mud, the grass he'd gathered for a mattress a sodden island in the gloom. Little rivers ran across the clearing, carving small channels through the needles as they went. There was the backpack, soaked flat into the mud.

Lightning, and then thunder, slower this time as the front moved off. Sam reached for the headlamp but it was no longer on his head. He dropped to his knees and felt the ground in a circle around him. Nothing. His heart began to pound. It was very dark in the forest and he was disoriented, nearly dizzy. After the lightning it was

almost as if he were blind, and he reached out to the tree to steady himself, and felt as he did so the headlamp swinging back and forth against his chest; it must have slipped down around his neck as he slept. He closed his hands on it as if on a good luck charm or medallion. He took a deep breath.

Gradually the rain began to taper, then to disappear. A wind followed, gusting suddenly through the trees and shaking down the drops of water that had collected there so that for a moment Sam thought it had begun to rain again. The wind was cold. He realized once more that he was shivering. He was afraid to try the headlamp because he thought it might have been ruined in the rain, so he did jumping jacks in the dark, stumbling once on a rock he did not see, and twisting his ankle painfully. He swung his arms windmill-fashion, and gradually the feeling came back into his fingers and toes. They felt like they were burning.

He sat down beneath the tree, but as soon as he stopped moving he began to shiver, so he stood up and did more jumping jacks. He was light headed with hunger.

After a little while he worked up the courage to try the headlamp. He clicked the button once and nothing happened, and his fear of the dark felt as if it would overtake him. Then he clicked it again and the light came on, very bright in the darkness of the forest. Sam felt suddenly lucky, and so much in love with the light that tears came to his eyes.

He paced in a circle around what had been his bed. He shook water and mud from the backpack, then looped the straps over a stob that stuck out head-high from his

tree. It wasn't going to dry, but it was better than letting it just sit there in the mud. This simple housecleaning made him feel productive, even virtuous.

He began to shiver again, even though he was walking quickly, nearly jogging, but having the headlamp on made him feel strangely happy. He did more jumping jacks, but had to stop when he grew dizzy. The light comforted him, bobbing merrily across the trees with the motion of his head. He twisted to the left and watched the shadows jump away from the beam, then he twisted back to the right. He began to forget that he was shivering. He let the light play back and forth across the trees and felt happy. The shivering lessened, and he began even to feel warm, as if he had climbed into a down jacket and zipped it tightly around his frame. He thought he would sleep for just a little while, and then it would be time to get back into the canoe and paddle home. He was sure that a nap was just the thing that he needed. A little rest.

He was just drifting off when he remembered the man in the canoe. Jim. He remembered how he was bound up in strips of bed sheet, and wrapped in the silver blanket. He thought of how the blanket might be warmer even than this down jacket he was wearing, and then he tried to zip the jacket and realized that there was no jacket, and that hypothermia was going to kill him if he did not move.

The light picked up mist floating above the water as Sam came staggering down the little hill back to the canoe. The mist looked ghostlike in the beam. The man was as before, head lolling back in unconsciousness, but the turban Sam had fashioned from the bed sheet had been unraveled across the man's face by the rain.

He was reaching for the edge of the blanket when he realized that the man was watching him. His hand stopped dead in the air.

The man's eyes were glassy, a flat, sick blue. He was so close he could watch the pupils contract unevenly within the irises. The man's head lolled back and he grunted something. He didn't seem to be aware of Sam. He tried to lift his arms but the knots caught him at the wrist, held him down.

He looked back up at Sam.

"Babe?" he asked. "Anne? Where am I? What happened to Tony?"

Sam tried to say something but he could not find any words. His throat had closed up and nothing could get through.

"Where's Anthony?" the man asked again. "He was just here a minute ago." He spoke as if to someone nearby, as if he and Sam were not the only two people in who knew how many miles.

"I just went out for a gallon of milk," the man said, and then he began to scream. He screamed very loudly, the scream high and reedy, like the cry of some bird of death in the night. Like the last howl of a mountain lion, hounded and treed and ready for the bullet. Sam stumbled back, tripped, fell onto the rocks.

When he had done screaming, the man's body relaxed and he closed his eyes. His breathing, the labored moan, slowed and then continued as it had before.

Sam could not bring himself to touch the blanket, but when he went back up into the trees the shivering hit him again, and he heard his father's voice, and he stumbled back down to the canoe, the beam of the headlamp obviously fading now, and jerked the blanket away from the man, keeping his own head as far as possible from the man's, looking like some awkward bird trying to free itself from a trap. He wasn't sure if he should cover the man with the sheet – it was soaked through, and he thought it might be worse than just leaving him exposed. Finally he tented it from the man's knees across the canoe, stretching it tight over the gunwales and holding it down with rocks. He hoped it would do some good.

I'm sorry Jim, he thought. I'm sorry, but I have to do it. I'm sorry but I'm going to freeze to death. Jim oh Jim I am so so sorry.

He wrapped himself in the blanket and walked and walked until he was warm through. For the rest of the night he slept without dreams, waking only once, when he thought he heard something moving through the trees. He knew that Panic was circling him, and he was too afraid to turn on the light. In a little while Panic slinked away, and the forest was quiet again, and he slept until morning, when the light woke him and he shuffled stiff as an old man to the canoe and found there his prisoner Jim, bound still at the wrists, but the sheet kicked off sometime in the night, the narrow blue chest exposed, the mouth open, the face gray.

His skin felt like moist clay, soft on top but harder, denser, beneath. He pushed his hand against the man's shoulder, as if to shake him. The shoulder did not give, but felt stiff under the skin as if the man were flexing himself against Sam's hand.

"Wake up," Sam said quietly. "Please please please wake up."

He couldn't be dead. He wasn't dead, it was clear that he wasn't dead. Yes, he was. He was dead. Oh God, he was dead. No, no, he wasn't dead. This was just a mistake and soon it would all be cleared up, and Sam would wake up from this dream and find himself back at home in his room and the streetlights would look orange and comfortable from his window. He couldn't be dead. It wasn't fair that he was dead.

Sam thought how it would be fair of somebody to let him start things over. He didn't know who to ask, but it seemed like a small request to him, nothing too difficult. He would pray about it. Please God, all he needed was another twenty-four hours; his decisions would be different. Please God, they would be better. He knew now that crossing the lake had been a mistake, the first mistake, and everything that happened after was simply the result of that initial false step. Please God, he would listen to his father and his mother for the rest of his life. Please God, he would do only good things from now on. All he wanted was another chance.

But the man was still silent and still dead. Sam squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, hoping to see something different. Nothing changed.

Then Sam went away from himself for what seemed like a long time, though probably no more than a minute passed. He could think of nothing, but simply saw himself standing on the shore next to the canoe, its red sides streaked with dew, the mist on the water dissolving the world around him. He observed from a position maybe ten feet above himself, as if his consciousness had left his body and floated now, unencumbered, in the air. He watched as he staggered away from the canoe, holding in front of himself as if polluted or contagious the hand that had touched the dead man.

There came a detachment, the very strong sense that the scene he watched unfold was simply that, a scene, something enacted only for his viewing from which, when it was over, he could simply float away. What was happening had no more to do with him than a death in a film, or on a stage. It had less, even, to do with him than the death of his grandparents, who lived across the country and rarely visited, and whose funerals he had attended without any real feelings of grief, though it had been painful to watch his mother cry. The situation was really very simple. It was not a real situation. Soon it would be over. They would draw the curtain over the man and the canoe, and Sam would be allowed to go home. His detachment showed him that completely. He was only an observer, and soon he would be allowed to leave the theater and stop for dinner somewhere bright, eat a warm meal, sleep in a warm bed.

He coughed out strangled, yelping noises as he backed away, and it was the noises that brought his consciousness back into his body again. He felt them in his throat, and was reminded that he had a throat, and a hand outstretched before him, and two legs on feet that felt like blocks and clumped awkwardly between roots and stones.

Then he tripped and went over backwards, and the pain of the fall brought him fully back into himself and the cold morning and the red canoe beached on an unfamiliar shore, with a body inside.

The sun was marching toward him across the lake, and for a little while Sam observed its progress. As it came it cut a ragged shadow on the water in which could be discerned the tops of the trees among which he now sat. He hugged himself and rocked back and forth. He could not make himself look at the canoe or at the man, but only at the approaching sunshine. He still wanted to believe that if he did not look at the man, he might disappear. But he knew the knots he had tied in the sheets that bound the man to the canoe would have been difficult to unravel.

Finally the sun approached the shore, took it, and warmed everything around him. Gradually Sam ceased rocking and simply sat, staring out over the water and thinking that he had killed the man. Jim.

He hadn't done it on purpose, but the man was dead and if anyone were to make an investigation they would have to blame Sam for his death. He had swung the paddle. And he had taken the blanket. He did not regret it. He would never regret what he had to do. But no one else would understand.

He wanted to talk with his father, but he knew that if he did he would admit everything. He would ask for guidance, but guidance was not what he needed.

A movement on the water caught his eye. Something flashed, then flashed again, and gradually the flashing became the dip of paddles into the smooth water. There were three canoes coming toward him across the lake. They were painted bright blue, so they blended in to the color of the water and he did not notice them right away, not until they were close enough that he could see the red dots of the life vests, two in each canoe.

He didn't think they had seen him yet, so he ducked away into the trees and walked as quickly as he could back to the canoe. He paused once to peer again at the boats on the water; two of them had split away in opposite directions, as if to cover more of the lake, but the third was coming nearly straight for him.

When he got back to the man his confidence vanished. The dog sat on the man's chest, eating at his face. It looked up at Sam and grinned with bloody jaws. The man looked far worse than Sam remembered – he looked as if he had been tied up and murdered. The gray face seemed to stare at him in blame; he couldn't look at it directly, only sidewise, as at a ghost.

The knots were still very tight, and he ripped one of his fingernails badly as he fought them; the fresh blood was very bright against the dirty gray sheet. He got one hand untied and looked up. The blue canoe was still a long way off, but it was getting closer. He wished he was still hidden in the shade – the sun beat down on him like an enemy, exposing all that he had done for the world to see.

The second knot was more difficult, his left hand slippery with blood, the pointer finger throbbing each time it touched the sheet. Finally it, too, was loose, and Sam

passed behind the man and locked his hands underneath the man's arms. He moved as quickly as he could so he would not have to think about what he did.

The man's knees caught against the gunwale at the first heave, but with the second try Sam pulled him from the canoe, overbalancing so that he stumbled back and dropped the body against the rocks, where the head snapped down with the sound of a ripe pumpkin dropping to the floor.

He thought the body was heavier than before until he looked back and saw the dog tugging at the man's foot. Please won't you leave me alone, he thought, and jerked at the man's shoulders with all his strength. The dog shrieked and let go.

Gradually they got farther from the shore. Beneath the trees the light grew dim and green. The sound of birds was all around. Sam thought he could hear shouts behind him but he felt calm and sure. There would be a good, private place up ahead. A place for ordering. Jim was lighter and lighter in Sam's arms, and then it was as if Sam was following Jim, who would lead him somehow through the green trees, whose smile and bright blue eyes assured Sam that everything would be alright.

This Life You Live Is Not Your Own

One of the few worthwhile pieces of advice I have ever heard was given to me by my mother. Tom, she told me, always tell the truth. Because she did not ask much of me otherwise, I have done my best to follow her wish.

So all that I am about to say is the truth, or as near as I can make it. It is also unremarkable except for the fact that it happened to me, and if you don't admit to yourself at least once in a while that what happened to you yesterday, or a year ago, or fifteen years before, matters now, then you might as well accept that you are lost. In the past ten years I have worked as a carpenter, a landscaper, a short order cook, a taxi driver, and a postal service clerk. There are others. I have lived in Denver, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and now in Portland, Oregon. At each of those places was a woman, and

between Las Vegas and Los Angeles there was one who followed me. But the usual things happened, and I lost her before I came up north.

When I was seventeen I lived with my mother and stepfather in Stanford, Montana. The town didn't have anything to do with the university. The nearest university was in Helena, and it wasn't really a university at all, but a college. There's a difference there.

Stanford was a small town even then, though it has shrunk since, and my stepfather had grown up in Chicago and was always on the lookout for a better thing. That summer he was selling air conditioning down in Helena, and even sometimes as far as Billings. He was a tall man, beginning to go to fat around the middle, and he wore eyeglasses. He could move quickly, especially if something you said angered or insulted him. But usually he was kind, or at least he tried to be kind, and I respected him for that, even if I could never like him.

He said he was making a killing, and I believed him. That summer begged for air conditioning. Each day was flat and dry, and they all felt brittle, like old scraps of paper burnt at the edges. For close to a month it did not rain at all, and from the pale sky the sun cooked the roads until the tar oozed.

My mother was not a natural creature of the heat. She had spent her youth in Seattle, a city full of rain, and had come east with my father, who, after saving for years to own his own business, bought the gas station in Stanford sight unseen, moved there, and died of throat cancer six months later. He was a man with faith in roads, my mother would say. Even now I am not sure what she meant by this.

Because she could not stand the heat, she spent most of the summer indoors, where it was cool and she could sit on the sofa, legs up, and read. She read anything that crossed her path, but was especially fond of mystery novels and natural history. She could tell you more about plants and animals than anyone I knew, but you would rarely find her in the outdoors. She liked to keep a distance. She was a short woman, but lithe, and she kept her dark hair long, and would brush it morning and evening until it shone.

My stepfather had decided to take my mother along on one of his sales trips. They had a hotel reserved in Billings and dinner reservations at a restaurant my mother had heard about from a coffee-circle friend. Two nights in Billings does not sound like much to me now, but back then it seemed almost exotic.

I remember how we felt like a family that morning. It was a remarkable feeling. My stepfather served pancakes, mixing the batter with exaggerated energy, then pouring it onto the griddle with a flourish, where it sizzled and popped in the bacon grease. We had orange juice and black coffee. We always drank black coffee. My mother smiled and smiled. She was beautiful. It reminded me of how she looked in old pictures, holding me as a baby, or even in pictures taken before I was born, when it had been just her and my father in Seattle, and neither of them had even heard of Stanford.

That was a Friday, and I didn't go to work but stayed at home. They were re-finishing a long stretch of highway outside of town, and I had a job holding a traffic sign. One side had SLOW written on it, the other STOP. Those jobs aren't that bad if

you can get them – they pay well, and the work is easy enough if you don't mind standing. But it gets rough in the heat, and it was going to be a hot day.

And I wanted to hold on to the good feeling the three of us had together at the table that morning. The house was small, one of those prefab tract places, but its smallness helped hold the good feelings, just as at other times it could hold a bad feeling long after what was bad had passed. I don't know how to explain it any better than that. Maybe that is the source of my discontent, that I cannot put my feelings in to words.

The big picture windows in the living room faced east and the sun made comfortable bright lines on the carpet and the couch. You could see why my mother liked to read there.

I should tell about Amy. If I try to tell about the beginning of things, I have to tell about Amy. She was the first woman that I ever loved. Writing that makes me feel like I'm in a Lifetime Channel special, but it is true.

She was older than I was by three or four years – was already out of school – and she worked an early shift at a diner next to the gas station my father had owned, and which now belonged to my stepfather. I thought I might have a cup of coffee while she finished work, and then drive us the half hour to where Rye Creek came down from the Little Belt Mountains and backed up and deepened in the irrigation cuts on the prairie. There we could take a little swim, though even the biggest hole wasn't deep enough to go all the way under unless you ducked down into a tuck position. Then you could

float just a few inches off the sandy, muddy bottom and let the eddy pull you slowly around and around until your breath ran out.

After my mother and stepfather were gone, I drove out to the diner and parked in a corner of the lot. The streets of Stanford were almost always empty, always quiet and peaceful to drive through, the window rolled down and your arm out, hand tapping comfortably against the door.

I think the place was called "Davy's" but I'm not sure anymore, and anyway the name isn't that important. It's only that I like to get the details right.

The sun glared off the big plate glass windows, but I could see through the door across the counter where Amy poured coffee for a man in a blue plaid shirt. I could only see the man's back, but then he turned his head and I saw that the lower part of his face was decorated with a drooping black mustache. Decorated seems like the right word. It was a big mustache.

Amy was half Chippewa-Cree, and her tan wrists and forearms were smooth and strong. These days almost everyone you meet wants to tell you that they are part one kind of Indian or another. Maybe some of them are, but usually they're lying to make themselves feel good. I can't stand that. I have never been able to lie and feel good about it afterwards.

She was born in Box Elder, which is up there on the Rocky Boy's reservation, and she grew up there until she was fifteen or sixteen, when her father moved her to Stanford when a mechanic's job opened up. He had skillful fingers; they weren't blunted the way most working people's fingers are, but long and delicate-seeming and

very, very strong, and in the evenings he amused himself with a deck of cards. He could do things you would never be able to figure out. I was always a little scared of him.

I walked to the diner. Tall grass, dead and brown in the heat, sprouted through cracks in the asphalt. I recognized most of the trucks and cars that were there, which wasn't a lot. You could hear cars coming on the highway a long way off, and occasionally the loud jake brakes of the cattle trucks coasting down the hill.

Amy disappeared into the kitchen. The mustache man watched her go, the mug halfway to his mouth. He kept watching the door to the kitchen, probably waiting for her to come back. Even at ten in the morning, she looked raw and wild. Her hair, done up in braids, glistened, and she had deep green eyes.

Then she was back, and smiling when I sat down. It's strange to me now that I did not know how much I was in love with her, or what it meant to be in love with someone like that. When I am glad that I have no children it is because I think of how naked I was as a boy, and that I didn't even know it. There's no way to tell anybody how it feels when you find out you are naked. You only discover your nakedness when you see that she is not naked like you. Try to tell someone that. You'll just embarrass them, or they'll look at you like you're crazy.

Amy lived in a different world than anyone else, and if you were lucky she brought you there sometimes. But it was her own world, and it would remain her own world, no matter how much I or anyone else thought we knew about it.

She poured me a cup of coffee and went back to her other customers. She didn't say anything, but she smiled again. The mustache man watched her the whole time. Finally he turned to me, and I realized why he wore the big mustache. There was a red birthmark on the side of his jaw, very red and very obvious. Even with the mustache you couldn't help that it was the first thing you noticed.

He said something to me. I was thinking about how it would be to go through life marked like that, and didn't understand at first. The mark was red as dark wine.

"I said, what a piece. What I wouldn't give to taste that."

Today, a remark like that doesn't seem important to me, but when I was a boy all remarks seemed important, and I had great trouble distinguishing between those that I should bother with and others that weren't worth thinking about. This one I thought about for too long, and the mustache man was waiting for a reply. He leaned in close and gave me a smile.

I think it was that smile that made me change my mind. I had been set to swear at him, to take a swing even, but his smile was the smile of an innocent, the smile of a fool. He looked as if he didn't understand what he said.

"She's someone's sister, too."

Immediately his face changed. He looked hurt, or confused that I had refused to play his game with him. He seemed apologetic, like what he'd said was just part of an act, not something that he really meant for me to take seriously. You felt bad for a face like that.

"She is a looker," I said. "I'll give you that."

“Don’t listen to me,” he said. “There was a time.” Then he pointed to his face.

“This doesn’t help. It doesn’t always hurt, but I’ve never known it to help.”

“I guess not.”

He took a small flask from his pocket and poured a little into his coffee.

“Don’t tell anybody.”

I told him that I wouldn’t tell, then, because his face still fascinated me, I asked him where he was from.

“Just about anywhere,” he said, “but Texas originally. Son, it’s been a life on the road.” He explained that he was hauling cattle for one of the ranches nearby, a name I recognized because they posted their land and wouldn’t let you on to hunt or fish.

“Violators Will Be Prosecuted” read the signs.

“They’re cheap bastards, but they pay on time.”

He finished his coffee and put down cash for the meal, setting the mug on top of the bills like he was worried the money might blow away. Finally he leaned against the counter and stood.

“You’re a lucky boy,” he said, and turned away. He was overdressed for the weather, and when he walked outside he stopped in the sun as if he was confused. I did not expect to see him again.

I hadn’t liked talking to him, even though outside of what he’d said about Amy he seemed nice enough. His birthmark was what bothered me. I knew it wasn’t his fault, but it seemed like it was. The big mustache only drew attention to what it tried to hide.

Amy was serving waffles to an old couple at a corner booth, both of them dressed as if for church. They had lived in Stanford their whole lives, and they always took that corner booth. Their son now worked the ranch, and life was reduced to long breakfasts at the diner and a series of crossword puzzles. He did the puzzles, and she corrected his work.

Amy asked me what was the matter.

I told her there was nothing wrong, and asked would she like to come swimming that afternoon. She would.

We drove to the deep bend I talked about earlier. The day was just beginning to be hot, and we drove with the windows down and the wind whipping through the car, and we had to speak loudly to be understood. Mostly we were quiet, watching the fields go by, the green of alfalfa, the brown of ripening wheat.

Because it was late summer, the water was low, but you could still splash around and cool off. The creek was cold where it came out of the mountains, and sometimes you saw trout dart off under the cut banks.

Amy's favorite was cold lemonade, so that's what we drank that afternoon. It was so cold that my teeth almost ache now with the memory of it. After we cooled off, we lay out on a blanket and warmed ourselves again under the sun. Though her skin was already dark, she always wanted to tan.

It is an effort to go back there now, to imagine how wide the sky would have seemed, and the peaceful sound the wind would make in the cottonwood trees. I felt then that I had no illusions about the world, but I was still in love with it. I had seen bad things happen—I could remember clearly sitting with my mother in our living room the night my father had died. Her grief was so upon her that she didn't seem to notice my presence, and so I sat alone with her and felt as if I had been buried alive. But I was young and resilient, and my father's death had not hurt me the way it hurt my mother. I think she did not love my stepfather, but he was a steady man and he offered her help when she needed it most.

In the sun, with a weekend ahead, I was rich. I stopped time there by the side of the creek and reveled in my wealth. I let the gold coins slide through my fingers, half-aware that I would never see them again, but letting them slide without regret.

Amy rolled up on the blanket and sat looking into the water. "My mother is coming to town," she said.

"When?"

"Day after tomorrow I think. I think she's going to stay with us for a little while."

Amy did not talk about it much, but from what little I heard it had been bad with her mother, in the usual way, the same story you see anywhere people have just a little bit of money and even less to do.

She took another can of lemonade from the cooler and used a finger to flick ice from the top.

“I don’t think she’ll stay very long. She doesn’t like it here.”

I once walked in on my mother while she was on the telephone with someone long distance—I think it must have been a cousin in Seattle. The door was open and she didn’t notice me at first. This was before everyone had a cell phone, and you fooled yourself into thinking you could talk privately wherever you went. She was tugging at her ear, her left ear, as she spoke, and that’s the image I have of her, thinking she was alone and tugging at her ear. I wondered what images Amy had.

“She’ll be glad to see you,” I told her.

“For a little while.” She took a drink of the lemonade. I was in love with the way her Adams apple bobbed under the skin of her throat. Her body was delicate and powerful in a way that I have never seen since, even in the dancers I have known.

“Let’s swim again,” she said.

“I’m still warming up. I can watch.”

“Not this time, buddy. It’s both of us or nothing.”

In the water she had me close my eyes and try to find her. If I listened close, I could hear the movements she made above the other sounds of the river. Several times I almost caught her, but I never could. Once I touched her shoulder with my fingertips, but she wriggled away and I tripped trying to pursue. When I opened my eyes I saw her skipping through the water like an otter.

I don't know how long I had been asleep when the doorbell rang. The house seemed unfamiliar in the dark, and it took me a long time to get to the door. There had been a dream about the man from the diner, and I had trouble separating myself from it. We had been together in the cab of his cattle hauler, barreling down a dark road. Neither of us wanted to go where we were headed, but the road was narrow, without any place to turn around.

I unlocked the door. Amy stood there, not alone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know where else to go. Dad threw her out." Her mother had one arm around Amy's neck. Despite her state, she managed to look as if she had chosen to be where she was at that moment. She impressed me.

"So you're Peter," she said.

"No," I said. "I'm Tom."

Amy motioned that I should open the door for them, and I stood aside as they passed through. Her mother smelled of vodka and cigarette smoke.

Once they were through I shut the door and led them along the hall to the living room, where Amy sat her mother down on the couch. She sat heavily, and let her head fall back until it rested against the cushion. "So you're Tom."

"What's happening?"

Amy looked at the couch before answering. "She showed up like this off the bus. She doesn't have a car anymore. I can't take her home like this."

She stood up and rolled her neck and shoulders. She had changed her clothes against the evening chill, but I could picture how she'd look in the water.

“Do you have anything to eat?”

When I was in the kitchen I heard the murmur of their voices without being able to make out any of the words. If you didn't know any better, you might think it was two people having a regular conversation. You would not have thought that it was a mother and daughter, or that the mother was drunk and had nowhere to go. It might have been two strangers making small talk.

I worked quickly to make the sandwiches. Finally I sliced them into triangles and carried the plates to the living room.

“What's this?” her mother asked.

“Turkey and Swiss. I hope you like turkey.”

“Why not,” she said.

I watched her eat. She didn't seem to taste the food, but she ate it all quickly, as if she thought I might want to take it back from her.

When she had finished, I took the plate back and set it in the sink. Amy was not yet halfway through her own sandwich.

Looking at them side by side, it was easy to see that they were related, but not necessarily clear that they were mother and daughter. Her mother looked too old for that, old enough to be her grandmother. She wore a dirty white sweater. Around her neck hung a bead necklace, the beads of red and blue.

“There's a guest bed,” I said. “If you want it, I mean.” I felt silly. They hadn't asked to stay. I felt caught up in something I did not understand.

"That would be fine," Amy said. She asked where the sheets were, and went to make up the bed.

Her mother and I looked at each other. She did not look as old now. The couch evidently suited her, and she looked relaxed. She brought her legs up and folded them beneath her like a schoolgirl.

"Do you know Merle Haggard?" she asked. I reached to clear her plate away. "Don't worry about that now. Do you know him?"

"Some," I said. "I don't listen to him a lot."

"'I'm A Lonesome Fugitive'. Do you know that one?"

"No," I said. "But I know 'Skid Row'."

"That's a good one." She closed her eyes and rubbed at them with the palms of her hands, as if trying to clear her head.

"I saw him once," she said. "He played a show in Spokane when we were passing through. I thought to myself, there is a man I would never marry. He had a voice like a bad angel."

Amy came back into the room. "Bed's all ready," she said.

"Time's up," her mother said, and followed her down the hall. She had trouble getting up from the couch, but when I reached forward to help her she pretended not to see. She was humming to herself, and didn't look back.

When Amy returned she sat on my lap and put her head on my shoulder. "I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"That's fine." I didn't want to talk about it either.

"I wish I knew how to help her," she said. I let one hand rest against the curve of her back, and wrapped the other arm around her side. I could feel her heart beating inside her ribs.

"Can we go for a drive?" she asked. "She'll sleep for a while."

We drove through town, down Central and out onto the dark highway. Stanford closed up early, and the only light came from the streetlamps and the neon sign of the *Two Dollar Bar* down a side street.

For a long time it was quiet in the car, and then Amy slipped her hand into mine, her fingers long and warm. I didn't know what to say, and even now I think that my silence was probably best. Words tend to get in the way. They confuse what you feel. I read a book one time, and in it a character said something about the difference between dreams and things – actual things, I mean – being something you couldn't overcome. That what you hoped for would never be what you finished up with, and the harder you hoped the more likely you were to be disappointed. That's the way it seems to be with words for me. Whenever I try to say what I feel I end up losing the thread.

After a time we parked and I turned the car off and we sat there in the darkness at the side of the road. The prairie was dark all around, and the sky filled with all the stars you wouldn't be able to see in a city. It was beautiful and lonely at the same time. A long way down the road came the headlights of another car, gliding along slowly at first, then getting faster and faster until the car blew past us on the road and was gone.

"I would ask her not to come," Amy said, "but she'd show up anyway. I don't know why she does this to me."

"She probably wants to see you," I said. "Not to hurt you."

"It doesn't matter what people mean to do. It's what they do."

Because it was one of the last times I was ever to see her, I have thought a great deal about what Amy said that night, and how I answered. I have thought enough about it that my answers have become confused in my mind. I see her profile in the dark, and do not remember the difference between what I said and what I wished I said. I see her gesturing at the darkened prairie, the road invisible on it.

"I think sometimes that this could all belong to me," she said. "Could belong to us. If we wanted it, this could all be ours. From here to Great Falls, to Missoula, to Spokane. All the way to Seattle, if we want."

I asked what she meant.

"It's just a feeling," she said. "Don't you feel that way sometimes? That the world is opening itself for you, and all you have to do is take it?"

I said I did, which was true.

"It never lasts though, does it?"

"I don't know. I think it might. I think if we tried to make it last, we could."

She shifted in her seat. Another set of headlights had appeared down the road and she was watching them come. When they had passed she turned to me.

"See," she said. "It never lasts."

I could only see her profile, but it was enough. I had the same feeling of richness from before, but now I knew I was watching my riches slip away. I wanted to tell her but I couldn't find the words, so I took her hand again and squeezed it hard, hoping it

would be enough. How often in my life I have wished I could communicate like this, have wished that my hands or arms or cheeks were all that I needed to say what I wanted to say. What does it take to make another person understand?

When we got back to the house, Amy went in to check on her mother while I stayed in the doorway. Her mother had thrown off the covers. The air felt thick, and it smelled like sweat and cigarettes and alcohol. Amy opened the window.

"I want to sleep outside," she said. "I want to watch the stars."

So we spread blankets on the lawn and crawled between them. The wind was gentle, the night nearly calm. Again, she found my hand.

"Can you feel this?" she asked. "

"Yes," I said.

"This belongs to us. If we feel it, it belongs to us."

So I lay there in the dark, and listened, and felt, and after a while it seemed like part of me did believe her, believed that something in the night belonged to us. I listened harder, until all I heard was the rustle of the grass, the call of an owl from a long ways off, the sound of Amy breathing next to me. I listened until I felt like we left the wind and the grass and the world behind us, and I knew that our bed could be anywhere, anywhere on earth, anywhere at all.

That is how I remember it. The next day she took her mother back to the bus station. Though we continued to see each other, we never talked about that night. Then in September she left for Box Elder and did not return.

The next year I, too, left Stanford. At first I returned every couple of months to visit my mother and stepfather. They were happy together, and were saving for a Caribbean cruise vacation for the next winter. Each time I visited they spoke of the cruise as something to look forward to but that they weren't quite ready for yet. My stepfather worried about the cost, and leaving the gas station unattended, and my mother was happy to let him decide.

One summer I drove to Stanford in a series of rainstorms, the sky purple and heavy with their coming, then clear again as they passed through, leaving the air smelling of dirt and wet sage. It was the Fourth of July, and there were rodeos in some of the small towns I passed. I stopped at one and bought a hot dog at a booth painted bright red, then sat in the stands to watch the bull riding. The ring was circus of mud, and the third bull fell heavily on its side, pinning the rider's leg.

They called out for a doctor and, though I'm not one, I climbed down from the stands to see if I could help. The boy who had been pinned was white faced, and lay very still in the mud, not saying anything though he must have been in great pain. Someone ran for the ambulance, and another for the first aid station, and then I was the only one left with him in the ring.

I knelt in the mud by his side and put my coat over him because he was shivering hard. He had a mustache that made him look older than he was, which probably wasn't much more than nineteen or twenty. He never made a sound, not when I lay the coat over him, not when the stretcher arrived and they splinted his leg and lifted him away. I stayed with him there, my hand on his shoulder, until the end, and neither of us spoke.

Then I got into my car, and drove away.

The River

This Friday afternoon, like every Friday afternoon, they waited at the kitchen table for their sandwiches. Ian liked pickles, liked the way they crunched under your teeth and the salty taste, but he knew Casey hated them. Casey was always pickier. Ian could picture what would happen when the sandwiches came. Casey would open his up and peel the pickles off and stick them on the farthest edge of his plate, where Ian could reach them. But you had to do this carefully, because the Dungeon Keeper didn't like it when you shared your food.

"Jesus Christ," Ian said, under his breath. "Jesus Christing pickles." He was ten and a half, and only a month into swearing, but he felt he took to it like a natural. He said it

again, loud enough so he could be sure that the girls at the other end of the table could hear. "Jesus Christ!" One of them looked at him like he was something nasty on the bottom of her shoe. He grinned back.

He was too old to hang around here anymore. He wasn't a little kid. None of the little kids would steal cigarettes from the backpacks of the eighth graders at recess, and when he smoked them he was only sick once. No one else would even try. He had two in his pocket now, probably smushed to bits because he had to sit with Casey at this Jesus Christing table for hours and play Monopoly or Uno or some other Stupid Shit.

The Dungeon Keeper was in the kitchen and she had the telephone wedged between her shoulder and her ear. She was wearing an orange dress, and Ian thought she looked like a pumpkin. She was talking loudly, waving a finger at the wall. "Well then," she said, "it's your responsibility." Her finger whipped up and down. "Take it into your own hands."

Ian watched Casey across the table, but his brother didn't seem to notice. The Ferris sisters thought Casey was cute, they thought he was adorable, they thought he was so funny. Only Ian knew the truth. His brother was just a little booger, and what use was a booger that followed you around and couldn't do a Goddamn Thing?

Casey was staring out the window at Zip rolling in the snow. The wind was coming in big gusts, and when it gusted everything out the window went white, and when the wind eased you could see Zip out there again, still wriggling in the snow. It didn't surprise Ian. Casey and Zip shared the same shelf in the ol' brains department.

“Don’t you take that tone,” the Dungeon Keeper said. Her finger moved faster. “Not with me. Not when you’re a month and a half behind. You come get your boys.”

The finger paused for a moment. “I will do no such thing,” she said. “I’ve got my own here to take care of.” The house creaked as the wind gusted again and the windows went white. “Well that’s fine,” she said, in a hard, mean voice. “We’ll talk soon.” Then Ian could hear plates clattering again. They were angry clatterings. In a little bit she appeared with the sandwiches.

“Eat up,” she said, passing plates to the other children. She looked at Ian and Casey. “I’ll wrap yours up,” she said. “You boys need to run on home. You can take the dog with you.”

“Why?” Casey asked. Ian was surprised. The little puke was paying attention. Casey looked up and his little round face looked curious. His eyebrows wiggled and one of the Ferris sisters cooed. Outside, Zip had found something old under the snow and settled in beside the porch to chew.

“Get your coats,” the Dungeon Keeper said. The way she said it made the word, *coats*, sound like something ugly that you didn’t want to touch. “No questions. And you can tell your mother from me that she can expect the same thing again tomorrow, so far as I’m concerned.”

Ian led the way along the sidewalk. He had his new green jacket. No, not totally new, but you could barely tell it came from the Goodwill. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. Jesus, it was cold. The new snow was light and fluffy, and when you stomped down hard it blew away from your feet like feathers. I am giant, he thought. He stomped harder. "Casey," he said. "Do this."

Ian looked back. Casey was half a block behind, his red coat bright against the snow. Zip snuffled through the drifts beside him. God, Ian hated waiting. Casey was so small, and he walked funny and sideways like a pigeon, and he always got snow down his coat or lost his mittens or slipped and started to cry.

Finally, Casey shuffled up. Already both of his boots were untied, and the snow was blowing down against his socks.

"Why do we have to walk?" he asked.

"Dunno," Ian said. "Because she said so." But he knew the Dungeon Keeper was angry with their mother, and that there was more than one reason she might be angry, and that Casey wouldn't understand any of them.

"Why can't we get picked up?" Casey asked. He was slipping into his whiny voice.

"Dunno," Ian said again. "Don't ask so many questions. And quit crying." Casey hung his head and Ian could hear him snuffling snot. Or it was Zip farting in the wind. He didn't care. But he felt a little bad. Casey hadn't done anything wrong. It wasn't his fault that the Dungeon Keep was a B-I-T-C-H. Ian took off his gloves and scrubbed some of the snow out of Casey's boots and laced them up again. Casey's nose was making big slurping noises.

"I'm not crying," Casey said.

They kept walking.

"How cold does it have to be for water to freeze?" Casey asked. His voice still sounded thick.

"Thirty-two degrees," Ian said. Easy one.

"How cold does it have to be for the river to freeze?"

"Easy," Ian said, and thought quickly. "Twelve degrees. Twelve degrees is the River Freezing Temperature. Twenty degrees colder than normal."

He stomped along in the light snow, blasting huge steps like only a giant could. He could hear Casey behind him, jumping along to stay with his tracks.

"How cold is it now," Casey panted. His breath was puffing along in little clouds.

"Twenty-five below," Ian said. He liked the sound of the number.

"Then it must be frozen," Casey said.

"Yep," Ian said. "Frozen stiff. Frozen like a freezer."

"Frozen solid?" Casey asked.

"Course it's frozen solid," Ian said. "It's frozen like an ice cube. Hard as a rock. You could drive a truck across it."

"No you couldn't," Casey said. Ian could hear him breathing hard as he struggled to keep up with the giant steps. "Could you?"

The snow squeaked under their feet as they walked, and the cold air burned in Ian's nose with each breath he took. He tried to breath as little as possible, but his heart started racing and he sucked air in. God it hurt.

He realized he couldn't hear Casey's footsteps behind him anymore. Ian turned and saw his brother half a block back. While Ian watched, he stopped and reached into his pocket for the sandwich. A blue pickup truck passed, the sound of its motor muffled by the snow.

Casey dropped a mitten into the snow, and of course he didn't notice it. Sonofabitch, Ian said to himself. It was what his father said the other night when Ian picked up a carton of eggs upside down, and spilled the eggs onto the kitchen floor where they went splat splat splat splat and ran over the linoleum. Sonofabitch, his father said. Unfuckingbelievable. He got most of the good ones from his father. Shithead, and Shitforbrains, and Cocksucker, and Doublepissingcunt, which he heard once when his father weed-wacked his own shinbone by mistake.

Casey finished with his bite of sandwich, and started walking toward him again in the snow. He was still trying with each step to stay in his brother's giant footprints, but he was too small and his legs were too short. He had to hop off one foot and stretch to reach the next snowless place.

Zip was rooting around in the snow, looking for something dead he could chew on. He didn't seem to care much about what was going on around him.

"What about your mittens?" Ian asked.

Casey plunged his hands into his pockets, and came up with the one. Ian could still see the other back on the sidewalk, a little dark shape that the snow was covering like a blanket. Jesus Christ, he thought. What a dummy.

Casey looked confused. He stuck his hands back into his pockets, and came up with the sandwich and a silver wrapper.

"It's back there," Ian said when he couldn't take it anymore. "You dropped it way back there." Casey was about to cry again.

"Go on," Ian said. "I'll wait for you." He watched as Casey walked slowly back down the sidewalk, not even trying for the footsteps anymore. He really was like a booger. He hated waiting around for him wherever he went. To the store, on the playground, shoveling the driveway, walking to school. It made him crazy, always waiting when he was already as big as some of the sixth graders, and he knew he was smarter. Yesterday, when Mrs. Good called him up to the board, he solved the word problem by himself. Not even a hint. You had to subtract and then divide. Nobody had done that before.

Casey reached the glove and was stuffing it in his pocket. The wind came up again and for a moment Ian couldn't see his brother at all. Then he could see Casey slowly walking back with his head down. Suddenly he had an idea. He looked up and down the street, but there was no traffic and no one walking. The two of them were alone outside. Then he ran hard to the other side and flung himself over a snowbank so he was hidden from the sidewalk but could watch with just the top of his head exposed.

In a minute Casey came into view, walking slowly and not even trying anymore to keep up with the giant monster footsteps he'd given so much effort. Zip was alongside

him, snuffling away in the snow just like before. World's dumbest dog, Ian thought. That is the world's dumbest Shitforbrains dog. When Casey reached the end of the footsteps he didn't even seem to notice. He shuffled along, reaching into his pocket for another bite of the sandwich. Before he went out of sight, Ian watched him drop his mitten again. Zip picked it up between his teeth and started to eat it. Then both of them turned the corner and were gone.

After a little while, he stood up to make sure his brother had really missed him. Yes, Casey was gone, and Zip with him. How about that.

He crossed the street again and looked down at the footprints in the snow, and the scuffling way his brother walked with his toes turned in like a pigeon shambling along. How long until he realized he'd been fooled? That he was on a path to nowhere? Ian guessed at least a few more blocks. Then what? He'd probably sit there and cry for a little while, and then he'd keep on walking home. He knew the way. At least Ian was pretty sure he did.

Ian cut across the yard of the yellow house, and continued on into the next street. He saw Casey crossing a block down, still hanging his head down at the sidewalk, not looking around, not wondering where his brother had gone. Space Cadet. This was a good lesson. It was for Casey's own good. He should learn how to keep track of what was going on around him.

Ian knew exactly the quickest way home from here (through the Thurman's yard, down Cooper Street, to the bridge), and where the best place to lay a snowball ambush (over the bridge, from behind the hedge in the Henderson's yard) that would catch his brother by surprise.

He started to run. The snow was beginning to push its way down into his boots, and his mittens were cold and covered in ice. As he walked he swung his arms around like a windmill. He thought of Dad swinging his arms, saying Listen up boys, and Learn Something. This is how you keep your hands from freezing. Swing 'em hard and push the blood back in.

In a little bit the feeling did come back into his fingers. They hurt enough to make his head feel light.

Sonofabitch, he thought. Sonofabitching fingers! He let the power of the words roll around in his head, back and forth, gathering strength. Then, sonofabitch, sonofabitch, sonofabitch!, he shouted, ducked, and ran the rest of the way to the Henderson's. He could hear the river hissing with ice as he crossed the bridge, and in spots it was pure white, covered in drifts of snow. Jesus Christ!

He waited for a long time.

He stacked twenty-three snowballs, and counted them over twice. He threw a couple to test the range, but they stuck to the ice on his mittens, and he couldn't get a clean

throw. He pulled one of the cigarettes from his pocket and tried to light it with matches, but the matches kept blowing out and eventually he put everything back in his pockets again. He looked up and down the street, but it was empty. Just the wind and the snow making everything look as cold and white as it felt.

Last week he and Casey had spent the afternoon building a snow fort. First they shoveled a long trench, and then they built a wall behind it and stocked it with at least fifty snowballs. They had piles and piles. You could crouch behind the wall and you'd be invisible from the house. They took turns defending and attacking, and when it was over they huddled together behind the wall and pretended they were polar explorers, lost on a frozen sea. Zip huddled with them, and Ian explained how if things got really bad they might have to eat Zip to survive. Casey started to cry. "We might have to cut him open and crawl inside."

"I wouldn't do it," Casey said. "I'd rather die."

"Then you'll have to die," Ian said. "It's the only way to survive."

"Zip could *save* us," Casey said. "He could go for help."

"We're in the Arctic. No one can help us here."

"Zip would save us," Casey said.

Remembering, Ian was suddenly sick of the winter. He hated standing out here in the cold, waiting for his stupid brother who couldn't even find his way around. He hated going back into the cold house because they couldn't afford the heat, and he hated most of all the way his mom smelled, like globs of old lotion, and how all she talked about was his dad and how he didn't give a shit anymore, and how she didn't care either. He wished it

was summer again and that everything was warm and the wind when it blew wasn't so cold that it felt like it wanted to snip off your balls.

His fingers were very, very cold. He couldn't feel them anymore. Ah, God! He tried swinging his arms again, but his hands were heavy as rocks. Maybe he was turning into a giant after all. Maybe he could use his rock fists to smash through walls, through bricks, through trees! He would be Arzod the Magnificent! Robot Destroyer of Worlds! Lord of Darkness!

He forgot about the ambush and shouted the words out into the street. Still nothing but the wind and the faraway sound of a car going past. But Casey would respond. They were both members of the Alliance of Interplanetary Domination. Splashing in the bathtub or using the old hammer to chip chunks off the crumbling sidewalk. They both knew the special call. You had to respond to the Prime Directive or you were Es Oh El. Then the team, (and sometimes even Casey could be the leader), then the team could hit the garage door button and out one of them could go and patrol and make the neighborhood Safe, and when they were done they could open up their secret stash of the old Halloween candy and Recharge Their Batteries. Once Casey found an old bird's nest that fell out of a tree, and they kept that in the same box as the candy and took it out only on special occasions, when the Forces of Darkness had been overcome.

Still nothing. He felt very small and scared and lonely, and he wished Zip would come around the corner barking and dropping the mitten out of his mouth and picking it up again, all frozen and snotty. And Casey with his hands shoved down into his

snowpants to keep his fingers warm. But the street was empty, and nobody came. His stomach felt cold and hollow, but he pushed it down and tried to think.

Of course. The snow. That was the answer. He just had to track him down.

The wind was already working on the footprints, but you could still see where Casey missed took a wrong turn down Olive. Yes Gumshoe, Ian thought, Now we are getting somewhere.

He followed the tracks until they crossed the street and doubled back up the road like his brother had realized he was going in the wrong direction. The tracks went all the way back up to the top of the hill, and on the way he picked up the second mitten that Casey had dropped.

At the top of the hill the tracks circled around and around, like a goldfish going around in the aquarium. He knew that a goldfish didn't remember anything; they forgot whatever happened to them two minutes after, so everything was a surprise. His mother explained it. Otherwise they'd be so bored they'd have to kill themselves, she said. From the circle of tracks a single set led back down the hill toward the river, and Zip's tracks were following around like usual, and for a moment Ian felt relief. He started after them.

The tracks headed for the bridge, but they cut off early and arced down Baker's Hill, down toward the water. He couldn't feel his nose, or his fingers, and his toes ached. The green jacket wasn't enough to keep the wind from his shoulders. It was just a cruddy second-hand jacket, and that was all it had ever been.

He shouted Casey's name, and shouted it again out into the wind. Casey! Casey! Casey! But there was no reply, and the light was turning flat and gray and dead.

He stood up, on to his tiptoes, to look down the hill that led to where the river cut like a frozen knife into the bottom of the valley. He stood like that for what felt like a long, long time. Then he started to run.

In the summer if you were brave you could ride your bike down Baker's Hill and not put on the brakes until the very bottom. You could race your buddy or your brother and whoever was braver wouldn't put the brakes on and wouldn't put the brakes on and would beat you down the hill and only finally stop at the very end of the street, where the asphalt ended and a broken embankment led down to the water. And if you were the winner you would stand there astride your bike and raise your arms up like a Roman soldier and shout something mysterious that only Winners shout. Racing like that was something the bigger boys did, and Ian was scared to race against them. But he and Casey practiced on the hill, and sometimes he let his brother win.

And Ian could see down the hill to where the winners gathered, and beyond that to a dark shape that ran back and forth along the bank and howled, and that was Zip, just a frightened dog; and he could see to another dark spot halfway across the river that was his baby brother Casey or a hole in the ice.

With the Guests

Three months before, Julie had called out of the blue. Cynthia hadn't heard from her in close to a year, but she recognized the same Julie excitement. Julie said she was getting married. He was a doctor. He was amazing.

When Julie finally hung up, Cynthia went into the kitchen to tell Robert. He sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and their beat-up Toshiba, scrolling through the Craigslist employment ads.

"Let's put it on the calendar," he said.

"Are you sure?" she asked. They were both worried about the money, but she knew he wouldn't bring it up.

"Of course," he said. "I think it would be good to get out of Montana for a little while. Take a break."

"See anything?" she asked.

He closed the laptop and sipped the coffee. "This is getting cold," he said. "I think I'll give it a turn in the microwave." He stood up and came to her. "Nothing long term. The temp positions are hardly worth the bother."

But a week before the wedding, he found another temp position, at a UPS warehouse down the valley in Missoula.

"I'm sorry," he said that night. "You know I'd go if I could."

She stripped her shirt and pants and hung them over the back of the wicker chair, then slipped under the covers. It was cold in the bedroom. The sheets were freezing.

"I know," she told him, and wondered if she believed him. "But you've got to keep the boss happy."

"It's the busiest time of year," he said. He was naked now, and the line of his shoulders cast moving shadows down his belly and his arms. The cold never seemed to bother him. "This warehouse is going to be slammed for Christmas, and then it'll all be over." He stretched and the shadows fled. "Back onto the street with me."

"Don't forget the light," she said.

"It's two weeks of work," he said when it was dark. "I need the two weeks. I'm lucky to have it right now. Maybe I can get you a little Christmas present."

"I don't need any presents," she said, "and I can pay for the both of us. I have enough saved."

He slid in beside her. The bed was small, and she loved how cozy it was with the two of them against the cold. The dull white of the curtains was reassuring against the dark.

"It wouldn't be a problem," she said.

"You could," Robert said. "But I need to work. Every little chance helps." His hands were warm. It still surprised her how little the cold seemed to affect him. She settled a leg over him and felt his belly rise and fall with his breath.

"I just wish it wasn't now," she said after a little while. He helped her roll on top of him. She kissed him.

"I don't want to let you down," he said.

"I know you don't." She tugged the blanket around her shoulders. "I'm freezing."

"We can fix that."

The alarm went off at four-thirty, and she listened with her eyes closed as Robert swore and fished for the clock on the bedside table. He knocked it to the ground and it stopped beeping. They had coffee together and she ate a piece of buttery toast. She thought of making love the night before, and how afterward Robert had dropped off so quickly into sleep and she had been alone in the darkness, listening to his breathing and

thinking of the drive tomorrow, and wanting sleep to come. It was something he could always do, and she rarely could, but long ago she had decided not to let it bother her.

Cynthia dropped him at work on her way out of town. He walked across the parking lot to a large, gray warehouse, turning at the door to blow her a kiss. She smiled.

She had decided last night she would take the drive all in a day. From Missoula on I-90 through Spokane, then down to 84 and across Oregon to Portland, then south again for a couple hundred miles to Jacksonville. She figured twelve hours at the most.

She was surprised when she found that driving alone was easier than when the two of them were in the car together. She thought they usually worked well as a team, one of them, usually Cynthia, in the passenger seat, the navigator, a map spread across the knees, pointing the way; Robert driving and asking now and then for a handful of chips or for a little cup of coffee from the silver thermos. Alone, she remembered that directions weren't that difficult, and when she wanted a cup of coffee she pulled off the road. Robert never liked to stop.

She drank the coffee and thought that the last time she'd driven long distance alone was in college, after a breakup, when she fled home and then, when her father hugged her and told her the little shit wasn't worth it, wished she hadn't. More than that, she remembered the feeling she'd had when she left the boy and started off, that sudden opening up, knowing she had nothing more to do than to drive and be driving, and that was enough. It was the same feeling she had now, though she wasn't running

from anyone, just sipping coffee in the cold of the morning, looking out the broken brown walls and towers of an ancient lava flow.

As she approached the coast she was surprised at the green leaves everywhere; she had forgotten what it was like to live in a place that didn't go brown and then white in the winter. Then it was dark, and she was in much more traffic than she was used to, and all her coffee was gone. The big semis put her on edge, and when it began to rain the fountains of dirty water they threw against her windshield sometimes blinded her completely. She was happy to leave the rain behind. Jacksonville, almost without traffic, seemed very quiet when she arrived, and she quickly found the motel where Julie had agreed to meet her.

After she parked and turned off the car, she realized she was nervous. She sat for a minute with her hands resting lightly on the steering wheel. Finally she got out and stretched, and walked to the room.

Julie shrieked when she opened the door, and grabbed her with both arms in a hug that smelled of lotion. "I can't believe it," she said. "It's you!"

"Me," Cynthia said, smiling. "And it's you." They hugged again. Julie looked beautiful. Her cheeks were brown and her hair golden and warm.

"How was the beach?" Cynthia asked. She was suddenly self-conscious about her own appearance, about her rumpled traveling clothes and the exhausted red flush on her cheeks.

"No beach," Julie said. "Just the booth. We never get any sun in this place. It rains, rains, rains. Tell you what, though—let's all of us go for a bake tomorrow, just us

girls. But first you have to meet Doug. I can't believe you haven't met him. It's criminal. You're going to love him."

Cynthia expected a big man, because Julie was a big girl herself, tall and long with wonderfully muscled legs that came from running all the time. In high school they were both runners, and Julie and her long legs were always faster. But Doug was a short, wispy man, who reminded Cynthia of an English professor who had infatuated her briefly her senior year. She slept with him once. Julie called him Mr. Slipper because of the soft brown shoes he wore, but Cynthia hadn't cared about the shoes. The professor had become weepy after sex and told her about his wife and begged her forgiveness. "I've never been unfaithful," he said. He was clearly lost without the proper supervision.

For a moment she saw the same quality in Doug. She thought maybe that was why Julie was attracted to him, why she was going to marry him. He was a ship without a rudder.

"Nice to meet you," he said, and took her hand. His fingers were thin and smooth. "What beautiful wrists." And she realized her mistake. Of course he has a rudder, she thought. It must be that she needs him for that. Of course. And she couldn't tell if it was the road miles talking or herself.

"Doug's a doctor," Julie said. "A bone doctor. A whaddyacallit." She looked embarrassed. "I know the word," she said. "God, what a klutz I am."

"A bone doctor," Cynthia said, wanting suddenly to save her. The three of them laughed.

"That's right," Doug said. "But you can call me osteopath." He smiled at the two of them, like he was glad they were laughing.

"How about a beer?" Julie said.

They sat in the lobby, each with a beer. It was a small room, and a short Christmas tree stood in the corner, draped in blue and white lights that blinked in patterns. Cynthia held her beer out like she was inspecting the label. "That cuts the dust," she said. Julie giggled. There was a copy of Popular Mechanics on the end table. Doug reached for it but Julie stopped him. "Don't be rude, honey," she said. The blue lights blinked on the tree, and then the red lights.

The stoop-shouldered night clerk came around from behind the desk and bent to Julie's ear. He looked nervous.

"I don't understand," Julie said. "We reserved a block of rooms."

The clerk said something else.

"I can't believe it," Julie said. "You have to be kidding me." The clerk shook his head.

Julie looked embarrassed again. "I hate to say this," she said, "but they haven't got a room for you." She looked at Cynthia. "They overbooked."

"She could sleep at the house," Doug said. "In Medford."

"And drive back and forth?" Julie said. "No, not going to happen. We're staying here so we *don't* have to go back to Medford."

"I'll find someplace." Cynthia looked at the clerk. "What else have you got?"

Main Street in Jacksonville, Oregon was only four blocks long. The sign said California Street, and shops and cute little restaurants lined the way. There were no hotels, and no one was around. The air felt like cold and damp. Everything was thick and heavy, and she wished she'd thought to ask Julie and Doug about a restaurant.

The clerk, at least, had suggested a bed and breakfast. The smell of the car again after twelve hours in it made her feel claustrophobic, almost sick, and she was glad to get out again. The bed and breakfast was just a few blocks down, where it sat atop a hill at the head of a gravel drive. The porch was dark, but bright red lights were wound around the railings.

She knocked without success, then called the number on a sign next to the door, and a soft voice answered. She explained her situation.

"Of course," the voice said. "Hold on one moment."

From a pool on the lawn the sound of falling water came through the dark. She walked down to the pool, which was edged in cattails and sharp, thin sheets of new ice. She tested the ice with a foot. It bent down into the water without breaking. In a minute a figure called to her from the shadows alongside the house, and she went back up.

The face that greeted her looked older than the voice on the phone. He introduced himself and extended his hand. She smiled. Inside, the house was bright and warm, and another Christmas tree, this one much bigger, stood at the center of what she found herself thinking of as a parlor.

“We have the one room,” the man said. He led her out of the parlor, to a door off the living room. There was a large bed in the middle of the room, and red drapes above it. Another door opened to the bathroom, where it smelled like eucalyptus. A red bolster lay at the foot of the bed. “And pool and sauna in the yard,” the man said. “The pool is chlorine free. It’s salt water. Better for your skin. And it’s solar heated, of course.”

“How much?” she asked. He told her. It was less than she expected, but still too much. But she felt asleep on her feet, so tired she couldn’t even remember the man’s name. “I’ll take it,” she said.

“Also,” he said, “we have to ask for your discretion.” He looked embarrassed. “We have two guests who are rather well known, and I believe they would like to their visit here to remain private.” The man had black brushy eyebrows, and he arched them now like he and Cynthia were plotting. “They haven’t said anything to *me*, of course, but all the same. You know these types.”

“Oh,” she said. “Of course.” The man nodded, his hands clasped loosely at his waist. “Of course I can be discrete.” She had almost laughed at the request, but he seemed so serious.

They said goodnight, and when he was gone she felt her energy returning. So tired, she’d come around from being sleepy, and felt jittery and burnt. She bounced a couple times on the big bed, and let herself fall back.

She phoned Robert but he didn’t pick up, and she knew he must be asleep. Tired, probably, from the new work. In a rush, a feeling of homesickness came over

her, and she closed her eyes to keep from crying. She wished she were back in the dark room with Robert, listening to his breathing. Her shoulders ached, and she was alone in a strange town for the wedding of a friend who was no longer a friend, spending money she shouldn't spend. God. What a fool. But she remembered the sauna, and that at least was something to do. She found a thick, white robe hanging from a hook on the bathroom door.

In the dark house she felt her way quietly to the door and out into the yard, key in hand. For a second she stood before the swimming pool, dark and opaque. She dipped her foot into the water, pulled it out again. The water felt like ice, and she was naked underneath the robe.

The sauna was shaped like a cask of wine, and it would have been a tight fit for more than a couple of people. But it was empty. She sat down and ladled a cupful of water over the heated rocks, and the water swooshed up into steam that was hot to breath. She closed her eyes. She stayed like that for twenty minutes until the sweat flowed down her face and between her breasts, trickling onto her belly in little streams, and gradually the homesick feeling fell away and she relaxed against the cedar planks. Then she went out to the pool and jumped. The cold water squeezed the air from her lungs and she could only manage a squeaking yelp. When she got into bed that night, she let her clothes lay where she dropped them on the floor. The room was warm; air whirred softly from an iron grate on the floor, and her skin smelled of the eucalyptus shampoo.

She slept late and got up feeling vaguely guilty for it and thinking of Robert. She tried him, but only got his message. The smell of coffee was coming in underneath the door, so she showered again and went out.

At the breakfast table sat a rumpled, plain-looking man and a delicate blonde woman Cynthia recognized from a bad romantic comedy she'd recently seen. The woman nodded at her, but the man seemed to take no notice of her existence. The proprietor brought out bowls of vanilla yogurt with blackberries, and then poured hot black coffee into their mugs. They ate. Cynthia didn't know what to say, so she said nothing, and the couple seemed happy not to speak as well. In a little while the proprietor brought out thick slices of quiche.

The rumpled man looked up, offended. "I can't eat this," he said. "I'm lactose intolerant. I told you when we got here. I even wrote it on your little card."

"But parmesan is an aged cheese," the proprietor said. He emphasized both syllables. *A-ged*. "There is no lactose left. Time disposes of it."

"I told you I can't," the man said. "It's not a complicated issue, unless you're trying to make me sick. Then it is very complicated. For you."

"Just eat it," the woman told him. "It won't hurt you." She noticed Cynthia watching. "He's a fussy eater," she said. It was something you might say about a toddler.

"I'm not fussy," the man said. "I just can't eat cheese. Any kind of cheese."

"Of course not, dear."

The proprietor disappeared. In a little while, Cynthia noticed the man picking at his quiche, and in another few minutes it was gone. She realized she was staring, and when she looked up again they were standing to excuse themselves from the table.

"Have a good day," Cynthia said.

"Oh yes," the woman said. "You too." She did have a beautiful smile.

The day came on. She thought she might tell Julie about the couple, but realized that she didn't want to. The words wouldn't come. She knew Julie would ignore it, or make it her own story, or, worst of all, decide that Cynthia was jealous and trying to disrupt the wedding.

So she went to a ladies' spa while the men of the party snuck off into the hills to drink whiskey and shoot trap. "Doug has so many shotguns," Julie said, "and he keeps half of them in the back of his car. Can you believe it?"

A middle-aged woman scrubbed Cynthia's feet with some kind of salts, then layered a dark, soil-colored paste all over them. "This will keep the moisture in," the woman told her. Cynthia decided she'd rather drink and shoot.

That evening they held a rehearsal dinner above the Jacksonville Tavern. Cynthia recognized some old friends from college, but not as many as she'd expected, and they had little to say to one another. When she got back to the bed and breakfast she called Robert again, and this time he picked up.

"Guess what," she said.

"I sorted a thousand Christmas boxes today," he said. "I guess I'm not in a guessing mood."

"I'll tell you then," she said. "You wouldn't be able to guess anyway."

"He was quiet after she told him. Then he said he didn't believe it. Then he asked what she was like. Cynthia smiled into the telephone.

"She seems nice enough," Cynthia said. "I've just seen her the once." Cynthia was lying on the bed, her feet dangling just above the carpet. "I don't know about the man she's with," she said.

"That's no surprise," Robert said. "Those Hollywood guys are all assholes."

"How do you know?" She laughed.

"Everybody knows that," he said. He laughed and suddenly she missed him very much. "I wish you could have come along," she said.

"Me too, babe," Robert said. "Tell you what—get an autograph for me. Get two if you want."

"Maybe," she said. "I don't think I'll see them again."

"I talked to the boss today," Robert said. "He said they're looking to fill a full-time spot after the rush. I think they're trying us out."

"What do you think?" she said.

"I'm not sure. But anything's worth a shot, right?"

The hope in his voice almost broke her heart.

That night she went again to the little sauna and stayed for half an hour. She felt like she might meditate. When she stood up she became light headed, and nearly

walked out naked before she remembered the robe. The pool felt colder than before; in the dark she could just make out the little slushy flakes of snow that fell onto her face in pins and needles. Her room was dark and warm, and she slept like the dead.

The wedding next day went quickly, like an afterthought. The church was small and the old boards of the floor squeaked loudly as the guests settled into the pews. It smelled like spice and dust in the big sanctuary, and the light was rosy with stained glass. The pastor was a Welshman with a wonderfully thick voice that sounded to Cynthia like the words formed themselves in circles. She could see only Doug's face from where he sat, and she watched as he whispered encouragement to Julie, whose hands trembled and whose voice, when she recited her vows, broke once into sobs. Doug's face flushed red, but he kept whispering slowly to Julie and in a moment she finished. There was more crying from the families who sat at the front of the chamber. Then the organ. An old woman played it beautifully.

Would Robert ever ask to marry? Maybe, she thought, once he had a job and felt secure again. She wondered if she would say yes. He was a good man, in a hard time, and it was hard for her to watch. She remembered when they'd first met, and how confident he had been, the way he could walk into a room at a party and begin immediately to talk, to dive in to whatever was happening, and in a few minutes have half the party hanging on his words. How many books he'd read, all the characters he knew, the way he spoke bad French with confidence and a cartoon accent. Silly jokes

about amorous fish and Jacques Cousteau. The gray wool coat he'd always worn, with the wooden buttons carved with designs of deer, elk, wolves. The size of his hands, hard and heavy from his work as a carpenter, and the way those hands were so light on a steering wheel, and lighter still on her body. The softness of his lips, the warmth of his tongue when he put it there.

Then ceremony was over and she found herself on her feet as the bride and groom passed. As Julie passed. Her eyes were still wet, and red at the edges. She looked happy. She looked triumphant.

The reception was loud and drunk. For a little while she danced with a dark-mustached man in a white cowboy hat and silver belt buckle, and when he got too friendly she sat down. She had seen too many artificial cowboys. She drank another beer while the dancing paused for the bride and groom to cut the cake, and she clapped when Doug forked a dainty bite into Julie's mouth. She left early.

In the parking lot was the man she'd danced with. He was smoking a joint, and blowing the smoke up above his head into the air where it formed a cloud in the cold. She was surprised, but only for a moment. He smiled at her and held out the joint.

She took it and held the smoke in her lungs for a moment, and passed it back.

"I haven't done that since college," she said.

"I never went to college," he said, "but you can make a shitload growing this."

He gestured with the joint.

His mustache, when he kissed her, reminded her of a walrus. She started to laugh and he held himself away from her at arm's length. He was wearing a blue shirt and a blue tie and he looked like he belonged somewhere else.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No, I'm not sorry." She was still laughing. "I'm getting married, you know. Sometime next year."

He shrugged and rubbed the joint out underneath his boot. "Just checking."

The sound from the party carried through the windows and onto the streets below. She walked back from California Street into the dark lanes with no streetlights. The weather was warming up, and with the change a gray-white mist rose from the damp leaves and lawns. There were tall trees she didn't recognize, and still the faint sound of the party floating out to her from beyond the dark.

Her eyes were closed and she could feel sweat beginning to bead, when the door opened and with a rush of cold air the actress came in. The heat and steam had warped the frame, and the actress had to tug the door shut behind her. She sat and let her robe fall.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I had to get away for a little while."

"I don't mind," Cynthia said. She tried not to stare. She poured more water on the rocks and felt the little room grow hot again.

"I can't believe him," the actress said.

"Your husband?"

The actress laughed. "Not yet. Actually, not ever, though that's between you and me."

"To the grave," Cynthia said.

"Pardon?"

"I'm sorry," Cynthia said. "I mean, I'll take it to the grave."

"Of course," the actress said. "Thank you." She poured another dipperful of water over the stones. Sweat began to glisten at her temples.

"What is it about these boys," she asked, "that makes them think they can treat us this way. Like we're poor dumb kittens." Cynthia couldn't imagine the rumpled man treating anybody like a kitten.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess they're not all that way."

"Show me one who isn't," the actress said.

They were quiet for a little while. The heater ticked slowly.

"Can I ask you something?"

Cynthia considered. "I guess so," she said.

"Are you married?"

"No," Cynthia said. "Not yet."

"But you will be?"

"Yes," Cynthia said. "I think so, yes."

"But he hasn't asked you."

"Not yet," she said. "I'm not sure he knows how to ask."

"Boys," the actress said.

"Boys," Cynthia agreed.

"Well good for you," the actress said. "The best of luck. It seems like it would be a wonderful thing."

"Can I ask you something," Cynthia said.

"That seems fair," the woman said.

"Are you?" Cynthia began. She stopped. She felt suddenly silly.

"Her?" the actress said.

"Her." Cynthia felt relieved. "Yes, I guess. Her." She felt her heart fluttering a little.

There was a pause, just a short moment, like the woman was making up her mind.

"Does it matter?" the actress asked.

"I'm not sure," Cynthia said. She felt deflated, as if she'd lost something, but that was silly. She reached for the dipper. "Do you mind?" she asked.

"Not at all."

The water hissed again on the rocks.

"That's the question I wonder," the actress said, "is would it make a difference. If I were her or if I weren't. What do you think?"

Cynthia thought. "I think so," she said. "Probably it would. Probably most of the time."

"That's right," the woman said. "Most of the time it would. But not right now." She leaned back and closed her eyes. They sat, and Cynthia watched the sand run

through a sand-dial nailed to the wall. She was as alone in the sauna as she had been before. She watched until the last grains had dropped.

“How about a jump?” Cynthia asked. The actress looked puzzled. “In the pool. I’ve been jumping each night.”

“Oh. Maybe next time.” She seemed surprised that Cynthia was still there.

“Of course” Cynthia said. Suddenly she felt silly. “Well, goodnight then.”

The woman closed her eyes. “Goodnight,” she said.

In bed in the dark she laid her body out as flat as she could. She thought that if she could let her mind slip, she might disappear into the sheets. Then she woke in the dark and couldn’t understand where she was. It was three o’clock and her head pounded. She got a glass of water and drank it slowly, then drank another. It was three-fifteen. Soon Robert would be up, headed to work. He and the other men and women, bunched together in a group, their breath steaming in the big warehouse, styrofoam cups of weak coffee in their hands. All of them wanting to ask about the next week, and the next, and no one saying anything.

But for now he would be sleeping, she thought, and breathing in a heavy, steady roll, not old enough yet to really snore, but beginning to. He would be curled on his side, on his left side, and if she were in bed with him she would be fitted there against his chest, asleep too, and sometimes even breathing at the same time. In a little while

she would call him, and then she could sleep again. She would tell him she loved him, and as they hung up she would say good luck today, be safe for me, I will see you soon.

What Is Expected

For what seemed like a long time we had been two couples. Lauren and me, and Mike and his wife Susan. Everybody called her called Suzy. We all went to school together and then stayed on in Missoula afterwards for a while, like a lot of people did, and got married, which was rarer.

Suzy and Mike were dancers, and we went together sometimes down to the AmVets on Saturday nights to dance. Lauren loved to dance, but I wasn't as keen on it, so Mike would end up dancing with both of them while I drank a beer and watched. I didn't mind. It was good to watch them out there on the floor, spinning around and a crowd of men clapping at their dips and promenades, Mike grinning at them both, hamming it up like he was a movie cowboy. He was always best in front of a crowd.

Alone, he was different; you might talk with him like you were friends, but you would be hard pressed to know exactly what he thought of you.

In the spring Suzy met a lawyer from Seattle, and we didn't see much of either of them after that. Even though things hung on for her and Mike for another couple of months, I think that was it. Lauren told me that Suzy knew she needed something more than a town with just one good dancing bar, and she figured that lawyer could show it to her.

Lauren and I didn't talk about it much, though once I made a comment about Suzy that made Lauren's face go dark. She has a pretty face, and dark eyes, and when she is angry what's pretty about her face becomes something frightening.

"Don't judge her," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"These things are always two-way streets," she said. "You should know that."

I didn't mention Suzy again for a long time after that, though Lauren would talk about her still.

Once she told me about the lawyer. "He expects certain things from her."

"What kind of things?" I asked.

"Things you shouldn't expect," she said. "Things that have to be given. It hasn't been easy for her."

"Hell," I said, "it hasn't been easy for anybody."

“No,” she said. “It hasn’t.” She hugged and laughed, her dark hair framing her face. She gave me the look that meant she was going to ask me to do something I didn’t want to do.

“What about taking Mike out hunting?” she asked. We hadn’t seen him for a couple of months. I’d heard he was down in California for a while – doing what I didn’t know.

“I doubt he’d want to go,” I said. “I don’t even think he’s in town.”

“He’s in town,” Lauren said. “I talked to Suzy. She said he’s been writing her letters. Rough ones. She says he’s been low.”

“She would know about that,” I said.

“Don’t push it,” Lauren said. “You’re his friend – be a friend to him.”

“I’m not that kind of friend,” I said. “We were friends together, the four of us, but that was it.” I didn’t say that I thought having Mike along would ruin the hunt. Though he was smooth on the dance floor, he moved clumsily everywhere else.

“I was planning to go alone,” I said. “You know I like being out there alone.”

“We’re all making sacrifices, Les.” I knew better than to ask Lauren what sacrifices she was making. And that was that.

I pulled up in front of Mike's place just before four. The house was dark. I sat in the truck for a minute and let the headlights shine into the living room. Pictures on the wall glinted behind the white bars of the blinds. Nothing moved.

The yard was lit with the orange glow of the streetlamps, and snow was falling. It looked more like December than October. I rang the bell and waited in the cold. After a minute I rang it again, and finally the light came on in the hall and the door opened and there was Mike.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Time to go," I said, and gave him what I hoped was a friendly smile. The truth was he looked pretty bad. His hair had gotten longer and it looked greasy. He wore a blue bathrobe torn on one side; you could see his stomach, fish-belly white.

"Close the door," he said, and pulled the robe tight around his shoulders.

"Jesus."

I came in and shut the door, stamping the snow from my feet.

"What time is it?" he asked again. He looked like he was trying to remind himself of something.

"It's four," I said. "Time to go."

Mike looked sheepish and he tried to pull the torn part of the bathrobe shut. It didn't work.

"Give me a minute."

The place looked mostly the same since I'd last been in it, although several photographs were gone from the wall and a big green couch had disappeared.

“It was Suzy’s,” Mike said, nodding to the spot where the couch used to be. He was dressed now and had a faded yellow backpack in one hand. “From her mother.” One of the straps of the backpack was wrapped in duct tape.

“I’ve got to find my boots. Will you make some coffee?” He disappeared again into the back of the house.

The kitchen was surprisingly neat, with a row of blue plates stacked in a drying rack alongside the sink. I remembered making coffee there late at night after dancing, everyone talking in the living room and Mike sprawled out on the green sofa that had disappeared. I found the filters and the coffee beans in their old spots. I had to search a minute for the grinder, but I found that too, and a towel to muffle the sound of the grinding. I’ve never been able to stand that sound.

I stood there and waited for the coffee to brew, trying to enjoy the smell and not to think about the time we were wasting. Snow drifted down in the yard, looking powdery in the orange light. The light caught the flakes out of the dark and held them for a moment before they vanished into the dark again. The road was going to be bad.

I didn’t hear Mike until he stood right behind me. “Well,” he said. “Aren’t we going to be late?”

The snow gave out about thirty miles outside of Missoula, and we were in the clear. We drove along in silence for a little while until Mike started to talk, and then he

seemed determined to talk the rest of the way. He told me about his trip down to California, where he said he rented a beach house and watched the waves come in and out. Mike was not from money, and though his parents were wheat farmers up on the Hi-Line all their capital was tied up in their operation. I had seen the place once and didn't doubt its worth, but it might as well have been on the moon for all the good it did Mike.

"How'd you find the house?" I asked.

"That's a funny story." He laid his hands flat on his legs, the palms over each knee, like an old man does before he stands. "I never did. Suzy found it for me. Called me up about a month ago."

I drove on. The stars were out.

"I took her up on it," he said. "I don't think she expected it. I drove to the hotel and told her right to her face. You should have seen her eyes, like she was about to cry. She said she couldn't talk right then, and I knew she wasn't alone. I flew down there the next day. He bought the ticket, I guess." Mike slapped his hands together once, a loud clap. "We sure as shit didn't have money for that kind of thing."

The road passed away in our headlights. Sometimes I saw the bright eyes of deer down in the borrow pit, whether they had just crossed the road or were making ready. The road was mostly empty, but we passed a few rigs heading in towards town, and once a big truck blasted by us, trailering four-wheelers with rifle mounts. I don't understand why somebody would drag all that machinery out hundreds of miles to hunt. You did better walking, trying to be quiet.

“You know what, Les?”

“What?”

“It wasn’t so bad. That beach house.” He took a deep breath. “At first I thought I would shoot myself. I was that serious.”

Mike stopped, like he wanted to me to say something. I didn’t know what to say. Killing yourself wasn’t something I knew anything about. I had known people who did it, sure, or tried to do it. Driving a motorcycle into a tree, or going for a midnight swim after six or eight beers. But it wasn’t anything I knew about, and I didn’t want to. When things got bad you just kept doing what you needed to do. That was life. Eventually the wheel would turn.

“But then I thought, why give her the pleasure, you know? So she can roll around in it when I’m gone? No thank you. You have to have some self-respect.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“So I start waking up early each morning and watching the ocean. All the different colors in it.” Mike had his eyes closed now, like he was back before that view in his mind as he spoke. “Have you ever seen the sunrise over the ocean?” he asked.

“Once,” I said. “In Washington State.” I remembered the green of the water and the salty, decayed smell of the kelp on the black rocks of the shore. The jagged rocks cut out into the water and the waves broke white all around them. Lauren and I camped under tall trees and there was a path we took down to the shore to watch the waves before we crawled in our tent for the night. It rained a lot. The smell, the ocean and the rain and the trees, was the strongest part of the memory. And the way Lauren stood

out on the rocks and waited for the waves to crash around her feet. Laughing all the time.

“You haven’t seen it,” Mike said. “Not really. The sun doesn’t hit it right up there. It’s too dark. You need to go down to California and see it for yourself.”

“Maybe sometime,” I said.

“You should do it while you can,” he said.

“Do you think Lauren would like it?” I asked. I still saw her on the rocks.

Mike was quiet, and I felt sorry for him suddenly, all alone in that house and pretending that the sunrise mattered.

“You don’t need her. Just go alone.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“I feel sorry for you,” he said. “I do.”

“How’s that?”

“The big difference between us,” he said, “is that I’m free. If I want to see the ocean, I can damn well see it. I don’t need to ask anybody.” He leaned his head back against the rest. It seemed like his whole body was vibrating. He didn’t move, but it seemed like he did.

“That’s one way to see it,” I said, and tried to remind myself that I was taking him hunting because he needed help. When you were hurt, you tried to hurt other people. I understood that.

“You bet your ass,” Mike said. “You bet your ass.” He closed his eyes.

We drove out 200 until it began to cut north towards Great Falls, and then I took a turn south and we followed a dirt road for a long time, the road white in the headlights, until finally we were there. Mike got out to open the gate, and I scratched at the windshield with my driver's license, where the frost was outrunning the blowers.

I watched him in the headlights as he jerked at the wire holding the gatepost in place. Out in the flats behind him his shadow jerked in time. After a minute he got the gate loose, and I pulled through and waited again while he forced it back together. He cast a black shadow against the frozen grass, all red in the taillights, and the exhaust around him moved like something alive.

"Hoo-ee," he said when he was back in the truck. "That'll take your balls right off." He acted as if he hadn't told me only an hour before that he wanted to kill himself. That was fine by me. I wanted to keep him happy.

I flicked the headlights off and eased slowly up the two-track to where it crested a low ridge, the truck bouncing in and out of the frozen ruts, and pulled off into the tall grass to park. We sat for a minute. Already I could feel the cold coming in under the doors, gnawing at my feet.

"What do you think the temperature is right now?" Mike asked.

"Cold," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "But what exactly? What exactly do you think it is?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't have a thermometer."

"I wish I did," Mike said. He sounded like a kid, an excited kid when he hears school might be canceled. A little of the old Mike, of the guy who liked to be in front of a crowd, was coming through. "It'd be good to know exactly how cold it is."

"I don't think anybody's going to ask," I said. Light was on the horizon. In the half-dark the plain looked flat and empty, but I knew that when the sun came all the cracks and holes and ridges would be cut open, and what looked flat would not be. "Listen," I said, still wanting to keep him happy. "Why don't you take first shot this morning."

"You don't want to flip?" Mike asked. He looked surprised.

"No," I said. "You take it."

"Well that's considerate," Mike said, and I could tell he was happy. "That's a very considerate thing."

From the truck we walked over the ridge and continued along the track in the direction of a long coulee that sat at the lowest point between two ridges. I wore long underwear and wool pants yet I could still feel the cold cutting away at my legs like I was dressed for summer.

As we walked my nose began to run and then freeze. I couldn't see Mike, but I knew the same thing would be happening to him, and I hoped he wouldn't start to sniff. We walked along in silence except for the crunching sounds our boots made in the frozen grass. A thick layer of white frost covered everything, and it glowed up at us in the gloom. Out on the horizon the sky was getting lighter, and flat red streaks of cloud appeared.

The coulee cut through the prairie, making a dark shape as it burrowed into the earth. In my mind I could see the way it looked in the daylight, the dark patches where the brush was thick, and the thin yellow grass that looked like it would be soft to the touch.

I led Mike down a cow path, into a stand of Russian olive that fringed a wide spot in the coulee. When you are moving that slow, even your breath sounds loud, and the thudding sound your feet make when you miss the trail and kick into a clod of frozen dirt is like a drum roll. I walked to the spot I knew, a flat-topped outcrop of sandstone that you could hide behind and have a good view into the coulee and of the prairie that sloped down toward it. Mike settled himself beside me.

Gradually, the light grew. A small pond, tucked beneath the deepest of the cutbank, began to sparkle. Our shadows were crisp across the stone before us.

Then the deer were there, a small bunch skylined atop the broken brown wall of the coulee, milling slowly as one by one they skidded down the steep path into cover, their heads never ceasing to search the prairie. We heard the dull sound of hooves against frozen dirt, and a buck emerged, heavy antlered, trotting along behind the does. The tines of his antlers, looking white and clean, caught the light of the rising sun.

“Look at that big old bastard,” Mike said. “Look at him come.”

The buck trailed single-mindedly behind the does, head down and sniffing. He would catch up to one but just as he got close she would slip away to one side or the other and he would have to follow in a circle or a figure eight, or decide on another doe

and chase until the same thing happened. Each circle pulled the little bunch closer to where we sat.

Mike pushed his backpack forward so he could rest the stock on it, and crawled belly-down out onto the slab. His rifle-barrel flashed in the sun. If he didn't stop it flashing, he was going to spook the deer. Then the nearest doe froze, looking at us.

"Shit," Mike said.

"Shut up," I said. "Hold still." As if he hadn't heard, he shoved again at the backpack.

Still the deer came on, the buck nearly frantic in his attempts to single out a doe. The feathery frost on the long dead grass lit up and sparkled like glass. I couldn't feel my feet at all. I hoped we wouldn't have to follow the deer, because I wasn't sure I could walk.

Mike was finally in shooting position. His breath rose up into the air at regular intervals. Except for the buck, the deer had all stopped a hundred yards out. I imagined what the deer looked like through the scope. The telescopic sight would make them bigger and sharper, but it would also flatten them out against the backdrop. They would look right on the edge of too real and not enough. My head began to pound, and I realized I was holding my breath. Even the buck had stopped moving now, and he looked straight at us. Shoot, I thought, shoot, shoot, shoot.

At the same moment that I felt the concussion of Mike's shot in my nasal passages, little spray of frozen blew up beneath buck, and suddenly the deer were all in

motion. They jumped like they were on springs, and began to bounce back down the coulee.

Mike was swearing to himself. He worked the riflebolt and the spent cartridge spun away into the frost-feathered grass. My ears had the high, white noise that always comes after shooting.

They were a long ways off and on the skyline, but I put the rifle up just to get a look. The last over was the buck, and he was already nosing back at the does like he'd forgotten the noise of the rifle and the sting of flying dirt against his legs. Then they were gone.

Mike sat up, pointed the rifle across the pond, and shot into the cutbank. He worked the bolt and shot again into the bank, and then he worked the bolt and shot once against the ice. The shot ricocheted off with the sound of an angry bee. He worked the bolt again and pulled the trigger, but the bullets were gone.

"Mike," I said.

"Damnit," he said. I stepped away. I hadn't tried to stop him. I pitied him. He seemed to have forgotten I was there, to have cut me as cleanly from his mind as if I had been sliced from it with a knife. If he looked at me now he would see only the brown hills behind me.

"Mike," I said.

"Les, I'm out of bullets," he said. He looked up at me. I still had my hands up against my ears. Mike's eyes were shining in the cold. "That bitch," he said. "That bitch."

We hiked to a low ridge and I poured us each coffee from the thermos, the coffee thick with cream. We could see nearly all the land we could hunt, miles in each direction, an endlessness of gold and brown. It was empty. The sky was high, and blue, and sharp. It felt as if we were on the bottom of some great ocean. In the distance a red dot—maybe a ranch hand's truck—slowly traversed the silent landscape, then vanished in the rills.

The faint booming of rifle shots came from a long way out. Three right in a row, then a little break, and then another four or five.

"Sounds like somebody's having some fun," Mike said.

"Asshole fun," I said. "Blasting up a herd."

Mike took a sip of the coffee. "I just need some more practice," he said. "That's the problem. I just haven't been shooting enough."

"That could help," I said.

"Damn right," Mike said. "That would make all the difference in the world. Practice."

"You've just got to put in the time," I said.

"That's the real problem," Mike said. He scratched at the dirt with his heel, digging a line in the ground. "It's not having any time to practice things. Don't you

feel that way? I do. I never have enough fucking time to get anything done. Not a fucking thing. Suzy was always asking me to do little things, right? Like she'd ask me to fix a slat on the fence, just hammer it down straight. Fine. Easy. But damned if I could get it done." With the toe of his boot, he pushed the dirt back into the hole he'd scratched.

"They can be that way," I said. "Hard to please." Mike stared off across the crests and buttes of the prairie. He acted like he hadn't heard me at all. Here I was offering him a hand, and he wouldn't even look at it.

"Sometimes I think that was what did it," he continued. "That there wasn't time enough to figure things out. That's what we needed, and we never got it."

"It's a hard thing," I said.

"Do you know what she said to me?" he asked. He looked at me and I couldn't look away. There was a bead of snot at the tip of his nose. "Do you know what she said?"

"No," I said.

He hesitated, and finally turned away. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters anymore."

Suddenly I wanted to punch him. For wasting the first day of hunting with a missed shot. For the dull look on his face now, and the memory of that fake cowboy grin. For floating along in life like it owed him something, and then for giving up, even though people were trying to help him. Christ, the man had *friends* if he wanted them. All he had to do was try. I couldn't stand how he wouldn't try.

I pounded him on the back, as hard as I dared. "Mike," I said. "Mike, Mike."

We had finished the coffee and we were both cold again, so we stood up and continued along the low ridge. I knew a few rocky spots here where deer sometimes holed up during the day. They tucked themselves into deep pockets where the rain and wind scoured the mudstone away. I thought we might still get lucky, might erase the events of the morning, but we walked for another mile and didn't see anything. And that was the way of it for the rest of the day, when we drove the ranch that afternoon, and at dusk when we set up again along the coulee and hoped for a second chance.

We got back to the truck just after dark and the cold was already coming in hard again. Frost had begun to work its way across the hood. The sky was still clear and you could almost see the small warmth the day being siphoned up and out into space. The stars were poking through the blue-black night, and everything was quiet.

I had a couple beers in the backseat, but they were frozen and slushy. The starter was slow, and I tried it twice before the engine fired. I took my rifle from my shoulder and worked the bolt until all the bullets were out on the seat. In the dome light I watched Mike doing the same. His hands were white, and he fumbled once, and dropped his rifle, and cursed before picking it up again.

As we got closer to Missoula the stars began to disappear and within an hour we were driving in a blizzard. The most frightening thing about these storms is the wind, which whips up all the light snow and whirls it around just off the ground, so thick you can hardly see. It was thick now, and it scared the hell out of me.

It got quiet in the truck. We lost the oldies station and there was just fuzz and static on the radio, and then Mike switched it off. Then there was just the sound of the wind blowing like it wanted tip us over and beat on us for a while.

The storm got worse as we drove on, and the snow drifting across the road got deeper. It was hard to know which lane we were in. I felt my way along and hoped a semi wouldn't suddenly appear out of the snow heading in our direction.

"We could stop," Mike said.

"There's no point," I said. "We'll just get hit from the back instead of the front."

I drove. Then I said, "Talk about something."

"About what?" Mike asked.

"Anything," I said. "Just talk."

"Okay," Mike said. He put his chin down on his chest for a minute, then raised his head. "I've got something," he said. "Something strange that happened just today."

"That'll do," I said. "Play on."

"I'm not sure I should tell you." He looked over.

"Why the hell would you bring it up? Tell it or don't, it's all the same to me."

"Okay. You know how long we sat there this morning. Just sitting and waiting."

"I remember."

"I started to think," he said. "Sitting there. Just imagining different things, like you do sometimes. I started to think about the ocean and how it felt to watch it every morning. How it felt like I wasn't really in a body. Like I left my body behind when I watched the water." He looked at me. "Don't laugh," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes I want to hear."

Mike continued. "Then I saw the deer, and it was like my thoughts just jumped from the one thing to the other. I was thinking about the ocean and how it felt to watch it, and then I was thinking about the deer. Like a movie switching scenes. I watched that buck and I started thinking about what it was like for him. Chasing the does. Not thinking about anything else. I thought that seemed like a good thing."

"Amen," I said.

"I'm serious," Mike said. "It seemed good. And then I imagined myself in the buck's body. But it wasn't really like that. It was like I was suddenly in there, and I didn't have any control over it. I felt like my arms and legs changed around and I had a deer body."

We passed a car down in the ditch. The windshield was smashed in and the roof crumpled down. The car was dark, and there were the faint impressions of old tire tracks in the snow around it. I could barely see it through the snow, and Mike didn't even seem to notice it.

"And then it was over," he said. "I was back in my body. And I felt like everything had drained out of me, like somebody pulled the plug in a bathtub."

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "So I missed. I missed on purpose."

"What?"

"Because I couldn't do it," Mike said. "I just couldn't do it. Not after that."

I let the road go by for a little while. I was trying to control myself. I knew he wanted me to say something, something that would let him off the hook, to show him everything was okay.

"Well that's fine," I said. "That's just fine, Mike. What a wonderful thing you did. Saved that deer's life." I knew I was hurting him.

"It's not like that," he said.

"No, it's not," I said. "It's not like that for you, is it? For you it's always a special deal. A magic deer. A beach house down in California. Someplace to cry yourself to sleep and then watch the sun come up."

Mike flinched and I stopped. I was breathing hard.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean it."

"Hey," Mike said, "no problem. I get it." He shrugged. "I guess I have it coming."

"We'll have another chance at a deer," I said.

"I know," he said. "Don't worry about it."

If the night were clear I knew we would be staring at the dark mass of the Rocky Mountain Front jutting up from the plains. The storm was easing off. Sometimes the snow settled almost totally, and I could see the road for a few hundred yards ahead.

Then I saw another car in the ditch, and a shape next to it. As we got closer the shape became a man, bent over with his hands on his knees, vomiting into the snow. He must have seen us, because he straightened up and started to climb the little hill to the highway. He slipped in the snow, but he didn't fall. Once he made his way up to the road he shuffled out into the middle and held up his arms.

I slowed up as we approached and he moved a little off to the side, but not much. Mike rolled down his window and as we stopped beside him the man grabbed the door of the truck and steady himself.

"Brothers," he said. "Brothers!"

He had a long black braid that ran down his back, and his coat was covered in beadwork, but he was a white man. He wasn't dressed for the weather. The back end of the car was visible through the snow, and I thought it looked like a Cadillac. You could smell the puke on him, and the liquor. His cheeks had little white streaks that I thought at first was frostbite until I saw it was some kind of paint.

"I'm looking for the powwow," the man said. "Maybe you can help me."

Mike looked at me. "I don't think there's any powwow around here. Do you know about any powwow, Les?" Snow blew in through the window and began to melt on the dash.

"No," I said. And I didn't. Summer was powwow season, and that was long gone. "Where are you coming from?"

"California," said the man. "Berkeley, California." He smiled at us. There were bits of stuff stuck in his teeth. "I'm on a vacation. It's not winter yet, is it?"

"Have you got any gas left?" I asked. He looked confused. "Gas," I said. "Gasoline. For your car."

He thought for a second. "Yes I do," he said.

"And a cell phone?" I asked.

He stuck his hand in one of his coat pockets and fished out a phone. He held it up for us to see. It looked expensive.

"That's good," I said. "Here's what we'll do. You can get back into the car and turn up the heat. We'll keep on and send the wrecker back from whatever place we come to next."

"How long will that be?" asked the man.

"Not too long," I said. "A couple hours at the most."

He got an open look in his eyes that I didn't like. "Why don't I just get in with you?" he asked.

"It's better if you stay with your car," I said. I was finished helping out for the day. All I wanted was to get back to town where I could have a hot meal and go to bed. I didn't want the man's smell next to me for eighty miles. And I didn't want him puking in my truck. I started to pull away.

"I think it's better if I come along," he said. Suddenly he didn't seem nearly as drunk.

"Just stay," I said. "Get warm. Someone will be along soon."

He reached a hand in to grab Mike's arm. "Come on, buddy," he said. "Don't leave me here." His head shifted from side to side.

"Listen," he said. "There are voices out there." He waved his free hand back at the storm. "They're talking to me." He pushed his head into the cab. "Don't leave me here, man."

"Les," Mike said. "What are you doing?"

"It's better if he stays," I said. I accelerated and the man began to jog along to keep up, his black braid bouncing on his back.

"Wait," he said. He scrabbled with the handle. "Just wait a second. We can talk it over."

"Just get in your car," I said, and pushed harder on the gas, harder than I meant to because the truck jumped forward and the man cried out in surprise.

With his other hand he made a grab for the window and missed, and slipped, and sat down in the snow by the side of the road. He was sitting like that when the snow got too thick to see him anymore.

"What are you doing?" Mike said again. The snow still blew in around his head.

"Shut up," I said. "Just be quiet for a minute."

"He's going to freeze," Mike said. "He will freeze to death."

"I told him to get in the car," I said. "If he does that, he'll be fine."

“We have to help him,” Mike said. He stared at me with a hard look that I didn’t recognize. “It’s our responsibility.”

“We are helping him,” I said. “We’re helping him by finding somebody to pick up his sorry ass. We’re helping him by getting ourselves out of this storm. We tried. We can’t do him any good.”

Mike didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you get it?” I said. “It’s not up to us. He has to take care of himself.” I stopped the truck and looked at him. “Mike,” I said, “there’s only so much you can do.” But I knew already that it wasn’t any use. I wanted to believe what I was saying, but I couldn’t. Mike kept looking at me, and not saying anything, and we sat that way for a while as I tried to think. But there was a high white noise in my ears, and I knew that nothing I could say would make any sense. So I swung the wheel hard and turned the truck around.

The Cadillac was running when we got back, the windows fogged. We’d only been gone ten minutes. Mike got out of the truck and slid down the embankment to the car. “Sir,” he yelled. “Sir, we’re here.” The car was empty.

I climbed down and walked around the other side of the car, where a set of footprints headed off in the direction of the mountains that were invisible in the storm. A box of tissues sat on the passenger seat, a single leather glove next to it.

"Jesus," Mike said. "He's out there all alone."

I didn't say anything to that. It was hard to imagine a place that felt lonelier than the ditch where we stood, with the wind whipping snow into our faces and cold cutting into our noses and our ears.

I climbed back up to the road and got the phone out of the truck. "I'm going to call the Highway Patrol," I called down to Mike.

"You do that," Mike said, stamping his feet. He climbed gingerly back to the truck, kicking steps into the drifting snow, and tugged on the big orange coat. He zipped it to the throat. I dialed emergency and listened to the phone buzz in my ear. After three rings a woman's voice picked up. It sounded fat and bored, like you would expect someone who worked dispatch to sound. I imagined her with a big Styrofoam cup of gas station coffee. The coffee was white with cream and sugar, and she would have a stale donut on a napkin beside it. Most of all she would be warm. She would be indoors.

I scraped rime from the mile-marker post and told her where we were. The connection was in-and-out.

"All our units are out right now," she said. "It's the storm." Then quiet for fifteen seconds, and the sound of her clearing her throat. "Still there?"

"I'm here," I said. "You said nobody's coming?"

There was another silence, and then "in the weather," then nothing for long enough I thought the connection was gone. I kicked at a mound of snow, and then she was back, saying "someone there within an hour, two at the most."

"You can't be any quicker?" I asked. "I don't think he even has a decent coat."

"Not tonight," she said. Then she asked me if I was alone, and I told her Mike was with me.

"Don't separate," she said. "You probably know this, but I'm required to say it." Then the call broke up for good.

I hung up and I walked back along the road to where I'd parked the truck. The snow was forming long parallel ridges across the asphalt, and the ridges were crushed down in places where they had been driven over.

"Mike," I said, and then I saw him standing next to the truck, hunched up out of the wind. I told him about the patrol.

"You can stay here," he said. "I'm going after him."

Snow had already begun to soften the edges of the man's tracks. In another few minutes they would be gone.

"I can't let you go out there alone," I said.

"Sure you can," he said. He was smiling at me, like he was suddenly happy. "It's a good plan."

"It's not any kind of plan," I said.

"You'll be waiting when the cops get here," he said. "After I'm gone a little while just give a shout and I'll know where you are."

"What if you can't hear me?" I said.

He looked as happy as he had dancing at the AmVets. His voice was full of confidence, like we were talking in a warm living room.

"Just give a shout," he said. That's all you need to do. I'll take care of the rest."

Then he turned away and began to walk, trailing the man from California.

Suddenly I felt like there was more I needed to say, and like the moment for saying it was disappearing as quickly as the footprints in the snow.

"Mike," I shouted. He stopped and looked back.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what to do."

He walked back to me. "That's all right," he said. "It doesn't matter anymore."

He shook my hand. "I'll be back in half an hour," he said. "Maybe a little more." Then he slapped me on the shoulder and smiled again. Snow sifted down that orange coat in waves.

"I'll be shouting," I said.

Mike raised an arm, then turned to go. I watched as his shape disappeared into the night, and I stood there watching for a long time. Once I thought I heard voices in the dark, but it must have been a trick of the wind. Then the snow seemed to clear some, and I could see beyond the ditch and a little way into the fields where his footsteps led. I waded through snow to the truck and sat in the warm cab, the engine idling even and slow. I kept the highbeams on. They would be a point in the darkness for Mike to see, and he would need that light to get back.