

Strange Love: Romance Not For Sale

by

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- "Creation" -- Potent Aphrodisiac 2 (summer/fall 1991)
- "Trinity" -- Alternative Culture Magazine (<http://www.alternativeculture.com>, 1996)
- "Just Coyotes" -- Alternative Culture Magazine (<http://www.alternativeculture.com>, 1996)
- "The Center of the World" -- Xizquil (spring 1991)
- "Rendezvous" -- HyperLife (<http://www.hyperlife.net/>, 2000)
- "A Neighborly Visit" -- Mind in Motion (May 1987)
- "Leno's Feast" -- Fugue 5 (spring/summer 1992)
- "Transitions" -- The Animist: Electronic Journal of the Arts
(<http://animist2000.netgazer.net.au/>, 2000)
- "The Meaning of Life" -- Alternative Culture Magazine
(<http://www.alternativeculture.com>, 1997)
- "A Man with a Black Case and a White Dog" -- No Cats Allowed, Stray Dog Press
(1994)
- "New Moon" -- Abortion Stories, MinRef Press (February 1992)

Strange Love

CREATION

Creation: the first concept. The artist in his studio, poring over blank paper. Canvas to come later. For now, the scene accrues, a color at a time, line by line, an outline, forms growing, flowing tentatively together.

Peter, this one's name. Painting, his one passion. All the women in his life live here. Or maybe, after all, it's just one woman, coming out here from his dreams to live and breathe in various stages of colored dress and undress, sliding mercifully to life--but then, only to freeze in a moment of timeless time, for all to see? All . . . well, that concept is a final one, one yet to come.

For now, he is alone. He works hard, he knows; his fingers ache by nine in the morning. He takes a coffee at ten. It's a real job, he thinks to himself, though without an hourly wage. It's a vocation as well as an avocation, an occupation as well as a preoccupation. Here in the tiny cabin he calls his studio, he works, he plays, he studies, he worships: it's all in his art--the conception, the practice; the reflection, the resultant peace; on to new conception.

A knock at the door: Who is it? Damn. He puts the brush down. Stands in front of the paper. A bare light bulb shines overhead. It's Zena, plaid-shirted. "Hi, Peter.

Came to see you about some firewood." Right--it is October. "That dry pine, dead-standing--Frank told me you didn't need it right now, you said. But that you would take half of it if we cut it down. Can we do that, then? Say today?"

Chainsawing: today. When the craft calls out for silence. Well, Peter thinks, any day would be the same, that way. "Sure, go ahead."

"You're sure."

"Yeah, that's fine. Go ahead."

"Okay, thanks, Peter." A big smile. She tries to peek around, to see.

Peter shifts. She's beautiful, he thinks. That turn of the cheek, lovely. The light in the hollow, he could capture that, if lucky. He'll try.

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Zena in the kitchen, frying onions freshly harvested. Frank's in the den reading. Slanting sunlight passes the climbing ivy in the window, strikes her cheek. It's flushed, slightly, a rising color as she thinks of Peter . . . and Frank.

Frank's all right. He was a good choice, a good provider. She's loved him. And yet . . . something Zena cannot express, cannot name with any reliable word . . . something is missing.

It's been seven years, their time together, married. Their house is cozy, clean.

With the extra firewood they'll be plenty warm this winter. Frank's part-time jobs will, they've learned, continue to give them a good balance of income and time to spend together, skiing in the woods, walking . . . talking of children, they might have--next summer, or . . .

Zena slices her thumb--Damn. The glob of blood trembles, falls in a tiny red splash to the counter, onto a piece of cut onion. She runs to the bathroom for a band-aid; Frank looks up from his book. "What happened, Zena? You all right?"

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Chainsawing, that afternoon. The all-penetrating violence of death. Red oil, like bloody paint, on the stumps. But they're dead anyway, Peter allows, from white pine blister disease. He has his wood in for this year, but the half he'll get from Frank and Zena's cutting will go to next year's pile. That's good, Peter thinks. Less to worry about, more time to paint.

Peter is poised over his still-wet, morning's record of Zena in jeans. Dark silken hair under hard hat, chainsaw in hand--the modern madonna. Is this what the modern rural masses, nonexistent as that concept may be, want to see? Who knows? Peter doesn't. He's a painter, not a market analyst.

What else is there? He's given up every other job he's tried, from bush work to

rail work to office work to carrying mail, all to no end, no satisfaction. His income now derives from a bit of carpentry and design contract work, draftsmanship and commercial art. Odd jobs, low income, subsistence. A living. But most important, space in his life, precious time freed, for art.

Trouble is, they just pile up, the stack of pictures everyone who sees them likes, but nobody buys. They are intricate, bold, imaginative, sometimes breathtakingly real, others symbolic in an even more real way that strikes him to the heart with their pointedness, their accuracy, their . . . love.

Or is it this that's missing, in his art as in his life? Is his love for art alone too inbred an emotion, too sterile to bear the fruit of public work, to bear the colorful children out into the actual, the commercial, the domestic world? The world that spins from love, whose inhabitants live for love, love not merely of their work and pleasure, but love for each other; not the conceptions of each other but each other whole in the mortal flesh?

Mortal. Maybe that's it, his hangup, the flaw in the human divinity. That we are all doomed to a slow decay, with beauty diminishing inexorably, constantly. And then it disappears, along with what remains of us. And so we're left with nothing. Except children, whose beauty perhaps increases for the first twenty or thirty years. But then the old cycle again. Nothing permanent in itself, only the overall cycle . . . and even that-- well, of course in the cosmic sense, neither is paint everlasting. Only, perhaps, the concepts it paints, he paints: the shapes and relations of things that themselves perish, but

leave their traces forever in the mind . . . the mind of . . .

Another knock. Peter blinks out of his daze. He hasn't painted a stroke all afternoon, while the chainsaw roared, but has sat brooding over the paper, paint hardening on the slender brush. He's sat still there, thinking, like a picture himself, the very figure of thought unmoving, reflection of eternity.

"Yes, come in."

It's Frank this time, black tuque in hand: "Thanks, man. We've got a couple loads piled. We'll leave you the same stacked between some trees. It's great. Helped us out in a pinch."

Peter only smiles, weakly.

"Yeah, cause I had to go to work, slash-burning, and didn't have time to go out for wood like we'd hoped."

"We . . . " Peter reflects, silently.

"Now with snow practically on top of us--" Frank turns his half-bald, mustachioed head to the mountainside, where the snowline has crept down to within a hundred feet of the inhabited elevations.

"Well, fine. And thanks to you, too. A good deal for both of us. Okay, see you, Frank"--as the door closes. Sigh. Back to work, three p.m. No inspiration, and fading light in the still-treed glade. Incomplete picture.

Frank's on supper tonight. Zena sits on their bed, attempting to read. She looks at the words, sees only trees, colors, paint. She sees Peter. What is it about him that draws her attention like that? Whenever she sees him, she now realizes, she feels this lingering image of him, his presence in her.

She doesn't tell Frank; their conversations do not, as a rule, touch on such personal, private realms. They talk, genially enough, of their aging Volvo, their ski trails, their garden, their "new" living room furniture that they've acquired from a local auction. They go out; they make love; they . . . but they don't speak of romance. That's for the unmarried.

Has Peter ever been married? Zena wonders. She thinks not. He's never spoken of anyone. The women in his paintings . . . does he even paint women? He must. What else is there, of value, real value, to a man? He must, at least, dream of them--of us.

Frank calls her in to supper. She closes the book, closes her eyes, holds her breath for a long moment. She turns out the light, and before getting up off the bed, savors the beauty, the empty chill beauty of the dark.

In the dream, Zena hovers, jeans off, orange hard hat still on, straddling Peter in a tub of thin paint, cool like water, not sticky but refreshing, yellow-bright with swirls of red. He is floating on his back. She leans down, pressing her breasts onto his, her plaid shirt falling open and off altogether, her hat falling off and floating away, her hair falling past his to wash at the tips in the paint like a long, luxuriant, natural hair brush. He laughs, bouncing up into her breasts and nudging the firm hair between her legs. He becomes warmly flushed and then spurts blue paint; she writhes in it, giggling joyously.

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In the morning, Peter fills out the partial sketch of Zena in jeans, yes back in jeans for now, maybe more Zenas later, even in the same frame, nude, perhaps even with yellow hair, blue pubic hair, red swirls on the breasts. Yes, this sort of thing might even be popular, Peter begins thinking as the brushstrokes mount paint upon paint, as the scene grows, as the landscape comes alive with vibrant greens behind her, a more-than-realistic wash of trees and underbrush, a living, livid sky, a streaming sun, and he sits back then and cries, careful to shed the tears short of the paper. Oil doesn't mix well with water.

Is this enough, he thinks to himself in desperation, is this encounter of love with flesh enough, when the love is paint and the flesh is paint and the encounter is painting? To go further with Zena than dreams and paint would be blasphemy to the divine nature

of love as it takes its final form between two living souls--in this case, Frank and Zena. To take his burgeoning love to her in the flesh is out of the question. Then where? How? When? He cries again, and in an instant of unthinking fury crumples the painted paper in front of him, smearing wet paint on his fingers, and tosses the clotted mess into the trashcan under the desk.

A mouse scurries away into the corner of the cabin. Peter wipes his hands and stalks out in disgust: disgust at the mouse, his own impetuosity, his lack of certainty about a direction or style that might be popular; disgust at his unbeautiful, unloving life. He thinks himself unloved.

Peter has coffee in the larger cabin, his house. As he sits there at the table, alone as always, in a flash he resolves to give up painting. He'll dedicate himself to finding a woman he can live with and love, and perhaps, if he doesn't wait too long, they can have a family. Eternity in the cycle of life, in the popular mode. That'll be the ticket. Diapers, TV, popcorn, station wagons, the whole trip . . . and he suddenly gets cold feet. Christ, he thinks, I can't do that either. He's just painted a picture in his mind, and he's crumpled that up, too. Then what?

After a long empty moment, he takes a pencil and blank sheet of paper out of a kitchen drawer, and begins to write:

Creation: the first concept. The artist in his studio . . .

Frank is in the house making lunch. Zena pounds the axe through another round of the newly-cut pine. She likes this work; it leaves her mind free. She thinks of Peter in his studio, poring over his paintings . . . and wonders if anybody else has ever seen one in progress. He sure was careful to stand in the way so I couldn't see any of it, Zena reflects. I wonder if he does paint women, their bodies nude. I wonder if he's ever painted me, imagined my body nude. I think I'd like that, to model for him. But Frank wouldn't like it, I'm sure. He'd think it would create some kind of thing between Peter and me, some carnal knowledge, or a step on the way to it. I guess it would feed the imagination of a single guy like Peter. Probably mine, too!

Actually it has already: that dream of Peter last night--what was it? Yes, I was riding on top of him, floating in a pool of paint. With my shirt open, my breasts hung down over him. He was looking at them, at me, with a clear, open gaze of love. I was filled with love for him and pressed myself down on him. He still floated. My thighs were filled with desire. . . .

So it's real, after all. Or is it? Is it just some dumb fantasy that'll distract me from Frank and make him suspicious? Peter's probably never given me a second thought. After all, I'm already "taken." And I'm happy with Frank, happy enough. So why do I dream like that? Why do I want to model myself for Peter? To dream of him; yes even

to make love--

Zena puts the axe down, gently against the chopping block. She looks around at the golden birch woods, up to the pale blue October sky. She almost cries out to it, to him, with her pain, her joy, her frustration and sudden knowledge.

She walks steadily, gracefully, full of a sense of lightness and new life, toward the house. Inside, a wave of rich fragrance: garlic and zucchini, frying. "Smells good, Frank," she says in passing. He merely nods. The kitchen radio is on, a call-in show about car repair. She goes into the bedroom, takes from the bed-table drawer a pen of black ink and a pad of white stationery and begins to write:

Creation: the first concept. The artist in his studio . . .

CHESS

I have no regrets, looking back. Sure, I sacrificed my Queen--but I had three good-looking prospects headed for the back row. Is it my fault they got picked off one by one and never made it, leaving me in the end, like this, alone? Well, practically alone--thank god for a private nurse.

She was so beautiful, Andrea. That she was already married was not written in her face--its radiance, its soft unblemished cheeks, the clear gaze of her eyes--eyes that looked into mine and told me what would be between us even that first time we met. 1968, Bob Kline's party in a little turreted room over Telegraph Avenue: I remember the mystical, the almost palpable magnetism between us, allowing the thrill of contact even before we'd met, with her secret husband Peter there slouching behind her; and then, smiling Bob introducing us.

I can feel her tears, even now, that came of it, when Peter left her. The irony, that he was the one who made the leap, when it was her fault. Oh, but what am I saying? It was my fault, mine all the way!

Unless--unless I was merely carrying out the pawn's duties in some transcendent master's game.

And for what? The bliss, the anxiety, the final anguish? Or was it all for the sake of the experience, a lesson in strategy? In any event how forgettable it was, for there were more to come:

Francine. Long-legged, lithe Francine, pregnant even before I'd said good-bye to Andrea for good. Passionate Ruth, who nearly killed herself. Dour, enduring Connie--who even now sends me flowers for my death. She, the most loyal, though I betrayed her the worst. The first, and, to a degree I haven't yet fathomed, the last. How could she stand it, watching, waiting to see it all come crumbling down around me: my elaborate forays into the checkered territory of romance, my transparent defenses? Not once, I still believe, did she falter in her faith I'd call her back, or in her faithfulness to that illusion of who I might have been for her: a husband.

I come back to that first step. Deciding to go to that party at Kline's rookery, without Connie. It was as if I were already courting Andrea--the concept of Andrea--and I knew it. After twenty years of guarded monogamy, and getting on into my middle forties, the time was right. And in that anything-goes atmosphere of the late sixties, the times were ripe. It was then, I sensed, or never. Either go for broke or fritter away my adventureless days till the end.

After that first contact, that first embrace in the swirling mists of "In-A-Gada-Da-Vida," my nighttime visions--even in Connie's arms, even while trying to smile into that

pale, innocently freckled face--were of Andrea, Andrea's blue eyes, the creamy countenance, the honey-red lips I had yet to taste.

I--oh--my treacherous heart falters, threatens to stop again. So quickly I come to the end. And still the faces come, the faces change, as easily as the names. Telling Connie about Andrea, Andrea about Francine. Meeting Ruth, after a three-year layoff; and after four promising years of a "model relationship," as Bob Kline called it, having him tell me that she'd tried to commit suicide. Me rushing to this very hospital (who knows, perhaps to this very bed) to find her drawn and silent and not even wanting to look in my eyes.

And so I never did again. Though I got my sneak preview of death's visage, eye to eye with that dark knight himself, when my own heart banged shut even as I tried to stride confidently back through those revolving hospital doors into the so-called real world again.

Maybe I'll never see that world again, closed as I am into this self-made box now forever. Left to wonder at how I've changed those innocent lives: Connie, cast adrift like a widow before her time. Andrea, still so repentant after her divorce, that when Francine came along in seventy-one and things fell apart with us, she let the bishop talk her into going off to some retreat seminary, Bob called it a nunnery. Francine, ravaged by a botched abortion and bitterness etched into her face forever, cursing my sex for its (for

my) selfish ignorance, and then running off with that little lesbian slut from across the Bay. And now, Ruth. I suppose she'll go on to marry a restaurateur and live like some bourgeois queen in a cozy hillside ranch house in Walnut Creek and cut her hair page-boy style and run her three step-sons to baseball and violin practice in her twenty-foot station-wagon.

My mother used to say, "Everything happens for the best." Does it--even my own poorly-executed demise? For the others, who can say? For me, all right, perhaps it was all somehow, cosmically, karmically necessary, and therefore okay. No, even "best"--in some metaphysical tournament of judgment. In the meantime, who can ever tell what a single pawn's move portends for the layout of the board in the end? Only the supposed Grand Master--and if such a personage does not in fact exist or has left the moves in the hands of such a field-marshal no wiser than myself, a warrior-king with a heart a few beats short of the endurance needed to take the battle to and past the end, what then?

Let's pose the question like this: if there is a next life, would I, will I do it again? It's difficult to think it through. These pillows, they're not soft enough, nor on the other hand, hard enough. Too soft, too hard, all at the same time: to a dying man, I guess that makes sense. Anyway, I sidestep the question: Andrea, that first look, that party, dancing . . . Francine, in bed, asking . . . or Ruth, crying for me on the phone . . . hell, even way back to marrying Connie in the first place, 1948, still crazy, both of us, from

the war. That decision from this distance seems like a given; yet, I have to ask myself: was I foolish even to get into the game in the first place?

The sea air, through the open window to the west, wafting past those lovely red and white roses Connie was touching enough to send, tells me something. It conjures up the image of the Golden Gate . . . and it reminds me of Francine, the New Year's Day when we walked along the beach. Her legs, those wonderful legs. A thin, long nose to match. Blackest, long hair . . . I can't stop, can I, even now.

When that nurse, for instance, comes in again I'll goose her, if it's the last thing I do.

So, I conclude: nothing different, not in this life. But as for the next time, my life again, the next game: what moves are called for, then? Does it matter? The questions, the answers, they dodge one another to eternity.

So why play?

For the fun of it, some say. Forget the pain, the sacrifice, the cruelty, the tears. Lose one? Just say, "Come on, set 'em up again."

"Oh, that looks good. Thank you, nurse."

O pulsing crotch, sweet fork in the flesh-road, should I make my final move?--

Now!

Oop--

Checkmate.

TRINITY

So Zelda and I were walking down the street, minding our own business, and we saw this old drunk leaning up against the wall of Woolworth's, or maybe I should say he spied us. We were on our way to the Savoy to have a beer. He must have known. Ten minutes later, we're sitting down in there starting our beer and in he walks, sees us right away and comes over to our table, sits down and orders himself a beer, just like that.

He's drunk already, but his eyes are kind--more human, actually, than you see in most people you pass on the street, whose souls are shuttered away from the world. These liquid lights penetrate to our hearts; it's like double moonlight shining from a forest pool at midnight.

He tells us we're beautiful; that we look like his kids. He asks us what we do for a living.

We tell him we're teachers. Then we ask him the same question.

"Oh, I was a construction foreman on the dams--"

"Like the Duncan?"

"Yeah like the Duncan. Worked out there nine years . . . the last one with Alice.

She was just a child, really. She was infatuated with me, y'know what I mean? I was working eight hours on, eight off, making a thousand dollars a month clear; but my family was going hungry." Gulps half his beer.

"Why was that?"

"Because my wife couldn't drive! She couldn't get to the grocery store!" says he, leaning towards us, wrinkling his forehead and rolling his eyes. "And besides that she's stuck at home with my little twin girls, and meanwhile back in the bunkhouse Alice says I want you, and I told her, 'But you can't'--but, what can you do? So one time I came home on a Thursday instead of a Wednesday and Jacqueline, that's my wife, says what you been doing out there? I said I can forget it if you can." (His eyes shine up to say know what I mean?) "Jacqueline ends up saying okay, show me you care. Take me to town, and I don't mean goddam Castlegar.

"So I asked for a leave of absence and they said no, so I quit! We went to Frisco and Vegas for ten days, spent a whole lotta money, oh, did we ever. Anyway a year later I ran into Alice in a welfare line in Creston and I said to her, 'What do you do with that money the gover'nment gives you?'--She says 'I buy records.' I told her 'You oughta go to work right now.'"

At this he throws up his hands, eyes gleaming: "She doesn't even have a record player!"

I look at Zelda, who's got her eyes on the guy bending over at the pool table, lining up the old eight-ball. I think, I've seen this before. So I look back at our inspired, new-found friend. Somebody has to be polite.

He's leaning over the table, trying to get back Zelda's wandering attention. But I'm looking him right in the face now so he notices his beer instead and drains it.

The barmaid is just then passing by so he nips her sleeve--"Miss, another, please." Zelda perks up then and orders another as well. I've hardly touched mine; in those days I could nurse a draft for an hour.

Anyway, the guy continues, on a new tack: "You know about the Golden Rule--you treat others the way you'd want them to treat you, right? Everybody's good inside, eh? Christ, forgive them--they don't know what they're doin' (when they're throwin' rocks at this beautiful woman who just made a mistake gettin' pregnant with some other man)."

Zelda's tuned back in now; this religious stuff was right up her alley. And I'm the one having trouble following the guy, who rambles on: "Three years of arguments I had with these Jehovah's Witnesses over blood transfusions: 'partaking of blood' they call it. No--sharing with a brother, that's all, someone in need--like that hockey accident where a skate sliced a neck artery and I jumped down and closed it off and the poor guy gets a transfusion immediately--of course--no questions asked.

"I asked my grandfather when he was a hundred and one what should I believe in and he says you have a head God gave you; you know what's right and wrong--" He paused to drink the fresh beer, licked the foam off his lips.

"That's so simple! No more lies, in a chain with no end--it'll never get ya anywhere. You start one, it leads to another, and another, and so on. Each one makes it worse, instead of better, know what I mean? Y'know, there's only one commandment, just like there's only one God. And that commandment, do you know what it is?"

I look at Zelda. We don't know.

"Don't lie to yourself. And, whatever you do, do it right; don't fuck around--" He looks at me.

Then, to Zelda: "Y'know, you're a great lady counselor, always listenin'. Tell 'em what they wanna hear, pat 'em on the back, tell 'em what they're doin' is okay. Am I right?"

The guy could read my wife like a book. Zelda doesn't know what to say, I can tell. "Sure," I say, speaking for her. Then he says to me, "What do you think of that story?"

Which one, I wonder. "It's sad," I say.

"That's exactly right." Then, to Zelda: "You're beautiful. You should create more just like yourself. Not more assholes like we already have too many of."

Then he changes the topic again, and says to Zelda, "You don't smoke. Do you smoke grass?"

"A little," says Zelda.

"Well, what else can ya do?" He leans back in his chair with a drunken smile, pulls out a cigarette. "Now being drunk, is that wrong?" He looks to me, then Zelda.

"Uh, no . . ." She says what he wants to hear.

"That's right. The first thing is, be humble. You're lucky. You don't want to start smoking and then never quit, like me." His hand is shaking.

"Say, I told Jacqueline . . . well anyway. Can you drive me home?"

"We're walking," I tell him.

"Whatever." He gets up, putting out his cigarette. "In that case I'll be going." He shakes Zelda's hand, lingering with it as if it were a floppy dog's paw, and all the time smiling a sad sweet smile. "Ah," he says, "I can feel the good going through there." I give him a look. He drops her hand and squeezes mine. Nothing about the good goin' through me.

Then he withdraws, saying meekly, "Best of luck to you--individu'ly, and in what you're doin'." And he trails off, mumbling, out onto the street.

I look down, and there's blood on my hand.

So what happens is, seven years later I've got this three year old kid and Zelda's taken off with another guy--some jerk she worships like a saint. I'm not good enough for

her any more, I guess. But good enough to be left with the kid. I don't mind. I've always been good with kids.

We went on this camping trip, a long hike up a steep valley where there was supposed to be some kind of festival, in a wilderness park, which I thought would be no big deal and something fun for the kid. But then there were all these cars in the lot and I said to Chrissie, my kid, it looks like we'll have some company. We parked at the very end of the lot and started up the trail a little way into the woods.

She was really good about the walk. I only had to carry her about a third of the way, and it's maybe a four-hour hike, all with a backpack on. She got really excited when we hit the snow. Anyway we got up to the top of the trail and found this big crowd camped there all around the edge of the woods, a stage set up in a meadow, loudspeakers going on, musicians, speakers . . . and I asked around and it turned out it was some kind of environmental festival that was going on. Most of the people had paid twenty bucks to be there, to somebody stationed at the start of the trail back in the parking lot. We didn't see anyone; I guess we got in free since we were late coming, or maybe we just slipped past.

Anyway maybe we wouldn't have paid twenty bucks to come and hear speeches, but now that we're here--Okay fine, I thought to myself; I won't argue. I support the environment. Let's set up the tent, I said to my kid. There were these little clearings for

campsites in the woods. Chrissie helped me by holding the pegs, and trying to push them one by one through the tent loops into the ground.

That night there was a campfire nearby and we sat by it watching the flames, listening to a few guys play their guitars. I noticed a slightly familiar face in the ring of listeners, a tall man stomping in the cold, rambling on to somebody next to him, his raw face illumined by the fire.

The next morning was cold when we got up so I carried Chrissie on my shoulders over to the new campfire, that the early risers or the night owls had restoked, where folks were having coffee; and I saw the guy again. In the daylight I almost recognized him, and the voice confirmed it.

So I went up to him and said, "Hey, I think we met in the Savoy in Nelson, years ago. Am I right?"

He seemed not to remember me--I thought maybe the kid threw him off. But he looked like he was thinking hard, and he finally said, "Maybe so. I been through hard times, son, hard times. No end of persecution, trials and tribulations." His voice was hollow, haunted, and I started to wonder if I really did have the same guy. "When a woman leaves a man, you look into your soul like there's no tomorrow, and you see hell." His eyes had been distant but now they bore right into me. "You know what I mean."

Then he looked up and smiled at Chrissie. "Looks just like her mother," he said.

He offered me a cup of coffee with a shot from his flask, and then got sidetracked into conversation with a fellow who had his eye on the flask. "I'm hungry," Chrissie whined, so we went back to the tent for cereal and powdered milk. After breakfast we heard music from the stage so I picked up a blanket for us to sit on and we headed toward the meadow.

"It wasn't as if I never told 'em," he said to me suddenly, hot breath on the back of my neck. That voice again.

I turned around, holding my little girl tightly as she rode on my shoulders. The multitude walked on past us.

"Yeah," he continued, his eyes twinkling, craggy jowls working: "You can't say they weren't warned. Why, I've been tellin' 'em for a coupla thousand years, and the bozos haven't pricked up their ears yet. What's it gonna take, anyway--for the whole thing to explode in their laps, or what? I mean, they've just got no sense, if you ask me, and I know you didn't, so there you go."

An infectious smile. He took out tobacco and papers to roll a smoke. "I see you roll your own now," I said. It seemed like we were in for a session, so I sat down right there in front of him and perched the kid on my lap. He sat down in front of us. We three were like rocks in the stream. He went on talking:

"Yeah, you know, it's not only the appearance that keeps 'em off my trail--after all, who'd ever suspect an old reprobate like me! But, here I am, just like I've been tellin'

'em. Are you listening?, I say. Oh, you're drunk, they tell me. Oh, you smell bad. Oh, you only worked four hours yesterday, like some o' these cockamamie politicians, tryin' to argue their cases on my behalf. Which half?, is what I wanna know. Not this one, not this; not right or left. No, you tell me, do you see a split personality? Come off it. Okay, maybe I was a different man once. But when that old black locomotive comes through, bringin' in the troops, which side of the train are they gonna jump off?--heh, heh.

"So . . ." He paused to gaze around us at the moving crowd, the fluffy clouds in the faraway blue sky, as smoke curled out of his mouth. Then he turned his attention to me: "You haven't said much--I'm open to another point of view, y'know; I'm all ears." And he turned his head to pull on a rabbit ear, winging it back and forth in his hand. The warts stood out on his bulbous nose. He was smiling again.

I didn't know what to think of him, what to believe, what to say. Was he after something? What?--money, sympathy, a following? Maybe simple friendship. I couldn't tell. But he saved me from my indecision:

"That's okay. It's your prerogative. It is a free country, ain't it?" And he pantomimed fear, shrinking down in his collar, looking around him surreptitiously. "You never know. Who knows why I've been thrown in the tank so many times. Do you? No, course not. I don't mean it the wrong way. But they're not gonna tell you. Charges? Why, the words they put down on that paper before they wipe their asses with it don't mean . . . caca. And then there's this controversy over ethics in public office. Ethics--

now who's kiddin' whom?" He emphasized the m; his voice had taken off on a musical ride, heavily laden with sarcasm. "I didn't elect the bastards; they never came to me. So I don't even expect them to operate in my interest. All they're concerned with is lookin' for the other guy's shit. 'Scuse my language, little girl." He smiled sweetly at her, chucked her chin. She giggled and tucked it shyly back closer to her chest.

"Christ, you can even take this here en-vi-ron-mental festival, for that matter. These organizers, what do they have in mind, at twenty bucks per? Well, I can count already a few thou. But not in my pocket." He rose up on slow thighs to his knees and pulled one pocket inside out, empty. Then sank back down to sit erect, leaning forward for emphasis, words pouring out in the dust.

"The schemes, the scams they'll think of. They'll rob milk from every babe for the fight against abortion. They'll raise the tax to pay the tax-collectors. They'll kill to keep the peace. They'll shut you up to guarantee somebody else's right to free speech; burn down the forest to save the trees. Yes, it's a mighty wonderful system we've got here, ain't it?"

He sucked the last of his butt and crushed it out on the beaten earth--almost bitterly, I thought. Yet when he turned that bloodshot face back up he was still smiling.

"You know what it's gonna take, don't you? Course ya do. Everybody knows. It's just that we're too stubborn to think of anything else than to go along with the shuffling herd. Anybody got any bright ideas? Lock 'em up.

"Ah, what do I care? I've seen it all before. It'll be a show, I tell ya. And the preachers say read your book. Hell, the book'll say look around you, look at me! But no one will read it, anyway--I mean really read it, y'know what I mean--so what's the dif?"

"You don't smoke, do ya?"--he offered his pouch. "Okay, I'll have another. This isn't what's gonna do me in, I'll tell ya. Least not for another coupla centuries." His voice broke into a hacking cough. My daughter flinched. His ruddy face had darkened; the smile was gone.

He silently rolled another cigarette, then paused with the wooden match. It burst into flame. His thumbnail was so quick I hadn't seen it scratch the matchtip. He took a deep drag and blew out a long, white cloud of smoke.

He looked at me directly, his round eyes clear and shining. Across our silence flickered a gleam of understanding; yet in his look I saw also an appeal for confirmation. Of what, I still wasn't sure. But I sensed that whatever it was he wanted, I couldn't give it.

I was still speechless. The strains of amplified music wafted over our heads. I rose to my feet and took Chrissie's hand.

"Well," I finally managed, "it was nice talkin' to ya."

I didn't see the guy again until the next day, when the festival was over. A long ragged line of people wound its way down through the trees, back on the trail to the

parking lot. I started out at a brisk pace with Chrissie on my shoulders. In no time the guy turned up behind us, saying, "What's yer hurry, friend?"

"Oh--" I wheeled around--"hello again."

"Back in the herd now, are we?"

"Looks like it, yeah."

"I know a shorter way."

"Oh? You been here before?"

"Hell, yes. Alice and I used to come here. Nothin' to do but drink and f--" he glanced up at Chrissie and smiled. "Anyhow, there's a fork a little ways down. Avoids the crowds."

I wasn't sure whether to trust him; but I figured he wouldn't have suggested the route if he didn't know it. And it was downhill, anyway. . . .

When we came to the fork the main trail was marked with a row of blazed trees. The trail to the left looked little used, no bigger than a deer track. Our friend forged past us and headed down. The main line of people continued on the blazed route. Several people gave us strange looks as they saw what we were about to do. When I still hesitated he glanced over his shoulder and waved his arm forward: "Come on, I know this country like the back of my hand."

So I plunged forward, following his long strides down the mountainside. Somewhere behind us the sun was coming up brighter, but down where we were going, in the dense big trees in the draw, the light only dimmed.

We followed the trail without talking for over an hour. It became harder and harder to tell there was a trail at all, but for following the shadowy figure gliding down ahead of us through the trees. I really started to have my doubts. Chrissie had started out humming and cooing, the way they do, but now she was dead quiet. The old-growth forest we found ourselves in was filled with a deep, dark gloom.

Our guide suddenly stopped, looked around at the ground and the trees and up at the distant sky, threw up his hands and said, "It's no use. I've done it now. We're lost." He sat down on a mossy log and reached his arms out. "Here, I'll take your little girl a moment. Come sit on my lap."

Chrissie, you see, had begun to cry a little. She knew what was what. But she reached to him, so I leaned down and let her off, and she walked over to sit on his lap, where she sat studying his hands. I was glad to be relieved of one burden and took off the backpack as well. I set it down next to a tree and leaned against it. My mind was in a turmoil; but the thick moss under me was soft as a feather bed, so I stretched out and closed my eyes and felt as if I could lie there forever, and never wake up. . . . I took a few deep breaths. But I couldn't just forget that we were in a jam.

I sat up again, so abruptly that I strained a muscle in my side. "What are we gonna do?" I demanded. I was angry now and the new pain made it worse.

"Yeah, good question. You got any water?" I only realized then that the guy wasn't even carrying a pack. No blanket, nothing. I got out the plastic water bottle from my pack and handed it to him. I wondered where he'd slept up there in the cold, but it was not the time for curiosity. I just wanted a way out right now for me and my daughter--this crazy fellow be damned.

He took a slug of water and immediately spat it out. "Yagh, tastes like vinegar."

"Yeah, it's an old vinegar bottle," I said with some perverse pleasure of revenge.

I was exhausted, and the older man looked beat, too. I looked back up the hill. I couldn't see the trail. How long had we been guessing, following mouse-trails for all I knew?

If we could find the trail again, the thing was to follow it back and get onto the main trail again. If we made good time we'd have enough daylight to reach the parking lot by dark. I turned back to suggest this obvious strategy to our friend. His head was tilted back as he sucked from his pocket flask. Chrissie was reaching for it and asking for some.

I lunged at him, swiping at the flask to knock it away. With a half-opened eye he saw me coming and deftly moved the flask out of my reach. "Not for you dearie," he said to Chrissie. Then to me: "Care for a swig?"

"No!" I shouted. "Now let's find that so-called trail we were on and get back up to the blazed trail. I don't want to rot out here in the jungle even if you do."

He capped the flask and tucked it away inside his tattered suitcoat. "Jungle . . . tsk, tsk. It's not all that bad. So we're lost, temporarily. Ever try forty days of it?"

At that he took out his paraphernalia and started to roll a smoke.

"Look," I said. I was ready to explode at him again, to yank the girl out of his hands and storm up the hill without him. But he looked at me . . . the most gentle, innocent expression. It completely disarmed me. I realized that I was as much to blame as he was. Or maybe there was no blame to lay: we'd simply gone another way, and were taking a rest-break. It wasn't over yet, and it could turn out to have been quite an enchanting little stroll through nature's house. That's what his eyes told me, what the lush moss told me, what the air breathed and the shaggy trees whispered.

But my little mind cried out: You've gotta get us back home! Back up the trail! Forget this lunchbucket you had the bad sense to hook up with. . . .

"I've got an idea," he said then with a calm, even voice. "We're both tired. The best thing would be to conserve our energy, not wander all over the place until we're both too exhausted to walk back, once we find the trail. Now, I know I can use more of a rest. If you're eager to get going, go ahead and see if you can get us pointed in the right direction. You can keep your backpack and the little girl here with me until you find a good trail; then come back for us, marking your way as you go."

My poor mind whirled. Did his plan make any sense? It had some merits, and some drawbacks--like leaving Chrissie behind. What if I went and got myself lost, separated from them? But he was right about all three of us wandering around aimlessly through the bush.

I looked to Chrissie for help. Kids know. They have a feeling for things. If she was the least bit uncomfortable with the idea of staying with this character, there was no way I'd go for it. But she sat there peacefully pulling at the moss, and sweetly said to me, "It's be okay, Daddy. Big Chrissie wait here."

I still wasn't sure. But they looked so calm and peaceful there together (and my pack so heavy) that I took off on an impulse up the hill, confident I'd find the trail quickly and be back for them.

iii

So I'm sittin' in the Savoy one day tellin' this tale to a mr. nice guy and his wife-- she's got this really beautiful way of resting her chin on her hands while she's listening, y'know, blow yer socks off--I figure I've got a good thing going but talkin' so long gives me a powerful thirst, know what I mean?

Anyway he's the one buyin'.

I sit there and lick the last drops out of my glass and then rub the old tongue around in the mouth, catching my breath, y'know . . .

And "Yeah?" he says with his big deer's-eyes. "So what happens next?"

I tell him, all cool, like--"Ah, you want to hear more, how about another drink?"

"Go to hell," sezee. Just like that.

"Okay fine," I say, and I'm walking.

JUST COYOTES

Beside me Harah grabbed covers, threw them off, thrashing with her fever. My reading light burned down on her open face banked by strands of damp hair. Finally she sat up, slowly, and reached away from me for her dog-eared paperback, short stories of Poe called Master of Terror. She wore an old white turtleneck riding over her bare bum. I was wrapped up in Naoya's The Paper Door, a book of Japanese short stories which featured characters (usually the narrators) facing painful choices: like the husband caught in a crisis in his marriage caused by an affair with another woman. How to choose the proper course of action--to be true to himself when fate has presented him with another path?

Harah coughed wetly. I put a hand on her thigh, and kept reading. Not much longer to the end of the story. After that, maybe one more. The weekend had been a busy one for both of us. She'd dug new beds in an old section of garden, before succumbing to the chicken pox our daughter had brought home from school the previous week. I'd dug blackberries, greased the truck, stayed up late playing music with friends. I'd fished without luck by a cold, windblown river. Now my torpid limbs soaked up heat from Harah's fever under the winter covers.

"I wonder," she said while still looking at the page she was reading, "what I did during that week as a child." She was an only child, raised by a brutal father in a harbor town, after the unsolved murder of her mother.

"What week?" I knew that to continue reading now was fruitless. I looked at her blotchy complexion, her puffed temples.

"The week I chose not to get the chicken pox--saving it till now, instead."

"I don't know." I really wanted to finish Naoya's story. The husband, a novelist, had arrived at a critical point of decision. In the meantime, life had to go on: he was reading his son a story about an enchanted lion, while his wife wept in the bath. Wept, I imagined, as Harah did in those black episodes in which she tried to express some deep pain locked inside her, and was never able to. Did she try? Did she really want to? Maybe it was only I who wanted her to. But now was not the time; her tone was too casual, the hour too late.

I fell asleep before finishing the story. That night I suffered vivid dreams of a teenaged girl who had been killing people (her mother and sister) and had buried their parts in the row-house backyard. Someone made her dig up the shallow graves, and she showed me the grisly, half-rotted remains. With horror in my heart, I tried to take a compassionate attitude toward her, as a neighbor, a friend. But what could I do? I woke up in the gloomy dawn haunted by her words: "Then I'll find a way to kill you."

I tasted onions from the previous night's supper, and blamed the nightmare on them. "I should have known better," I said to Harah as I dressed. She lay glassy-eyed, unmoving, her head propped up on the reading pillow, the Poe book closed beside her, the reading light still on. "Are you all right? Did you stay up all night reading?"

"I'm fine," she said with a slack mouth. "I couldn't stop. I think my fever's better."

"I'll make some breakfast for you. What do you feel like eating?"

"Hmm. Nothing I can think of. I'm not really hungry. You go ahead."

It was not yet light out. Our nine-year-old daughter, Niki, was crying from her room down the hall, a tiny, distant wailing. When I got up and went to her to see what was the matter, she said she'd had a bad dream.

"Coyotes were coming after me. I tried to chase them away by throwing my chicken pox scabs at them, but it didn't work."

"So did they eat you, then?"

"Stop teasing." She didn't smile. It was hard to tell her freckles from the scars of the chicken pox.

Toast and jam, apple juice, mint tea. Harah had no appetite; Niki licked the last of the jam from his plate and said, "I'm still hungry."

"I almost made eggs," I pleaded.

"That's all right," they both said at once.

Niki told Harah of her dream.

Outside, the wind blew high and gusty. I retreated to my study, and from time to time glimpsed tantalizing patches of blue sky which never quite broadened through the gray March cloud cover. The writing went slowly. By the end of the afternoon I was ready for exercise . . . but hesitated before trading the cozy house for the damp, cold outside air.

Harah appeared in the study door, holding foamy glass mugs of homemade milkshake, and smiling.

I pushed my work away and leaned back in my chair. "You look like you're doing better."

"I think I may have turned the corner." Her black eyes had a new sparkle.

"Did you manage to take a nap?"

"No, but I think I'll have a hot bath now, then maybe try. Want to join me?"

"I was thinking of maybe taking a walk. I'm stuck on these revisions. I can't decide which way the story wants to go. But the weather doesn't look that inviting."

We sipped the milkshakes: Harah still in the door, me in my chair.

I felt vaguely disappointed, as if I wanted Harah to tell me which way to go, what to do. Or, was I just picking up on something she wanted from me, but wouldn't say?

"Where's Niki?"

"In her room coloring. I suggested she make a picture about that dream she had. Now she's totally absorbed in it."

"Good idea. Get the demons out."

"Yeah, like that Poe guy. Maybe it's better for some people to keep them in!"

"I don't know. He might have been like his characters, then, instead of just writing about them."

She drained her mug and looked at me strangely.

"What, are you afraid I've got some demons in me? We all do, I guess." I finished my milkshake in a gulp and stood up. "Well, I guess that puts me over the hump. Might as well go out while there's still daylight."

I kissed her in the doorway on the way out. After days and nights of fever, her lips and cheeks now seemed cold. When I remarked on this, her black eyes sparkled and she replied, "Probably just the milkshake."

I started with a leisurely climb along the deer-trail slanting up the wooded hillside to the east of the house. Where the ridge flattened out I eased into a loping run, enjoying the clean, cool air, and the ground underfoot with its carpet of brown leaves. The birches stood bleakly awaiting the new year's growth. I ran on through them to the cedar grove, where I stopped as I always do to stare up at the trees and sky, and into the calm, all-forgiving forest.

A notion occurred to me, as I started running again: Why take the same old path to the right, which loops around to the road and back down the driveway home; why not go left this time instead, and see how that choice develops?

It could turn out like one of Naoya's slighter stories, I thought, in which a trivial incident on the subway or in the countryside is described, and left by its author to stand by the wayside, a little Shinto shrine to everyday experience.

But I knew the left-hand trail, after all. I'd been that way a couple of times before. Nothing unusual or interesting was going to happen. It would make a story more like the contemporary American kind in which the point is to say that nothing interesting happens.

I decided to take the left fork; but right away hesitated again because the trail was not clear. It was less traveled by deer; it was crooked and somewhat obscured by brush and the undulations of a seasonal creekbed. I looked more closely at the ground. A ragged, foot-deep trench, roughly six feet long and a foot wide, gaped up at me, giving the impression that someone had dug here: a forestry agent, sampling?

Or had some tiny, localized earthquake pulled the ground apart in this one spot? Ridiculous, I know. But this is the effect it had on me. Some cause was to be found somewhere: some blame assigned.

I bent through some overhanging branches and followed a more or less clear passage along the slope to the west. The forest cover thinned, opening ahead to a white,

close-hanging sky that was condensing into a sparsely blowing snow. It was here that my opinion of the uneventfulness of my choice came to be qualified by a sense of the ominous, of the possibility of something beyond my ken looming ahead, ready to precipitate out of the heavy, roiling air.

Around the hump of the hillside the terrain flattened again and I came to a place where a few birch trees had been cut to enlarge a natural clearing. Bits of black plastic poked out from under the sticks and leaves, and I inspected the ground more closely. Little mounds of dug earth appeared around a formation of crude terraced beds. Again I found myself looking into trenches: these deeper and wider than the stream cut, and four or five feet long. A few were covered with a casual lattice of sticks, as if to obscure sight of them from above.

Was this place the source of that sense of foreboding? I knew this to be an old pot plantation--not a graveyard. I could recall that Harah and I had chanced upon it some years previously. And then, for some inexplicable reason, I began to wonder if Harah had ever contemplated suicide. Suddenly I wanted to return home quickly. I was comforted to know that Niki was there, coloring coyotes.

Heading back down the gentle southward slope, I figured I was pointing homeward. I expected to come first to a rocky ridge face and adjoining ravine--the place where thirteen years before, I'd brought my unmanageable dog, Miso, at the end of a chain. My options for dealing with him had come to a dead end. Then for once in his life

he'd sat obediently, while I put a rifle to his head. I buried him there and covered the shallow grave with a large heap of leftover cedar shakes. The following autumn I noticed a hole in the side of the mound of wood, making it look like a hut. The grave had been robbed: probably by coyotes.

Making hasty choices on the braided animal trails, I stayed too high and bypassed the homestead. Instead I stayed on the flat ridge, past the now-tranquil scene of another murder: a fresh deer kill, only partially covered in leaves by a cougar. This discovery had come more recently, in the winter of the previous year. I'd found the carcass still pliable, half-eaten--on a trek that began as a morning stroll down the driveway and detoured through the woods, on a whim. Now, of course, there was nothing, the bones far-scattered. But my heart beat unsteadily as I came out of the woods on the dirt road by the house of my nearest neighbor. To complete the figure eight of crossing loops I walked home on the roadway, welcoming the cheery column of smoke I saw rising from the house at its end. I left my psychic agitation behind in the dark woods, drinking in the fresh air and enjoying the live feeling in my limbs.

Supper was ready: corn macaroni, kidney beans, tiny spinach thinnings; Parmesan cheese for sprinkling on top. The three of us held hands until Niki said, "Silence is spooky," and we broke to eat. Harah served herself small portions but I was glad to see her with some appetite again. I told her about my outing, having seen a number of "empty

graves." She scraped her fork slowly on her plate as she listened, her cheeks rosy from the bath and yet still gaunt from the sleepless night in Poe's crypts.

When I mentioned the plantation site, her sunken eyes widened. "Oh--I was just thinking about that place earlier today! It's the first time I've thought of it since we were there."

I felt a sudden chill, myself, and tried not to think of my own premonition there. "That's pretty eerie. Why were you thinking of it today?"

"After reading all those Poe stories, I was wondering--as I was lying in my bath: If I murdered someone, what would I do with the body? I could take it up in the woods somewhere and bury it; but then, would someone notice the turned-over dirt?"

Niki stopped chewing and put down her fork; she seemed a little shocked at what her mother had said.

I too was taken aback and said to Harah, "What a morbid imagination you have."

My wife of ten years looked hurt, and lowered her eyes in the manner (I imagined) of a Japanese farm wife; then, unable to eat, she turned her head and looked out the window into the gloomy twilight.

I didn't know how seriously to take this fantasy of hers. It was totally unlike her, or what I knew of her, to have such thoughts of violence. Maybe it was just the fever, or, as she said, the Poe stories.

"Wanna see the picture I drew today?" Niki broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Sure," I said, getting up from the table. Let's go have a look. You can tell me all about it."

I didn't like going down the dark hallway that evening, but it seemed no worse than that brightly-lit kitchen with its idle cutlery and brooding, unknown desires.

As I read to Niki I thought of Naoya's story, the one with the unfaithful husband reading to his son. Niki's freckled face looked genderless: as it was before the chromosomal die was cast. All a matter of X's and Y's: crossroads and forks . . .

In such a manner did my divided attention wander. Then when we came near the end of our chapter from The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, I heard a faint yelp, a distant, high-pitched keening. "What's that?" I said, listening.

My daughter's eyes shone bright and black as her mother's.

"Just coyotes," she said.

THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

i

Snow fell softly through the trees...so softly that nothing else could be heard. Rowena's breath hung in the air as she paused, head slightly cocked, listening. Snowflakes settled on top of the goat-girl's bare head, where her fine, long, honey-brown hair was not quite so neatly parted as usual. She heard no footsteps, hoofbeats, cartwheels; nothing. She continued down the trail, smoothly as a deer. Where the game trail came out onto the cart-track, she paused again and looked both ways. Not that she had anything to hide, this day; just that one always had to be watchful. Then she headed down the track to that shadowy beast of a fortress, looming out of dawn's half-light.

Duke Cranbrook's body swelled past the sides of the high-backed, magisterial chair. He sat hunched over his "desk"--actually a plain, if massive, wooden table. The table rang with a steady clink--chink--c-link as he counted the coin of the realm into neat, tall stacks. Each stack he tabulated in his ledger with the spidery scritch, scratch of a fountain pen.

The Duke looked at his watch: it would soon be mid-morning. His blood was beginning to rise. Yes, certainly this morning the page should be sent on his little errand.

Mira (that is, Elmira, Cranbrook's Duchess) sat on a stool before her vanity, piling hair upon hair, twisting her powdered neck by degrees back and forth for the suitable adjustments, lightly licking her painted lips. She was twice the goat-girl's age. But with a little effort, she could still manage to make herself up to be almost...almost beautiful.

Dick, the tinker, tossed a wedge of hair away from his eyes with a quick twist of his head and held his breath. One more connection and the bomb would be all set to package up. He could already envision the headline resulting from his handiwork: "DUKE BLOWN TO BITS"--no, that was too graphic. "CRANBROOK MURDERED--TERRORISTS BLAMED" was more likely. Either way--who cared about the words? It was a matter of fact. Dick cracked his thin lips into a half-smile, tossed the persistent wedge of hair out of his face again and bent to his work.

Where the cart-track ended at the wall of the fortress, a guardhouse stood, controlling access through the gate. The gate was made of stout wood reinforced with iron bands, and was large enough to admit fully-loaded carts of supplies from the village-

-or to discharge a full troop of cavalry riding four abreast. A smaller door set in the gate could swing open to allow passage of foot-traffic. All entrants were subject to scrutiny by guards stationed day and night. Rowena, however, received special consideration, as the mistress of the Duke.

“Morning, Bayard:" she gave her customary greeting to the chief of the morning guard.

The grizzled, gap-toothed former peasant, who'd given up a poor barley-field for this well-paid job in the employ of the Duke, bellowed out in his gruff voice, “Ah, yes, and it's a good morning to you, too, Missy”--and he returned her cordial smile.

Corporals Harding and Woods rocked back in their chairs inside the little cubicle, rolling their eyes and pursing their lips. Bayard had frisked the goat-girl well enough on her first visits to the private stable of the Duke; now stern orders prescribed hands off. Rowena was thus permitted the luxury of unmolested entry to the fortress--even with provisions, she discovered after several trials with baskets and bundles of prepared foodstuffs and items of well-crafted, homespun fabric.

Inside the walls of the fortress was a sort of town, which was actually much smaller than the village that lay seven kilometers away down the cart-track. It was populated solely by the Duke's officials and higher-ranking henchmen--along with their families, such as they were: a few arrogant wives, fewer children. All servants, all supplies came from the village over the cart-track; all, that is, save milk from

Cranbrook's half-dozen goats. Rowena hurried up the path past the Duke's mansion to the stable beyond, where her nannies were bleating for her.

The page dispatched, the ledger filled with fresh figures, the stacks of coin re-bagged and sent away, Cranbrook sat with hands folded, leaning back in his chair, a smile of satisfaction forming on his face--whether from the duty just done or the pleasure now anticipated, it would be fruitless to discriminate. Cranbrook prided himself on his self-reliance, and he had the matters of state, as well as of his own human desires, well in hand.

The new tax had certainly been a boon. What better way to drain the funds the rebels were counting on in their subversive campaign? It would become increasingly impossible for them to recruit fighters or to buy weapons, equipment, and food.

The tax, of course, was the Duke's own brainchild, as were all his ingenious stratagems. Certainly no one else could be credited with ridding the realm of that insipid slob Enright. No one else had shown the courage required to put an end to that so-called Duke's nincompoop democracy, with one sure shot to the back of the head. A return to law and authority: that's what the people had needed, never mind the rabble-rousers who had coerced the jellyfish Enright into parliamentary representation with their empty threats of civil unrest. Hell, even Mira had come on board, after her initial whining over the death of her poor, high-bread cousin. Naturally: she had thus moved with her chosen

life-mate into the higher echelons of the realm herself, and had no further rights to complain.

Cranbrook was a man of principle, and the principle that had got him where he was, he carried into every task demanded of his office. Why waste funds on an accountant when he could count as well himself, and know for certain the income figures were right? Why entrust his personal security to a dim-witted (and lecherous) peasant such as Bayard when Cranbrook himself could inspect every inch of his lithe, gentle, daily visitor? And why rely on the information of duplicitous spies or desperate victims of the torture chambers, when he had an inside track to village gossip, via that selfsame visitor?

Let the seditious perverts rail all they liked: Duke Cranbrook was on the ball, not simply a "ruthless thug." Let the heartless advisors quiver all they would with fear and resentful lust: Duke Cranbrook would not send this tender morsel, Rowena, to the rack. Why torture her when he could eat his cake too?

iii

Rowena still used the rear entrance to the Duke's mansion, even though she was known as the Duke's consort. It was a matter of form. She set down the brimming milk pails, then knocked twice, waited, took a deep breath--and caught once more the edge-

scent of charred stubble from the burned fields, in the otherwise fresh snow-smell of the morning air. She closed her eyes, as if in prayer, then opened them quickly again as the latch clicked and the door swung open.

“Morning, miss,” said the broad-faced serving woman who let her in.

“Hello, Anna,” Rowena spoke in a subdued voice. She dropped her eyes and hurried past, hoping her minor lateness this morning--that extra ten minutes in Dick’s bed-- wouldn’t provoke Cranbrook’s suspicion, or his bullish ire. She didn’t stop to think which would be worse.

The night-shift officer stood solemnly before Cranbrook, his Duke, relating the latest information divulged through the unfriendly persuasion of the torturers. The informant had, unfortunately, expired before he could tell all. But then, there seemed to be no master plan for rebellion anyway. It was always hit-and-run, a sabotage here, an assassination there, nothing for weeks, then a riot...

Cranbrook had been growing more and more impatient as the winter wore on. His impatience had obviously been grasped by the torturers. This new information was nothing new. Plans were being made against the Duke’s life. An attempt could be expected any day. He’d heard it before, but each time, the news brought sweat to his balding head.

Mira stood at the door of the great room, listening. The high ceiling, painted with angels and trumpets in an earlier age, amplified the sound of the officer's report into hollow echoes--she too had heard it all before. She thought, why didn't they just get it over with? With the Duke gone, she would rule at last. As for her bed, it would be none the worse--in fact she'd be free to fill it as she pleased--in the manner of the current ruler.

The Duke looked at his watch and quickly dismissed the officer. Rowena would be arriving soon; he resolved this time to get something definite out of her. His rationale had, for some three months, been the same: by judicious use of his "tools of office"--chiefly, his "woman-prod"--the goat-girl would freely open up and spill out the secret affairs of the populace.

Only it hadn't yet worked out. Cranbrook had made a number of attempts at casual, intimate conversation: "So what's happening in the village these days; anything exciting?" or, "What's your family think of your new job? Do they approve?" even, "When do I get to meet them? Not in my dungeon, I hope! A-ha, ha, ha, ha!--You're not laughing...."

Rowena never laughed with the Duke. She behaved shyly, courteously, obediently. She answered his indirect questions truthfully, his direct ones curtly, enigmatically. She had gone so far as to admit overhearing, in some faceless conversation, that odious epithet, "ruthless thug." Of course this had not been offered by

the girl as a personal opinion but merely as a relating of a common (or perhaps, she hedged, a random and unrepresentative) perception--and the Duke had coarsely laughed. Then he had rewarded her frankness with a particularly forceful entry from behind.

Dick handed the parcel over to the courier: none other than Teddy, Rowena's ten-year-old brother. The red-haired freckled boy wore such a solemn expression, Dick felt an uneasy sense of pride cut with sadness--or fear. But he managed to give the new recruit an encouraging smile, clapped him on the shoulders and sent him on his way through the workroom door--a blanket of homespun wool in a bold red and black design, a gift from Rowena's mother. Then Dick sat back down at the table strewn with tools and bits of electronic leftovers, and peered at the order list. Next, a fragment-bomb, needed in three weeks--in case the Duke's men somehow held onto power without him. No problem. As long as he could keep collecting a little stipend to keep the taxman on the other side of that blanket, Dick was content to keep tinkering. Until, that is, the taxman started to wonder where his tax money was coming from.

Rowena was announced by Lanny, the Duke's page, outside Cranbrook's high-ceilinged office. The Duke's low reply echoed within, as if amplified with the reverberating power of the head of state.

She entered. He rose to meet her, stiffly walked to her and was about to embrace her, with the habitual hot and toothy kiss on the neck.

Rowena glanced back at the high oak door she'd come in. It had remained open a crack, but now clicked shut. The Duke laughed, breaking the tension of his own mounting heat. Then he abruptly turned serious. He gripped Rowena by the shoulders, one in each huge, hairy hand. He glowered at her with burning eyes.

"You might be interested to know--my dear--that I've been informed, again, of an attempt being plotted against my life." He waited for a reaction.

Rowena couldn't hold that relentless gaze, and she dropped her eyes to the floor. Cranbrook grabbed her chin and glared at her, his face right up against hers. She nearly gagged from his fetid breath.

"Listen to me," Cranbrook hissed. "What do you think about this? Is it rumor, or fact?"

Rowena quickly sought some breathing space in the semantic loophole he'd left her. A plot (the plot) lay somewhere between rumor and fact: more than the one, less than the other. She met Cranbrook's eyes with her own doelike countenance. "I don't know. I don't really spend much time in the village these days, as you are aware."

A swift backhand stopped the goat-girl's impertinent mouth. "Take your clothes off," the Duke commanded.

Rowena's cheek stung; she swayed before her tormenter, still stunned by the force of his blow. The Duke took her hesitation as a further affront. He placed a rough hand at the neck of her peasant's blouse, ready to rip it from her body at one swift stroke.

Rowena dared now to look Cranbrook in the eye with a certain private fire, a fierce light that at once challenged his presumption and disarmed his intention. At the same time she began slowly unbuttoning her blouse from the bottom. Flustered, Cranbrook backed off, a slight quiver in his hand. The goat-girl exposed her shallow, taut breasts and once more lowered her eyes.

"All right," said the Duke in a low, roughly even voice. "Now the skirt."

She stepped out of it quickly and stood in her underpants. He glared at her. She stepped out of them and dropped them in a pile with the rest of her clothes.

"Now lie down on your back," Cranbrook said, and he believed that Rowena enjoyed all this, because she smiled at him as she lay down and spread her long, slim legs. The Duke unbuckled his belt.

Mira had returned to her mirror. There she sat gazing past her own visage--the broad, thick, slightly parted lips--beyond the glass and into darkness. Her whole body, so

still in the mirror, was trembling inside, invisibly, tenderly. She couldn't get the goat-girl out of her mind--not that she was trying to.

"Mira," she whispered to herself, "you're beautiful." The voice came from the imagined lips of the goat-girl.

In the mirror, her own prominent, high-boned cheeks became the goat-girl's knees spreading wider, wider, yawning to reveal what Mira, spellbound, perceived as the center of the world. She gasped lightly, shuddered visibly, then let out a long, low involuntary moan. Then another, louder; the Duke would be occupied in his office and wouldn't hear.

Dick sat at his work table, holding his head in his hands. Once again, Rowena hadn't returned to the village after her morning "chores". Instead of dropping by for a visit on her way home to help work the loom in her mother's house, she'd be crying in the Duke's stinking stable, then lunching with the kitchen help, and wandering the barren fields outside the fortress, awaiting an afternoon rendezvous. Dick gritted his teeth with smoldering rage at the dog who had all license with his beloved, and he reaffirmed his daily dedication to the assassination. Whether tomorrow, or the next time...

A hundred days of such agony, a hundred days too many. And yet, it was all for the good fight, the best chance the village had against losing odds.

Still, the cause of freedom couldn't really assuage the inner gnawing Dick felt, as palpable as if a rat were trapped in his gut. His only consolation was that the bondage was temporary, and that in time, loving grace would salve the stinging pangs of the present ordeal.

With a snort of pent-up frustration, Dick resigned himself to further patience and looked to his plans for the next device. Tomorrow, he thought, if all goes well, yes even tomorrow, it's possible to be free.

v

It was dark when Rowena walked out the back door of the royal mansion, her daily service done. She staggered down the stone steps, nearly losing her footing on the slippery snow. Her legs and buttocks and private parts ached. She'd felt it all before, and as before, wondered if it was worth it. She bent her head to the stable path and dumped the milk buckets there with a clatter. The next morning would arrive all too soon: she nearly broke down, standing there over the buckets. But she straightened herself up with face tilted skyward and a silent prayer.

Finally she was able to approach the main gate. Voices could be heard from within the lighted guardhouse, and two night guards stood outside, one on either side of the gate. Rowena avoided looking at them directly and strode between them, opening the

smaller gate herself and passing through. She didn't bother closing it, either, but hurried instead on her way, still conscious of her pain. She heard one of the guards curse as he left his post to close the gate, whereupon a chorus of rude shouts and laughter chased her into the night.

Rowena managed to leave her shame behind as she found the start of the trail beside the cart-track. The parcel, that Teddy was to bring home for her for tomorrow's mission, would have to wait another day, she reflected, because Cranbrook was going hunting tomorrow. He hadn't said what the game would be.

Rowena turned her thoughts to Dick, her Dick that she so truly loved, who had put up with so much so that they could win out in the end. They had worried, in the beginning, about how Rowena's parents, Josef and Carlotta, would react to their late nights together. They had thought it unjust that Rowena was allowed only alternate nights with her lover--Josef's way of insuring that she would "keep some perspective" until they were married. Now Rowena could appreciate the relative insignificance of that restriction. Would she turn back the clock, never venturing as she had, with her village eggs, into the Duke's orbit? No; to enjoy simply uniting with Dick as a romantic couple in the village was, they both knew, a naive dream in the face of the overriding reality of the time.

Carter, their best friend, had only last week been found beheaded outside his bicycle shop. He'd been "supplying the rebels with transport," The Royal News proclaimed.

med. Jena, the baker's wife, was abducted and gang-raped into permanent shock. Her crime? "Abetting the provision of enemy troops." Translation: being married to the village baker. These cases were representative of a steady, sinister trail of terror that scarred the village and underscored the more general oppression at hand: ever-increasing taxes, tighter curfews, searches and seizures of any person or property, destruction of crops...

The burning of the crops was a particularly heinous crime. By this action Cranbrook sought (and found) a way to sap the ability, if not the will, of the villagers to sustain their resistance through the winter. His chief advisors had taken care to warn Cranbrook not to burn all the crops: for the fortress depended on the produce from these same fields, these same peasant hands, for its own winter provisions. And surely, some felt, if faced with the prospect of certain starvation, the people would have nothing to lose in storming the fortress or devising some other precipitous acts of mass rebellion. So the Duke contrived an excuse, and a margin of safety: having collected the customary first half of the harvest for the fortress's exclusive use (though its inhabitants numbered no more than a tenth of the villagers) Cranbrook arranged an apparent "ambush" of a small company of his own soldiers. In "retaliation", after the villagers had brought in what the former royal accountant had suggested was barely enough harvest of their own to sustain an acceptable proportion of their number over the long winter, the Duke had had the remaining crops set afire in the fields.

Now the fields, which Rowena skirted as she followed the trail by night-sense, lay wasted under their thin blanket of snow. There had been only random instances of retaliation by village rebels as yet. The winter was turning out to be a mild one, to the great good fortune of the villagers. For their food supplies were running desperately low, and their emaciated bodies were hard put to generate any heat. Rowena's aging parents, Josef and Carlotta, were starting to look like scarecrows. Thinking of them nearly brought tears to her eyes. And they, like so many of the villagers, were now beginning to wonder if they should even bother to plant again in the spring. But of course they had to hope. And the fortress had to be supplied in the coming year, so surely the harvest would be allowed, once again, to the point of filling those needs; and then...

Yes, it was murmured in the shadows and hungry corners, it was more and more evident that before the coming summer was gone, the Duke would have to be gotten rid of. The sooner, in fact, the better.

Rowena panted as she hurried along the lonely forest trail. A half-moon rose to light up the snow to guide her way. She would be too worn out to love poor Dick tonight, but she would go to him for mutual comfort just the same. Forget the parental routine: she was adult enough, after all she'd undergone, to make her own decision about where she slept. Tomorrow, she'd go to work empty-handed.

The next day came and went: The Duke had no luck hunting, had missed a buck twice and then given the last shot to his officer, Thrums. It was a doe that had appeared at the edge of the forest at twilight, when they'd given up for the day. Her graceful leap for cover was broken in mid-bound, a bullet through the neck. Inside the doe was a tiny fetus. The Duke ordered that specially cooked up for his supper. The doe was brought home for the dogs.

Elmira ate her own guinea fowl that evening with obvious disgust at the Duke, though she said nothing of it directly...until the meal was done, and she snorted, "Pig," and rose from the table patting her mouth with her linen napkin.

Cranbrook started to rise to take action against her, thought better of it and sat back down. He chose instead to laugh at her, saying, "And you, bitch, do you wish that was your fetus I ate?"

The retort stung, because in fact Elmira had been unsuccessful at any attempt to get pregnant--despite the false Duke's plunderings. She answered, "What idiotic meaning is that comment supposed to have, may I ask?"

"Meaning? Come now. You know me. I'm a soldier, not a philosopher."

"Well, then. Tell me this, your heroic highness. Whose fault is it that you spill all your oh-so-potent seed on the thighs of that trash you see twice daily--"

“Now, now, Elmira,” the Duke whined in a sing-song voice. “Not every day...not twice every day. Look, I went hunting today, didn’t I?”

“So this, then, is your way of seducing me, while you’re fresh?” Mira splayed her fingers out at the mess of bones on the Duke’s grease-smeared plate.

“It does rather rejuvenate one, one might say.”

Mira turned in disgust to leave.

“Wait, dear. Do you have no appetite for dessert?”

Mira stormed around to face him again. “That’s right, while the villagers starve. That’s the way you like it, isn’t it?”

Cranbrook turned florid and rose halfway from his chair. He lowered his Voice: “Ah, the glorious, generous Enright spirit lives! How easy it is to live in the lap of luxury, to share the spoils of power, and pontificate as you do. Mira, you’re a fucking hypocrite.”

“And you, noble sir, are nothing more than a two-bit tyrant. And a stupid one, to boot. Think about it, if you are able: it’s not enough to murder--”

“Oh, the devil--again?”

--to murder the man who brings democracy to this wretched land--”

“Oh, come on--that smiling toad? You really think he’s missed?”

“Let me finish. --to our small nation, for the first time. Then to bar the gates of the popular assembly--”

“Popular, yeah, yeah. Do I have to listen to this shit?”

“But then, in your wisdom, you have to go and burn the crops--”

“Elmira, we’ve been through this how many times? It’s fear, I tell you. It’s no big secret. A people afraid is a people powerless.” The Duke smiled inwardly at his own turn of phrase.

“But you wonder why they’re trying to kill you? You’d watch yourself, and what you said around that leggy slut of yours if you had any sense.”

“That’s enough!” shouted Cranbrook as he lunged across the table, grabbing for the Duchess’s fleshy arm. She snatched it away with a mocking giggle.

“Mark my words,” she concluded.

“Jealous old sow,” he snarled.

“No,” she sang on her way to the dining room doorway, “I’m not concerned in the least about the hidden intrigues of your sordid ‘romance.’ Just keep it up, dearest, and see what happens. I can’t wait.” With that the Duchess whirled and stalked away.

“You Enrights are all alike,” the Duke shouted after her. “You rise like cream to the top--and then you go sour.” The Duke enjoyed this final jest, and his hollow laughter followed the Duchess all the way down the long marble hall. She tried to insulate herself from her husband’s noise by following her own train of thought:

If those two did manage to destroy each other, she would simply pick up the pieces and carry on with the rights of power invested in her blood. Mira opened the door

of her own boudoir, stood vacantly for a moment in the center of the room, and then collapsed on her bed in a heap of tears.

vii

Rowena trod lightly past Bayard's gate the following early morning. He merely nodded, too sleepy this morning for his usual, open smile. The dogs had kept him awake in his bed half the night with their vicious debates over the remains of the slaughtered doe.

Rowena trembled slightly with the gift she carried from home in a basket slung from her arm. The parcel was to be called a box of jellied fruits, the best of the village kitchens, and sure to please the Duke's palate. Carlotta had blessed her daughter with good luck wishes and a flood of tears as Rowena left that morning. Josef's embrace was more grudging, following the row they'd had the night before over her previous night's outing at Dick's. But today they both stood behind her, hoping their troubles might soon, even by this evening, be ended.

All the way to the fortress, Rowena had rehearsed the simple plan over and over in her mind: she would mention the gift to Cranbrook as she departed from their afternoon tryst. Cranbrook would grunt his approval as he remained sprawled on his office floor in his usual post-coital stupor. Rowena would say that she'd left the parcel in

the care of the cooks in the kitchen so that the treats could be served properly with the next morning's meal. The cooks, also of the village, were privy to the plan. They would know that the Duke, as was his habit, would venture into the kitchen on his own, some time in the evening after supper; he would indulge his appetite with whatever goodies they'd taken care to put aside for him and he would (they snickered, remembering his handling of their bodies on more than one occasion) at last find his "just desserts."

The Duke dispatched his field officer with the day's orders for a house-by-house search of the village: the evidence for his planned assassination would be found, and all those suspected would be brought in for questioning.

Cranbrook inexplicably thought of the goat-girl. Then he felt a stirring in his crotch which quickly erased the shadow that had begun to pass through his mind. Well, the morning's work is quickly done, he thought; why not send for her now? He rang for the page.

Rowena's milking was done, and she sat peacefully on clean straw in a corner of the stable, eating her breakfast of barley bread. Lanny appeared at the door, the clear-eyed youth of sixteen with impeccably combed hair. He was unusually early this morning. Rowena glanced at her basket, with its white-wrapped cargo peeking through the cloth, and wished she'd taken care to hide it in the straw before the page arrived. To

risk the Duke's getting wind of it so soon would invite certain disaster: he'd insist on having the jams for a morning tea with his mistress. Rowena searched Lanny's face for a sign of awareness. He seemed not to have noticed anything.

"If you please, Miss," said Lanny in his customary thin voice, "the Duke will see you now."

"All right, Lanny. Thank you. I'll just have a last bite and get my things together. And--Lanny, would you mind while I relieve myself?"

Lanny reddened and stepped away with shuffling feet. "Certainly, Miss. I'll uh, I'll wait for you down the lane."

Mira had avoided breakfast with the Duke that morning. Her mouth tasted venom for his barbarous insults the previous evening, and she was not ready yet to sit down in the same room with him. What price power? she wondered, and as she stared at her loveless face in the mirror she began to cry.

Dick fixed the powder charge to the main leads. The body of the fragment bomb was yet to come; he hadn't yet received the special assortment of scrap he'd ordered from the machinist's. The casing was the final job; he'd do it in light plastic, that material being the most permeable at the moment of ignition. For now, it was satisfying to have

completed the heart of the little beast, that would pump its death-blood into the Duke's crowd so that their own black blood would flow back into the earth, back into life.

There was a knock at the door in the front of the house. Dick decided to ignore it. He sat perfectly still. He began to sweat as the knocking continued. A voice shouted for him to open up. Then the locked door banged open as the soldiers battered it in. Dick jerked in his chair toward the blanket. As he did so, his hand on the table brushed the power leads together. There was a quick spark, then a flashing explosion as the charge blew up in his face.

viii

Rowena pushed the last of her soup away and put her elbows on the table in front of her, and held her face in her hands. The morning's ordeal rose in a dark vision again and she tried to choke it back. She picked at the fragments of straw that had mingled in her hair during her cry in the barn. The head cook, Matilda, put a comforting hand on the goat-girl's shoulder.

"There, come now, dear, it'll all be over soon, now, won't it."

Rowena looked at her with red and bleary eyes. "Will it? Will it all work out all right, do you think?"

"Lord, I hope so. It's got to. Just trust in God."

"And your own Dick's craft," chimed in Ruthie, the other cook.

"Yes...Dick...oh if I could go to him now," Rowena whispered.

"Yes, dear," Matilda said, and then with eyes to the corner where Rowena's basket lay in wait, "after your next appointment." She put her arm around Rowena's shoulders.

"You know, for a girl of twenty you're a brave one, you are; for any one, I should say, no matter the age."

Ruthie, a plump lass of twenty-two, dropped her eyes.

Brave, Rowena wondered, or stupid?

After lunchtime in the kitchen came the blessed interlude that carried Rowena to her second session with the Duke, and that today was more precious to her than ever. She walked with a slow, steady gait through the field beyond the fortress, halfway to the wood. Windswept gray clouds sailed overhead; dry wisps of grass waved at her feet. She was utterly alone now, with her mission. She held her hands behind her as she walked. A starling called and darted past her. Suddenly she stopped and saw herself from above, walking like a prisoner to her fate. She closed her eyes to regain her strength of will, but what she saw made her shudder: Cranbrook's leering pig-eyes filled with suspicion as he demanded to know why she'd secreted his gift away in the kitchen instead of presenting it to him directly; and why she'd chosen to tell him about it only on

her way out. Worse yet, he would demand to see it at once--yes, and to have her open it for him....

No, she now saw clearly, this plan that had been hatched in the back rooms of the village, even by her own loved ones (even by herself) to insure her safety, was doomed to failure. It was just too suspicious. If I'm laying my life on the line anyway, Rowena realized with sudden strength and inner light, I'll do it the way he would want it.

She turned swiftly and strode back to the kitchen for the parcel. Ruthie and Matilda would surely put up a fuss; she would convince them quickly--and quietly--to put their trust in her.

ix

The goat-girl stood before the Duke, holding in her hands the parcel neatly wrapped in fine, white paper. Her eyes were large and dark with purposeful apprehension.

"I've brought you a gift," she said, and a little bomb went tick in Cranbrook's brain. "It's a box of jellied fruits, the best of the village kitchens, to serve with your hot biscuits in the morning."

“Well, well, for me? How nice.” Cranbrook took the box out of Rowena’s hands; his face wore a pudgy child’s grin. “Let’s try some right away. I’ll call for some biscuits--there were some fresh this morning.”

Did Rowena sense a glint of suspicion in Cranbrook’s eye, a playful cat’s grin? She couldn’t tell; but she had foreseen this response and was ready with the second, more enticing gift. She pulled her heavy sweater off over her head, tossed it on Cranbrook’s desk and moved closer to him, looking up into his eyes.

He misread those fear-dilated pupils as a look of love.

“John,” the goat-girl coaxed, “I didn’t come here to eat with you. The treats are for you. Save it for your breakfast tomorrow.”

She rarely called him by his first name. He secretly wanted her to--but usually it was “Sir” instead. He held the parcel and looked at her to further divine her intentions. She was wearing her sheerest blouse, one he hadn’t yet seen. It had highlighted her petite breasts in the loveliest way, as she’d stretched her arms up to pull off the sleeves of the sweater.

Cranbrook licked his lips. Well, yes, perhaps the treats could wait. His appetite was building for a choicer feast. He lay the parcel unopened on the office table and fumbled with the buttons on his trousers. When he’d removed his jutting penis he sank to his knees and tunneled his head up under Rowena’s voluminous skirt. Today she wore no underwear. She was his.

It was this day that Elmira took it into her head to change the rules of the game. She'd been prowling the hallways too long, listening lasciviously to the sounds of her husband's misdirected lust. She burst in through the door and stood, even with her forethought, unprepared for the sight she beheld. The Duke was visible from the waist down, as he knelt at Rowena's feet and was covered by her swollen skirt. His organ waved obscenely about as he writhed now to get free of his darkness. Rowena turned her head to the Duchess and simply closed her eyes, looking down in shamed resignation. The Duke scrambled to his feet, his hair a mess, his face beet-red, his nose wet. He pawed at the rogue penis in a vain attempt to stuff it back into its corral.

Elmira worked up enough steam to blurt out, "You--out--now!" as she pointed first to Rowena, then to the door. Rowena stood her ground, hesitating not in consideration of her own fate, but that of the precious parcel.

"You have one hell of a nerve," Cranbrook finally managed to shout. "Just what the goddamn devil do you think you're doing, barging in here like this and acting like you can give orders! I'm in charge here!"

The wilting penis was finally tamed, during this bellowing, and properly tucked away. Elmira wasn't finished. "I've had enough, Mister would-be Duke. You haven't got the balls of a palace monkey."

Rowena suddenly wanted to laugh, to let out all of her hatred and fear and revulsion and scorn and pain--but it was, she instantly knew, too deadly an impulse to

risk. She stifled the urge; then, quickly, she found herself edging closer to the white-wrapped box on the table, wondering if the safest course now would be to snatch it up and get right out. But no, what madness! She couldn't think in such a panic. She closed her eyes and breathed in deep to calm herself. Somehow to return to the original plan. To see that the parcel stayed out of Elmira's hands--

"And I'm not taking it any more," Elmira went on. "I don't want to see that whore in here with you again."

When Rowena flashed an indignant look at Elmira with steady eyes, the Duchess lost control. She lunged at the girl with claws flying, ripping the sheer blouse to tatters and then tearing at the exposed breasts. Cranbrook, horror-stricken, himself abandoned any semblance of composure and cuffed Elmira on the side of the head with a roundhouse swing of his beefy right arm. He caught her with the middle of his forearm and sent her sprawling to the floor. Rowena clutched her arms to her bleeding breasts and would have fled on the instant, but again she remembered the parcel. The hell with it, she decided quickly--she grabbed up her sweater from the floor and ran.

Cranbrook let her go, his attention preoccupied with the whimpering beast at his feet. He poised his foot for a kick in her sloppy face, then reconsidered.

He spat on her instead and walked out.

Rowena sobbed as she ran down the cart-track toward the forest trail. She was still carrying her sweater, as oblivious to the cold as she had been to the gawking guards as she'd run out past the gatehouse. In a few minutes, however, her exhaustion brought her to a stop, and she stood, gasping, face turned up to the leaden sky for breath. She heard the clapping of horses from further down the track, the clatter of a cart. Now she tried to regain some sense of self-possession, finally pulling the sweater over her shivering chest.

She stood aside as the cart passed. In the back was a body, with its head slightly propped up, as if merely unconscious--but more certainly dead. The face was a horrific mask of bloody, blackened flesh, unrecognizable. The shirt that lay shredded over the chest, stained with blood and gunpowder, had once been light gray--and with that sudden, sickening knowledge she shut off her thoughts altogether. Numb with the nightmare glare of the inevitable, she hurried on her way, shivering again, but now as never before in her life.

When she reached the village an hour later, Rowena went straight to Dick's house. Teddy was there. He'd come to make a delivery, but the door was open and Dick wasn't home. Teddy looked in to the workroom, and...

Rowena found her brother sitting dazed and ageless, in a chair in the front room. The door was still open. Sparse flakes of snow flitted in and melted on the floor. Teddy's ashen face at once confirmed what Rowena already knew had happened. But

she made the boy tell her what he had seen. She didn't go in to look for herself. She could only fall to the floor beside him, holding on for dear life as she gave way to an endless wracking of sobs.

The Duchess lay on the floor in a cocoon-like stupor for most of an hour, then slowly came to her senses. The game had changed, all right. It was still too early to predict the winner. But the stakes had definitely gone up. The Duke had the next move, unless Mira was quicker.

She looked at the parcel on the table, and a quizzical look crept over her face. She recalled the scene she'd witnessed upon entering the room, and it suddenly seemed so incongruous. Not that she would presume to know the erotic practices of that particular pair, but the girl's stately poise while being tunneled into, her choice of an especially alluring blouse, the parcel wrapped in a too-elegant, white, fine tissue--and then the idea dawned on her: this was it! The girl was not a mere spy--she was the assassin herself. Mira chuckled aloud with a low, admiring huskiness deep in her throat, close to her heart. Yes, she thought, how nicely done. I'll just get out of here, now, into the safety of my own chambers four thick walls away, and tidy up my hair to meet the press.

The Duke brooded as he paced outside in the snow, in the relative solitude of the sedge behind the mansion, where only bleak wisps of dead grass pointed the way to the wall. He drifted back and forth slowly toward the wall, muttering to himself. Whenever his wandering footsteps took him past the obstruction of the building and into view of the sentries at the gate, the guards were careful to look away.

Cranbrook fumed and cursed under his breath, at a loss for a proper revenge to set things aright, in what was, after all, his own house...his castle. Elmira would pay, all right. Maybe next time he would tie her up and force her to watch; he could certainly come up with some interesting act appropriate for the occasion. He couldn't suppress an audible cackle, then quickly he looked around toward the sentries: their heads were turned his way but were wheeling up to the sky and around again, away, as if following the progress of a distant hawk. Cranbrook reversed direction, his tongue racing over his lips as he expanded on the possibilities of revenge.

His step quickened, lighter now. He nearly broke into a trot, but his heavy legs instead brought him with swift, stalking gait to the wall of the fortress. The Duke mounted one of the defensive positions on the eight-foot wall, a couple of stone steps giving the soldier a protected view through the battlements. Cranbrook stood there leaning and looking out, his chin on his hands, like a boy visiting a castle. The fields and woods beyond, snow-swept and desolate, far from the village, gave the Duke a cold kind of peace, a fresh and sudden sense of freedom from the worries and responsibilities of the

realm, from Elmira's jealous carping, from the chest-tight constriction of his bottled-up soul. This land was beautiful, he realized; and the wonder of it, that he was moved to resolve he should appreciate more, was that it was his.

After a while, the Duke felt the cold and remembered the parcel of jellies. His mind was clear now and he would enjoy a little snack before supper. To celebrate his new plan for teaching Mira a lesson.

He dropped by the kitchen to raid the biscuit tin. The cooks were busy at their pots. Cranbrook grabbed a jelly-spoon and used it to pry the tin open. Then, stowing the spoon in his mouth, the Duke gathered a half-dozen biscuits in one hand; with the other he fetched a quick feel from the cook who happened to linger within easiest reach: Ruthie, in this case. She shrieked and he guffawed, spoon and all, too long and loud; then he exchanged the spoon for his first biscuit, which he plopped into his mouth in one piece so that his parting comments were unintelligible.

Matilda and Ruthie had been anxious about the parcel's absence as their day had drawn to a close. They had simply to trust that things would work out in time--if not today, then on some later occasion. But now they gave each other knowing looks, and after whispering some words of encouragement to the scullery maids who had to remain, scurried for their wraps to leave.

Elmira was just slinking out of the office as Cranbrook turned the corner to the long hall. She hissed at him and walked away, beyond the office door.

"Duchess," the Duke called out. "Have some biscuits with me?" He held out his bulging hand as he paused at the door.

"Suck yourself, you goat." She padded away, more quickly.

Cranbrook wondered how or why she could smile as she did if she was still so bitter. Women, he thought. You just can't figure them.

He entered the half-open office door. The parcel was still on the table. Hard to imagine that nosy bitch in all this time alone hadn't got into it--she'd probably been too busy diddling herself, Cranbrook concluded with a smile. His mouth had begun watering. He opened the tissue carefully, lovingly. He thought of the goat-girl's knees opening, yawning, the chasm between her thighs, the center of the world...

x

Rowena pumped and squeezed, and warm milk squirted into the bucket. The goat's flanks ruffled as it munched on its morning hay. Rowena felt the comfort of her simple duty, of being needed--not, any more, by the Duke--but by the nannies whose teats swelled as if by clockwork. Also by the children, however few and privileged, who would drink the milk. Aristocrats, perhaps. But growing children, just the same.

The village messenger had ridden through the night, banging on doors and shouting: "The Duke is dead! The Duke is dead!" His cries echoed now in Rowena's ears and mingled with the metallic jets of fresh milk. She didn't know quite what to feel inside, yet. It had all happened too fast. Was there some pride in a job well done? If so, she was still too numb to feel it.

What lay ahead for her, then? Would she be able to look beyond this role of goat-girl, to some gratifying position in a new order; or would she blend back into the more humble daily round of village life? She had the feeling that the night just past, which she'd spent at home instead of with poor Dick, might be her last there. Would she go it alone, now, and perhaps remain alone, forever?

Rowena was startled from her reverie when she noticed the royal messenger, not Lanny but the page's father, standing watching her from the doorway of the stable. She knew him as a man of proud bearing and resonant speech. She was thus taken aback to hear him proclaim, with a somewhat halting, and almost secretly mirthful voice, "Girl, the Duchess will see you now."

The goat-girl was seized with a strange panic. Strange, because she knew the Duchess was no real lover of her murdered husband, and so vengeful justice would not be her game, exactly. No, it would be something more sinister, more perversely female, Rowena was afraid. Her nail-raked breasts began to sting.

On the way to the mansion along the cobbled street, Rowena saw in the gutter the morning's Royal News. DUKE ASSASSINATED, it blared: then, in slightly smaller type: Long Live Elmira!

The Duchess sat alone in the high-ceilinged office, reflecting on the shambles about her, that the tardy servants had managed to clean up only in the most superficial manner. Mira felt it fitting to take up the reins of office here just the same. She stroked her breast and smiled as she thought of her plan. Her thighs parted slightly...

There was a knock at the thick oaken door and the goat-girl was announced. "Yes, yes. Send her in," the Duchess panted impatiently.

Rowena entered slowly, sheepishly--then took one look at the Duchess's glazed eyes and moist, quivering mouth and knew she was facing a new round of ordeals. She remembered the Duchess's fury only yesterday and understood now its real source. She also instinctively knew what she must do.

"Ah, Rowena. How nice to see you here, so loyally come back to us today, when the realm might be thought in a state of anarchy. Let me assure you it is not. Have a seat, dear; I don't think there's any blood on that chair." Elmira smiled.

Rowena tucked her long skirt neatly under her legs and sat primly at attention in the rickety chair before Elmira's ragged, spattered, simple throne: the high-backed chair, the massive table.

"I know," the ruler continued, "all about your arrangement with the Duke." She laughed, because what she'd said was so obvious she hadn't needed to say it at all. Except as introduction to the following: "You will realize that just as you have so faithfully seen to your milking duties"--and at this Rowena saw the Duchess absently stroking her own breast--"I will also expect you to continue to fulfill your more...personal obligations to the realm."

Rowena said nothing. Her eyes suddenly felt heavy, and her gaze fell past the Duchess to the wall beyond, emblazoned with the royal coat of arms and beneath that, the ancient, fearful weapons of the realm: two halberds crossed, an impenetrable barrier to mere human flesh.

The Duchess, growing agitated, rose to her feet and leaned forward for emphasis. "Forgive me if my meaning is obscure. You will, I'm saying, be my mistress now."

xi

Spring returned to the land. The insurgency had subsided the rest of the winter into an uneasy peace. The villagers prepared their seed for planting, in the faith that their efforts this year might bear edible fruit. The government continued essentially as before, in its autocratic structure, but with a perceptibly gentler touch. Taxes had twice been reduced, so that they now stood only slightly above pre-insurgency levels. Certain

political prisoners and uncharged detainees were released from the fortress dungeons. There was talk on both sides of the fortress walls about some sort of popular representation again.

In the bedroom of the Duchess, birdsong drifted about with morning sunrays. Elmira stretched a large arm alongside the sleeping body of the goat-girl. Life had been sweet, after all, to this woman so long frustrated and abused. Yes, she might even be convinced to start up the assembly again, so as to have more time for other, more compelling matters.

Rowena turned onto her back as she drowsed. The single sheet mounded slightly over her belly. The Duchess didn't know whether to hope that the child was the Duke's, or that peasant's, Dick's. It was a state of affairs that was almost comical--and one she couldn't do anything about. It wouldn't really be a rebirth of either of those insufficient characters, anyway, but a whole, unique little being rounded in the mold of its mother.

Yes, Mira thought, the price, but also the reward of power is compromise. To be willing, and able to give, because of the bounty received. The people would have their democracy. She, who was otherwise barren, could now enjoy a child she would call her own, and a lover who...perhaps Rowena didn't share the depth of passion, so deep inside; but her willingness was as good. They had, together, Mira felt, come close enough, to the center of the world.

THE COUNTRY PRIEST

When Constantine heard the first girls arrive, he pushed away his flagging work on tomorrow's sermon. The theme was the familiar one of conquering common passion for the sake of devotion to Christly passion. The ring of the double meaning of "passion" was lost in the Inuktitut translation, however, and Constantine had been struggling to find the words to get his meaning across. Now the sound of boots shaking off snow, of coats rustling as they were shed and hung up, was a welcome distraction.

Would Eva be wearing those tight jeans again as she had begun to do, showing off that rounding rump of hers? She was only thirteen, true. But becoming a woman. Had she had proper instruction yet in womanly virtues, in the necessary vigilance against sinful impulses? Undoubtedly not. Constantine would have to see to it. But not yet. He sat still at his study desk, looking at his pale, wrinkled hands.

Every Saturday morning the girls came. Sitting there in his living room ranged around his wife Esmé, they would torture him with their giggling glances, their obvious flirtations veiled from him by the low tones in their own language--veiled but thinly, because Constantine LaForge knew the language well enough, and he could see through their girlish mannerisms to their real intentions.

He would wait for the songs to begin. He looked out at the lightly falling snow, watching a dog across the roadway gnawing something with a vengeance.

They'd be going through their pledge, with their hands over their hearts. Their pudgy white hands, their still-dark little hearts.

Constantine rose slowly, his eyes moving to the closet door and then quickly away again to the window. This was the good season, the time to make spiritual progress. It was the season when the girls wanted to be inside the priest's warm house, instead of out running around in the hills that surrounded Kanik Bay. And they were still too young, at ten to fourteen years of age, to have a serious interest yet in boys. This was the season. In winter they tended to get to bed at reasonable hours; so they weren't cranky and sullen, as was their tendency in the seasons of longer daylight. But not to denigrate them too harshly--they were a cheery lot, and they brought a welcome gaiety into the musty gloom of the LaForges' rectory.

The priest opened his study door and watched smiling as Esmé LaForge led the eight girls through the opening bars of "O Canada . . . the true north strong and free." Ah, the thrill of it in the blood. Constantine joined them, adding his rich bass to their high, thin voices.

He left abruptly after these formalities, and went back to his desk as Esmé brought out the crochet projects they'd started last month. He'd seen these things before, and he didn't like them. Little multicolored sleeves for the recorders that they played in school. They were sewing in drawstrings to pull them tight, to close off their instruments from the wild elements: this all was fine, but then Constantine knew what

they would do next. They'd have them dangling with amulets and charms, possibly even before the crocheting was done. Charms, Constantine thought, of the devil. And the girls didn't even appreciate that unpleasant fact of life. Yet.

The blood had risen to Constantine's cheeks as he sat again at his desk, just thinking about it. He'd had to confiscate, right in the middle of his sermons, such sinister paraphernalia as a goose wing, a plastic shrunken head, a dried lemming liver, a miniature skeleton, and even, much as he hated to recall the grisly thing, a mummified penis of the bearded seal. All these from the fidgeting hands of kids in his very church! Mostly from boys, he had to admit. But Mary, he knew, was already collecting charms for a necklace her father had given her for Christmas; and a silver pentacle, probably the most troubling of the illicit items, he'd snatched from Willa . . . Willa with the low-lidded, penetrating eyes, and the Black Sabbath T-shirt that she wore, probably even today, under her sweater.

The whip, that hung in Constantine's study closet--was that the answer for such deviance? He hadn't used it on anyone else, yet. He alone bore its marks on his back, from the practice of self-flagellation he'd indulged in before Esmé came into his life. Since that time, something had been missing: something austere, and pure, and undeniably real. Was the Church mistaken after all when the edict had come down allowing priests to marry?

Esmé was the first woman Constantine had been close to; it was she who had approached him in that way. Did he even hesitate? No, he'd jumped at her. And he'd learned something about the sensual life, firsthand--the better to minister to the needs of his congregation. In this the Church's wisdom was manifest. Yet what had been sacrificed?

None called to do the good work could rest in their own comfort. None could shirk under the weight of God's greater desire, nor turn away from the sting of His truth. Constantine smiled to himself, and his eyes gleamed with a renewed sense of mission.

As the girls swarmed at the entryway shuffling coats and boots, Constantine watched again from his post at the study door. Esmé bustled past with the tea tray, smiling in her constant way. Constantine nodded, preoccupied with a growing intention. Eva was giving him a coquettish glance under long, straight hair that swept about her face, looking at him steadily even as she raised one leg at a time onto the chair in the entryway to zip up the sides of her high black boots. With his purpose mounting to an urgent immediacy, Constantine resolved to speak to her. Now.

He strode across the room, padding softly with his slippers on the threadbare carpet. The majority of the girls buzzed out the door like so many bees. Eva was among the stragglers and Constantine's arm reached out to clamp on her shoulder. Eva's eyes flashed in frightened defiance.

"Eva. I'll want you . . . to stay for a moment. Could you come back into the study for a little chat? Only a few moments."

"What about?" asked Eva's little voice.

"Concerning your coming of age as a member of the church. Please take your boots off again."

Constantine released the girl's shoulder. She took one harried look at the door as it closed behind her fleeing companions, and then complied without a word. As she bent down, Constantine's gaze fell on that tender young bottom. Esmé returned for the cookie tray and said, "Something up, dear?"

Constantine was startled out of his reverie. "Oh--that is, no, nothing serious. I want to talk with Eva about confirmation. She's of the age . . ."

"That's right, she is. A lovely young girl, isn't she? Constantine, we will certainly want to keep her in the choir. She's developing a beautiful voice."

Eva blushed and said to the priest, "Let's go do it."

Constantine smiled as best he could for his wife as he led Eva to the study door, guiding her with a hand placed under the back of her neck. The girl's shining black hair flowed in disarray over his hand, making it appear like some tiny head. Esmé padded off to the kitchen. Constantine's blood began to race, warm and thrilling.

He told Eva to have a seat in the padded chair at the wall opposite the desk. He shut the study door behind him, turned the desk chair around to face her, and sat down.

"Now, Eva," the priest began. The frightened animal eyes had become calm, steady, and filled with a black light of inner intensity that burned into his soul like hot oil. He cleared his throat. "Do you know what the Church teaches about becoming a young woman, as you are?" Constantine couldn't help glancing at Eva's budding breasts, shrouded as they were by the loose sweater she wore.

Again Eva blushed, and said nothing. Constantine waited.

"Well? Do you know or don't you? I see you in church every week. Are you paying attention when you go there?"

"Yeah, sure. But I dunno. You mean, like, they want us not to fool around?"

Her question threw Constantine off guard. "Ah, well, heh-heh; I guess you could put it like that . . . Eva. Do you know what that actually means? To 'fool around'?"

Constantine felt himself with a growing erection.

Eva said coolly, "I know what it means."

"What does it mean, to you?"

"It means fucking, if that's what you want me to say. Putting your long john in my cunt."

Constantine was speechless.

"It's hot in here," Eva muttered as if to herself, and took off her sweater. The plaid shirt she wore under it was missing a button right in the middle, and Constantine,

already flushed with the heat of the encounter, saw that she was wearing no bra. She looked at him fiercely now, with challenge in her eyes.

"Is that what you would like . . . me to do?" Constantine found himself asking in a hoarse whisper.

"You're not even wearing a sweater," she mocked.

"No--I mean, what you said. To put my--" he choked on the words and could not finish.

"Is that what your Church teaches?"

Constantine was suddenly furious at the impertinence of this little witch. His eyes went to the closet, his hand to the desk drawer where he kept the key. Yes, this was the season of reckoning. He would show her the whip. Maybe the very sight of it . . .

"I don't care about your old leather whip," she said, stunning him.

"How did you know--" he started to say, but as he whirled to face her again he saw that her shirt was off. Her small round breasts sprouted large, red nipples. His mouth gaped open. He had a sudden vision of his own head as a leering skull.

"Is this what you want me to do?" Eva said sweetly. "So you can whip me?" She smiled strangely. "All right, then whip me with your penis, like a real man." She threw her head back and laughed.

Constantine, already shocked by her words and behavior, hissed out at her:

"Shhhh! Stop that!"

"Why? Wouldn't your wife like to watch? Should I call her to come in?"

"Shut up!" said Constantine frantically. What had gone wrong? His mind spun around for a possible defense should Esmé walk in on them. This was not his doing. This child of the devil was tempting him. He had but one recourse. Esmé or no Esmé, he was obliged to pursue the moral instruction. He got the key and went briskly to the closet.

He turned the key in the lock and threw open the door. But when he reached in for the whip he hesitated, because he thought he saw the miniature skeleton twitch from its resting place on the shelf before him. Impossible--but . . . the priest's eyes moved quickly over the shelves in the darkness. Things were not as he had left them. The lemming liver seemed to be missing. Now a ruffle of feathers caught his eye, and he saw that the goose wing was swinging back and forth, hanging by a string from a hook on the ceiling. He had not put it there, had he? Had someone been in here, someone sneaking in on a Sunday during church service? Constantine tried in vain to remember the person from whom he had confiscated the repulsive thing. Now the shrunken head seemed to have opened its plastic mouth, in a scream of tiny laughter. What was happening to him? He leaned forward to put his ear closer, steadying himself on a lower shelf. In doing so his hand closed around the leathery seal phallus, now swollen and pulsing. Constantine might have uttered a scream of his own just then, except that his windpipe was shut as the whip closed snakelike around his neck. He threw it off in horror in the same instant as he

heard a knock on the main study door. He panicked, slamming the closet door shut behind him and holding it shut with his hands.

Esmé's voice came through, tinged with a high note of curiosity. "Constantine, dear, would you be wanting lunch soon? There'll be hot soup on the table in a few minutes; there's plenty for Eva as well." The priest watched the doorknob turn, as if in slow motion. He realized in the same moment that the knob on the closet door was also turning slowly in his sweaty hand.

"No!" he nearly shouted, and both doorknobs stopped. He tried to calm his voice. "We're still in conference. We'll be done shortly. Eva will be going home."

"All right, all right," and Esmé padded away.

Eva had shrunk against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest, and now she relaxed again. Her breasts thrust at Constantine, pointing at him like accusing, impertinent little imps. His erection had vanished and he no longer had the urge to whip this frail, blooming young girl.

"Put your shirt on, my dear. What makes you think I would whip you? Does God treat His errant creatures so harshly? Do you not have faith in the forgiving Christ?"

Constantine's voice echoed out over the bowed heads of his congregation. His mastery of the guttural sounds of the Inuit language had surely persuaded these people over the years that God could hear and understand their prayers and concerns; and what

was more important, that God had something of value to say to them. But this Sunday there was a disturbing lack of attention in certain quarters of the sea of heads.

Particularly where the young teenaged girls sat, there were whispers, giggles.

Did the men--the girl's fathers, especially--look up with some new knowledge this morning, that smoldered in their dim eyes? And these plump mothers, who looked at the priest and looked quickly down again: had they listened closely to their daughters' loose talk among themselves on Saturday night? These families, the pious hunters and stern councilmen, what did they know, or think they knew, of what had transpired between the priest and the young girl in his study?

Some of the older heads turned in the girls' direction and began muttering. Were any among them still listening to Constantine's prayer for them? Had they listened at all to his entreaty for the Lord's forgiveness of their slavery to passion, that he had so forcefully depicted in the morning's homily?

Constantine ended the standard prayer. The heads rose, and the villagers reseated themselves--not without some residual murmurs. They appeared to him in that moment as a swaying congregation of walrus, looming out of some dark billowing deep, wallowing over slick black rocks. The priest blinked his eyes and the vision passed. There was surely some old evil afoot: an evil that should have vanished long ago, with the disappearance of the last shaman that Constantine's predecessors had hounded from the fishing camp here at Kanik Bay. A murky sea-fog was rapidly filling the little

building from within, blocking the light from the tiny windows. There were moans from the back row. A woman in the front stood up, her eyes showing white. She fainted, and was carried outside. A flood of sunlight entered through the briefly open door. The voices of discontent were rising as Constantine stood helpless on his pulpit, unable to begin the hymn.

At last through a supreme effort of will, inspired perhaps by the fresh rays of light, Constantine raised his voice in song. Esmé began at the organ with a discordant flourish, and Constantine glared at her, his voice cracking. The congregation exploded into ugly, raucous laughter.

Now there was nothing to do but adjourn the mass with a wave of his hand and whisk himself away, off through the alcove and out into the snow. He lurched forward, then stopped to hear the strange keening now coming from his church. It was no hymn he knew. The organ chimed in, playing discord upon discord. What had happened to Esmé! Concerned as he was for her, Constantine turned away toward his house, a haven on the high shore of the bay. His thoughts had turned for comfort to his whip--not for his tormentors, but for himself. The brothers at the seminary had taught him well.

Suddenly Esmé emerged from the alcove door, running to her husband in tears. Someone else had taken over, she cried.

Constantine opened his arms to receive her. Someone had begun thumping on a skin drum, too--the heartbeat of the devil, the old religion, the shamans and sea-

goddesses. But Constantine could not go back in there to stop them, because he feared he would never come out.

Instead the priest hurried home with his wife under his wing, to make tea and pray together what to do. They sat at the kitchen table with their hands linked together.

Constantine looked at Esmé's red, round face, her full lips and bobbed brown hair, her plain innocence of expression that reflected so genuinely the goodness of her heart.

When he closed his eyes and bowed his head, the image of his wife was abruptly replaced by Eva's pert little breasts, flashing black eyes, and leering smile.

With passing time these ordeals lost their power over Constantine's soul. By Wednesday afternoon he was able to go out to the Co-op store to buy stationery. But there he fell into a disturbing encounter with young Mary. As he was standing in line to pay, she waltzed past him, brushing his thighs with one hand while fingering her charm necklace with the other. He flushed hot; she smiled at him provocatively and said, as if in all innocence, "Oh, forgive me, father."

Constantine held his temper until he got outside, but still his heart was racing. He decided to stay out for fresh air until he could recover his composure. He climbed partway up the rocky hill overlooking the village and then sat down to rest, breathing heavily.

It was good to get away like this now and again, Constantine reflected. To see things as God does, from above. To watch over the poor struggling souls down there in the village--and the one right here in this tormented old body, goodness knows . . .

Without warning a hand tapped his shoulder, so that the priest nearly jumped out of his skin. He whirled to see Willa, grinning widely and smacking away at a piece of gum. She wore the headphones of a portable tape-player. Though it was a cold winter day, she wore a jean jacket open over her Black Sabbath T-shirt. Constantine cringed from the sight. But Willa's eyes bore unmercifully into his as she chanted, "Who-do-you-love, man, who-do-you-love? Who-do!" Then she skipped away, laughing wildly.

Constantine's tuque fell off as he tried to stand on unsteady legs. His wispy hair was raised in puffs of the chill breeze as he sat back down again. He trembled now, not so much from the cold as from the raw nerves of the schoolboy who was too timid to play the courting games, too wary of the demon sex, to so much as speak to a girl in private, or to hold a girl's hand.

But finally he reminded himself, getting shakily to his feet on the gigantic boulders, that he was a grown man, that he had the power to act on his own desires. More than that, he was a priest, and thus he had the responsibility for delving into these most personal matters, rooting out the impurities in the lives of his parishioners.

Let them tempt him as they would. Constantine LaForge would be ready. This aging body, they would discover, could ably sacrifice itself in the service of the soul's duty.

When Saturday morning came, Constantine awoke uncertain of his purpose. Esmé lay asleep beside him, her soft, yielding body his. Wasn't this enough? Didn't he have opportunity enough to work out the metaphysics of flesh and spirit from within this consecrated union? Three faces swam before him, raven hair waving, black eyes burning. Mary, Willa . . . Eva. Somehow, they had to be dealt with, exorcised. Exercised, thought Constantine. Curious how the words are so similar. To exorcise the demons, they must be exercised, tried. Well, today, we will see how far the snake dares creep from its den.

As before, the priest escorted Eva to his study. But as soon as he'd shut the door behind them, Eva sat down on the desk chair, drew her legs up and began peeling off her jeans and underpants. Constantine stood at the wall, once more rendered speechless the girl's unpredictable audacity. Eva proceeded to sit back in her chair, raising her feet up spread on the seat, with her knees wide apart by her solemn, radiant face. Constantine's heart was thumping, and he didn't know what to do. An animal urge was impelling him toward her, yet he stood still against the wall, fighting it.

"Come on," Eva taunted him, reaching out her hands for him. "Aren't you man enough?"

His mind was in a whirl. She caught his trembling fingers and pulled him down to his knees. He thought desperately of the whip--this time for use on himself, his own hunched back. But as the very abyss lay before him, he screamed, silently, and was swallowed up.

The hard-packed snow crunched outside as innumerable boots carried the population of Harrison Bay to the hall. Men, women, and children. They would talk all night, no doubt, about the indiscretion of their priest. Constantine swayed red-eyed, on his knees in the dimness of his unlit study, while he awaited his crucifixion.

He could picture the old men, the old women talking in the hall. He knew them well and he'd heard them all before. It was the children whose testimony rankled most, their tales told with snaky tongues. Not only Eva. Willa, Mary, all the rest. Would Tommy and Moses talk, too? No doubt. Once one started, they'd all join in the damning chorus. It didn't matter that this was the first time anything had actually happened. They knew his mind. And their knowledge would be the spear that would pin him to his cross.

Would these people then have the miserable church to themselves, the altar to disgrace, the organ to murder? Or would his superiors dare to send another sacrificial lamb here in his place? Constantine, for the life of him, didn't care. As for himself,

maybe he could take up housepainting, or some other humble trade, in Trois-Rivières, or Ste-Foy.

With some bitterness at his inevitable fate, and yes, even at his miserable part in bringing it upon himself, Constantine rose and began to think of the packing to be done. Even now he could hear the muffled sounds of Esmé in the bedroom as she began the job, humming his favorite hymn.

From impropriety, arises piety, Constantine whispered under his breath. And he thought wistfully how nice a touch these words would have made for his next sermon.

NUCLEAR SUNSETS AND OTHER ROMANTIC DILEMMAS

Parodies begin slowly. From paradise rich and varied, to the wilderness of storm and desert, her dreams came. Her song was of the thousand-folder lover.

Today, she wrote, everyone was taking out the garbage and stopping to gaze at the orange flooded sunset. Even Mr. Jones next door was entertaining questions from the crows.

And Bert, the black-widow god who has stolen my heart! He's somewhere on the East Missouri fishin'. That lady Salmon over there grabbin' his attention.

Well, I have me here to go right out the window after Ronnie McGee, even if he is a little old for me. And being a salesman, well, he's not really what Bert would call "an ace." I'd rather have that gambler, God damn him!

Sexual energy consumes me; I'm on the prowl.

But then those sunsets--what a beginning to a new romance--

Over picket fences they talked, she said in so many words, about this new thing in their lives. Nothing was clearly defined, in that orange sky. Everyone only knew that each tomorrow would wear a new face.

Yet some old ones stuck with their ways.

Like what Jamie MacFarlane told me around three years ago. Said you don't have to get out of high school right away, and but--Jamie always sayin and-but, and but the other girls laughing--on the other hand you didn't have to "learn" your own language and math and all that stuff, so you could just quit slowly and take up time. Livin, you know, protected by the institution. You'd still get pushed around a lot by the guards, teachers and principals. And but the jailhouse can rock, he said. They bounced him out to New Orleans pen eventually.

So now I'm 22. We were both 19 then and it seemed like 80 in grade 11. Computer crazies, they called us for our two-person love club. Though neither one of us ever figured out why. Anyway, no one else wanted to join.

But then the sunset, it scares me. Like this dragon coming up out of the sky, and more over the horizon. I don't know where I'll go after Constantinople!

Wars, bombs, what's the difference. One bomb, one more friggin holocaust if that's the word, and but if anyone gets around to reading this someday, they'll think, what a tiny excuse. "Just one" is like saying "only a little pregnant."

Bert out there playing around on those fuckin, there I said it, riverboats, Jesus-- that man disturbs me!

When the cloud starts coming in thick around here I'll go crazy trying to pick food out of the grocery stores or wherever, I won't know how to breathe or whether to drink water, not milk I know from science class, Jesus cokes or what?

And Jamie goin off workin in the mine, now ain't that radioactively ironic. Said it wouldn't run into our water, no way, he worked it out on his own made it himself little computer. Which again, was more of a private joke. Damn hood!

Me, if I ever "take a little break" in these circumstances now I'm gonna lose it, I know. Swept up under the rug, or the tide or whatever. Orange cloud. I wonder why they don't say more about it on the fuckin radio! Just "reported" and potentially hazardous, a "new substance in nature."

Stuck in My Ways in Constantinople

I'll tell the next little chapter in my last little life. Bert flew in on the last plane to land from the west, nearly raving mad. Said the damage and chaos and accidents and panic was unbelievable. He's gonna die in three days, he says and here I am sittin at this ugly desk writing. But he can't listen to me now, he won't even hear me. Says the end is coming so what's the use. Of loving? I asked him but he never answered.

Now, already, it's later. Does that make sense? I need some kind of outlet even if this city goes too, I can go with it just the same as if Ronnie or Jamie or even Bert who came here to be with me never lived but . . .

They took me out of the burning building, they told me. Caught fire from some cloud come down, not from the west but straight down out of "heaven." I'm so glad I wasn't burned, my ankle's ok broken but not my face all scared--is it scarred? I'd go out like Bert then. He gambled and lost. I didn't even gamble, and look what's happening now!

I think everyone in this city is scared to the same degree. All the Americans on this block are jabbering about their bank accounts "back home." The locals are running around after rugs and drugs.

I honestly don't know what I'm a gonna do next, as the song goes. And...but...I know this: everyone's praying!

First time in their fuckin lives.

--for Jamie, wherever in hell you are.

THE BOY, THE WITCH AND THE PRINCESS

A boy went wandering one day in the forest. He followed his nose along the forest floor, threading his way past fern and mushroom, tendril and stalk, over mossy mounds where mouseprints merged with the textured green, along velvet ways needle-gold and hushed. In time he came to a house sweetly made of gingerbread, round-edged and candy-trimmed. He went to the crisp dark door and knocked soundly.

Come in, a voice creaked.

Unperturbed, the boy entered. He was on a mission of discovery, having left the house of his parents behind, having decided there was nothing of the old life to be pursued, and ready for new teachings from whatever source. Still, he was taken aback when he saw the old woman hunched over a spinning wheel, her long pitted nose and crooked teeth grinning at him, her unkempt hair tumbling like a rag from her bared head.

“Grandmother,” he whispered.

“No,” she cackled, “not to you. But come in, little one, I want to feel your bones. I imagine you’re hungry, you scrawny chicken, and we must do something about that.”

Sometime later the cauldron bubbled still beside the table, on a blazing hearth. The soup was tasty but thin. “I’m wanting meat,” she told the boy with a purposeful look, and he took her to mean that she would have appreciated it if he’d brought with him

a prime cut from the grocer's, or at least a junior hunting license. "I'll see what I can do," he said with some naïve hope that this would reassure her. She muttered absently, cleared the table, and brought out the poker chips and playing cards. Shuffled in a blur too fast for the human eye.

"I don't have any..." he started to say.

"No need for gold or silver," she interrupted him. "Life or death. How's that?"

The boy was twelve, going on thirteen. He'd seen enough action videos, played enough Nintendo to have an inkling of this adult concept. Still it had no teeth until she laid the carving knife, big as a scimitar, on the table beside them.

"Me or you," she added graciously. "Cut for deal?"

He was down to his last white chip. The pot was full; the cauldron still simmering, only half-full; the fire down to glowing coals. It was hustle time. He saw her pull a card from under the table to her hand. He snatched up the scimitar and flashed it over her. The one whisker on her chin wart seemed to quiver in a draft that swept suddenly, coolly into the cottage from the darkling forest.

"If you please," the crone said sweetly. "Forgive me and I'll promise you more than your own life in security. I will give you love and beauty beyond compare."

"And how will you arrange that?" the boy demanded with a haughty air. Yet the scimitar wavered in his hand.

“I cannot say: you must simply trust me, and forgive. I have nothing else to offer you--except of course my bitter bones for the soup pot--until you take the oath.”

The boy considered. His home, the strict domain of his mother the seamstress and father the honest woodcutter, was not his path ahead. In the moment his prospects were clear: off with her head (and stringy soup and gingerbread for a week or more)--or take this chance on a direct jump to the promised land: the jungle of love, the mystery of leaping into the sea.

Like a drop of seafoam suspended from the lip of the cresting wave, he gave himself to fate. The carving knife fell with a clatter to the floor.

“Okay,” he said, “I’m ready.”

“Kiss me.”

Her black lips puckered: cracked and crusty. Her hollow cheeks bunched forward; her wart-whiskered chin jutted as a crag from the wave-battered headland.

The boy closed his eyes and glided into the darkness, his own rosebud mouth pursed gently, lips half-parted...

The ravishing princess tossed away the last of her skirts and straddled the boy, laughing merrily. He was no longer a boy now, but a man. He had never beheld such beauty, never imagined such love. They embraced and fell into the swan-down sea, wrapped forever after into a radiance so pure, that their story has been told ever since.

A NEIGHBORLY VISIT

It wasn't entirely his fault. He'd just been minding his own business. No one else ever came to visit. He hadn't sent out invitations. But the dwarf appeared, unannounced, on Fred's threshold.

He just stood there, cutting a gnomish figure, with his orange peaked hat, his leather trousers, his Chinese plaid work shirt, as if waiting for something. Fred sighed in resignation and said, "Oh, all right, come in, come in, whoever you are." The dwarf nodded slightly--or perhaps he just stooped a bit to clear the top of the door hole and enter Fred's tipi. Fred wondered, if he'd had the door flap closed--if the drizzle had been a little more substantial--if that would have made any difference and this would never have happened.

But he hadn't, and it had. The dwarf removed his felt hat, which had absorbed about as much drizzle as a hat can take before starting to drip, and reached up to put it on the warming rack at the top of Fred's cookstove. "Mmhh, oh yeah, all right," muttered Fred, realizing the dwarf's need and jumping up to take the hat and put it up there where the dwarf wasn't able. Fred's lanky six feet towered over the dwarf. He felt self-conscious and returned to the bed where he'd been lying down reading the local rag, The East-West Kootenay Review.

It happened that he'd just been reading a piece about the Kootenay Indians, their legends and folklore. There wasn't anything about dwarves, Fred thought. Just Coyotes, Old Men, and all sorts of animal-persons. Magic, to be sure. But no dwarves, no orange hats. Certainly no Chinese work shirts.

So who was this dwarf, then, and where did he come from? Fred was almost afraid to ask--much less a question like, What did he want? Fred, as I've said, wasn't much accustomed to entertaining visitors. In fact he was a downright hermit-person. He'd set up his tipi in a natural clearing on a little bench on Crown Land halfway up the mountain, a three-mile hike from the nearest road. He preferred to brood on the mysteries of the cliffs above him; to spend the forty-two weeks of the year that he wasn't treeplanting, in harmony with his silent surroundings and in communion with the spirit of the nature where he'd made his home. But now it had come to this.

To be honest, he'd expected as much. He could remember small men in recent dreams who could have been, in retrospect, dwarves, or reminders of dwarves, or symbols of dwarves. He'd tried to put them out of his mind. They didn't do anything in the dreams, didn't mean anything. They just stood there, just as this one was doing not five feet away, waiting.

Fred looked up distractedly, at last, and said, "Okay, my friend, what can I do for you?"

The dwarf said nothing.

Fred tried, "Make some tea? Here, have a seat." Fred went over to a place on the raised platform where some dirty clothes were piled, tossed them into a more remote pile and found a little cushion for the dwarf to sit on.

The dwarf stepped around the stove and sat down, folding his hands on his lap, right there next to Fred's bed. Since the seat faced out, the dwarf didn't look at Fred, but quietly looked ahead, and sometimes down at his hands. Occasionally the fingers on those small hands would fidget.

Fred forgot about the tea, concerned as he was about the dwarf's more permanent presence, and wondered what to say next. Finally Fred decided that, if the dwarf was so shy he wouldn't speak, he as host would open up the conversation himself.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've asked you here," he began. The dwarf looked at him suddenly with large, shining eyes. "No, I mean, that's just a kind of a joke," Fred stammered. The dwarf looked away again. "--because I didn't ask you here. I mean is it my fault I dreamt about you, or your brothers? That I'm reading about Indians and coyotes?" Just then an owl hooted outside in the drizzle. It was starting to darken.

Fred continued: "I don't try to believe in magic, in imaginary beings and spirits and things. Don't get me wrong--I'm open to suggestion, if you know what I mean."

The dwarf was refusing to look at Fred at all now.

Fred began to feel that he'd hurt the dwarf's feelings and tried to make amends.

"No, really, some of my best friends might even be imaginary." He said this as he got up to fill the kettle from a water bucket on the floor. He placed the kettle on the stove and looked over to smile for the dwarf.

But the dwarf was gone.

RENDEZVOUS

The cabin appears in the distance, nestled beside a half-frozen pond. It's a scene from an old-fashioned Christmas card--except the cabin's chimney pipe shows no smoke.

"Looks like we're the first ones here," I say to Matt. I check my watch again.

My companion bends forward with the weight of his pack. He rests his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "Yeah--what time is it?"

"Twenty past three."

"Well, we're behind schedule from losing our trail. They could have had the same trouble on the other side."

"Yeah; or maybe they got a late start."

Matt turns his eyes from me toward the cabin. Sweat generated from our last steep climb up the scree slope drips from his limp, wet mustache.

I try some other explanation: "Maybe they're already in the cabin and there's no wood; or they've just got there and haven't lit a fire yet." I start to shiver. It's the end of June, but at six thousand feet a sweating body cools quickly.

We trudge on through wet, foot-deep snow to the cabin. A couple of wooden steps at the entrance are falling apart, but otherwise the rustic structure appears stoutly built, with walls of rough planks supported by a stone foundation.

I push open the creaking door; wind whips into the single room. There is a neat pile of split firewood stacked beside a little stove, with cobwebs stretched between.

The cabin is well-equipped, for all its remoteness. There are stacks of blankets and sleeping bags and spare shoes, all on a drying rack overhead; and four built-in bunks complete with foam mattresses. In the kitchen cupboards we find matches, toilet paper, tea, cocoa, canned soup, and a bag of rice--along with a portable campstove and fuel, cookware and dishes.

Matt starts unlacing his wet boots and suggests we get a fire going to dry our clothes and heat water for tea. I'm too anxious for the arrival of the other party to sit tight just yet; I tell him to go ahead, and I'll scout around to see if I can see or hear a sign of their approach. He tries to reassure me that they're probably just running late. But I leave him to the stove and take off with map in hand to the end of the ridge, calling out and peering down into the dim vastness of the Tumbler Creek drainage.

There's no response to my shouts in the empty wind. I know that somewhere down there, a trail runs along the heavily wooded slope, veering up for a final ascent to the pass. Somewhere down there are my wife Faron, our daughter Suze, and an adult companion, now over half an hour late. That's not a big deal, if you're meeting someone at a restaurant; but this is wilderness.

A beauty so desolate, and incomplete . . .

Morning light drew our eyelids slowly open. I pulled Faron closer for a kiss while we still had the chance.

"Nine weeks," she said in a forlorn whisper. "Nine weeks too long."

As soon as our lips touched, Suze awoke from her bed beside us, right on cue. There was no turning the clock back now.

Never had I been away from Faron for longer than a week, in our four years together. Now we would have to last likely four or five weeks at a stretch, until I could arrange a quick trip back home on a couple of days between shifts. The treeplanting camp would be a full day's drive away, in the next valley.

But when John Harris had called me, a job offer out of the blue, I'd told him I'd do it; because with a half-finished house and a three-year-old, we needed the money. The house was a full forty feet long, but so far, only fourteen feet wide: like an overgrown trailer, or a glorified railway shed. The exposed hallway served as a temporary outer wall, showing not one but a row of doors to various rooms in what was really only the back half of the future house.

We got up and dressed; then Faron made breakfast while I finished packing. It was all happening so fast. Over breakfast and a road map we tried to calculate how many round-trips our budget could bear, feeding the gas-guzzling Ford three-quarter ton truck.

I wasn't too concerned about using some of the big bucks I'd be making for the odd trip home. At a hundred and fifty dollars a day . . .

Faron was more prudent: "Remember all the other things we need that money for, Will; those planting days have to cover us for the whole year."

"Yeah, I know, but--"

"Hey, I know how we could do it!"

Uh-oh, I thought. She's got that adventurous gleam in her eye. I almost flinched.

"You're going to be up near Inverness in a couple of weeks. Directly across the mountains from here."

"Yeah, that's kind of neat."

"More than neat, Will. Look on the map. There's Mirror Pass, right up there. If there's a trail on the east side, you could hike over the pass on a day off and meet me on the Tumbler Creek side."

"That's true. You could drive up to the trail--if the road's open--and pick me up. It would take me a whole day to get home, though. If I happened to be lucky enough to have two days off, I'd have to head right back over the next morning, and then work another shift with no rest. We wouldn't have much time together; just the overnight."

Faron leaned onto a muscular forearm. Her jaw was set. This meant one thing: there had to be a way; and if not, she'd push one through anyhow. "Still, it seems so close."

I had no solution to offer, other than driving the long way around.

"Hey, I've got it. You hike up your side, and I'll come up the trail from the west, and we'll meet at the pass. There's a cabin there, where we can stay the night. We'll have more time together that way." Her eyes sparkled.

I pictured our bed, not in the cabin but out under the millions of stars wheeling around amid the frosted peaks. "Hmmm. I wonder. Maybe it's not such a crazy scheme after all."

Suze had stopped stuffing pancake in her mouth long enough to attempt speech. The result was something of a strangled whimper, muted but nonetheless effective.

It brought me back to earth. I spoke for the little tyke before she choked: "But Faron, what do we do about Suze?"

"Oh, I'm sure she'd love to come, too."

"I'm sure she would." Suze was vigorously nodding her head, with her cheeks still bulging. "But how's she going to get there? It's what--a three-hour hike for an adult, in shape?"

"She could walk up part of the way."

"And have you carry her the rest? Wouldn't it be easier to find someone she could stay with?"

"Oh, she'd rather come--wouldn't you, Suze?"

When Suze hesitated, perhaps trying to swallow first, Faron added, "We'll bring lots of food along; and your bluey quilt . . ."

"Yessee, yessee, I wanna come."

That settled that. And so our plan was hatched--at least in principle.

Saying good-bye was difficult--though less so for me than for Faron. I had the excitement of a trip and new experiences to look forward to. Faron would be at home with Suze and the big garden to look after; and as if that weren't enough, she'd also taken on the job of babysitting two other kids.

"Are you sure you can manage all that?" I'd wondered.

"Oh, no problem." And for Faron, it probably didn't seem like much.

Backpacking around Europe at seventeen, running a printing press at nineteen, roaming the mountains for a week in her twentieth year, and having our child at twenty-one: these all came naturally to her. With Faron it was a matter of style, pace. On a morning off from more widespread obligations, she could conjure a whirlwind in the kitchen yielding a batch of bread, a couple of dozen quarts of canned fruit, and several pies--with a cord of

firewood split and stacked, between infrequent peeks in the oven. One or two burned pies, no big deal: the cost of accomplishment.

But now as we held each other one last time by the brown truck door, Faron cried for her coming loneliness. I smoothed the wet strands of hair to the sides of her cheeks, encircled her arching back to pull her closer, and took her mouth to mine. Then I got into the truck, tried to smile for her, and rumbled down the driveway.

3

From my first day of work I began to dream of the coming rendezvous. Packing fifty-pound treebags up and down the razed slopes and gnarly ravines, through logging slash and rockslides, fighting duff and sod and rock and flies, my body took a beating and my mind sought solace elsewhere. I filled the mindless dimension of the work with clear visions of Faron: her sparkling almond eyes, her sensuous full lips, her arousing body.

But the quality of my work suffered. Daydreams of the distant peaks turned to nightmares under my nose as I had to spend two days replanting whole sections of ground: digging up each of hundreds of seedlings and packing them back in the earth, firmer, straighter, deeper.

Somehow two weeks passed, and that hellish first contract was finished. No one had made much money. A dozen planters had quit or been lamed. After days of

blistering heat, it snowed the day we broke camp. I worried about my truck with no chains getting down the winding dirt roads, but made it with no trouble. A ragtag caravan of assorted vehicles carrying forty surviving planters and all our camp gear-- kitchen and shower trailers, collapsible tent-shacks for drying clothes and for dining, all our treebags, tapered shovels, spiked boots, rainwear and so on--proceeded up the valley to set up again for the more promising five-week Grand Creek contract.

I took the occasion of a supper stop in Inverness to phone Faron. Beyond the essential I-miss-you's and I-love-you's, she had some news to report. She'd taken an exploratory trip up the western route to the pass, accompanied by Karianne, a woman whose husband, David, was part of my crew. The idea was to make the hike a double-date. They took Karianne's small horse along in the back of our old Dodge half-ton truck, as a means of carrying Suze and Karianne's two kids up the trail.

The Tumbler Creek road was in such bad shape, Faron told me, that they had to stop and move rocks in several places along the way, from slides that half-covered the road. On the creek side were steep dropoffs.

"I was terrified," Faron told me.

I asked her why they didn't turn around and go back home.

"Turn around! Are you kidding? That would have been worse, to try to back up far enough to find a wide spot for turning around. You know how it is for me to try to drive in reverse."

"Yeah, you're right." She could only reach the pedals in a normal driving position with the help of two pillows propped behind her back. "So what did you do?"

"Well, Karianne got out, with all the kids of course, and tried to guide me through. She seemed to think I had lots of room. But I couldn't see anything--except air on one side, and rock on the other. My hands were shaking so hard I could barely hang onto the steering wheel."

It didn't work out very well, for all that. There were too many logs that the horse couldn't get over; and even after continuing on foot, they were turned back by old unmelted snow on the upper reaches of the trail.

So Faron's sturdy five-foot-two frame would have to be fit for the task of carrying Suze at least part of the way up. She still sounded determined to make a go of it. I promised to keep in touch as I found out more about the road and trail at my end.

The caravan turned west from Inverness into the mountains. Halfway along this last road we passed the plush Columbiana Alpine Resort, and the pavement turned to dirt and gravel. This would be the closest outpost of civilization--if civilization is tennis courts, hot tubs, a telephone and a bar. The new campsite was located an hour's drive along Grizzly Creek, at the point where Grand Creek roars in.

At the confluence of the two major creeks, a flat clearing served as a base camp for a hunting guide, who had given advance permission for us to stay there. Of course,

the very evening of our arrival, the guide showed up with his horses and clients; and so the brightly-colored tents that had just sprouted in his corral, like so many brightly-colored mushrooms, had to be moved to the woods. The hunters were after grizzly. Early the next morning they saddled up, with their rifles ready in their leather cases, and rode off in the direction of Mirror Pass.

Beyond camp, the dirt road narrowed and stretched up the Grand Creek valley for twelve more kilometers. The planting blocks rose up the east slopes from the road. Mirror Pass beckoned invisibly, tantalizingly from around the last mountain in sight.

As we traveled each day in the crew trucks that took us to work, I began to plan in earnest for the day I would drive my own truck to the end of the road, where the trail to the pass began. When I broached the idea to Harris, my towering, intimidating boss, he told me that the road was reportedly washed out somewhere past the last planting blocks. There was a possibility, he said, that it had been patched since.

"But if not," I was happy to hear him say, "you could take one of the boony bikes. I'll check out the situation one day when I'm up that way." He enjoyed bouncing around on the balloon-tired, all-terrain, motorized "trikes" and I was glad to have the big man's support for my little adventure.

More weeks went by. On the better ground here I became preoccupied with trees, time, and money. Never mind the dazzling vistas of glaciated peaks from the higher slopes. I could look at them during lunch. On and on I pushed myself. Faster, faster,

stride, stride, tree; stride, stride, tree: my shovel and I made a hybrid machine. Up and down the mountainsides, all day long in a race against time, I pounded in the seedlings, up to a thousand a day. At twenty cents a crack, I couldn't afford to think about Faron.

Back in camp at the end of a day, when my stomach was filled and the conversation became sparse and stale, my thoughts would return to her. As time wore on, past the third week, into the fourth week, and fifth, I ached with a visceral emptiness, that all the good camp food couldn't begin to fill. I'd plod over to my plywood box (the Ford's homemade camper/canopy), brush my teeth reflectively, and crawl into my bed of foam pads and sleeping bags, diverting my mind until dark with a good mystery or Stephen King novel. But it was the dimly-formed vision of Faron's face, the disembodied love behind her ever cheerful smile, that would haunt me into sleep.

Faron and I still had a plan, of sorts. We just had to wait until the end of the contract, because until then Harris was unwilling to give the crew more than one day off at a time. That magical date was impossible to pin down, meanwhile, because of inconsistent daily planting totals and a mysteriously indeterminate number of remaining seedlings.

Related to the problem of timing was the problem of access. The road was indeed washed out beyond repair, Harris had found, not far past the last cutblocks. The boony bike "might" make it, he told me, if the right place to cross were found. There were other complications, however.

Pressure was mounting on Harris to finish this contract and move to the next one. That meant the off-days coming up would be needed to break and move the camp. I could probably wrangle out of that obligation; but the boony bikes would have to go with the camp. That left me with my truck. There were numerous minor washouts on the way, that we crossed daily in the crew trucks only with a good deal of scraping, bouncing, churning, and plain dumb luck. These freshets were increasing in volume every day, I'd noticed, in the sweltering June sun.

I needed a backup plan. So after work one evening, with less than a week to go in the contract, I looked into mountain bike rentals from the Columbiana resort.

Summer was off-season at what was primarily a ski resort. I wandered through the deserted buildings until I found someone who could tell me about the bikes. They were available only on Sundays and Tuesdays, cost twenty-five dollars a day, and had no panniers. I took this information to the bar terrace and sat for half an hour over a watery draft beer, scribbling out a bewildering matrix of dates, distances, risks and benefits, pros and cons. Maybe this harebrained scheme, I was starting to think, just wasn't in the cards.

Getting nowhere, I phoned Faron. Her plans were complicated by trying to arrange days off from babysitting, and to find someone to come along on the hike. The basic idea was to have help carrying Suze. The so-called "double-date" idea had fallen

through; David had decided he'd had enough of Harris's whip cracking, and had left this morning to drive home. Faron's best bet at this point was a mutual friend, Ron; but he hadn't made a final commitment as yet. I told Faron that a fellow planter named Matt had expressed interest in accompanying me.

"Oh?" she said. "What's he like?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. He will be sharing the cabin with us, after all."

"Okay--he's tall, dark and handsome, and a helluva planter. He flails away at the slash and duff like some six-foot-five bear. Let's see, what else? He has black hair and a beard. He's a theology student. And he's just broken up with his girlfriend Janet, who's--"

"Woman friend, you mean. Or just 'friend.'"

"Whatever. She is pretty attractive, herself. She's been planting, and tenting, with Matt all season. But now it looks like that's finished. Matt says he's ready for a break, something more challenging than the usual days off hanging around camp or town."

Faron said, "It won't be quite the same as just us, up there together."

"It wouldn't be just us, anyway, with Suze there. Or whoever you get to come with you."

"That's true."

"Anyway, it still makes sense for both of us to go with someone."

"I know. Ron was telling me that Mirror Pass is called the grizzly capital of the world."

"Oh, great. Well, I hope he decides to come along. Bears or no bears, anything could happen."

"We'll be all right."

Was that just her characteristic confidence at work, I wondered, or some greater understanding that was not yet clear to me?

"I'll take your word for it, hon."

By the end of the call, Faron's voice was shaky with emotion. "Will you call me again as soon as you find out more about your days off?"

"For sure. I can't wait!" I realized as I said this how true it was for me, and I realized also the truth about Faron's approach to difficulty: you just had to want something like this badly enough, to make it happen. One way or another.

There was a long, palpable silence. Then Faron said, "I guess we should hang up. We're spending all the money you're making."

"Yeah, isn't it terrible? But it's worth it. Bye--I love you, Faron."

"I love you, too, Will."

The last full day of work, a Saturday, was a long one. The hope of finishing that day spurred everyone on. I started highballing, and in the process lost the line of planted trees I was supposed to be following. The hell with it, I said to myself--and ended up planting a single line of trees on a beeline into nowhere. When the run of four hundred was done I tried to get my bearings, bushwhacked over ridges while calling out for some sign of humanity (watching out meanwhile for a rumored rogue moose, a mother separated from her calf) until I finally stumbled into a tree cache. Alex, my graybearded supervisor, calmly looked up from his cup of coffee and said in his best Texas drawl: "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?"

Despite the crew's collective best efforts, a few dozen boxes of trees still remained in the caches at the end of the day. That was just as well, because now there was a large unplanted hole to fill between my errant line and the main section of planted trees.

Sunday was an optional short day with a partial crew. I chose not to work, but to rest and prepare for the hike. Monday the camp would come down and be moved; and Tuesday, Harris announced, would be a full day off before the next contract began.

I hopped in the crew truck with the radiophone and drove it down the road to the one point where radio waves could find a hole in the wall of mountains. When I reached

Faron, our voices and breathful silences pulsed wondrously in the crackling airwaves. I discovered that our timing was perfect: she'd already arranged to be free on Monday and Tuesday, and today she was preparing for the trip.

I spent the rest of the day packing and helping out with the initial stages of breaking camp. I also finalized plans with Matt. He was an experienced mountaineer, whose judgment I was inclined to trust. He thought, and I was willing to agree, that the big truck would probably do fine over the washouts. We would try to take the truck as far as the major washout, eight kilometers up the road. From there we could easily walk the last four kilometers to the trail. As for coming back, we figured that we'd have to aim for a return before four-thirty on Tuesday. Harris didn't have a definite location for the new camp yet, so we'd have to phone the forest company office from Columbiana in order to know where to go that night. Then it would be touch and go to make it to Inverness, because my truck only had a quarter-tank of gas, and Harris couldn't spare any from his marginal supplies.

Monday morning the washouts were definitely deeper. We barreled through fine on the first one, wide spray and all. But just out of the second one the Ford's engine stalled. It seemed a bad sign, to start the trip like that--if indeed the trip could continue at all. I had to stop and wonder once more if maybe this romantic adventure just wasn't meant to be. If perhaps all these minor obstacles had been placed in our path by a higher

authority. Couldn't I take a hint? But then I thought of Faron, pushing on with her end of the journey from the west, and I was determined to find a way through to join her as we'd planned.

But the truck wouldn't start again. Matt and I tried everything: gas pedal, air cleaner, choke, spark plugs, and just waiting. Finally I thought of priming the carburetor with a little gasoline poured down its throat. But I didn't have a spare gas can. Nor did I have a hose long enough to reach the low level of fuel in the Ford's tank.

But we had passed a crew truck parked on the side of the road, not far back. There was a small crew working again that morning, still trying to fill in that infamous hole I'd unwittingly, but now fortunately, created. Maybe someone was looking after us after all; maybe I hadn't picked a theology student for nothing. The question remained, however, whether the crew truck's gas tank was full enough to tap with the short length of hose I had.

I got on my knees and sucked until a rush of gasoline came spurting into my mouth; I couldn't help swallowing some of it. Somehow I was able to repeat the odious rite, more carefully, until enough gas had dribbled through to fill a small bottle.

The priming worked; the truck started. We managed to drive on through several more minor washouts to the eight kilometer mark. There we were stopped by a raging river cutting completely through the road. On the other side was an old shed lying on its side, a victim of some previous spring flood.

It was time to get out and walk. Or swim. I hesitated, weighing what to do with the truck key. Leave it in so someone else could drive, in case something happened to us? Or so someone could steal it? Who? As a compromise I left the doors unlocked but pocketed the key.

A slender poplar had been good enough to fall neatly across the torrent of runoff. So Matt and I stripped off our boots and pants, heaved them across the creek, put our backpacks on, and waded across, using the poplar as a handy bannister to brace ourselves against the frigid current. Then we dressed and walked on in high spirits down the last stretch of road, vast mountains towering up on both sides of the narrow valley.

Where the trail was supposed to start, there was an old cutblock, partially logged, with a few old skid roads crisscrossing it and disappearing into the remaining growth of trees at the edges. I pulled out the dog-eared map that I'd drawn with directions from the Forestry office in Inverness, to get our proper bearings. The map proved not to match exactly the actual layout of skid roads on the site. In fact, after three-quarters of an hour of fruitless trial and error, we gave up and decided to follow our noses uphill in the general direction of the pass, which we could see from the clearing.

The dense alder was wet from an overnight rain, but it offered plenty of handholds. Matt and I put on our raingear and managed the ascent without much difficulty, in a couple of hours of climbing, jumping creeks, crossing boulder fields and

snowslides. Then we had to pick our way along a precipitous rockface, until at last we stood beneath the final, broad, steep approach to the pass itself.

Our destination hovered before us like some distant dream coming true, which it was. Mirror Pass, In its summer color, its profusion of alpine flowers and moss and sparkling rivulets, its mantle of shifting cloud and patches of ice and snow, was stunningly beautiful. Regrettably, I had to admire this grand view with the foul taste of gasoline burping up in my mouth.

Near the top was the toughest going of the trip, up a slick bank of compact mud and shale above the flowers. We crawled like snails along that final bank, our boots balanced at the tips of the toes on the slimmest of notches kicked into the hard surface, our fingers grasping at ephemeral stone chips that went skittering away at our touch.

Then we were there, in the snowy pass, with the Christmas-card cabin nestled some two hundred meters away beside a half-frozen pond.

Did I really expect to see Faron, Suze and Ron all cozy in the cabin, drinking tea and smiling for us when we arrived? Returning from my scouting mission, I walk

back into the cabin, stamping the snow off my boots, ready at least to warm up while waiting. Matt sits with his feet up roasting by the stove, apparently unconcerned.

"No sign of them yet?"

"No."

He reads my face, my heavy voice and says, "I wouldn't panic about it. There's plenty of daylight left."

He looks the part of the preacher now, with that smug assurance. But I'm not about to embark on a discussion with him about God's benevolent hidden agenda behind all the world's disasters.

Anyway, he's not here to talk shop. "Before you take those boots off, how about we climb that hill behind the cabin for a better view of what's around us?"

"Good idea." He can gaze at the mountains; and I can scout the western approach from a higher vantage point.

After our sightseeing session we came back to the cabin and settled in, the sun's rays slanting lower through the cabin's tiny west windows.

At long last there was a voice in the distance, calling. Instantly I slipped on a pair of the cabin's battered old running shoes and ran out the door, down the rickety steps and across the snow in the direction of the shouts. The voice grew louder, closer.

A series of little parallel ridges, spines of alpine rock and scrub trees, angled down from the cabin toward the headwaters of Tumbler Creek. I crossed one or two as I headed down to meet the approaching hikers. Finally Faron came into view a hundred meters down along one of the ridges. She was alone with Suze, carrying a large backpack as well as the child on her shoulders.

As we approached like two powerful magnets, the force of our unfamiliar closeness was staggering. Within reach now, Faron's face beamed vibrantly under her bedraggled hair and skewed wool cap. We embraced with all the muscular energy we could muster, for long, long moments, silent but for our breathing.

Finally words came, breathless and trembling.

I said to Faron, "You made it."

"Yes. I can't believe we're finally here, together."

"You came alone? What about Ron?"

"When I came by to pick him up, he said he was sick and couldn't come."

"Oh, Faron. You look exhausted."

"Yeah, but--it wasn't too bad."

Suze still sat above me on Faron's shoulders, bundled in her purple snowsuit. I picked her up into the air and then cuddled her joyfully, while still holding Faron.

"I walked some-a-way myself," she chirped.

"She sure did," Faron said. "For a long way, too. And she would have walked more, except she was so slow, I didn't want to take the time. We were late getting started, at Ron's. He took a long time deciding not to come."

"I was getting worried. We've been here over an hour."

"What time is it?"

"Four-fifteen."

"Oh--we're practically right on time, then. It's only three-fifteen, our time."

For all my figuring of logistics, I'd forgotten we would be meeting on the time-zone boundary; and so I'd worried for nothing.

Except that now Faron had more to say about the difficulty of the way up. The trail she'd been following petered out in the alpine, and she'd come by instinct the last half-hour or so in the rough direction of the pass. Hiking up among the ridges on the west side, she lacked the clear line of sight that had guided us to the cabin from the east. Attaining the lower bowl of the pass, she'd lost her bearings and had to depend on her voice to make final contact with us.

When we arrived at the cabin Faron exchanged brief greetings with Matt, unstrapped her pack, and immediately collapsed on one of the bunks.

I helped Suze out of her snowsuit and boots. As I did so she said in a thin, shy voice, "Will, I'nt someping a-eat."

Back in my familiar role, I chuckled, "Okay, Suze, what would you like?"

"Someping from backpack."

I opened Faron's pack and found it crammed with extra warm clothes for two, bedding for three, food for a group, toys and books and art supplies for Suze, and a bundle of mail for me. I was astonished at the size of the load--at least thirty pounds she'd carried up, with Suze doubling that.

"Faron, you didn't have to bring all this stuff, did you?"

"I thought you'd want to see those new books you ordered."

"Yeah, but I could have waited! I mean, I appreciate it, but all the way up here . . . and the junk mail--"

"It doesn't weigh that much."

I wasn't sure whether to admire her or simply feel appalled at the extent of her ambitions. I sat beside her, putting my arm around her. She leaned her head against my shoulder. I could feel the weight of her exhaustion and relief. It was so good to see Faron, to hold her again like this.

Suze reminded me of my promise to get some food. I found a muffin for her and sat back down beside Faron. Now I wanted nothing more than to cuddle with her under the bulky down comforter she'd brought along.

Matt graciously took his flute outside to serenade the mountains and left us to ourselves. Faron was so chilled from her trek that she kept her down coat on as we lay on

the bunk together in tender embrace. That didn't matter; we could at last lie still together, with mingled feelings of excitement, fatigue, accomplishment and good fortune. By the time Matt returned, Faron had almost drifted away into the mists of sleep.

After a supper of lentils and vegetables, rice cakes, fruit and mixed nuts, we all gathered around the cabin's logbook, while a light rain fell outside. We learned that the shelter had withstood thirteen years of the clashing of weather systems at the top of this mountain range, where moist air traveling from the coast drops its last load of rain and snow before reaching the Rockies. Entries made in every month of the year recounted blizzards. We felt snug enough so far, though we had some reason to be apprehensive as we closed the logbook and prepared for bed.

Matt chose one of the top bunks. I made Suze's bed under his, while Faron piled our comforter on the other bottom bunk. Outside, the wind was picking up. We put more wood in the fire for the night and dove shivering into our beds.

Love was never so lovely as this, so patiently earned; so forgiving of the weeks we'd spent apart, and those yet to come; so generous with its soothing balm. Our hands played over the rediscovered terrain of our skin, finding soft echoes of the mountains and rivers and forests that lay all around us in the unseen night. The roar of our passion was muted by respect for Matt's close-by solitude, yet in the process it was transmuted into deeper frequencies, richer harmonies, more resounding exclamations of the heart.

The cabin walls shook with the buffeting of wind and rain from all directions, while thunder and lightning made a mounting attack on the darkness. Our bodies clung tightly together into the night, courting sleep. Somewhere in the realm between love and the void, we heard a crashing of wood outside. Faron's eyes popped open--I could feel the lashes against my cheek. Instantly I was alert to the arrival of a grizzly, come to claim some of the new food in its domain.

Or, I considered, maybe it was just the wind blowing some boards about. As the sounds subsided amid the general cracking of the elements, somehow we found our way into sleep, long and dreamful.

6

I was in a hallway, a long, cockeyed room like a carnival crazy house: with sloping floor, walls out of plumb, shadows painted at random along its indeterminate length. I walked slowly down (or was it up?) this narrow passage, noting the seven doors I passed, all closed. At the end I came to a warped mirror. I didn't like what I saw there: seven more doors, and a wobbly me, stretching backward and forward forever. At the end of the hall where I thought I started, I found another mirror, like the first. There was no exit now, I decided, but through one of the doors.

But which one? They all looked the same. Did they lead to different rooms, a

common "outside" . . . or to another hall, or halls, just like this one? I paced the length of that hall several times, deliberating. Nothing was changing: it was I who would have to choose. Yes, I wanted to get out. I had to get out. That much I knew. Why, I didn't know. But I would not stay in this oblong box.

So I chose the first door--that is, the closest to an end of the hall. By now I couldn't remember which end it was, but it hardly mattered, as far as I could tell.

*

The morning light found Faron and me wrapped tightly in one another's arms. Suze still slept, as did Matt, in the bunks farther down on the cabin wall. As our thoughts awakened in the soft light and softening wind, our limbs came alive once again to the exquisite touch of each other's skin, so tender, so transparent with feeling. We breathed together, our blood coursing as one, our loins throbbing to a rapid, then a slowing tempo. We lay for a long time looking into each other's luminous eyes.

Suze finally stirred and came awake. Her little cooing noises rose up into the chill air and brought further stirring from Matt's bunk. Faron and I still lay in reverent silence together. Suze peeked her head around the partition between our bunks and then came crawling into bed with us. Our arms wrapped around each other in complete delight.

All too soon, we plunged out of the covers and into cold clothes, amid cheery

good mornings delivered with frosty breath. Matt and I briskly bustled about, making breakfast, while Faron dressed Suze and then started packing.

Breakfast was dried fruit, porridge, nuts, and leftover soup. We savored it as a feast. I knew from Faron's glowing silence that she still bathed with me in the wonder of our renewed connection. Matt and even Suze seemed also to be chewing in a reflective spirit, honoring the occasion.

Then there was time only to write our regards to the cabin and the mountains in the logbook, stuff our packs full once again and head off to our separate destinations. I accompanied Faron, with Suze on my shoulders, to the end of the top ridge where their descent would begin.

We stood there holding one another for many long, blissful moments in a gray, icy drizzle, saying good-bye, our wet cheeks pressed warmly together. With visibility no more than three feet, turning my family loose was like sending them off into the void. The final bliss of our parting now became painful. They vanished into the mists; and I trudged back to the cabin to begin my own descent on the other side of the mountain.

*

As I entered the cabin door, I discovered with some horror that I was back in that oblong, misshapen hallway. Quickly I groped behind me to get back out; but the door

was shut now, and when I whirled to try it with all my strength, I found it locked.

Very well, then, I can accept what fate throws my way; I'll choose another--if one may be found still unlocked. I strode to the far end of the hallway--gave myself a crooked smile of assumed confidence--and tried the door there. It opened; and I can say that that I entered with some considerable misgiving, thinking that if this were indeed a different experience I was letting myself in for, it could hardly be an improvement on the one I'd found behind the first door. Except, of course, for the weather . . .

7

We awoke in the morning light, clinging together tightly. Faron was turned to face outward, and I, with the wall to my back, wrapped my arms around her from behind. Matt stirred from the upper bunk farther along the wall.

He crowed, "Good morning, Faron. And Will."

Faron took a deep breath; too deep. "Good morning."

"Hi," I said.

"Did you sleep well?" Matt had turned and was stretching half out of bed toward us, looking mainly at Faron.

"All right," she replied, "except for that crashing outside. I thought a bear might be trying to get in."

"Yeah, me too," I chimed in.

"It must have been some of that old wood scrap blowing around out there," said Matt. "Say, who's on breakfast?"

Faron turned to look at me, smiling a silent query.

"Oh, I don't mind," I volunteered.

"No, I was just kidding," said Matt. "I'd be glad to do it." And with that, his long muscular body jumped out of bed, stark naked, onto the floor in front of Faron. She shrank back involuntarily at the sight, but kept facing him. Matt took pains to find the right clothing for the day's descent before putting anything on.

My own thin arms felt dead now around Faron's waist. She moved away, out of the covers and onto the floor, and bounced up and down in the cold air.

"Brrrr!" she blurted out, as Matt scanned the bounty of her body with admiring eyes. "Now let's see. What warm clothes can I wear today?" Her ample breasts jounced and swayed as she grabbed for her clothes.

Matt was taking his time with his own clothes, I noticed, as the show went on. Faron's legs were openly displayed as she stepped into her pants.

I turned my back on them and stared at the wall, breathing deeply. Suze poked her head around the partition between our bunks. Her cupid's head sported an impish grin.

"Look, Will, Matt has penis just like you!"

It had just flopped into his underpants as he tugged them on. Faron laughed.

"Well, not just like Will's," Faron couldn't resist saying. I looked at her sharply. She realized her indiscretion and clammed up, zipping her own pants tight. She looked to Matt.

He smiled casually. "That's right, Suze. That's because we're both men."

"Yeah," sang Suze. "Sometimes, Will puts his penis inside Faron . . ." Her eyes looked puzzled for a moment. "Could you do dat?"

Now Matt blushed. I waited for Faron to say no. Finally I couldn't stand the silence. "Come on, Suze," I said, jumping out of bed and picking her up, "let's get you dressed. Are you hungry?"

Matt seemed to have lost interest in clothing himself any further as he turned to the job of packing. I dressed quickly and started on breakfast. I lit the wood stove, cranked up the Coleman stove to boil water for porridge, ran outside for more water from the pond.

My mind raced over images of the previous evening, trying to recall evidence of the apparent attraction between my wife--well, common law, anyway--and this friend--well, recent acquaintance. There was nothing I could put my finger on. . . . No, wait--I remembered Matt's off-color story about the guy in the hot tub at Columbiana who'd said the tubs didn't have wood liners because there would be too many orgasms--er, organisms. Oh, how Faron had laughed, as if she were having one right on the spot.

Did either of them have any real loyalty to me? I wondered. Well, Christ, there was the child, at least, to think about.

I dipped the bucket in the pond, trying to divine in that cold pool what I might see when I got back to the cabin. Faron and Matt hugging: an innocent, friendly, warming hug, I tried to tell myself. Wasn't that why they lingered in their embrace, for me to see-- to excuse their secret desire by so exposing it?

Matt would still be shirtless. When they finally pulled apart after I crossed their threshold, I would of course notice the hefty bulge in his long-john trousers.

We would eat a desultory breakfast together. Then Faron's question would come: "When will we see you again, Matt?"

He would of course be delighted to answer, "As a matter of fact I've been hoping to get to Homewood ever since Will told me about it. It sounds like a pretty neat place. As for my plans, well, they've changed a bit, recently. I was going to go back to Vancouver with my friend Janet, but now her plans have changed, too, and she's going back alone. So maybe I will have a couple of weeks . . ."

And so it would go. Faron's inevitable response ("Oh, you should come stay with us for a while, and have a long enough visit so we can really get to know each other") was practically audible to my burning ears as I mounted the steps with the sloshing bucket, wondering whether I should knock first. I heard the sound of quick, shuffling bodies inside. I opened the door . . .

Of course. Back home again, jiggedy-jig. Whoever was responsible for this cruel joke, I was not amused. The combination of lentils and fruit? I tossed and turned. Boards banged; the little room rocked from side to side--walls shifting, floorboards groaning. Invisible windows threw blackness back into itself. I considered getting up and going outside again, this time to investigate that infernal banging. But I couldn't even see the door in the dark, and besides . . .

Lightning flashed. The room reeled eerily. There was a door, visible for an instant. I almost awoke enough to make the effort. Then, there was a row of doors--at least three I could see to choose from.

I chose the middle door, and as I walked through it it shut behind me like a trap.

*

Matt and I stood not five minutes down the mud-and-shale bank just below the pass, looking at the ground. The bearshit steamed in the cold morning mist, just at the point where the flowers began.

Our progress had come to a chilly halt at the fresh sign. Our eyes swept the landscape, near and far. No bears. I wondered what this grizz had eaten, and how recently. It likely owned this mountain ridge, sniffing and browsing every inch of it, in time.

Which would be worse? was my paranoid query as I followed Matt's lead, creeping down the slope. For a bear to kill Faron and Suze, leaving me without them? Or for the bear to snap me in half like so much dry spaghetti--leaving them to grieve? Maybe, I dared to hope, our love so fresh and strong would keep the bear away.

But no. The sound was just below us. In the boulder slide, large rocks knocking together--with upwards of a thousand pounds of grizzly tipping the balance. We saw the animal at the same time as it turned its head up to us; it snorted with a loud HWMFF.

Sweat broke out on my neck. Matt gaped up at me with an instantaneous look of fright. It was the first time I'd seen anything but experienced confidence in him. He was experienced, all right; and something about that bear's behavior . . . but then Matt's eyes softened with what I perceived as the gentle acceptance of the saint.

The bear charged. It leaped up the hill, practically flying with its enormous bulk over the boulders and onto the adjoining mud-and-shale slide. Matt was closest. He knew, I say, about bears. He instantly fell to the ground, clutching his head in his curled arms and squeezing his knees up against his vulnerable belly.

Ursus horribilis pounced on him in an instant, growling and whoofing, cuffing him back and forth with its huge paws. The stiletto-like claws tore Matt's vest to ribbons. The escaping down floated around them both like a cloud of tiny angels . . .

This flurry seemed to amuse, then to infuriate the bear. It first sat back on its haunches, waiting for the feather storm to subside (and while doing so, stealing a quick look at me, frozen up the bank twenty human paces away). Then with the quickness of a cat, or a rattlesnake, the bear's muzzle clamped shut on Matt's neck. The severed jugular spouted all over the cursed place; Matt's poor waste of a body was left to flop about like a beached fish.

The bear stepped back until the death throes were complete; then it nosed forward to lap up a taste of the blood. Faint from the shock of what I had just witnessed, and what I feared was in store for me, I lay on the ground still immobilized, knowing there was nothing I could do. No more choices, no more plans. Nothing more to worry about going wrong, on this so-called adventure. No more rendezvous with Faron and Suze, nor Harris and the gang, nor anyone but Dr. D.

Then the beast, already bored with its lifeless prey, turned its glittering eyes and red mouth my way.

*

I awoke with a start, my throat constricted with a strangled cry from deep within the darkness. As the morning dawned through thick fog, sporadic gusts of wind still blew scattered rain against the roof and walls.

All right, I thought to myself. It's all right; I didn't even come back here through any goddamned door--at least, not that I remember.

Faron may have been still asleep, but I hugged her so tightly she woke up, turned to face me and smiled. Then I leaned out of bed to peek at Suze. She lay neatly tucked in her bed, peaceful as an angel . . . her rosebud mouth relaxed, her eyelashes so delicate as they lightly lay on her downy, cream-colored cheeks. Then quite suddenly her eyes opened, and blinked several times.

"I have a bad dream."

"Oh," I said. I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No-ey. Was too scary. Will, we are gonna go home, today?"

"Yes. Except, Suze, you know what?"

"What?"

"You and Faron are going down one side of the mountain, and Matt and I are going down the other."

"Oh, but . . . I want to go treepranting wif you."

"That would be nice, Suze, but you can't. I need to make lots of money so we can buy things we need, like food for you, and gas for the truck."

"Oh."

"Besides, you'll be with Faron."

"Yeah," she said, with a strange little darkness crossing her brow. "But Will, Faron might miss you, too."

"Yes, I said. "And I'll miss Faron, and you too."

Then we had breakfast to fix, and backpacks to stuff; jobs to return to. Before I knew it our little vacation had come to an end, and I was following Faron and poor little Suze out the cabin door . . .

*

The night was long and wild. The wind carried me along in the clouds. There were deer dancing in the stars, that I couldn't see. They peeked their heads down through the clouds to say hello, then went back to their dancing.

Bears were everywhere, looking for food, but also hiding behind corners, rocks, low clumps of trees. I thought this was where, in the wintertime, Santa Claus lived.

When it got light in the morning the deer rode away on the stars and the bears all disappeared and I woke up. Faron and Will woke up, too. And Matt. They got me dressed and we ate porridge and soup and nuts. Soup for breakfast! Leftovers, goo-guk. They let me have figs to eat when we started to walk down the mountain. I was cold.

There was snow on the ground. I was wearing my purple snowsuit but it was raining in the sky and my snowsuit got all wet. My face was wet like tears all over it--but I didn't cry.

Faron carried me a long, long way. She said we were walking in the clouds. Just like an airplane, or geese. But an airplane doesn't walk, silly. That's what I told her. Just people. And geese do, too. But in the clouds, they fly, she said.

I flapped my arms. We flew down the mountain. I was cold and wanted to go to sleep in the black truck. Faron was tired and wanted me to walk. I was too tired. I cried when she put me down. We rested and ate some nuts, that I held in my hand. But I dropped some, my fingers were so cold.

The bears could eat them, I thought.

Do bears eat people?

Faron said not usually. I wanted to go back up on her shoulders.

We finally got to the black truck. I woke up when Faron strapped me in my kid-seat. I looked out the window and the bears and the deer were saying good-bye. But I didn't wave. I didn't want them to see my eyes.

Then we drove away, down the bumpy road. Va, va; ya, ya, ya. I was hungry again, but Faron said I would have to wait. I started to complain, and Faron said stop complaining, she had to drive; but I was so hungry, and still cold, and I started to cry. Then we were going so slow, I thought we would stop and she would feed me.

Faron said she was just trying to be careful; I had to wait. I stopped crying and said blow my nose, Faron.

Just wait, she said, mad at me. I don't know why she got so mad at me. Then--

Then the truck fell over. And over, and over and over, down the hill we fell off the road, down the hill and the truck was flying, like an airplane but upside down, and it was quiet like in the clouds.

Then we bumped down so hard! And the roof was all crunched in, and I could crying see that Faron's head was broken and I screamed--

*

I lost it--thanks to those strings pulled by the watchful mind. The good strings, and the not so good. I'm glad that the curtains are on auto-drop when the scene goes to absolute hell.

Or was it I who got the drop, through some infernal trap door that left me, far from salvation, lost in the center of a maze? What I saw was simple enough: an oblong box, irregular of construction--or misshapen from weathering, or warped by some trick played by the conspiracy of eye and mind, mirror and eye, mirror and mirror . . .

Still the row of doors; I couldn't remember which I'd tried. So I tried them all, turning the knobs to see which I might yet open. Just to get my options clear. So I could

put all my rational faculties to best use.

Through each cracked-open door, I heard a distant sound of hollow laughter, and the skin crawled briefly up my back. Four doors locked. Could I assume these represented my choices thus far? I could assume nothing. But that was my hypothesis, for better or worse. And so I had but three remaining doors to try. I was beginning to wonder if there was any point to guesswork, or if this was a setup to run me through the mill before the final door. And then--what?

I blindly grabbed the nearest knob and it came off in my hand. In a rage I flung it at the mirror at the far end of the hall, where it created a shattering explosion of shards. One small but deeply-seated sliver I had to remove from my own wrist. And then, with blood on my hands, I boldly marched through the swaying door without so much as a peek through the doorknob's empty hole.

Morning dawned through misty, drizzling sleet. Visibility, if you chose to call it that, was practically nil as we got up and peered out the cabin windows.

We dressed for wet weather, packed up the rest of our things, and sat down to a hearty breakfast, mulling over the prospects before us. It did not look good. If Faron had been disoriented in clearer weather on the way up, what would it be like now?

Matt had a suggestion. "Maybe, Will, you could go partway down with them, until Faron got started on the trail. Or I could come too if you want, and help with the load."

Good basic idea, I thought; but there were other factors to consider. I looked at my watch. "Gee, I don't know. Would we have enough time left to get to Columbiana for our four-thirty phone call? If we miss the guy in the company office, we won't know where the new camp is, and we miss work tomorrow. Also, isn't Harris going to send help looking for us if we don't show up tonight?"

"They might start worrying. But really, it shouldn't take us more than two hours to get to the road, then another hour's walk to the truck."

"Okay," I said. "Let's say five hours to Columbiana, to be safe. It's after nine now. If we left right away that would give us no more than an hour to go down with them on their side, another hour to come back here. And we still have to get on coats, and boots, and Suze's things."

Faron spoke up now. "I think I'll be fine. I made it okay carrying everything uphill. Maybe, Will, you could walk down with us just to where we met you on our way up."

Somehow I knew that Faron's self-reliance would assert itself here. I readily agreed to this plan. Now I could be helpful to her (and we could say our little family farewell alone together out in the wild and whirling elements) without jeopardizing my schedule.

Matt deferred to our decision, saying flatly, "I'll stay and finish cleaning up. Then we'll be ready to go when you get back."

Ten minutes out of the cabin, we were all three soaking wet. Faron's down coat and Suze's polyester were slick with the freezing rain; Faron's hair streamed out from under the edges of her soggy wool hat; and both their faces gleamed with the shiny glow of the exercise and the glaze of sleet. We couldn't see very much at all: traces of footprints here and there in the patchy snow along the ridged rock; white air.

We followed our noses some ten minutes further, and then I turned the backpack over to Faron. She looked around uncertainly, trying vainly to recognize some landmark or sign of her passage the day before. We were now past any leftover footprints, and visibility remained negligible. I tried to offer some final guidance before turning them loose.

"We know Bastille's over that way. So down there a little farther to the right, that deep draw goes down toward Tumbler Creek, and then your trail must be somewhere farther right, pretty much downhill from here."

"Yeah, I guess so. But it comes straight up the hill a long way from where it follows the contour. If I don't find where it starts up high, I'm not likely to find it until way down below."

"Well," I persisted, conscious of time ticking away, "we lost the trail on our side and just bushwhacked uphill. And I guess we'll do the same on the way down. If you just head straight down you're bound to end up on the trail eventually--or if not, you'll come out on the road, or down to Tumbler Creek itself. Either way you'll know where you are."

"That's true . . ." Faron still seemed uncertain. "I did tell Ron that if I wasn't back by seven he was to come out looking for me." She looked intently into the white haze. "This ridge here looks kind of familiar," she ventured, putting on a bright face.

"Are you sure you'll be okay, now? I could still come down with you part way, a little more, if I would be any help."

But by now I already knew that her mind was made up.

"No, that's okay. We'll be all right, thanks."

We stood and held each other close, our cool cheeks firmly pressed together against the sleet, for a long moment meant to last until another reunion--another time and place, home.

I left them and turned back up the ridge to the cabin. When I looked back, Faron and Suze were gone into the clouds below.

I had a strange feeling of uneasy hesitation as I opened the cabin door--was it a premonition of some disaster, a bad decision, a wrong turn on the forked road of this fragile labyrinth we call life? I turned and gazed off into the vague and formless western sky. Was it too late to go back and help them find the trail? My hand still clutched the latch of the cabin door. Yes, too late. I would go on ahead, and trust that it would be all right in the end.

The packs stood ready by the bunks, and Matt was putting plates and bowls away. I thanked him for doing the dishes.

"Oh, no problem," he said. "How'd it go? Did you manage to find the trail?"

"Oh, no problem," I wished I could say. Maybe, I thought, Matt should have come along with us after all. I told him the truth. "Not exactly. But I think we got to the right general area. Faron said it looked familiar."

Matt looked somewhat dubious, and concerned. He didn't know what to say. I told him what I'd told Faron, that if necessary she could head straight downhill.

"Yeah, that makes sense," he said, nodding slightly. "I guess so, anyway. If you thought they were going to be okay . . ." His voice trailed off, and his eyes fell to the floor. He turned to the packs. "I guess we'd better get going ourselves then, eh?"

Within minutes down the east side from the pass, the air was clearer and drier. Evidently the foul weather was expending itself against the western bulwark of the pass and the adjoining ridges that formed the height of land along the spine of the Purcell cordillera.

Matt commented about Faron's strength and courage; I bathed in the glow of appreciation and respect for her. And I hoped that the trip had been worth the effort for Matt, who hadn't enjoyed quite the rewards I had.

The ground was still slick and slippery. But once we'd picked our way down the mud-and-shale slope just below the pass, we could walk in fairly full stride.

We reached the truck with time to spare, and drove on past Columbiana into Inverness. It was still only four o'clock when we phoned the company office for directions to the new camp location. Then I phoned Faron.

There was no answer. Still perhaps too early. Her descent was about the same distance as ours, with a similar drive to get home from the foot of the trail. But she was no doubt slower with her doubly-heavy load.

Matt and I decided to stay for an early but much-needed supper in Inverness. I was worried. We talked about what we could have done but didn't--because I was so concerned about earning an extra day's wages. Wagering two lives, my life, for a hundred dollars. We agreed that Faron had likely had trouble finding the trail, and Matt reminded me of the obvious--that she would have taken extra time to find it.

Still, I hardly tasted my lasagne. Matt ate fish and chips with similar disinterest. He was concerned about hypothermia if they strayed across the mountainside too long, especially under the threat of coming darkness. I phoned again right after supper. Still no answer.

Next stop was Belford, two and a half hours away on the highway toward Carston. The rest of the crew had ended up "camping" at a ski-lodge called the Purcell Condo. Plans had changed slightly. No more propane showers that ran fire-and-ice; now we could relax after work with whirlpool hot-tubs, color TV. There was a pay phone in the lobby.

Matt went to find Harris to check in with him. I phoned home again and once more got no answer. It was after eight o'clock; it would be dark in another hour. Surely, I thought, Faron should have been back home by six or seven. Maybe she stopped at Ron's on the way home and got invited for supper.

I phoned Ron's place. No answer there, either. So I tried Faron's sister and close neighbor, Sandra. She told me Faron hadn't been heard from, and that Ron had phoned a half-hour ago to say he was organizing a search party. They would go up right away. By now they had probably left.

I said I'd drive on to meet them and join the search. Sandra started to tell me not to worry. My voice started to choke as I thanked her and quickly hung up.

Matt had vanished down the faceless corridors, the neat rows of nameless doors standing innocently at attention (one of them reserved for me). I knew Matt would be concerned and would likely want to come with me, but I wasn't about to start knocking on doors to look for him now. I was out the big glass doors of the lobby and on the road. Let them figure out where I'd gone.

As I stopped in town first for gas and a thermos of coffee, I considered the futility of an after-dark search. Yet something had to be done; Faron and Suze couldn't be left out there in weather like that. If they were conscious and lost, the search party might locate them by voice. Yes, it was definitely worth trying, in nighttime hours that might otherwise see them go over into irreversible darkness.

I barreled down the highway, trying to imagine what could have happened. I blamed myself, of course, because it would have been so easy to go down with them to the trail. And now? Maybe Faron had turned an ankle and just needed to sit tight and stay warm until help arrived. Or maybe a bear--I put that thought out of my mind. No, she must have simply lost her bearings and wandered . . . through the sleet and fog, both their coats soaking through to the skin, Suze stoic with the cold rain streaming down her cheeks as the tears would if she hadn't been holding them back, in her blind trust in Faron to lead them back to the truck and home.

I pictured Faron trying, with increasing desperation, to guess which way to go, whether to veer left or right. If she headed too far left, she stood the chance of bypassing the rise of the trail altogether and ending up in the untracked vastness beneath the glaciers. So probably she would angle to the right. But that way she might also miss the upper trail and would end up instead high above its lower contour, separated from it by hundreds of feet of steep, slippery brush. So she'd have to backtrack, and by then she'd be exhausted from trying to keep her footing on the alder stems that covered the ground like millions of greased rails--not to mention the sixty pounds of load taking its toll on her shoulders, leg, back, spirit . . . Suze's patience meanwhile would have surely worn thin and given way to moans and whimpers, at the least. If she had considered making the child walk, now Faron would realize that under such conditions, that would be even worse than carrying her.

So she would perhaps consider an attempt to return to the cabin. Her pride and determination to forge ahead would be a force against such an option--as would the prospect of hiking back uphill still lost, ever more fatigued, with darkness fast approaching.

In fact the night was fully upon us by now, and for a while on the road my mind was as blank and black as sky and coffee coursing toward dawn. It was three-thirty when I hit the turnoff to home, and with impulsive hope I decided to drive in as far as Ron's

house to see if they were back. But his car was gone, and the house, as I peeked and called inside the front door, empty.

Back on the road up to Tumbler Creek, my heart sank to a new and frightening depth. I could envision it all now: the trucks parked at the bottom of the trail; heading up in the early light, suddenly alert and energetic, shouting as I go. The blinding glare of fresh snow on the ground. An answering shout, muffled by snow and distance, way off to the left, off the trail that continues up and to the right. Scrambling across the contour, through the upper reaches of alder, the patches of juniper shrub and walls of slick shale. The repeated calls coming at me from a slightly higher elevation as I cross.

"We found her," I finally hear--and the way I hear it, it doesn't sound encouraging.

Then, I see Ron bent over Faron's still form, blowing air into her mouth. Useless, mouth.

Suze, somewhere else, downhill. Cold, useless.

How? (Why is too painful, full of me.) How?

Sometime later, entering my empty house at home, my living tomb, I see in the darkness: Faron, trembling with exhaustion, hefting Suze off her shoulders and down

onto the ground. The child waiting while the backpack is discarded. A startled cry and Faron turning to see our daughter rolling down the hill like a tumbleweed.

A scream from Faron--Suze is strangely silent now, still rolling away out of sight through the wet alder. Faron jumps up, slips back to the ground and scrambles on her stomach, knees and elbows, grappling holds with numb hands on slick roots . . .

Her foot catches on a root and she, too, tumbles head over heels, but her head comes down on the first roll against a large, round rock.

When she wakes up, the rain has stopped. Suze is gone. Faron can't move, but realizes, gradually, that that's okay. Then she feels a breath on her neck and turns to find Suze, warm and dry as a newly bathed and powdered babe, snuggling in her original nakedness up to her own naked body: and the two of them lie in the spring flowers, the sunshine relaxing their pale, supple flesh into one, with the milk and breath and blood flowing between them again . . . mother and child.

Now I see; this is my house. I've tried all the doors but two. All right, I've seen it all. What can be worse? I walk like a condemned man through the next to last doorway, noticing at the last moment that the door beside it is cracked and weathered, and wears a handle instead of a knob; but that's all right, one circle of hell's as much damned fun as

the next.

*

It was a fearful night. As morning dawned through thick fog, sporadic gusts of wind still blew scattered rain against the roof and walls. When I finally got up and went outside to pee, I shivered in the icy drizzle on my hair and bare arms and shuddered back inside as quickly as I could.

Faron was sitting up looking out the window. "I don't know how I'm going to find the trail like this."

"You mean naked? You'd better dress warmly, then." I hurried back onto the bunk and draped my arms around her.

"No, silly . . ." She turned her head and smiled briefly, brushing a kiss against my shoulder. "I'm serious. I mean, it was hard enough to follow the trail on the way up when I could see. This is ridiculous."

Matt poked his head down from his bunk. "Good morning--such as it is."

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"Well, it looks like a mess out there all right. But it's likely to be clearer as we get farther down in elevation."

"What about Faron's trail, which she lost even on the way up?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should go with her till we find it."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I gave Faron a little squeeze with my long, bare arms; she still held the bedclothes in front of her. I said to her, "Matt and I could leave our packs back at the cabin, and we could help you carry Suze and your backpack at least part of the way down."

Faron was still dubious. "What if you guys got lost on the way back? You wouldn't even have your packs."

Matt and I discussed briefly the problem of timing, whether we could make it down the east side for our four-thirty phone call. It seemed it could work if all went well.

Faron turned to the window again. "Now it's snowing."

Large, soft flakes streamed down in a spontaneous blizzard.

I quickened the pace: "We should eat and run, then, if we're going ahead with our plan, before it gets too bad out there."

"Yeah," Suze chimed in. "Eat and run!"

By the time Matt returned from washing dishes at the pond, he could report that the fresh snow was an inch deep. He couldn't see the cabin from the pond and could barely follow his own tracks back.

When Faron heard that, she stopped packing. "Goodness. I don't know about this. With all that snow on the trail, maybe we should wait. It's bound to melt . . ." She looked unhopefully out the window again.

"Or get deeper," I added. "It's not as if we had a week's food supply here. We should decide pretty quick if we're going at all."

Again we tossed around our options, the jobs to return to, the people waiting for us below on both sides of the pass. The idea of a search party (or two), mobilized into action on our behalf while we sat up there deliberating, made me wince. Not to mention a day's wages lost. But outside, the snow fell faster and faster. It was almost a relief to watch it happening, making the decision clearer.

"We've got to think about first things first," I said to Faron finally. "Let's wait. It might just blow over."

Matt nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

Faron let out a loud sigh. "All right." It wasn't her usual style to let caution hold her back, but in this case her motherly intuition seemed to have gained the upper hand. She looked at Suze, who had been silently soaking it all in like a sponge. "Suze, we can unpack all your toys and books and crayons and coloring books after all. We're going to stay here for a while until the snow stops and we can see where we're going."

The snow continued to fall. We read books, drank tea and cocoa, told our life

histories, philosophized about the ecumenical movement. Suze colored and played quietly, listening. Before the day was done, we'd read all her books to her half a dozen times; outside the snow was a foot deep. There was no sign of clearing as darkness fell.

Our food supplies were running thin. Suze had eaten the last rice cake in mid-afternoon. The soup and porridge were gone. We still had a handful of nuts and dried fruit left, that we'd been hoping to save for the hike down. The cupboard shelves had a little rice, maybe a cup. There was powdered milk, some more of the crusty old cocoa, a can of ox-tail soup. We decided on soup and rice for supper, with our trail food and cocoa scheduled for the next morning.

We ate in moody reflection of our fate that evening. The snowfall was a bit lighter, I thought, as I trudged out to the pond to wash dishes. But I couldn't say for sure.

Faron and I colored with Suze while Matt occupied himself with the logbook. When darkness fell we all crawled into our bunks once again. Matt was still absorbed in reading the logbook and took it to bed with a candle. Faron and I did not make love this night--we simply held each other close and still, until our bodies softened as one into sleep. Outside, the snow fell down and down, thicker and faster in the chill of the night.

*

Back in the box, was I? Unfortunately, no. The choice was staring me in the

face. In whatever box this was, I rebelled by sitting down crosslegged on the slanting hallway floor: on strike. Maybe, I thought petulantly, all the doors were locked now, anyway. But I won't give them the satisfaction. Let them wait, now, and see what happens.

We got up, the usual scene in the cabin. Ate breakfast and packed to leave. Decided again to let Faron and Suze go down the mountainside--blind as bats, all of us. Matt and I down our side, past bear-sign, all the way to the road in a jaunty hour and a half, and on to the truck, cocky as all get out. Philosophizing about the role of religion in the modern world, for God's sake: comparing Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation, for instance, and their different approaches for the relief of suffering souls . . . and we weren't suffering, by Jesus; we'd just made it up and back, adventure accomplished.

There was only one problem. When we got in the truck and headed back towards Columbiana, we were stopped by an incredible, raging river where a nondescript little stream had crossed the road the day before. There was, in fact, no road left at all over a good ten-foot span.

We couldn't believe it. We paced back and forth, wondering what we'd done to bring such a fate down on our charmed heads, and what we were going to do about it. Especially me, because it was my truck and I hated to simply abandon it--or perhaps worse, to try a crossing and botch it, leaving the truck stranded for who knew how long.

I decided to risk it. With a good head of steam, and the high clearance of the heavy-duty frame, I thought we just might make it. I got in the truck, trying to radiate confidence. Matt hesitated only a second and then got in beside me to add his confidence, or the semblance of it, and I gunned the truck for all it was worth. The rear wheels churned and bucked over the river rock as we swayed halfway through the two-foot deep, rushing water. Then the engine sputtered, gasped, and died.

I looked at Matt, both our faces fallen. The truck, already unbalanced, tipped in a surge of current, then rolled over on its side. I pushed my door up into the air and clambered out, with Matt, all arms and legs, on my heels. We would have to jump into the middle of the stream. I had no footing when I hit bottom, and my legs were swept out from under me by the current rushing under the submerged side of the truck.

One leg got stuck under the truck and I struggled to keep my head out of the water. Matt crouched halfway out the upended driver's side, holding the door open with one hand and reaching for me with the other. Our fingertips stretched inches apart.

He had to come farther out of the truck to reach me; so he propped the door open on its stiff hinge, and while holding onto the floor of the cab, extended his long legs down into the water. When he got his footing he reached down again to help me up, still holding onto the truck for support. As his firm right hand closed around my upraised elbow and pulled, the truck rocked slightly with the weight. The door gave out a sickening crack and swung down before I could say "LOOK OUT!" It smacked down

shut on Matt's left hand. He screamed and let go of me. The current knocked me over again. I gulped water, realized my ankle had come free, got back to my knees, finally to my feet. I grasped the handle of the truck door and opened it so Matt could pull out his hand. It showed only a small spot of blood as he plunged it into cold water to ease the pain and swelling.

He stood leaning over, forlornly moaning; I stood soaked and shivering beside him. His hand was battered but intact. I put weight on my ankle testily. We stood there for a moment like that, and then, uncontrollably, we both started laughing, and crying, and laughing louder.

*

When the next day came, the weather had not let up. Despite whatever unseen dangers lurked in wait for us on the way home, I awoke with the queasy feeling that we'd made a mistake in staying here, cooped up in this little box.

The cabin was still shrouded in thick fog; but there was one positive sign--the snow was coming down wetter. If we could just get down from the higher elevation, we'd be home free. If not, there would certainly be a search party, at least from the Homewood side, arriving soon. We figured it was safe to eat up the last of our nuts and dried fruit, along with the last of the cocoa and powdered milk, for breakfast.

There wasn't much. We sat on our bunks eating silently. When that was gone, we found that our certainty too was eaten away. The popular subject of our fate was up for discussion again.

Faron was still cautious; now I was all for trying to get her and Suze started down on that trail. "What do you think?" I asked Matt.

"I think we should just stoke up this stove," he said, getting up to do just that, "and sit tight until this weather clears a bit. It's bound to change before too long, I bet by this afternoon. Then if no one's arrived from below yet, we could head down to find the trail, like you say."

"That would leave us too short of time for going down our side today, wouldn't it?"

"Depends. We might still have time. If it was before four or five, say, we'd be okay."

The stove roared now. We all edged a bit closer. Faron finally stood up and stationed herself next to the stove, warming her back.

"That sounds like a good plan to me," she said after some deliberation.

"Yeah, okay," I agreed.

"Oh, but I'm hungry," said Suze. "Faron I want someping a-eat."

Faron twisted uncomfortably, looking as if she wished she hadn't heard that.

"You'll have to wait, Suze. We'll go home later today, and you can have whatever you want to eat when we get home."

"And Suze, you just had breakfast," I added. "Besides, that was the last of our food."

"Oh, but how long will it be? I can't wait that long. I need someping a-wait. I need someping nowww." And she began to cry.

I offered to read her a favorite book, *The Three Little Pigs*. She forgot her hunger momentarily. Three books later, I needed a break, something to relieve my own boredom, to take my mind off my own hunger.

"Where's that logbook?" I asked Matt.

"It's still up by my bunk, on the windowsill," he told me. "Do you want me to get it down for you?"

"No, that's okay, I'll get it."

The little windowsill on the end wall of the cabin was beyond my reach, so I hefted myself up to the bunk, resting my knees there while I found the logbook. Then I jumped down onto the floor.

My right leg crunched through the thin plywood flooring, in a place I should have remembered was less than solid. I yelled in agony, and in distress at my stupidity. The

left leg had held, over a joist; the right foot had twisted, half-catching the joist on its way through. It now felt broken, dangling in cold air.

Matt and Faron helped me out of the hole and examined the leg as I lay groaning on the floor with the stabbing pain. The foot was skewed at an unnatural angle, already purple and swollen.

Suze was more upset than anyone; I soothed us both by holding her against my chest as I lay there on the floor. When her panicked cries had quieted down to a soft, plaintive whimpering, Matt said he thought I should have a splint.

I didn't relish the prospect of forcing the bone straight again. But without really considering the alternative, I asked Matt, "Is it really necessary?"

"You'd be better off with it. With your leg loose it would be too easy for the broken bone to tear through the skin. A splint will keep it stable. It may even start it healing properly."

"What will we need?" Faron asked him. "A board, some strips of cloth?"

"Yeah," said Matt, "actually a couple of boards, and some padding; I'll see what I can find outside."

Suze was now fascinated with the preparations. I could only think of the pain, and the pain to come. When the plank ends, strips of a T-shirt, and handfuls of melting moss were gathered at my feet, Matt bent to do his duty. Faron, holding Suze, knelt close beside me.

"This is probably going to hurt," Matt didn't need to say. I squeezed Faron's hand. He pulled gently, pushed slightly. Nothing happened; I lived. He tried again, harder, and this time I thought I was going to die. One attempt more, and bone cleared bone, sending a bolt of lightning pain straight through my head. But my ankle was almost straight. "I think that's going to have to do for now," my doctor decreed, and with Faron's help, he proceeded to wrap up half my leg, cushioned with moss pads, between the boards.

I managed to say, in a hoarse whisper, "Thanks, Matt."

"Oh," he shrugged. "You're welcome. You know, I've never done that before, except on a dummy in a first-aid course years ago. It's not the same."

"No."

Faron bent closer and brushed her cheek against my suffering face. Her tears started flowing freely. I put my arms around her and let my own tears come. Then Suze, of course, also started crying, and Faron had to laugh and turn her attention to comforting the child.

"Are you ready to get off that hard floor, yet?" Matt asked. "You don't need a body splint, you know."

They helped me onto the lower bunk where Suze had slept. And then it was time to decide in earnest what to do. It did seem that the snowstorm might be on its way out. The sky was somewhat brighter than before.

Faron and Suze headed down together to get help; it seemed a good bet that they'd meet up with a rescue party on their way. Matt and I spent the rest of the day waiting, helplessly waiting. The pain in my leg was unbearable, but I had to bear it anyway. We hadn't even any tea left for Matt to nurse me with, never mind brandy, aspirin, morphine--anything to muffle the ringing, throbbing pain.

He tried to comfort me with thoughts of home, the approaching rescue, my deliverance from the hells of treeplanting. He tried to divert us from our boredom and nagging, ever-present hunger with talk about baseball, politics and the downsliding economy. Faron hadn't returned, so she must have found the trail. Unless she'd got lost. Or had got down to the bottom and then had driven off the road. Or some other nameless possibility. The question remained: Where was that goddamned search party?

Suppertime came and went, providing no supper. I tried to read myself to sleep, without success.

The night was a dark and hostile place whose walls leaned in and threatened to crush me, then fell back away so my body could lay open to cold, penetrating points of starlight.

In the morning we saw patches of blue sky beyond the billowing clouds of mist that still swept over the mountains. We felt certain it would be our last day here. But the clouds hung on, and by noon, when no help had arrived, Matt's patience had run out.

He'd just brought in a fresh load of firewood and dumped it in the box beside the stove, and now he stood between me and the door, with the door still left open. His dark eyes sagged and his mouth was drawn down into his shaggy, black beard.

"Will, I hate to suggest this, but what would you think about the idea of me going down on the east side to try to get help?"

I'd be up here alone . . . with only the bears for company . . . but I, too, was tired of waiting.

"You mean take my truck and go to phone somewhere?"

"Yeah. I'll get you a ride on a helicopter. That would be fun, eh?"

A wall of fog moved across the door, sucking Matt's words out with it. The cold air swept in.

"Sure. Anything. Yeah, go ahead, Matt. Hey, close that door, will you? Yeah, it's a good idea. We've got to do something. We can't just rot away here waiting forever. I don't know what's happened at Faron's end."

I stared at the ceiling, trying grimly not to think about it.

"Will," Matt said. "I'm sure they're okay. The fog must be still too thick . . ." he faltered, "down there, for the others to follow the trail up. It would've been easier for her on the way down."

I wasn't convinced. But it didn't much matter what either of us thought.

"Yeah, you're right. Go ahead then. I'll manage."

Matt stood silently debating for a moment--still framed by the door, now closed.

"Really," I told him. "I think you should go."

"No, I was just wondering," he said, "whether to take my pack or not. It's got my climbing gear, and extra clothes in it--"

"Don't worry about it. Go ahead and take it, just in case. I know you're not going to desert me up here. You don't need to leave a deposit."

Matt snorted a laugh of appreciation. "Yup. Right. I'll take it, then."

He packed up in short order. A brief hug around my shoulders, and he straightened up to leave. Then he thought of something. He carried the half-full bucket of water from the counter, got a cup to go with it and set them on the floor next to my bunk. Then he took the roasting pan I'd been using as a chamberpot out the door, brought it back in, empty, and set it down on the floor beside the bucket.

"There," he said. And there's plenty of firewood. The stove's full, so you may not even have to drag yourself out of bed. Do you think you can manage okay, now? I'll be back in a jiffy. Anchovies and double cheese?"

"Uh, hold the anchovies, thanks. Yeah, I'll manage."

"Bye, Will."

"Take care."

My pain had become rather dull, but we kept each other company just the same. I counted the hours till salvation. Matt left at close to one o'clock. By three he should have been striding with his long, strong legs down the road. I ticked away the minutes approaching four o'clock, the time I safely estimated as the hour of Matt's arrival at the truck.

My heart beat faster as I looked at my watch, riding with the imperceptible sweep of the long hand to the top of the hour. Two o'clock. Matt would be opening the door of the truck, throwing his pack into the passenger's seat, climbing in, reaching for the key--
--the key that was still in my pocket.

*

No doors left unopened. I tried them all again, and all were locked--and just as well, but for that first one. I counted in the dim light, three on each side. But no: there had been seven. And now . . . I checked again: up one side of the hall (two locked knobs and a frozen latch), down the other (three locked knobs). Odd, but who was I to try to figure it out? The thing was now, to get myself out. Or was this my final trial, the acceptance of fate closed forever from further possibility--my final home in an oblong box, with no exit.

I was tired. I lay down, looking up at the ceiling, the too-close ceiling, imagining all the billions upon billions of stars out there somewhere, somewhere. I had seen them once; and once (one life), I guessed, was enough.

11

Morning light grew slowly from the drizzling fog outside, through cabin windows misty white as a cocoon. Faron and I were still wrapped tightly in each other's arms, under our cozy quilt. Suze still slept snug in her bed, and Matt stirred slightly from his upper bunk.

We lingered long in bed, watching our breath hover in the air, enjoying the peace of the special time and place. I was as yet unconscious of the dreams I'd had; I was only aware of Faron warmly breathing beside me, and I savored to the last that exquisite touch of our bodies together. Suze moved in soon enough to make it a threesome--a crowd, actually, but idyllic in its own way. Then Matt bent his tousled head down from his bunk to greet us with a hoarse but cheery "Good morning."

"Morning," said Faron.

"Hi--hi--hi," was Suze's high-pitched, staccato salutation.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Not too bad," Matt responded, "after that crashing of wood outside. I thought it might be a bear. Did you hear it?"

"Yes," I said, "and I thought of going out to see what it was, but decided I'd be better off behind that cabin door." It was only as I said this that I remembered my dreams.

I chose not to speak of them, as I had already set my sights on the return journey and wanted to proceed with our plans with a general feeling of confidence. I told myself that if we all survived such a night, we could certainly survive the day ahead.

There was nothing to do then but plunge out of the covers and into cold clothes. Matt and I briskly bustled about, making breakfast, while Faron dressed Suze and then started packing.

Breakfast was dried fruit, porridge, nuts, and leftover soup. We savored it as a feast. I knew from Faron's glowing silence that we still bathed in the wonder of our renewed connection. Matt and even Suze seemed also to be chewing in a reflective spirit, honoring the occasion.

But then there was time only to write our regards to the cabin and the mountains in the logbook, stuff packs full once again and head off to our separate destinations. It was decided that I would first accompany Faron, with Suze on my shoulders, to the end of the top ridge where their descent began.

We stood there holding one another for many long, blissful moments in the gray, icy drizzle, saying good-bye, our wet cheeks pressed warmly together. With visibility no more than three feet, turning my family loose was like sending them off into the void. The final bliss of our parting now became painful, and I wondered--not for the last time--if we were being foolish and blind to ignore the weather.

Faron caught my mood and reassured me, gamely taking her familiar role: "If you guys made it up okay on your side without any trail at all, then I should be all right finding my way down." I wasn't sure if she believed what she was saying, this time, or if she was just trying to make it easy for me.

"Maybe I should go down farther with you, till you're on the actual trail."

"No, that's all right, really. It might take us a long time to find it, or we might find it a long ways down. Matt would start to worry, and you might get lost on the way back up, like I did yesterday. I think we'll be fine. But thanks."

"Well, okay. I'm sure you'll recognize the way you came up, once you find it."

One more kiss, and they vanished into the mists; and I trudged back to the cabin to begin the descent on the other side of the mountain.

Matt and I were shortly hotfooting it down the east slope, leaving most of the foul weather behind. I felt, with some smug yet curious comfort, the truck keys in my pocket as we headed down. And with each step onto rock, mud, ice or heather, I was careful to

aim for a stable footing, aware that one false step and a twisted ankle could leave me stranded. Yet my leaps and bounds all managed to fall into place; and it took only an hour for us to reach the bottom.

Once on the road, we had another hour's walk to the truck, during which I began to recall in more detail the succession of nightmares, and so nursed with more and more regret, second thoughts about my headstrong decision to let Faron and Suze go unguided down the western slope. I told Matt about the soul-wrenching dreams (omitting the one about him and Faron starting something between them).

Matt said, "Well, I guess it's out of our hands now, buddy."

"Is that meant to console me?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you think we should have let them go like that?" I wondered, as I asked this, how my hiking partner would take the implication of joint responsibility. He took it without flinching.

"I had my doubts, but I did go along with it. Now that I hear those nightmares of yours, though, I must admit--I'm not so sure any more."

"But how much do dreams matter? Do you believe in prophecies? Those different unhappy endings can't all happen."

"That's a point. Maybe they were just warnings of what could happen."

"Yeah, no matter what we do. Damned if we let them go, damned if we stay up there."

"I see what you mean about that," Matt said. "At some point you just have to do the best you can."

Having given ourselves this measure of philosophical assurance, we went on to marvel at the psychic potency of the night's electrical storm; and then our conversation turned to lofty theories about the world ecumenical movement.

Matt felt that a person born to a given tradition was really in the same position as a person coming to it from the outside: it was up to that person to embrace a particular faith with the full power of individual choice. Without such devotion, their creed would be an empty shell. I agreed, with the additional observation that all the world's religions seemed, in their esoteric teachings, to advance similar values, moral codes, and revelations of cosmic unity.

Amidst such speculations we paused to greet a Stellar's jay, who perched beside us on a snag that leaned out over a precipitous drop to the gorge below. Matt said it was a good omen.

The truck, we knew, was parked just around the next bend in the road, across the last washout. But the runoff had swollen to a considerably greater depth and force after

the overnight rain. This, according to my cosmology, was a bad omen. We chose to cross with the aid of a rope sling which we set up to ferry our packs across.

With dry clothes waiting in the truck, we decided to keep our boots and pants on as we waded into the waist-deep, icy current. Luckily our poplar bannister was still there for us to hang onto as we fought the turbulence on the way across.

We came to the truck with final sighs of relief, briskly changed and jumped in the cab. But around the next bend in the road, Matt was moved to wonder if we'd taken a wrong turn. Because there was a major washout where the previous day, harmless inches of water had trickled over the road. It was nearly as wide and deep as the one we'd just waded through. Could we have somehow bypassed the real road? No, the truth remained: this was brand-new (except that it had a certain grim familiarity for me)--created overnight by the combined deluge of the storm and the melting snows. Logs that had formed a foundation for the roadbed were strewn about in the water, among the large rocks downstream, like so many pick-up sticks.

We got out of the truck, gaping at the extent of the destruction. The creek that roared in front of us was a good ten feet across and two feet deep, and full of boulders in such irregular array that, except for the old logs, and the road which plunged abruptly into the torrent on either side, one would never know that a road had ever crossed there.

There was little chance of making it across; that much was clear to both of us. We paced back and forth along the rocky bank, our minds racing from one unreasonable solution to another.

We could go for the crossing, Matt suggested anyway--hoping for freakish luck to bounce us from boulder to boulder and over to the other side. If we didn't make it, well . . . the truck could sit there in the creek until we got a tow truck up here.

But it would be a thirty-kilometer walk to Columbiana, I pointed out, and it was already mid-afternoon. If we phoned from there for a tow truck, it might not make it past the other swollen washouts farther along the road. It would, however, coming all the way from Inverness, be sure to cost plenty--maybe close to the value of my stranded truck.

"Hey," Matt said, backing off a little, "it's your truck. Whatever you want to do."

Maybe, I considered, I could just ditch the ill-fated Ford--at least temporarily. Then I'd have to make it somehow through the rest of the planting season without a truck (and all my gear for camping and planting, the variety of clothes for weather ranging from snow to burning heat, the spare boots, shovels, sleeping bags, tent . . .) but I could plan to return later in the summer with the Dodge to pull it out--or what was left of it by then.

We desperately plumbed our reserves of luck and surveyed the possible angles of an alternative crossing. Twenty feet upstream the creek was wider and somewhat

shallower, though still it swelled with a wild force that made the prospects of success seem madly slim. The only hope might be to build up the deepest holes in the creek bed there with fresh layers of rock. The current was strong enough to make loose boulders roll, however; so a log dam, supported by a row of well-placed rocks, would have to be installed first. It just might work, we began to think. I observed that we would also have to mine the approaches on both sides for the large rocks and log-ends that otherwise prevented access to and from the existing road. That operation would provide plenty of fill right at hand by the stream.

It was still a gamble, and it would take hours. If we invested our afternoon in such work and then stranded the truck in midstream, we'd be left without enough daylight, energy or food for the walk to Columbiana. Either way--botching it like that, or forgetting the whole thing and walking now--we'd be faced with a six-hour walk. Unless the gamble worked.

"So, what do you think?" I asked Matt.

"Like I said, it's your truck."

"Oh, hell," I said, with a shrug of my shoulders. "Let's go for it."

We spent the next three hours hardly talking, just working doggedly to throw and drop and nudge rock after rock into place, building up the stream bed, wading and digging, smoothing and widening the approaches.

At last the job was done well enough--we hoped. The water still rushed over the rocks about a foot deep, but without its former turbulence, as the boulders now fit together in a relatively even pattern under the current. The large tires and high-riding frame of the truck would be put to the test, but with a good head of steam, we just might make it.

I hopped in behind the wheel, with my adrenaline starting to flow. Matt posted himself on the upstream side to watch where the wheels were headed. It was going to be hard to see where I was going, and I'd only have one chance.

The engine revved smoothly; I gunned it. I spun the steering wheel just right, apparently, because I was over and down onto the road in a moment. Matt's eyes were large, however, as he trotted down to the truck and pointed back to the creek.

"Man, you just made it," he said. "Your right rear wheel took out that log dam just as it passed over. Good thing you had some momentum or you'd still be back in the creek."

We arrived at Columbiana just in time for our four-thirty phone call to the company office. I also tried my home number to see if Faron had arrived yet. There was no answer, and once more I began to worry.

"It's still a little early yet," Matt reassured me. "It must have been slow going with that load she was carrying."

"Yeah, I guess you're right.

But back on the road, I had to wonder, would we really be able to enjoy a celebratory supper tonight? In fact, would we even get as far as Inverness? My eyes followed the needle of the fuel gauge down to E, and below.

"Maybe I should have tried Ron's while we were at the phone, to see if she stopped in there on her way home. Or maybe her sister's place . . ."

"Hey, we'll be in town in a few minutes. It's all downhill from here."

As soon as we gassed up and parked, I headed for the pay phone. Matt went on to a restaurant across the street, called The Meeting Place.

Faron answered, her voice vibrantly alive. She and Suze were all right. But on the way down, she'd been lost.

"Oh, Faron," I told her, sick at heart. "I should have gone with you farther to find that trail."

"I don't how much that would have helped, really. I just couldn't see a thing. And I was completely soaked, and shivering, and my pants were torn, and Suze was crying--" And Faron started to cry on the phone while she told me the rest.

For hours she'd wandered through the untracked brush, until, at the limit of her endurance, she decided to bushwhack straight downhill, leaving the backpack behind so as to save what little strength she had left for carrying Suze.

My grief at being partly responsible for her nightmarish ordeal was balanced by a final elation that they'd survived. The backpack could stay there forever, even with our down quilts inside, as a monument to what might have been.

"But I know where I left it," Faron said. "Under a certain tree . . ."

"Oh, great. Under a tree."

"No really," she laughed. "I don't think it would be that hard to find. I made a little stone cairn, to mark the trail where I came onto it, straight downhill from the pack. I bet we could find it."

We. Now that sounded more promising. Maybe it would be fun to go back there together. We could take along some flagging tape and mark the hillside as we traversed it, looking for the pack. Suze would enjoy a little picnic out there--if the bugs weren't too bad in July.

We told each other good-bye, and I left the phone booth with a spring in my step, to cross the street to The Meeting Place.

Morning dawned through the nearby window, and my eyelids pulled slowly open. Faron still slept beside me curled up under the covers; I'd tossed them off during the night

and now felt cold in the chill morning air. I could see that Suze still slept peacefully in her bed. I pulled the bedclothes back over me and snuggled closer to Faron.

It was clear out, likely to be another scorching July day once the sun came out in force. This was to be the day we would go back to Mirror Pass together, to see if the bears and squirrels had left us anything of the backpack. If we could find it. If the Tumbler Creek road was still negotiable. If I didn't get called back to work while we sat down to breakfast. If the good weather held.

Romance Not For Sale

CABIN FEVER

"Were you alone in your dreams?"

Leave it to Linda to ask me a question like that, while holding me stiff in her hand.

What could I say, but "No, actually. I was being courted by two other women."

She was quiet for just a fraction of a moment, as if she didn't really want to ask the next question, but she couldn't help herself. "Oh--and who were they?"

I've always prided myself on my honesty. So I said, "One was Sharon." Linda tried to smile, failed. She looked into my eyes, then straight through me . . . no doubt to a place three years gone, a place I'd entered by confiding in Sharon that I "loved" her.

"Who else?" Linda asked, her voice without expression, her dark eyes vacant.

"I'm not sure. Maybe Glynnis, or someone I can't quite fit a name to." To dream of Glynnis was not so bad. She was the lover who had stood between me and the void when I was between my first wife and Linda. The short history of Glynnis was over and done with when Linda came into my life. Sharon was another story. Sharon was Linda's big sister.

"Were they both at you at once, or what?"

"No. It was more like separate dreams, one after the other."

"Anyway, you were making love with them?"

I pulled her long lean body closer, spoke to her over a bony shoulder. "No, I don't think I did. It was kind of erotic, you know, with both of them, but nothing serious. Like with Sharon, I remember she came over and--oh Linda, this is ridiculous. All that's past now."

My wife remained silent, though I read the unspoken reply in her mind:

"Evidently not."

I began to stroke her back, her hips, her tense buttocks. She began to relax, to moan softly. With that signal our three-year-old daughter Belle awoke from her own little mattress on the floor beside our bed and crawled in on top of us.

Linda had plans that day to go to her mother's place with Belle. The three generations were collaborating on a birthday present for Sharon. I wasn't yet sure how I'd fill the day. It was a Saturday, in mid-January. It had snowed overnight. The air was fresh and cold, a few degrees below freezing, as I went out to feed the horse and ducks. I first lit a fire in the trash barrel to burn the paper that had filled its kitchen bin to overflowing; we burned waste paper outside to keep the ashes in the woodstove pure for use on the garden. The fire took off briefly, flaring up quickly in the morning breeze off

the hillside; then it subsided to a slow smoldering as we watched through the kitchen window over bowls of granola.

I finished eating first and went over to stand in front of the crackling woodstove, still trying to warm up, and still considering how I might take advantage of a day to myself. Then Linda came over to stand beside me by the stove. We hugged and kissed, savoring an unusually close feeling of physical contact this morning. We hadn't made love in a week--since the last Saturday, I observed; and before that, the previous Saturday. I remembered, because that was New Year's Eve, and we'd made love before going to the party at the village hall. . . .

That night at the party, a bunch of us had shared our New Year's resolutions. When my turn came I told those gathered friends that I was tired of working too hard, with long hours and no vacations, on a series of local carpentry jobs. I resolved to enjoy more time off in the coming year--to spend more time, I said, visiting people.

Later I found myself in conversation with Sharon, standing beside a white-draped table all festooned with sprigs of holly. I was telling her how I once was a downhill skier; how I'd traded in my Heads for a pair of second-hand touring skis when I gave up the fast life and moved out to the country. She wanted to hear more. She asked me about my first wife. I didn't want to talk about that part of my life. Before, the subject hadn't come up. Now I just told her I'd decided to look for a slower, more leisurely--if frugal--lifestyle, more family-centered. But first I'd had to weather a long winter alone in a tiny

cabin, especially lonely after an autumn that saw Glynnis come and go. That winter there had been tons of snow, I said, and I'd taken advantage of my new skis to combat cabin fever. Then, in the spring, I'd met Linda.

Sharon suddenly seemed impatient. She drained her punch and then quickly refilled her glass cup. Then she said to me, "So you don't get cabin fever any more?" She eyed me sharply, with a slight tilt of her head that caused her brown hair on the one side to waver expectantly--an engaging pose.

"Oh--" I faltered, "I guess I do get to feeling a bit homebound at times; that's why I made the resolution I did. Only I meant to say that I planned to do more things like skiing, and fishing . . .

"As well as visiting people?"

"Yeah; that too. I guess I haven't made any time to visit you in quite a while."

"No. But then I haven't exactly gone out of my way to see you, either." She lowered her eyes.

It was a sad fact of our lives, these last three years since a merely cordial relationship had nearly exploded into a love affair. Belle had been a baby then, nursing at home with Linda almost constantly. My friendly visits with Sharon had become more frequent, intimate and dangerous. We were, as my best friend put it to me, playing with fire. But, with the help of my underlying faithfulness to Linda, and the morose jealousy of Sharon's husband, Jeff, we'd had the propriety finally to bring our flirtations to a

grinding halt. Except, of course, in the occasional dream.

I finished my own punch and stood there cracking the plastic cup in my hands. I glanced around the crowded hall. Jeff, a moody songwriter and musician, was fortunately nowhere in sight. Then I caught a glimpse of him at the other end of the hall, busy with setup for the band. At that point Linda came up behind me, putting her hand lightly on the small of my back.

"Hi, you guys."

"Hi!" Sharon and I said in unison, both startled out of our uncomfortable reverie.

"We've just been talking about skiing," I said to Linda. "Sharon's been inspiring me. She says she's been up and down the mountain already--with snow on the ground only a week."

Sharon joined me in recreating our conversation for Linda's benefit: "With all that rain and oppressive overcast we've had, I was down with a good case of cabin fever even before real winter set in. You could say I was motivated to get out and go for it. Especially with Jeff gone so much for the recording sessions. Anyway, it's worth the climb; it's a really fun run now."

"That's nice," said Linda. She didn't ski.

I said, "I wonder if I'm ready for that run myself."

Sharon replied, "Oh, sure you are; it's not that hard."

"We are at about the same level of skill, I think, aren't we?"

Sharon giggled as if at a private joke and nearly spilled her punch. Linda took a quick step back out of the way and scowled at her fuller-bodied sister, the sister who was three years closer to my age.

I was still facing Sharon. I was tipsy myself. I tried not to keep from looking down the loose, squarish neckline of her yellow dress; my eyes fixed instead on her laughing blue eyes, the red sheen of her holiday lips. I tried to keep my dancing thoughts on track--like errant skis on an icy slope, I thought with some amusement. Now, what were we saying? Oh, right--

"Remember that beginner's cross-country workshop we both took, what was it, three years ago?"

"Oh yes, that," Sharon said. "I remember." She glanced at Linda, who'd returned to her station at my side with a firmer arm around my lower back. "We both fell down a lot."

"Right," I laughed. Then, suddenly serious--"We've both improved since then, haven't we?"

She just looked at me and smiled, a regular Mona Lisa. It was time to end the conversation. I put my arm around my black-haired mate, smiled back at Sharon and said to her, "See you later."

I'd ended up hotly kissing Sharon that night in the midnight melee, against my better judgment. . . .

Now, a long week later, in Linda's arms by the woodstove, I found myself saying, "This must be making-love day. It's Saturday."

It took her a moment to think back. "Oh--you're right. I guess we have a date tonight." Then she looked a little sad, pouting and averting her eyes.

"Linda, everything all right?"

A dainty slippered foot pawed at a clump of dust on the floor--a product, I reflected, of dirt, hair, sawdust, and ash.

"Still thinking about my dream?"

"Oh, it's all right."

"Linda, I prefer you to any dream."

She shyly smiled. You could say she was better-looking than Sharon. In fact, I loved her for all kinds of reasons, and for feelings we truly shared. Sharon was different, with another kind of beauty, other feelings. I never seriously doubted that I'd made the right choice. Not that I ever had an actual choice: Sharon had been married to Jeff as long as I'd known her.

Belle, who up till now had been peacefully dawdling over her soggy granola, dropped her spoon on the floor with a clatter. "Aaaah--droppy spoooon! Mommy . . ."

"Well," Linda said with her characteristic singsong sigh as she pulled away from me, "I suppose we should get going to Mom's." As she went over to tend to Belle she

turned her head back with an afterthought: "What are you going to do today?"

My body felt eager for exercise. There was no work this time of the year. I hadn't been out of the house much during the past week of dim overcast weather. "It's a nice day," I said. "Maybe I'll go skiing."

"Oh, yeah . . . up on the mountain?"

"I'm not sure how far I'll go. I also have some letters to write, that book I'd like to finish reading . . ."

"I have some more things for your list." Linda carried coats and boots in from the porch.

"Do I want to know?"

"Fix the pulley on the flour mill, and the leaky tap in the bathroom; sweep the floor . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, right. Don't worry; I'll think of something, if I find myself with time to burn. I'll start up with you two, on skis."

Finally we got ourselves warmly dressed and out of the house. I'd stoked and shut down the woodstove to last at least the rest of the morning. Linda took a last look at the smoldering trash barrel, now sending up but a few thin wisps of smoke, and said, "Do you think that fire's okay to leave?"

"Oh, yeah," I replied without hesitation. It'll be fine, with that screen on top."

I snapped the ski bindings down tight on the flanged toes of my boots and set off. Linda carried Belle on her back so as to make better time, keeping up with me. We had a twenty-minute trek uphill on our snow-covered driveway, to reach the truck we kept parked on the plowed road. I thought I might go with them as far as the road and then ski back down the driveway. Or, I considered, I might continue walking up the main road to the foot of the mountain and then ski up the logging road where Sharon had been.

When we reached the steepest part of the driveway, I took my skis off, and Linda put Belle down to walk because she was too heavy to carry any farther. Halfway up the steep hill, Belle slipped once too often, got snow in her boots, and started crying. I reacted callously.

"The baby's crying again, Linda. Maybe I'd better take her home again."

"I'm not a baby!" the red-faced Belle bawled at me.

She managed to muster enough strength and pride to finish the toughest part of the climb, followed by Linda close behind and then me, carrying the skis on my shoulder and the poles in my other hand. For the last, level stretch to the road I put the skis back on. By the time we came to the end of the driveway I'd pretty much made up my mind to go all the way up the logging trails on the mountainside and ski down. Though I'd hiked to the top several summers ago, I had never yet been up on skis. Did I not trust my limited skills?--or was it, rather, a lack of what Sharon had called motivation, or, shall we say, clear resolution? In any case, now I figured if Sharon could do it, I was game, too.

Our truck sat beside the plowed and sanded road just opposite Jeff and Sharon's driveway. Jeff's car was gone from its shoveled spot. He would be in the city now, recording his first album of original songs, including the local hit, "See You in My Dreams."

Linda put Belle in the truck and then turned to me before leaving.

I said, "Maybe I will try the mountain today. Conditions are good and I have lots of time."

"Okay. Well, have a good ski." She smiled. "Don't fall down too much."

As we hugged one last time, I watched a lazy column of smoke rising above the trees on Jeff and Sharon's side of the road, against the looming mountain. I let Linda go and as she turned away I said, "See you in my dreams."

She looked at me oddly and then turned to the truck.

I unsnapped my skis, stood there in the road and watched her drive away. I began shivering; my forehead felt flushed with fever.

LENO'S FEAST

Councilman Leno Atack sat at his desk, his face in his hands. It was a good job, he told himself, the best he could ask for. But he was tired--even though he hadn't moved from these pale, blank walls all day. Leno arched his back and loudly groaned. His stout chest ached from sitting so long; his eyes watered from poring over so many documents, memos and government reports. The stack of them on his desk teetered like a poorly-built inukshuk, a man of stones pointing the way somewhere on a bleak, windy day. Leno took a deep breath, flexed his stubby fingers, and looked to the window, where he could see outside how cold it was. He thought of the time when he was ten and his fingers had nearly frozen on such a day, when his family still lived out on the land.

Leno looked at his watch. It was 3:15. Time to go home; he'd worked enough. The kids were already out of school now--why not everyone else? This was like school, but more lonely. There weren't the others to joke around with, the teacher to fool. There were other Council members, sure, but they didn't need to hold down the office as Leno did. It only took one, and he'd been the lucky one to get the job.

He put on his parka, tying up the wolfskin-fringed hood around his face, and walked out the long, low building to the crisp snow. Skidoos rumbled past; kids played in their roundabout way home from school. Leno didn't even know half of them. He walked the long way home, around the snow-packed road that squared the block of

houses. He should have gone up the back alleyway, but today he wanted a bit more exercise. He finally came round to the house he'd been given to rent when he was elected to the Council, two winters ago--the white one with the tag on it reading "41." As he walked up to it on the shoveled path, Leno thought with pride what a fine, large, warm house it was. He'd done pretty well for himself. And he was only forty.

Thin, grayish-blue smoke from the oil burner was rising from the chimney pipe, and Leno wondered what there would be to eat that his wife Mary would be preparing. But today it was too early yet for supper. He'd sit down for some tea and bannock with her. As he opened the front door, he heard a muffled voice and the loud closing of the back porch door. A skidoo started up and roared away. Now who was that?, he wondered.

Leno walked through the living room to the kitchen. Mary was standing near the door to the porch, as if at a loss for what to do. Her face was flushed. Leno asked, in the native Inuktitut he and his wife still used at home, "Who was that, Mary?"

The round face of his squat wife turned away. Yes, she was still pretty. But this was too much. "Who was that, I said!"

She turned back to him, suddenly flaming mad. "It was Robert, the teacher," she blurted. "I don't appreciate being talked to like that."

"And what did he want?"

“Just to talk about Lizzie’s schoolwork. She’s not trying very hard. We’re supposed to talk to her about it.”

“Oh we are, are we?” And suddenly the old resentments broke through from their long buildup like green river water at the spring breakup. “So she can get good marks and go to boarding school down south and get a good job like me, only for her it’ll be as a typist in the School Board office where all those stuffed pricks can walk by and peer up her skirt? No way. She shouldn’t even be in that school. We should take her out right now and teach her how to do the work of the Inuit women, before she’s totally useless-- unless it’s too late already.”

Mary at first reacted to Leno’s outburst with dumb surprise, but then she patiently waited for her say. “Well, this is a different tune from you. I’m not sure what I’m hearing. The great graduate of the white man’s system now wants to tell our daughter that it was all a mistake, and the Inuit should go back to starving in our igloos. Or is it just for the women to go back to scraping their filthy animal skins, chewing rotten meat for their babies to suck on, sewing with bone needles till--”

Leno’s fuming glare stopped her short. She must have realized the offense she was causing, for her eyes, now damp, were downcast. Leno was taken aback by his wife’s torrent of words, and he could only stand there confronting her in angry silence, searching his thoughts for words. He’d only heard this sentiment about the plight of women, until now, in newspapers and radio interviews from the south. What a state had

things come to when the woman in her home could pick up such ideas--she must have heard them on the radio, too--and turn them against the husband in an argument like this. And then there was the "visit" by this white teacher, the tall, bearded, single man, Robert. What was he doing here so soon after school, anyway? He should have been in the classroom marking papers or erasing the board. She's afraid to look me in the eye, Leno thought.

He decided to hold on to his suspicions at this point and not to provoke any more such disturbing discussion. He stalked out into the living room with the satisfaction of the victor, but with the self-consciousness of the defeated. He turned on the TV set and sat in his threadbare armchair, the one he'd salvaged from one of the teacher's houses when the School Board sent up new furniture.

Mary had looked up and stood there at the kitchen doorway, staring at him. Leno felt her eyes on him as he picked at the chipped wood on the arm of his chair and tried to watch "Mickey Mouse Club" on the TV. He realized what a caribou must feel like when it's aware it's being hunted without yet seeing the hunter. Then she turned back with a final muttering under her breath to the kitchen to start working on supper.

The next day, after a night of poor sleep, of alienation from his wife's body and spirit, Leno sat down at his desk in the Council office to tackle the day's work. Staring at the document before him, he felt, with some amusement, like a pupil waiting for the

teacher to prod him to get to work. Just like he used to do, in fact. And from the sound of it, just like his daughter Lizzie was doing, probably at that very moment. Waiting for Robert to prod her.

No, Leno forced himself to think, not yet. She's only eleven. Was it too late to take her out of school? Probably. It was too bad that Lizzie was their only child. All the fault of those butchers at the hospital in Moose River, where Mary had been flown for the birth. They'd cut out her ovaries while they were inside her for the Caesarean. And for no good reason that he was ever told.

Now, with only one child to raise, there was no room to experiment with different cultural paths, the way some parents did with their kids. One would be sent to school, the next one would be kept home to learn traditional skills, a third might be sent back and forth, like Lizzie's chum Sala Putak... who wasn't doing any better or worse than Lizzie in school, but was probably a bad influence.

No, Leno hadn't spoken to her last night about her schoolwork. Why encourage her on the same road he'd taken? Who knows, she might bounce him out of a job before he knew it. Then where would he be? No, it was too late to change the course she was on, but still not worth helping Robert and the others make her any more white than she wanted to be. So that was that. Now, where was he?

The memo. The long, official looking memo that smelled of more work that he'd put off dealing with, and that had remained stubbornly on the top of his ungainly pile of

papers. It had come from Richard James, the village's Government agent, who served as middleman

between the Inuit and the southern bureaucracy. Leno himself was the next link in the chain on the Inuit side. It was his responsibility to carry out Government policies as they applied to village affairs, and conversely, to represent Inuit concerns to the Government--normally through the Government agent.

James played a role, then, roughly equivalent to Leno's; yet his house was as much an improvement over Leno's accommodations as the latter were over the bulk of the population's housing. Plumbing, heating and electricity Leno had, but not the fine, soft living room furniture, the vast array of kitchen implements and utensils, the large stereo system with its various components, the automatic washer and dryer...The occasional party he'd attended there gave Leno all the glimpse he'd needed of white opulence, which he both scorned and envied.

He turned his thoughts to the memo that James had signed for the Government. It read:

2 November

To: All Inuit Village Councils

Re: Service Amenities/Housing

It has been brought to our attention that water delivery in the settlements has been less than adequate, in regard to maintaining reserve

supplies in houses of Government employees, including teaching staff. In addition, the lack of adequate housing and school facilities pointed out by local school committees and ratified by population meetings has made it necessary to review at the Territorial level and recommend the following amendments to the Village Guidelines (Sect. 3(a)1, para. 5,17) at this time:

1. Effective immediately, water delivery to Government staff (including all school employees save temporary, locally-based help, e.g. janitorial, secretarial, cultural prep., etc.) shall be increased to a daily basis, or made upon request. Until such time as village tank truck fleets are upgraded and/or expanded, the fulfillment of this requirement vis-a-vis delivery to the village housing at large shall be considered "Priority."

2. Blueprints for upgraded housing for Government staff (defined as per sect. 1) and expanded school complex buildings to be forwarded in near future. Construction crews under contract from southern points to be augmented by local hiring, under quota of Territorial Labour Code Sect. 42, recruitment and training to begin immediately. Prescriptions on village-by-village basis to follow.

Territorial Government Central Office

via: Village Agents

signed: Richard James

“Locally-based help, eh,” echoed Leno, mouthing out the words. “That’s Peter Airo, Thomassie Putak, Jana Samsik...me, too, for that matter.” He realized he was talking to himself, in English no less, and shut up. Someone might hear him and think he was stupid. Someone who’d wandered into the Council office to ask for more water to be delivered...when it had to be pumped out through six feet of ice on Perry Lake and trucked on the two half-tracks--if both were working--four miles to the village, to fill tanks in a half-dozen houses. Now they were asking for daily deliveries. That would leave time for about a dozen Inuit houses a day out of sixty-seven. If both tank trucks were working, which was maybe half the time.

Leno got up and stretched, and walked off his nervous agitation in the direction of the main office “lobby,” where the coffee machine sat at the ready. Rita, the secretary in the office at the other end of the building, heard Leno and came out to join him.

“How you doin’ today, Leno?” He liked the way she talked, her English words carefully modulated, like her hair that was so neatly tied behind her head before it continued in a dark cascade down her back to wave like a wolf tail over her blue-jeaned rump. He liked the way she wore her cotton shirts with the top three buttons undone. And he liked the fact that this young woman, fifteen years his junior, seemed to enjoy his company at coffee. He smiled.

“Oh, okay, I guess.” He sipped coffee, too hot. “Got a pretty heavy request to deal with from the Government right now. It’s that business about the water and the new houses, all coming at once. I don’t think the population’s gonna like it. It’ll mean more taxes in the end. And people aren’t going to get the water they need.”

Rita had taken a seat on the little chrome-and-leather bench beside the coffee. Leno sat down in the oak chair with the burbling machine between them. “But didn’t everyone already give their okay to those things, last spring was it?”

“Heh, those guys wait long enough till we forget what it was we okayed.” Leno paused as he sipped, his attention diverted by the tightness of Rita’s jeans on her open-crossed thighs.

She noticed his absent staring and shifted her legs to cross tightly together. Leno picked up the thread of what he was saying.

“Uh, yeah. What it was, we agreed to more housing and water service. For the settlement. That doesn’t mean only for Government employees. It means for the Inuit--- at least that’s what the people thought when they voted on that thing.”

“You mean it’s just gonna be for us, like who worked at the Council?”

“Hah, hardly. They thought of that already and were careful to exclude all what they call ‘locally-based help.’ How’s that for a little subtle racism?” Leno was proud of his choice of words: “subtle.” Rita probably did better in school than he did, had even finished a higher grade, eleven. But he enjoyed talking with her, carrying on English

conversation like this. It set him apart from the old-fashioned, ignorant "Eskimo" that he hadn't wanted to become.

"I'll say," she was agreeing.

"Well, why don't we just demand to be part of it, though. If the population wanted those things for the Inuit, at least the bureaucrats could start with us."

Leno was amazed to hear, with such innocent clarity, what he had not consciously schemed himself, but had secretly desired. It was perfect. He would approach the Council--they could all be considered Government employees--and they would call a meeting of the population. Certainly when reminded of their earlier decision, the people would reassert the need for improved housing and water service; and of course they could now realize, when properly briefed on the Government's current plans, that it would be necessary to stipulate, in specific terms, the first stages of such improvement in the village. Naturally, to compromise with the Government's already-arrived-at understanding, an extension of the narrow definition of "Government employee" should be made to local Inuit Council members and--his mental rehearsal paused long enough to remember Rita smiling at him coquettishly over her coffee cup--even, perhaps, their own "Locally-based help." Oh yes, and they could throw in the demand, for bargaining's sake, for inclusion of the Inuit in the employ of the School Board: Airo, Putak, and the rest. Those Uncle Tomahawks, Leno chuckled to think, would likely be just as happy

with what they've got now. Leno satisfied himself that the strategy was complete and tossed down the last of his coffee.

"Yup, Rita. We've got something to work on, now." He took one last, longing glance at the slender V of visible chest, smiled and walked away back to his office. She stood there a moment, looking down at herself, and returned to her own end of the building.

Leno could put the distasteful memo away for now and get on to other things. He'd bring it up at the Council meeting on Friday. He wondered whom Rita was seeing these days. She still lived with her parents in that shack down near Putak's, didn't she? He remembered hearing from one or the other of the Councilmen that she often went to the teachers' parties. Leno thought of her drinking and dancing with Robert, the best-looking of the single teachers, and began to feel that irritated resentment again. He rubbed a broad, stubby-fingered hand over his acne-scarred cheeks. With hot eyes and a deep sigh, Leno went on to the next slip of paper on the top of his pile, a pile that never disappeared.

The right to call population meetings and move on their deliberated decisions was the prerogative of the village Council according to the Government's own "Guidelines." Of course the village Council had no power to act on such decisions without the corroboration and, inevitably, approval of funding by the Territorial office. But they

would have to exploit what little power they had. The eight-man Council, in their Friday meeting, fully supported Leno's plan. A general meeting of the people was announced immediately.

The population meeting, in the thick smoke of the community hall, saw call after call for improvement of local housing and water service. Every speech was an echo of what had been said on the matter in April. As it became obvious that a more specific directive was needed this time to spell out the demand to the Government, Leno rose to reiterate his proposition.

He deferred to the still-intact custom of speaking in the native tongue. "It's obvious," Leno began in a loud voice, unusual for him but effective at times like this when he needed it--public speaking was his own talent, and he'd learned to respect and use it to full advantage. "It's obvious," he repeated for emphasis, "that we all want more and better housing for all our people in this settlement. And if that's a long-range goal, at least we can be confident that we have a reasonable demand now for good water-delivery service. My own feeling is that we need at least two more tank-trucks to bring that service up to the level necessary." He paused to allow the murmurs of approval to settle with his listeners. He noticed Mary, a face in the crowd, looking at him with admiration. His chest swelled and he continued with even greater confidence.

"But you know, this Government doesn't listen very well. We've told them already, after the meetings last spring before breakup, and they haven't heard what we've

been telling them. I think we should break through that white ice--" and at this Leno noticed a sharp glance from Robert, who was standing with two other teachers over by the door--"and tell this Government in no uncertain terms that when we say housing, we mean Inuit housing, and when we say water, we mean Inuit water." The teachers all looked blankly now into the crowd, whose faces beamed dimly though the hazy fluorescence of the hail.

Leno had only to finish now, to drive his point home. "I would like to propose that we be very clear that that's what we want for our village." Now came the crucial part, the clincher, when the game had been sighted and stalked, and finally frozen in its tracks. "However. We've got to start somewhere. This Government, we all know, is just going to say forget it, it's impossible, it's too much money to do all that. You know how they are, and they've said as much already. However. If we present to them a long-range plan, which the Council can work out, to bring by stages what we're asking for, I think that's our chance to get what we need."

He sat down. That was all he needed to say, and it worked. The Council was given the clear mandate to draw up a development plan and present it to the Government in the name of the community. The first stage in the Council's report to the Government would be extension of the directives regarding new housing construction and increased water delivery to apply to all Inuit at present holding full Council status. The second

stage, to be negotiated at a later date as yet unspecified, would bring related benefits to ancillary staff of the Council and the School Board.

Ancillary. The word rolled around in Leno's mouth, silently. It was his wording, primarily, in the draft, and as he prepared the report in its final form he again relished the power of his acquired vocabulary that he had learned with such diligence at the boarding school in the south. He packed the document up in a temporary, used manila envelope, wrote on it with a felt-tip marker in large capital letters "RITA--TO TYPE AND MAIL," and put it in his wire "out" basket. It would have been more expedient to take it to her directly right then, for she was working at the other end of the one-story office building. But Leno felt a nagging hesitation about giving her the report just yet. She wasn't going to like it, and he didn't want to face her when she read it. But it would have to happen sooner or later.

Heck (he reasoned it out again): we asked for everyone to benefit in the end; it's just that we couldn't demand everything at once. The Government didn't have unlimited funds, after all, and these things cost money. Leno finally decided to get it over with, to drop off the envelope on his way out the door. He'd knock off early and go home for a couple of beers with Mary. It was Friday, after all.

Rita looked up at him when he came into her office. Her usual smile was absent. She must have heard already what we've agreed to ask, Leno thought--from one of the

other Council members. You can't trust anyone. The second and third buttons of Rita's shirt were done up today, and he sneered as he tossed the envelope on her desk. Fickle women, he thought to himself. One day they lead you on, the next, nothing to offer. Fuck 'em. And without a word Leno turned and left.

As soon as he turned up the alleyway to his house, Leno saw the skidoo parked at the little, pale green picket fence that marked his back lawn. His face grew hot as he walked up to the machine and recognized Robert's keys in it with the leather thong dangling from the ignition. He was glad of his talent now, but that didn't help him much in knowing what to do next. He looked at his watch. Strange, he thought. It's only two-ten. Robert should still be in school.

What the heck? It's my house, for jeez sake, he thought, and strode up the snow-crunchy walk to the door of the back porch. At the door he decided to try a quieter approach and slopped in silently, as he might stalk a bear.

The door creaked on its hinges as he swung it shut against the cold. Damn, he cursed under his breath. And there were Robert's boots making their puddles on the floor. When Leno opened the inner door to the kitchen, it, too, creaked. A chair moved in the living room. A cup clattered down on a table. Mary appeared at the doorway to the kitchen looking frustrated.

“Well, Leno.” She spoke in halting English, for Robert’s sake. “You’re--you’re home early. We’re just, ah, having tea--Robert’s here--he brought Lizzie home sick from school.”

Robert appeared and stood behind and to the side of Mary. He wore a smug smile that made Leno avert his eyes to the blank kitchen wall. Leno didn’t know what to say or even what language to use. He wanted to assert his own native authority in his own house, but in the presence of the teacher he didn’t want to sound stupid. He chose English.

“Where’s Lizzie?”

“We’ve put her to bed. She had a pretty high fever and was sick at school. Seems like the flu.”

We, thought Leno. We put her to bed. Indeed. “And why aren’t you back at school?” he snapped, finally glaring at Robert for an instant.

Robert’s cool reply deflected Leno’s eyes again. “I had a spare this hour anyway. It’s culture class.”

Leno just stood there. He looked at Mary again, his lips pursed tightly.

“Well,” said Robert. “I might as well leave now.”

It was only then, as Robert moved his tall frame past him through the kitchen, that Leno noticed Robert was wearing a coat and carrying a hat. Still wearing it. Nothing had happened, and yet he had gotten all upset, even angry.

Now he felt ashamed, as he heard the teacher putting on his boots in the porch. But he still didn't like that Robert. No, he still didn't trust him. The outer porch door closed, the boots crunched down the walk; the key turned and the skidoo roared to life, and then faded away in the December afternoon.

There, thought Leno, and he turned back to Mary, who was still in the doorway, leaning up against it with one arm over her head, looking at him with an inscrutable smile. Like the Mona Lisa, he thought. Women. You can't figure 'em. "Let's have a beer," he said, in perfect English.

The community hall was decked out with bright red and green, silver and blue ribbons, and artwork from all the classes of the school. It was packed with people, and the air was thick with tobacco smoke and frosty breath and steam from the great kettles that would feed three hundred. Baked char, roast caribou, seal steaks, the same meats frozen and raw for the slicing, a large pot of soup, another of potatoes, stacks of bannock, urns of tea...it was a grand Christmas feast, and the gay gabble of voices was punctuated by the metallic clatter of serving spoons and pot lids.

The children were served first, and soon disappeared outdoors to the skating rink that had both white and colored lights set up around it for the occasion. The older people were next, then they lingered in the vicinity of the big barrel stove, pulling up chairs and lighting pipes, telling tales of Christmases past.

Leno stood in line watching the collective merriment and feeling warm from the brandy he'd just sipped from a pocket flask, the fancy one he'd bought on a whim two years ago on the Council's trip south. The few who had seen him take his nip just watched; they didn't come over to ask for any. At this rate, it would last a while yet, perhaps into the square dancing tonight, thought Leno, feeling the flask snug in his vest pocket.

He was looking forward to the roast caribou. He hadn't enjoyed any in months. There had been none for sale at the Co-op all that fall; the hunters must have been saving what little surplus they had for the annual feast instead. It was a long line-up, though. Leno slipped out his flask and had another swig. He thought with pride of his full water-tank at home. Well, now nearly full, after the deep, hot bath he'd enjoyed alone while Mary had gone early to help with the food.

Leno's mind ran once again over the blueprints the Council had received two months ago, the blueprints for the house that would be his. A house just like the one Richard James and the teachers enjoyed, just like the one Robert--

In the moment Leno thought of him, as if by magic, the tall, bearded white teacher appeared. Now Robert was standing, talking with the person in front of Leno in line. That was Peter Airo, the culture teacher. Oh, they were good friends, were they? Robert didn't so much as glance at Leno.

They were approaching the serving area. Mary was there dishing out soup, her face ruddy and gleaming with steam. Next to her was Rita--wearing her plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, well open at the neck and sweat-marked--slicing roast caribou. There wasn't much left, Leno saw to his chagrin, as he peered past Robert's shoulder. The teacher had somehow managed to step into line just between Peter Airo and himself.

There, Peter chose caribou--but certainly he'd had some from his hunting all year! A healthy slice still remained, but then Robert's long arm pointed to it, and Rita hefted the whole piece onto his plate. Robert carried it away, down the line for bannock. Surely it could have been sliced in two! Rita looked at Leno and smiled, wiping her empty, greasy hands on the front of her shirt.

Mary, just beyond, smiled too. "Soup?" she asked.

TRANSITIONS

Day 1

--What's the purpose of your trip, Mr. Now?

--To argue the vagaries of existence with one who understands.

--I see. Is that why you brought a smaller, lighter notebook but two days' too much food?

--Yes, I thought I might stay awhile.

--You mean, until your food runs out.

--Are you badgering me?

--Sorry, sir. Back to the questions. Just what are you doing here?

--Following my footsteps.

--One at a time...

--What my heart says.

--At the moment. What about tomorrow, when the food runs out?

--You mean, five days from now?

--Whenever. It will happen.

--That's all right, I still got my pen and pad.

--Till that runs out. Then what?

--I'll swim in the creek.

--Get serious. Weren't you going to become a lawyer once?

--To get back to your original question, I just felt inspired to go.

--Just like that. No plan?

--I did pack a little too much food—just in case.

--In case you might be inspired to extend your visit, when the time comes...

--Yeah.

--By the way, who was that pretty lady I saw by the bridge you crossed coming this way?

--Is that part of the interview?

--Absolutely. Our readers want to hear everything. Especially that part.

--I thought I'd set out on a solo adventure. Now. Does that answer all your questions?

--Not by a long shot. But I can see you're ready for a break. Why don't you walk awhile, and I'll see you at the next stop. Don't be late.

Day 2

--Well, Mr. Now? You look different.

--I turned back. Spent the night at home.

--Alone?

--Yes. Dropped half my stuff off: the sleeping bag, tent, food...too many options, it was a burden. And so unnecessary.

--We learn from our mistakes.

--You said it.

--So what have you decided to carry with you now? Do you mind my prying?

--No problem. You've noticed my different pack: a standard mid-sized Outbound daypack with its top pocket zipper replaced by Velcro which is too worn to rely on anymore...

--Go on...

--All right. Item: one dog-scratched mouse-chewed twenty-six year old ensolite pad, which I got for my first camping trip in the west, when I came to California in 1972...

--Are you planning to give me the whole story?

--You want the whole story?

--Uh...does this mean for every item? We're only on the first.

--We've got 2 days.

--Save it for later. What's next?

--Okay:

- one mini-bungie for a chest strap
- one pair Tevas strapped to the outside of the pack
- one canister pepper spray for bears, strapped around my waist
- in my left pocket, one handkerchief and a basic pocket knife combo
- in my right, a trail map and whistle
- on my body, one knit polo shirt from GAP, one pair seersucker bathing trunks, both hand-me-downs from my older brother

- a \$5 watch on a \$7 leather band
- poly socks under medium heavy wool
- cheapest (\$23 Cdn) Sears running shoes
- my father's leather notebook, 6-ring 4X6, two pens

You want the contents of the pack, too?

--Absolutely. Our readers are hungry for information.

--Okay. You want the food bag first?

--Your choice.

--Let me put on these Tevas first.

--Is this an ad or what?

--Ad, plug, hyperlink, they're just comfortable around camp after a long day's hike.

--And I'm paying for this?

--No—I am.

--Oh? What are you bringing?

--Poetry and philosophy. Flute music.

--Names, titles?

--Huh? Oh, just my own stuff. You know.

--Hmm. I really don't think I have any use right now for...

--Not even the flute?

--It sounded like no bird I ever heard.

--Fine. I'll just be quiet.

--Could we have another few moments? I believe you were starting in on the food.

—All right. So far, what's already gone, a cheese and pickle sandwich, two carrots, a tahini and honey sandwich, a butter and honey sandwich with chocolate chips, a nutritional meal bar and raspberry chew, a couple of handfuls of trail mix—

--Consisting of? This is key.

--Filberts, raisins, sunflower seeds, coconut. I think I brought too much food still. Could have left the trail mix home, along with the signal mirror, the fat candle...

--What else have you eaten already?

--Several crackers. Four hard-boiled eggs.

--This is in addition to breakfast at home, I believe.

—That was a small meal. Toast and tahini and honey, peppers and onion and garlic sautéed in olive oil...

--And what's on the menu for tomorrow, if I may be so bold--

--More crackers, cheese, trail mix, a tahini-honey sandwich, chocolate chips, algae treats, dried apples...

--Let's just hear the breakfast.

--Probably the sandwich. Whatever else. Oh—and coffee and chocolate soymilk, from home.

--You mean you made the coffee and carried it all day?

--It's very small and powerful.

--Whatever you say. Go on...

--Clothing: silk undershirt with long sleeves, polypropylene undershirt with long sleeves, a red fleece saying "Canada North" on the breast, a down vest—

--No ads, please.

--Each one has a story.

--Like every citizen in "The Naked City."

--You got it. There's a yellow double-layered treeplanter's polyurethane rain jacket,
hand-knitted wool cap—

--The lady by the bridge?

--How did you know?

--Everything's connected.

--Hmm. Even my spare underwear?

--Everything. No exceptions.

--Well, at least you're clear. Shall I go on?

--Proceed.

--One pair spare poly socks and one pair of heavy wool, one short 5/8-inch rope and
carabiner, one box moleskin, one bundle of six lengths of baling twine—

--Orange or black?

--Orange. God, you're picky.

--I don't like being called that.

--What, picky?

--No—God.

--Why the hell not? What's the difference?

--It carries too many connotations.

--Like what?

--Like the old man with the beard.

--I get it. You don't want to be confused with me. I can see your point. On the other hand...

--We need specifics.

--I'm giving them, all right? Colors, smells, history—

--Calm down. Just a descriptive tag or two will do, this time through.

--Fine. Wait a minute, what do you mean, "this time"?

--Your privileges here aren't unlimited, you know.

--So we have to go through this every time now? It wasn't like this before.

--Yes, I know. In 1972...well, then my pet cat did the talking. Today, it's my turn. I wanted to meet you personally. To get to know you. To understand better. About you and the things you carry around you...and what you leave behind.

--Humph. Are you ready for more?

--Always.

--Okay. One hand-carved Sioux love flute of cedar, with cougar head mounted—

--That's your totem?

--Yeah. There are a couple more stories behind that one.

--Later.

--Maps, wallet and—brown leather wallet—and truck key on blue plastic key chain, for the trip home. Toilet paper—

--What's the toilet paper for? We don't have toilets here.

--I think your readers can figure that one out. To continue: webbed work gloves for the cable crossings. Ace bandage.

--An ex-Boy Scout, I can tell.

--"Be prepared," right? But, I think I still brought too much food. You know, I was thinking. There are basically three levels of lifestyle: survival, comfort and luxury. Luxury is excess. But it's all in degrees. I already cut my load in half, and it did make a big difference, but now I see I'm still in the "excess" range.

--We forgive slight lapses. You don't want to mess around too much at the "survival" end of things, now, do you?

--No kidding. A "slight lapse" there can be fatal.

--No kidding. You're still smarting from that "close scrape" on the boulder slide up Poplar Creek, aren't you?

--I put some chaparral ointment on it.

--What else is in your kit?

--This really is a border crossing routine, isn't it?

--You're in another country now. Open it up.

--Needle and thread, gauze and bandages, Traumeel, waterproof matches, Chinese wooden comb, floss fork, floss, toothbrush...whoops.

--You forgot toothpaste. What an idiot.

--I guess with the tube of Traumeel, I thought—

--You thought...

--Maybe my brain misfired, okay?

--Sorry. We don't have to bicker like old lovers, now do we?

--Sigh.

--You're acting like one anyway. What went wrong?

--Save it for the next guy, will ya?

--Oh, tough talk now. You used to watch "The Untouchables" when you were a kid, am I right?

--My favorite show was "The Twilight Zone."

--Like every other kid on the block. Anything else? Anything...unique?

--I forgot to tell you about my supplements.

--All that food and you need "supplements"?

--Yes, you see, in today's mineral-depleted soils—

--Here we go.

--What?

--Oh nothing. Just tell me, what's in the white box.

--Blue-green algae, sprout tablets, bifidus.

--You forgot the bug screen and bug repellent, citronella.

--No, they're right here.

—I meant, you forgot to declare them.

--I wasn't finished yet.

--Okay. I see one blue-labeled small plastic bottle. More algae?

--Those are electrolyte tablets. And—hey, a mosquito just bit me.

--Be prepared...I see one pound heavy plastic. I thought I told you it wasn't going to rain.

--Chalk it up to experience. In any event: one roll birchbark for starting a fire...

--Let's come back to that. I don't know about this second pen.

--In case I lost one, or it ran out.

--You've done the weight-benefit-risk analysis.

--In this case, yes.

--Tell me, Mr. Now. Where did you get your unusual name?

--Let's just say it's a shortcut to who I am. In the meantime, I'd like to report a small rubberized flashlight, 2 spare AA batteries, and a plastic disposable lighter.

--Fire again. Tell me about fire--in your opinion.

--It is my power over you.

--Oh, really?

--It gives me an edge.

--I see. Into the comfort zone, eh?

--I'm talking survival, too.

--Though in this case, perhaps a luxury?

--It could be anywhere in there. I'll admit, the definitions are fluid. I haven't really done this before.

--You mean, the analysis, or the experience?

--Well, both. Except...

--Except the time you got eaten alive by mosquitoes all night, sleeping in your half-pound of open plastic. 1972, was it?

--I was a raw youth. Then there was the campsite on the ridge by Crater Lake with the wolves howling, and a cougar hissing so close I prepared to fight for my life...

--With your two-inch pocket knife.

--It was all I had. And incense to mask my smell.

--So how is it now?

--Similar, in some ways.

--Starting over, are you?

--Just continuing.

--Step by step.

--Yeah. Half done now already.

--What's next for you?

--You mean after the hike?

--Yeah. Between now and, say, the winter.

--I've started to think about that. I mean, to imagine steps along the way.

--Whether to go it alone...

--I have other options. I'll see what develops.

--Your passion for inspired "argument" has given way to a certain terseness, I believe.

Tell me, are you really planning on wearing those Tevas through the mud on the other side of the pass all afternoon tomorrow?

--It'll depend on the condition of my feet by then, and the trail. We'll see how it goes.

--Tell me about your friend by the bridge.

--You can talk to her yourself.

--I realize that. I'm asking you.

--I plead the fifth.

--You're sure it's not the fourth?

--I'll bet on it.

--How much?

--Loser pays for lunch?

--In the meantime, you were saying...

--Watching fire is better than television.

--I'm glad you think so. I agree. Much more primal.

--Yeah, and ever-changing. Ever-fascinating.

--And yet, you only use its light to write by.

--I try to keep a balance.

--And to top it off, you also resort to writing by flashlight, don't you?

--Just for this last bit, before bed.

--And now, what's all this poking, prodding...

--Just tending to the cinders. I want to be careful not to leave any, any dormant coals.

--You're afraid of hurting me?

--Well, I'd feel guilty, if I caused a huge forest fire by my negligence.

--But in the realm of relationships, you're a little more happy-go-lucky?

--Low blow. Can't we move on from that subject?

--You'd better tend those coals. I'll go talk to your lady friend.

Day 3

--Pleasant dreams?

--I hardly slept. It was kind of restful, anyway, just being out under the sky and trees, curled by the fire.

--You relit it?

--Had to. My legs were too cold.

--She said something about that. Tell me, what sort of philosophical poetry do you write, Mr. Now?

--Oh, before I forget again, I forgot to mention: the Silvicool® tree sac, foil-lined and polyurethane coated, with a nice drawstring, 8 bucks from Bushpro. I bought it the first day of that horrendous 1 ½ day misadventure with Suzanna from Germany who went from there to the U.S. Marines. It was the worst paying contract of my treeplanting career. Plus a two-hour drive, a ferry ride each way; and supper at a schwag Nakusp restaurant. They served us pasta with a dollop of tomato sauce, a puny green salad and 2 slices of white bread. The mangy hash-addled highballers ate like wolves and called for more. Now about this rain—

--I only gave you one mosquito. Things could be worse.

--How much snow is going to be in the pass?

--You never know.

--No. I suppose not. There's no arguing with you, really. I can see that now.

--My fault, is it? Do you like the view?

--I do appreciate that pound of plastic coming into play for a while this morning. It wasn't much help for warmth, though.

--You should have brought wool pants.

--I know. By the way, that sharp peak across the valley reminds me of that first camping trip in the west, to Glacier National Park, also in the rain, Wolf Mountain, I made an enlargement 8X10. Black and white—no thanks to you.

--Hey, it's an art form. Just like your little parade in blue ink.

--Pass the chocolate chips.

--Please.

--Thank you.

--Tell me something. Are you going to clean me up before publication?

--Minor housecleaning only. I love you as you are. I accept and support you in your journey.

--My journey. That's rich. Natural fires and all? I am bringing the blue sky back, you'll notice.

--I appreciate that. I feel that editing is like living. We can't really cut the past. We can re-vision it, for therapeutic purposes. But it's better, I feel, to accrete than to delete. Revision moving forward rather than backward, means integrating past mistakes into present learning, always keeping the whole in mind.

--The growing whole.

--Your trick.

--You mention wolves. Were you afraid of bears last night? It's all right—you can tell me.

--Only a few visions in the dark. A grizzly swiping at me with its six-inch long, razor sharp claws. Maybe sitting hard on me, batting me around a bit. Or a black bear, hungry for a few large chunks of thigh meat.

--I wondered if they might react to your flute playing.

--React?

--Mm, the shrill sounds of a small animal in distress?

--That reminds me of another story, my last east-west crossing of these mountains.

Jumbo, Dewar, Earl Grey II; it could be a trilogy.

--You say you hear voices in your head, and you write them down.

--I don't recall saying so, but yes, that's true.

--You make your living doing this?

--Actually I'm in the nutrition business, as I may have mentioned.

--I don't recall. Do you think that Pepsi pays Stephen King every time he mentions their brand?

--I'm confident we can work something out. Oh, and, I also partake in the investment sector.

--I see. And after the year 2000 worldwide computer economy collapse—

--I'm going to buy more matches soon.

--Good plan. Time to brush up on all your bushcraft, bush pro. I've been thinking about this concept of excess. I'm glad you brought it up, in fact. It might be time for a few large fires—you know, earthquakes, volcanoes, pole shifts.

--I'm sure you'll find a way.

--Hey, I've enjoyed having you here. You're still comfortable, right?

--On the edge. Keep that blue sky coming.

--You really may be better off in Arizona, come to think of it. Since you seem to like traveling fast and light. A regular moving target, you are.

--“Keep on walkin’. Don’t look back.” Marley and Jagger can’t both be wrong.

--No more searching for “The Lasting Relationship”?

--I'm a wandering monk now.

--Indeed. And what is your practice, noble sage?

--I'm going to begin as soon as I get back home. Four hours a day of writing, Monday through Friday. Morning by default, otherwise squeeze it in. I might like to garden some sunny morning, or play my drum.

--You're clear on your priorities, are you?

--Absolutely. Music practice an hour a day. The rest free.

--And weekends?

--Saturday off. Sunday, four hours for business and writing, mostly planning.

--That's enough to sustain your business?

--I'll throw in four more hours a week, anytime that makes sense. I'll plan that by the week, according to the needs of the time.

--Good luck. It's getting into fall, you know. I've seen these sorts of good intentions before. You're sure about the garden, firewood, fall chores, town trips, social events...it's all covered in the time I've allowed you before snow?

--Yeah, well, as far as relationship goes...I'm gonna have to cut way back there. A monk's life, you understand.

--As I say, good luck. Someone still loves you, you know.

--She'll have to love me as I am.

--Do you know that to love is to recognize those qualities that attract you to another, and to nurture them in yourself?

--Is that why when I come to this lovely shaded golden-pebbled brook, having just told myself, "No words, now, no words"--the words came to me, "Drink of this water"?

--We're having a conversation, right?

--But I wanted to put you on hold.

--You do it to everyone, and everyone does it to me.

--You have my sympathy and affection.

--Nice words. What do they mean?

--I'd rather not talk about it anymore. I want to be alone.

--Go for it. I'm always here. You can report when you get back home. About the purpose of your trip.

--I'm going now. It's been real.

Later...

--I've been thinking about that "happy-go-lucky." I'd like to change it to "devil-may-care."

--Oh, you're back, are you? How was the pass?

--A little too much of myself. Nice view, though. The classic towering mountain over its glacier and flanked by two subordinates like breasts with their peaks hard with desire, or the upraised knees of a lover with the river running between her thighs...

--And to the left?

--A wondrous broad and verdant valley.

--And you stayed awhile, and then walked on.

--Yes, and I do care. Even though to others, what I do and how I am may seem hurtful, or even evil.

--And like a devil, you may—or may not, as your whim dictates—care.

--I tried to go without words, without you, but the voices, the words wouldn't stop. They did become the clang of a street car, pounding with my steps and the beat of my heart, offset by chirring squirrels and brush gently rubbing past my leg as I walked—then the chimes of a meditation retreat, calling me to the breath, the breath alone. But I didn't want to go there.

--Why not?

--Not today.

--What do you want, today?

--A feeling of harmony with you.

--I'm touched.

--Is commitment an issue with you?

--Do you mean my commitment, or yours?

--Mine.

--You're free. Always absolutely free.

--That sounds pretty open-ended.

--Oh, I'm nothing if not that. Certain cosmological finalities notwithstanding.

--The Big Bang, in reverse?

--Let's go beyond time, shall we? Say, can I get you another sandwich? How about a thunderclap or two?

--I see you have your sore points too.

--It's easy to be abused in the area you give the most.

--You're talking to one who understands.

--I feel safe with you.

--I like hangin' out with you too and all, but uh, time to get moving again. There's things I gotta do.

--Like what? Just for discussion's sake. I could care less, personally.

--I have to do some thinking.

--This sounds serious.

--I'm just feeling antsy about entering "society" again. And I can't take you with me.

--Why not?

--They'd run me out of town. Anyhow, that's one thunderclap too many. I'm outta here. Catch you back at the truck. If you have any last questions, save 'em.

--Oh I will. But I'm not going anywhere. You know where to find me.

THE MEANING OF LIFE: OR, ANIMAL TRACKS

Once a man went walking with his partner. He didn't like to call her his wife because she and he agreed that they liked to see things differently than the mass. Yet they were not too snobbish. She credited him for his aristocratic features; he her for her purebred peasant look; yet really they were both middle class, and did everything they could to escape from that heritage.

They boycotted the community Christmas dinner: the one event of the year that "everyone" attended. The next day they went for a walk on the flats. Wandering, for that is all you could do there. They wandered right to the edge of the water, where the river carved away a foot of sandy soil every year, and where the fence lines ended: another abandoned project, a strawberry field.

He crossed on the rotting ice over the slough; she went to the old beaver dam overgrown with long prairie grass. They embraced there; and nearly toppled into the water. That would have made a good movie shot.

They wandered on. It was only a matter of time before they found themselves in the long snow-beaten grass, soft as a foam-core futon, rolling around in mock-lovemaking, relaxing to look up at the sky through tan strands of grass; marvelling at the purity of the moment. Then her knees got wet and they had to get up.

They wandered on, reflecting on the serenity of the previous evening.

"Much better than the Christmas dinner," she observed. They had enjoyed, instead, a long hot bath by candlelight, and leisurely conversation.

He agreed, stumbling on the grass. The cat, too, had been glad for their company. He mentioned this as he examined the cause of his misstep, a clump of coyote scat. Their cat was a replacement for one who'd disappeared, probably a victim of marauding coyotes.

He inspected the dark dried turds for clues: embedded were a number of short white hairs. Rabbit? There were no black cat hairs in this pile, anyway.

Did they speak of the meaning of life, following animal tracks across the wastes?

I know they spoke of humour, the importance of it. He wrapped a handful of long grass in front of her face, and hugged her from behind: "The attack of the two-legged coyote!"

"I know what you should do," she smiled. "Write a story as funny as you are."

He laughed. "Yeah, you're right. Why not? My natural voice. Treat the reader as a friend."

"And for your subject, take what's real. Our morning here together on the flats."

"All right. Sure. When's my deadline?"

She said without hesitating, "Tonight."

He missed the deadline; she seduced him and he was never one to decline a persuasive seduction, believing firmly that any seduction was persuasive if carried out in good humour and with honorable intention.

So, the next day, loose-limbed and languorous upon arising, he put himself onto the assignment. He tried his best. But he was rusty. He hadn't written anything new in months. The words dragged themselves out of his fingers. His mood, he found, was no longer frivolous, but melancholy.

Maybe it wasn't a root problem, he thought. Maybe the cat on his lap as he wrote was too distracting. Maybe he was distracted by the thought of his obligation to spend the afternoon with his daughter. Maybe he was distracted by the virtual pile of new reading he had taken on, in the form of a large number of files downloaded from the Internet the previous week, still unread.

Even so, his characters loped mechanically through their traces, following the tracks of deer on the flats, crossing ice and beaver dam without remarkable incident. His narrative mood (it occurred to him with some detached horror, powerless to change it) matched the bleak, slant-sunned day they spent there; and the story rambled like their aimless feet.

He showed it to her when he was done. She read it, not smiling.

"Well . . ." she said tentatively.

"Well what?"

"I don't know. It's missing something. Wasn't it supposed to be funny?"

She tossed her tan strands of hair to the side, as if wishing she were laughing in the sun. The overhead fan whirred silently.

"Yeah, but it's subtle. You know, the irony of understatement."

She looked thoughtfully at the manuscript again. "Hmm. I'm not sure. How about more dialogue; that might liven it up a little."

"Maybe. Anyway, it was just an exercise, right?"

"Whatever. I thought you wanted some direction. I gave you my advice."

"Sure. I appreciate it. Anyway, I did the best I could. Maybe the subject just wasn't right."

"Haven't you told me before that any subject is okay; that it's just the style or treatment that matters?"

He looked offended. "Uh . . . maybe. But still, you can't always make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." As he said this, he remembered what he used to call his older sister, Sal.

"Hi Sow," he'd say to her.

She never laughed at his joke.

THAT GENDER STUFF

"How would you like for me to be different?" she asked point-blank. We'd been lying together naked in bed, reading and talking about the Mars-Venus theory of the sexes.

"Oh, uh, well, I wouldn't put it that way, I wouldn't want you any different than you are."

"But are you at all frustrated, or missing something, some ways I'm not as feminine according to the stereotype?"

"Well, I mean--I wouldn't want you to be any different. I'm happy with the whole person you are."

"But still--"

"Ah . . . I guess there are some ways of being feminine, that I miss, being with you."

Now her eyes lit up, shining with some alchemical mixture of challenge and hurt. "All right. Like what?"

I tried to avoid getting too pointed and personal, by first sketching a profile of the feminine stereotype--a straight-line, 100% female in all attributes, against which any individual (of either gender) would measure up with a wavering line, sometimes meeting

the straight-line standard, sometimes not. The model attributes included gentleness, sensitivity to process, attention to "frilly" dress, makeup and perfume, affinity for childcare and baby care, fondness for domestic skills like cooking and sewing, and interest in "female chit-chat" (which I left undefined).

She encouraged me in this academic effort, fascinated by the figure I painted. Then she dared me to repeat the same exercise, this time dealing with men.

Her strategy paid off: I quickly realized that to give men the opposite attributes (brusqueness instead of gentleness, working at a job away from home, and so on: you know the drill) planted a minefield of culturally-weighted assumptions. This whole business of stereotyping was grossly unfair to differences between individuals, blind to context, and inconsistent with respect to culture. Mixing features from a hunting or plowing culture (women minding the hearth) with those from modern culture (frilly dress) showed how blatantly arbitrary and self-serving were my ideas of personal models for the genders.

Yet, if you don't follow one stereotype, are you merely falling into the reactionary stereotype? If you don't follow the mainstream fashion or conditioning, are you responding instead to that of your subculture or local community?

For instance: finally I was able to broach the subject of her chopped hair. Was it really unfeminine, as I tended to think? The question had become rather fuzzy. Does she decide her hair length on the basis of:

- a) conformity
- b) perversity
- c) comfort
- d) whim
- e) habit
- f) my preference

(And is my preference in turn determined by my own a, b, c, d, or e?)

When we ask these questions in a spirit of inquiry, we defuse potential argument and come to a place of wonder in unity. Her eyes go wise, inward and distant and also live and present, and we feel the intellectual orgasm and shared space of lovers of each other's truth and the greater truth we seek together.

We had common questions, but no firm answers yet. Still leaning up against the big pillow together, bright twin reading lights on...

"I just feel," I tried again, "that there must be something to this gender stuff."

"What real evidence is there, though?"

"Well, the obvious physical differences--"

"Like big muscles, or hairy skin . . .?"

I knew she was going to her usual gambit about no firm dividing line: some women have bigger muscles or hairier skin than some men, and so on. I quickly

clarified: "I mean at least genitals, and breasts, and hormones." But was that all? I risked a shakier limb: "And all these cultural and historical patterns of dividing up gender roles must have some real basis, to carry such majority weight all these centuries."

"Not necessarily. Are wars necessary, based on biology?" She knew I wouldn't argue that one.

"No, I don't think so. But with the two sexes, it just makes natural sense for behaviors to match up with what we're already given, the different physical templates. Each successive layer matches the form underneath, beginning with the X and Y chromosomes. The basic form starts out different and stays different: round and square, say. Moon and sun . . ."

She took a deep breath and smiled radiantly. "Now I get it!" she exclaimed. The reason we don't see eye to eye on this is that you're a poet--"

--and you're a scientist." She wouldn't have given herself the label but accepted it with grace.

"Yes. What you're talking about is symbols, and I'm talking about the actual details of individuals that make us different from stereotypes. What you're doing is like religion."

That caught me off guard. I knew she'd gone too far but didn't know what to say. It was unlike her to use a metaphor like that.

"I can see it now," she added.

"What?"

"You're getting ready to tear my argument apart."

"No, no," I pleaded. "I was just considering, trying to understand what you mean.

I think actually I can see how it applies. In the twelfth century they had this cult about women, the Virgin and the Whore. Women were all modelled after the Virgin Mary or the Whore of Babylon. One or the other, nothing in between."

"Yeah, that's the idea. Or your romantic poets. The lady in white satin, and the big strong knight."

"You're right, I admit it."

"You want pattern, and I want--"

"Chaos--or rather, as Crichton's new book has it, 'complexity' theory."

"Yup, yup. That's it."

"I see what you mean now about religion. Trying to simplify through abstraction, and fantasy. Art does that too, doesn't it? The schools of dogmatic fashion--"

"Yeah. It's like this rock painting I'm doing. I'm accentuating the stripes, exaggerating them for effect."

"Which is fine, but if all your paintings had to be like that, or if everyone's did, it would be oppressive: nothing but stripes. The way Cubism was, I guess. Revolutionary, at first, and then dogmatic."

"The Mexican Revolution."

"The American Revolution."

"The Beatles, as musak."

I held her breast. "Ummh," she moaned.

We both laughed. "Right," I said, "now you've done so much talking, you're allowed to go back to the 'Ummh . . .'"

And we got back down to the X and the Y, and let the rest fall away.

A MAN WITH A BLACK CASE AND A WHITE DOG

In the old days, life was hard, and life was good. It was hard because Pete had to work: he had to help the old man haul wood with a harness and sled in the winter; he had to guard the goats when they had their young in the spring; he had to spend the long summer days with the old man in his field by carrying pack-sacks of seed and fertilizer and crops that the old man picked for market; and in the fall he had to go hunting with the man and track and chase down the wounded birds and deer that the old man killed. Life was good because it provided for Pete in all the ways that he knew: a warm fire to curl up beside at night in the season of long cold; a day of leisure and occasional excitement in the fresh spring pastures when he could bask in the sun with his nose perked for the approach of the bears hungry from the mountains; the cool, refreshing dips in the pond at the end of a dusty summer day's work; and, after a successful hunt in the crisp autumn woods, the reward of juicy scraps and bones. Pete had been satisfied, in the balance; and in the last turn of the seasons, life had become that much easier, because the old man had got a tractor to do the heavy hauling work, both winter and summer.

Now one day the sound of a motorcar came in a cloud of dust up the road and stopped in front of the old man's house. A man in a shiny clean suit got out of the car mopping his brow and walked up to the old man's door. With the stranger was a dog, a

white fluffy-haired dog who stepped primly on the stone paving and wagged her tail beside her master. Pete was a spotted hound with no pretensions to beauty; but his interest was aroused in no small degree when he caught a whiff of this pampered miss. He ran up polite as could be, tongue out and feet prancing, welcoming the newcomers for all he was worth. The stranger took little notice of Pete, and the stranger's dog seemed to feel that she should act with the same preoccupied aloofness, turning her head with those pretty pointed ears right away from him. Pete walked away to the corner of the porch and sat down, watching.

The man walked up the two steps to the porch and knocked on the door. The old man inside turned off the radio and appeared at the screen, asking what he could do for the man. The stranger had a thin black case in his hand. The old man did not invite him in. The old man's words got louder and the stranger became angry. The white dog sat down as if at attention beside the stranger, waiting for the outcome of the meeting. She did give Pete a glance or two, unable to hide completely her curiosity.

At length the harsh words stopped and the stranger turned to go. By this time he had to coax his dog to come along with him, for she had lain down in the dirt beside the walk and was blinking at Pete with her head on her paws. The man scolded her and tugged at her collar. Pete got up and walked around in a circle, his tongue out, panting in the heat. The beauty, a little dusty for her rest, finally got up and walked to the stranger's car with him, with a few sad wags of her tail and last looks at Pete. They drove away

with a roar and a billowing cloud of dust.

Pete was in poor spirits the rest of that day. The old man seemed to feel in a similar mood. He fed Pete an uninspired supper that night of leftover porridge and greens. Pete took a few licks of it and left the rest. The next day the old man took Pete with him when he went on the tractor to work in the fields. By the end of the day Pete's mouth was as dry as the boards on the old man's barn. They went straight home to the farmhouse at the end of the afternoon, without stopping by the pond. So Pete ran off before suppertime for a swim in the pond; and the old man had words with him when he came back, because Pete had run off without letting the man know. Pete ate the rest of his bowl of porridge and greens and slept under the porch.

The next day was cool and cloudy and would have been a good working day in the fields, but the old man appeared on the porch wearing a white shirt and shiny black shoes and telling Pete they had to go to town today. They walked out back to get the tractor and Pete hopped up to ride in the box behind the old man's seat, and they rumbled onto the road and so down into town.

The old man parked the tractor in front of a big stone building. He looked at Pete and told him he'd better stay where he was. Pete was excited because he would be able to see all the town dogs and people as they passed, and to smell all the strange new smells of the town: from the passing bakery trucks, the butcher shop, the produce stall on the

next block, even the garbage truck . . .

And then the man who had been out to the farm passed in his car, and Pete saw that lovely white dog in the back seat looking around at him eagerly, not hiding her surprised pleasure. The car turned the corner and circled around toward the back of the stone building, parking just before they were out of sight so that Pete could still see a glimpse of the white dog through the windshield of the car.

She was still looking at him, her eyes and nose over the back seat. Holding his excitement, Pete knew that this long-distance flirtation could not go on for long. He thought about the old man in the building, with his own handful of papers, and the stranger with his black case who had gone in the same door. There would certainly be time for a little exercise, a little visit, and then Pete could be back in his box on the back of the tractor in plenty of time before the old man returned.

He jumped out and quickly stepped along the sidewalk around the half-block to where the car was parked. The front window was open and Pete could hear his new friend panting inside. Cloudy day or not, it must be too stuffy in there. Couldn't she come out for a little frisk on the lawn of the stone building?

She clambered over the seat and leaned with her paws out the front window. Ah, she was even more beautiful than Pete had remembered! And she didn't seem to mind his long floppy ears, his drooping eyes, his thin-haired tail. Not at all. She worked her rear legs up and was through the window and down. Pete gamboled away with her onto the

lawn, the two playing a brief game of chase and jump like a couple of puppies. But what was a lawn when there was the whole town to take in?

Let me show you around, seemed to be this town dog's attitude as she abruptly set off up the street at a rapid clip, with Pete following close behind. He'd never seen such finely combed, such clean white fur. And she smelled positively divine.

Where was she taking him? It didn't matter.

They cut across the main shopping street and onto an unpaved lane with little traffic. They ran up it at a trot, past an alley where a big boxer came rushing at them, stopped by a chain-link fence. Pete held his breath as they passed a garage stinking of paint and turpentine. A motorcyclist came roaring down on them, swerving at the last minute as the driver lashed out at them with a kick. The white dog sneered at him haughtily, then in the next moment chased a shrew into a hedge and came out grinning with her head covered in prickles. Pete felt like laughing, if he could have.

They came at last to the end of the lane, high at the very top of the town where you could look out and see even the road winding into town from the countryside. Come on, she seemed to say, impatient with Pete's open-mouthed gazing. Here at the end of the lane there was a high iron fence with a fine stone house way back on a vast cropped lawn. The white dog cocked her head for Pete to follow and led him to a place where there was room to crawl under the fence. Was she mocking him as he squeezed through on his belly? Her pristine fur was well matted with dirt by now, so she had no right to be so

smug. But this grand place--was this hers?

She pranced straight for the house with Pete at her heels. Around at the back she put her paws to a low white swinging door and they were in a cool room rich with the heavenly smell of hanging hams and cheeses, a room entering into a kitchen where a black woman was cutting red meat. The woman looked at the dogs coming in behind her and had something to say to the white dog, in what seemed a serious tone until she smiled. But Pete was still confused because while smiling, the woman shook her long sharp carving knife at him and shook her head as if he'd done something wrong. He thought then of the old man and the other man in the building and knew he'd been away from the tractor long enough.

But the little flirt was off into the other rooms of the house, showing Pete around, and this was an opportunity not to be given up too quickly. So he padded off after her, his ragged toenails clicking on the polished floors. What posh furnishings: a half-dozen soft, potential beds in every room--and white dog hair on every one. What luxury! Pete thought of that cut of red meat in the kitchen and could only imagine how this princess must eat.

If she wasn't bad.

She bounded up the stairs and it was the same story up there. Pete now began to feel truly out of place, and wanted to let his companion know in some way that he really should be getting back. They could always hope there'd be a another trip to the farm by

the man in his car. They could swim together and frolic in the meadow; they could play hide and seek under the house. Pete could show her his favorite paths in the woods; he could even share with her his rug by the hearth . . .

At this moment Pete imagined that his master was calling him: not so much angry as disappointed, and even worried. He would have to say goodbye; and perhaps his hostess would also feel obliged to go back with him through the town.

She seemed to catch the meaning of his whines and mutterings, for she hopped out of the frilly pink bed on the lushly carpeted floor--the bed that Pete had surmised must be her very own--and with a prim expression led the way back down the stairs and out of the house. On the way she stopped for a fresh morsel that had been dropped in her bowl in the pantry; there was only one and she growled when Pete approached to see if there was any for him. So that's how it is with her, he thought; but what should I expect? The pantry door opened at that moment, however, and the smiling black woman, the big knife still in her hand, tossed a glistening sliver of lean red meat right under Pete's nose. He snapped it up gratefully and, tail up, was ready to escort his lovely, back down the way they'd come.

This time the white dog led him down a different, more travelled street; and as they stepped together, side by side this time on the sidewalk, Pete felt proud to be seen with her like this. Never had he walked in such company. He wondered if he ever would again.

The old man was waiting by the tractor, his face darker than the billowing sky. He glared at Pete, and as Pete slowed his pace against the moment when the other dog would have to leave his side, he thought that if he ever got a beating from the old man, this would be the time. He only hoped that his friend would not witness it. She too had a problem to face, because her master was sitting in his car waiting for her just as impatiently and angrily as the old man standing by the tractor.

This was no time or place for sentimentality. The white dog gave Pete one knowing, sure look that summed up the feeling of what they had shared, and she dutifully walked off to her own fate. Pete walked to the tractor and stood looking up at the old man, ready for whatever the old man had in store for him. To his surprise the old man just told him flatly to get in the box, and then mounted to his own seat and set the engine to chugging. Pete saw the white dog approach her car and the man get out and open the back door for her and yell at her with a livid expression on his face, and then Pete saw her put her head down behind the seat and never once look up. It was better to have parted with the look that they had.

And the old man drove the tractor around the block to the back of the big stone building, as the car, with the white dog down out of sight in the back seat, drove away. There was a yard enclosed in a high chain-link fence, with a gate which was opened by a fat man with a uniform on and then closed behind them when the old man drove through;

and the tractor was parked and the old man told Pete to get down now and they walked out through the gate and the fat man with the uniform on locked the gate behind them. And they walked up to the main street to the bakery, and the old man told Pete to wait outside while he went in to buy something. He came out with a little white bag and walked slowly, with Pete beside and a little behind him, down the sidewalk to a bench, and took something good to eat out of the bag and began eating it and gave some to Pete.

It tasted good. Pete hoped there would be more for him but there was no more, and as Pete looked up at the old man he saw something he'd never seen before, tears running down the old man's face. Pete wanted to go home. He thought the old man would want to go home, too. They would go home together. But the old man just stayed there on the bench, sitting, wiping the tears off his face, starting to get up, and then just sitting. Pete curled up beside the old man's feet on the sidewalk, the black shoes that were no longer shiny, and he thought of the white dog.

RULE 31

XXXI. Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.

--Andreas Capellanus, "The Rules of Love"

I phoned my brother to finalize plans.

Christine answered the call.

"Ben, it's been a long time."

"Yeah, over a year . . ."

"Is that all? It seems like longer than that."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Do you?"

"Well, uh, I don't know. Christine--um, is Andrew there?"

"No, he's working late today to finish up a job."

"I guess I'll tell you, then. We've decided to take you and Ben up on that offer to join you in Mexico at the end of March. It sounds like fun. Daphne's got a term break coming up around then, and my boss says housepainting will be slow until the middle of April. We can both use a change."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

It was my turn.

"Do you?"

She laughed.

I still don't know whether it was my brother's idea or Christine's. The usual family reunion at Christmas hadn't happened, and in early February Andrew had called with the invitation for something new and different.

"C'mon, Ben, it'll be just like Ocean City," I remember him saying to counter my initial, instinctive hesitation. Instead I recalled that summer day when I was fifteen and I walked in on Christine in the bath. I'll never forget the splendor of her body as it appeared to me then, my first real glimpse of Christine, or any woman, in the flesh. She looked directly at me, with utter calm. I just stood there, unable to move, for the longest time. Finally I backed out of the doorway, wearing what must have looked to her like the all-time sheepish grin; she merely smiled back. And her eyes held mine until the door closed between us again.

". . . just like Ocean City." Did he mean the times we use to race along the sand forever, the games of whiffle-ball in the outgoing tide? Finding coins under the boardwalk? Christine's nipples stared up at me from the sea-colored bathwater.

My heart had started pounding as I told Andrew I'd talk to Daphne, we'd see if we could swing it. And it kept up that steady, intensified beat for six weeks. I began burning toast, gazing out the window, reading in bed after Daphne fell asleep. If she'd asked about these little changes, I would have said that it was nothing, or that I maybe I

was thinking about the upcoming trip. I'd never told Daphne about my attraction to Christine and wasn't about to start tampering with her implicit trust. But she never asked. Perhaps she was too busy with her studies toward the end of the term to notice my inner excitement, as I silently shaped my castles of sand.

I hardly said a word to Daphne on the bus ride, despite her persistent chattering. I had moved into a mood of absorbed anticipation. Not that I expected anything of a tangible nature to occur between Christine and me--after all, this was a double date, obviously not the time to entertain boyish fantasies. Still, when Daphne fell silent and read, or slept, I daydreamed, rather obsessively, of Christine. I called to mind her light red, wavy hair; the soft and open lips, the few faint freckles high on her cheeks, and those ice-blue eyes with their long lashes; her expressions, gestures, and softly husky voice; her measured movements, and the tanned fullness of her body in the Mexican sun . . .

I was always attracted to Christine. She hardly glanced at me back in the days when she and Andrew were going together in their senior year in high school. I was just a wet-behind-the-ears kid, "Andrew's little brother." Four years younger, I was still in junior high; and she was a full-blossoming woman.

"Going steady," for a week or two at a time, was the big adventure for me and my crowd. I learned what I could from eavesdropping on Andrew and Christine, when our parents were out and I was upstairs supposedly reading, and I tried to construct a scene

from the sounds of their shuffling, murmuring bodies on the couch downstairs.

I learned what I could, too, from experimental petting with the girls my age. But Tammy Miller and Ann Woodward, with their prim little bras and tight trembling lips, had nothing on Christine, in my book. It was she who would enter my thoughts, she whom I imagined I held on the gym floor during the slow dance, not Tammy or Ann but Christine, creating her own special kind of thrill in me. I sometimes wondered if she was intentionally projecting herself onto the screen of my fantasy--secretly, psychically . . . but of course I knew that she belonged to Andrew.

They were married two years into college--they'd both gone to State. Then they dropped out together at the end of their sophomore year, 1967; that was the thing to do at the time. They went traveling out west for a while, lived here and there taking on various odd jobs, called or wrote home only occasionally. Eventually they settled down in Santa Barbara. Andrew found some fairly steady work as a carpenter; Christine did some modeling in L.A. and was trying to work on becoming a photographer.

Meanwhile my few so-called girlfriends came and went, and I more or less followed in my brother's footsteps. I forgot about Christine enough to fall in love with Daphne. We first started going out our last year at Fairmont High, and two years into the state college, we married. Unlike my brother and his bride, however, we stayed in school four years to graduate. Our marriage followed the pattern of our college friendship: we studied together, partied together, bitched together about the courses . . . even cheated

together, if you want to call it that, by helping each other out on our term papers.

Daphne didn't have Christine's looks, but I loved her anyway. Fairly plain of face and figure, she never wore makeup or styled her hair with anything more than a comb or brush. She had more freckles, a darker complexion than Christine, and a more boyish body--a girl who had still been a tomboy when Christine married Andrew.

But I loved her; at least that's what seemed true when I married her. I decided then that my old infatuation with Christine wasn't love. It was all so clear in my mind--otherwise I wouldn't have committed myself like that. I would have waited, or connived, or somehow found another outlet for the feelings I had, until my secret passion could find a time and place to flower . . .

On into the desert country, across the border and into the land of another language and time, down through the scrub and the dust and the shimmering heat and through the charming, dirty little towns . . . I'd been laid off since December, suffering from the rainy winter in Berkeley, and felt glad that Andrew had come to the rescue. But there was more. When that long ride was over, and we'd come to rest bedazzled by the azure panorama of the Pacific coast, and the bus deposited us amid the stucco and adobe of Puerto Vallarta and I recognized Andrew's dirty white VW van, I knew that something would happen here.

They were sitting in the café, right on schedule. We carried our packs in, smiling.

My brother got up with a friendly "Hey! Ben, Daphne," and shook my hand, and guided Daphne over to one of the two empty chairs by their table, next to Christine. I met Christine's eyes and we both smiled, as I sat down across the little round table from her, between Andrew and Daphne.

Andrew, still standing, said, "You made it, guys; how was the trip?"

He wasn't usually so outgoing, to jump up like that with a loud greeting. Perhaps they'd been sitting there for a long time waiting for us. There were glasses half full on the table. I sat between Andrew and Daphne.

"Oh, not too bad," I said to my brother. "Hard to sleep well, of course. Daphne didn't do too badly. She had the foresight to bring a pillow along."

Christine took a sip of her beer. Eyes of a goddess.

Andrew offered, "Here, can I get you both a cerveza? Something special from down here, more to it than that watery Schlitz back home."

"Okay, sounds good." I looked at Daphne. She nodded to Ben.

"Cuatro, por favor," said Ben, holding up four fingers to reinforce his meaning to the waiter who was hovering nearby.

There was a pregnant silence. I looked over my shoulder and surveyed the room: old men sitting alone at their tables, middle-aged ones with straw hats talking in animated and incomprehensible voices, a young man at the bar with a senorita in a flowing red dress, a red carnation in her hair, rouged cheeks and a prominent beauty mark. I

wondered if she was for real, or just for effect--to impress the tourists, or the local young men. Meanwhile, without even looking at Christine, I could feel the power of her unashamed gaze, and my cheeks began to burn.

"Where're you guys camped?" I blurted out. It was the only thing I could think of to say, to break that thundering silence.

Andrew answered, "Oh, it's about four miles down the beach, south. No one else is around; it's a little paradise. Did you bring a tent?"

"Yes . . ."

"You won't need it. It hasn't rained in a the week and a half we've been here. There's a bit of thatch shelter we put up for shade, a lean-to kind of a thing we cook under. Oh, man, you'll love it: swimming every day, snorkeling, spear-fishing . . . why yesterday I caught--"

"Sounds great," I said as the waiter brought our beer.

I couldn't care less about my brother's fishing prowess. And I couldn't keep my mind off Christine. When I found the courage to glance at her, she simply took a little sip of her beer and smiled at me like some Cheshire cat.

Andrew paid and tipped the waiter, generous as always.

From out in the street came the sounds of engines, horns, chickens and children, mingling as they floated in. I noticed that Daphne was unusually quiet, almost moody. Christine broke another silence and piqued our appetites with a bright report on the local

food--avocados, tomatoes, peppers, chilies, tortillas, and of course the fish Andrew had caught. Then, rather suddenly, she turned to Daphne and said, "Well. How are your studies coming? Is it interesting?"

"Oh, laughed Daphne as she looked up, somewhat startled. "Yeah, it's pretty good. I like it. A lot of reading, an awful lot. They have an excellent library there. Good professors. Yeah, I can't complain."

"Anything in particular you're studying now? I know you're in English."

"Actually, yes, I'm starting to develop a thesis proposal on D.H. Lawrence."

"Oh, that sounds like fun." When Andrew laughed at this, Christine frowned at him. She carried on. "I really enjoyed some of his books. Lady Chatterly's Lover, and Women in Love, I think it was, or Sons and Lovers; I can't keep them straight."

This conversation was beginning to bore me, and I finished my beer. Andrew and Daphne quickly followed suit. But Christine wasn't quite finished.

"Don't you think, Daphne, there's some contradiction in studying a sensibility like Lawrence's, one so physical, so passionate and earthy, in so much paper, words, ideas . . . I mean, I'm not putting down what you're doing, but don't you feel kind of . . ."

"Christine--" Andrew broke in.

But Daphne spoke for herself. "I know what you mean. Of course it's a contradiction. But that's the contradiction we all live, isn't it?"

"Um, how do you mean?"

"I mean we have this physical existence, these bodies we all live in, with all their functions, and desires and so on, and we obviously don't go around, just . . . acting on them all the time, like animals. We're rational creatures; we live in, you know, a more civilized fashion. We create these elaborate languages, and value systems, and moralities, that, okay, deny us those 'primal urges,' as Lawrence might call them. But it's precisely that conflict and contradiction that concerned him, that he deals with over and over again in his work . . ."

"Excelente," said Christine, smiling and clapping. "You pass." She finished her beer and started to get up. Daphne just sat there, with serious, wary eyes and pouting lips. Christine put her hand on my wife's shoulder and said, "Oh, I didn't mean to make fun of you or anything. You really made sense of it for me. It's true. We can't just act on those hidden passions of ours any time we want to, or societies would fall apart. Not to mention couples, families . . ." Then she looked directly at me.

I blushed and rose quickly, saying, "Let's get to the beach. I've been dreaming of that water for so long my skin's crawling. I feel like a regular lizard."

Our first meal on the beach was a decent one, to be sure--light, nourishing, in fact rather delicious, Andrew's fish and all. I offered to help Christine wash dishes in the surf, as she'd already done the cooking. In doing so I felt smug about being more liberated than my brother.

Christine agreed, and I accompanied her to the nearby waves. Her sensuous closeness as we walked side by side was almost too much to bear. I didn't know how I could survive even this first night.

We set the dishes down on the wet sand and went back for more, hardly speaking. When we got to work, rubbing sand on the plates, she asked me how I liked their "little paradise." I told her it was marvelous. I wanted to tell her I loved her. Did I? I ached like crazy.

I wanted her to tell me she loved me. She said, "We'll all be sleeping together tonight. That will be kind of nice, won't it?"

I was taken aback. "Uh, sure, yeah, it will be nice." I didn't know what else to say. So I asked, "Do you just lay your sleeping bags out on the sand?"

"Yes," she said. "As long as the rain stays away we can just lie out under the stars. It's, as you say, marvelous. Sometimes we don't even need the sleeping bags over us. But--you know, it's kind of too bad--we have to wear something; I mean, I do. Even though we're isolated, we have to be careful. The Mexican men just wouldn't understand. Much as I'd love to just bare my whole body to the stars . . ." She looked up dreamily at the pale Milky Way.

I thought of the señorita in the bar, and wondered how much of Christine's romantic allure was put on for my benefit--and why. Meanwhile, my passion was aroused beyond a doubt. Finally I couldn't stand it. "Christine--I . . . I have to tell you

something about how I feel, how I've always felt about you."

"Shsh. The neighbors are watching." It was true. Daphne was sitting alone by the shelter, whether gazing out to sea or supervising the dishwashing I wasn't sure. Andrew was pretending to be preoccupied with stoking the campfire. I grabbed some more dishes to wash.

This was madness. I didn't know exactly what I'd wanted to accomplish by my little confession. And I didn't know how I could continue being around this siren in the presence of Andrew and, not to be forgotten, Daphne. Christine's hints about "sleeping together" and baring her body rang in my ears, pounding my brains to mush with the inexorable rhythm of the surf.

But we put a lid on our dangerous discussion, gathered up the dishes and returned to the campfire to join Andrew and Daphne for fireside conversation while we watched the night come on. We ended up talking about couples with kids and couples without.

Andrew said the reason they hadn't had kids in their seven years of marriage was that they were still trying to get established in their careers. He was thinking of starting to contract for himself. And Christine's modeling, he said, would certainly be jeopardized . . .

"She could do maternity wear," Daphne interjected, somewhat peevishly I thought.

Andrew laughed.

Christine's eyes flashed. "That's not the only reason."

There was a moment's charged silence; then Andrew was quick to pick up the ball. "Christine's also still involved in some photography 'courses' back home--"

"You mean with Ed? It's not courses, Ben. Lessons. Ed is simply offering me some of his skills because I sought him out to learn more. You make it sound like I'm still a student."

Ben's curled lip showed that he knew all this. "'Skills'" was the final terse word he had to say on the subject.

It was time for bed.

That night we did somehow manage to sleep together, the four of us, all laid out in a row: Andrew, Christine, me, and Daphne. Daphne looked at me strangely, I thought, as I was quick to roll out my bag next to Christine's, a foot and a half of no-man's-land in between. But I pecked her on the cheek good-night and that seemed to satisfy her. To indulge in more affection at such a time would have been imprudent, I told myself as Daphne rolled over to face the darkness of the open beach. As if to prove that point to myself, I turned the other way and saw that Christine, and Ben behind her, were watching.

The next morning was like a lull in a storm. Breakfast was a congenial, social affair. The bright sun inspired us then to childish play--frisbee, tag and netless

volleyball. Our carefree feet sent up cascades of sparkling sand and splashing water.

In the afternoon a long low bank of clouds rolled in. Andrew and Christine made a quick trip to town for more groceries. I thought it might have been a gesture on their part to give us weary travelers a bit of time alone together. Daphne took immediate advantage of the situation by blurting out something about my flirting with Christine all morning. It wasn't true--compared to the previous evening's dishwashing session.

"Daphne," I said smugly, "you're imagining things."

"No, Ben, it's as plain as day. You two have been laughing and smiling together all morning. I'm not blind, you know."

"We're just having a good time. All of us together--I thought."

"Well, you obviously are. Have you forgotten about me?"

"Oh, come on, Daphne. What do you want me to do, ignore Christine and just relate to you? Would that make you feel better?"

"I didn't say that!"

It occurred to me that it was a good thing to have it out now, like this, before there was real cause for such a confrontation.

"Daphne, just calm down, will you? I'm just being friendly. Look, I'm not going to say I don't feel some affection for Christine. I've known her for as long as she's known Andrew." That was a poor choice of words. Daphne shot me a fiery glare, her lips pursed. I plunged ahead. "She's . . . family, for crying out loud. She's married to my

brother. What more do you want, for security?"

That seemed to have some effect. Daphne remained silent, and leaned against me, looking down to where her toes curled in the sand. I put my arm lightly around her back, then stroked the wisps of black hair stirred by the wind. I said, "Let's take a walk."

The bank of clouds continued to roll in from the west. When we heard the awful noise of the van returning from town, Daphne and I walked back to the camp. I presumed that my brother and his wife had also had some kind of a run-in, because Christine showed a determined set to her lovely jaw and Andrew appeared sullen.

Andrew said flatly, "I'd better get to work on that muffler."

Christine said to Daphne, "Want to help me slice mushrooms and tomatoes for a salad?"

I felt left out, adrift, in limbo. I sat down in the sand and began to draw aimlessly with my finger. After a few minutes of this I grew restless and said to Christine, "I guess I'll go explore down the beach the other way. I'll be back in time for supper."

Christine abruptly put down her knife and said to Daphne, "I think I could use a walk, too. This is almost done; you don't mind, do you?"

Daphne looked at me like a scolded puppy, then answered in a muted tone, as if speaking to me, "No. That's fine. I can finish."

Christine wiped her hands on the seat of her cutoffs and walked over to join me.

Andrew cursed loudly from under the van, turning his head to look at us as we passed and then back to his work like a man possessed, the eyes fixed and unseeing. He resumed banging away on the muffler.

When we returned an hour later, Andrew and Daphne were lying half-clothed on Christine's red-and-white towel, locked in a lovers' embrace. Daphne didn't bother even to look at us; and neither seemed to care that Christine and I stood there, agape, or that we'd walked for a long way toward them, hand in hand, squinting at the mirage on the sand.

It was easy to guess what had happened. Andrew would have clambered with his bulky body out from under the van, wiping grease and muffler cement on his shorts. He would have stood with his hands on his hips as he likes to do, watching us go off in the distance, smaller and smaller. Then walked over to the kitchen shelter shaking his head, muttering under his breath.

Around then the first drops of rain hit, and Andrew says to Daphne something like, "I don't know about you, but it makes me kind of jealous to see Ben and Christine together. Even the way they look at each other."

Daphne, grateful, responds, "I know what you mean. It's been the same for me. If he wasn't your little brother I'd be wondering. I still wonder, even so. Andrew, I just don't know what to do about it."

And with that she would have gone to him for crying comfort, and leaned against him, her head against his hairy chest.

He comforted her, no doubt, with his strong arms on her back. Before long his thumbs were running under the long thin straps of her bathing suit top, up and down her skin . . . and it was the end of us.

I still see Christine, now and then. We happen to belong to the same tennis club in San Francisco. She thanks me for what I started--that's her version, anyway. I can't really argue. After all, it was I who kissed her so passionately there on that foreign beach when we were out of sight, and she who gently but firmly pushed me away with the taste so wild on my lips. She told me then that she'd been leading me on, and she apologized. In desperation I tried to paraphrase for her something I dimly remembered from studying Chaucer, a medieval rule of courtly love to the effect that it's okay to love two women, or for a woman to love two men at once.

"Yeah, sure," she said; "that's all right as far as it goes. But then you have to live with the consequences."

So now Christine is thankful, and happily remarried--to Ed, her photographer friend. He doesn't play tennis.

And I'm single again; and I still dream about Christine, especially when I'm back home at Christmas. Then I miss the old days, when she and Andrew and I would all be

together.

These days Andrew stays in Santa Barbara with Daphne. He never seems to make it back home when I'm around. In fact, I never see my brother anymore.

MAKING DO

He stood holding his limp, streaming pecker in his hand, and gazed at the wallpaper around the bathtub. A map of insignificances, it signified his paltry life without outstanding recognition for any uniqueness, talent or creation. Square after square danced in ranks before his eyes, each containing its own sacred circle within the grid.

Yet he realized, returning to the bed of his lover where she lay with her legs sprawled open for him, I don't have to figure out the perfect way to escape. I just have to take a deep breath, and dive in.

Two days later, they eloped. It wasn't as if they didn't see it coming. Tendra told him it was best to do it on her birthday; Borders nodded, "Whatever."

When it was his turn to drive he took a left to Sacramento, then booted it south. A setting sun put an end to their Icaric journey and he lay on the marriage bed recalling that damnable procession of squares, distracted as she stroked his bulging sidekick.

Had there been anything worthwhile on the tube, they might have found a tempting distraction from the by-now usual foreplay. As it was the screen remained dark after a whirl through the channels, and Borders thought only of that wall back home, the

flatness and drabness of color in the design, and the patience that he felt it necessary to summon up in order to endure this latest affront to his individuality.

What could love do to restore a man's sense of purpose in the world? How could the grizzled chin in the morning be made to appear worthy of the brain inside, the blood that came coursing out when the skin was nicked by the obligatory razor?

Borders was already one step ahead of himself as she grew bored by his distraction and began to doze; yet he also was caught by this image that refused to leave his inner vision. Anywhere but here: in this sameful motel, with its die-cut room, its gray screen of mass entertainment silenced against the air conditioner's hum, the groan of his own thoughts pinned on his axis.

The next day at breakfast, a take-in set of rolls and self-brewed coffee, they talked of his dilemma. Tendra said that in India the wives were given away like cattle. It was the man's duty to keep her well provided-for, and her duty to learn to love him. "That's all very well," said Borders, "but what happens when it comes to making love? How do they begin?"

"Like last night, I guess," she said and bit a roll, holding the pasty pastry in her mouth without chewing.

They had indulged in romance without marriage for a year, done the sex thing to where it was fun sometimes and they could more or less come on demand, and figured

that by tying the official knot it would make little difference in fact, but a lot of difference to her parents, a shopkeeper and diabetes nurse in Fresno, Bengalese by origin.

"Where is this going?" she asked him suddenly, swallowing awkwardly.

"What do you mean?" He knew what she meant.

"I mean, are you going to learn to love me?"

He hesitated too long and she turned away to cry at the wall, pastry crumbs dribbling down the side of her mouth. He got her the box of tissues, and thought about his own crying wall, and picked at the fresh-dried blood on his own face until his finger was wet. He rubbed the blood between his finger and thumb, and wondered what it might have been like if he had some special talent, as a writer, say, or a painter. A photographer in this situation would grab his camera and walk right out, snapping frames as he went. The future would be resolved into a flurry of closeups, a collage of retakes. A writer would brood until his space was secured, then unload with some obscure mythology or divertisement, and all would be healed.

No, for him it was just another square on the wall, another circle with its pinprick in the middle, its point of painful truth, its limitation in the box to which life had assigned it the name, day. In the life of an ordinary man. Why bother?

Not that he was ever suicidal. He put his hand on the small of Tendra's back, and stroked it tentatively, absently, carelessly and yet with some recognition of the need to

comfort her. She stopped crying and was still. Borders was an electrician by trade, between contracts. He had a junior-college education, had enjoyed reading novels in Literature I and gotten off on the nudes in Art History, had even started a photography course in the summer but left it off when he had met Tendra and they had gone hiking for their first date in the Sierras on an impulse of hers, since she'd never been in the mountains before and he said he had. She'd wanted to put her trust in him.

A little later they were driving south again, with much silence yet mutual reservations about this plan to go into Mexico for some semblance of a honeymoon. A destination had never been chosen, and so when the sign came that the customs station was ahead in 3 miles, Borders stopped the car and pulled over. "We need to think about this."

She looked at him apprehensively, as if he were questioning the whole relationship, the elopement, the meaning of his life and as it happened, his life with her. He was.

"I, I just..." he began, but he couldn't find a way to continue. The squares danced in his head. A tear formed in her left eye. His hand still rode the steering wheel. A dragonfly flew headlong into the windshield, and lay sprawled there, oozing slightly, twitching. "I just don't know anymore what I want, or how I would even go about getting it, if I did know."

It seemed to take all her courage for her to reply, but she did, finally, saying, "I thought you wanted me."

"Yeah I do, Tendra, I do and I did and I still do, but y'see that's not it. I mean that's not the whole story, it's not all there is to it. Maybe for a woman it's enough, I know that sounds sexist but isn't it true in some way, I've heard you tell me that and so it hurts me to tell you that for me it doesn't work quite like that, it's not quite enough, there needs to be more, something else, some way for me to be in the world and have it mean something, I mean something important, something where other people can see me or what I've done and say, "There, there's a man, what an accomplishment! Or, like, just, not people, but for me to look at my life and be proud."

Still there seemed little for her to say. She became so small, hardly breathing, her small lips still and slightly parted, waiting for an opening, a way, he imagined, to fly out as a bird from a cage.

He even knew what she was thinking: Wasn't it enough for him to be proud of having this woman, this exotic beauty to call his own? He did want to kiss her now, if only out of solicitude, and in feeling this impulse wondered if what he imagined her thinking was true. Maybe it was enough. He leaned forward to kiss her. She turned away toward the passenger window. He could see that her tiny hand clenched the door handle whitely, ready but unable to spring it.

NEW MOON

i

". . . and may the blessed Virgin forgive Jessie for her sin committed in ignorance, as God may forgive me for my failure to bring her wayward soul to see the truth. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Maria lies looking up at the full moon through the skylight over the bed. After a moment David speaks. "Don't you think you're being a little hard on yourself, Mar? You can only do so much."

"I know, but while there's still hope, I can't stop trying. I'll go see her again tomorrow."

He lies there silent a while longer, then says, "You still interested in this hike we've been talking about? We could go up Lightning Ridge, where we picked huckleberries last year."

Maria turns to him and places a hand on his chest, where she begins to play with the curly blond hairs. "Yes, that would be nice. Let's do that. Soon."

"Next weekend?"

"All right." David smiles; hers comes grudgingly.

In the morning Maria sets about reviewing the leaflets she's been distributing at the Williamsford Mall during Right-to-Life Week. "The Choice to Murder?", "Responsibility--God's and Yours," and "Life Begins at Conception" are topics that are all too familiar to her by now. And yet they haven't worked to convince Jessie of the error of her impending choice. Perhaps, Maria considers, it's her approach that's been wrong . . .

She prays again this morning--holding her head in her hands, leaning from the couch over the coffee-table strewn with leaflets and flyers. But she is not given any revelation of new strategy in this particular crusade. She emerges from her spiritual struggle only the more resolved to stick with it, to the end.

The phone rings. It is Jessie. Maria's heart pounds and her voice quavers as she listens and responds to Jessie's request. Jessie wants her to come over to talk about the baby.

Maria's hopes are high as she flies out the door and fairly runs the three blocks to Maria's house, an old homestead cabin standing alone on a large field at the edge of the woods. As she slows to catch her breath approaching the house, Maria readies herself one more time, knowing that this is the time for action, for true good works.

The sun breaks over the mountain, and Jessie's eyelids flicker open. Her first thought is the same as the last one of the night before. The time is now; and so she begins to try to explain, in silent, inner speech.

When it is over she sobs softly, back into a light and dreamful sleep. When she awakes again she is still certain of her choice, and she phones Maria before her mind changes. Then she crawls back into bed, and closes her eyes.

Shortly there is a soft knock on the cabin door. Jessie doesn't respond. The door opens a little and Maria peeks in, hesitates, then enters and quietly closes the door. She stands for a moment in the kitchen space, surrounded by plywood counter, wood-burning cookstove, open shelves stocked with jars of grains, beans, seeds, teas. Along the wall toward Jessie's bed are bookshelves holding paperbacks, magazines and files--worn but neat. A cabinet of rough lumber and bricks, holding a stereo system, records and tapes. There is a black phone sitting on a speaker. On the wall, a solidarity poster, a Guatemalan woman and child. In the center of the room are arranged a tattered old couch, a small low table, a rocking chair, a simple rug.

Maria walks softly across the room and settles into the rocking chair. Her hands rest on her rounding belly. She, too, is four months pregnant.

Jessie is ready to open her eyes again.

Maria smiles gracefully. "Morning, Jess. Been sleeping well?"

"Yeah, not too bad . . . but oh, I can't get away from this strange dream I had, just this morning. I saw . . . my baby. He was a full grown person. I just passed him on the street. We recognized each other suddenly. He turned around again. It was the eyes. I looked at his eyes, and he told me, without even speaking, that everything would be all right. That he was all right, even though I'd, I'd . . ."

Jessie starts to cry. Maria goes to sit beside her and comfort her, with arm and hands around Jessie's shoulders. She cradles her with a firm hug. Finally, Jessie takes a deep breath. She sits upright, adjusting her nightgown. She looks at Maria sharply.

"You've come to try to talk me out of it again."

"Look, Jessie--"

"Haven't you?"

"You said you wanted to talk about it."

"Maria, do you really want to know what it comes down to?"

Maria is attentive but says nothing.

"Gerry. His not being here. To care for me, for the child. I don't want to do this whole trip alone, Maria; it's just not my life, what I want it to be."

"What do you want it to be?"

Jessie reflects a moment. "Well, it might have been, with Gerry . . . No, I'm gonna stop crying over that spilt milk. I guess it's partly the things I'm involved in, like, you know, the refugee committee, the pesticide action group . . . not to mention trying to

make a living somehow."

"So are you morally opposed to welfare?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not on political grounds or anything. I just don't want to feel-useless."

"Useless? Caring for a new human life?"

Jessie is silent. Then--"I would have been ready to. If he had. But it's different now."

"Did Gerry love you?"

"Oh, I thought he did. I thought I'd finally found someone who could accept my faults, my imperfect beauty, my stubbornness, my tendency to doubt and cry too much, my . . .self. But I was wrong."

"Or maybe he did love you, but he decided that he just couldn't handle such a change in his life, as it would mean to have a baby."

"That could be. In fact that's exactly what he told me. Except that's not what I call love. At least he didn't put any blame on me. Just said he hadn't settled on a career yet, wasn't sure where he was going with the Forest Service, you know, or if he'd be staying in this area the rest of his life."

"Did he want to stay?"

"Oh, who knows. Let's forget about him."

Jessie brings her legs out from under the covers, brushes them past Maria to stand

up. Maria stands and moves out of the way. Jessie runs a hand through tousled, strawberry-blonde hair cut shoulder length in back, shorter on top. Maria's hair is dark, well-shaped in a neat, wavy bob; she's wearing a navy polyester skirt to her knees, black flat-heeled shoes, a plain white blouse and yellow sweater with buttons open. Jessie feels the contrast in her rumpled nightgown, bare feet and unkempt hair. She looks at Maria's belly, down at her own, fights back a sudden, momentary spasm of tears and strides to the kitchen counter.

"You want some coffee?" she manages to ask.

"Sure, I'll have some. Do you want me to--"

"You're drinking decaf now, right?"

Maria decides to let Jessie continue the task she's started with such sudden energy. She remains where she is and answers, "Doctor's orders. Doesn't want an express train coming out, he says."

Jessie laughs now, the heartache passed. She rummages for the coffee jar while Maria goes to the couch. "Oh, there it is. Guess I'll have some of this low-octane stuff, too. I'll do yoga to wake up."

She picks out the can, puts some coffee in a filter and starts water heating in an electric kettle. Then she continues puttering, putting things away, tidying up.

"You know," she continues, "after Gerry left I didn't know what to do with myself. So I just cleaned this place spic and span. Dusted, scrubbed, I even put all these

jars and stuff in alphabetical order, if you can believe it. Now they're all mixed up again. I never know where anything is."

Jessie tosses down the dishrag and steps into the space in front of the couch. She raises both hands, palms together above her head, looks straight up, takes a deep breath, then bends slowly down at the waist. As she does this she asks, "Do you believe in hell, Maria?" Her hands touch the floor.

Maria says, "I thought you'd never ask." She utters a nervous laugh. "The question every Catholic studies for. But you know, it's not like in Sunday school. The big red devil, and hot coals. It's inside, when you sin and can't get it out, and it burns and burns. That's all, really."

Jessie is slowly returning to an upright position. "'Can't get it out': How do you get rid of sin, then?" She brings one foot up to rest on the other knee, and extends her arms out and slightly up.

"Well, the Protestants believe you're stuck with it. But we believe that confession to a priest cleanses the soul, and atones for sins by repentance--and by the grace of God, through Christ's sacrifice."

Jessie switches feet. "Hmm. And that makes things all right again, does it?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you have a license to . . . commit sin, knowing it will be forgiven."

Jessie loses her balance. "Are we getting personal now, Maria?" She bends

down, arms still extended, legs now spread, to touch alternate toes.

"Jessie, do you think that's really good for the baby? I mean--" but she's cut short as Jessie stands and glares at her blackly. Then she continues, "It does apply, if you're wondering about abortion. Mortal sin is not a matter to check off on a ledger because you say so many Hail-Mary's."

Jessie wraps one leg around the other, and one arm around the other. "But I wonder," she says, "if I later regretted it--or what about if I feel bad about doing something in the first place, but go ahead with it because--because it's for the best, because . . . it's what I have to do--oh, there's the kettle."

Jessie untangles herself and goes over to pour the water.

"So then," she says, "am I forgiven?"

"No!" exclaims Maria. "I mean, I don't know. I'm not the judge. God is."

"But you already called it a mortal sin."

Jessie brings over two coffee cups, hands one to Maria and sits next to her.

"That's true," Maria says, a little uncertainly. "The Church . . . well, you know it's wrong; that's why you feel bad about it. That's what counts. And it's not the regret, or even the act of confession afterwards, that makes it better. Nothing will bring the baby's life back. It's your soul at stake. The torment you'll suffer, inside yourself."

"Like now, if you want to know the truth."

Jessie sips at her coffee, burning her mouth. She puts the cup down on the table.

"Exactly:" Maria continues, "because of what you're intending to do. It's the attitude of sin, not the sin itself."

"I know what you're trying to telling me, Maria, without the theological fine points on the head on the needle. I know it inside." She sticks a finger at her own rounded belly. "But it's my life I've got to live. It's not quite the same as your life, you know."

Maria has been silently looking at Jessie and down at her feet. Now she looks up and responds: "Hey, Jess, I don't want to lose a friend over this. And I'm not trying to convert you or anything. I just want to make sure you won't do anything you'll regret; that's all. For your own sake, too, not just the child's. Because who knows, years from now your life may change and be quite different from what it is now . . ."

"But it's now that I've got to live my life; it's as it is now that I have to cope with it. It's now that I need to decide what to do with this baby, and if I decided to keep it I'd have to live with it from now on."

"And from now on, as well, if you decide not to keep it."

"I know it, goddamnit. You keep your own child: that's for you to decide. Mine, that's for me to decide." Jessie turns abruptly away from Maria and looks over toward the bed. Then she breaks down--"Oh, Maria . . ." She puts an arm around Maria's shoulders and begins to cry. "If you'd just give me some credit for my own attempt to deal with this--like you did when I first got involved with that crummy man . . ."

"Okay, and this time I won't even tell you I told you so . . ."

They look at one another testily; then Jessie is overcome by a little laughter. Spontaneously, they hug each other, lingering with it for a few moments. The heavy atmosphere has cleared.

Maria picks up her coffee cup, takes a sip and says brightly, "It's amazing how it works. My best friend, planning on doing something that's most against my principles, yet still she's my best friend."

Jessie smiles and responds, "I value that, Maria, I really do. And I do understand your position."

"My position . . . And when it's done, then, you can cry on my shoulder."

Jessie begins to cry again, stifles it. "Oh, boy, you really--"

"I mean it, Jessie. I wasn't being sarcastic. I won't moralize, when it's over and done with. It'll be too late."

"Maria, please!"

"I'm sorry, Jessie. I'm not really meaning it like it sounds to you. Maybe I'd better just go now." She puts her cup down and stands up. "Just remember through it all that somebody does care for you. I do."

Jessie remains seated, with hands folded on her lap. "Thanks, Maria. I'll try."

Then, as Maria is almost gone through the door, Jessie runs to catch it before it closes: "Maria--"

"Yes?"

"I almost forgot. The reason I called--"

"Yes?"

"What you said about best friends, and leaning on you--"

"Yes, anything, Jessie."

"Even if I decided to go through with it?"

"I would still love you."

"Could you--then could you take me to the clinic?"

iii

Maria stared at the spot of dried blood glaring up at her from between her legs on the seat of the Bronco. Was it Jessie's blood, or the dead baby's? Was the abortion a lesser sin if considered a form of suicide, self-mutilation? Was she, Maria, then less culpable as an accomplice? David glanced at her; his jaw twitched. Her face was still beautiful, though it had become, in the past couple of weeks, as pious and impassive as the Holy Virgin's. He swung his gaze back, his strong features that were marked with new lines, to his own side window, and to the rough road ahead.

Nearly a week since the abortion, and still Maria's thoughts were not free of it.

She and Jessie had not spoken to one another since. Maria saw nothing out the window, when she deigned to raise her head that far, but wild waste, slash and grotesque rock.

David finally asked if Maria really wanted to be going to the ridge, if there was somewhere else she'd rather go, or something else that he could do for her, that would make her feel better. She managed a faint trace of a smile for appreciation's sake, and even looked at his eyes for a moment, but said no, this was fine. There was nowhere else to go, nothing else he could do--but this she didn't bother to say. He knew it anyway.

They passed the brown Forestry sign that read

BRUSH CONTROL AREA

with facts and figures in smaller print giving details of the herbicide treatments planned. The year-old sign was merely a landmark to them, signifying that they were close to their destination. The last two kilometers of road wound along the top of the ridge, ending in a wide spot clear enough for a turnaround. David wheeled the Bronco around in a cloud of dust which settled on the collection of tire tracks. He got out and looked around, breathing deeply. The sky was a brilliant blue; a bright sun highlighted the distant white peaks which surrounded Lightning Ridge.

David walked around to the passenger side where Maria still sat, staring ahead. He opened her door for her and took her limp hand. A faint smile graced her lips. Maria

stepped down onto the road with David, and they walked along the path that the road became at the end of the turnaround. David put his arm around Maria's waist; she followed suit. They looked at each other, walking quietly together. David's expression softened and a glimmer of light came into Maria's eyes.

As the clear path gradually dwindled, they chose their own path through the green brush. Where they eventually came to a space growing with soft wild grass, they kneeled. On their knees they faced each other, embraced, and kissed passionately. Maria's heart was with David now, and they both gave way to the overwhelming desire to make love, then and there, on God's earth.

The soft sound of the wind and their breathing was broken by the chattering of a helicopter that came up along the side of the ridge and then up, around and straight overhead. David and Maria, joined as one, looked up painfully and saw a broad swath of whitish mist drawn behind it--like a bridal train, thought Maria. David was not so free and easy with his imagination, but indignant, in fact outraged, as he realized what was happening. He lurched to his feet and stood with his fist in the air shouting, screaming at the departing chopper still chattering like death's teeth. And as he stood there, as she lay looking up, with her legs spread below the gentle mound of her belly, the white mist settled down upon them.

David got them moving fast--stumbling into their pants and running back to the

road, hand in hand. In the ten minutes that it took to return to the Bronco, they both had succumbed to paroxysms of coughing. Maria vomited, just before getting into her seat. David was almost too dizzy to drive, but managed somehow to make it back down the twisting, rutted road to the highway, and back home without further mishap. Maria felt her skin tingling all over, but especially from the waist down, where she'd been exposed.

All this time they had not spoken. They got out of the Bronco, walked up the driveway and into the house, and stood there in the dimly lit entryway, still silent. They didn't know what to do. Finally Maria offered that maybe they would see a doctor. David agreed, but said that he was now too dizzy to drive any more, and that she'd have to take the wheel.

They covered the forty-odd kilometers to the Williamsford Regional Hospital in normal time. But to Maria it was an eternity, haunted as she was by looming visions of Lightning Ridge and the adjoining valley shrouded in fog and swirling mists: the shapes of her anxieties for David, and for her own nameless wounds. The valley she saw had an unfathomable depth. Her thoughts and feelings sank there, becoming shrouded in mystery, of unknown character or dimension.

They waited three hours to be seen in the emergency room, for the doctor on duty there had to sew up an ear that had been nearly torn off in a soccer match. And an old woman with an arm in a sling said her arm hurt and needed attending to. When finally

their time came, David and Maria were interviewed and treated in short order. The doctor gave David a prescription for headache pills and told him to rest for a few days, until the dizziness went away. He gave Maria some ointment for her burning skin and told her that she, too, would improve in a couple of days. If not, they should check back with their regular doctor.

On the ride back home, David and Maria both said they seemed to be feeling a bit better, after all.

Indeed, by Tuesday David was nearly feeling like his old self again and ready to go back to work. And Maria's skin no longer tingled. But the fog lifted in the valley beside the ridge, and what she saw there filled her with horror and dread.

In the dream Maria had that night, the valley had no bottom. It was just blackness. She longed for the comfort of the fog again, or even the white mist to cover the blackness. But there was no covering that hideous void now, now that she'd seen it. And the last thing she saw before she woke up was worse, far worse: the valley filling with blood.

She screamed at the vision, and then was confronted with the reality: globs of blood and shapeless tissue had begun passing from her womb. Overhead, outside the skylight in the early dawn, rode the sickle of a waning moon.

The darkest night in July has passed, giving way to a gray, blustery day. Maria lies in her bed looking up through the skylight, alone for the first time in her five years with David. She hasn't slept all night, worrying about him in the hospital with a sudden relapse after a week of apparent recovery. And then there's the feeling sorry for herself. It's too late, she's been trying to tell herself, to feel sorry for the baby.

She gets up slowly and phones the hospital, to find out how David's doing. They tell her he's still sleeping; his condition is slightly improved. She says she'll call again later.

Then, Maria knows, it's time to see Jessie again.

When she arrives at Jessie's house, it is with the hope of renewing this friendship that has been wounded by death and stretched by separate griefs. The grief is also, to be sure, a shared one--and it is in the spirit of commiseration that Jessie greets Maria at the door with a hug that is at first tentative, then quickly warm and deeply felt.

They pull away enough to smile, sadly, face-to-face.

Maria ventures, "How are you feeling, Maria? I heard what happened."

Tears well suddenly in Maria's eyes. "Oh, I'll get over it . . . I hope."

Jessie pulls her closer again, but Maria resists, wanting to retreat a bit, to regain

her own strength. Their smiles are gone so quickly.

Jessie drops her arms and asks, "And David. Is he all right?"

"They said he's improving, when I called this morning. It still worries me, though, after he seemed to be getting better."

Jessie turns from the doorway, even as Maria speaks and leads them into the cabin. A television set sits on the coffee table in front of the couch.

Maria takes a seat on one side of the couch.

"Does this make it easier?" she says, gesturing toward the television.

"Yes, if you can believe it; trash that it is. There's nothing else to do."

"But what about all your committees, your--"

"Right. And after all that, look what they go and do to you. To you and David. And . . . to your baby."

Maria listens in stunned silence. Jessie slumps into the armchair next to the couch, facing her. After a moment Maria says, "Jessie, do you still resent me for trying to talk you out of the abortion?"

"Well . . . no, it's not resentment." Maria waits for more of a response. She knows Jessie well enough to expect the whole truth sooner or later. Jessie obliges her:

"But goddamnit was I mad at you, after it happened, after I went through with it and it was too late; I was mad at you for not talking me out of it! I guess I just wanted someone else to blame, is where that was coming from. But now you're going to ask me

if I still regret doing it, and I don't. I still feel like it had to be done, for my life where it's at now and for that kid's sake, agree with me or not."

Maria is silent, absorbing the impact of Jessie's outburst. Then she says her piece. "I couldn't even talk to you afterward, after I drove you home from the hospital. When you were in there, and I was waiting, it was as if you had become, I don't know how to say it, but something less than human."

"That's funny, because that's what your pro-life leaflet accused me of thinking about my--embryo."

"I know! I know! That occurred to me after a while. But I still didn't know how I could, could . . ."

"Relate to me."

"That's right. And then, all the rest . . . happened to me."

"It's just terrible, Maria." Jessie leans over to put her arm around Maria's shoulders. "It wasn't your choice. That's the worst part."

Maria falls silent, staring ahead at the floor, her hands together between her knees. Then tears begin to fill her eyes. "Oh, Jessie, we so wanted this child!" She turns to her friend and clings to her, crying.

After a while, Jessie ventures, "Have you confronted Forestry yet, with what they did to you?"

"David went in and yelled at them, the next day. But they just said it was posted.

With those big brown signs, that have been there for a year."

"But what about now that you've had a miscarriage?"

"Oh, we already talked about it, with the doctor. He said nothing could be proven. One case like this is no evidence at all. We're 'within the range of normal miscarriages for the population,' he said--or something like that. It's hopeless."

Still Jessie persists. "But couldn't you go to Forestry yourself and show them, firsthand, the effect of their policy?"

Maria is silent for a moment; then she turns on Jessie. "Do you know what that would be like?" She jumps up from her chair, still confronting Jessie. Jessie uncrosses her legs and backs away slightly. "It would be like you showing up on Gerry's new doorstep, wherever that might be, with your aborted baby" (she cradles her arms) "saying, 'Will you make it up to me, Gerry? Will you come back?'"

"Oh, Maria!" Jessie screams, turning her head away.

Maria drops her arms. "I'm sorry, Jessie, I shouldn't have said that to you."

Jessie purses her lips, fighting back tears. Then she blurts out--"I'd never want that bastard back. I've got my own life to live, now, without thinking about him any more."

Maria sits back down only partially, leaning on the arm of the rocker.

"Interesting, isn't it, that Gerry works for Forestry. Is he involved in their spray program at all?"

"Yeah, he is. His department, anyway--silviculture. But let's just forget about him."

"All right . . ."

"But you, I don't want to forget about. Listen, I can see how you might not feel like knocking your head against a brick wall with Forestry. But how about just talking to a few people around here, about what happened to you? I bet we'd get a lot more support to stop those chemicals once and for all."

Maria sits still, biting her lip. "I don't know, Jessie. What do you mean, like speaking at public meetings, going door-to-door, or what? I don't think I'd be up to that sort of thing. Not about my . . . baby." She fights back small tears.

Jessie takes Maria's hand. "No, no," she says, "just people you know, at your church, maybe, or the prenatal group you were in. I'll help organize it if you want. You just have to be yourself--especially to let other mothers know, so their babies can have . . . oh, Maria--"

"Yes--say it: the right to life."

Maria closes her eyes. She can still feel the warmth of her hand clasped between

Jessie's hands. She sees the ridge again, with sparse patches of cloud drifting around its base. Below is an immense valley, partially obscured by clouds. But farther below, on the valley floor, can be seen farms, roads, houses. The broad mountain that is Lightning Ridge now hovers as solidly as her faith, her love, her renewed sense of commitment. Above, just rising from the edge of the neighboring peaks, comes the first shining crescent of the new moon.