Biggest man in Italy| Stories and poems

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The University of Montana
THE BIGGEST MAN IN ITALY

Stories and Poems

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Biggest Man In Italy............................................... 1
Two Sleeping Bags At Goat Haunt Shelter.......................... 11
Friday Night In The Wild West....................................... 12
The Great Sand Dunes.................................................. 23
Tamaracks................................................................. 24
Something Might Happen Here...................................... 41
December................................................................. 54
Summer Without Turquoise.......................................... 55
Father's Day............................................................ 56
The Biggest Man In Italy

When I first saw Mr. Summers, he was walking slowly up the stairs, adjusting the brim of his white cowboy hat. I thought he was another one of the men who just came into the library to escape the July heat. They sat in groups by the windows and watched the children playing outside in the fountain. Because they had books opened on their laps, I could not ask them to leave.

But he walked straight to the reference desk, turning only to see if anyone was watching. He took off his hat, leaned his large body over the desk and whispered, "Have you ever heard of Robert Browning?"

I smiled thinking he was a cowboy who didn't want anyone to know he liked poetry. "Yes, we have several books of his poems. I'll show you where they are," I said.

"That's not what I had in mind. My mother said you might have something on his history."

"Oh, you want a biography." I walked toward the encyclopedias to find a summary of Browning's life. "Have you read his poems?"

"My Aunt Edith used to read them to me" the man said, placing his hat back on his head. The hat and his boots were new, as were his jeans. I showed him the encyclopedia article.

"No, this isn't what I want at all."

"Did you want more information?" I asked.

"I thought you might have a family tree -- there's another word -- a gene. . . ."
"Genealogy."

"Yeah, that's it."

"I'm afraid we do not have a genealogy of Robert Browning, sir. We have some local genealogies. Perhaps you'd like to see what we have on Charlie Russell, the Montana cowboy artist."

"No. I want to know all about Mister Robert Browning's descendants. You see, my Aunt Edith was his great-great granddaughter."

"That's interesting."

"Yes. And, well, maybe there's something else you should know."

He walked to the corner of the room next to the religion books then motioned for me to follow. "Come here, come here," he whispered. He ran his hand nervously along the brim of his hat. His eyes scanned our books on Buddhism.

"My mother and I read in the paper that the love letters of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning sold at a London auction for over a million dollars."

"Yes. . .?"

"Now listen close," he said very softly. "My Aunt Edith died last year -- Edith Barrett Bailey. She had this vanity case with a comb, a brush, nail scissors, a mirror, and there's real silver around the edges. That stuff can shine, you know. And she was the great-great granddaughter of the Brownings. Well, if letters go for a million. . . now this is just between you and me, okay?"

"Okay."

"You see we've talked to someone in New York about this and he says the vanity case is worth five million dollars."
"What!"

"Shh! This is a library," he said, looking over his shoulder. "Now listen, Mother wants me to ask you if you have a family tree of the Brownings. That'll help us when we go to insure the box. If those letters go for a million, just think what something you could use would be worth -- and from the great-great granddaughter too!"

"You say this case belonged to the Brownings?"

"No, my Aunt Edith. Haven't you been listening? We have it hidden in a safe place. And now I need to have a family tree!"

"Who did you have look at the case, Mister..."

"Summers, Bill Summers is my name. It was an old friend of the family. He used to run a pawn shop in New York City. Joe Edwards. Joe knows how to find something valuable."

"Oh," I said. A good librarian never tells a patron they may be wrong.

We walked to the biography shelves and looked under Browning. I grabbed a book and turned to the index to see if I could find any "family tree" information for Mr. Summers.

"Yes, Aunt Edith used to tell me about Pen, that was the Browning's son. He painted but he wasn't as good an artist as his parents were poets. His mother was overprotective and he had some trouble growing up. That's why he liked Fannie. She was different, had that beautiful red hair, and she was a rich American."

My quick examination of the biography led me to find that the Brownings did have a son named Pen whose mother made him wear dresses and he did marry an American named Fannie Coddington. They lived in
"The whole family enjoyed going to Italy," he said. "Fannie liked Venice and the canals. Her son, my aunt's Grandfather Charles, got tired of the Italians. 'Noisy folks,' he said. He finally emigrated to South Dakota where he homesteaded on 640 quiet acres near the Missouri River. Just think, if he hadn't come, I might be an Italian now. Wouldn't that be a kick," he said, straightening his tall frame like a soldier coming to attention. "I'd probably be the biggest man in Italy."

Summers' story was beginning to interest me. I was impressed by his seemingly personal knowledge of the facts. However, I found the following passage in a biography of Robert Browning: "After his wife's death, Robert Browning took a great interest in his son Pen. He enjoyed visits with his son's wife, Fannie. After the poet's death, however, the younger Browning's marriage soured. Though there was a miscarriage, Fannie had no children. She left Pen, entered an Anglican convent and wrote to her friends, 'He kept large snakes in the cellar.'"

I stared at the words, "no children" then turned to Summers. "I'm not sure I can be of any help to you, Mr. Summers. This book says that the Brownings had no grandchildren. That would mean there was no Charles and that your Aunt Edith couldn't be their great-great granddaughter."

"What do you mean, there was no Charles? I sat on Great-Grandpa Charlie's knee! Let me see that book." He took it from me and read the passage. "Aren't there some other books here? Let me see another one."

"You can look here all you want, Mr. Summers," I said as I turned to walk back to the reference desk. I wondered if I could take a walk
by the river after work, sit under an elm tree and read Wilkie Collins.

A half hour later, Summers was back at my desk. "I've looked through all those books," he said. "They didn't tell me anything. Don't you have somewhere else we can look?"

"Let me see," I said as we walked over to a shelf which held the [Official Museum Directory. Under Waco, Texas I found the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University. "Baylor has a special collection of materials about Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, perhaps you could write the people there for help."

"Do they have a phone?"

"Yes," I said. "They do."

He looked at the book and quickly wrote down the number. "Thanks," he said. His boots pounded the steps as he walked to the pay phone at the foot of the stairs. I watched him plunk several quarters into the phone then remembered that Browning had written a poem about the Pied Piper of Hamelin:

> For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,  
> Joining the town and just at hand,  
> Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,  
> And flowers put forth a fairer hue,  
> And everything was strange and new.

I had almost forgotten Bill Summers when I felt a large hand on my shoulder as I stood at the card catalog. I turned to see him looking at me, now without his hat. He was nearly bald.

"I called those people in Texas," he said. "Those professors. That's a lot of quarters from Montana. I had a hard time getting the secretary to let me speak with them. She said they were in meetings. But when I said five million dollars they got to the phone real quick."
Do you want to know what they said or not?"

"What did they say?" I asked, gently pushing Summers' hand off my shoulder.

"They said the same thing you did, that the Brownings had no grandchildren, that there was no Charlie, and that my Aunt Edith couldn't have been their great-great granddaughter."

"Maybe your Aunt Edith was a distant cousin," I offered.

"No... I just know -- wait a second!" His face broke into an enormous smile as he pounded his big fist on the table next to the card catalog. "I'll bet -- yes that's it -- I'll bet Pen and Fannie snuck away from England before their marriage and had a secret love child!"

"What?"

"Wow, even you and the experts didn't know this! I bet the vanity case is worth even more than Mother and I thought. She can quit working now. We'll need to invest the money carefully, you know," he said, his voice rising with excitement.

"Mr. Summers, could you lower your voice, please," I said, wincing slightly when it looked as if he was going to pound his fist on the table again.

"Oh, sorry. You won't go and tell everyone will you?"

"No, Mr. Summers, this is our secret."

"That's right! This is our secret."

"However, I think you should have someone else look at your Aunt Edith's vanity case. To be really worth something, it would have had to have belonged to the Brownings and even then I don't think it would be worth a million."

"Five million. Well, you're a librarian, aren't you? he said, a
look of scorn touching his face.

"For many years."

"Then you probably don't know much about vanity cases. Not like Joe Edwards," he said triumphantly. Summers wiped his hands on his jeans as if he was getting ready to count the money. Then he walked toward the stairs and left the library.

He was standing at the front door the next day when the library opened. This time, he was wearing a long-sleeved western shirt and a bolo tie cinched with a silver-trimmed turquoise stone the size of a robin's egg. I tried to find something to do with the music books, but he soon found me in the stacks.

"Psst!" he said. "Mr. Librarian."

"Good morning," I said.

"There was something I forgot to tell you yesterday."

"Oh," I said, holding back an urge to sigh.

"There was one other thing in the vanity case. There was a thimble which belonged to Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself," he said, carefully enunciating the poet's name. "It was engraved E.B.B."

I stared at Summers who, at six-four, towered over me. "That's lovely," I said.

"Well, someone stole the thimble."

"What?"

"They stole the thimble from my Aunt Edith."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, but Aunt Edith was smart; she wrote a note. I even know what
it says: 'In this box was a thimble which was handed down to me from my great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It has been stolen. Sincerely, Edith Barrett Bailey.' What do you think of that?"

"Mr. Summers," I answered sternly. "You're deluding yourself with this vanity case. It isn't worth five million dollars. If it was worth anything, it would have had to have belonged to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, not your Aunt Edith. And she wasn't the Browning's great-great granddaughter anyway -- didn't you hear the experts at Baylor? Pen and Fannie had no children. The Brownings are famous for their love poems. That's why the love letters are worth so much. I'll bet your case is only worth a couple hundred dollars."

Summers fiddled with his tie then curled his lips into a sneer. "I see... Well, Mother warned me about people like you. She told me there'd be people who'd tell us it wasn't worth much."

"You're fooling yourself, Mr. Summers."

He made a fist and stared at me. "She told me people would lie about the value of our vanity case. They would say it was cheap so they could buy it themselves, then sell it to a dealer who would pay them millions. I'm surprised. I trusted you -- there might have been a hundred thousand in it for you. No, I won't ask for your help again."

Summers strode toward the stairs. I wished I hadn't gotten mad. A good librarian should remain neutral.

I was sitting at my desk a week later, trying to figure out what computer books the library should buy, when the phone rang.

"Hello."
"Hello, is this the reference librarian?" a woman's voice asked.
"Yes."
"Do you know anything about Robert Browning?"
"What?"
"Robert Browning. He was a poet." "Yes, I know that!"
"How many children did he have?"
"One."
"Any grandchildren?"
"No."
"William, he says there was no Charlie." I heard her tell someone at the other end of the line. There was a loud scoff, then she said, "Thank you for your help. Good-bye."

A week after that, Summers returned to the library. He wore a new hat, a gabardine jacket, tailored pants, and his belt carried a large silver buckle. He had a briefcase in his hand as if he were going to travel.

"Good morning," he said, smiling kindly.
"Hello," I said.

"I've got some Polaroids I want you to see. We had them done for insurance purposes. Here's one of the comb, one of the brush, one of the nail scissors. And the mirror, you know I used it when I shaved this morning. Aunt Edith would've liked that." He stepped closer to me. "Oh," he added, in an off-handed way. "Here's one of her notes." He gave me the photograph which showed a scrap of paper with the fol-
In this box was a thimble which was handed down to me from my great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It has been stolen.

Sincerely,
Edith Barrett Bailey

"What do you think?" he asked, grinning.

"I'm impressed, Mr. Summers."

"I've got an extra copy of the note. You can keep the picture if you like."

"Thank you."

"No hard feelings, buddy. Maybe I can give you a little something when we get our five million. Must be hard trying to live on what a library pays. Of course Mother wants to save Aunt Edith's case for now. With inflation, the prices will keep going up and someday, the vanity case will be worth six million."

"Of course," I said.

"Well, good-bye," he said as he reached to shake my hand. His hand was soft and warm and twice the size of mine.

Summers walked to a nearby table, set his hat on his briefcase, then carefully laid his pictures down, one by one. He raised his hands and laughed. He looked like a poker player admiring his winning hand.
Two Sleeping Bags At Goat Haunt Shelter

The trip could have been easy
down Waterton Lake. We touched hands
on deck and let the guide locate
hawks, peaks and the international
boundary cut by a surveyor's axe.
Where we watched mountains from shore,
Kootenai Creek was clear with stones
ready to toss and skip.

But in the morning,
when you gave me your white shoulders
with a promise of curve below,
I knew distance in your eyes
and your embrace was like
the grip of a rope tied to a pine.
My hands across your naked back
linked us tighter than teeth
on a closed zipper.
Friday Night In The Wild West

It was Dean's idea to camp in the Alabama Hills, not mine. He told me I had to see the sphere-shaped rocks west of Lone Pine where they filmed Lone Ranger episodes. He said I'd like the flat sagebrushed plain between the rocks where a thousand movie extras fought a battle in the movie "Gunga Din." Before we'd left Montana, my brother had already shown me the black-and-white photographs Ansel Adams took of the place. Granite boulders that looked like giant eggs were stacked in piles hundreds of feet high. And behind the rocks was the east slope of the Sierra Nevada. From Lone Pine to the top of Mount Whitney is a rise of ten thousand feet in just a few miles.

The evening we went to the Hills, Dean and I bought our groceries from a store on Highway 395. We drove up the Whitney Road as the sun set behind the Sierras. It was late March and leaves were beginning to green the cottonwoods. My brother and I were glad to be pitching our tent at the foot of mountains where the night air would catch a chill.

The back seat of our Toyota was covered with Dean's photo supplies. There was the weathered brown case that held his Nikon, the newer, larger one that held his Hasselblad and the bag filled with lenses, filters, gadgets and film. In the back window I saw his heavy metal tripod. I knew he'd use it in the morning to steady his camera for small f-stops and slow shutter speeds. Dean made money from his pictures and he was going to try to do Ansel Adams one better by catching the place in color.

We turned right at a sign pointing to Movie Road. In a few hundred
yards, we turned right again. By the time Dean had made three more turns, we were winding in among the rocks, our car surrounded by granite.

Dean cooked hamburgers in the fry pan set on our small cook stove. I listened to the meat sizzle for awhile then wandered into the boulders around camp. You can get lost in the Alabama Hills squeezing between rocks, scrambling through this labyrinth of stones.

The granite's surface was rough, cutting my hands, but it was fun to climb. I circled camp behind the rocks and looked over the top of a boulder to see Dean fifty feet below. As he hunched over the stove near our tent, I imagined I was Tonto, an arrow strung in my bow, ready to rescue the Lone Ranger. Outlaws had him at gunpoint and were threatening to remove his mask. Now what would Tonto do? Would he let his arrow fly or would he pause, wanting to get a look at the Ranger too?

I enjoyed Dean's supper -- burgers, instant rice, carrots and some coffee. We sat next to the stove as if it were a campfire and talked about our week in the desert.

"Remember Don," my brother told me again, "take photographs, not pictures."

We were standing on a sand dune in Death Valley when Dean first explained that concept to me. I was snapping pictures of the evening sun when my brother had put his hand on my shoulder.

"Slow down," he said. "What will you get if you just point and shoot?"

I told my brother the wonders of my new Canon Sure Shot with autofocus, autoflash and autoexposure. "All you have to do is look at the mountains through the viewfinder and it'll give you exactly what your
"You can't rush a photograph," Dean said. "It's like loving a woman -- to do it well takes patience and time. To capture the land you want to see more than the eye sees, Don. You only look at a picture, but a photograph looks at you, too."

"Is that why you never take pictures -- I mean photographs -- of people?" I asked him.

"I'm still learning people," he said. Then he told me about the Canadian, Yosuf Karsh, who works for hours to get the right angle on the person he's photographing. "To photograph a person you have to reach a piece of their soul."

"Too much for me," I told Dean on the dunes.

Dean and I agreed that the desert was an excellent place for photography. We'd hiked salt flats, mountains and dunes. We'd camped in a dry canyon wash under the stars where the only sound you could hear was that of a great horned owl.

After the meal was done, we crawled into the tent and into our sleeping bags. Dean told me he was lonely for his wife. He said he wanted to hold his one-year old daughter, Emily, again. "I'm lucky to have the love of a woman and a girl," he said.

"I guess I wouldn't know about that," I said, remembering my close encounters with females, how too often they'd only included quick kisses on a street corner and hurried touching in the front seat of my car.

Dean woke me when the first truck arrived. It sounded like a pickup the way its muffler roared as it climbed the road. Music from an AM
radio station blared from the cab. We listened as it drove closer, stopping no more than a hundred feet away. We heard the doors slam.

"Shoot Roger, how much did you bring?" a male voice shouted above the radio.

"Two cases, I told you, two frickin cases."

"What are they?"

"Budweiser. King of the beers."

"Alright, Rog. Bonus, bonus."

The pair sounded half drunk. Dean and I guessed they were from Lone Pine High.

"Get me a Bud, Rog. Rick and Jerry are bringing your little lady and I want my share of the booze."

"Drink up, D.B."

"Michelle's a fox. I don't know how you do it -- a cheerleader no less."

My brother turned over in his bag and groaned. I tried to imagine great horned owls. "Shut up, Roger," I muttered.

More vehicles arrived, their headlights bright on the tops of the high boulders that surrounded our tent. For some reason, each one stopped where the first one had so those boulders kept our tent out of view. A dozen more car and truck doors slammed. Someone howled above the roar of the radio.

"Hey Rick, didn't old Roger pitch a game today. The Baker guys didn't know what hit em. Get it -- hit em!"

"Cut the crap, D.B."

"At least you guys won for a change," a female voice shouted.
"Yeah," added another girl.

There had to be twenty teenagers on the other side of the rocks. It was party time in the Alabama Hills, but Dean and I hadn't been invited.

"Hey Roger, where's your beer?" a girl asked. My brother covered his ears.

People came and went from the party. Cars and trucks drove up, their riders listened to a few blaring tunes, drank Roger's beer, then drove back to town for more. They laughed and swapped crude lines about the high school principal until one girl said Mr. Burns was okay.

"We don't want to offend Michelle, do we?" someone yelled.

"No way," the chorus answered.

Dean rolled over in his bag and whispered to me, "Don, we've got to get out of here."

"How?" I asked, hearing the vibrations of Duran Duran coming from the party radio. "The only way out is past their trucks."

"Damn, I don't like this," my brother said, his voice drowned by Rod Stewart.

You could hear the voices in the crowd change with each additional beer. The guy they called D.B. now slurred his words when he talked. The girls giggled. No one told jokes anymore, they just laughed.

"Marsha and Cindy and I gotta take a piss," a girl yelled.

"Don't be long in the powder room, ladies."

Above the sound of the radio, I heard bottles smashing against the rocks.

The girls' voices approached our tent. "D.B.'s smashed," one of
them said.

"He does it every week," said another.

"What a jerk -- what did Mindy Sawyer see in him?"

"She goes for jocks. She saw his buns in his wrestling uniform."

"Score one for Mindy."

"Shut up, Marsha."

The girls continued their conference about the males of Lone Pine until one of them pointed a flashlight at the tent.

"Oh my god! she shouted.

"What?"

"There's a tent!"

"Where?"

"Right there."

"Wow, do you think D.B. set it up?"

"No stupid, someone's camping here. There's their car."

"Who would camp -- it's freezing out here."

"Oh my god," the first one repeated. "Let's tell Derrick."

"They'll never believe it -- a tent!"

My brother reached for his tripod. It was set by the tent door ready for his morning camera work. He pulled it up next to his sleeping bag with his hands. I prayed this teenage mob wouldn't come after us. Someone turned off the radio. A few minutes later there were flashlights beamed on the rocks. They pointed toward our car, then at our tent.

"You weren't kidding, Cindy," a male voice I hadn't heard before said. I guessed it was Derrick.

"What do we do?"
There were two of us and there had to be twenty of them. We were silent inside the tent.

"Derrick, look at the license plates. These joes came from Montana."

It must have been Derrick who approached our tent. He shined his light so that it lit up the blue nylon fabric. He shined it high, then low so that our forms in the sleeping bags appeared in silhouette.

"There is someone in there," Derrick announced.

"Wow."

"Hey Derrick!"

"Yeah, Rog."

"Let's go. They're probably a bunch of climbers."

"You're right, Rog. They're probably headed up Whitney in the morning. Let's leave them alone." The guy named Derrick turned his flashlight away from the tent and walked off. He slapped the hood of our Toyota and yelled, "So long, Montana." Then, "Come on guys, the beers are getting cold."

Dean relaxed his grip on his tripod. "Too close, Don," he said.

"This was your idea," I told him.

"Don," he said, "next time we're in Lone Pine, remind me to take the motel."

The party quieted down. Though someone turned the radio back on, it was at a lower volume and Lionel Ritchie was on the AM. Fifteen minutes passed and I didn't hear a single bottle break against the rocks. Outside the tent, you could see a half-moon rising over the Inyo Mountains to the east. But my ears were still fighting the radio and in
awhile, more voices approached our tent.

"Let's go back here, Michelle," the guy said.

She whispered something back that I didn't understand. Then the couple walked right by the tent, their shadows stopping by the rocks where Dean had cooked the hamburgers. They were no more than twenty feet away.

"Your hair looks great combed like that, Roger," the girl said. "You looked good out on the mound."

"Michelle, you don't know how much I've waited for this. Michelle... you've got a great body."

Lionel Ritchie was still on the radio singing, but Dean and I still heard the kissing.

"Shelly, you're good, really good."

"Roger."

"My," I thought. "Is this makeout point?"

"Please don't do that," the girl said.

"What?"

"Rog, please move your hand."

"We've gone together since Valentine's Day."

"You said you wouldn't."

It was quiet for awhile, quiet with the shuffling of bodies.

"Roger!" the girl said urgently now. "Don't do this if you love me."

"Hell, girl, that's why I am doing it," he answered.

There was more moving of bodies. Huey Lewis and the News came on the radio.

"Roger, I said no. Rog..."
"Come on, Michelle, I'm safe. I went to the drugstore."

"Stop... please."

There was the sound of a hand hitting a cheek.

"Roger," the girl cried.

Dean and I heard the hand hit the face again. Then my brother grabbed his tripod and crawled out of the tent. "Leave her alone," he yelled. He was standing outside in his longjohns.

I didn't hear anything but Huey Lewis for a moment, then the boy yelled at Dean, "Back off Montana."

"Go home, Roger," my brother replied. I wanted to see what he looked like, staring at the guy, gripping his tripod in his hands, but I stayed inside my sleeping bag.

"Who is that?" the girl asked.

"Shit, it's a jerk from the tent," Roger replied. "Shit Montana, you've blitzed my evening." I heard the sound of glass breaking. "Shit!"

"Roger," the girl said. "You've ripped my sweater."

The boy screamed a paragraph of four letter words. He yelled until he'd verbally abused Dean, Michelle, our tent and everyone else in the state of California. "You've ruined a pillar of a night, Montana," he said, tossing a bottle at the tent. It bounced off the nylon roof and fell harmlessly to the ground. Sierra Designs makes their tents strong.

When I looked outside, I thought my brother looked silly but strong in his longjohns; he still held the tripod in his hands. From what I could see, Roger was over six feet and solidly built. He was bigger than Dean but walked away without challenging him. I looked around for the girl, Michelle, but she was gone.
"Friday night in the wild west," my brother said.

"Dean, that was great!"

"Great, yeah. Those guys kept us up half the night."

When I woke up there was blue in the sky and my brother and his camera equipment were gone. He was out in the Hills adjusting f-stops and shutter speeds; he was trying to catch the Sierras in their golden light.

It was quiet and cold in the early morning. The rocks were so still, I wondered if the night had been a dream. Staring at the boulders, I remembered Dean had told me the Alabama Hills had been named by a Confederate Civil War veteran who thought they'd be a fine place to ambush Yankees. I dressed, crawled out of the tent and walked to the car. There was a dent in the hood and one of the side windows was broken.

I walked up the road to where the trucks and cars had parked during the night. Broken wine and beer bottles littered the ground. My head hurt from lack of sleep.

Scrambling up the nearby rocks, I climbed until I had a view of the mountains. The Sierras' winter snow glistened in the sun. An Ansel Adams photograph never looked so good. The round boulders of the Hills shone cream, tan and brown.

Scanning the boulders, I caught sight of Dean in the distance. He had his Hasselblad on the tripod pointed toward Mount Whitney. It took several minutes of waving to catch his attention. When my brother's taking photographs, he's all business. His hands frame the possible shots, his mind ponders the exposure, his eyes are lost in a mountain.
He looks the part of a photographer, with thinning hair, flecks of gray in his beard and a few wrinkles around the eyes from squinting into the sun. Dean waved back to me only when his photograph was done. We scrambled off our rocks and walked across the large sagebrushed flat to meet on Movie Road.

"Ready to head north?" he asked.

I nodded my answer.

"If we get an early start, we'll be in Montana tomorrow. I've got ten rolls of film to develop then." Dean unscrewed his Hasselblad from its mount, then set the tripod across his shoulders. As we walked to the car, I didn't think of the dent in the hood or the broken window, I thought of Dean walking up to his small brown house where Sheila and Emily were waiting. I would take a photograph when the family of three embraced. But like Dean told me last night, it's easier to capture the Lone Ranger without his mask than a woman's smile.
The Great Sand Dunes

The mosquitoes were invisible, except by flashlight. Medano Creek inches deep, roared like an ocean. We forded the stream, fought bugs, crossed the flats, searched for sleep.

In the crescent of a barchan dune our night was safe from wind. Then with Jupiter a star, the moon our guide, we climbed that himalayan pile of sand.

Do you remember the raven's first cry at dawn, its black shadow sailing? Across the sand, the Sangre de Cristos, silhouettes above imagination. Daylight tanned the dunes, shaped them to look human.

When my arms, careful as morning, slid around your waist, you knew the sand was a waterless sea, knew how slippery the mountains we had to climb.
Randall got out of the sleeping bag he'd laid on the living room rug and walked to the room where Laura slept on his wide double bed. Standing by the door, wearing a t-shirt and boxer shorts, he could hardly believe that she was there. Eighty days after their last lunch at the Queen of Tarts Cafe, twelve weeks after their last climb to the "M" on Mount Sentinel, five months after that last hurried kiss next to the Science Building, she was back in Missoula. On Saturday morning, she slept in his bed.

An October sun shone through his south-facing window, its light resting easily on her sleeping form. Randall admired her dark brown hair spread across the pillow, her face with white cheeks as smooth as a child's. He saw that her knees touched her chest underneath the blankets. He thought she might be cold.

"Warm up my sweet," he whispered, remembering the times they'd cuddled under a blanket on his couch.

"Move your hands, Randall," she would always tell him when he got close to her breasts.

Laura hadn't changed, he thought, during the two months she'd been away. She was giggling again when she got off the Northwest Airlines flight from Seattle, squeezing his arms again when she asked, "How's my cowboy?" though Randall had never ridden a horse in his life.

They'd driven home from the airport under the stars and the moon. When they'd climbed the stairs to his apartment she'd unpacked her
guitar first, singing songs about love while sitting on the edge of his bed.

Randall tiptoed around that bed where Laura still slept, heading to the window where he could see Lolo Peak skimming the blue in the sky. Randall smiled at the mountain. He loved the clear October weather when the fog along the Clark Fork burned off by mid-morning. Along the streets of Missoula, the maples were turned fifty shades of yellow and red. On Lolo Peak, the alpine larch trees had turned smoky gold. If anything could bring her back to Montana, he thought, it would be autumn.

The phone broke Randall's thoughts -- he rushed to the kitchen to catch it before the ringing woke her.

"Randy, did the little woman arrive last night?" the voice shouted when he picked up the receiver.

"Dan?"

"Is the hundred pound lady sleeping over there?"

"She's here," Randall replied.

"Got her blue nightie on, I suppose."

"She's still sleeping," he said.

"It's ten o'clock, wake her up."

Randall never liked to argue with his friend on a Saturday morning. After spending two years with him in the dorm, he knew that Daniel Storm shouted until he got his way. Randall carried the phone from his kitchen to the bedroom, the long extension cord trailing behind. He knelt beside the bed then gently tapped his sleeping guest on the shoulder. "Laura, a phone call," he said.

She rolled over, her slender form stretching the way a body will
when it's first waking up.

"It's Daniel."

She yawned, opened her brown eyes, then looked from his eyes to the phone in his hands.

"Hello," Laura answered, laying the phone on her lap with one hand, twisting a curl in her hair with the other. Randall studied her thin shoulders, covered only by the blue straps of her nightie.

"You're working all day?" she asked, twisting that curl of hair over and over above her ear.

Randall got up and went back to the window. He looked again at Lolo Peak while she talked. "He says we're going to Seeley Lake or something, Danny. I don't know if I can." Laura turned to Randall and spoke, "When will we be back from the lake?"

"Eight o'clock," he said, "seven-thirty at the earliest." He wanted to spend the whole day with her. After all, she was only here for the three-day weekend.

"Just a second, Danny," she whispered into the phone. Laura walked over to the window, stopping next to Randall. She put a hand under his shirt and ran the tips of her fingers down his back. "Dan says there's a place to dance at Seeley Lake," she said. "We could meet him there tonight." Her fingers nearly tickled him, all the way down the spine.

"Okay," he said.

"Randy says that's great. It's been a long time, Danny. I'll carry a skirt along and see you there," she said as she squeezed Randall's arm. His throat burned as he watched her hang up the phone.
Randall remembered the day he'd introduced his roommate Daniel to the girl he'd met in Chemistry lab. She was wearing a brown wool sweater above her well-fitting jeans. It was the one with reindeer knitted into the design, deer knitted so well that they showed off her gentle curves. Laura had been as cheerful as the sweater that afternoon, laughing at Daniel's North Dakota jokes. They'd gone to a movie that night and he'd walked her home alone. Back in the dorm, he'd asked Daniel what he thought of her.

"Too skinny and she's a brunette," Daniel had answered. "I like blondes."

A month and several movie dates later, Daniel had invited Randall to the Lily Restaurant for lunch. "The girl's not right for you, Randall," he'd said.

"Why?" Randall had asked, remembering her kissing him the night before.

"I can see the lines under your eyes, kid. She's wearing you down."

"I'm doing fine," he'd said in April, knowing that just working a lab assignment with her got his juices flowing.

"That's just it, Randy, all that fun. Do you know why you have all that fun?" he'd asked, looking up from the book on the Russian Revolution he held in his hands.

"No, Dan, why do I have fun?"

"You're just like her."

"Like her?"

"Look in the mirror -- no harm, but you're skinny."
"Huh?"

"She's skinny too. The hair, the eyes... and look at your hands."

"I've got them all, Dan."

"Hands the size of a rabbit's paw."

"My piano teacher told me I had small hands."

"You're just like her, Randy. What are you going to do for variety?"

"Bag it, Dan!"

"You're dating your sister," he'd said.

Randall couldn't put the conversation out of his mind. The next day in lab, he'd noticed her thin arms, her hair longer, but only a shade darker than his own. Between the two of them, they probably weighed 225 pounds.

Daniel Storm weighed 200 pounds by himself and spent every afternoon in the university weight room. He practiced karate in front of a small mirror and slammed doors when he was mad. And he said he only liked blondes.

After showering and dressing, Laura walked into the kitchen where Randall was cooking breakfast -- an omelette with milk, cheese, green peppers and five large eggs. She drifted across the room, combing her still wet hair and glancing at the posters Randall had taped to the wall.

"Looks good," she said. "Mother used to make scrambled eggs for breakfast."

"It's an omelette," Randall said.

Laura had on a warm red sweater and new blue jeans with the crease
still in them. "When did you get this apartment?" she asked.

"August," he said. "Dan and I needed to be on our own for awhile."

"He's a funny guy, that Dan," Laura added as she carefully applied gloss to her lips.

"Yeah."

"I'll never forget the joke he told about the lady ostrich shopping in Chicago. Can you imagine, a bird with its head under a manhole cover," she giggled.

"Are you dressed for the mountains?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, whistling one of the tunes she'd played on the guitar the night before.

It was October's mountains that Randall wanted Laura to see -- October's mountains and trees. Fall was the time of year when the whole Rutter family went off to see the Missions and the Swans, off to see the trees in autumn. Driving the old brown family Plymouth up the Blackfoot River to Seeley Lake and beyond, Randall's dad would point out the fresh snow on the peaks then park the car beside the road. He would set his old Kodak on the roof of the automobile and frame a photo of the coniferous trees that lost their needles.

The trees were western larch and Randall loved them. In winter he'd seen their barren branches with only gray bumps where the needles used to be. He'd studied them in May when the first lime green shoots sprouted from those bumps on the limbs. All summer, a larch's needles held that lime color. Across western Montana they were hardly distinguishable from the pines and firs that covered the mountainsides. But as the days grew shorter and frosts left their mark in the grass, the
larches came into their own, each branch on every tree turning the yellow of that color in a box of Crayola crayons. Randall loved the larches in autumn.

He brought out a gray knitted cap from the hall closet and handed it to Laura. "It may be cold today; I'll stick in a pair of mittens for you too," he told her.

"You think of things, Randy. You organize. That's why I like being with you," she said, winking.

Randall poured orange juice into two glasses on the kitchen table then divided the omlette equally onto two breakfast plates. "Thanks," he said.

She tasted the omlette and grinned. "This deserves table grace," she said. Laura bowed her head and blessed the food.

Daniel had prayed too, Randall remembered, when the two of them had gone out to eat after Daniel's recent trip to Seattle. He'd whispered something that sounded like it'd come out of a hymnbook when they'd eaten at the Mustard Seed Cafe.

"Laura's looking good," he'd reported while chewing his order of Maui Chicken. "She's gained five pounds since moving home. That does a lot for a skinny woman's looks."

"I'm glad," Randall answered, thinking for a moment of Laura in a green or yellow swimming suit.

"She told me 'Say howdy to cowboy Randy,'" Daniel added, imitating her soft voice.

"I miss her," Randall confessed.
"Remember what I said, Randy. Don't hope much. She's dating an old high school friend in Seattle -- might marry him."

"She mentioned Ivan in her last letter."

"Laura and I went dancing in Seattle. She liked it too. We spent five hours at a club by Puget Sound."

"That's nice."

"I don't like my friends being fooled, Randy. She's playing the field now."

"At least she's coming here for Columbus Day."

"If I weren't only interested in blondes, I'd be after her too, Randall," Daniel said. "She dances well, roomie."

Along the Blackfoot River the larches were turning yellow gold. He drove Laura through Bonner, past the dangerous highway curves where autos had slid into the river, past the Johnsrud Park Bridge to the open prairie that was called Potomac. The traffic was light on Saturday and he stopped several times to photograph the brilliant forest shining beside the river in the midday sun.

He took pictures of Laura laughing by the trees. When the shutter clicked on the larches and his friend it made him wonder why she'd wanted to leave. They drove on to Clearwater Junction swapping stories, singing, letting their hands touch across the front seat.

Their first fight was in the Chemistry lab. He'd been responsible for recording data that week and he'd carelessly transposed some numbers. The results were skewed. Professor Donner F'd their papers and the
next week Laura had done her work alone.

Later, there was the movie, *All The Right Moves*. It had seemed okay, but Randall should have known from the reviews that she wouldn't like it.

"All that sex," she said.

"It said something about a guy from a steel town."

"You liked that girl's body."

Still, it wasn't any one thing that had Laura drifting away. Perhaps it was just that the newness had worn off. In good moments, Randall thought the love would sprout again, like the larch needles in spring. Then she'd told him she was transferring to the University of Washington in Seattle.

"I never expected this color," Laura said, scratching the back of Randall's neck as he drove. "All the branches look like golden feathers."

Randall turned off the main road and headed up the west side of Seeley Lake. On a narrow strip of land near where the Clearwater River came out of the lake, grew the oldest larches in the world. He remembered when his father had first shown him the big trees. He remembered holding his dad's hand as they'd walked across the forest floor of pine grass and kinnikinnick. His neck was bent as he stared up at trees taller than any buildings in Missoula.

"That one's 950 years old," he told her, pointing to one of the trees near the lake. "Dad first showed me this place fifteen autumns ago."

They walked hand in hand beneath the trees.
"We've got big trees in Seattle too, Randy." She smiled. "But they don't turn golden in the fall."

They walked along the beach by the summer campground where Randall had learned to swim. He remembered his mother holding him in her arms while he tried to flutter kick. He pointed to the boat launch where waterskiers shot out into the lake. Laura touched the water and said it felt too cold for that.

"Not in July," he told her, looking across Seeley at the fresh snow on the Swan Range, zipping up his coat to shield himself from the wind that was beginning to pick up in the early afternoon.

Randall took her to the tree where he'd carved his initials with his first pocket knife. He hadn't cut the R's very deep so the scars were gone. Laura remembered writing her name in chalk on a Seattle sidewalk. "I guess that's gone too," she said.

Randall turned and kissed her once.

"Thank you," she said.

Though he'd lived in Montana all his life, Daniel Storm had never been to Seeley Lake until Randall drove him there. They'd set out from Missoula on a cloudy September morning, Daniel drinking a few beers while Randall drove. "We're off to see your lakes and trees," Dan had said. "Rutterland."

It was raining when they reached the lake -- Randall was sad because they couldn't see the mountains. All he had to show Daniel were the pink rocks by the shore, each one showing layers of hardened sediment set down millions of years before. Rocks and tall larches catching the mist.
They got as far as the ranger station on the north shore before the weather became a downpour.

"Tough luck, Mr. Rutter," Daniel had said.
"Yeah."

They'd sat by the heater in the car watching the rain and sharing a beer until Daniel spotted some birds on the lake swimming among the cattails. "Look at those ducks -- they love it!" he'd shouted, pointing to the three birds.

It was raining too hard for Randall to tell much about them, but somehow, Daniel talked him out of the dry car to get a better look. They scrambled down a muddy bank and stepped onto the dock where the Forest Service anchored their boats. While their clothes got soaked, they watched the ducks paddling and quacking.

"Amazing," Dan had said, "how well three birds get along in the rain."

Randall was enjoying the sun, but as he and Laura left the Seeley Lake forest the clouds were building in the west above the Mission Mountains. By the time they stopped at another lake further up the valley the wind was getting cold. Laura pulled on the wool cap he'd given her at the apartment.

"This is Alva Lake," he said. "A railroad engineer named it in 1893 for one of his daughters."

"Where's the train?" she asked.

"They never got the rails here, but in the summertime you can still hear the loons. They call in the night."
"You know a lot, Randall," she said. "Let's get back in the car -- I'm cold."

He drove her on to Lindbergh Lake, the Rutter family's favorite place for a picnic. He told Laura the story his father had told him of 1927. Randall's dad had been a young kid with his own father on what was then Elbow Lake. Mr. Rutter told Randall he'd been there the day "Lucky Lindy" landed his plane. Everyone was so proud they renamed the lake.

Randall thought it was the best place in these mountains. Every August, they held a concert for the late Mrs. Kotschever. People steered their boats close to the lodge on the east shore and listened as musicians played Mozart and Bach. But even in October, when the people were gone, the wind brought its own music through the trees.

The sun and the clouds were playing games with the afternoon light when they parked the car at the road's end. A burst of light would sparkle on the water, then the show would be gone and Lindbergh Lake would be gray again. Randall took Laura's hand as they worked their way over the stones and the aspens set at the water's edge. Fish rose looking for bugs and left behind circles of waves. Squirrels chattered from the branches of the larches. Randall hoped his grip would warm Laura's small fingers.

The sun came out again and shone on the trees along the eastern shore. The band of larches was flushed with gold.

"Western larch," he shouted.

"Larches?"

"Larix occidentalis is the latin name," he said, squeezing her hand.
"I always thought they were tamaracks."

"Tamaracks grow in the Midwest," he told her. "They look similar, but those trees grow in swamps. Western larch are old and tall." He led her to a large tree by the shore and placed her hand on the cinnamon-colored bark. "Larch," he said again.

"You're probably right about the name," she said, feeling the grooves and lines in the tree's trunk. "But tamarack is a better word."

Sunlight was still filtering through a crack in the clouds; Randall turned to admire another hillside of yellow.

"Dan calls them tamaracks," she said. "Such a word full of sounds." She smiled. "Tam-ar-rack."

"Tamaracks grow in Minnesota and Wisconsin," he said.

Laura put her hands in her jeans pockets. It was getting colder. Occasional flakes of snow drifted across the lake and down among the trees. Randall listened to the quiet lapping of water on the pebbled shore and knew ice would stretch from bank to bank within a month. When the wind fluttered larch needles to the ground, it was as if autumn had changed to winter in the course of the day.

Randall had ordered an omelette and Laura had chosen the seafood crepes the last time they ate at the Queen of Tarts Cafe. It had been mid-July. They'd eaten at a sidewalk table and watched jugglers and clowns with police escort march down Higgins Avenue -- it was to advertise a circus coming to town.

"I'll think of you in Seattle, Randy," she'd said, sipping her coffee.
Randall watched one juggler work with six bowling pins.

"I may get higher grades in Chemistry but I'll miss you."

Laura's brown hair blew in the breeze and Randall tried to remember the details of her thin angular face. He ran his finger down the bridge of her nose and she showed a half-smile.

"Don't get too serious, Randall. Laugh sometimes. Listen to Dan's jokes," she'd said.

Randall handed her the well-wrapped package he'd kept on his kitchen table for a week. She ripped the yellow wrapping paper then looked at the two pieces of finished wood inside.

"They're bookends," he'd said. "Some I made with my father."

She traced the red, fine-grained varnished wood. "They're very pretty."

"You can keep all of your textbooks on one shelf now."

The bookends were made of larch wood. Years ago, Randall's dad had brought him to the mill at Seeley Lake looking for leftover lumber. They'd picked a few small boards for Randall's project in shop. He'd stayed up several nights after that, laying in bed with notebook paper, trying to find the appropriate design to carve in the wood. He'd finally burned a simple "L" into each end.

They could see the falling snow in the car's headlights as they drove into Seeley Lake. Country western music came from the Saloon, vibrating the walls. When Randall let Laura out of the car he could see Daniel waiting by the front door.

"Oh boy," Laura cried.

"Join the dance, Randy," Daniel said as he lifted her off the
ground, embracing her in a long hug. She laughed when he lifted Randall off the ground too. "How you doing, roomie?"

"Cut it out, Dan."

Inside, there were a dozen people milling around the bar and two dozen more out on the dance floor. It looked like the place to be on Saturday night in Seeley Lake. The women wore jeans and cowboy boots; the men wore jeans and logging boots. Randall decided he looked appropriate in his red plaid shirt. He tapped his foot tentatively to the Hank Williams tune of the band.

"Let's dance, Seattle woman," Daniel said to Laura. She winked at Randall then followed her large partner onto the floor. They drifted into the country-swinging crowd.

Randall walked over to the bar. Several men were gathered around a television set watching a college football game between Auburn and Georgia. Somebody named Harry was cussing because Auburn was behind 14 to 3 in the second quarter. Randall ordered a Coke.

The band finished their song and when he glanced over his shoulder, Randall could see Daniel and Laura clapping. She reached up and ran a finger through Daniel's hair, at the same time motioning for him to come. Randall shook his head.

"I can't dance."

"Don't turn her down, kid," Daniel said.

"Randall Rutter, I didn't come to Montana just to look at trees," she said.

He'd never liked dancing. Sometimes he got sick on Friday afternoons in gym class when Coach Kennedy tried to convince him to waltz with the
girls. But Laura pulled him onto the dance floor. She worked with him on the steps of the jitterbug. They danced in the corner of the room and Randall managed a laugh when he stumbled on his feet. Laura winked and let her hand stay on his shoulder after the song was done. "Thanks," she said.

"He needs lessons," said Daniel.

"Danny boy, stop picking on Randall."

"Sure, sure."

Laura took the sack she'd brought from the car and walked into the ladies' room when the band took a five-minute break. The two ex-roommates followed her walk with their eyes.

"She's okay for a brunette," Daniel said.

"Yes," Randall answered, remembering that he'd kissed her in the afternoon.

"Saw a lot of trees today, I'll bet. Tamaracks."

"Yeah."

She was wearing a red patterned skirt with yellow roses in the design when she returned. She'd combed her hair off her forehead and held it back with a blue barette. Randall thought she'd also added a bit of blush to her cheeks but it was hard to tell since her face always reddened after a bit of walking.

Laura sauntered up to Daniel.

"Shall we do our Seattle step, Mr. Storm?" she asked him.

"Alright, Laura Lee!" Daniel chuckled. "This gal's a dancer."

He nodded once at Randall then bowed toward Laura, escorting her back to the floor as the band got ready to play.
The words came twanging from the lead singer: "If you're gonna play in Texas you gotta have a fiddle in the band..." Randall stared at his two friends jitterbugging to the beat. Then he watched them do the country swing. Daniel was big but he knew what to do with his feet and hands. And Laura looked pretty, he thought, the only woman on the floor wearing a skirt. She laughed brightly as Daniel spun her around.

Randall walked over to the bar and ordered a beer. The football game was in the third quarter now. Georgia was leading Auburn 21 to 3.
Something Might Happen Here

I don't pray much anymore. When I try in the morning, I either end up watching the old man or the people walking to work. God is an empty space in my stomach. I eat breakfast and look at the man fussing with his garage lock. He limps into the shadows, then comes out five minutes later wearing a gray sweat shirt with the word "California" printed on the chest. Sometimes he carries a jump rope, sometimes he lifts a twenty-five pound barbell. Today he dribbles a basketball.

I wish I could meet the old guy. He looks seventy-five and couldn't be more than five feet tall. There's a chocolate mole on his cheek and an ugly scab on his forehead. Did he fall off his Huffy? I eat my Cheerios, drink my orange juice and watch him dribbling though his basketball may never find a net.

After his workout, while I am finishing my juice, the old man leans his hands on the torn black seat of his bike and tilts his head toward the sky. He studies the blue and the clouds and whispers words. Occasionally, his eyes close and his head sinks to one side as if he's fallen asleep. But he soon rights himself and again looks up. I want to know what he says. Yet by the time I'm headed down the apartment steps, running for the bus, he's gone.

Mr. Pierson has promised to call me into his office when he has the final word on the school situation. Since the smelter closed in September, many people have been leaving Great Falls. The high school
will need fewer Social Studies teachers next semester and I'm low man on the list. Pierson says, "You don't want to stay in this windy dump anyway."

"I like the sunsets," I say.

"Live by the ocean," he says.

It is five before eight when the bus lets me off in front of Great Falls High. There are a few students smoking next to the tennis courts but it's still quiet. Most kids don't come here until they have to. Down the long, dimly-lit first floor hall, I see a boy kissing a girl from the Bisonettes drill team, and Shelly Meyers, a student from my second period history class. She smiles and tells me there's a note on my door. It's from Pierson.

"Sit down, Baker."

"I'm gone?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Too few students?"

"It's the money, Baker. With no more copper going through, property taxes are down. We've got fewer dollars to work with. I've tried to talk the Board into keeping you until the end of the year, but your contract made it easy to let you go. Maybe something will turn up east of here. I've got connections in Glasgow and Glendive. There's always a few who quit when the blizzards come."

"Thanks."

"I'd rather dump that sack of potatoes in 211, but that grump's been around too long."

"Thanks anyway."
"You can leave town easy, Baker, nothing to hold you back."

"Sure."

"Happy Halloween," he says. I go.

There are few trick-or-treaters who will climb the four flights of stairs to my apartment on this Friday Halloween. With razor blades in apples, ex-lax in cookies and needles in Milky Way bars, what parent wants to send his kid up and down the street? I wait anyway, a basket full of Wrigley's Gum set by the door.

I pick up the Tribune, which today has a full color picture of a kid with a carved jack-o-lantern on page one, then decide I should phone my mother about my job. She lives alone in Seattle and would be happy to hear from her son.

"Hello, Mom."

"Patrick, it's so nice to hear your voice."

"I lost my job today, Mom."

"No. How could that happen?"

"Remember when I wrote you about the Anaconda Company closing the smelter here?"

"Yes."

"That means less kids in town. I got laid off."

"I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't take effect till mid-January," I begin consoling her.

"I should be able to find something else."

"Now Patrick, I know how hard it was when your father wasn't working. If you need some money I can send you a check right now."
"I'm okay Mom."

"And after you traveled all that way to work in Montana. Doesn't the principal know how much he'll miss you?"

"He'll be okay, Mom."

"I'll keep you in my prayers, Patrick."

"I probably should go now, Mom."

"Oh dear, I musn't run up your bill. Thanks for calling. And I'm sorry."

"Good-bye, Mom."

I go back to the Tribune. There's a story about Tuesday's election. Buck Conners has been mayor for years, but the old guy in the alley may change all that. It turns out his name is Henry Gabriel. I read that in the paper two weeks ago. His story was on page 4 under a headline that read: "Our Political Weather." It seems Mr. Gabriel wandered into the mayor's office one morning in his sweat suit and asked to see big Buck Conners. The mayor was busy and on his way to a city council meeting when Henry Gabriel stopped him. "Buck, are things right as rain?" the old man had asked.

"Who let this guy in?" Buck asked. He probably thought Henry, with his three-day stubble and pepper gray hair, wasn't a voter.

The next day, the Gabe, as he was soon to be known, cashed his social security check, went to the Ernst Home Center and bought a stack of signboards and marking pens. He pedaled his Huffy to his alley garage and began a campaign against the mayor. That afternoon, the joggers, loafers and duck feeders in Gibson Park saw the signs he'd nailed to the
trunks of the box elder trees. Each one read: "Is Buck Right As Rain?"

Of course, there was a law against posting signs in the park. A policeman arrested Henry when he caught him nailing one to a telephone pole. Mr. Gabriel might have simply spent a night in jail if a newspaper reporter hadn't seen him at the police station. "What's he here for?" she had asked the sergeant. He told her what had happened and she posted bond. Two days later, Henry Gabriel was in the papers.

That's when the "Gabe" craze hit Great Falls. We learned of his years as a California housepainter for the homes of millionaires, state senators and the dogcatchers of Yuba City. He was interviewed on the television news, discussed in the Club Cigar Bar and the students in my classes began saying, "Right as rain."

That's when Henry decided to run for mayor. Now, at the end of October, there are signs on every block which read: "Gabe For Mayor."

Now at breakfast I watch him paint them in his garage.

But an old man doesn't do much for me on a Saturday morning. I'd rather have a lover in my bed than him jumping rope outside my window. Her name could be Cheri and we could lay in bed all morning discussing last night's German film at the Rialto. Cheri's hair is rusty red and runs in long circles down her back. She mumbles pleasantly as my fingers trace the curve of her neck. Cheri warms my sheets.

The only woman who will wink at me this Saturday is Linda James, the attendant at Laundry Land. She is a former student of mine who laughs at my jokes and tells me how good I was in European History. When I ask for change for the washers, she will say, "How's school these
days, Mister Baker?"

Linda is humming and ironing clothes when I walk into the laundromat. She acknowledges me with a friendly wave as I carry my box of Cheer toward the machines. The girl's nineteen and I wonder if she'd have lunch with me at Bert & Ernie's. Or would she come to my apartment to view slides of Holland and France? There are no rings on her fingers and she walks to the storage room with the gait of a happy housewife. Perhaps I could tell her about losing my job, about how Pierson has dumped me, or even about how the Gabe uses my alley. But when the laundry's done, I just walk out the door with my folded sheets, shirts and underwear.

"Good-bye, Linda."

This afternoon, I'll go to the public library, find maps of Washington, Oregon and Idaho and try to find a town where I'd like to teach.

I don't own a television set and I'm not going to listen to another Saturday of "American Country Countdown" on KEIN, so I'll spend the evening playing chess, alone. Mr. Pierson and I used to have a game after school. Since I rarely found a way through his defense, he usually won. "Got to bring your rooks into play, Baker," he'd say. "Don't let them guard some invisible moat on the edge of the board; castle away."

My principal has a collection of fifteen chess sets, each one from a different country. I like the ivory one from India the best, but the Civil War set is the most realistic. For a moment, you can imagine Grant and Sherman conferring over a bottle of whiskey as they plan their moves against Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Clara Barton makes a great northern queen.

The pieces move only with my hands tonight. Black and white play
to a draw. Though I usually lose, I miss my games with Pierson. He kept up a lively conversation.

A few weeks ago we discussed the Gabe. "It's incredible what one silly man can do," he said. "Did you see the photo of him in the paper? He looked spaced, what the kids call an airhead."

"Mr. Gabriel rents a garage near my apartment," I said.

"Is that where he paints his signs?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him riding that bike of his? The pictures on Channel 5 made him look like a wobbly high-wire artist."

"Mr. Gabriel does fine."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. He's livened up the election."

I wonder where Henry is tonight. I conjure up an image of him sitting alone in his own place. Perhaps he's doing jumping jacks in his living room. He jumps to his own count, "Right as rain, right as rain."

Out of habit, I go to church on Sunday morning. It is the gray stone Episcopal one on Sixth Street. I walk the five blocks, hurry up the concrete steps and open the heavy oak doors. This old place is quiet inside. Large wooden beams support the arched ceiling and there are stained glass windows on the walls near the roof. When the light is right, they shine yellow, blue and green on the wooden crucifix near the front.

Father Gordon's sermon is on the widow who keeps pestering the judge to grant her justice against her opponent. The judge finally grants her
wish, not because he likes her but because he is tired of her nagging. That's one way to get God's attention, Father Gordon tells us — nag.

The ushers guide me up to Holy Communion. I walk past the rows of worshipers kneeling in prayer. I climb the red-carpeted steps to the altar. Kneeling against the chancel rail, I wish I knew how to nag God. Father Gordon sticks a wafer in my mouth and says, "The body of Christ given for you." His assistant tilts the chalice to my lips and says, "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation." Something might happen here, I think. I close my eyes and wait. A stranger leans over in his three-piece suit and whispers, "There are others waiting, sir."

The congregation files out in a line to shake Father Gordon's hand. Some mention the sermon, others tell him about friends in the hospital. An old woman, wrinkled by eighty years, asks him if the doctor successfully removed his bunion. "I know how awful they can be," she says.

When it is my turn, Father Gordon says, "We've missed you these last few Sundays."

"I'm out of town sometimes," I say.

"We could use another tenor in the choir," he says.

"Maybe," I say, shaking his small rough hand.

Wind, there's always wind in this town. It spills from the north and fills the sky with a bank of clouds, blue-gray with snow. Geese honk from an island on the river bend. They wave their wings and waddle like summer tourists taking the year's last stroll.

Past the geese and the island is the Anaconda stack. It's a monu-
ment left from the time when men were proud to blow their smoke. Five hundred and eight feet high, built in 1908, it towers straight and masculine from a hill northeast of town. They light it at night so everyone can see it. But this oversized chimney hasn't smoked for years and it's cracked along its side. The company is going to blow it up for bricks. I'll take one as a souvenir.

I walk home from church and see the leaves the wind shoots brown and brittle down the street. A four-year old pedals his tricycle up the walk. His face is dirty, his hair is black and he wears a shirt which reads, "Wonder Woman." I say hello and he stares at me. "We've got a cat named Hank," he says.

"Oh?"

"Hank's a girl and had eight kittens last week. Do you want one?" I'm about ready to answer him when his mother pokes her head out the front door of his house. "Bobby, it's time to come inside," she says. As I walk away, she watches me through a slit in the living room's venetian blinds.

There aren't many people on the streets of Great Falls at Sunday noon. They must be eating dinner or watching professional football or shopping at K-Mart. I buy a newspaper at a gas station and head home to heat some food.

There's a can of Green Giant corn on the shelf and I grab some ground beef from the fridge. I scrounge around for lettuce, a tomato, some mustard, pickles and bread. The kitchen is so dirty I have to wash some dishes to have some clean ones to cook on. I squeeze Joy into the
sink and start the burger.

The dish towel is hung over my shoulder while I fry the beef. I don't remember it's there until it slips against the burner, then all is in flames. I drop the pan and burger onto the linoleum; I toss the last white edge of the towel toward the sink. It catches the corner of Sunday's comics. Advertisements burn before my eyes.

The smoke alarm screams. I run for a bucket and hear a knock at the door. My neighbor Chuck sees the smoke, grabs the doormat and runs for the kitchen. He smother the fire in a moment.

"Damnit," I say.

"I'm glad I heard the alarm, Pat. It was lucky I was in the hall," he says.

"Thanks, Chuck."

"Got to watch those burgers," he says. "Regular is too greasy. Go for lean or extra lean."

"Yeah."

"Take care when you live alone, Pat. A man alone thinks too much. Sometimes your brain gets ahead of you."

"Okay," I say. "Yes, okay."

Chuck nods his head and heads for the door. I want to ask him about his recent divorce, I want to talk with him about his wife, but he has left.

Henry's out in the alley. He wears a black jacket over his white shirt and his tie's so narrow it looks like it's from another century. The old man's greased down his hair and his cheeks are red. Except for the time they interviewed him on television, I've never seen him dress
like this. He must have been to church.

What's he doing out there, one arm holding his Huffy, the other straight down at his side? Why does he stand there like that for fifteen minutes at a time? His eyes stare past the clouds, past the blue-gray as if they're seeing a dead wife or a son living in Nebraska. Or maybe he's just a weary old guy with not enough blood going to the brain.

It's time to talk I'd say. I put on my jacket, comb my hair and walk quickly down the four flights of stairs. When I reach the alley, Henry is still standing.

"Hello," I say.
No answer.
"How are you today, Mr. Gabriel?"
Silence.
"Did you go to church this morning? You look very fine." I look stupid talking to this statue. "I like your tie." From up close, I can see it is dark green and decorated with birds that look like pheasants.

"Thank you," he says. He moves his lips, but keeps his eyes pointed toward the sky. "I bought it in Sacramento."

"We've got pheasants around here," I tell him.
"They have wonderful heads, don't they?" At last he turns to look at me. His chocolate mole looms large on his face. "I like the way they bob back and forth when they're cutting through the grass."

"They come from the east side of the Black Sea, pheasants. The Greeks brought them west. It was the Argonauts," I say.

"I like them," he says.

Henry is staring at the pebbles lying in the cracks of the concrete
road. I think he wants me to leave. At least I want to leave.

"Do you ever pray?" he asks. His eyes turn back to the clouds. I look at my watch. It's quarter to two. I need to finish tomorrow's lesson on Louis XIV. "You know, a bird can't pray so he has to fly."

Henry leans his Huffy against the white, flecked paint door of his rented garage. He pulls the key from his pocket and fiddles with the lock. "If snow don't come and the wind's okay, I'll ride out tomorrow and find a pheasant," he says.

I pedal my 12-speed Nishiki south into the prairie, working my way up the long slow rise which goes from the Missouri River to the Little Belt Mountains. On this fourth day of November, the wind is warm and from the south. The grass along the road is brown, the cottonwoods along the Missouri leafless, waiting winter. I look up at the scattered white of cirrus and out-pedal a German Shepherd who nips at my ankle as I pass the last trailer at the edge of town.

I take the road to Eden. Eden -- nothing more than a farmhouse and a grange hall which has long ago seen the last of its Saturday night dances. A small stream runs through the valley, deer bound over and antelope crawl under the barbed wire cattle fences. This is Montana, the earth rolls under the sky. I can ride forever.

Today is election day. Though I've voted for Henry, in a few hours Buck Conners will likely be mayor again. Policemen, businessmen and even a woman on the school board spoke for Buck in a newspaper ad in yesterday's Tribune. They said he was good for progress in Great Falls.

I ride hard, catching the wind in my hair and feeling the ache
in my thighs. The sun is dropping toward the Rockies; they are a dream, distant on the horizon, my bicycle and I a speeding silhouette gliding across the prairie. In forty-five minutes, I've reached the top of Red Butte Hill.

My bike lies against a fence. I climb over barbed wire and stroll the cattle-grazed field. The wind catches the scent of sage. Geese from Canada honk high overhead as their vee points to Mexico. Clouds catch gold, then yellow, then orange. In the east the heavens are pink, then purple. The sun has set. Dusk and the air chills. I ride back to town to see who is mayor of Great Falls.
December

A mile upstream from the Greenough Bridge, where the Blackfoot River turns north under winter ice, ponderosa pines grow like twins, trunks united since birth.

She recalls the day she chased the dogs through snow, came upon the trees as lovers, their jigsaw-puzzle bark burned red, their cones scattering seeds like stones on the river sand.

Solitary in her cabin, taken to walks on the edge of ice, the woman sings against the still echo of a sandstone cliff, waits for the last eagle to emerge from his pine tree nest. Crying by the river's frozen bank, he seeks his prey.
Summer Without Turquoise

Amid the postcards and plastic buffalo of a Yellowstone store you found a Navajo's jeweled ring in a case behind the counter.

Priced above souvenirs and jigsaw puzzles of Old Faithful, that band--gold with four slivers of blue--slid easily on your finger.

Turquoise lies in a bright Wyoming sky stretched across the range. It's in the robin's broken egg left on the neighbor's lawn.

Mom had a Chevrolet that color. She drove it until the engine died. I learned the blues from birds and automobiles.

We could have climbed yesterday to that Mission Mountain lake, blue in its glacial cirque. But paths aren't walked when hikers sleep.

And rings aren't proper this summer without turquoise. Remember how many hopeful lovers had to pray, waiting years to find such a stone.
Father's Day

Mark Crawford drinks a beer while he tells me my father had a lover. He swirls it around in his mouth, then swallows with a loud, satisfied gulp. "I thought you knew, Ben," he says, looking up from the bar to watch the couple that has just walked through the steel doors of the M & M.

"He saw her two days a week, went straight from school to her house. You could set your watch on Tuesdays and Thursdays by Bill Martin. It was always four-thirty when he passed Park & Main."

I turned to look at the two people Mark has seen. The man is wearing a black beret that has a feather stuck through the back. His face is wrinkled and his beard is gray. The woman is much younger. She has on tight jeans, high-topped cowboy boots and a faded yellow shirt that matches her curly blonde hair. As they sit on the cafe side of the room she scratches his back and tells Esther the waitress that he is her uncle.

Esther, who seems to have worn the same beehive hairdo for the past thirty years, shouts their order at Bud, the cook standing ten feet away. "Two ground round cheese de!" I know the couple has been here before if they're ordering the cheeseburgers.

I want to punch Mark Crawford. He was the assistant coach on my little league baseball team, a high school student who taught me the fundamentals of a level swing. Why has he picked this day twenty years later to talk about some woman my father used to see? I clench my fists
as he grins and orders another beer.

"They say he'd just left her house when they found his body on Quartz Street. Chris Morris said he had a rose in his shirt pocket, a white rose." Mark takes off the baseball cap he's been wearing and combs his thinning brown hair.

The bartender, a college-age man whom I've never seen, hands me the 7-Up I've ordered. It's Sunday afternoon in Butte and I've just ridden the bus in from Seattle. My cousins called me on Friday to say that Vicki Marshall was killed in an automobile accident. She was thrown out of the back of her boy friend's pickup as he hot-roddeed down the Hill. I could see the skid marks at Mercury and Idaho where another truck braked to keep from hitting her. She was dead minutes after they got her to St. James.

Mark has come to the M & M to watch the U.S. Open golf tournament on the bar's color TV. The set at the country club is under repair and since he has a hundred dollar bet on Hale Irwin, he thinks it is vital to see what happens. Hale has bogeyed the seventh, eighth and ninth holes at the Winged Foot Golf Club to fall two strokes back of Fuzzy Zoeller with nine holes to play.

Today is Father's Day. On the television, ABC's Jim McKay keeps repeating that fact. He tells Mark and me and the millions of other golfing viewers that both Hale and Fuzzy are dads whose children would be proud if they won. I don't give a damn. My dad's been dead for twenty-four years and I only came to the M & M to get something to eat. I wouldn't have thought of my father once today if I hadn't seen Mark.

It's been five years since I've been to Butte, so I was surprised
he recognized me when I sat down to order split-pea soup and a grilled ham and cheese. I was studying the large chalkboard in the back of the M & M -- the one where they still write down the inning by inning scores of the major league games -- when Mark strolled over with a drink and said, "I'll bet you're Bill Martin's boy."

I hardly knew my father, William Epiphany Martin. He died when I was five years old. It was on the day of the seventh game of the 1960 World Series. My cousins Tom, Margaret and Eldon were huddled with me around their snowy Zenith television. They were rooting for the Pirates like my father would've if he'd been watching the game. I was rooting for Mickey Mantle and the Yankees. When Bill Mazeroski hit that home run over Yogi Berra's head in left field in the bottom of the ninth inning, I started to cry.

My sister Debbie dropped by my cousin's house sometime after that game. She talked with Tom and Margaret then stepped into their backyard where I was swinging my plastic bat at a plastic ball. I was trying to hit one over the fence the way I wished Mickey Mantle had. Debbie told me to stop playing for awhile -- she told me our father was dead.

The woman in the yellow shirt and the man with the black beret are kissing at the cafe counter. Esther and Bud glance up from their work to watch. Mark Crawford, however, seems to have lost interest. He is watching Hale Irwin study his putt on the twelfth green.

"That's some line you had about my father," I tell him as Hale misses the hole with his putt.
"Shit," Mark mutters as he sees his hundred dollars slipping away.
"Tough break," I say.

He smiles and looks back at me. "Your old man wasn't the only one
Charlotte Washburn had. She liked male company. You'd think she would've
retired by now, but last month I saw her at the mall coming on to the
photography salesman in Woolworth's. She must dye her hair -- you
wouldn't know she was sixty."

That's all I can take from Crawford. I pull off his cap and throw
it toward the still-kissing couple across the room. I grab his half-
drunk glass of beer and shove it the length of the M & M's oak bar. The
bartender rushes over to see what's happened.

"You're a twit, Martin. A damned twit. Well, mediocrity can be in-
erited, I suppose." Crawford is at least six-two and he stares down at
me as if I'm not worth a fight.

"You like to get a rise out of people, don't you," I say.

"Forget it, Ben," he says, leaning over to pick up his cap. "But
if you don't believe me, talk to David Brown. He can tell you the
stories."

I apologize to the bartender for Crawford's spilled beer. He nods
his head as if he understands. Half of my ham and cheese sandwich still
isn't eaten, but I toss three quarters on the counter as a tip for Esther
and head for the door.

Before I call my cousins to let them know I'm in town, before I
walk the mile west to the Marshall home on Alabama, I know I have to
find David Brown. He'll be staring in the windows of the stores on
Montana, shopping for items he'll never buy. David will be whistling,
perhaps, but other than that, not making a sound.

Jonathan and David Brown were powder monkeys in the Belmont Mine. The Belmont was called the Chinese Laundry because it was the hottest mine on the Hill. Being a powder monkey made it even hotter -- setting explosives in the drifts wasn't easy work. You had to lay the charges in the rock and make sure they would take. The Browns were two of the few blacks who worked on the Hill. They survived by doing the worst work in the hottest place around.

They were on the graveyard shift when Jonathan went back to check a circle of charges that didn't look right. They blew up in his face. Rocks were shooting out of the stope as if they were shot from a gun. David managed to dive into a chute after being hit in the cheek; he heard a scream before the debris covered Jonathan. Rescuers reached David Brown within an hour, but they never shoveled through the caved-in end of the drift to find the body of his brother.

Blacks weren't liked in Butte, so the memorial service for Jonathan Brown was small. After twenty-two years underground, David never went back to work in the mines. He rode the train east to visit relatives in Virginia, then returned six months later to begin his walks around the Hill.

You can see other ex-miners in Uptown Butte. They drink at Maloney's, the Sportsmen Bar and the M & M. They walk to the library on Broadway and read newspapers from New York and Chicago. When I still lived in Butte, I listened to them during the parade on the Fourth of July. The old men, wheezing with their damaged lungs, told me how grand it was to
live in this town when 20,000 worked underground.

I suppose David Brown's lungs are damaged too, but he must walk fifteen miles in a day as he goes from Walkerville to the edge of the Berkeley Pit, from the old Northern Pacific Depot to the School of Mines. There's no mistaking David. Not only is he one of the few blacks in town, he's got that scar across his cheek where the rock hit him in the Belmont.

After his brother died, David wanted little to do with copper. He walked where he could, refused pennies in change, and except for his trips to Safeway for groceries, stayed out of buildings with electric wires. No one seems to know where he bathes or sleeps, but for as long as I can remember, he's been walking the streets of Butte.

You wonder, when he passes by, his warm brown eyes studying you, what thoughts are in his head. Does he remember the accident -- his brother crying for help, the flying rocks still vivid? Does he wish it had been him? No one knows much about this white-haired black man because, for the past fifteen years, he has chosen not to speak.

There are rumors, though. Emmet Marshall, Vicki's father, said he used to stand at the edge of the Pit, waving his arms at the 150-ton ore trucks hauling the earth filled with low-grade copper. My cousins say he was caught climbing the company fence that surrounds the Belmont. Sometimes he carries a bird in a cage as he walks the streets. The old-timers joke that he's ready to explore a new underground shaft, that he has the bird to test for poisonous gas.

Like many children in Butte, I used to think David Brown actually slept in one of the closed-down mines, climbing to the surface at dawn
for his daily walk. I thought that was why he talked by scribbling words on a note pad and told stories by gestures alone. Then Mother told me that once the Anaconda Company turned off the pumps, all the old tunnels filled with water. She said David whistled because he liked to. It wasn't that Mr. Brown couldn't speak, he had chosen his silence.

I turn onto Park out of the M & M, passing Gamer's Confectionery, the small post office and the liquor store. Stopping at the light on Montana, I look up the street and remember David Brown was here the day my father fell. No one saw the accident, but minutes later, David passed the spot where Dad had stumbled on the wooden steps that lead from Quartz down to Montana and the Original Mine. David waved down a police car, helped the officer put my father on a stretcher, then walked on up the Hill. When the police got around to talking with the people who lived on Copper and Quartz, they discovered several who admitted to seeing William Martin lying head down on the stairs. Only David did anything to help.

Mom invited him home for dinner once, a month after Dad had died. I remember Mr. Brown squeezing Debbie's hand, then mine as we sat down to eat. Mom had pot roast, carrots and potatoes that evening. David grinned when he got ready to leave. He shook my mother's hand and said, "Thank you." Those are the only words I've ever heard him speak.

He's a few blocks down the street now, looking in the windows of a secondhand store near where the Winter Garden dance hall used to be. I'd like to hear what he knows about Vicki Marshall's accident, whether
he was around when that happened too. I'd like to ask him if Charlotte Washburn really knew my father, if all my mother's tears were about more than just the booze. I'd even like to ask him where he sleeps at night. But David isn't whistling today and I am frightened by his silence. Instead of attempting conversation, I walk to the pay phone by the movie theater and call my cousins about meeting them after dinner. There are many people I want to see today. It'll be after eleven when I reach Margaret and Tom's, using their couch as a place to sleep.

Like the miners with silicosia in their lungs, Butte has aged since I visited five years ago. The Kelley closed in '79, the Berkeley Pit in '82. Last summer they stopped looking for molybdenum east of town. No one in Butte is mining now, either above or below ground. The Anaconda whistles that used to signal the end of a shift have quit. In almost every block, I see vacant lots where buildings used to be. I can no more remember what was there than I can recall the details of my father's face without the use of photographs.

As I cross Washington near St. Patrick's Church, a young woman approaches me to talk. "You're from around here, aren't you?" she asks, smoothing the front of her green and white skirt.

"Twenty years ago, I lived on Caledonia," I tell her.

"I saw you at the bowling alley last week. You were bowling for the Speedway Bar."

"No," I answer. "You've got me confused with someone else." The woman has a smooth face and short brown hair. She won't look me in the eye.
"What's your name?" she asks.

"Ben," I announce, wondering how long we will talk. "Benjamin Charles Martin."

"Would you like to buy me groceries at Albertson's, Ben? I could use a ride in your car."

I tell her I live in Seattle now, that I came to town on the bus.

"I'm just here for a funeral," I say, "here's a dollar you can have."

"Don't you have another dollar, Ben?"

"No."

As she walks away, I remember how this town is filled with characters, how Mother used to say it took a character to work in the mines. I walk west on Galena and see a woman in a white bikini sunning herself on the concrete steps of an old apartment building. Next door is an oriental man hanging his clothes on the line. There are children playing outside many of the small houses, houses packed so close together on the street you could jump from roof to roof without touching the ground. I used to think the homes were built that way for winter warmth, as if two wooden houses huddled together on the street could take away some of the chill of a forty degrees below zero day. Now I know the Anaconda Company just wanted to build them close and fast and cheap.

The neighbors called my father a character, they said he drank too much booze. Mom begged him to stay away from the bars and hid or destroyed all the alcohol he brought into the house, but Dad always managed to have something. Debbie says he kept a supply of Johnnie Walker in the glove compartment of Mr. Thompson's broken-down Buick and a stash
of beer in a hole by the fence that surrounded the Anselmo Mine. Even at four years old, I knew things weren't good the Monday morning the principal drove him home and two teachers laid him on the davenport. He'd collapsed in the middle of teaching Chemistry. Mom had him sleep it off, keeping me out of the living room where his breath made things smell.

There were mornings when I stared out my bedroom window and watched his awkward steps to the car. There was the day I heard him tell my mother, "I need help, Ruth. You've got to help me." The worst times were the afternoons when he'd come home singing and stumble through the front door. If I went out to play after that, Patty and Michael Franklin would pantomine my dad with his bottle.

Our old neighbors, the Marshalls, have a home on Alabama now. It's on the far side of the park from St. James Hospital where the ambulance brought Vicki before she died. I walk by the wading pool where kids are splashing their instructor and look at the blue house with white trim where Emmet Marshall moved his family after he retired from the mines. The place has a big yard and not even Carl Lewis could jump from Emmet's roof to the neighbor's.

I don't want to visit the Marshalls only two days after their daughter has died. Their home could be crowded with relatives mixing drinks, discussing the Monday funeral and trying to say sweet words to Vicki's mother. There's an American flag at half-mast waving on the porch and three cars are parked in the driveway when I step up to the door.
Georgia Marshall's eyes are bloodshot and tired as she greets me in her faded print dress. She pauses for a moment, trying to recognize me in a moustache, then says, "Muffin, how are you Ben Muffin?" calling me the name she used when I played with her daughter in first grade. Mrs. Marshall hugs me like I'm still six years old and asking if Suzy can come out and play.

I tell her I'm sorry her daughter has died, tell her I've come from Seattle for the funeral. "I wish I could have known her now, Mrs. Marshall," I say. "I hear she was studying art at the university in Missoula."

Several paintings hang on the living room walls; they are all works of Vicki's. The watercolors and the oils are of people, the people of Butte. There are men standing in miner's clothes by the Anselmo headframe, there are children wading in the Chester Steele pool in the park across the street, and over a bookcase is a drawing of David Brown. "She finished that one last week," Georgia Marshall says. "Figured it was time to capture old Mister Brown."

I bend down to retie my shoes when Mrs. Marshall starts to cry. There's not another person in the house. Suzanne and her father are out taking a walk and for a moment I remember how excited Suzy was at seven when her younger sister was born. The day the Marshalls brought Vicki home from the hospital, they'd invited me in to see the baby. She was the smallest human life I'd ever seen. I could hold both of her feet in one of my seven-year old hands. Vicki was toddling the next summer when Mother and I left Butte for Spokane. I never saw her again.

"What're you doing now, Ben?" Georgia Marshall asks as she offers
me a chair.

"Working for the newspaper," I tell her.

"That must be interesting," she says.

"Yes," I say, lying, not wanting to admit I work in the classifieds taking phone calls from readers who want to sell everything from motorcycles to their sex lives.

"Your mother, how is she?"

"Great," I say, realizing she's now been an American History teacher for twenty years. "She does aerobics three times a week."

"I'll bet she knows how it is to lose someone."

"Yes," I say, even knowing I felt more relief than sadness when my father died.

"Suzanne will be here soon. She'll be happy to see you."

I don't know whether I want to see Suzy Marshall. The last time we met I was twelve years old and afraid she'd think I looked funny because I'd just gotten glasses. Suzy was afraid too, that day. The orthodontist had braces on her teeth and she had a metal smile.

We played Monopoly all afternoon, talking and laughing like the childhood friends we were, unaware of how adolescence would soon have us see our bodies in different ways, unaware that never again could we simply be friends with such innocence. When Mom picked me up late in the day, ready to drive that night to Missoula, then on to Spokane, Suzy gave me a hug. It was my last embrace of childhood.

"Where is she living?" I ask.

"In Helena. She has a job with the Department of Natural Resources -- got that the summer she graduated from M.S.U."
I've talked with Georgia Marshall for an hour when Suzanne and her father walk in the door. Emmet Marshall has a sun-browned face and deep wrinkles under his brow. Other than that, he's the same man I knew twenty years ago, the man who always arrived home sober after the day shift in the mines. I never believed a man could drink only one beer until I saw Mr. Marshall satisfied after a single bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Suzanne is tall and beautiful. Her red hair is gently curled and reaches to the middle of her back. Her blue eyes peek at me through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. She walks as if she could play a good game of volleyball or tennis.

"Howdy Mister Martin."

"Hello, Suzanne," I manage to say.

"Would you like to take a walk?"

"Sure, but you've just been out with your dad."

"I can walk some more," she says.

As we head down the front steps of her parents' house, I wonder how Suzy and I would have been if I had stayed in Butte. Would she have been the girl I asked to the prom? Not likely, I think, seeing that Suzanne Marshall is three inches taller than me. She smiles and winks as we pass by Cinders Field, a block from the house. "Here's the baseball diamond," she says.

My father wouldn't drink a beer when I held him by the arm. I
remember the day he took me to the Helsinki Bar. While I held onto him, he opened the old door on East Broadway and waved at Ralph Viren who was serving the drinks. All the men on the stools turned to see the son of Bill Martin. They laughed when he said, "No drinks today, Ralph, Ben's got my arm."

"Is he going to play baseball?" one of them asked.

"Like Mickey Mantle," my father replied.

We walked from the Helsinki to the Ben Franklin Store, bought a bat and ball and drove to Cinders Field. "You're going to play good ball, Benjamin," he said, "maybe be a power hitter."

Dad stood halfway between home plate and the pitcher's mound. He leaned over and tossed the ball with plastic stitches marked on the side. I swung as hard as I could, turning so fast that I spun clear around and landed on my rump.

"You're not trying to kill it, Benjamin," he said. "Connect -- let the bat meet the ball."

That afternoon, I learned to watch my father's underhand throw, following the ball until it reached the piece of cardboard we used for home plate. Then I'd swing and knock it through the gap between second and third base.

"You may not be a power hitter, Ben, but maybe you could settle for being Bobby Richardson," he said, reminding me of the New York Yankees' second baseman.

Suzanne and I pass Cinders Field and walk up Alabama to where it intersects with Park. "Let's go west," she says, pointing to the statue
of Marcus Daly, one of the Copper Kings, that stands by the entrance to the School of Mines.

"I wish I'd known your sister," I tell her as we cross Excelsior and head up a hill. "She painted very well."

"Yeah."

"Will you miss her?" I ask, my words sounding hollow toward a woman I haven't seen in fifteen years.

"I went to Mom and Pop's for dinner last night, I kept waiting for her to walk in," she says.

"It was by Central, huh?" I ask, mentioning the school where I saw the tire marks early in the afternoon.

"They were pulling away from the curb and Allan hit the gas to beat a car down the street. Vick always did have soft hands -- she wasn't much for a grip . . . . She slipped out of the back of the truck and hit the pavement."

"It's no damn good, is it," I say, thinking how similar Suzanne's sister's death is to that of my father's. Perhaps Allan had been drinking too when he drove the truck down Idaho, but that's a question I won't ask my childhood friend.

"Life can be a bitch," she says with a wry smile.

"I'm sorry," I say, running my hand across her shoulder as a gesture of comfort.

We have reached the Daly statue. I turn to look back at the town, built on what they call the Richest Hill on Earth.

"Still a good view from here," I say.

"Smaller than Seattle, though."

"There aren't any gallows frames in Seattle," I say, pointing to
"I know."

Suzanne suggests we leave the road, cut across the school lawn and climb Big Butte. "The first time I ever climbed up here was with you," she says. "We must have been seven years old."

We follow the motorcycle path up to the School of Mines' "M," a large, laid-out pile of rocks painted white on the side of the hill. Then we scramble up the steep gravel and dirt until we reach the benchmark at the crest of the butte. From up here you can see all of the town and a good section of southwestern Montana. To the north and east is the Continental Divide; to the south are the Highlands still covered by snow in June. In the west are the higher mountains of the Pintlar and Flint Creek Ranges. Twenty-plus years ago, when I reached this spot with Suzy, I thought we were on the top of the world.

"We held hands back then, do you remember," she says laughing.

"I do," I say, taking her hand now for a moment to forget the world below us.

From Big Butte, I can see the juniper forest, the small evergreens that grow scattered across the brown hills along the highway to Anaconda. When my father drove Mom, Debbie and me home from a day at Flathead Lake, he would say the trees were like people, each one growing alone, each one with a story to tell. I used to think the junipers were the ghosts of Butte, the ones that couldn't escape their life here for one in heaven, but were forever left rooted in the Montana earth.

Suzanne and I look at the trees and the mountains for awhile then
start walking down the hill to the Church of the Immaculate Conception where Vicki's memorial service is to be held in the morning. The bells in the church ring six times as we climb the steps that lead to the doors.

The Church of the Immaculate Conception is one of the newer buildings in Butte. Constructed in the thirties, it is whitewashed on all four sides and up the bell tower. Inside, the sanctuary is lined with stained glass windows of the saints. The Dove of the Holy Spirit is carved in stone above the altar. Suzanne and I are the only ones in the church, early on this Sunday evening.

"Let's stay for a bit," she says. "I need some time to think."

I sit in a pew near the front and begin to think about God. At the church in Seattle I visit occasionally, a Catholic sister suggested we think of God as a woman. "The Old Testament has many motherly images of the Creator," she says. "Why must everything be masculine?"

Since my father died, he and God have been mixed up in my brain. When they closed the casket and shipped the body off for cremation in Great Falls, the issue got confused. I can't visit a tombstone or go to see William Epiphany Martin's remains, so it's like my father flew to heaven and mingled his spirit with God's.

I ride Metro to work in Seattle and sometimes pause to pray. I try to let God come in, try to let Him be the mystery that He is. I try to talk to Jesus too, but my dad is always leaping in. I see him now in the Church of the Immaculate Conception -- his mouth is open as if he's waiting to speak. But there's a space between us and the words can't get through.

* * * *
I ask Suzanne if we can follow Caledonia east from the church, past the Anselmo Mine, to where our homes used to be.

"You don't know how true that is," she says as we head toward the mine.

We pass the Anselmo and I look toward the intersection of Crystal and Caledonia. Where the Martin house used to stand at the corner, there are only weeds. I reach down and snap off one of the green shoots that has a blossom. The flower is lavender and white, lavender along the length of the thin delicate petals and white at the tips. It looks like something I might have once carried home from school to my mother in a bouquet.

"Knapweed," Suzanne says. "Ranchers are trying to kill it with poison all over Montana."

I hand one of the blossoms to her and ask, "When did they tear the house down?"

"Three years ago," she says, letting the weed's flower fall back to the ground. "My house is gone too." She points down the block to a park where some boys are throwing a frisbee.

I walk twelve steps off Caledonia and stand among the weeds. "This is where Mom looked out the kitchen window," I say.

For as long as I can remember, Mother kept two stones on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. One was red, the other black. The red one was beaded jasper, something she'd found by the Pacific Ocean and then had polished by her friend Elizabeth. The black one was an apache tear, something she'd picked up at Woolworth's.
While we were washing dishes once, I asked her about the two stones, why she had them there.

She reached across the sink for both of them, her hands dripping with dishwater. "The red one's like a fiery young man," she said, "perhaps an indian warrior prepared for battle. The black one's a woman, a beautiful woman who keeps the emotions inside where few can see the pain."

Mon used to rub those stones for minutes at a time. She'd look out the window with her eyes, but her hands were feeling the curves in the rocks. "It's like these two have had the time to wear off the rough edges," she said, "time to find peace after fighting the wind, the cold, the rain, the ocean waves. . . ."

When my father was late home from work or the bars, you could often find my mother in the kitchen with those stones. I always thought she was trying to rub away the power of the booze.

"Have you heard of Charlotte Washburn?" I ask Suzanne as we walk down Alabama to her parent's house.

"Sure," she says. "She taught me art at West Junior High."

"Did she teach Vicki too?" I ask.

"Mrs. Washburn was the one who got Vick to paint in watercolor."

My pulse quickens. I hurriedly tell Suzanne what Mark Crawford told me at the M & M. "I've heard that she and my father were lovers."

"I don't know about that," Suzanne answers. "People did gossip after her husband died. I think she still lives up on the Hill, perhaps you could ask her yourself."
We've reached Chester Steele Park, the Marshall house is across the street. "Thanks for the walk," I say.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" she asks. "Mom and Pop would like to see you." Suzanne smiles.

"No thanks," I say, my mind diverted toward another woman I'm not sure I want to see.

"I'm glad you came, Ben," she says. "Next time we meet we'll have to go out to eat or play some tennis."

"I'd like that."

Suzanne opens her arms to embrace me. I feel the soft comfort of her body next to my chest. "See you in the morning," she says. "I wish we weren't in Butte for this."

"Yeah," I say.

Suzanne goes up the walk and into the house where her parents are waiting dinner. I turn and begin my walk back to Uptown Butte. David Brown may still be walking there and I've got to find him.

There are pigeons cooing from the eaves of the building that holds the Fox Theater. Remembering they're also called rock doves, I chuckle as I ponder the dove in stone above the altar at Immaculate Conception. In Butte, when a pigeon flies through an open window at your house, it's supposed to be an omen of death. Perhaps it's a sign of the Spirit too.

Charlotte Washburn's name is listed in the phone book attached to the booth by the theater. I give my dime to the phone and dial her number. It rings seven times but there's no answer. Mrs. Washburn's address is listed as 235 West Gagnon. I ask a man in the theater where that is, but he doesn't know. Three people I pass on the street don't
know either. My hunch is the street is one of those half-block pieces of asphalt crowded on the hill above the Original Mine.

Evening is drifting into Butte. The thermometer on the Miner's Bank Building reads 59 degrees. I wish I had a jacket even in June. As I cross Montana on Park, David Brown is nowhere to be seen. I ask a couple walking out of Mings Chinese Restaurant if they have seen an old black man whistling.

"In Butte?" they ask.

But a half block further down the street I find him. He's sitting on the grass in the small park where J.C. Penny's used to be. There's a small bird in a gold-colored cage at his side. He's not looking at the bird, however, he's staring at the mural painted on the wall of an old building. The mural shows the Copper Kings, Marcus Daly and William Clark. It shows men drilling in the mines and children playing at Columbia Gardens, the park that closed only ten years back when they started mining the east hill. In brilliant colors, there are women hanging clothes on the lines behind their small houses, there are street cars running up the Hill. This is Butte, as it was.

"David Brown?" I ask.

He turns his head.

"My name's Benjamin Martin."

Mr. Brown turns to look at the bird he has in the cage. It is as small as a sparrow, but with its wings the color of cobalt, and its breast the color of the sky, I know it is a bluebird -- a mountain bluebird. David Brown whistles at his small companion and the bird sings a short reply.
"My father was William Epiphany Martin," I add, trying to get the man's attention.

He stops whistling and turns his eyes from the bird to me. He smiles.

"Did you know my father?"

David Brown opens the cage and lets the bird fly out. He flutters back and forth over the grass, his small beak snapping at insects. The bird flies up and perches himself on a telephone wire above us. Mr. Brown smiles again; his eyes study me.

"Do you remember Bill Martin?" I ask, a bit of urgency in my voice.

He nods his head and squeezes his hands together as if in a gesture of warmth. I wish he would talk so that I could have a normal conversation. I wish we could talk about the day my father died, about whether his breath smelled of booze. David points up at the bird, then he points at me. His fingers form a message, "O.K." I don't know what he is saying.

"Do you know Charlotte Washburn?" I ask.

His eyes turn sad as he makes the sign of the cross on his chest. He pulls out a note pad from his pants pocket and takes a pencil from behind his ear. "DEAD," he writes on the pad.

Suzanne remembered her as a teacher, Mark Crawford says he saw her flirting in the mall and her name is still listed in the latest Butte phone book. It cannot have been very long ago that she died.

"Do you know Gagnon Street?" I ask. "Two thirty-five West Gagnon?"

David Brown points up the Hill. He grabs my arm and walks with me to the small phone booth by the Metals Bank Building. The map at the back of the yellow pages is not very complete, but he points to a spot
with the tip of his little finger.

"Thank you," I say. Though I am embarrassed, he gives me a hug. I want to stay and learn how to talk with this man who doesn't speak, I want to learn more about his bird, but something compels me on.

I climb the Butte Hill again, following the sidewalk up North Main. My thigh muscles ache. As I look west down Park, all the way to Marcus Daly's statue by the School of Mines, I remember there are engineers in town who claim there's another billion pounds of copper in the Hill, not to mention the gold, silver and zinc. But to get it, they'd have to tear the metal out of the ground like a grizzly bear tears up a meadow looking for roots and berries. Uptown would be a memory like Meaderville and McQueen, empty space and another pit where the buildings used to be.

Mrs. Marshall says it's a shame the Company was allowed to destroy folks' homes, giving them nothing but a little money in return. "That Italian food," she said. "When I think of the food Mr. Locati made in Meaderville -- what his wife served us at the Aro Cafe -- I get sick inside."

The sun is disappearing behind the Flint Creek Range. At dusk, the buildings on Broadway, painted various shades of red, look as if they're the color of dried blood. Two young girls in long skirts rush across the street as if they are late for a party or a bus. Their laughter accents the quiet.

I climb past vacant stores and bars still in use. A crack stretching the length of the street reminds me that the Hill is caving in. There are three thousand miles of tunnels beneath my feet, most of them filled with water and rotting timbers. On the corner of Quartz and Main,
I see a penny wedged in a sidewalk crack. It is almost covered by the weeds. The date next to Lincoln reads 1945 D. For a second, I wonder if the penny could have found its way from a copper vein here to the Denver Mint and back again to Butte. Should I keep the change?

Charlotte Washburn's house must not be far from the Original Mine. Its gallows-like headframe is black against the dusk's pink sky. Birds fly around the wheel holding the cable at the top of the frame. If I had a camera, I would take a picture of the mine and the birds. It'd be something to mail to Mother in Spokane.

As I pause to take in the view, an elderly couple poke their heads from behind the living room curtain of their small home. Their Irish setter, chained in the yard, begins to bark. The dog has worn a path in his twelve-foot space between the sidewalk and the porch. But his growl is jealous of my freedom, not my presence on the walk. I turn off Main onto Woolman and approach the mine.

Pigeons are the birds that fly around the headframe of the Original Mine. The rock doves Mom called "dirty birds" have nested in the attic at the top of the hoist house. They are living above the dry room where miners left their overalls and carbide lamps after work. They're nesting near the "ouija board" that told every man how much earth he'd moved during the previous shift. The birds strut around the attic not knowing how many miners looked at the board and figured their pay.

One of the pigeons is pure white, like a true dove. It flies through the open attic window of the hoist house. It coos with that contented sound only pigeons can make as they irritate you with their calm.

A woman is sitting by the open door of the dry room. She's smoking
a cigarette and laughing with a sound that could either be my grandmother or a witch. How she got there, inside Anaconda's eight-foot-high fence topped by barbed wire, I don't know. The shadows of dusk are deceiving, but it looks as if she's wearing a red dress, a red dress in the room where one hundred and fifty miners changed their clothes three times a day.

She stands up, leans her arm against the doorframe and takes another puff on her cigarette. She blows smoke as the pigeons coo. "Hello Benjamin," she says.

"Have you been here long?" I ask, leaning against the fence as I try to get a better view. The woman is big. What could have once been light brown hair falls white on her shoulders. Her eyebrows are still brown though, and the eyes they announce stare at me from above cheeks not heavily rouged. There's just enough makeup to let me know she cares about her appearance.

"How is Vicki?" she asks.

"She's dead."

"She was a good woman. Too bad she got close to some low-grade men," the woman says. She blows more smoke, then stomps out the cigarette with the heel of her shoe.

"Her funeral is tomorrow," I say. "They're burying her at Mount Moriah."

"Most of us are put into the earth," she says. Except for a few like your father. They tried to burn him away, but I could have told them there's more to a man than flesh and bone."

I climb the Anaconda fence. It's difficult work and I cut my
hands on the barbed wire, but soon, I am over and walking through the weeds toward a woman I think is Charlotte Washburn. She's waiting for me in the dry room.

"Do you want to see him?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

There's a single pair of overalls and boots hanging on the wall. A carbide lamp, charged and ready to go, sits on a table near the door that leads to the shaft. A sign above the door reads, "Safety First." I hear the whir of the hoist's motor as it sends down the skip and brings the cage to the surface. The compressor starts to hum, drawing fresh air into the mine. The woman in the red dress smiles and opens the door that leads from the dry room to the Original shaft. I pull on the overalls and boots and put the carbide lamp on my head. When I turn it on, it shines on the open gate of the cage, the cage where for sixty-five years miners dropped down the shaft into the Richest Hill on Earth.

One name is printed on the clipboard that lists the graveyard shift's work crew. "William Epiphany Martin," I read. Inked next to the name is a note: "2200 level."

"Are you ready?" the woman asks.

"Yes," I say.

She closes the gate on the cage and hands me a metal bucket complete with a lid. Inside are an apple, oatmeal cookies, a tunafish sandwich and a thermos of coffee.

"You might get hungry," she says as she walks back to the hoist house.

The cage drops like a stone. My stomach sinks as I fall into the
blackness, the whirring cable shaking the cage as I go. Lights appear as I pass one, then two, then three levels of the mine. At the fourth, the crude, wild elevator stops. A solitary lamp at the station shines on a sign that reads, "2200." My descent is complete.

I open the corroded iron gate that holds me in the cage and step into the dirt that appears gray in the dim light. It feels hot down here and I am sweating. Water drips on my metal hat that holds my lamp. I switch it on to look at the one tunnel that leads away from the station. An empty ore car sits on the rails that lead down the center of the narrow passage, a passage that disappears into the haunting underground dark.

There have been great fires in the Butte mines, flames that have suffocated dozens of men before they burned them. Drifts have caved in and charges have backfired like they did to Jonathan Brown. Men have gone for weeks without seeing the sun, living on artificial light that must slowly melt the soul. Staring down the black passage, I remember my father never spent a day underground. Though born in Butte, I'm not a miner's child.

I step around the ore car and walk the 2200 level by foot. In my boots, I bump the rail, walking slowly as my lamp illuminates the walls of the timbered tunnel. The rails and the tunnel go on and on, turning gently to the left until I can no longer look back and see the light of the station. My only light's the one on my head and it shows nothing but gray.

Since I have no watch and no stars to watch for movement, the time slides past me in no way I can measure. Have I walked for an hour? Or
two? Is it two a.m. in Uptown Butte with the bars closed for the night? At a corner where two tunnels intersect and the rails go off in three new directions, I stop to eat.

"Oh, Lord," I say, half in prayer, half in frustration at sitting in the dirt of a damp, hot mine. I bite into the small tart apple the woman gave me. I eat the tunafish sandwich that tastes just like one Mother might have given me for lunch.

My meal's not complete when I first hear the singing. A man's voice filters through the darkness from one of the three passages I haven't yet explored. I set down my lunch bucket and listen. The words to the song are lost in the mine, but the tune is happy. I rise quickly and rush down the passage I think the music has come from. I half run in my boots, stumbling on the rails while my lamp dances circles on the sides of the tunnel.

The voice is getting louder and as the tunnel reaches another junction in the rails, I see a dim light down one of the passages. "Hello," I say, my voice echoing in several directions. The singing stops.

I walk toward the light. For a moment, I wonder if I've just completed a circle and, in rounding the corner, will find myself back at the 2200 station of the Original Mine. "Hello," I say again.

The tunnel widens as it turns. Around the bend in the passage, there's a lamp hanging from the timbered ceiling. There are two cots set against the side of the tunnel and coats hanging from nails above a box filled with clothes. A black man in a red-and-green plaid shirt is staring at me. He looks like David Brown, but his hair isn't white and there's no scar on his cheek.
"Do you know David?" I ask.

The man doesn't answer -- he looks upset to see me. He grabs something from beneath one of the cots. It's a small, gold-colored cage and even though the door is open, there's a bird inside.

I don't like seeing that small creature so far underground. I point at the bird, and without thinking, shout at the man. "Why do you have him here?" I ask.

"The bluebird carries the sky on his back," the man answers as he hurries into the darkness.

I try to follow, running now where there are no rails, where the sides of the drifts are no longer timbered. Dirt falls on top of me, water makes some of the rock wet and the earth like mud. The man's footsteps grow distant until I can no longer hear them. As I turn to go back to the light by the cots, I realize how difficult that might be. I've turned several corners in chasing the man with the bird -- I can only hope that ours are the only footprints to follow.

Who knows who walks in this mine? Who knows if I'm even under the Original shaft anymore? There are three thousand miles of tunnel in the Hill and the mines are all connected. You can wander underground from the Belmont by the Pit clear to the Orphan Girl west of Big Butte.

I try the most likely passage at each junction in the mine, but nothing looks the way it should. There are too many footprints in the mud and the dirt, broken glass litters the ground. Another light looms ahead of me in the drift. A man's form is silhouetted against it. He's holding a whiskey bottle in his hand.

"Hello, Benjamin," he says.