Confessions in the first person [Short stories]

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CONFESSIONS IN THE FIRST PERSON

By

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IT IS YOUR FRIENDS WHO WILL KILL YOU

About a month before Inky and he tore a wing off a stolen stunt-plane, crashed and started a forest fire, Two Jay drove up from Steamboat Springs for Jennifer's wedding. I was in my darkroom, printing the old portrait of her I'd taken when she'd lived with me. He held the world record for lowest ripcord pull, and I thought the print, with the love for freefall alive in her eyes then, would be as fine a gift as I could give. We had watched and listened as she fell ten thousand feet, her body a growing speck, rushing air like a distant question, humming at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, then hissing like a mortar round, and suddenly we knew she would bounce, he dull thud of impact certain in our guts. Two Jay had turned his head, but her canopy streamed out, cracked like a rifle shot, and a half second later she touched the ground.

"Just a dizzy bitch who got lucky," Two Jay said.

"Why did you come to her wedding then?" I asked.

"She was the best student I ever had," he said. "Why are you asking her damned pictures tomorrow? She's not even marrying you."

"She hired me to," I said. "You're right. She's not marrying e."

He had been my jumpmaster as well as Jennifer's, but she'd quit afore I had. I wondered why he didn't say anything about that, or bout the Busted Keel Saloon. I couldn't apologize then, no matter
what he might have said. I had slammed his head on the floor there, spit in his face and told him I felt like killing him. But he didn't even want to wait for the print to wash. He wanted to drive up the street to the Cloud Castle Bar.

"Let's walk across the radio station's lot," I said. "I need to get the hypo out of my nose."

"I've got something better than fresh air for that," he said, and opened the door of his Cadillac hearse. He had paid eight hundred dollars for it, overhauled the engine and cut a skylight in the roof. Between us, a new rig lay on the seat.

When I lifted it, it was too light. "You've gone to a square," I said.


"I know. I know." I said. "No excess hardware. But it looks like it's been stitched on a toy sewing machine." It hardly weighed twenty pounds and I imagined it would be like jumping with an umbrella and a sheet, the harness ripping off under opening stress or panels flying blown to China. The only thing I liked about it was that the canopy, in case of a malfunction, could be popped loose at a single point.

"It's the only way to fly," Two Jay laughed. "We walk on the tops of each others' canopies and come in on asphalt wearing tennis shoes."

"I'll bet your back feels it too," I said. Six years before he'd compressed nine vertebrae on a bad landing.

"Never been better," he said, and handed me a baggie full of cocaine. "Have a toot. That'll clean the hypo out."
I fished out my pocket knife and snorted two heaps off the spray blade. "How now?" I asked, "You kill somebody?"

"I do Inky a favor." He held out his hand for the baggie.

"Must be quite a favor," I said. "What do you do? Find him fourteen year old virgins?"

He laughed and the back of his fist slammed into my chest. I brought up my arms too late and he snatched the baggie. We rubbed some into our gums before getting out and walking inside the Castle. My head stung and my eyes jumped around trying to catch up with my brain, the days before Two Jay had moved to Steamboat coming back to me like warm waves with no time to stop them.

As we stood at the bar, before Sara came running across the dance floor, I remembered hunting doves with him, sitting on a strawbale while the sun fell behind the mountains, a cooler full of beer and boxes of shells next to us, the birds precise in their flight. "I know one thing," he had said, "If I had it to do over again, it would be in the air."

I was ready to ask him then, leaning at the bar, why he didn't do it again. He was only thirty, a welding teacher, his wife a nurse. I knew he couldn't make a living as a jumpmaster, but that was teaching too, and I thought he needed out of teaching. He had always taken too much of it to the sky, especially in summer. But Sara, one of his old welding students, yelled at him and ran across the dance floor. She threw her arms around him, hugged and kissed him, then squirmed around on his lap when he sat on the barstool.

"I used to dream about welding a cage around you," she told him. "You would laugh and try to make it a joke, so I kept building this
cage until you kicked the welding rod and threatened to kill me. Then you would laugh again and that made me mad so I poked you with the hot tip of the rod. The more I poked, the more you laughed."

She leaned back in his arm and kicked her cowboy boots at the ceiling. I was looking at her face upside down, down her throat and nostrils, her hair dangling a few inches from the floor and her thin legs scissoring in front of Two Jay's face. He looked at me and I knew he remembered the night at the Busted Keel. I knew he had taken everything to the sky.

* * * * *

He had called me about the river race in July. Gordon, the Busted Keel's owner, wanted a slide show of it to run in the bar. Two Jay was going to start it with a five man star and he asked me if I wanted to be pin man. I had quit after the New Year's Eve jump, so I was surprised that he even asked. I told him I'd just take the pictures, but I packed my rig in the car's trunk before I left for Steamboat.

"Faces," Gordon said, "lots of faces." We sat at a round table with Two Jay, the pilot named Inky, and two women from Denver. "And the winners of all the prizes. Be sure to get them. It's not a serious race, you know. The whole idea is to raise money for community projects."

"How many faces?" I asked. Gordon looked like a young politician I knew in Helena, Montana and I wanted everything as simple as possible, and with witnesses.

"I'd like to have four or five of those trays. You know. . . ."

"Carousels," I said. "That's around seven hundred slides."
"By tomorrow," he said, looking around at the people filling his bar, "there ought to be three thousand rafters in town."

"Seven hundred slides," I said, "at five bucks a piece?"

His eyes were like a cocker spaniel's. His lower lip flared fleshy and pink, and his voice held a small boy's innocence as wholesome as grain.

"Fine. I'll pay you ten dollars per slide if you want to donate to the community project. It would be tax deductible for both of us."

"That's an option I'll keep in mind then," I said.

"Remember," he said, "it's going to get crazy around here today and tomorrow, but that doesn't necessarily represent the nature of the community. What it does represent, however, is a sense of community I really find unique today. In today's society, I mean."

I looked at Two Jay but he had his arm around one of the girls from Denver.

"I can tell," Gordon said. "You're going to enjoy yourself."

He stood up so I did too. I held out my hand. The bar had filled with people and I thought of the night I hit the bentonite miner in Gillette, shaking hands like that, hanging onto his wrist and swinging to his side, slamming my fist at his temple five times before he went down.

But Gordon looked as fragile as a wheat stalk. I watched him disappear into the crowd, then walk slowly up a staircase toward the back.

I sat down again next to Lori, who was explaining her graduate grant, a study of pine beetles in Montana's Bitterroot Valley. She'd
been notified of her award on Friday the thirteenth and was afraid she'd get eaten by a grizzly.

"I talk too much, don't I?" she said. "My ex-husband always told me if I could just learn to shut up and do what he told me I would be happy. That's probably true, you know?"

"You probably wouldn't be here though," I said, and held up my beer.

She shrugged and drank her rumcoke. "Well, it really feels good to be in Steamboat. I'm not like this all the time. I mean, I have to work hard and not screw around. I've tried sitting around in the bars in Denver with a see-through dress on and all that shit. That's just not for me, you know? But here, it's different. I talk too much, don't I?"

"It's different here," I said, and held up my beer again.

"I don't trust men and I never want to get married again. Not you. I mean you're nice. But I don't trust men. That sounds stupid, doesn't it? I'm just too drunk."

"If you think I'm nice you're not drunk enough," I said, raising my beer a third time.

She gave me an elbow in the ribs and smiled. I imagined a dragonfly hovering, landing on her lower lip.

"I know," she said, "this isn't me. I mean it's my little cutesy act, you know?"

Inky leaned over and put his arm around her. "Do you know Two Jay is castrated?" he asked. "That's why he skydives. He can't get his kicks like whole people."
Two Jay had his mouth next to the other Denver woman's ear. He turned and laughed and said it was true.

Inky waved his hand in front of Lori's face. "You don't want to waste your time on skydivers," he said.

Maybe it was just the way he waved his hand. Or maybe I'd heard that kind of joke too much. I knew Two Jay had heard it more but I couldn't laugh it away like he had. I wondered what his limit was, if he had told anyone I quit diving, and decided Inky didn't know anything about me. He seemed like just another pilot who didn't jump, but when his hand waved I felt like I was on a plane ride to eleven thousand feet, cramped with four other divers and our own stink from the night before, my ears popping as we circled slowly, and I couldn't wait to open the door.

"What kind of balls does it take to fly a plane, Inky? Helium?"
"Sure," he said. "Better than no balls at all, right Two Jay?"

Two Jay lifted his head away from the woman's ear again. She wiped at the inside of it with a paper napkin and smiled, her shoulders sagging under his arm.

"I don't know anything about helium," he said. "What I want to know is, who's goin' beacon riding?"

And an hour after the bar closed we all rode up a mountain in Inky's Thunderbird. He passed around an ounce of cocaine and I thought he tore the oil pan off a dozen times as I filled a two-gram vial Lori gave me. She never stopped talking until we had climbed eighty feet on the beacon ladder and Two Jay had straddled the bullet-shaped light.

I was last to get on, ducking my head as the others had, then swinging my legs up when the casing passed over. We all screamed as
loudly as we could for three or four minutes, then silently watched the light, solid enough to walk on, swing out at the stars from between our legs.

"What in the hell are we doing up here?" Lori asked.

"Spinnin' around in space," Inky said. "It's us against the universe."

I leaned back on my elbows and looked at the night sky. I knew there were hundreds of billions of stars beyond the few thousand I could see, and they were dying and being born in thermonuclear fires and violent explosions I could hardly imagine. I knew our galaxy was only one of billions of others, that it extended more than a hundred thousand light years, and that there was no center to any of it. It was isotropic, looked the same in every direction. All we had was hope in gravity.

"Doesn't have anything to do with space," I said. "Two Jay's just rechin' his balls."

* * * * *

"It's ten o'clock," Nancy said. "Eggs and bacon for those who rise." My sleep had been volatile, fragmented by nervous dreams of meteors and comets, electromagnetic discharges in the ionosphere and dust clouds collecting ice. I lay shivering under a quilt. Two Jay and I had come in at six. Nancy stood at the foot of the bed, pressing into it and pushing away with her thighs. Her hands were in the pockets of her robe and when she turned to go upstairs she slipped one side open, then stopped and smiled at me over her shoulder.

"You'll miss some good pictures unless you get up."
I'd become used to her teasing, understood it was the price for letting them live with me in Wyoming when Two Jay had sold their house. And for always pestering her about her responsibilities as a nurse. But when she sat across from me at the breakfast bar, I avoided her eyes. Her black hair fell loosely on a yellow terrycloth robe, and her eyes were black too, big and expectant as a kestrel's. I looked at the two boys watching television, then studied my plate.

"How do you like Steamboat?" she asked.

"It's all been dark until this morning," I said.

She propped her elbows on the counter and grinned behind the coffee cup she held in her hands. "Didn't you meet anyone interesting last night?"

"Inky and the boys."

"What did you do?"

"You know, got a little drunk. Same old shit." The lies came back to me. I remembered telling her once that I had venereal crabs the same as Two Jay, that we had picked them up from a friend's carpet in Casper.

She put down her coffee cup like it was a chess piece and tilted her head at me. "I'll bet it was the first time you've ever gone beacon riding."

I looked at her sitting there smiling at me and wondered what she wanted. I understood she knew everything. Three years before she would have thrown everything in the house at us for coming in at six in the morning. But I knew it went beyond that. She knew everything about Two Jay.

"Yeah, first time I did a lot of things it was with Two Jay."
"Did you buy any coke last night?" She leaned over, her breasts swaying heavily under the robe and resting on her arms folded at the counter.

"Hell no," I said. "I can't afford that shit."

"Ohhh, poor thing," she said, pouting her lips.

I watched a hang glider sail across the face of the mountain and dug in my watchpocket for the vial. "I dipped out of the community pot once, though," I said, and set the vial between us. "I don't know if I have to pay for it yet, but I think I'll need it today."

"Are you going to share?"

I looked at the kids again. Max, walking toward us, was five. "Now?" I asked.

She tapped a pile onto a tableknife and snorted it as Max climbed up to her lap.

"What's that?" he said. His eyes were as big as Nancy's but they were blue, like Two Jay's, and his hair was red.

"Not for kids," she said, and handed back the vial. "Save as much as you can for tonight. I'm off duty at the hospital today. So I'll wait for you if you want to see the best part of Steamboat." She laughed and tickled Max. He squirmed and giggled, then stared at me as if I were a wooden plank.

"I want some Cheerios," he said. I remembered the night he was born, Two Jay leaning by my side at a bar, telling me how the importance of Nancy's pregnancy had never really hit him until he saw the baby, and naming him for his favorite movie, The Blue Max.

"Go wake Daddy up," Nancy said, letting him slide off her lap, "and I'll get your Cheerios."
I went downstairs to get my gear, and with a zoom lens and twenty rolls of film stuffed in my vest, I walked to Main Street, where I saw Inky waiting in a long line at a Dairy Queen. He said he had thirty minutes to get some breakfast before he was supposed to meet Two Jay and the other four divers at the airport. He was going to take them up, and he said he needed to. A good shot of thin air would clear his head.

As we stood on the sidewalk in the July heat, bumper-to-bumper traffic crawled to the starting point of the race, and I noticed that Inky's eyes never lit on anything for more than two seconds. Three high school girls in bikinis walked by and he shook his head.

"God, there is a lot of nice ass in town," he said. "But you think this is something, you oughta see Mardi Gras in Rio. I mean, fourteen, fifteen years old. Anything you want. Talk about screwin'!"

"You like 'em young, huh Inky?"

"Not too young. I mean there's a point you gotta say no, right?"

I flipped up my sunglasses and stared at his eyes. "Like what point?" I asked.

"You know. I mean I'm not into Lolitas." He folded his arms and looked at me squarely for the first time. "Why?" he asked, "you crave that kind of action?"

"I don't think so," I said. His eyes were green, open as a cat's while he looked at me, then oddly grey as they nervously skirted everything around us again.

I left him then and walked to the starting point. The heat made my stomach turn. I belched up the taste of rancid bacon and wondered when I'd buy a fishnet vest for my film. Two girls from Boulder
offered me a glass of wine on ice and I took it, thinking I'd either heave or cool down.

"You ought to take your vest and shirt off," one said.

"And your pants," the other smiled.

I got a closeup of them both licking their lips and told them I'd see them later.

Farther up the river a guy on the bank yelled, "Hey, I left the cocaine in the car. Is that all right?"

"Hell no!" a girl floating in a tractor tube said. "Pass it around, man. Pass it around."

I snorted two hits with them and started shooting. At least two thousand people, drinking, snorting, getting stoned and tearing up each other's rafts, waited on the water, floating on inner tubes lashed together, kayaks, canoes, a Volkswagen shell, and even a picnic table with barbecue and topless waitress. There was a guy on a horse and another with a pig. I shot them for over an hour and was sweating as if I'd been working all day when I heard the drone of Inky's plane.

Two Jay and the other four divers bailed out to form a star. I zoomed in on Two Jay's red and black jumpsuit as he flew away from pin position, the star exploding symmetrically, and I remember wondering where Nancy was when I shot him descending under a full wing above the river.

Three miles down and two hours later, a guy with a bloody eye crawled up the muddy bank and staggered toward me. I asked him if he was all right.

"I'll just have to see how it goes, man," he said. "That's how it's been all day. Just see how it goes. If somethin' happens, OK."
If it doesn't then fuck it, man. At least everybody's havin' fun."

"Maybe you should have somebody look at your eye," I said.

"You know a locksmith?" he asked. "I lost the keys to my van. An iron boat ran into my raft and popped it."

Blood trickled down his wrist as he held his hand over the eye. "I'm from Iowa," he said, stumbling away, "and I don't even know what river this is."

"The Yampa," I said, and let him go. Chunks of styrofoam floated toward the finish line. Gordon yelled through a bullhorn from the bed of a truck, trying to get people to pick up the pieces, but everybody in the river ignored him.

The red light of an ambulance blinked at me from across the river, so I walked to the bridge, wondering about the boy with the injured eye. But when I got there, five EMT's stood around an unconscious girl. They were arguing whether to administer CPR or not, whether she had a pulse and if she was even breathing. The girl lay sprawled on an inner tube, her light skin badly sunburned.

I switched to my wide angle and was about to shoot the whole thing when Nancy pushed her way through the crowd. Max and his little brother walked at her sides. She knelt and found a pulse at the girl's neck, then stood and convinced the EMT's they shouldn't do anything but load the girl into the ambulance and get her to the hospital.

I popped the wide angle off, bayoneted the zoom, and shot her as she watched them drive away, her hand playing at her throat. She never even knew I was there and I didn't want to talk to her so I continued walking downriver, toward the park where I could hear a rock band warming up their instruments.
I climbed to the pavilion's roof over the bandstand and finished shooting my film at the crowd dancing below me on the grass. With the zoom, I watched Two Jay bearhug a blonde in a red bikini and spotted the two girls from Boulder who had given me the wine. They stuck out their tongues and gave me the finger when they saw me.

I rolled over on my back, took three hits from the vial and looked at the sky. My last jump had been over Denver at midnight, New Year's Eve, and all I knew about my quitting was that I would have been dead if I hadn't stopped. I didn't know what it was I feared, but it wasn't dying. And as I lay on my back, my breathing lifted. I wanted to be up there, diving out of a plane, more than I ever had. Nothing seemed as good, or as pure. The boy from Iowa, the girls from Boulder. Like all of them, I thought. Bloody eyes or not, they were blind to what limits their pleasure could take. Only a few had even smiled.

* * * *

People waited in line outside the Busted Keel so I went through the kitchen, shouldered my way through the crowd and drank four beers before deciding Inky wasn't there. I was ready to leave when I saw Two Jay sitting at a table with the blonde from the park. He wore khaki shorts and a camo T-shirt and she was still in her red bikini.

I knelt between them and Two Jay motioned for the blond to sit in his lap. When I sat down, the seat of her chair was wet. She said something to me but I couldn't hear her over the bar's roar.

"Have you seen Inky?" I yelled.

"No," Two Jay said. He patted the blonde's ribs and slid his hands to her hips. "Why?"
The blond smiled as Two Jay's hands moved to her breasts. She moved on his lap, hiding his face from me.

"I want to jump," I said.

"What?" he asked, peeking over her shoulder.

"I said I want to jump!"

"Good," he said, turning the blonde sideways on his lap. "Do it."

He licked his lips quickly and grinned, his eyes as blue as the sky I'd stared at from the roof.

"You want to go?"

"No," he said. "I've got better things to do." He tipped back his chair and powdered the slope of the blonde's breast with coke, then licked it off.

"Maybe tonight," I said. "A night jump. I'll get something to eat and then find Inky."

The blonde lifted her legs, rested her ankles on my thigh and wiggled her toes.

"What?" Two Jay said.

"A night jump," I said. "I'm going to get something to eat."

"OK," he grinned, tapping more coke from the vial. "So am I."

I know now I needed him to say more. On my thirtieth jump, he had been my first hookup, inching toward me as I struggled like a baby, extending my fingers, stretching every muscle against the air, anchorless, turning the wrong direction, correcting, falling until he finally caught my sleeve, grabbed my wrists and pulled us face to face. I lifted the blonde's ankles off my thigh, set her legs down, and leaned close to his ear.

"What about Nancy?" I asked.
"What about her?" he said. "She can get something to eat too."

I rolled the blonde off to the left and pushed his chair backwards. He went over and lay on the floor laughing, but I stuck my knee in his chest, grabbed him by the ears and spit in his face.

I thought he would throw me off of him then. His face was red and I thought he would rise with me in the air and throw me at the bar, but he just looked at me and waited. I banged his head on the floor and he took hold at my wrists, squinting his eyes.

"You're gonna die, you stupid bastard!" I yelled. Spit bubbled at the corners of his mouth as he clung to my wrists at his ears. I bounced his head again, harder than before.

"I feel like killin' you myself," I said.

"Go ahead then!" he screamed. "I can't do anything else! So if you're gonna kill me, then fuckin' kill me!"

I thought all I had to do was keep my knee in his chest and bang his head on the floor until he got mad enough, but tears rolled out the corners of his eyes and his hands slipped off my wrists as one of Gordon's bouncers lifted me away. He carried me through the crowd and piled me into the street. The line of people stared at me.

"That's the first fight we've ever had in here after the river race," he yelled, pointing his finger at me. "Don't ever come back in here!"

I had a 9mm Browning automatic under my carseat at Two Jay's, but as I walked in the dusk I decided to go to a restaurant before I did anything else. My eyes stung, my back hurt and the vest, weighted with my camera gear, pulled at my shoulders. I must have changed directions four times, thinking of Nancy, before I walked up to my car in front of
their house. A light was on in the kitchen, but I pulled out and drove to the edge of town, where I found a restaurant next to a motel, its windows facing the river.

A quiet girl in a calico dress handed me a menu framed in glass. She poured ice cold lemon water from a pitcher and smiled when she brought me a salad, a small loaf of whole wheat bread, and a prime rib red with blood. An old couple next to me shared a piece of blueberry pie, and when the man mumbled, the woman laughed. I sipped a tall glass of cold buttermilk as I waited for the check, touched the lace curtain next to me and leaned back into the chair's high cushion. Everything there reminded me of Jennifer.

"It was so beautiful," she had said. "I never wanted to pull at all. I never looked at my altimeter once. I just knew when I had to pull."

And she hadn't been afraid of it, I thought. She had quit when her father died, taking over his ranch in the Bighorns and accepting the work there as easily as she had gathered her canopy in her arms. But I had fallen with my back toward Denver on New Year's Eve, watching the stars glitter until the air turned warm. I had been ready to die, but I rolled over and the city's lights exploded up at me like rockets. I pulled, and after five seconds under canopy, I landed in a parking lot, where I went to my knees and pounded my fist on the asphalt.

* * * *

It started as a black speck in a grey distance. It grew larger, the size of a dime, coming straight at me, horizontally, its velocity terminal. Appendages appeared as it spun vertically, sped toward me,
large as my hand then, a spider, flying at my face. My left arm flew
up and I was sitting in the motel bed, staring at what I'd seen, remem-
bering how it had gone by when I raised my arm. By ten-thirty I had
walked to the Busted Keel, unzipped my film bag on a stool next to me,
and ordered a double Scotch.

"How big's the river, Gordon?" I slid a ten dollar bill onto the
bar and smiled at him.

"You can't drink it dry," he said. "Even if it is free."

"I didn't mean than," I said. "Bring me another anyway." I
folded the ten in my wallet, pulled out the trailer on the first roll
of film, and wound the negatives around my fingers. He watched, both
hands on the bar, and waited until I started exposing the second roll.

"What did you mean then?"

"Twenty fucking rolls," I said, "and only one good shot."

Through the bottom of the Scotch glass, he looked more innocent
and fragile than I'd thought, and I realized that if I had any courage
at all, it was in facing what I saw in people's eyes, even if I did
need some sort of lens.

* * * *

After Sara's legs stopped scissoring in front of Two Jay's face,
and after we'd done a half a gram of cocaine on the Cloud Castle's bar,
Sara looked at me as she struggled into her nylon rodeo jacket.

"I remember you now," she said. "You took pictures of Peaches."

"Peaches?"

"My mare. The palomino Dad sold." She frowned like she might jab
me with a welding rod. "Maybe it wasn't you."
"Sure!" I said. "The Western Horseman ad. Glad to know he got her sold."

"Too bad you can't sell some of that porno you take," Two Jay said. Sara frowned again and circled her arm around his waist.

"You oughta see some of the filthy things he takes pictures of," he said. "Sometimes I think he's a fish, but my bet is he's jolly."

Sara was still trying to focus on my face as he guided her toward the door. I decided it didn't matter. I sat at the bar and drank four more beers, my nasal passages running cocaine. I knew he was going to die.
SANDBAR

J.D. picked me up three miles past Gerson Springs about a week after I run a hayhook through his hand. I'd been shooting rabbits and I just let them lay because they probably had tularemia, what with the heat stroke all over Montana and such little water. My rifle even got too hot to carry by the barrel and it was a bad summer for ticks. They should have thinned out by then, the Fourth of July, but they were crawling up my legs all over me, along with the dust and sagey smell. I was twelve years old.

All I knew was how good the town swimming pool was going to be. I could smell the river's thick-sweet air and the sun made the asphalt give under my boots. Little tar pockets bubbled up gooey and crackling when I stepped on them and I set that heavy scent of the river and road tar against the town pool's chlorine snap in my nostrils. I closed my eyes to the country's glare and tried to walk a straight line inside the red-black of my eyelids, hearing the high board bang, the ka-whoomph of some town kid's cannonball trying to get the lifeguard wet, and the screams of girls getting dunked or thrown in from their sunbathing.
Wild grapevines laced up through the tall fence at the concrete's edge and I thought I could smell them too, even though I was three miles from town. I could see the stockyards next to the railroad tracks from a little rise in the road when J.D. pulled his Mercury over and rolled down the passenger window. I was surprised because I hadn't figured on seeing him for a couple more days, at least. When I leaned my head in, the air conditioning poured out at me and he looked sick in there.

"Get anything?" he asked.

"Six bunnies and one buzztail," I said. I dug in my pocket for the rattles and handed them through the window.

"How about these?" I asked. "Nine sections."

"You damned little stud-horse you. You killed a big bastard."

He held them by the bottom button and shook them next to his ear, kind of grinning and slanting his eyes at me.

"Wicked as a Butte Boy's bung-hole," he said, "and twice as easy."

* * * *

I guess I just felt like killing something that morning or I would have rode to town with my Aunt and Uncle. We lived four miles back, up Reservation Creek, but it was so dry I couldn't find a frog to plink at. So they went in early and I walked across the old Zook place with my twenty-two to see how many cottontails I could pop.

I got five and the rattlesnake before the sun had everything sitting tight. Then I did in the one rabbit that squealed so much because the bullet only broke his back. The snake nearly nailed me,
not rattling like that until I was right on top of him, and the rabbit nearly killed me too.

He was scratching and clawing uphill in the loose rocks and clay with his front paws, his ears laid back and his hindquarters dragging and slipping sideways on him. He screamed like a crazy thing with his mouth wide open and those bucked teeth sticking way out there so I emptied my gun at him and was hurrying so bad I never hit him once. I was trying to keep track of him and load up a new clip at the same time so I fumbled the clip and half a box of shells on the ground and he was still screaming so I finally just ran down the gully and up the hill and smashed his head with a rock.

Right there I thought something was wrong with me as my right arm went stiff when I brought the rock down and heard his skull crunch. My elbow locked up so the whole arm pointed straight at him like an iron rod ran through it. The muscles between my shoulder and neck just quivered like guitar strings when I tried to trigger my elbow. I hadn't worn a hat and I thought the sun was barbecuing my brain. I had a bad headache, my throat felt like I'd swallowed the rattler, and my left cheek and eyebrow kept twitching together. I kicked the rabbit over and saw fleas crawling on his belly, scabs and pus pockets around his ears. It must have been a hundred and six.

I stood wishing I had gone to town with my Aunt and Uncle, or rode my bay mare Troubles, when I remembered Gerson Springs lay a mile or so to the north. It only took me fifteen minutes to clear the ridge and drop down to the road where Old Man Gerson had blown the Springs out of the hillside with dynamite. He planted willow trees and cottonwoods
and they pumped the shade up through their branches like giant air conditioners. I began to breathe right again. I saw a family of water-snakes whip through the grass and heard the hum of bees.

Gerson built a stone drinking fountain there and the only picture I had of my Mom and Dad they were standing by it. My Dad was hugging my Mom with both arms and she was laughing. One of her hands gripped the fountain like he was trying to pull her away from it. His hat was tipped way back. He wore baggy pants and his T-shirt was wet.

A lot of town people drove out in the evenings to get their drinking water from the fountain's spigot. They watched the bats and nighthawks eat mosquitoes while their jugs filled and their kids climbed around in the trees. It was good water. High in zinc they said.

I lay under the one-inch pipe slick with green moss Gerson sunk into the hillside before he built the fountain and listened to its trickle fill my mouth. When I swallowed, the trickle hit me between the eyes or ran up my nose, so I practiced swallowing without closing my mouth and it went down in lumps that hurt, like whole ice cubes.

I cupped both hands under the pipe and rubbed my face and head down twice before I started for town. I hadn't walked a mile on the old road before I was dry. Everything was still. I knew the river was flowing east, the same direction I was walking, on the other side of the railroad tracks and cottonwoods, but it moved faster and a lot smoother. I thought of building a raft and taking her clean down to Miles City someday. Eat catfish and maybe kill a goose. Camp on the islands. Maybe take Charlie Littlehead along.

The air was so settled and heavy I thought it might hail. I saw no clouds anywhere though, so unless some were coming fast out of the
south, I knew it wouldn't. I walked another mile and the only thing I saw move was two magpies float across the railroad tracks. They stroked their wings like the air was putting them to sleep. My boots popped on the little bubbles of tar.

The sun hammered down right on top of me. I knew the town pool opened at two. They figured on two hours from the town kids' lunches to settle, according to the mayor who said in the paper they might get the cramps otherwise. I figured I could make four miles easy by two. Sweat ran down my forehead and burned my eyes and my hair felt like it was ready to catch fire, but I concentrated on the doorhandle of my Uncle's truck, how hot it would be when I went to lay my rifle in the rack and get my swimming suit from behind the seat. I cussed myself for not putting the suit in the jockey-box. Now it would have globs of grease on it.

I thought I heard a car but nothing came down the road. A rooster pheasant squawked just once over by the river and I imagined a fox or a coyote got him. I remembered the night three of my cousins depantsed me. How they stretched me out, pale in the full moon, and baby talked to me. How they laughed and played with me. I remembered the white madness coming into me and running naked to the bunkhouse to get my twenty-two, J.D. talking to me there, putting me to bed and sitting next to me, explaining things, his big hands stroking my legs and chest until I stopped shaking, quit crying and went to sleep.

A bumblebee flew in a drunk line toward me and I stopped. He came straight at my head, veered left, right, left, dropped down, rose a little, then hummed right and on by. Sometimes I didn't see them
coming. They'd all of a sudden just bang into my shoulder or chest and it would knock the breath right out of me. I knew some people used them for fishbait.

After he passed, it was quiet again. I found a tick crawling on my neck. I kept walking and thought about my swimming suit, the pool and the sunbathers. My skin was white from my neck down except for my hands and I imagined floating on my back like an iceberg in perfect blue water under the lifeguard. Her name was Bonnie and she was slick and brown as Troubles.

In the cottonwoods across the tracks a mourning dove cooed and I cupped my hands, the rifle resting across my chest, to answer it. In the fall I liked to sit up in the thick limbs of a willow tree and call them into me at dusk. The would flutter at the tree's edge, spread their wings wide in that dying light, and I would take them with my little four-ten. I wrapped their breasts in bacon and baked them in tinfoil with peppers, potatoes and onions. Four would fill me up.

J.D. taught me to cook them that way the first year he hired on with my Uncle. The second summer he worked he showed me how to catch mudcats and snapping turtles on setlines. One turtle almost took my finger off and J.D. felt so bad about it he drove me all the way up to Big Timber, where the river is clear, and we caught rainbows under the bridge.

I didn't think there was anything he would ever like more than fishing, but when he came home from the Army he bought me two full-blooded Arkansas coon hounds, and we hunted almost every night that first summer he was back. They cost him five hundred dollars apiece
and my Uncle said he was crazy as a damned Indian with his money, but my Uncle didn't know anything about hunting dogs or ever love them the way J.D. and I did. We hunted bobcats with them that winter, but in the spring he took to practicing his bull riding and I didn't get to see much of him at all. Most everybody said he was getting a mean drunk around then, and I thought it was because he was spending time with the bulls instead of with me and the dogs.

The hayhook I put through his hand kept him off the bulls on the Fourth and maybe that was all my fault; I don't know. Four of us were on top of the stack and we had alfalfa and sweat down our backs from trying to keep up with my Uncle and my cousins on the Farmhands. The flying ants were thick and once my cousin dumped a nest of black widows out of the bales, so they were crawling all over and we were just finishing up, crowded at the top, when a bale hit the back of my leg and I spun around to keep from going over the side, the hook arcing high over my left shoulder and shooting down with all the power I had, J.D.'s tanned glove stretching out on the bale when I followed through with my wrist and sunk in the point.

It was almost like I could have stopped, but I watched the iron go in just below the glove's little red plastic bead and the silver tightener and then I felt the bale's weight on the tip of the hook. J.D. had a grip on my wrist with his other hand and he stared up at me from under his hat, his teeth artesian brown and jagged, his lips curling back, and his jaw flared out wide as a bull's skull, but I couldn't let go of the hook. My arm was stiff and my knuckles felt white hot around the shaft of the hook. J.D. was squeezing and
squeezing with his other hand until I saw the sweat running down his face and my knees finally buckled.

He was hurting bad in the cab of the pickup but he laughed and called me Captain Hook. He poured peroxide on both sides and worked it in when we got back to the ranch and he said he wouldn't get blood poisoning because of all the alfalfa the hook had been greased with. My Aunt bandaged it for him and didn't think any tendons were hit, but it hurt him so he couldn't grip down on any bull rope and he looked pretty mean when he lit out for Augusta.

I figured he would stay up there the whole week, so when he pulled over as I was walking to town, calling to the doves in the cottonwoods, I was happy to see him but felt like something must have gone wrong.

"Headin' to town?" he asked. He threw the rattles on the dash.

"Yeah," I said. "How was Augusta?"

"Never got past Butte," he said. "Where they dig out their own asshole." He ran his hands through his hair and locked his fingers in back of his head.

I felt another tick, saw him on my wrist and flicked him off. I saw beer cans and an empty whiskey bottle on the floorboard. I'd never been to Butte, but I didn't think they had a rodeo there.

"How's the hand?" I asked.

"Fine. Hell, it's comin' along fine." He held it up and turned it. I thought it looked awful sore.

"You goin' in to see Lora?" I asked. He had a picture of her by his bed in the bunkhouse. She worked in the dentist's office.

"No, no," he said. "I'm just on a runner." He reached down to
Riley

the floor and mumbled something, then sat up and threw a box of plastic straws into the back seat.

"Wouldn't want to run into her," he said and bent over again.


He came up again and threw a piece of deer antler in back with the straws.

"Get in," he said.

I opened the back door and slid my rifle onto the seat and got up front with him. It was like an ice house. My body went heavy, like somebody strapped weights to my chest and the back of my neck, but my head tingled, like all my blood was fizzing and popping in the veins of my scalp.

"What are you gonna do when you get there?" he asked.

"Where?"

"Town. Where you goin' once you get there?"

"To the pool," I said. I just want to get into that pool."

"You need a suit to swim in the town pool" He sounded like he hadn't slept for a while. His eyes watered. His head tilted back and I looked at the wound in his hand.

"It's in the pickup," I said. "It should be in the front of the Agate."

J.D. didn't pull out. He sat with his left arm hung over the steering wheel and his right arm stretched across the seat. His arms looked like a gorilla's, way too long and thick from his wrists to his elbows. He was looking at me softer then, like he was about to laugh, like I made him feel good and he didn't care if I was just a kid.
"The pickup might be at the fairgrounds," he said, "if they went to the rodeo."

"It'll be in front of the Agate," I said. I knew my Uncle had taken my Aunt to the exhibits at the fairgrounds early. They would have probably had breakfast there and met up with somebody. My Uncle would want to go to the Agate and sit all day in the dark, visiting with friends he hadn't seen in a year or more and sipping gin and tonics. He would step outside with everybody to watch the parade and take off his hat for the flag. He would meet my Aunt at the horse races in the evening. She would drive us home after the trifecta and think it was the best day all year.

"Town pool is going to be crowded, hot as it is and the Fourth," J.D. said.

I imagined stroking underwater among all the legs and bright-colored suits in the five-foot area, all the surface sounds deadened and everybody not knowing I was down there with my eyes open.

"You got a little girlie friend in town?" he asked.

"No," I said, "they all hate my guts."

J.D. took hold of the steering wheel with both hands, kind of laughing, and rested his head there.

"I wouldn't mind goin' swimming myself," he said. "But I don't have no suit for the town pool."

"You can rent one," I said. "The lifeguard, Bonnie, she has a whole box full of..."

"I don't want to wear nobody else's shitty suit!" His head came up sharply and the way his eyebrows curved down scared me. He run his hands back through his black hair and he slumped in the seat.
"She probably wouldn't let me in with this infected hand anyway."

The engine ran and I shivered from the cold air. I was getting another headache at the base of my brain. I watched an airplane come out of the Castle Rock country, cross the river and disappear over the south hills.

J.D. sat up and leaned across at me. "Let's go in the river," he said.

I didn't say anything. When you opened your eyes in the Yellowstone all you saw was mud. I thought how blue and sparkly the town pool would be and imagined diving way down to the drain and letting some air out of my lungs so I could stay on my back and look clear up at the clouds through twelve feet of water. I always got the feeling I could just go to sleep down there it was so clean and cool and blue. And when I came up for air the sting of chlorine turned my eyes red, so everything in the world looked sort of wrapped in cotton for a little while.

"What about it?" he said and laid his hand on my shoulder.

I looked at the hand and knew it was real bad from the pus and firey colors. I wondered what had happened to the bandage, and thought he was the toughest man I ever knew.

"Shay's Landing is better than the damned town pool anyday," he said. "All the fucking diseases in the county get into that pool."

I just wanted to be outside again. I had goosebumps and was shivering inside the car. J.D. moved his hand from my shoulder and played with his keychain that hung from the ignition. It was gold and it ran through a little ivory skull with ruby eyes. He had three shoeboxes in a dresser drawer at the bunkhouse that were filled with
keychains. He'd been collecting them since he was a kid, he said, and my favorite was the one with an agatized snail.

"OK," I said and smiled at him.

We rode about a mile past the stockyards and J.D. turned left. The Mercury rose, leveled out and fell across the railroad tracks. Its front end curved wide on the dirt road to the Landing and slow through the cottonwoods like it was just going down to the river bank for a drink.

J.D. opened the trunk and spread a clean Hudson Bay blanket on a piece of sandy ground in the sunlight. The river air was muggy, not dry like the road's, and I stood breathing its weight while J.D. sat on the blanket and pulled off his boots. I leaned my hand on the hood and it burned me. The engine ticked as it cooled.

I sat on the wool blanket to haul off my boots and left them on the hard-packed sand the way he had. The big rodeo buckle he won in Billings lay by my hand when I pulled at my stiff socks and he was running brown and naked at the river as fast as he could. He screamed when he hit the water and then he went face into it. He stroked four or five times toward the big current before he flipped over on his back and hollered again. I'd never seen him hit the water so wild.

I was the one usually to do that, but this time I walked gently into it and he watched me from about twenty yards out, on the edge of the backwash. I knew he almost had to tread water out there, but it looked like he was just standing, maybe treading with his arms a little. He looked real happy and the river's cool flow started drawing air from my belly as it soothed my feet and pulled at the tightness in me.
I faced downstream when the water reached my chest, settled my feet in the bottom's mud and sat against the current until my back and shoulders felt the river's push. The water gurgled close to my ear. I watched its wide sweep and bend toward town and listened to its run. It never stopped for anything. I knew that in a second sometimes it could swallow up a sheep, a cow, a horse, or a person. It sounded different every season but its glide didn't stop, not even under the ice. I closed my eyes and cupped my palms back into its current.

Then J.D. touched me and I thought it was a catfish, a slick skin sliding quickly against me and something sharp like a fin or one of the spines below the gills.

"Let's go out to the sandbar," he said and I thought it would be all right.

It lay about sixty yards past the main channel and we stretched out in the current alongside each other, pumping our arms and flutter kicking, quartering upstream. My legs trailed downstream and my foot swept under J.D.'s belly. His big arm slammed into mine once and we were both fighting the current's level brown push at our throats. I kept my eyes up out of the water, watched the sandbar and knew I just had to keep moving at the same angle long enough. But when I reached the middle of the main channel I felt a sudden panic that I needed to swim directly into the current or I would be swept away. I had to force myself to keep my eyes up and on the sandbar because I knew I might try to face the river head-on and tire out and J.D. would have to keep me from going under.

We both breathed hard when our feet touched bottom and J.D. sprawled out on his back in the white sand as I came out of the water.
The sand warmed my feet and pricked rough and sharp between my toes.
J.D.'s black hair lay curved and flat across his chest like moss on a
brown rock in the shallows. He bent one arm over his eyes, crooked up
a leg and wriggled his back into the sand, and I stared at his body
longer than I ever had. I just remember thinking how thick he was,
muscled and hairy, full of a power I had always trusted, but somehow
weaker for being so open and raw like that.

I turned away from him and stood looking back across the main
channel. It didn't look as wide from there as it had from the bank.
My heart was pumping hard but I felt strong and cool under the hot sun.
I knew I could swim back quartering with the current and thought I
could go at least half of the way underwater.

"Lay down," J.D. said, "and I'll cover you with sand."

He reached up and his fingers pulled down at the inside of my leg.
I sat next to him and he said "Lay down," again as he pushed on my
chest.

He started covering my feet with the warm sand. I flopped my arms
to the sides and felt its weight pack between my legs.

I closed my eyes to the sun and it was like looking through red
glass. The sand covered my chest and arms, my palms holding it, and it
held me like a piece of driftwood, a piece of the sandbar. I hardly
breathed and I let the feel of sleep come into me. J.D. rested his
head on my thigh. He turned his cheek, mixing his face with the sand.
His whiskers rubbed and nuzzled against the smoothness of my belly.
Then I felt his wet tongue washing at it and his hand furrowing under
me.
A quick breath shot out of my stomach muscles and I heard it, as if a flock of ducks rushed over. I turned my head left, downriver to the east, and opened my eyes. All I saw was pure blue sky and I knew I had to get across the main channel.

I swiveled my head back and looked straight at the sun and it burned my eyes so quick that I rolled up out of the sand and stepped toward the river.

"I'm going back," I said.

"No. Wait," J.D. said.

I laid out on my chest and began a slow breast-stroke, my eyes on the shining grill of the Mercury.

He caught me by the ankles. I was at the edge of the main channel and he pulled me straight back as he stood up. His big hands cupped my rib cage and he lifted me in front of him. The brown water swirled around my thighs.

"You don't like to be covered with sand?" he said. "That's OK. I'll just give you some of this."

I waited there for him to release me and stared at the car across the channel. My hands gripped around his wrists and I squeezed. The wound in his palm scraped and slid at my side. I smelled his nightbreath: the cornfields, the dog's wet hair, wild rosebrush, coon musk, kerosene lamps in the bunkhouse, and fish in our hands. I heard his grunting.

Then everything went reverse. He was still in back of me, his forearm around my waist, holding me half in and half out of the river, but when I felt him push inside me the river was flowing west and it
caught fire against my skin. My arms flew up like wings and I doubled over, flying down, vomiting toward my guts, swallowing my tongue and kicking my feet to the sky.

J.D. swore and I squirmed around to look at him. His head was down and I twisted my left arm back to his shoulder, bent my legs so my feet were on his knees and pushed off and away from him. I lay flat in the water and stroked my arms twice, kicked my legs hard and then sucked fast air before going under.

I opened my eyes and knew there was depth to the brown flow at my face. I knew that it would end. All I had to do was pull at it with my arms and I would be carried across, frog-kick my legs and I would bear way from the sandbar, pull again and I'd be on solid ground. I screamed inside my lungs, but felt like I could hold my breath forever, hidden by the muddy water.

The main channel's push went slack and I caught my feet on the rising bank. I heard J.D.'s arms slapping the river and I ran to the car. The handle on the backdoor was cool as I grabbed my rifle from the seat. I pumped a round into the chamber.

J.D. had stopped a few yards beyond the edge of the main channel and was standing in water at his hips. He stared up at me and his left hand moved against himself.

I walked to the blanket and acted like I didn't see him. I bent over to pick up my shorts.

"Don't get dressed yet," he said. I looked at him. "Just lay down on the blanket and wait for me. You need to dry off."

"What are you doing?" I asked.
"Don't you jizz yet?"

"What?"

"Jizz. You never come yet?"

I shook my head, said "No," and put on my shorts.

"Just watch then," he said. "Just watch."

The muscles in his left shoulder bunched and rippled against the sunlight. His eyebrows curved and he spurted his whiteness into the river and it disappeared east.

I raised my rifle to my shoulder when he walked to the water's edge. I took a bead just below his nose and thought it would be like squeezing the trigger at a snapping turtle's head.

"I ought to shoot you right in your mouth," I told him.

He looked up at me and his eyes were as gentle as a mourning dove's. An owl swooped down out of a cottonwood to my right and was halfway across the river before it pumped its wings. A nerve in my right elbow quivered. J.D. turned away from me. He ran his hands up through his hair to the back of his head and locked his fingers. My bead centered the red and white circling wound. He just pushed his face down under the muddy water then.

* * * *

They run the Interstate right through the old Zook place and they blocked off the Gerson Springs road on account of the county's new bridge at Shay's Landing. There was a little fight over not maintaining the old road, mostly from the people who got their water from the Springs, but it didn't amount to nothin'. So the asphalt breaks up a bit more every March from frost-heave and those who want water from
the Springs use my lane to get there since I bought the Gerson place. They come right through the yard with their jugs and kids and dogs and I don't mind as long as I'm not too busy with the stock or some damn thing. Not many come anyway.

I don't know whatever happened to J.D. and it doesn't concern anything now why he ran that way or how long he had. What matters is he couldn't stop himself. I believe it all boils down to hurt, no matter how many ways you look at it. Might as well shoot dogs as rabbits.

I don't get across the river much, unless to put setlines out during the June rise in Big Porcupine Creek. But sometimes I'll drive out to the middle of the new bridge and shut off the pickup.

They haven't dammed it up yet and I read how the Yellowstone is the second longest free-flowing river in the world. I don't know if that's the truth or not, but I still hear its run, and once in a while I hear traffic up on the Interstate and realize that those people don't even know the river is here. That country up there has death in every gully now, so they can't be blamed for not seeing anything but heat-waves.
THE OFFERING

Dunk and I sat on the wooden floor of his house trading comic books. The acrid smell of cat pee was in my nostrils, and it was snowing outside, eastern Montana snow, the kind that sparkles even after it has floated to the ground and squeaks under your shoes with every step. I didn't have to deliver papers that morning because it was Christmas, but I was in the habit of getting up at five. So I had fixed pancakes, read Saturday's paper again, and drooled over the pistols in a mail order catalogue before taking off for Dunk's place on the south side. I had loaded my Gazette bag with funny books I'd read three or four times, written my grandmother a note, and then left the house without waking her.

The evening before, she had given me a toothbrush and a pair of hand knitted wool socks. Gram gave me two toothbrushes every year, one on my birthday and one at Christmas. I suppose she did it because she was so proud of her own teeth, which were still in good enough shape to chew the dollar's worth of cinnamon bears I always gave her.

She was eighty-two, and worried about me unless I left a note. If I did that, I could be gone a week in the summertime, building rafts
and treehouses by the river, fishing, raiding gardens and throwing
apples at cars from the roof of the Stockman's Hotel. The notes
usually read, "Gone camping," and camping was alright with Gram as long
as I checked in after I finished my paper route in the mornings.

My mother was dead and my father had taken off when I was two.
Gram and I lived close to the river in a small house she built with
scrap lumber from the old Alexander School when the city tore it down.
A friend had helped with the wiring and indoor plumbing, but she had
snugged down the rest, from root cellar to roof, by herself, and she
kept it clean, which is more than I can say for poor Dunk's mother.

I hated his place because it stunk so much and his old lady was
always smoking cigarettes and coughing, or screaming at somebody and
throwing his cats around. But the house was warm and nobody else I
knew would trade comics on Christmas morning except Dunk. Besides, he
had the best **** Batman, Tarzan, Kid Rodelo, Sergeant Rock, Creature
Features **** you name it.

He had oodles of them, most of which he stole from Bugger Oshman's
Post Office Store. Bugger wasn't too swift, but he had those big round
mirrors put in there, so I gave up hitting his place. Not Dunk. He'd
slip four or five comics in his pants so fast I could hardly tell when
he did it. One time he even reached the top shelf, just crawled right
up, and swiped a Playboy. He said the mirrors were a bunch of bullshit
to scare everybody, that Bugger couldn't even see that far.

No doubt, Dunk had more guts than I did, and he was tougher, too.
He said us kids were pansies compared to the niggers he used to fight
back East. I didn't know how much he hated niggers until Gram's two
friends, the Nigger Beck sisters, dropped by one day while Dunk and I were digging for worms. The two sisters were old as Gram and lived alone in the country, up on Sarpy Creek where Gram was born. Dunk just walked into the house, right up to Gram and said, "Why are you lettin' them niggers in here?" Gram gave him that speech about pigment and my freckles and not being any different — it was like all one big freckle — and smiled and took the Nigger Beck sisters into the front room. Dunk said if he were me, he'd move out, niggers walkin' around everywhere.

I thought about it, but the Nigger Beck sisters were always nice to me and besides, they made me wonder what it was really like in Africa. They didn't look like the nigger women with huge pots of water balanced on their heads I saw in Tarzan movies. They just looked like they'd been burned to a frazzle. Their hair had kinked, splayed and spotted with white ash, like old wire at the town dump, and their skin had gone crisp. Their eyes seemed large and full of blood and water, rolling a lot, as if they were in some terrible pain, but then they'd laugh and I knew they weren't.

And Gram was alright. She liked root beer, cinnamon bears, and movies like "I Was A Teenage Werewolf", and if I closed the door to her bedroom at night, her snoring didn't bother me. I didn't say it, but I figured niggers were better than cat pee all over the place anyday.

I told Dunk I'd trade two Kid Rodelo's for one of his Sergeant Rock's. We sat like two Indians, his comics in huge boxes around him, mine in my canvas newspaper bag.

"No deal," he said.
I looked at the cover of the one I wanted. It was a new double issue. Sergeant Rock, his khaki shirt ripped, two bandoliers of ammo crossed on his hairy chest, and the butt of a cigar in the corner of his mouth, was falling into a pit of bamboo stakes pointing up at him. A yellow-faced Jap poked his grinning head around a tree.

"OK," I said, "I'll throw in this Tarzan. Have you read it? It's the one where he finds the Lost City of Gold." I leaned back on my arms to look tough, but my right hand landed in a cold puddle of cat pee and slipped across the wooden floor. It almost made me sick.

"No, but it ain't enough."

"Damn it, Dunk. Don't be such a gyp!" I yelled, wiping my hand on my Gazette bag. "And why don't you ever clean this place up?"

"OK, if you don't want to trade..." He grabbed Sergeant Rock from my lap and threw him in a box.

"Alright, alright," I said, "I'll give you two Kid Rodelo's, this Tarzan and this Creature Feature. And that's it!"

He was reaching for the Rock when the bedroom door opened. His mother stood there for a second with her hand on her forehead, her eyes closed. Her hair was red and it stuck out every which way. She wore a pink nightgown with big holes in it. I could see a man's hairy legs on the bed in back of her. He slowly opened her eyes and I realized Dunk was putting his funny books away. I was still sitting on the floor when she kicked me.

"What in the hell are you two little bastards yelling about so goddamn early in the morning? Jesus Christ, it's Christmas! Why do you have to come over here screaming about your sons-a-bitching comic books on Christmas morning? Huh? You little turd! Answer me!"
I tried to, but it felt like my ribs were broken. I was lying on my side trying to breathe when the next one caught me in the butt. It felt dull, like her foot was a wooden block.

"Quit kickin' him! He didn't do anything!" Dunk screamed back at her. Clutching my coat, I rose to my knees.

"What the hell's going on?" the man in the bedroom yelled. I liked the sound of his voice. It was deep and promised an end to all this.

But Dunk's old lady kept screaming, "I'll kick him as I goddamn please, you shit faced brat! And I'll kick hell out of you, too!"

"Just try it," Dunk said.

I was up and staggering for the door. I heard a ripping sound as my hand touched the doorknob and looked back as Dunk grabbed a roll of fat with his hand. Her nightgown was torn to the waist and her belly hung over in a blob. Dunk pulled and twisted the skin; his old lady screamed and clawed at his hair. Dunk was squirming and twisting and kicking and then I was out the door, running in the snow. I knew the man was aiming a rifle at my back. A block from the house I could still hear her screaming. My ribs ached, but I kept running and didn't stop to look back until I was another block away.

"Slow down, Bugsy. You don't have to run." Dunk said when he caught up with me. "Hell, they won't chase us out here."

We walked north, toward the railroad tracks. Neither of us talked. I caught my breath and kept looking over my shoulder until we began to climb the dike of granite chips where the tracks lay.

We headed west then, walking between the rails, stretching out to every other tie toward the Stockman's Hotel. There were no diesel
engines steadily thrumming and growling around the depot as there usually were, and for the first time I realized how quiet the town was. I couldn't see a person along Main Street. There were only three parked cars, covered with snow so deep it looked like they hadn't moved in months. The railroad tracks ran empty to the ends of town and melted into the valley, the hills and trees engulfing them. I heard a faint, distant call and watched a flock of about twelve geese skim the treetops by the river. I imagined gliding with them over the cottonwoods, searching the ice for open water, sailing east above the valley and watching the town disappear. I wondered what the river looked like from up there, running all the way over to North Dakota, flowing into the Missouri, and its winding down to the Mississippi, miles and miles of warm, inviting waters, and then looked down at the ties so I wouldn't stumble.

* * * *

The lobby of the Stockman's was a big warm room with Navajo rugs and pictures of famous Indians on the pine walls. Huge leather chairs, heavy with wood, waited for somebody to sit in them. In front of the switchboard, and behind a glass case full of candy, paperbacks and cigarettes, a clerk named Isaac usually sat reading dirty magazines. A carpeted stairway with lodge-pole handrailings led up to rooms where mostly railroaders stayed.

I used to deliver papers to them and they always gypped me at collection time because they were never there or they said they were out of money. I hated railroaders. They all had big guts, big noses and little gold chains hanging out of their vests. I knew they had
plenty of money in a bank someplace where they also had a big house, a wife and kids my age, kids who didn't have to do anything for their money but empty the garbage. And I knew they bought those kids go-karts, shotguns, bicycles and televisions, but they wouldn't pay me for bringing the damn newspaper to their hotel room.

I quite delivering to their rooms altogether after the weirdo from Glendive wouldn't pay me. All I wanted was what he owed me, but he said I needed to learn how to crawl on the floor like an Army soldier, like I was under barbed wire with a rifle. He showed me how and then wanted me to do it without my pants on. I didn't even go up the stairs after that unless it was to get on the roof.

In the middle of the lobby, surrounded by the chairs and pictures of Indians, a pool table with a torn felt and loose bumpers stood on wobbly legs, its edges burned by years of cigarettes. It cost a quarter to play one game, but Dunk and I took two registration cards from the desk and slid them over the holes, between the bumpers, so when a shot was good, the ball wasn't lost to the machine.

We'd been playing that way for about three hours when Jerry came in. The bar and the cafe were closed. The desk clerk, Isaac, was gone and no one else was in the lobby. Jerry was an ex-boxer. He said he held the record for being knocked down the most times in one fight without getting knocked out. His face was smashed all over and he had taught us a little about how to use our dukes. He could shoot a wicked game of pool if he was drunk enough, and he would always buy us candy and pop if he had any money. Dunk said he was probably the toughest guy around if he wanted to be.
But he was in bad shape that morning when he walked through the lobby. I wanted to scream for somebody to help, but there wasn't anybody. He didn't have a coat and his shirt was completely unbuttoned. Bloody vomit ran down his chin onto his bare chest. His hair was greasy and stiff. One shoe was gone. The sock, caked with snow, hung onto his toes and his white pants were ripped and stained brown in the seat. He walked by us, weaving and staggering, then collapsed in a chair across from the pool table and stared as if he were going to bet on the game.

Dunk and I stood with our cues, looking at each other, then at Jerry. Dunk walked over and stood next to him, but Jerry's eyes never left the table. He put his hand on his shoulder, slightly shook him and said, "Hey Jerry, what happened?"

Jerry's eyes blinked and his head nodded and jerked as he tried to look up. Finally he smiled and his swollen throat, full of blood, growled deeply, softly, "Hey, Dunk, Merry Christmas, Dunk."

I went outside to look for somebody. A black dog was trotting down the sidewalk. It stopped to lift its leg and pee on the corner of the Hotel, looked back at me as it did, and disappeared around the brick, leaving the street a little less white and a little more empty.

Dunk had Isaac there when I came back in. He was a big dumb kid whose father was a railroader. He stood there swearing at Jerry. He didn't want to touch him.

"Maybe we'd better call Doctor Mackney," I said.

"He won't come today," Isaac whined. "I gotta carry him up to his room. Jesus, he stinks. I'm just gonna throw him on the bed. I ain't gonna clean him up. Damned old drunk."
"We'll help you," Dunk said. "He can wash himself. Can't you Jerry? Then we'll fix something to eat, huh Jerry?"

Jerry had passed out. I thought he was dead until I saw his chest heaving and heard his raspy breath.

"Oh shut up and get outta here," Isaac said. He picked Jerry up in his arms and walked quickly toward the stairs with him. We started to follow but Isaac jerked his head around and said, "You heard me. I said get the hell outta here! And get those registration cards off the pool table."

Dunk picked up a ball from the pool table and glared at the back of Isaac's head bobbing up the stairs. I thought I'd see the white ball connect any second. Instead of throwing it, he yelled, "You're the one, Isaac! Not me! You're the one!"

Isaac never looked back. He just said, "Get outta here you little bastards or I'll break your necks," and kept bobbing up the stairs.

"Let's call Doctor Mackney," I said to Dunk. "Jerry's going to kick off."

Dunk dropped the pool ball and walked around the glass counter of the desk, slid open the door and grabbed two Milky Ways. He tossed one to me and then stood there, unwrapping his. "Ahh, so what if he does?" he said. "Maybe that's what he wants. Maybe he just wants to go up there and forget everything."

He reached up to the switchboard and quickly unplugged the three or four connected lines, letting them snap back down to the base, then ran around the counter, grabbed his coat and headed for the door.
The street outside was too white and empty. Snow lay over a foot deep and more was coming down. The city crews had strung bare light bulbs across Main Street, but they didn't work right. Everything was white, even the wreaths they'd hung up at each intersection.

We made snowballs as we walked and threw them at signs, light poles, and over the tops of store fronts. The cop car cruised by, but we had seen him four blocks away, so we stopped in time. He still stared at us as he went by and Dunk craned his neck out and bugged his eyes until the cop stopped his car. We ducked around a corner and ran down the alley, laughing and slugging each other's shoulders.

We came out of the alley next to the Roxy, so we looked at the billboards. Randolph Scott, his hat tipped back, held a woman protectively in his left arm and a sixshooter blazed from his right hand. On the other poster a band of Apaches tortured a man who as staked to the ground.

"Hey, they're gonna have a show tight," Dunk said. "Look at this. December twenty-fifth. 'Revenge Apache'."

I stared at the Indians in the poster. I loved their high moccasins and breechcloths. Masters at torture, hiding in the rocks and living on snakes and pinon nuts, they were quiet, and they never surrendered. They meant what they said.

I always chose to be an Indian when we played in the summertime, even though they always lost. I remembered Charlie Littlehead, a friend of Dunk's and mine, getting mad during a movie, standing up and screaming, "Why do we always lose?" as the cavalry bugled out of
nowhere to save the day. He threw a Black Cow sucker at the screen and Dunk and I laughed so hard all three of us got kicked out.

"You got any money?" Dunk asked.

I shrugged. "That was my last quarter in the pool table. I'm broke. I don't collect for the paper until the end of the month."

"What about your Gram? Will she give you some?"

"She might, if she has it. Social Security doesn't come for another week though."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Double shit."

"Let's go try the laundromat," Dunk said. It was small hope. Once in a while we stole pop bottles from the racks by the machines and sold them to Safeway's for three cents apiece. Ten bottles would buy movie tickets for both of us.

"Grocery store isn't open," I said.

"Let's go down there anyway. We can try the washers and dryers."

"Alright," I said, but my heart wasn't in it. Sometimes we found a little change in them, and once Dunk had even found a dollar bill, but chances were slim.

We walked slowly through a vacant lot, taking pride in our tracks through the clean, unbroken snow. The sun was beginning to start its way down, and I started to feel like we needed to hurry or we would miss something that was beginning to happen somewhere else. I stopped and looked around. I remembered Jerry. I wondered about Gram. Snow was still falling and everything was silent. Shadows were long but it seemed early. I didn't know what it was we were missing, but I knew I didn't want the sun to go down.
Dunk was ahead of me, making his tracks look like he'd walked through an elm tree, when I saw the Doone family through their picture window. Colored lights blinked around it, framing them like a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. They sat at a big table with a white cloth on it and they wore fancy clothes. A fireplace flamed orange in back of them and they all stared at something in the center of the table.

I walked closer and heard Dunk yell, "Where you goin'?" so I turned and put my finger to my lips, and he came sneaking up alongside of me.

We were in the front yard, crouched below their window, when I saw what they were staring at. It was a turkey skeleton, a pile of bones with pieces of meat still clinging to them, drying in the warm air. The family wasn't really staring at the thing; they were all eating pumpkin pie, heaped with whipping cream. Dunk and I were both silent. We just stood there in the falling snow, looking at the pie. I watched Donny, one of their kids, stuff half a piece into his mouth with one bite.

He wore a white napkin at his throat and I remembered the Saturday after a matinee that I had almost killed him. I was playing a rancher who had caught two rustlers, Donny and a red-headed girl named Carol, so I tied a little cotton rope to a limb in Fritz's willow tree. I tied their hands behind their backs, made Donny Doone stand on Gram's old washtub, then knotted the rope around his fat little neck and kicked the washtub out from under him.

About six of us were standing around wondering what to do and watching him kick and turn red in the face when Mrs. Fritz came running
out of her house with a paring knife. She cut him down and had to cut the rope again at the knot around his neck because it had tightened and he was still choking.

I don't know how long Dunk and I had been standing in front of their window, but my mind had floated from Donny to the stockings hanging on the fireplace, wondering if those stupid Doone kids really believed a fat man in a red suit climbed down their chimney and never got sooty, to the turkey skeleton, to the pie, to Jerry, lying on his bed in the Stockman's, bloody puke hardening on his chest.

We must have scared them, because Mrs. Doone dropped the pie from her fork and Mr. Doone ran to the door. Dunk and I were already around the house and in the alley when he yelled, "Get outta here, you god-damned peeping punks!"

Dunk stopped running, cupped his hands by his mouth and yelled back, "Up yours, Luny Doone!" I nearly fell down from laughing. I didn't care if he had recognized us or not. He was a banker and I beat up Donny all the time.

"Do you know Donny, the fat one?" I asked Dunk.

"Yeah. What a pimple he is!"

"I almost hung him once," I said.

"You what?"

"You know. Hung him. 'By the neck until dead'.""

"Bullshit," Dunk said. He was grinning and I knew he didn't believe me. But it was true, and right then, I wished that it had killed him.
The laundromat door was locked. Nobody washed clothes on Christmas. We cussed a lot, kicked and pounded on the glass door just short of breaking it and then stood with our faces pressed against it. The lights were on inside. I imagined standing there, sipping a cup of hot chocolate from the machine, smelling the sweet air of dry cleaning fluid and soap, and listening to the dryers hum as they rotated clothes, snaps and zippers irregularly clinking on the metal drums.

But it was dark where Dunk and I stood. The sky had turned full of stars and the air cold. I was hungry. I thought of Gram and figured it was time to head home. No movie. It would be starting soon. Dunk and I would be alone again. He would walk back up across the tracks and I would go toward the river, north. I always hated to leave him, but the cold was as real as a knife between us.

Summer was the best time. We lived in the treehouse and the dugout by the river, fished most of the day and lay around in the sun-baked sand. We ate corn and tomatoes from the gardens we raided at night and catfish with wild asparagus and mushrooms. The river was big and powerful. It held us there, together.

As I stamped my feet and shivered in front of the laundromat, I remembered my Gazette bag, full of my comic books. It was at Dunk's place and I would need it in the morning. I was afraid to go over there again, but I knew I would have to.

"Hey Dunk" I said.

"Yea?"

"How does he make it out of that pit?"
"Who? What pit?"

"Sergeant Rock. How does he make it out of that Jap boobie trap?"

Dunk took hold of my arm and I turned around. He was looking down
the street at the Presbyterian church. Cars were pulling up and people
were walking in through the big double doors.

"Come on," Dunk said, pulling at my arm.

"Where we goin'?"

"To church," he said, grinning as he pulled me along.

"I'm not goin' to church," I said, tearing my arm away from him
and stopping. "I have to get my Gazette bag. Let's go over to your
place and you can go in to get it."

"No. Come on. Hurry up." he said, skipping sideways and waving
me on. "Just for a minute. Come on."

"To church?"

"Just follow me," he said.

"What's the matter with you? I've gotta get my bag!"

"Look," he said, walking back to me, "would you just do this?"

"What?"

"OK," he said. "Look. I'm sorry my old lady kicked you this
morning. I want to make it up to you, OK? I'll give you that Sergeant
Rock, but I can't do this if you leave, so I need you to come along, so
would you just follow me? Please?"

I didn't know what to say so I followed him. I never heard him
talk like that to anybody.

We ran down the street and melted into the group of people walking
up the steps. A man handed me a paper just inside the door, smiled and
said, "Good evening. Glad to see you." I smiled back, not knowing what we were doing there, but already enjoying the warmth. I had been to the Lutheran church with Gram more than once, but the only thing I liked about it was the story-time, especially when they'd told the one about David and Goliath. I'd hated the rest almost as much as railroaders. The Presbyterian church was dark because they only had candles lit. I just followed Dunk, like he said, holding on to the back of his shirt and trying not to laugh. We turned down an aisle and squirmed our way to the middle of a hard black bench. The whole place smelled like burning wax and moldy potatoes in our root cellar. Organ music came from someplace up front and the longer I sat there, the more I felt like I was going to be buried.

For about twenty minutes I did whatever Dunk did, which was what everybody else did. I stood silent and acted like I was praying. I sat down. I stood up again and acted like I was singing. I sat down and sang some more. I listened to the preacher up front talk about some sick people who couldn't be there and I acted like I was praying for them when he did. Then two men came walking down the ends of the rows with little baskets.

A woman next to me put some money in one and handed it to me. I handed it to Dunk, but somehow the whole basket tipped high in the air and over the top of the bench in front of us and coins were rolling all over the floor. Paper money and checks were floating around and people were snickering and bending down. The basket was under a woman's legs in front of Dunk and he was pulling on my arm again. We squirmed through people, walked up the aisle, the smiling man at the
door frowning now, and Dunk said, "It's my friend. He's sick. See how white he is?" and we were out the door, running up the street, Dunk laughing, jumping in the air, falling, rolling in the snow and then, the Roxy.

Dunk paid our way with a ten dollar bill. We bought a bucket of buttered popcorn, two jumbo cokes, and four boxes of pompoms. We walked through the velvet curtains into a blazing desert with cactus, gila monsters and the Apaches, who tortured a settler by slowly roasting him. They took his daughter with them, tying her hands and making her walk in back of their horses. Her white dress was ripped. She had no shoes. Then Randolph Scott was with us.
TRACERS

My Dad's down the hall there and I'm going in to see him. But I don't know, it ain't like it's Big Buck in there no more. His lips look like yellow school paper that got wet and dried up. He can't talk no more. And his eyes, know what I mean, Zack? He just kinda rolls 'em at me. I'm waiting for the nurse to come out. Why are you waitin'? You got someone dyin' too, Zack? I got some venison jerky. You like jerky, Zack? I'm studly. Totally awesome. My Dad's dyin' and I ain't cryin'. He said to me a long time ago, "Don't let 'em shitcha, Little Buck. I'm dyin'." Don't let 'em shitcha; that's what he always says. When he's dead, I'll get all his guns. He promised them to me, and Big Buck's never broke a promise in his life. I'll raise some hell with that M-14. Maybe blow away my Social Studies teacher. I'd like to, don't let anybody shitcha.

Big Buck took two M-14's when he quit Viet Nam. He went over there twice. Ve-e-e-e-it Na-a-a-a-a-a-am! That's the way he says it. Like a machine gun. That's what an M-14 is. A .308 caliber. Full automatic, semi-automatic, or single-shot, whatever way you want to set
it. I passed my hunter safety course this winter like gas on glass, and I'm only twelve. Awesome. Go ahead, name a caliber. C'mon! Any caliber, and I'll tell you the muzzle velocity. C'mon, don't be a jughead all your life!

.270? Twenty-nine hundred feet per second. Thirty-ought-six? Twenty-nine hundred and ten feet per second. 7mm? Three thousand, one hundred and ten feet per second. .308? Like the M-14? Twenty-eight hundred and twenty feet per second. 'Course, it all depends on grain, too. How much the bullet weighs. Those velocities are for a hundred and fifty grain. Don't let anybody shitcha, I ain't no alcoholic. I'm studly. I got it all in my computer.

You wanna hear a story? How Big Buck got his two M-14's? Probably too long for you. Maybe you'd like to hear how I got top score on M.A.C.H. 3, know what I mean? The Video Game? Five lives for two coins? Take your Bomber in under heavy enemy fire, or fly in low and fast in your fighter? What's that, Zack? You really wanna hear about the M-14's? Well, maybe I shouldn't tell you. Maybe some other time.

There was this long building in Fort Bragg, see. Where they kept all the guns to practice with on the firing range. That's where my Dad taught the jugheads how to shoot straight. Big Buck, he rek-o-noitered the sit-chee-a-shun. There was only two guards at night, see, and they'd walk around the building in opposite directions until they met at the ends. They they'd stop and light up. Have a toke. Pot heads from Boston. Baked beans, know what I mean?

Big Buck does his scoutin' about a month. After what he pulled off in Coolievile, this is candy. So one night he gets outta his car
with a big set of bolt cutters. The guards are at the other end. He
strides right up and zig-zag, he's in like the flag. He was only gonna
take one, but he gets to thinkin' maybe somebody will get in trouble,
'cause each gun is numbered and each number has a man. He don't want to
get that man in trouble. So he slings another one over his shoulder
and stands quiet. It takes the guards six and a half minutes to walk
to the end where he came in, where he cut the padlock and stuck it in
his pocket. They light up and jabber awhile. They could notice the
lock ain't there. But they're baked beans from Boston and they don't
see nuthin'. They start back around again.

You still with me, Zack? Don't be a jughead all your life. I
don't tell this story to everybody. Accounta the FBI, know what I
mean? He sold one, see? Four hundred and fifty skins. Big Buck ain't
no baked bean.

So he waits in the dark there, rows and rows of guns on both sides
of him, standing as still as he is. He's thinkin' the Nam was no good.
No better the second time neither. The politics sold him out. Don't
let nobody shitcha. He's thinking he deserves two, one for each time,
what he calls a mo-men-toe. Not like stealin'. Something he can
remember what he got through on his own by. They never can pay him for
it. He's a little scared watchin' the guards walk by, but he don't
move. Only a bad blade ain't never afraid, know what I mean, Zack?
He's thinking he can't kill 'em if they catch him, but he ain't no
jailbird neither.

He walks out the front door and drives off the base right away, to
my Mother's place, and hides the guns under the bed. She don't like
them. They ain't married yet so I ain't born yet. The next morning
the MP's are checking every automobile coming in or leaving the base,
tearing things apart.

Don't let 'em shitcha, Big Buck is awesome. I mean totally. Every
day at the range he'd fill his jacket pockets with ammo. He's got six
big cans full. At home in the basement. Tracers too. Sulphur in the
noses.

We go out north of town and shoot tracers at night sometimes.
They're like little matches you control your fire with. Every third
round is best. I've shot it too, 'cause I'm studly, but I don't know.
I'm just Little Buck. Main thing is to just keep her steady. Hold 'er
down to keep her from climbin' too high on ya. Watch the tracers and
you can nail a jackrabbit at four, five hundred yards. Gotta keep a
grip on 'er though.

My Dad wouldn't go back to Nam a third time. Even if he could, he
wouldn't. I would, if they lined 'em up and let me shoot 'em all day.
Know what I mean, Zack?