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Teenagers rode ropes from cliffs above a summer pond. At the final rising instant they kicked free and fell, windmilling their arms through leaf-dappled light. A boy and girl in cutoffs plunged hand in hand toward the glassy surface of water; laughing as they fell, they let go of each other the moment they hit. Their friends on the bank cheered and raised soft drinks to smiling lips.

I shook the ice in my glass and stood. Outside, wind drove snow against the trailer; the windows hummed, and the curtains quivered in cross-drafts. The kids in the commercial cannonballed from overhanging rocks into the graceful slow motion of endless summer fun.

I turned off the set. The television was new, but reception this far out was seldom clear. A satellite dish would be the ticket, and I smiled to think of my folks' place down in the Big Hole Valley with just a radio.

At the breakfast counter I parted the curtains. Our Christmas tree rolled across the yard, bits of tinsel whipping in the frozen boughs. Snow had drifted to the third cinder block in the tractor shed wall, but it wasn't snow that got you up here, like in the Big Hole. It was wind. And even if this was still Montana, I felt like a stranger so far out in the open.

Cody had started the next day's bread at the sink, and her dark arms were dusted white to her rolled sleeves, her jeans already spotted with flour. It seemed unlikely, a woman who looked like that, baking bread in the kitchenette of a mobile home, and as I watched her, I felt again the mild shock of finding myself on leased dry land with her. The difference in our ages alone had

been reason enough for doubt, but as time passed, I found that I was willing to believe.

"Twenty below riding a thirty-mile-an-hour wind," I said. "We should have sold the steers in October instead of waiting like the bank wanted." Snow sifted across the yard, rising like smoke through auras of mercury-vapor light above the feed lot.

"The bank is the boss, Pard." Cody folded the dough back on itself and looked at me. "Relax. It could be worse, old man." She blew strands of her jet-black hair away from her face and shook her head. I reached over and brushed her hair back with the flat of my hand, then put two fingers in the flour on the counter and touched her cheek, leaving white dots on her mahogany skin. She ducked away from me with that look of hers and tried to rub the flour off with her shoulder. The smile lingered, though, as she reached up and smudged my nose. "You're a worrier is your problem," she said.

I slipped my arm around her and found her ribs with my fingers. "Worry about this," I whispered and felt her body fill with electric strength. I put my face in her hair and held her just off the floor until she began to relax. The last time we got going we broke a chair in the kitchen set.

After ten months we still played with each other, as proof, perhaps, that we'd be all right, that the distance to town and the fifteen years between us wouldn't matter. But in spite of the teasing, an early winter on a leased place seemed a hard way to start all over.

It might not have been the telephone but wind in the trailer skirts that woke me. The bedroom had gone cold, and it seemed we'd slept most of the night. I could hear Cody's voice down the hall

in the spare bedroom we used as an office. The clock radio's luminous digits said 4:37.

I turned up the electric blanket, closed my eyes, and found myself standing in an irrigation ditch, shoveling mud onto a canvas dam and watching the metallic progress of water as it flooded my father's fields. Cottonwoods flanked the river, and under the trees, I could see the Percheron Norman teams we used for haying, lazing in tandem through the shade. The water in the ditch was so cold it cramped my legs.

"...up," Cody said. "Wake up, Clayton."

I shielded my eyes from the ceiling light with my arm and looked at Cody leaning over me. Her robe fell open, and I slipped my hand inside the terry cloth and let it ride the length of her back. At her thigh, I turned the robe aside to see the rose tattooed on the inside swale of her hip.

"Come have some coffee," she said, taking my hand and pulling me up. "I need to talk to you."

She pulled until I was sitting, then gathered her clothes and went off barefoot down the hallway toward the bathroom, walking hard on her heels. I put my arms on my knees and my head on my arms; I closed my eyes and tried to go back to the ditch. My right knee made a lump under my arm; a knee the size of a grapefruit. It always would be, the doctors said, and it ached if I didn't use the brace.

The smell of black soil soured by water lingered from the dream. It came to me at odd times, that odor of place and youth. The smell of home. My old man had married again at seventy-four. His bride owned the black mud now.

The Mr. Coffee was going when I got to the kitchen. Cody leaned against the counter, standing with one foot on the other as

she smoked a Camel filter. She was wearing a pair of slippers that looked like mallards. Execuducks. I'd ordered them as a joke from an ad in one of Cody's magazines because she did our books. The slippers were for successful people who already had everything.

I pulled back the curtain at the sink. Pellets of snow struck the window like shot. I couldn't even see the diesel tank, twenty yards away. As I stepped back, I saw my reflection on the glass, my sleep-straightened sandy hair standing as if in comic fright.

"Honey," Cody said. "That was TJ's mother on the phone. Are you awake?" She drew on her cigarette as if she needed it to breathe.

"I'm awake." I took two porcelain cafe cups from the drainboard and watched the coffee rise in the Pyrex pot. "TJ's got a mother?" I said.

Cody turned away to snub out the butt, and I looked at the clean lines of her back and legs, the currents of black hair spilling off her shoulders. In profile the blood really showed: Plains Cree and French, although her father, she thought, had been a Harp. I wondered how TJ Rountree, a person we did not often mention, had managed to get me out of bed.

With him it could be anything. I'd known him when he was just starting out on broncs, a skinny kid, who at first took a hell of a beating. But he toughened in his twenties, getting hard and limber as a bullprick whip. Over the years, I'd helped him off some winners, and for a while in the early 80s, it looked like he could be somebody. On his way down, he met Cody, and they ran together for a couple of seasons, until I found her one night passed out in the grass behind the horse trailers at the Last Chance Stampede, lying there where Rountree left her. I got some help and took her to the hospital. After she took the cure, we

started seeing each other. When we got married, we acted like Rountree had never been born.

"He's in Missoula," Cody said. She filled our cups and put cream on the table for hers. She lit another cigarette. "In the hospital."

The coffee was strong, although it would have been better the way I used to drink it, with half a shot to the cup. I couldn't do that anymore, living with Cody. I had two drinks a night and put the bottle away. Cody claimed that having whiskey around the house didn't bother her. When she'd been drinking, she went mostly with wine. Still, I kept the bottle out of sight. "He drying out or what?" I asked.

Cody nodded. "Bleeding shits, shakes, scared half crazy. His mom is there with him."

"Now it's Mom," I said. I sat down at the chrome and Formica table. Like the rest of the furniture, it had come with the trailer and had no connection to the past. "So what does Mom want from us?"

Cody stared at her slippers, cigarette smoke boiling from her nose. The one thing you notice right off about reformed drunks is the cigarettes and coffee. "He just waited too long," she said. "He thought he could cowboy up and go cold turkey. He was in some kind of shock by the time they got to him. He's asking for me."

"Well kiss my ass and call me Mildred," I said. "That takes guts." I started to stand, my knee popped, and I almost went down. But in that instant of vertigo before I caught the table, I understood something that had been there all along just under the surface. I saw why we'd never had a real fight, Cody and I. We called it love, but we knew we'd kill each other if we ever got

started. As I looked at her I saw that we both understood it now.

"I've got to go," she said. "He's hurting and he's scared."

She walked around the table and put her hand on my arm. I didn't know what to do, and I knew whatever I said would be wrong. I touched her hair. "I'll be needing the truck in the afternoons to feed," I said.

"Maybe the bus then," Cody answered. She slipped her arm under mine and hugged my waist. "If you'd just drive me in."

When it was light enough to see outside I started the truck, fed the horses and checked the stocktank heaters. The wind tapered off at dawn and morning broke clear, not a cloud from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountain Front. Smoke from the idling truck rose in vertical white contrails against a sea-blue sky. I thought about taking Cody into Great Falls for the bus, and I didn't believe, when it came right down to it, that we'd go. She would change her mind, or I'd say no, or, maybe Rountree would do the right thing for a change and either improve or die before we left.

Cody'd been through a bunch of men when she was running, but I could never understand why she'd ended up with him—a man so obviously out for himself. Winning a few in a row can turn your head, although when I'd been riding saddle broncs I hadn't lasted long enough to discover how I'd act on a roll. A chute post got my knee my second season, and riding pickup was about as close to winners as I got on the summer circuit.

We didn't have much to say during breakfast, and I tried for some restraint. It didn't work. Finally I said, "Okay. Tell me why."

She looked up, butting those black eyes on me. "Just don't," she said with a twist of her mouth. "Just don't you start."

"I need an answer," I told her and heard in the sound of my voice how much I meant it.

"Because," she said and took her dishes to the sink where she started to wash them, then one by one smashed each piece against the divider. She had to hit the cup three times before it broke, but when it did, chips cleared the drainboard and ricocheted off the microwave. When she finished, she took the porcelain handle from her fingers and put it on the table. She looked outside at the glare of sky on empty space. "Because he tried to love me," she said. "It wasn't easy for him, like it is for you, but he tried."

"And you drank yourself stupid, it was so good."

Cody turned her glistening eyes back to me. I'd never seen her cry, and she did not cry then; she stood at the sink, gazing at me through cataracts of ice.

"That's right," she said. "It was good. I just did not know how to face it sober."

I stood outside in the concrete forebay until the driver closed the luggage compartment doors and climbed aboard. Cody looked out the tinted window. Her face was green, her loose black hair clasped behind each ear by a beadwork barrette. A green Indian on her way to town. The driver ground gears and released the brakes, and Cody raised one hand. I shook my head and she looked away.

I went inside and walked around until I could feel my leg. The people waiting on the benches seemed to have been abandoned there in their winter clothes. Three bums sat together by the wall lockers, not going anywhere, just sitting quietly, sharing warmth until someone threw them out. A woman from Rocky Boy or Harlem held a sleeping child—a grandson perhaps. Leaving the reservation or going back; she could have been Cody's mother, the child, mine.

Cody was in motion. As I walked to the truck I knew I had a choice: I could drive home and talk to the cows and wait, or I could move too. Momentum seemed the only answer.

Rising exhaust and river steam yellowed the frozen midday sky. Alone in the lanes of traffic, I felt somehow freed, opened to all the possibilities of so many people moving at such a pace. I drew five hundred dollars in cash at the branch bank on 10th Avenue South and drove on to Holiday Village where I walked the mall looking in all the windows.

At the Westerners' I found a pin-stripe Fenton and a pair of gabardine slacks that matched. The fitting room was tight, but I managed to change without removing my brace. I topped off the shirt and pants with a black scarf and a pearl-gray Resistol Sundance. The clerk put my work clothes in a Westerner's sack. I felt dressed and ready; the sack suggested purchases in reserve.

I was surprised to see kids on every level, crowding the record stores, buying clothes, clowning on the escalators. Some of them wandered in pairs, holding hands. Some embraced in darker passageways near the theater, waiting for the matinee. Most seemed bored by the presence of so much merchandise.

Posters in the windows at Adventure Travel showed mossy castles in the Highlands, high-rise hotels in the Caribbean, an airliner in flight above white-domed clouds, and high-breasted girls in bikinis. I went inside and looked at more posters, at casinos in the desert, at tanned skin fronting white sand beaches, at coconut palms silhouetted against atomic skies. All the places I would never go.

When the travel agent came over, I pointed to an aerial shot of some islands off Santa Cruz. "How much one way?" I asked.

She figured up a flight schedule to Guadalajara by way of

Denver and El Paso. "For one?" she asked without looking away from the terminal.

I told her yes and she touched more keys.

"One way, coach, is three hundred and sixty dollars—during our Winter Traveler's Special," she said.

"That's not that much, is it?"

She looked up. "My boyfriend and I went down last year. We stayed on the beach at Teacapan. We fell in love with it." She smiled. Her green eyes were bright as bottle glass in the glow of the screen.

I drove out to the Tropicana Club near the front gate of Malmstrom Air Force Base and went in to plan my future. The place was already in full swing, mostly airmen in civvies, a few wheat farmers in town for the day, a cowboy or two, and some poker machine apes—everyone drinking loud or watching two strobe-lit women who danced in wrought-iron cages swinging from the ceiling on chains. I walked to the end of the bar, as close to the cages as I could get, and put my Carhartt coat on a stool. The bartender gave me a napkin. I noticed a blender on the backbar. "Pina colada," I said. "Make it a pitcher."

The place could have been a warehouse: black cinder block walls with palm trees painted here and there in day-Glo greens, a tequila sunset mural backing the bandstand. Music throbbed from the darkest corners. Overhead spots threw multicolored cones of light on the dancers. The closest girl took off her top, twirled it and rotated her small breasts in the opposite direction. The guy next to me squirmed and grinned. He was wearing a mesh cap that read: Ford Tractors and Equipment. "She really puts out," he said and I turned back to love her.

She was oriental, Korean maybe. She looked into the colored lights and bopped away without seeming to notice the music. The other girl was very white, with dark red hair flounced into lazy curls. She seemed a little stiff, as if, perhaps, she was new to the cage.

The bartender put a fishbowl on my napkin and filled it with froth. "You want the umbrella?" he asked.

"Sure thing," I said and put a fifty on the bar. I rested my weight on my elbows and let the one leg hang.

He left the pitcher beside my glass and put a pink and blue bamboo umbrella, two candied cherries, and a lavender straw in my drink. He raised his eyebrows. "Just right," I told him, and he shook his head and smiled.

I was toying with the umbrella and thinking about Adventure Travel when it came to me: Green Indian. One of the illegals who irrigated for my father used to say that. Anything he didn't like or understand was an Indio Verde. Used to call my old man that behind his back, and son of a bitch, if he hadn't been right. I could see his face, the Mexican, but I had no idea what his name might have been. The old man called them all Manual, as in shovel.

I tried the drink and it was so cold it hurt my heart. It seemed almost perfect. All it needed was more fruit, more booze, and more light. I tried to imagine the perfect pina colada, freshly wrung from the jungle, to visualize the dancers' cages hanging from palm trees that fronted a white crescent beach with breakers coming in and sails like shark fins marking the horizon. One girl would be Polynesian, the other, old-country Irish. I was alone on the beach—the jungle at my back—dressed in a white terry cloth robe and Panama straw the color of cream, drinking the

perfect pina colada and watching the waves churn to foam at my feet. In this state of mind, I owned the beach. I owned the dancers.

The music ended, the lights went down, and several airmen struggled to help the women from their cages. They got the job done, handing the dancers down like frozen beef. I closed my eyes. I wanted to stand centered between palms and watch the sea. I wanted it all: salt winds and sea warmth, sand burning the soles of my feet, the glow of endless ocean seared by sky.

I took out my wallet and flipped through my cards. Nothing on American Express or the Discover Card so far this month. The Visa looked good too. The MasterCard could stand another fifteen hundred, and there was my bank card, like an ace in the hole. I took them from their plastic pockets and spread them on the bar like a poker hand. I had some money tucked away at a bank in Butte. I could do it. I could be a wanderer in the world. I could go to the swimming hole every day.

I wondered if Cody was there yet, and how long it would take Rountree to straighten out once she found him. I wondered what she had hoped to accomplish beyond trying to do the right thing. I wondered what she would do if TJ cleaned up his act.

The dancers came along the bar, teasing the drinkers. The girl with red hair stopped to toy with my friend in the Ford cap. He was having fun now, all wiggly on his stool, making signs with his hands. She smiled with her teeth, a thirsty dust-bowl look of accommodation. She nodded at what he was saying, cut her eyes to me and noticed my drink. I watched as he pulled his wallet to show her something. She looked down the bar at my plastic full house and smiled again.

Her outfit was mostly moccasins and strings of black leather

torn into a vampy Mohawk motif. I took my Carhartt from the stool and held it out for her by the collar. She slipped into it like a cape, and the coat made her seem small. "Are those hot?" she asked, looking at the cards.

"Not yet."

She bent over the bar to look closer and pulled the coat tighter from inside, hiding her arms. "I don't get it," she said.

"It has to do with green Indians," I said. "My wife took off this morning. I've got three hundred head of black cattle to feed for the bank and a trailer full of new appliances. If I don't get drunk and kill somebody I might catch a flight to Guadalajara."

"I'm from Omaha," she said. "I know just how you feel."

"A couple weeks on the beach, drinking these beautiful drinks, and watching the water roll in."

"Yeah, right," she said. "Like Jimmy Buffett there."

"Just exactly like Jimmy Buffett, frozen concoctions and all."

She took one arm from inside the coat and fanned the cards with the tips of her fingers. "Are you nice?" she asked.

"Oh, goodness yes, and quite wealthy, too."

"Come on. I mean, are you straight up or what?"

"Maybe if you're not so straight you don't lose so much," I said.

She shook her hair back with a quick movement of her head. "You won't go," she said. "You want it all back. I see guys like you every day, a handful of plastic and a plan. It's talk. It's a country song."

"Maybe you're right," I said, "but I'd lie to you for your love."

"You'll do more than that," she answered.

We laughed. She was on the road where I felt I should be, and the truth was I did feel better. I held out the fishbowl. "Here, kid, try some of this and we'll see if you've got what it takes."

She raised the bowl like a giant shell to her lips and held my eyes as she drank. She closed her eyes then drank again. When she handed it back she said, "My name is Danny...." She picked up a card, tipping it to the bar lights, "Mr. Delaney."

"Clay," I said. "Mr. Delaney died." I refilled the bowl, adjusted the umbrella. "One other thing."

"Right," she said and threw back her hair again. "I just knew there would be."

"I am going. I'm just not going alone."

Danny wiped the mustache away with the tip of her third finger and asked for the bowl again with her hands. "Of course you're not," she said.

At Holiday Village, I put the tickets on my American Express and drew a thousand in cash with the bank card. We drove on across town in the blinding late light of afternoon with an accelerating sense of impending joy. From Airport Hill, where the sky cleared, Great Falls was lost beneath a sea of haze the color of sand.

The lady at the American Airlines counter tore our tickets and explained the flight changes at Denver and El Paso. She barely looked at the tickets as she talked, and it worried me that she might make an error. I could just see us boarding the morning flight from El Paso with hangovers, an attendant saying, "Excuse me, Sir, but there seems to be a mistake."

"...luggage?" the airline lady asked.

"Just carry-on," I answered. "We're buying everything new."

Danny had an overnight case with her dancing costume and a tub of cocoa butter for the beach. Between us we didn't have a toothbrush. "I can't believe we're into this," she said on the escalator to the boarding level. She laughed and gave me her palms

to slap. I laughed too and slid my hands over hers. We'd been laughing so much the last couple of hours my face had started to stiffen.

"Believe," I said.

We had twenty minutes to kill. At the bank of international clocks in the concourse mezzanine, I told her I had to make a call.

"I'm thinking rum coladas," she said.

"Get some with all the goodies. I'll be right back."

I left her in the flight lounge and found a row of phones. I dumped some bar change on the phone tray and got the operator to ring McDonough's, our closest neighbors, three miles south. The youngest boy, Alfred, worked for me sometimes, when he could escape his old man.

Mrs. McDonough answered, and I asked for her son. When he came on, I said, "Something's come up, Al. Cody and I are going to be gone a while, and I need you to feed for me."

After a silence so long it seemed we'd been disconnected, he said, "Just a minute." Away from the receiver I heard him call: "Daaad." He sounded like a calf. Alfred, the slow son who would stay home.

"What's going on?" McDonough said in my ear.

"Like I told your boy, something has come up short notice, and I need him to feed for me. Cody and I are going to be away." I heard him breathing on the line. "So would it be all right? Can you spare him?"

"Are you drunk?" he said.

"No. I'm in Great Falls."

"Well, I don't know," he said, "what's going on with you people. That's your business. But I can tell you this: I picked up your wife at Bowman's Corner after she called here this afternoon.

I went and got her and took her home drunk as seven hundred dollars. She ain't gone, she's out there with a case of Wild Berry."

"Hang on," I said.

"We get to your place, there's no tracks, no truck. She starts pulling her hair, for Christ's sake. You want my boy to walk into a jackpot like that?"

"You sure she's still there?'

"She's there. It's twelve miles to Augusta."

I felt myself sag. "Sorry about the trouble," I said.

"I've got more to do than ferry...."

"Thanks again," I said and hung up.

I went to the wall of east-facing windows and looked out. I could see my one-ton in the lot, and off south, the slope-shouldered rise of the Little Belt Mountains—lit, like a memory of mountains, with alpenglow.

Above the escalators hung a mural of Lewis and Clark making their portage around the Great Falls of the Missouri. The men in the painting looked like Hulk Hogan as they strained to drag their pirogues up on to the prairie. The sky behind them suggested midsummer and high adventure.

Danny was watching the American Airlines 737 join an accordioned tunnel outside. She'd killed both drinks. I leaned into the bar behind her and looked out through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I touched her hair.

"I've been all over," Danny said. "But every time I see my ship come in I get real goosey."

"Me too," I said. I paid for the drinks, and we walked into the mezzanine toward the boarding gates. Outside, the last direct rays of winter light stoked the Little Belts like bedded coals.

She put her overnight bag on the conveyor at the security

check. I emptied my pockets and took off my belt buckle. Danny went through, no problem. The machine went crazy on me. One of the uniformed women behind the counter raised her hand.

"My brace," I said and pulled up my pants leg for her to see.

Danny held the tray with my things, looking at the iron on my leg. The security lady came around the counter with a hand-held detector and ran it all over me. It liked the brace. "Okay," she said. "Sorry."

"It's all right," I said. "I'm not boarding anyway."

Danny fingered my buckle. When she looked at me it was with the dryness I'd first noticed at the bar. "Most guys just want to take you to Heaven at the Paradise Inn," she said. "But you, we get to go to the airport first."

I stuffed my pockets with change and put my buckle back on.

"You know something?" she said. "The last time I made it to the airport with a big spender like you we went to Reno."

"How nice for you," I said and took her arm.

"What are you doing, man? I mean, I quit my job! I've got maybe three hundred dollars and no place to stay. It's January, Jack. Just let go, okay? I've had about enough for one shift."

I held her elbow until we got to Gate 4 where a line had formed at the podium for the flight to Denver. An attendant spoke into a red phone. He hung up and began taking tickets.

"Just great," she said. "Now we get to watch the nice people take off before you dump me here. This is getting creepy, you know?" She jerked her arm and I bore down. People leaving the plane glanced at us as they passed.

I took the packet of tickets from the cigar pocket in my coat and let go. I put some one hundred dollar bills inside the folder. "I've got to go home," I said. "The beach is no place for a gimp.

You can go for both of us."

"Oh, come on!" she said, her palms out, warding off the tickets.

"And get a good Irish burn. And watch the water come in. And drink some real pina coladas."

The line ahead had shortened to three people. "Cash my ticket to get home. Stay as long as you can. Here," I handed her the folder.

"You don't need to rescue me," she said, her eyes beginning to shine. "Do you think I need you to leave town?"

"All you need is a white robe and a Panama straw and some shades. This isn't that complicated, and you'll make me feel better. Go."

"Take a break," she said. "Give me a minute." She stepped into a ladies' room and I walked down to a window to look at the plane. My leg ached. I was beginning to feel the first waves of an afternoon hangover, and I realized that I was hungry. I drew a heart in the condensation on the glass and put a palm tree inside and shot an arrow through it. Cody would be passed out by now.

Danny took my arm. "Listen," she said. "What's going on?" Her hand was deeply freckled, and it was warm in the way of a warmth I needed. In the hard light of the concourse she looked about my age.

"I called home," I told her. "My wife came back. She's a drinker and she's drinking again."

"If you hadn't called, would we have gone?"

"Yes, we would have gone."

"It would be sweet," she said, "the frozen concoctions and all." Then she handed me the tickets and walked her dancer's walk back the way we'd come. At the security station she glanced

toward me, shook her head, and kept going.

I waited until the engines gained pitch and the tunnel withdrew from the plane before I walked back to the bar, where I bought a pack of Camel Filters. I asked for a cup of coffee and smoked the first cigarette and watched the plane taxi north, its wing lights bright in the growing dusk. The cigarette made me dizzy.

I sat down and thought about having something to eat before I headed back out to the new place that except for Cody would never be home. I could not go home. But that meadowed valley with its beaverslide stackers and hayrake teams was always waiting in me. I could close my eyes and smell it; I could turn my head, and it was there.

I smoked another cigarette and drank my coffee and watched as the plane left the earth, leaping south into a winter sky that was turning with slow certainty toward summer.