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from The City of Trees

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The storm bored in from the Northeast; across the Great Plains, off the Divide, down from the Three Medicine Wilderness as I crept along the Big Flat road in second gear climbing steadily along the river bluffs. It was New Year’s, mid-afternoon but it was already hard to see and the crunch of gravel underneath my tires was reassuring.

Lonnie Manxman met me by the mouth of his drive with a flashlight and we walked a couple hundred feet behind a hexagonal log home, decks on every side, light blazing from the windows so that it shone through the murk like some rustic space ship. We walked back to an older cottonwood, thick-trunked, brushy, and bowed away from the hillside from the years of wind. Lonnie was a Brit, small, crisp and urgent in his fur-trimmed parka and arctic Mickey Mouse boots. There are a lot of newcomers around town these days. Brits. Russians. Hmong and Tibetans. There’s a whole wave of people moving in, some from as far away as California. A lot of the locals are bothered by it, though personally, I don’t mind very much. Like the maples lining the city streets, I’m a transplant myself—an introduced species, if you like—and I figure so is most everyone when you get right down to it.

We stopped at the base of the tree and Lonnie pointed to a dark patch not quite halfway up it. “There he is!” he said, in a great booming voice that was more than a match for the storm. “That bit of fur? He was only twenty feet up at noon but I tried to fetch him off the ladder and the little bastard ran right out of my hands!”

I nodded, kicked at the snow drifted beneath the cottonwood. “They try to come down headfirst,” I said. “They get an eyeful and they go mental.”

“Well, what do you think?” said Lonnie.

“If we don’t get him down while it’s light he won’t last another night up there,” I told him. I tried to make the requisite customer eye-contact but it was hard in that gloom. When I peered
into the hood of his parka, all I could see was the flash of his teeth, an animal-like nose. “Now I can get him down,” I continued. “But you might not like the way I do it.”

Lonnie chuckled again. “Well, I don’t seem to have much choice now, do I, mate?”

“No,” I told him. “You really don’t.”

I zipped into a beat-up expedition parka I bought at a yard sale, buckled on my climbing irons and safety saddle, slipped a pair of one-fingered shooter’s mittens over my thermal gloves.

“What’s his name?” I said.

Lonnie grinned. “His name’s ‘Cornell.’”

I swam up through the thicket of suckers, into the murk of the storm. As I drew closer, I could hear the cat yowl above the wind.

“Here, Cornell,” I said in the rescue falsetto I’d adapted some years ago. “Hang in there, boy. I’m coming, Cornell. I’m coming.”

“Yowww!” said the cat.

In ten minutes I’d cut my way up through the brush to the cat’s roost. I had just got my hand around the trunk and clipped myself in when the cat lunged, ran right up my arm, leaped off my shoulder to the main trunk and scrambled another ten feet towards the top.

We climbed on into the storm. Each time I reached his perch, the animal panicked, climbed higher into the tree.

The bark had grown slick, the shooter’s mittens made me mistrust my grip. The wind teared my eyes, my nose ran like a faucet. My hands were losing sensation and I had to keep stopping to shake them out, and by the time I reached the top, the conditions were very near a white-out. I tried to look down but the wind had changed direction, now seemed to gust upwards, into my face. I spat, watched it rise for a second before it carried away horizontally.

By four o’clock, Cornell hunkered a few feet above me in the top wood. He was one of the most pitiful sights I’ve seen. He bunched himself up, clung to his little branch.

“Yow-ww!” said the cat. “Wowww!”

“Wowww;” I said, sadly. “Isn’t that the truth?” I squirmed
out within arm’s reach, fumbled with my safety line, released some slack, drew closer.

The little tiger peed in terror and the wind gust ed, pinned me flat against the bark. The snow was blinding.

“Oh God, Cornell,” I said, dropped my little rescue voice. “I can’t believe what you’ve got us into. It’s just a good thing we can’t see down.” I steadied myself, caught my breath, unzipped the knapsack that was clipped into my harness, then jammed my hands up under my armpits until the sensation came back.

“Yowww!” said the cat.

“Cornell,” I barked. “Get a grip on yourself!”

“Wowww!”

I was scaring him even worse, if that was possible and I lay on my stomach and called to him gently, “Come on, Cornell. Come on, boy!”

But he wouldn’t come to me, and that was that. And talking in that crazy voice made me feel I’d entered a kind of cartoon world.

I pulled out more slack. I was lying full length along the branch, my belly to my safety knot. “Come on, boy!” I called. “Come on boy! Come on! Argh! Jesus! Fuck!”

It was hard to move in all those layers and my parka kept snagging on the suckers, and I had one of those quick, telling visions of myself: I was a man approaching his middle years, sixty feet up a Montana cottonwood in a blizzard. It was New Year’s Day. I was talking to a cat. I thought: How do these things happen?

But I knew the answer to that. This is the way they happened: First, the pet owner calls the fire department. The fire department tells them that they haven’t done cat rescues since the days of Norman Rockwell and that the pet owner should call a tree service. The pet owner calls a big outfit with an aerial bucket. The big outfit tells them they can’t get their equipment back to a tree like this one. The pet owner finally calls me. I’m a tree climber. A throwback. I don’t have a bucket. And this time of year, generally speaking, I don’t have anything much better to do.

I wormed my way out another foot. Again the cat howled, backed away, but by now he was off the main branch and he was
clinging to twigs. It had finally happened, and we both knew it. He'd run out of tree.

I was breathless and the cold was starting to seep through my clothes. "OK," I gasped. "There's two ways we can do this. I can zip you up in this nice warm knapsack and you can ride down with me. Or you can take the short cut. Which one's it going to be?"

The cat flattened himself, tried to back up further but of course, he couldn't. He was shaking wildly. He looked across the little patch of storm that lay between us, his eyes round, bright and crazed, so desperate that for a moment, they stopped me cold, as if they reminded me of something. I thought, finally, that we were thinking exactly the same thing—that it was time to get on with it.

"Cornell, listen. Are you coming down with me?"
"Wowww!"
"You're sure?"
"Yowww!"

"OK," I said. "So be it." And I reached as far as I could, jiggled the branch he was clinging to and the little cat finally let go, frogged out like a skydiver, disappeared into the storm.

By the time I got home, the snow had let up but the wind still gusted hard enough to blow a flight of ravens out of my weeping birch. I killed the motor, sat in the truck for the very last of the light, watched the top whip back and forth, heard the deadwood rattle and I thought to myself that I really needed to get up there and clean it out, that a birch full of deadwood in my own back yard was plain bad advertising, though it was common knowledge the big weepers just didn't fare very well in Montana.

I let myself in the back door, found Chris reading on the couch in her new Christmas robe, her copy of The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind propped on her stomach while the dogs napped beside her. Every Christmas her mother gave her a brain-busting tome along those lines. The robe was beautiful, cardinal red, genuine silk. It was the kind of gift I couldn't afford and her mother had sent it along with the book, for all I know, to make that very point. I've got nothing against her, Chris's mom. And if she thinks I'm a back-country oaf who
spirited her daughter off to the hinterlands to keep her from a career in the law or whatever, well, that’s certainly her right.

“Tell me this again,” said Chris. “You got eighty dollars for throwing someone’s cat out of a tree?”

I paused. “I like to think that I helped him reach a decision.”

“He fell out of a tree and he was OK?”

“He fell into a snowdrift.”

“But you pushed him out?”

“Chris. I didn’t push him out.”

“So what did you do, exactly?”

“I twanged his branch.”

Chris tipped her head back and guffawed. “You what?”

“I twanged his branch. He wouldn’t let me grab him and another night up there would have killed him. Besides, they were feeding him smoked oysters off a spoon by the time I got down. There’s nothing in the world luckier than a lucky cat.”

“So how’d you know he’d be a lucky cat before you pushed him, I mean, ‘twanged his branch?’”

“I did a background check, OK?” I was getting exasperated. It was really hard to explain these things sometimes, if you hadn’t actually been there.

“All right,” she said. “You don’t have to get sarcastic.” Chris stretched, pointed her toes in her new rag wool hunting socks. The dogs yawned and stretched with her. The hunting socks were my present. It was quite a combination, those socks, that robe. As if Chris’s mom and I were having a kind of contest for her soul.

Chris gathered her taffy-colored hair in a twist, rolled her head languorously.

“God, Munday,” she murmured. “Isn’t it glorious not to have to go to work?”

“It sure is,” I told her, but I knew in a matter of weeks I would give quite a lot to have to go to work, that we had arrived at that point in the year when my business went into dormancy.

I read in Newsweek that I’m what is known as a “new entrepreneur.” The article was talking about a growing trend toward small, family-run businesses, and I guess that’s what I am. Although Chris has a full-time job of her own, she does do my
books. I run A.M. Tree Service from my house. I’ve got a little shop in the back, attached to the garage. I have a brush chipper, a one-ton Chevy dump, beefed up with helper springs. I have a 200 gallon sprayer unit and a pickup that I use for estimates, spraying or both. I buy good quality used equipment, pay cash for it and keep my overhead to a minimum. I’ve got a good reputation and get most of my jobs word-of-mouth.

I call my business “A.M. Tree Service,” because those are my initials, because I thought it lent the impression of early bird industriousness and because, for a while at least, it had set me up first in the Yellow Pages. That was before the arrival of AAA Tree Service. For a while, there was an Aardvark Tree and Landscape, too. But they didn’t last.

Anyway, my winters are long and dead and there are a couple of months when I will take whatever comes along, just to keep the bills paid. One winter it was hardwood floor installations. The past winter I’d been high man on the scaffolding at St. Olaf’s church, working for WaiPo McMahon, a Kung Fu Master and remodel carpenter who specializes in historic restorations. WaiPo was from Hawaii, came to Montana on a football scholarship and, like so many people, decided to stay. It was WaiPo’s contention that in a town like Nez Perce, you needed two or three lines of work to get by. I couldn’t agree with him more and along those lines, I was trying to get him to teach me how to marbleize.

I squatted by my fireplace, built a larchwood tepee, lit it, fed it quarter rounds until it blazed. Chris had dozed off, the two dogs woofed, paddled their feet in their dreams. I switched Chris’s reading lamp off and watched the fire-cast shadows swim along the living room walls.

We’d celebrated New Year’s at Rae Ann’s place, on the north side of the river. Rae Ann was the graphic artist at Bitterroot Ad, where Chris worked. I was ready to go home at 12:30 but Chris wanted to stay on to the ragged end. There was never a time when she hadn’t.

I watched the fire, watched Chris sleep. I was still restless, “squirrely” as Chris liked to put it. The holidays are difficult for me but more than anything, I dislike the dregs of them, the clutter and noise and left-over hype, and I find myself longing for that point, still a week away, when the evergreen carcasses are
dragged out to the alley, the ornaments and lights are stowed away and the new year stretches out before me, clean and fresh and unmarked.

I heard the relentless thump of bass drums as some major university marching band performed "Age of Aquarius" and I thought, Why is the TV on? and Why do bowl game bands always play that song? I snapped the set off, stepped out the back door in a down vest and high-tops just to feel the storm rush over me. The east wind carried upon it the phantom honk of my next door neighbor's tenor as he grappled with a song I recognized as "Never Can Say Goodbye." I laughed to myself and thought, My God. It's Oldies Day all over the planet.

Back in the house, I wandered to the kitchen, poked around the refrigerator. I could have used a can of smoked oysters myself. I was starved. Nobody'd shopped since Christmas and there wasn't a lot to choose from: there was fruitcake, but I was sick of fruitcake. There were nuts, but I was sick of nuts. There was Chris's cream cheese Confetti dip. Two foil-wrapped venison enchiladas from a couple weeks before. They smelled OK so I got out a spoon, opened the foil.

"This is truly disgusting," said Chris.

She startled me. "Mmph," I said. "I thought you were asleep."

"So here you are, face in the fridge, your butt sticking out. Wow." She shook her head and grinned. "I mean, where's the magic?"

She stood in her rag socks with her arms folded, that red robe tight across her chest. She managed to look both glamorous and down-home.

I took a drink from the milk carton to wash down the enchilada.

"Munday!" she said, and the grin disappeared.

"Chris! OK. Your timing is unfortunate. But look at it this way. This situation here, well, I see it as a privilege of my station."

"What station?"

"I thought you understood. I'm a world-famous rescuer of kitty cats."

"I'm still not sure I understand," she said, "how you can call that a rescue. But listen, before I forget, while you were out with
your cats, a man came by to see you."

I closed the refrigerator, wiped my mouth and said, "What man?"

She shrugged. "He was looking for a job."

"What kind of man would this be, coming by the house on New Year's, looking for a job?"

"A tree man." she said. "Who else?"

The dogs straggled in, milled around her feet, Niki the shepherd, Sky the blind spaniel.

"I guess it's a consensus," said Chris. "We're going to the park. Want to come along?"

I nodded, suited up again, and my wife, the dogs and I, walked out into the night.

The storm had settled back in. The snow whirled around the streetlights like a great cloud of insects. Our boots squeaked along the ice trails and the dogs flashed in and out of the murk, racing around the big bare trees. The temperature had dropped and it must have been sub-zero. I could tell by the way my mustache was icing. I'd forgotten my mittens and my hands had gone numb, dead white, the way they do from capillary damage—years of chainsaw use. I flexed them, stuck them under my armpits, and I thought: I'm thirty-seven years old. I don't smoke or drink but I've got the hands of an old man.

"He was an odd one, this guy," said Chris.

The snow whizzed by us. She was shouting above the wind but her voice still came out a murmur. I couldn't see much more than the shape of her, but every time we walked close to a streetlamp her violet parka lit up like a beacon. It was eerie, like talking to a will-o-wisp.

"So what's so odd about him?"

"You're going to laugh."

"Try me."

"OK. He kind of looked like the devil."

"Really?" I said. "With his bright red suit? His long pointy tail?"

"No," she said. "Come on. OK, maybe that's not quite right. Maybe not the devil. But there was something about him. His eyes?
His voice? I don't know. See? I told you it was odd. I can't even tell you why.

"The devil wants to come to work for me?"
"Now you're making fun."
"Does he climb?"
"Yes."
"Does he run a chainsaw?"
"Yes."
"Does he have a driver's license?"
She frowned. "He said he did."
"Wow, he's three out of three. I'd call him tonight, if I only had some work."
"He doesn't have a phone," she said.
"Oh, no. It's starting to go sour."
"He's got a room over in the Montaigne."
"Of course," I said. "Where else would he live?"

The Montaigne was a hotel on the river, built in the twenties. In the thirties, it became a rooming house for railroad workers, loggers, people on the move. It still housed a mix of bohemians, students, old men and renegades. Six out of seven of the last people who worked for me lived at the Montaigne, whatever that says about my business.

"What's his name?" I said.
"His name's Tom Sweeney."

Valentine's Day, the first thaw. The ice cracked and puddled, the western wind blew the sky open, rendering the snow back to dirty gray crystals.

I'd spent two weeks up a scaffold in the St. Olaf's nave working for WaiPo, scrubbing away at the candle smoke and incense soot that clung to a hundred-year-old mural of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Saturday morning I was on my back with a bucket of calcium carbonate while far below me, WaiPo and his step-daughter marbleized the columns—she was small,
wiry like Waipo, and she wore her hair in a braid past her waist—watched as the great doors swung open, wheezed shut as worshippers came and went as if the old church were breathing. I couldn’t tell whether it was the old church or whether there was something about the painting that was starting to get to me. Maybe it was the way the two of them stood there by the Tree of Knowledge, just waiting for something to happen.

Maybe it was their expression. They were supposed to look innocent. Instead they looked dumb: buck-naked, sweet and dumb as anything with their wistful little What, Me Worry? smiles.

All the paintings in St. Olaf’s were done by an old Jesuit named DeSousa. According to the story, when he wasn’t painting a mural, he was out chopping the wood, cooking the meals, saying the mass, conducting a thousand souls in and out of this world. I had to admit, the idea of staying that busy had a certain appeal. Maybe if you stayed that busy, that’s the way everyone began to look to you after a while—What, Me Worry? I don’t know. But I was relieved that Saturday afternoon when I got home to find my first tree call of the season.

It was Lonnie Manxman’s Aunt Edie, calling about a frost-split rowan, a short drive from my home near Bridger Park. From two blocks away I spotted it—bright, rawlooking, the two leaders peeled back like a banana, so their branch tips brushed the snow.

Edie Hendricks came to the door, a snowy-haired woman in a huge timber cruiser’s coat with a terrier at her heels. Even with the February thaw, I could hear the furnace throbbing in the basement, could feel the heat pumping out, the breath of the house with its odor of mothballs, sachets, something else I couldn’t identify. Geographies in the basement? A thousand dinners alone? It was the smell of an old person.

I’d hardly begun my sales pitch when she interrupted and said, “I don’t want to lose my old tree. My husband planted it when we moved here from Anaconda. Whatever it costs, well, you just go ahead and fix it.”

I tried to ignore the little bubble of glee that tickled up through my belly. “Whatever it costs?” I thought. Nobody ever said that! and I fairly skipped back to the truck to collect my cabling gear.

I like cable-and-bracing jobs. You can work them alone, there’s
no brush to drag and it's one of the few times in the tree business when what you're doing is so obvious that some self-appointed eco-cop doesn't come over and say, "Hey—why are you cutting that tree down?" About eighty percent of my business is pruning, and the sheer dimwittedness of the notion that cutting a tree down was the only thing I could possibly be doing brings me close to despair.

But then I caught myself. I was about to ruin a perfectly good morning, thinking about some of the things people said to me and about all the nifty responses I never had the presence of mind to come up with anyway. I yanked out the come-along, a couple sections of screw rod and the brace and bit and got to work.

After all, I thought, that kind of encounter was exactly the way I'd met my wife.

It was back in California, twelve years ago. I was standing on the top rung of an orchard ladder in San Carlos, super-gluing a plastic owl to a liquid amber crotch and I heard a woman say, "Hey, what's the big idea?"

I didn't turn around. I don't like to encourage these dialogues, but she asked me again and it became clear she meant to nag me about it. For a lark, I bounced the owl up and down, held him backwards over my shoulder like a hand puppet, made him talk in what seemed a reasonable facsimile of an owl voice: "Hello, Miss Lady. I'm the scary owl-boy."

The woman snickered. "That doesn't sound like an owl. That sounds more like Bullwinkle the moose."

"So sue me," I said in my owl voice. "But this nice man's put me here to scare away the flicker birds."

"The flickers?" she said. "Why? I thought they ate the bugs."

"They do. But they're pecking the bark right off this tree while they're at it."

"But isn't that part of a larger plan?"

It made me laugh, I don't know why. "If you say so," I said at last, and I gave up my little puppet show, turned around on my ladder and there was Chris, lanky and fair haired, shading her eyes
to look up at me. She appeared to be nearly as tall as I was, with a lovely, smooth, strong-looking jaw, a wide, friendly mouth.

This will probably sound odd, but all that day I had a feeling something extraordinary was about to happen, from the time I got up to the time I came into work. I can’t say exactly how it felt, except that I knew everything was about to change, and that any decisions I thought I might make had somehow already been made, and that they had been made a long time ago.

“You’re trying to tell me that silly-looking owl is going to scare away a woodpecker?”

“Not a woodpecker. A flicker.”

“OK, a flicker.” She smiled then, and for the first time I appreciated the seriousness of the moment. I knew exactly what would happen next, which would be that I would fall in love with this woman. I remember looking at the owl I was holding, at the eyes, which were yellow, shiny, big as silver dollars.

“Besides,” I said, “I don’t think he’s silly-looking. For a three-dollar owl, I think he’s quite terrifying.”

It was an extraordinary moment for me, because I had always been a bit shy around women. But there was something about Chris that made me bold, and almost before I knew what I was doing, I’d asked her to the motorcycle races at Laguna Seca that weekend.

It was an extraordinary moment for Chris, who’d grown up in Los Altos with her two sisters, her mother working full time and giving piano lessons out of the house, because she accepted. She was going to the cycle races with a man she’d barely met, a man who worked outdoors, who worked with his hands. Not just a man who worked with his hands, as her mother pointed out to her that evening, but a man who worked in the trees.

“What’s the problem with that?” Chris had asked her.

“Well. Nothing, really,” said her mother. “It’s just that it sounds so atavistic, dear.”

Atavistic. That’s a good one. I’m well aware of the names by which my fellow tradesmen and I are known: “skinners,” “trimmers,” “hackers.” Defacers of the flora, men whose vision of a well-pruned tree lies somewhere between a hat rack and a fire hydrant, whose notion of shade tree maintenance was to cut the sonofabitch right down. In short, the trade had an image
problem. It was hard to be in the same business with some of those gorillas and still profess to care how the trees look when you were done with them, to care about how they fared, to persevere and call yourself an arborist. An arborist. That's what I was. But the term wasn't even in the dictionary.

The door banged open, startling me. I heard the wheezing bark of the little terrier, heard Edie Hendricks pipe out, “You be careful up there, now, Mr. Munday. You make sure you don't fall.”

I released the come-along ratchet and pulled some slack off the spool. Don't fall, I thought. Don't fall indeed. It's plain bad form to fall to your death in front of the customer and you'd think anyone would know that. Yet people tell me that nearly every day of my life.

I hitched the two sides of the tree to the come-along, scrambled up the orchard ladder and began to ratchet in the slack. “Don't fall.” People tell that to me, but nobody ever tells that to Chris.

I'd never seen Grand Mal seizures before I met Chris and they frightened me badly. It was hard for me to accept the fact there really wasn't much for me to do except to help her ride it out. I went through a phase where I saw them coming all the time. Whenever she twitched, whenever she seemed forgetful, I tried to get her to lie down, tried to get her to re-medicate. I imagined dozens of scenarios during the day—what would I do if this happened, what would I do if that happened? Finally one night we were staying at a friend's cabin by Lake Tahoe. Chris wanted to go skinny dipping. I chose not to. Instead, I watched from the dock as she swam further and further into the lake and I thought God, if anything happened, I'd just never get out there in time. Then it struck me that it was one of those simple, lethal truths. That, finally, no matter what I thought, I couldn't be there every moment for Chris, and that it was unreasonable, maybe even perverse of me to think that I could. I understood that the risks she took were her own, and in a way, sacred to her. Exactly the way my own risks were. I knew all this intellectually. But on another level, I knew I had no choice but to try.

The Falling Sickness. I wondered if anybody still called it that, or if it was another one of those terms that had fallen into disre-
pute. Now, more than anything, I was curious about Chris’s disease. What was it like? Where did she go? Was it like a dream? Was it terrible, or was it incredible, beyond belief—a journey up some lost river? For a while, after Chris came to, I’d ask her where she’d been. But she never could remember.

I winched the back tree together, drilled out the base and bolted the split trunk together with screwrod, like you would a piece of furniture. I cut off the excess with a hack saw, peened down the screwrod ends, mitered out the nuts with a chisel so the bark would callus over, sprayed the metal parts with black tree paint. Then I stood in the top, spliced a length of 3/16ths cable into a pair of lag hooks. I cut out a piece of deadwood, released the come-along and went to the door to settle up.

“How does it look?” said Edie Hendricks.

She looked at me, not the rowan, and I hesitated. It seemed an odd question, and then I realized that beneath the heavy lenses, her eyes were milky, nearly sightless. There was a sudden rustling noise behind me and when I turned, the crown of the little tree was dark with waxwings, feasting on the winter-soured berries, perching on the eye-bolts, perching on my ladder rungs as they gobbled them down. Except for a flash of cable, the tree looked as it probably had for the past thirty years.

I shrugged. “It’s back. It’s open for business.”

“What’s that?”

“It looks like a million bucks,” I grinned.

“Oh, good!” she said. “Now. What do I owe you?”

I took off my gloves to tally her bill. What came next, well, I don’t know how these things happen. I was feeling good. This was my favorite part of the job—when I was satisfied, the customer was happy, everything was terrific. I don’t know quite how it happens except that I just want things to keep on going in that vein and not ugly them up with the introduction of money. In my mind I’d already spent the hundred fifty the job was certainly worth, so I was genuinely shocked when I heard himself tell her that it came to sixty-five dollars. The old woman beamed.

“T’m tickled to death,” she said. “I thought you’d charge me twice that much!”

Before I could change my mind, she’d already written the
check. She balked at the deluxe estate prune I tried to sell her on the rest of her trees and she turned down the dormant oil spray bid, but she finally bit on the deep-root fertilizing for later in the spring. I glanced quickly at the check to make sure it was signed, then slipped it in my back pocket. I walked past the tree, to the front gate. On my way out, I stooped to pat her dog. The animal wheezed, backed away, showed its teeth.

I drove straight to the bank and cashed the check, then drove slowly through the University district, one of my more productive neighborhoods. I cast a critical eye at my old work, a hopeful eye for the new: leaners, hangers, widowmakers, bastard traps, or what was referred to in a sales pitch as “life-threatening dead wood.”

I bought a quart of chocolate milk and drove along, drinking deeply from it while the familiar smell of crushed leaves, old sweat and chainsaw mix filled the cab. The weak winter sunlight smeared through the windshield. I was a man in my own truck, about my own business, on my own time. A whole new season lay before me and for just a moment, I was about as happy as I get.

I parked in front of Marvin’s Bakery, dashed across the slush to the Montaigne. It was three-story, red brick, forty-six rooms in all, on the left bank of the Nez Perce River. It was reasonably clean, reasonably cheap and remarkably scenic.

I stopped by Archie Dean’s office on the first floor and caught him at a bad moment.

“Fucking kids!” he said, “Can you believe it? They’re cooking fondue on a Coleman stove and they crank it up, set off the sprinkler system! Hosed down the whole building! I’m sitting here, eating my goddamned lunch and out of nowhere, it’s pissing all over me!”

I tried not to laugh, but it was hard. His hair was all wet, plastered over his forehead like a bad toupee. I knew Archie Dean when he still worked at the Husqvarna chainsaw shop over by the tracks. I must have been in there dozens of times over the years but I still wasn’t sure he knew who I was. I glanced down at the two or three stubs where his fingers used to be. It was a good
thing he got out of the saw business when he did. He was just about to run out of fingers.

"Know what you need Archie? Surveillance cameras in all the rooms. It’s the only way you’re going to keep on top of it."

Archie looked wistful. "Now there’s a thought," he said.

"I’m looking for a guy named Sweeney."

"Tall guy?"

"I guess so," I said. "All I know is, he’s supposed to look like the devil."

Archie packed his lip and guffawed. "You’re not takin’ any prizes yourself, Mister."

"I mean, he resembles the devil."

"Oh, I know who you mean: big tall red-head. Eats bird food. I went in there to check his radiator, there’s sunflower seeds everywhere. He’s 312. Upstairs, to the right. I haven’t seen him for weeks though."

I rapped on 312 and there was no answer. I rapped again and, just for the hell of it, I tried the door and it opened immediately. Archie must not have relocked it.

A strange thing happened then. There was a kind of popping noise in my ears and a pressure, like you get when you descend suddenly in an airplane. I checked the hall, saw it was clear and the next thing I knew, I was standing alone in this stranger’s room.

The radiator was shut down and my breath came out in plumes. To the north, there was a terrific view of the Nez Perce River and to the west you could see Trapper Peak, just this side of the Idaho border. But inside, the walls were close and stained and the room smelled of citrus and cheap roll-your-own tobacco. There was a steel cot, a mattress covered with a flannel-lined sleeping bag, the kind you used to take to camp with you when you were a kid. There was a collection of traveling souvenirs from the tree business: a larchwood crotch, smooth, gray, weathered as driftwood. There was a wren’s nest, sitting in a larger nest. There was a cherrywood burl that had been split on a table saw, oiled and polished so the grain stood out like flowing water and Archie was right—there were sunflower hulls everywhere. There were tins of boot grease, a chainsaw piston that served as an ashtray, a couple copies of Arbor Age magazine, a roll of climber’s sling. There were a few paperbacks—St. Exupery and
Peter Matthiessen. There was a well-worn snapshot tacked to the wall that got my attention—a young woman with big shoulders, a great mane of hair and a dazzling smile, holding twin toddlers in her round, strong arms. There was something familiar about her. I thought, for just a moment, she looked remarkably like Chris.

I listened to the knock and clang of the steam pipes. Somewhere down the hall an old man coughed. An osprey flew by the window at eye level, winging its way eastward, upriver toward the mountains. I watched the rafts of clouds move in and out of town, the light dimming, going bright, then dimming, as if there were someone outside playing with a switch. High on the side of Lookout Mountain a herd of animals cropped at the brush, but I couldn’t tell what they were.

It made me shudder. It was too lonely, and in a crazy way, too familiar. It reminded me of just how skinned-back your life could get, the room of this man I didn’t even know yet. To travel around like that, to live in something like a boy’s room with your little souvenirs and not much else. Maybe it reminded me of the places I’d lived when I was out drifting around myself.

I had just closed the door and locked it when a kid appeared in the hallway in robe and shower shoes, on his way down to the bathroom. He was carrying a loofa and a *Playboy* magazine and we exchanged greetings. I told him I was looking for Sweeney, that I wanted to talk to him, and the kid grinned and told me I might have to wait a while.

“Why’s that?” I said.

“Well,” he said. “For Christ’sake. The guy’s in Antarctica.”

I felt like driving so I headed out of town, to the east, along the Nez Perce River. I followed its bends upriver past the studmill, glanced at the fir deck glistening under the sprinklers. Every year it seemed a bit smaller and every year the log loads coming in looked a whole notch stringier, more pitiful. It had gotten to the point where they were cutting anything you could make a two-by-four out of. The mountainsides down the valley were a checkerboard of clearcuts. They’d taken all the big trees. Now they were going back for the smaller ones. I wondered what in the world they were thinking of. And then, out of nowhere, I thought Antarctica? What’s a treeman doing in Antarctica?
I was in my basement office, working on my first spring mailing when Chris walked in with a tray. The dogs snuffled in behind her and she said “Tea time, Munday.”

I liked it down in my office. Chris says I have a Bunker Mentality and I think she’s probably right. Four years ago I insulated the concrete walls with styrofoam sheets, paneled over that with tongue and groove cedar. I painted the walls white, put up the Bailey’s Woodsman’s Supply poster of my heroes, those two no-name California tree climbers, tied in a hundred and sixty feet up a giant coast redwood, chainbinders on the butt, spring boards at the kerf, blowing the top out with a two-man Stihl.

I put in some discount track-lighting, laid an earth-tone carpet remnant, and through the off-season I was down there most of the time, happy as a prairie dog. Sometimes I would stay up late, sleep on the day bed. I could hear the plumbing all over the house. I could hear the tick of the dogs’ toenails overhead and the soft footfalls of Chris as she passed from room to room. Sometimes when she went on a reading binge, I’d disappear early in the evening, and while she was plowing through Chekhov, Celine, whoever she was hot on that particular month, I’d hole up in my little room, watch TV until I hated myself.

I wished I was more like Chris—more of a reader. I used to be. But as it was now I spent more and more time with my business, more and more time outside, more and more time following the trees through the season and sometimes wondered about the way things had worked out.

Moving to Nez Perce, for example. We’d done it more as a lark. I don’t think Chris had planned that we’d stay here forever, but more and more it looked like we would. I hadn’t planned to stay in the tree business, either, but more and more that was just what I did. I stayed busy, Chris stayed busy, but I could never tell if she liked it or not.

Chris handed me a cup of cocoa and coffee, half and half, and sat down beside me.

I caught the smell of her—what was it? Cigarettes? Tatiana? Chris’s own candy-like smell? She lit a cigarette, put the match
out in her saucer. I hated to see her smoke, particularly when she smoked in my office and used anything handy as an ashtray. But I knew you had to pick your shots. I hadn’t mentioned her smoking in eleven years and daily I grew more certain I probably never would.

I rubbed her shoulders, told her that I’d stopped by the Montaigne looking for Sweeney.

“Can you believe it?” I said. “I mean, what the hell is a treeman doing in Antarctica?”

“He’s on the tower crew,” she said. “For the microwave circuit.”

“How did you know that?”

“He told me,” she said.

“When?”

“New Year’s Day,” she said. “Remember?”

I sipped at my mocha. “You didn’t tell me that,” I said.

“Sorry, Munday.” She smiled at me. “I could have sworn that I did.”

“Why is it that everyone knows all about this guy except me, his potential employer?”

She shrugged. “What can I say? You must be out of the loop. Did you go by there to give him a job?”

“I have to, now.” I said. “I can’t miss out on the only microwave tower-climbing St. Exupery-reading treeman in the west, can I?”

Chris grinned. “No,” she said. “I wouldn’t expect you could.”

I ordered us a pizza, went back to work. Chris went back upstairs and I could hear the noise of the shower running and after a while, I heard the doorbell chime. The dogs swarmed upstairs, barking while I looked for my checkbook and when I passed the bathroom, the shower was still on.

I opened the front door just as the pizza man was beginning to look anxious.

“I wasn’t sure I had the right address,” he said. He wore a yukon trooper’s hat in rabbit fur and his collar was up around his sideburns. It was after five and the sky was a smoky blue-black. A bright slip of moon rode off above the Bitterroots.

I wrote him a check, looked at the pizza box, suddenly doubt-
ful. It seemed it should be hotter. "Is this thing all the way frozen yet?" I asked him.

The pizza man grinned. "I ain't sayin' it ain't."

I shivered, took the pizza in, rapped on the bathroom door to tell Chris. There was no response.

I turned the handle. There's no lock on the bathroom door but it wouldn't open. I pushed again, but something on the other side was holding it. I pushed harder. In the widening slot of steam and light I could see the cloud of Chris's blond hair against the tile floor.

She was on her back, convulsing, and in the second that I stepped over her while I entered the bathroom, I had a moment of vertigo, a feeling that somehow the room had inverted itself. I dropped to my knees, caught her up in my arms, held her loosely while her body jerked and her breath came in ragged, whistling gasps. The Falling Sickness. I cradled her head, closed my eyes so I couldn't see her face, and I called out to her as though she were a hundred yards away. "I've got you, Chris!" I shouted. "Don't worry! I got you, honey. Hang on! Hang on! Hang on!"

The dogs sat in the hallway, solemn, attentive until gradually her breath slowed and she grew quiet. And when she'd been quiet a while I stood, dampened a hand towel, wiped her face and then carried her to bed.

She was still fully dressed so I took her blouse and jeans off, put the comforter over her, and as I did, she woke and her eyes flew open. "Oh God, she said, and she grabbed my hands, pressed them hard. "I love you honey. God, I really do, I love you—"

I held her to me, stroked her head and said, "I know that, Sparky. I know you do," and I did know that then, just as I knew that in an hour she would have no memory of any of it—the seizure, the fall or what she'd just said.