"Pragmatists" and other stories

Robert Stubblefield

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Pragmatists and Other Stories

by
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Other Stories
For My Parents: George and Cora Stubblefield

With Love and Gratitude
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Pragmatists

I don't pretend to understand the forces that push our lives in the directions they follow, but the summer I was twelve years old I saw enough to make me wonder at them. My mother moved us to eastern Oregon early that spring, to Court Rock and the farm she'd inherited from my grandparents. They'd sold a few of the parcels closest to town to a developer who put up tract houses. My mother swore never to sell another inch of land when she saw those houses.

"There's nothing here," my brother Wayne said as we drove into Court Rock.

"There's plenty here," my mother said, "and part of it is ours."

I tried to see the land as my mother described it, and to imagine her being a young girl in this place. The sloping hillsides were covered with juniper and brush, and layered by abrupt rimrocks. Looking at them rising up from the Two Cabin River left me with a weightless feeling, like the three of us would have a new chance here, and who we'd been no longer mattered.

Wayne was against the move. He wanted to be an architect, and planned on going to the University of Oregon when he graduated. He drew perfect, straight lines without a ruler, and his handwriting was the same way, all
precise angles and straight edges.

The farm was run down; the ground had lain fallow for over ten years. We didn't have money or equipment to tackle the forty acres in a big way, so my mother decided we'd reclaim it a piece at a time, in blocks small enough that hand labor could make a difference. Early in May, we planted an acre and a half of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers. We didn't get any frosts after the plants came up, so my mother said we were off to a good start. But the weeds were off to a better start. All those dormant seeds came to life and sprouted with water and cultivation.

My mother found work at the grocery store in town, so she gave Wayne and me the job of weeding. Wayne was to get the money from produce we sold for college. He didn't like the arrangement. Wayne was seventeen and wanted to be working on one of the big alfalfa farms on the river. It was a constant source of irritation between him and my mother.

She said the land was ours, and she wanted to work it rather than line someone else's pockets. "I've worked for other people long enough," she said. "Now we have this place and I want us to know what it's like to do for ourselves."

School ended the weekend before Memorial Day, and Wayne and I started weeding. We'd worked at it evenings after school but hadn't gained any. My mother made us breakfast and left for work at seven; then Wayne and I headed for the garden, or the fields, as my mother called it. At first it was hard to see where the weeds stopped and the plants started, but within two weeks Wayne and I had the rows hoed out, and started pulling the weeds closest to the plants. We worked every day until two o'clock. I enjoyed working out there
with Wayne, and if he didn't enjoy it, he at least accepted that it was going to be his summer job. But that all changed when Brady started coming around again.

Brady lived with us for most of the last two years we were in Springfield. He was a man my mother enjoyed being with and at times even loved, despite her best efforts. I was young, and I liked Brady; having him there was as easy for me as not. But Wayne was old enough that Brady's presence changed his role with our mother, and not in a way he liked.

Brady played the guitar and cards. He'd been injured in a logging accident up in Alaska years ago, and between his settlement and what he won at poker, he got by. He played country and folk music; a lot of Woody Guthrie tunes. He sang songs like "Tom Joad" and "This Land Is Your Land," with all the verses you never learn in school. Then he'd tell us about how Woody was a voice for the working man.

Things were always prickly between Brady and Wayne. The garden was the one issue they agreed on. As soon as Brady showed up, he said we should have planted just enough to feed ourselves. "If people in this country want farm fresh produce, they'll grow it," he said.

The bottom line was that Brady thought Mom should sell most of the farm and keep just the house and a few acres around it. One night when they were sitting out on the porch, I heard them from the bedroom window.

"When those zoning laws come in, you'll either have to sell all of it or nothing," Brady said.

"That's fine," my mother said. "I don't plan on selling any of it."

"There's no way a small farm can make money," he said. "Look down the river, all the places making a go of it are big outfits."
I heard the metal patio chair creak as Brady stood, then his boot heels thumped up and down the porch. “Dammit, Kay, I just want to see you and the boys have something.”

“What about your man Woody Guthrie?” my mother said. “Wasn’t he all for the small farmer?”

“Yeah, he was,” Brady said. “But remember ‘Roll on Columbia? Woody was working for the BPA when he wrote that. Who do you think dammed the river?”

“What the hell does that have to do with this?” my mother said.

“I’m just saying sometimes it pays to be a little pragmatic about the situation. A great song came out of doing what it takes to get by. Sometimes you do what you have to and look at the bigger picture.”

I heard my mother’s softer footsteps cross the porch and the screen door slammed.

As the weather turned hotter, Brady was gone more. He made trips to Bend, or Boise, and sometimes Portland. Usually he came home from these trips broke, but once in a while he returned flush with cash, and when he did, he was generous. That meant Black Hills Gold jewelry for my mother and fishing rods for Wayne and me. One time, Brady brought Wayne a copy of Architectural Digest. Wayne’s English teacher gave him her old copies, and he saved all of them.

“No more looking at them dog-eared old things, sport,” Brady said as he tossed the magazine to Wayne. “four bucks for a bunch of advertisements, but here you go.”

Later, while we were hoeing, Wayne told me about an adobe house in the
magazine. “The whole thing is basically made of dried mud,” he said.

“It'll fall apart when it rains,” I said.

“No, I don’t think so. This house is in New Mexico, but I bet it would work here, too. This is almost like desert.”

Wayne and I hoed up and down the rows and the dirt sifted into my tennis shoes and gritted between my toes. A fine film of dust covered us and ran in dirty, brown streaks from our sweat. I looked over where we’d weeded yesterday and saw damp spots where the sun drew water up from cut stems. One evening I'd brought my mother out here and shown her those spots.

“They're beautiful, Charlie,” she’d said, and hugged me tight. “Look at all that water those weeds suck up, and just think of all the nutrients. Now all that will go to the corn and potatoes. I think we're doing fine, Charlie.”

Walking down those rows with my mother, I thought we were doing fine, too. With the sun down and the soil still warm, the garden seemed like a different place. And I'd wished that Brady and Wayne were there to see it.

It was almost noon when Wayne and I heard a car come up the driveway. There were willows between us and the house, so we could see dust boiling up but couldn't see the car. “Maybe it's Brady,” I said. He'd been gone for almost a week.

“Didn’t sound like his pickup to me,” Wayne said, and kept on hoeing.

“Shouldn’t we go see?”

“If they want something they'll come out here or leave us a note. It's probably some salesman.”

The car didn't leave, and no one walked out to the garden. I chopped at weeds halfheartedly and kept looking toward the house, trying to see through
the willows. Finally Wayne quit hoeing and walked to the edge of the garden.

“Let’s go see who it is,” he said. “It’s lunchtime anyway.”

We walked toward the house, stomping our legs to shake off loose dirt. I realize now that Wayne probably knew a lot more about Brady than I did, so he might have had an idea that the car involved him in some way.

When we were through the willows and could see the yard, there was a man sitting in one of the chairs at the end of the porch. He held a straw hat in his hands and wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had on snakeskin cowboy boots and a big silver and turquoise belt buckle. “Hello boys,” he said as we crossed the yard. “Looks like you been rolling in the dirt.”

“No, we’ve been hoeing weeds,” I said.

“I can see that from those blister sticks you’re packing,” he said.

“What can we do for you?” Wayne said.

“A man in town told me I might find a friend of mine here. A guy by the name of Brady Wilson.”

“He’s not here,” Wayne said.

“Can you tell me when he might be back?”

“We don’t know when, or if he’s coming back,” Wayne said.

“I kind of thought you might say that,” the man said, picking up his straw hat and twirling it on his finger. “But I’ll tell you what, if you don’t mind, I might just sit here in the shade awhile and wait.”

I looked at the man sitting there, and that turquoise and silver reminded me of Wayne’s adobe house, and I wondered if this was a man who would live in a house like that.

“I told you we don’t know if he’s coming back,” Wayne said.

“And you told me you didn’t know when he was coming back,” the man cut
in. “Now, what if I took off, and not five minutes later old Brady drove up that road. Wouldn’t that be a stupid thing for me to do?”

Wayne sat down on the porch and I went over and leaned my hoe beside his, then sat down. The direct noonday sun beat down and bleached the dry yard of color. I could hear the sound of grasshoppers rattling their wings from the perimeter of the yard. When I walked to town with my mother and heard them in the bushes, I thought they were rattlesnakes. “Don’t worry,” she said.

“When you hear a rattler you’ll know it.” And she was right. Wayne and I were hiking on the back side of the place a few days later when a rattlesnake buzzed from under a rockjack. I didn’t have to wonder, I jumped straight up before I had a chance to register the sound. And I felt that way about this man in our yard. I knew the turquoise and silver on his belt buckle were real. By watching him and from the way Wayne acted, I knew he was genuine.

Wayne sat on the porch with his hands on his knees and seemed to be measuring something, calculating things I could only guess at.

“You fellas look hot and tired,” the man said. “Is there anything in the house we might drink while we wait?”

“There might be some lemonade,” Wayne said.

“Lemonade, lemonade,” the man said. “To hell with lemonade. A couple big boys like you coming in from the fields, I’d think you’d have a cold beer.”

“There isn’t any beer,” Wayne said.

“No beer in the house, huh? What’s Brady going to drink when he gets home?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Wayne said, standing up. “Why don’t you just leave. We told you we don’t know anything about Brady.”
“Sit down, you little shitheel,” the man snapped. “Now, you look here; Brady Wilson owes me five hundred and fifty dollars, and he’s damned sure going to cover it. You got that?”

“I got that, I got that all right,” Wayne said. “But that’s between you and Brady. Don’t bring us into it.”

“Well, you are into it. See that car out there?” the man said, pointing to a big silver car in the driveway. “That’s a Lincoln Continental, and I didn’t get it by letting assholes like Brady Wilson run back to hick towns and hide behind kids.”

“How did you get it?” I asked.

“Shut up, Charlie,” Wayne said.

“No, that’s a good question,” the man said. “Deserves an answer. I got that car by moving money around. Moving it from people too dumb to keep it to people that wanted it, needed it. Hell, money isn’t any good for some people, only causes them trouble. The sooner they’re rid of it the better. Now go into the house and get us some of that lemonade.”

I didn’t know which one of us he was talking to. I started to stand, but Wayne put his hand on my shoulder and stood up. The man watched him go into the house. I sat there on the porch and started wishing Brady would come. He could handle this, I thought, he got along with people.

Wayne pushed the screen door with his shoulder and walked out with a glass of lemonade in each hand. He gave me one, then took the other to the man.

“Thanks,” the man said. “We’ll get along okay, no reason not to. You just get ahold of Brady and tell him to come home and we’ll work this out.”

I took a sip of my lemonade. It was cold and tart. My mother had mixed it
before she left for work. Wayne went back in the house to get some lemonade for himself. I thought about asking the man to tell me about moving this money around, but I decided to wait until Wayne came back. I took another drink and watched the man over the rim of my glass. I heard the screen door fly open, and a look of surprise shadowed his face for an instant, then vanished. I looked up and saw Wayne pointing my grandfather's bolt-action Winchester .22 at the man's forehead.

The man took a drink of lemonade and crunched an ice cube with his teeth. "What in the hell do you think you're going to do with that?" he said through the ice.

"You finish that lemonade, then leave," Wayne said, holding the gun level.

I looked back and forth between the muzzle of the gun and the man's forehead, and I could see the exact spot where the bullet would enter. I'd watched Wayne shoot ground squirrels from fifty yards with that gun, and I knew he wouldn't miss.

The man set the glass between his legs and put his hands on the arms of the lawn chair. "I'll tell you something," he said. "If I was of a mind to, I'd walk over there and kick your ass, then take that gun for part of what Brady owes me."

"You'd never make it out of the chair," Wayne said.

The total lack of emotion in Wayne's voice and the way he held that Winchester convinced me that the man wouldn't make it out of the chair. Whether it was something that had been there all along, or had just sprung up, I knew Wayne was someone real, too. I could tell from the man's expression that he'd decided Wayne might actually shoot him. He didn't look worried or
nervous, though. He put the sweaty glass to his temple and held it there, and now he was doing the measuring. I knew he was checking the distance between him and Wayne, and him and me. I could feel the man's eyes on me, calculating actions and reactions, and I moved back toward Wayne.

That was when I knew this was something I was going to see concluded. I knew that either the man was going to leave, or Wayne was going to shoot him. I felt almost relieved. Everything had seemed open-ended since we'd come to Court Rock. Brady came and went, my mother worked in the store and wanted to be farming, and Wayne put in his time before he left for college. But I knew there wasn't going to be any gray area about this. It was something that was going to be settled.

The man swallowed the last of his lemonade. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'm standing up, and I'm leaving, for now."

"If you have a gun in your car, don't try it," Wayne said. "If you don't get in and turn that thing right around, I'll start shooting."

The man opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't. Then he stood up and walked slowly to his car. When he reached it, he pulled up the door handle and watched us. Wayne kept the .22 pointed at his head, but I could no longer determine the exact spot where the bullet would hit.

The man smiled and opened the door. He climbed in, started the car, and backed up. When he turned around the wheels spun, and dust and gravel rooster-tailed into the air. I saw the car disappear into dust, and only then, when it was completely gone, did Wayne lower the gun.

"He's not coming back," I said.

"I don't think so," Wayne said.
“He didn’t bluff us, did he, Wayne?” I said. “Wait until we tell Brady how you backed him down.”

“Brady’s an asshole,” Wayne said. “Don’t you tell him anything.”

Brady came back about a week later, but only long enough to pick up his things. He’d heard what happened and said he sure hadn’t meant to bring any trouble on us. Looking back now, I believe he was sincere. Other things changed, too, but not in ways sudden or tangible. My mother resigned herself to a long stint at the grocery store, and Wayne quit drawing building plans and became sullen. He put his *Architectural Digests* in a box and never looked at them. My mother said it was his way of distancing himself so it would be easier to leave, but I knew it ran deeper.

Wayne quit talking about the University of Oregon and its School of Architecture altogether. Two weeks after Labor Day he enlisted in the navy. He wrote me letters for the first few years. The last one was from Norfolk, Virginia. It was written in a flowing cursive that I couldn’t connect to Wayne. He said he liked the navy and the sense of control in his life.

For a long time I thought about Brady and I thought about Wayne, but never together or at the same time. And then one day I was thinking about Wayne moving all over the country to different naval bases, and I remembered Brady traveling through the West with his guitar and pickup. That was when I decided that Wayne and Brady were pragmatists in the same way. I realized that neither of them wanted responsibility for my mother and me, and neither of them was interested in the commitment to a person or a place to the point of taking whatever came with it.

Brady had been that way for as long as I’d known him. As for Wayne, I’m not sure. I wondered if maybe that day on the porch had just overwhelmed him.
If maybe he'd been forced to face down his whole life at once, and he'd had to turn away.

I stayed in Court Rock, and I'm not saying that was wrong or right. I'm thirty-five years old now and still live in that farmhouse with my mother. I planted our farmland into alfalfa and drive a school bus route for a steady income. Sometimes on January mornings when I'm warming up that yellow bus, and watching the exhaust float up into the frozen dawn, I feel pragmatic myself. I used to think about leaving every year. But when I'm out in the field during the summer, and I watch a thunderstorm build over those high, basalt rimrocks, and see the rain coming down in streaks, I know I'll never leave. The wind sweeps down, and brings with it the smell of rain on the dry soil, mixed with pungent sage and juniper, and I take the air in gulps.

The music I listen to is still that spare, open sound of men and guitars. When I play a Woody Guthrie or Dylan album, I picture all that distance in our lives, and how it's up to each of us to fill it the best way we can.
Hunting Rights

In the fall of 1975 I was fifteen years old and lived with my mother and father in a one-story house on a ranch just outside of Hamilton, Oregon. A stockbroker from Seattle owned the ranch as a tax writeoff, but my father managed and ran it to the best of his abilities while saving for a place of our own.

Deer season opened on a Wednesday, and I was taking opening day off from school to hunt with my Uncle Alec. My father was putting up the tail end of a third crop of alfalfa, and leaving hay in the field to go deer hunting was not a thing he would do. That April, he and my mother had borrowed ten-thousand dollars from Alec. Years later, when I saw my father rarely, and thought it possible that part of his life didn't mean much to him anymore, I asked him about it. “Don’t think that didn’t change some things,” he said.

Alec spent summers logging in Alaska, and winters on paving jobs in Arizona. Tuesday afternoon when I walked home from school, a new, black Chevy 4x4 pickup sat in our driveway.

The tailgate was down and my mother sat between Alec and my father. The three of them drank beer from cans. I crossed the gravel driveway and stuck
my hand toward Alec. “Good to see you, Rick,” he said.

Shaking hands was new to me then, and shaking hands with Alec, a man who had spent the summer in an Alaskan logging camp, made me feel part of something bigger than my own life.

“Let me show you my new rifle,” Alec said. He swung into the bed of the pickup and unlocked the metal toolbox behind the cab, then pulled a gun case from the box and unzipped it. “Here it is,” he said. “I just picked it up in Seattle yesterday. Ruger 25.06 semi-auto. Shoots fast and flat.”

The Ruger was light compared to my Winchester 30.06. The wood on the stock shone, and looked liquid enough to flow around my hands as I held it. I pulled the rifle to my shoulder and pointed toward a small hill across the road.

“That isn’t loaded is it?” my mother said.

“No,” Alec said. “That scope’s a 3x9. Turn it up if you want.”

“You have it sighted in?” my father said.

“Doesn’t need it,” Alec said. “They bore-sighted it for me at the store.”

“Bore-sighting just puts you in the ballpark.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll put enough lead in the air to knock something down.”

My father took a long drink from his beer. “That’s about all an automatic is good for, putting lead in the air.”

I handed the rifle to Alec and he wedged it in the rear-window rack of his pickup.

“I’m going in to finish dinner,” my mother said. She stepped off the tailgate and started toward the house. Alec and my father followed.

“You need to get some wood before you come in,” my father said to me. My father’s discipline rode hard on me, and though our relationship was a good one, there were ways of life appearing more attractive to me than his.
The woodshed was cool and dusty. I put a piece of dry tamarack on the chopping block and split stove-size chunks. I packed enough in one armful to last two fires and dumped it into the woodbox on the front porch, then opened the door into the dim house. It was the time of day when sunlight has passed, but nobody thinks of turning lights on. Alec sat on the sofa. My father was in the bentwood rocker he used when his back bothered him. They discussed where Alec and I should hunt the next day.

I walked to the kitchen and helped my mother set the table. She moved quickly and hummed to herself. Alec was her brother and the only immediate family she had left. It was the first night my father had come in from the hayfields before dark, and I knew she liked having them in the next room. She had saved the last package of frozen venison from last year for tonight. “Go tell them everything is ready,” she said, but they heard and were already on their way, carrying their cans of beer.

“Either finish that beer or pour it in glasses,” my mother said. “I don’t want cans all over the table.”

“I’ll do both,” my father said. He raised the can to his lips and tipped it enough to drain it, then set it on the counter and took three glasses from the cupboard and beers from the refrigerator.

“I don’t want another one,” my mother said. My father put one of the beers back.

“Decide yet where we’ll go?” I asked Alec.

“Your dad thinks Headboard Springs Plateau, so I guess we will.”

“I just don’t think there’s many deer up Skull Canyon,” my father said while pouring the beer. “I was up there last week checking the cattle, and only saw a
few does.”

“He wants us out of there until he gets that hay up,” Alec said.

“It’d suit me fine if you tromped around Skull Canyon until the weekend,”
my father said.

The food had been passed and we started eating. “This venison sure tastes
good, Beth,” Alec said. “We had beef sometimes in camp this summer, but it
didn’t taste anything like this.”

“Most people cut venison steaks too thick,” my mother said. “How was the
food up there?”

“Good, for the most part. Funny though, things like salmon and crab, that
we’d give anything for here in Eastern Oregon, you get tired of.” Alec put down
his fork and reached for the plate of corn. “After two months I’d have traded a
whole salmon for an ear of this.”

My father said he could finish the haying by Friday if the weather held. “I’ve
begged rain forever, but now I need just three more dry days.”

“Shit, you’re basically working for yourself anyway,” Alec said. “Go hunting
and put that hay up after the weekend.”

“Leave hay in the field this time of year and it might end up rotting there,”
my father said. He didn’t look up from his plate. “You should have shot that
rifle.”

I heard my mother’s feet move under the table, and my father looked ready
to say more, but didn’t. I considered it frustration at not being able to hunt with
us on opening day. I had heard him say it wasn’t right to open the season on a
Wednesday instead of the weekend.

After dinner, I helped my mother clear the table and wash dishes. My father
and Alec went into the living room. I joined them after finishing the dishes. I
could tell they hadn’t spoken much since leaving the table.

“Don’t let me keep you up, Carl,” Alec said. “I may run into town and see if there’s anyone around I know.”

“Don’t be surprised if there isn’t,” my father said. “Things change faster than you’d think.” He stood, yawned, and left the room.

“Are you a freshman or sophomore this year, Rick?” Alec said.

“Sophomore,” I said.

“What you going to do when you get out of school?”

“I don’t know. Mom and Dad want me to go to college, but I’m not sure yet.”

“College is okay, but there are a hell of a lot of ways to make money once you’re out of here. I didn’t go to school, and I make more than I can spend.” My mother came and sat on the sofa between Alec and me. “You and Carl should come down to Arizona for a visit this winter,” he said to her. “I’d take a long weekend and we’d drive up to Lake Mead or something. Maybe rent a houseboat.”

“I’d never get him away from the feeding and calving,” my mother said.

“Mind if I smoke?” Alec said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. An ashtray sat on the table at the end of the sofa, but I couldn’t remember when anyone had last smoked in our house.

“I don’t care,” my mother said.

“Want one?”

“No, I quit a long time ago,” she said. “You knew that.”

My mother watched the smoke rise from Alec’s cigarette. I had difficulty imagining my mother smoking, and it didn’t seem like something she’d ever done. It struck me as odd she had known Alec longer than me, longer than she’d
known my father. “You’d better go do your homework, Rick,” she said. “If you’re missing school tomorrow, you can’t get too far behind.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving in a few minutes anyway,” Alec said. “We’ll have plenty of time to jaw tomorrow while we skin those bucks.”

“What time should we leave?” I said.

“Doesn’t matter to me. But we might as well leave early or your old man will be on us. What about six?”

“That’s fine,” I said. My father would have us out by four-thirty if he was going, but I didn’t say anything to Alec. I walked to my bedroom thinking about how my father said most deer are killed in the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset, how the bucks move toward cover earlier in the morning than does and come out to feed later in the evening. Alec and I had buck tags, and half an hour could make all the difference.

I went into my room and tried to read my history book, but couldn’t find my way onto the page. After about fifteen minutes Alec’s pickup pulled from the driveway. I heard my mother’s footsteps come down the hall, pause at my door, then continue to the bedroom she shared with my father.

My alarm rang at five. After a few minutes, I got up and put on the clothes I had laid out the night before: a red Portland Trailblazers t-shirt, a red chamois shirt, and Levi’s. My lace-up hunting boots sat by the door with my knife in one and ammunition in the other.

My father sat at the kitchen table with his coffee cup in front of him when I walked in. “There’s more coffee if you want some,” he said. “I’m going out to finish baling. If Alec isn’t up by six, I’d go to school.”
"He'll be up," I said, pouring myself coffee.

"It'd surprise me. He didn't get in until about two-thirty."

"Maybe I should wake him."

"Wouldn't have much if you did. Let him sleep until he's ready to get up on his own." My father took his jacket off the rack behind the kitchen door and put it on. "Good luck Rick," he said. "There's always the weekend." He went out the door and crossed the backyard toward the fields.

It was already time we should have been driving up to Headboard Springs Plateau if we were going to make the base by dawn. I walked outside and heard my father start the tractor. The close-set headlights came on and begin to move. The steady noise of the baler and the shudder it gave as each bale dropped were rhythmic, and I could feel the tractor like I was in the cab with, or even instead of, my father.

There were no clouds in the sky, but two jet trails had crossed and spread in the southwest. The sun gave them a pinkish glow, but hadn't lifted over the mountains to hit the valley yet. I went into the house and lay on the sofa.

"Jesus Christ, I'm sorry," I heard Alec say, and realized I'd been asleep. His voice came from the kitchen. I heard my mother's voice too, but couldn't make out what she said.

Alec came into the living room. I kept my eyes closed.

"I'm sorry Rick, I overslept," he said. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Dad said it would be better to let you sleep until you woke up on your own."

"You let me do that and it'd be noon. I guess I was still tired from the drive down. Played cards too long last night."

"I made a fresh pot of coffee," my mother said from the kitchen.

I followed Alec and we sat at the table with my mother. Out the window, the
sun was up full, but hadn't evaporated the dew yet.

"We're late, but I haven't seen the deer yet that carried an alarm clock," Alec said. "Somebody should have got me up." My mother drank from her cup and nobody spoke.

Alec gulped his coffee and stood. "Give me five minutes and we'll be on the road," he said as he left the kitchen.

"Don't be too hard on him about this," my mother said. "Alec doesn't get back often, and he ran into some people he knew in town."

"I know," I said. I took my folding knife from my pocket and tried to shave hair off my arm. The blade scraped off a few hairs along with flakes of dead skin. "It's opening day, that's all. He could have gone into town tonight instead."

Alec came back ready to leave. My mother took her cup to the sink and rinsed it, then followed us to the front door. "Be careful," she said as we went out.

We climbed into the truck and Alec started it and turned onto the county road. "How did you do playing cards?" I said.

"Bought a few hands. Didn't really win any."

Alec followed the gravel two-lane for several miles, then turned onto the dirt and rock road leading up to Headboard Springs Plateau. Summer thunderstorms had washed ruts a foot deep into both tracks of the road, and Alec shifted the truck to four-wheel-drive. The truck swayed from side to side and I held my rifle upright with one hand and squeezed the armrest with the other. "Why doesn't your dad blade this road out?" Alec said.

"The owner doesn't want people traveling it."

Rocks kicked against the undercarriage of the truck as we climbed the last
steep pitch. The road leveled and we came to a barbed-wire gate locked with a chain and padlock around the gatepost. “Hope you’ve got the key,” Alec said as he stopped the pickup.

“Yeah, Dad gave it to me last night.” I climbed out and opened the gate. It was already hot. Dust hung in the air, tracing our route up the road. Alec drove through the gate and I got back in the truck. There was a small hill between us and the field at the bottom of the plateau.

“How do you propose we go about this?” Alec said. I surprised myself by detailing the same plan my father had dictated to me the previous two seasons. Skirt the south end of the plateau, then one of us work our way through the rims to the top--the other stop above the second rim up. Man on top get about a two-hundred yard head start and stay ahead. Low man walk right out on the edge of the rim so he can look over the country below, particularly the draw with the spring in it.

“That sounds okay to me,” Alec said. “Can we drive up to the field, or should we walk from here?”

“I suppose we can drive to the field at least.”

Crested wheatgrass covered the field, and deer grazed there at night before moving up the plateau to bed during the day.

The truck growled across a dry wash lined with sand and rounded boulders, then climbed onto the field. The road skirted the edge of the field, and my eyes fell to where the junipers began and the slope started.

For a moment, I was unable to register the gray movement at the perimeter of the field. It was not a place where deer should have been at that time of day. Five mule deer angled away from us. They held their heads up,
moving almost reluctantly, watching the truck like it was unreal, like it would disappear at any second and they could go back to browsing.

Alec saw the movement, but I felt if I didn’t watch them, the deer would stride out and bound into the trees, where the odds would be different, more as I expected.

Alec stomped the accelerator, and for an instant I thought he was going to try to make the end of the field and cut the deer off, which I knew was impossible. Just as quickly, he hit the brakes and was out the door and around in front of the pickup with his rifle.

A four-point buck led the group. While he lowered his body and tensed to begin running full out, in that pause, we started shooting. The four-point buckled, then I turned my gun on a smaller buck behind him. Just as I pulled the trigger, something struck my left cheekbone. I lowered my rifle and put my hand against my cheek and over my eye.

The smaller buck was down, but Alec still fired. Three does ran toward the junipers. One of them stumbled, then veered from the others. Carrying a front leg, she turned and doubled back toward the draw containing the spring. I had time to shoot again before she disappeared around the hill, but didn’t. After the doe was gone, I looked down and saw it was one of Alec’s spent cartridges that had hit my face. His rifle had ejected it out the side directly toward where I sat.

“Holy shit, can you believe this?” Alec said, and started to where the fallen deer lay. I stood and followed. The four-point was dead, but the smaller forked-horn banged its antlers against the ground, then was motionless.

Alec and I approached the larger buck and I saw a blood spot above the shoulder, up near the backbone, and another midway up the hindquarters. “We both got it,” Alec said. “It’s a nice one. Hope it was you that shot it through the
hams."

I had aimed just above and behind the shoulder, and was certain I had led
the deer enough to hit it in the front, but I didn't say anything to Alec. I walked
past the forked-horn to where the doe had faltered. Splatters of blood stained
the brown rocks a dark, wet color. Down the hill from me, Alec spread the four-point's hind legs and made the incision to begin field dressing it. I followed the
doe's tracks and saw blood brushed against the bleached needlegrass where she
turned.

Alec's dressing the four-point meant he was claiming it as his to tag. "Come
hold these legs for me," he said, "then I'll give you a hand with yours."

A man alone could field dress and load both deer in half an hour, and the
blood trail left by the doe made me sure where my responsibilities lay. "If you
can handle them, I'll follow this trail out," I said.

"Forget that," Alec said. "Let's get these bucks gutted and back to the
place."

Alec braced the buck's legs apart with his upper arms and continued to
open the deer. "Why did you keep shooting?" I asked. My cheek stung, and I
smelled gunpowder and brass from the empty shell casings mixed with blood.

Alec looked up at me, and I believe we both realized this was not going to be
simple. "Look," he said, "that's a goddamned doe trail. You were shooting too. I
don't even think we hit it."

Alec was right. After my first shot at the larger buck, I wasn't sure how
many times I'd fired. There were two dead deer to be taken care of, and at least
one wounded deer to either deal with or not. And for reasons at that time I
comprehended only dimly, I chose to deal with it.
I went to the trail and followed it along the margin of the field, picking up blood about every ten feet. "Come back here and help me with these deer," Alec said. I was almost to the point where the trail turned into the canyon, and I continued following it.

"Get back here," Alec said. I didn't look back, but I felt the skin on my neck tense where it was exposed above the collar.

"Come back here you little fucker," Alec said. "Someday your cherry will fall out and you'll understand you're not right about everything."

Hurrying around the break of the hill, I lost the deer's tracks for a moment, but the bad leg caused it to disturb the ground more than normal and it was easy to pick up again. Instead of turning downhill as I expected, the wounded doe graded upward around the plateau. There was a game trail below the rim where the bottom hunter would have walked, and the doe hit it. The terrain became rockier as I climbed, the trail covered with scree and loose pebbles. It seemed impossible for the wounded deer to continue climbing, and only the spots of blood convinced me I was still on her trail. I kept looking down the hill, expecting the doe to jump from the brush somewhere between the bottom of the canyon and me. Feeling my knife in my pocket, I wondered what would happen when I found the doe. I pictured myself killing her with one shot to the head, dressing her out and dragging her down the hill to the field.

The sky was clear, but it was the washed out, hazy clear of fall. A summer's worth of smoke from forest and range fires blended the blue toward white.

The rimrock I was under had a gap, and in front of me the game trail climbed to the top of the plateau. The ground was dry and hard, and the trail went around the rim and joined another from the opposite direction.
Juniper trees grew thick and low to the ground on top of the plateau. Up there my chances of finding the deer would be slim. And what if I did? The doe had graded uphill for several miles and quit bleeding.

No matter how carefully I watched, I knew sound would be my first indicator of the deer. The blood trail had stopped, and the tracks I saw were scrambled and meaningless. They could be twenty minutes old, or two weeks old. It seemed that everything I had done, or ever would do, involved tracking that deer, and that my life up to that point wasn't real, or was perhaps that of someone I had known rather than my own.

A deer sprang from its bed about twenty yards to my left, but it was into the trees before I could get more than a glimpse. I ran in the direction of the deer and came to the edge of the plateau sooner than I expected. I heard a clatter below me, and saw the deer picking its way through broken chunks of basalt. I raised my rifle and watched the deer through the scope. As it carefully stepped through the rocks, it was impossible to tell if it limped. I couldn't see any blood on its hair. I sat and put my left elbow on my knee for a rest, continuing to watch the doe. I could shoot from where I sat and walk off the plateau convincing myself it was the same animal Alec had wounded.

Before I decided, the deer reached the end of the rocks and bounded along the trail in steady thumps. I walked the the edge of the plateau to the gap where the game trail came up. I'd covered most of the ground on top, and didn't know where else to look. I decided to go back to where we had shot and then consider what to do. About halfway down, I cut off the trail to the wash at the bottom of the canyon.

Nearing the bottom of the wash where it fanned into the field, I heard a
hum, which grew into a sound I recognized as that of my father's truck. I stepped out into the open and saw the truck stop at the locked gate. My father was alone. He had left the haying to come looking for me. Vague, fluid doubts about what I had done set hard and brittle. Leaving my kill to be tended by someone else, I pursued a wounded animal which had vanished. I thought of the blood-trail as my only hard evidence if my father believed Alec, without considering what would already be lost if proof was demanded on my part.

Anger was a given, either at Alec or myself or both. I quickened my pace toward the gate.

My father saw me approaching and stepped from the cab. He walked to the wire gate and I passed my gun over to him before stepping through it. As he reached for the gun, I saw the knuckles on his right hand were scraped and swollen. "Ready to go home?" he said.

"There was a wounded doe," I said. "I tracked her, but the tracks disappeared into all the others. She quit bleeding—tough tracking on this dry ground." I took a plastic jug from the floorboard of the truck and gulped cold water until my chest ached.

I told my father the most honest account of what had happened I was able. I didn't put myself in the right, and admitted shooting after seeing the four-point fall. I told him about tracking the deer and losing the blood trail underneath the rim. He didn't speak until we turned into the driveway at our house.

My father stopped the truck and shut off the ignition. He put his chin in his hand and rested his elbow against the door. Neither of us made a move to get out. I could tell he was searching for something to say that would be of comfort
or use to me. Finally he said, “That deer will probably be okay. The wound
sealed off, she quit bleeding. Pulling uphill like that, she might not be hit bad.”

He took his hand down and looked across the hayfields toward town. “You’ve
done what you can,” he said, turning to me. “That deer may die, and there’s
nothing good can come of it. But I think you did what you could.”

We climbed out of the truck and went into the house. My mother met us at
the door and hugged me until her small breasts pressed against me and I felt
the muscles and tendons in her arms go taut. She stepped away and looked at
my father. “Alec skinned the deer and went into town,” she said. “They’re
hanging in the woodshed if you want to check.”

“I’m sure they’re okay,” my father said. But he didn’t look sure of anything.
He looked wooden, ashamed, and confused. He walked through the house and
out the back door toward the fields.

“Go shower that dust and sweat off,” my mother said. “Then we’ll have
something to eat.”

My mother came to meet me the next afternoon as I walked up our
driveway from the school bus stop. The weather had changed overnight, and it
was cloudy with a sharp wind blowing up dust. “Your dad will finish the haying
this afternoon,” she said. “Looks like he’ll beat the storm.”

When we reached the house, my mother put her hand on the doorhandle and
stopped. “Alec is leaving tomorrow,” she said. “He’s at the Sky-Vu Motel, and
he wants you and me to come in for dinner tonight. I’d never tell you you had to
go, Rick. But I am asking you.”

Driving to the motel, my mother looked across at me and said, “Can you
imagine it, Rick, me being a girl and riding between them in an old pickup your
father had. We were all the best of friends.”

“I can imagine it.” And I could.

Alec took us to the nicer of the two cafes in Hamilton. He kept insisting I
order a steak, but I had my usual hamburger. I tried not to stare at the
swollen, purplish bruise around his eye.

After we ate, Alec drove us back to the motel. He was in room number six.
The blinds were pulled, and the room was small and dark even after he turned
the light on. There was a bed, a television, and a small Formica-covered table
with two chairs. My mother and Alec sat on the chairs and I sat on the end of
the bed.

There was a bottle of rum on the table and Alec asked my mother if she
wanted a drink. When she said yes, he gave me a dollar in change and sent me
to the machine across the parking area for two Cokes. I brought them back
and Alec poured first rum, then Coke into clear plastic cups for my mother and
himself.

Alec handed me one of the cans still half-full of cola, then hesitated for a
moment. During the past year, people had begun telling me I looked like my
father, and that is what I thought of while Alec watched me. “I’m sorry about
yesterday,” he said. “I don’t want to leave with that between us.” He stood and
put his hand to me and I shook it.

“I’m going to stay here awhile,” my mother said. “You can walk on home if
you like.”

When I left the Sky-Vu Motel it was storming on the mountains
surrounding town. A steel-gray mist hid the tops, and I wondered how low the
snow would drop during the night, and if it would come down enough to cover the
doe’s trail.

When I walked through the front door of our house I could smell potatoes
and onions cooking. My father stood at the stove stirring them and frying
bacon in another skillet. “Did you get the hay in?” I said.

“It’s all in the stack. Do you want some of this?”

“No thanks. I ate in town.”

“There’s plenty,” my father said as he scooped his plate full. He crossed the
room and sat at the table. “Alec could have come here tonight, Rick. I wouldn’t
have stopped him.”

I took a plate from the cupboard and walked to the stove. “I know,” I said. “I
will have some of these potatoes.”

“Your mother loves Alec. She’s doing what she has to to live with herself.
And I’m doing what I have to. I hope you understand.”

As I walked toward the table, the food on my father’s plate steamed. He
held a fork in his right hand, then put it down. “That ten-thousand is gone, and
your uncle’s a bastard,” he said. “What am I supposed to do about either one?”

The mid-70’s were the last time a practical dreamer like my father could
have held any hope of buying his own ranch with wages, and it was only that
possibility keeping us in Hamilton. What had seemed my entire life was
actually rare and fleeting. The only power my father held over Alec was
forgiveness, and was perhaps the first power he had felt in a long while. For my
father, it was like found money, like soft dollar bills he clenched in the pocket of
a laundered overcoat.
The next year the ranch sold and my father's work added up to very little for our family. The price of the hunting rights alone was out of the reach of men like my father. But sitting there eating those potatoes and onions, I felt in a big, open, beautiful place most would consider nowhere, we were people of consequence, and our actions held value.
Reta worked at the bed & breakfast her parents owned, and I found work baling hay on a dry land farm a few miles out of town. We'd moved to Deer Point immediately after graduating from Portland State in June.

I worked in the darkness of early morning to retain what little moisture there was in the hay, then quit by mid-morning as the sun evaporated the last of the dew from the fluid windrows I was turning into cubes. I was just home, eating a late breakfast of Cheerios, toast, and iced-tea, when Ellen drove up. She let us spend the summer in what she called the 'horse pasture house' in exchange for us changing a few irrigation pipe once a day.

Ellen came by often to check on a gelding named Lynx she kept in the pasture. I surprised myself by looking forward to her visits. Ellen loved Reta from enough distance that she wasn't forced to pass judgement on me. I didn't realize the extent to which Reta's family felt I'd lucked into our marriage until moving to Deer Point. I held the same belief, but couldn't help resenting their solid affirmation.

Lynx trotted to meet Ellen as she stepped from the truck. The horse slowed to a walk as he approached Ellen, then sniffed at her neck and nuzzled against
her shoulder. Ellen had spent years as a trick rider following the rodeo circuit with her saddle bronc riding husband Frank. Frank had died two years ago at the age of eighty-five.

Ellen put her arm around Lynx’s neck and stroked her hand along his long jaw. “Sorry I didn’t bring you a nibble of grain,” Ellen said.

“Come on in, Ellen,” I said, opening the screen door. Ellen patted Lynx, then started toward the house. The horse didn’t follow, but watched with deep, liquid eyes as Ellen stepped onto the porch and into the house while I held the door.

I pulled out one of the wooden, straight-backed chairs for Ellen, then went to the refrigerator and got the pitcher of iced-tea. I’d been drinking from one of the Tupperware tumblers Reta and I normally used, but I took two glasses from the cupboard, filled them, and set them on the table. Melting ice cracked in the glasses.

“That sound always reminds me of my ears popping, doesn’t it you?” Ellen said.

“I never noticed before. I suppose so.”

Makes me think of traveling.” Ellen pushed a few wisps of thin, white hair back under the blue bandana she wore. “You think you might stay in Deer Point over the winter?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m still hoping to get a teaching job.” I’d been applying for jobs teaching high school history and coaching baseball all over Oregon and Washington.

“It’s early yet. I just want you to know you can stay in the house as long as you want. There’s a little work around here in the winter. People need wood cut, somebody needs help feeding their cattle and calving out.” Ellen placed her hands, palms down, on the table in front of her. “Look at that,” she said, my
skin is paper thin.

From the window, I could see Lynx standing in the yard. During our first few weeks in the house, I would wake in the night feeling something near. I'd prop myself on my elbows and see the horse outside our bedroom window. Usually I saw only his motionless, dark outline, but if the moon was up full, I could look too far into those eyes and feel the fragile assurances I held during the day slip.

"How would you like to go swimming with me this afternoon, Martin?" Ellen said.

She had talked about swimming before. When she mentioned it around Reta's parents, they ignored it like it was one of those ideas which pass over. I wished Reta was there. I didn't want to be in either the position of taking Ellen swimming, or trying to talk her out of it. "I don't know," I said. "I might get called to work later on."

"They won't have you bale any hay this afternoon," Ellen said. "Too hot and dry. Why don't we walk out through the pasture and go swimming on that gravel beach. It's a good spot. I'd like to go before the summer is too far gone. The water cools down once the days get shorter."

Ellen said it like a challenge, like if I didn't agree to go swimming with her it might prove something she'd long suspected regarding me.

"Okay," I said. "Why don't you come on out later this afternoon after it warms up." I hoped Reta would be back before Ellen returned.

"It's plenty warm right now," Ellen said. "My bathing suit is in a duffle bag on the pickup seat. Would you mind getting it for me?"

Ellen was right about the heat. It came on me sudden, not in the steady way it would if I'd been outside all morning. The duffel bag was heavier than I
expected, and I caught myself wondering exactly what Ellen's suit would look like. I handed her the bag and she went into the bathroom to change while I carried the tea glasses to the sink and rinsed them.

Ellen stepped from the bathroom barefoot and wearing a powder blue robe. The robe was what had made the bag heavy. "You know what I forgot?" she said. "Shoes. Imagine that. I wonder if Reta has any I could borrow. I'd wear my boots, but that river gravel is hard enough for me to walk on as is."

I went to the bedroom and found some white canvas slip-ons of Reta's under the bed. "They're a little big," Ellen said when she tried them on, "but they'll do."

I wrote a note telling Reta I had taken Ellen swimming and left it on the table. I thought I should write more, but couldn't think of anything with Ellen watching me. We left the house and crossed the dry, tan needlegrass at the head of the pasture. Toward the river the grass shaded to green and the ground became spongy under our feet. Ellen walked faster than I expected. A gravel dike about four feet high paralleled the river. I stepped up, then put my hand back for Ellen. She placed her hand in mine and allowed me to pull her up.

The water was too shallow for swimming on the side next to the dike. A crescent-shaped gravel bar sat about two-thirds of the way across, with the main channel running on the other side of it. I sat on the dike to take my shoes off.

"Will Reta mind me wading in these shoes?" Ellen asked.

"It won't hurt them," I said. I stood and locked arms with her, and we stepped off the dike into the river. The rounded gravel was difficult to walk on with bare feet, and we moved carefully toward the gravel bar. The shallow water held little current, and was lukewarm around my feet and ankles. The
main channel squeezed through rapids upstream, then broadened and smoothed.

"Have you and Reta ever swam here?" Ellen said, as she untied the robe and slipped it from her shoulders.

"No. We haven't had much time."

"You should take time."

I tired not to stare, but watching Ellen was so much easier than not, and seemed the most natural thing to me. Her swimming suit was a one-piece black that fit perfectly. Her skin was shockingly white, with the exception of her hands, face, and neck. Her legs were thin and frail, but her arms lean and supple. The muscles had shrunk from her skin, but her arms and legs were the long, lithe limbs of an athlete. I imagined her controlling a galloping horse with those arms, and no longer held any doubts about her swimming. She was beautiful in that unanticipated way commanding total attention.

Ellen waded into the water to her knees, then quickly disappeared to her armpits. She stretched her arms up and cut a vee in the water, and for one breathless moment was completely submerged.

Ellen surfaced ten feet downstream, taking slow, smooth strokes the way confident swimmers do. She turned and floated on her back, then rolled and swam against the current, gaining on it almost imperceptibly.

I sat on the rocks with my feet in the water until Ellen swam over and began wading toward me. She emerged from the water, walking more cautiously the closer in she came. And I thought of how gracefully Ellen had swum, and for an instant wished for her to stay in the water for no other reason than I wanted to watch her. "I should have brought you a towel," I said.

"That's fine. I'll just use my robe." Ellen sat and wrapped the robe around
her shoulders, then shifted her weight and crowded out a comfortable spot in
the gravel. "Let's visit awhile, then maybe I'll go back in the water before we
leave."

"Fine with me," I said. I picked up a flat rock and skipped it across the
water.

"Five skips. Pretty good for sitting down."

"Sometimes it's easier that way. I guess you're even with the surface of the
water."

Ellen smoother her hair back. "This makes me happy today," she said.
"Reminds me of Frank. We performed in rodeos from Madison Square Garden
to the Cow Palace in Frisco, but my favorites were always shows here in the
Northwest."

I found another flat rock, but rubbed it between my thumb and fingers
instead of throwing it.

"Driving up the Columbia after the Fort Dalles rodeo, dropping over Lolo
down onto the Clearwater after the Missoula show. We'd find a river like this
along in the evening, let the horses out of the trailer, and swim. That's what I
remember best. No, feel. I remember it all, but those are the times I still feel."

The sun was bright and steady on our faces, and the river swelled then
receded, lapping at our ankles more like the sea than a stream.

"You know, I still set Frank's place at the dinner table. That bothers some
people. 'You've got to get over it' they say. But why would I want to? I'm an old
woman. Why would I want to get over the best of my life?"

"Do you want to go back in?" I said.

"I don't think so. I'll be sore enough tomorrow as it is, but it was worth it."
Ellen stood, took my arm, and we waded back toward the dike. Standing on top of the dike, she turned back toward the river. “Listen,” she said, “it’ll never stop.

“I don’t talk about them as much, but the days after we quit rodeoing were good, too,” Ellen said as we crossed the pasture. “We took over my father’s hardware store and ran it for thirty years. That’s what bought this place.”

Reta was home, and waved to us from the front porch of the house as we approached.

“I remember visiting some friends from the rodeo days in Las Vegas after we sold the store,” Ellen said. “They took us up to Boulder City to see Hoover Dam like it was some big treat.

“The dam and all that stagnant water made me sad in a way only Frank understood. He pointed down at the whitewater below the wall and said they could choke the Colorado, but couldn’t kill it. he said the dam would fill with silt and wouldn’t be anything more than a big waterfall. Our friends looked at him like he was crazy, but I still think about that whenever I see a river.”

“How was the swim?” Reta said as we neared the porch.

“Almost as fine as I remember,” Ellen said. “I hope I didn’t ruin your shoes.”

“They’re okay. Needed washing anyway.” After Ellen was in the bathroom changing, Reta said, “How did she do?”

“Fine. She did fine.”

Ellen emerged from the bathroom carrying the duffel bag under her arm and with her hair tied back under the bandana. “Thank you, Martin,” she said, and kissed my lightly on the cheek.

“Thank you, Ellen.” I reached for her tentatively, and she put her arms
around me in a hug that surprised me with its strength.

Reta and I skipped dinner, along with the usual conversation regarding the applications we both had out. We stuck a bottle of wine we had been saving into the rolls of a sleeping bag and crawled through the barbed-wire fence above the house, then climbed the quarter mile to the top of the benchland overlooking the pasture. We kicked out the rocks to clear an area for the bag. “Look how these rocks are rounded,” I said. “They’ve been in a stream, probably the Big Lost.”

Reta opened the wine with the corkscrew on her Swiss Army Knife. Somewhere in the seam between twilight and darkness, stars began appearing. We found Sagittarius in the southern sky, then began searching for the Northern Cross. We each thought we had it picked out, and argued back and forth. Then Reta spotted it directly overhead, and it was obvious, so distinct we felt foolish for missing it, but only when we looked at it indirectly, seeming to dim when we focused on it. And that’s how my life felt to me; Reta and I spending our energy and vision staring down the future, paying interest on trouble that was perhaps only borrowed, remaining blind to the spots of grace passing in the unexpected, neglected margins of our lives. Reta turned over and lay on her stomach, and I put my arms under my head, watching satellites pulse across the sky. Down and to my right the scattered lights of Deer Point straddled the Big Lost. Above, the Northern Cross shone cold and resolute. I turned and rubbed the small of Reta’s back, and felt the soft, downy, invisible hairs rise beneath my hand, and for the first time in a long while, where I was at seemed more immediate and apparent than where I had been or was headed.
Finding Smitty at the moment management called from Vancouver and
told him to take on an assistant was what Helen called serendipitous, a term
she’d begun applying to our lives since deciding to leave Pasco. I knew we
couldn’t afford Sherwood Townehomes as soon as I saw the cars underneath
the carports and all that white lattice on the faux-Victorian townhouses. And
Smitty realized it as soon as he saw us.

Helen had a job clerking in a bank, and I was back in college on a low-
interest loan and a belief computer science would take me somewhere other
than where I’d been.

Management left the arrangements to Smitty, with the understanding he
pay fifty-percent of what he hired an assistant for out of his own pocket.
Smitty told us what the two-bedroom units rented for, then walked over to the
keyrack and took off a key. “Don’t let price scare you off,” he said. “Let’s go
have a look see. We might work something out.”

I don’t know what Smitty thought, maybe only if he was going to be stuck
with a resident assistant manager, I was easier to take than the majority of
tenants. He looked at my hands while we talked, and it wasn’t until later I
realized he was examining the calluses I'd built up from four years pushing handtrucks at the fertilizer plant outside Pasco.

The townhouse was brand new. It had never been occupied, and that was some kind of attraction to Helen after the places we'd lived in. The second floor had a balcony off the bedroom out toward East Portland and Mount Hood. We were across Macadam from the Willamette River, and although you couldn't see it, you could look at trees on the other side and feel all that water rubbing by.

The apartment had a washer and dryer in it. Helen and I looked at each other like we could calculate how much staying out of the laundromat would be worth from across the room. There was a hot tub and fitness room inside the office building, part of the “amenities” Smitty would later insist I stress while showing units to people standing with their hands in their pockets.

“You can have it for half rent,” Smitty said. “Help me out whenever I need you and stay out of the way the rest of the time.” He walked to the window and looked toward the parking lot. “Just let me tell you one thing—if I tell you to do something and it doesn’t get done, the shit lands on me. Remember, shit runs downhill.”

Even half-rent was on the high side of what Helen and I had budgeted, but we couldn't imagine anything better. A week later we hauled what we owned down the Columbia Gorge in two borrowed pickup trucks.

Helen was handing a wicker chair out of one of the pickups when Smitty walked up. “What’s the matter, you too cheap to rent a U-Haul?” he said to me as he took the chair from Helen.

“Take a week or so to get settled, them come by the office,” Smitty said
after we'd unloaded.

On the fourth day, I went to see Smitty. "Don't have anything for you to do," he said. "But I suppose I might as well show you around." He took me to the back of the complex to a row of garages tenants could rent for an extra fifty dollars a month. We walked down the row and Smitty unlocked the door of the last one. "This is my toolshed."

Inside, tools hung from a pegboard with their outlines traced with a black felt marker. A John Deere riding lawn mower sat along the opposite wall. "I've got to get some use on these things," Smitty said. "Everything is too goddamn new around here."

I walked to the lawn tractor and ran my fingers along the shiny, green hood.

"I do all the mowing during the day when people are gone," Smitty said. "You're at school then." He kicked the rear tire of the lawn mower. "With winter coming on, I'll use you to help me de-ice the walks when it freezes. Hope you don't mind getting up early."

"Doesn't bother me," I said, walking around the garage looking at the tools. They were on the cheap and light side, things you'd buy to outfit yourself without spending much money.

"I had night patrol in Chicago for over twenty years," Smitty said. "Four in the afternoon until two in the morning. Having trouble getting out here as early as I should."

"Patrol?" I said.

"I was a security guard back in Chicago. Moved out here to semi-retire and be close to my kids. I bragged so much about the time I spent in the Northwest when I was in the service, all of them took and moved out here as soon as they could."
And Smitty looked like I thought a retired security guard would. He was medium height with thin legs and a thick torso, and big, heavy hands. His iron-grey hair was cropped close, with what was long enough to comb pushed straight back. He looked like a man you would not at all mind having in charge of day-to-day affairs around an apartment complex.

School came to me slowly. I poured hours into each assignment, making certain it was my best work before I turned it in. I was meticulous, but Helen said a little insecurity around the edges wasn't such a bad thing.

Smitty didn't ask me to do much, and I began to worry he didn't think the deal was working. I was relieved when he knocked on the door early one morning and asked me to clean off the sidewalks that afternoon when I returned from school. I changed clothes and walked to the garage as soon as I got home. Smitty had the door up and a gas powered leaf blower sat on a piece of plywood supported by two sawhorses in front of the garage. "Ever run one of these before?" Smitty said as I approached.

"No."

"Me neither, but it says your supposed to wear those," Smitty said, pointing to a pair of goggles and ear protectors lying beside the blower. "Maybe we'll just use a broom. Seems like if people wanted that kind of noise they'd move farther out into the suburbs. All anybody uses anymore is power tools. Makes them all soft and deaf. Come on in the garage. I want to show you something."

I followed Smitty through the door, and he pulled it down behind us. "Notice anything different?" he said.

I tried to adjust my eyes to the yellow half-light cast by the single, bare bulb
hanging from the ceiling. "Give me a minute," I said.

"Don't have a minute to give; I'm thirsty." Smitty squeezed between the lawn tractor and the two x four studs along the wall and opened the door of a small refrigerator. "Want a Schlitz? You got two choices--Schlitz or nothing."

Smitty handed me the beer over the hood of the John Deere. "Figured we might as well make this a real workroom," he said. "I bought that fridge for my youngest daughter when she came out here to school. She dropped out after a year, so this may have been the best part of the investment."

We opened our cans and took a long drink. "This is just a start on what I want to do with this place," Smitty said. "I'll wire up some fluorescent tubes so we can at least have light. I'd like to leave the door up more, but I figure we might as well have a little mystery about how much work it takes to run this place, huh? Tenants walk by and see us drinking beer, they might figure anyone could do it, right?"

Sherwood Townehomes were new, but people moved through constantly. Part of my job was cleaning the apartments after one tenant moved out and before another moved in. Helen and I would wash the walls and appliances with an all-purpose cleaner cut with water on the walls and used full-strength in the kitchen and bathroom.

Young couples just transferred to Portland, recently divorced people trying to start a life with the least amount of complication possible, retirees out of big family homes and not yet into anything smaller--these were the people moving through Sherwood Townehomes. Helen had talked with a woman two doors down from us a few times. Her husband was an executive for an electronics
firm, and she was beginning the application process for law school. The woman wanted it understood they were passing through, that living here was a matter of convenience, and in no way a life they would choose under different circumstances. They were looking for a house to buy, and were the type of people who owned homes, not the kind who moved from one apartment to another. A month later, we were cleaning their place.

Smitty hired professionals to clean the carpets, but the rest could be a handful too, and this apartment was no different. The mirrors and windows were smudged with greasy fingerprints, and the stove and countertop were covered with crumbs and smears, but the oven didn't show any sign of use. The kitchen was left in a condition suggesting the man and woman had made a futile, flailing effort to feed themselves before abandoning the appliances for a diet of fast food and take out.

Once Helen called me from the bedroom upstairs where I was washing down the walls and pointed at the open cupboard door. On the inside of the white door someone had written 'Help Me” in what we reasoned could only be tomato paste. I tried to connect the red block letters to the middle-aged woman who had left the apartment earlier in the week bound for Fresno. “Why do people leave something like this for someone else to clean up?” Helen said. “What can we do? What are we supposed to think?”

Smitty told me that he had dreamed of opening a tavern in Northern Michigan when he retired. He said his wife Gloria was against the idea, insisting that in bars and taverns you saw people at their worst more often than at their best, and that it would eventually sour you. While I didn’t exactly agree with Gloria, I could see her point. Cleaning those apartments, I felt Helen and I were seeing people at their worst, or at least a time in their lives they would
later try to forget. It made us think, but not in the way Gloria would have predicted.

After wiping out those tomato-paste letters we went back to our own apartment and showered the cleaner smells off, then made love still damp from showering with the window open and cool air drifting in and replacing the stale smoke of the woman’s apartment with the smell of the river and each other.

I liked the water, the way the big rivers and storms moved through Portland, making it seem things were always flushing out, and you didn’t have to tire of anything, because it was all moving past and gathering somewhere else. It was a place where if you could hold on, endure, there was always the possibility of a freshet washing your trouble on through.

Early one Saturday morning Smitty telephoned and told me not to make any plans for the evening, that he’d be by later with more details. I told Helen what he’d said. “Maybe they plan on having us over for a drink or something,” she said. “Look, I don’t mind it this one time, but I don’t want them taking up every weekend.”

“I know,” I said. “But we are getting half-rent. It kind of goes with the territory that we get on with them.”

I had my books out on the table, but Helen walked to the supermarket across the highway to get the Oregonian, and I knew I’d spend the morning reading it rather than studying.

We ate breakfast and I made another pot of coffee. I thought of the smell of brewing coffee drifting outside, and how it would be a smell that would make people think of home, or another place they loved, and leave them wondering at where they were now, and where they were headed.
Later that afternoon Smitty came by the apartment. He had on a pair of pressed chinos and a chambray shirt. His hair was slicked straight back. Smitty said always wearing work clothes made him look like he was ready for whatever came up. "I may be new to this business," he said, "but I'm picking up the little things pretty damn fast." He said tenants felt comfortable around somebody relaxed, but not exactly at leisure.

Smitty asked me to go to the workroom with him. He unlocked the small, walk-through door. "We're going to keep the garage door down from now on," he said. "Only open it when you have to."

Smitty closed the door and we stood in darkness, except for a thin ribbon of light leaking along the bottom of the big door. I felt Smitty put his hand on my shoulder, then with the other hand he flipped a switch and lights snapped on all over the garage. Two fluorescent tubes hung suspended from the rafters by wire, two lamps came on toward the back. And on a table between the lamps sat a portable television. The lawn tractor had been moved to near the door, and between it and the T.V. there was a floral-print loveseat. "Are we going to watch the World Series tonight, or what?" Smitty said.

He opened the refrigerator and pulled out two cans of Schlitz. The refrigerator was filled with 16 once cans.

"My son-in-law's buddy works for the cable company," Smitty said. "He brought him over to hook it up this afternoon. I ran out the co-ax yesterday. We're in business."

Smitty turned the T.V. on. "No premium channels, but basic cable and all the sports we can watch. The little bastards wanted to hook it up at night, but I said 'Hell no, just put on your uniform and act like you know what you're doing, no one's going to give you any shit.'"
I'd seen places like Smitty's workroom before; outbuildings and shops with woodstoves where someone goes to keep to themselves and let their guard down.

Smitty and I finished our beers and he told me to meet him back at the garage at six. “Bring Helen if she wants to come,” he said. “Gloria isn't much interested in the game, so I doubt she'll come.”

I told Helen about Smitty's work on the garage and relayed his invitation to her. “No thanks,” she said. “It sounds like the next step will be to put pin-up calendars on the wall.”

I told her it wasn't like that, just a place where Smitty could go watch T.V. and relax. “That's fine,” she said. “Still sounds like a clubhouse to me.”

When I walked into the garage, Smitty was sitting on the loveseat with his feet propped up on two automobile tires. “Get yourself a beer,” he said.

I worked my way to the corner and took a beer from the refrigerator, then held one up for him. “Sure, I got some left, but save us a trip,” he said.

It was the A's and Dodgers in the Series. The game went back and forth. Smitty and I drank. The A's looked good, but never pulled it together. Finally, Kirk Gibson limped off the bench and ended the game with a pinch-hit homer.

While the Dodgers mobbed Gibson and the A's walked off scuffing dirt with their spikes, Smitty got up and snapped the T.V. off. “Remember when he took Gossage out of the park in the '84 series,” he said.

“Yeah. That was something.”

“Damn right it was something,” Smitty said. “It was something more than this. I don’t like post-game shows. I’d rather read about it in tomorrow’s paper.”
Gibson should still be with the Tigers.” He looked at his feet up on the tires. “L.A. stole every team they have, and now they steal the players.”

The ballgame was over, I could have left. But there are moments when you can’t walk out on another person, even when it is what you most want to do. During those moments we hear what we would rather not. That is how I felt, not so much that Smitty was going to reveal anything that would startle or disappoint me, but only that he was going to tell me things which would mingle his life with mine in a way I would rather avoid.

“There’s plenty of life in the middle of the country, but everyone wants to run to the coasts,” Smitty said. “Sometimes I think I followed a kid’s dream coming out here.”

Smitty was calm, but he spoke with an intensity I recognized as the same that compelled one man to grab another by the collar and pull him close when he sensed he was being patronized or ignored.

“I saw this place through a kid’s eyes on weekend passes from Fort Lewis,” Smitty said. “And I took that back with me and talked it up to the girls when they came along. They ran out here and saw it the same way.” He spread his fingers and rubbed his hand from his forehead over his scalp to the back of his neck. “I don’t know why I’m saying this, David, except that I want someone to know this isn’t what I thought it would be. For some reason that seems important.”

“That’s fine, Smitty,” I said, because I could think of nothing else and was somehow relieved.

“It’s not fine,” he said. “I sold us out. Took the twenty-five year plan and thought we could have the best of both ways. Gloria hadn’t worked for over
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twenty years. There’s a hell of a lot of bookwork with this job. She’s a little rusty at it, right.”

“I’m sure it’ll work out.”

Smitty drained his beer and dropped the can onto the cement floor, where it landed, bounced, then rolled to a stop. “Our dream was to retire and get a cabin on a lake up in Northern Michigan or Wisconsin. I should have stayed with it. The kids visited once or twice a year with money I sent and they pretended not to need. Everybody put up a good face. But we’re here now, David. And the youngest, she’s not making it. Pregnant and with a husband who’s never got over being cut from the college football team.”

Smitty stood, then bent over and started picking up beer cans. “My oldest is married to a game warden and lives over in the Coast Range. I planned on going over there fishing all the time.” He carried a handful of cans over and dropped them in a box beside the door. “I’ve gone twice since I’ve been here. I’m not complaining. I’m just telling you that if I was wishing it over this isn’t how I’d see myself, right.”

“That’s probably true of everyone,” I said.

“Maybe it is,” Smitty said. “You’ve got a young man’s problems, I know. I just want you to know that this is a place where you can talk and it doesn’t affect what goes on outside a damn bit.”

I didn’t realize how much I’d drunk until I was outside in the night air. Helen was sitting in bed reading when I got back to the apartment. I took off my clothes and sat on the edge of the bed with my back to her reading light. “I love you,” I said.

“I know.”

“I just want you to know that the person you understand me to be is who I
Helen put down her magazine and turned the light out, then put her arms around my neck. “Why?” she said.

“If anyone ever told you something about me, and you knew better, or knew I wanted it different, you’d be right. Not that anybody would. You know who I want to be, and that’s important.”

Helen pulled me down onto the bed. “I want to think we’ll always believe at least that about each other.”

Early in December Portland had a run of cold, snowy weather with temperatures in the single digits at night and the teens during the day. Every morning Smitty and I shoveled the sidewalks, then spread de-icer. The tenants complained about the weather and said how rare it was for Portland. For Smitty, it was a gift. Every morning working with him, or seeing him pass the window wearing his parka and gloves, I thought how this weather suited him.

Smitty had flyers printed instructing tenants how to prevent their water pipes from freezing. He went to each apartment handing them out and telling people to leave the doors open under their sinks and let water drip from the taps. He enjoyed watching the plumbers’ vans turning into the complex across the streets. He had a load of straw delivered which we spread around the bases of the rhododendrons and young trees. “They need protection,” he said. “This instant landscaping doesn’t make for hearty plants. They should plant them and let them grow instead of just digging a hole and dropping them in.”

Smitty and I were stringing Christmas lights around the rental office when a car with Washington plates drove up. Smitty asked me to finish, then walked
into the office with the man and woman who climbed from the car.

I was putting the ladder back in the garage when Smitty walked in.

“Management says we have too many vacancies,” he said. “They raise the rent by ten-percent, then bitch about the vacancies. Say I’ve got to market the places more aggressively. What the hell do they expect?” He walked over and sat on the lawn tractor. “People look at it—they like it or they don’t—they can afford it or they can’t. What can I do about it?”

It was Smitty and Gloria’s problems, it was borrowing money for school, maybe it was everything, but I began to realize what a tenuous position Helen and I were in. We were living beyond our means, and like preliminary waves before an earthquake, I sensed events beginning which I held no control over, events which could leave it impossible to salvage our life as we knew it. Helen and I had promised our moves would be forward, and I wanted us to keep that promise. We’d made lateral moves, maybe a series of them, but something about Sherwood Townehomes left me in fear of our lives bursting at the seams.

I wasn’t naive enough to believe age guaranteed us our wishes, but maybe just enough to think a man like Smitty deserved to at least harbor a measure of desire for what he possessed, or forget what he didn’t.

Management bore down, focusing on everything Smitty didn’t accomplish rather than what he did. Sherwood didn’t suffer a single broken pipe, and no tenants slipped on icy sidewalks, but that didn’t seem to matter much. “Those things count in the long run,” Smitty said. “This is a business where if you don’t make it now, you’ll never get a chance at the long run.”

I was on Christmas break. After Smitty and I finished the sidewalks, we stood around an electric space heater in the garage drinking a thermos of coffee
laced with milk and brandy. I walked back to the apartment warm and light-headed and full of myself.

Smitty gave me a hundred dollar bill and an Oregon Chief ham for a Christmas bonus. Each day I walked to the supermarket and picked out something to have ready when Helen came home. I felt rich after breaking that hundred. I baked a salmon one night, then another fixed oyster stew with small, fresh oysters and thick, sweet cream. I didn't skimp, and the less money left, the more spendthrift I became. I spent the last on a $19.50 bottle of red wine to have with the ham on Christmas Day.

A warm front moved in and rain fell with temperatures in the forties day and night. Without ice and snow, there wasn't much for me to help Smitty with. I was at school days, and only saw him about once a week when he'd drop by and we'd go to the garage and drink beer while watching an N.B.A. game.

"We're out the first of February," he told me during halftime of a Bulls-Pistons game. "Management called the vacancies and bookkeeping troubles two strikes. I'm not waiting to look at the third. Gave them notice today."

Smitty drained his Schlitz and tossed it over his shoulder toward the box by the door. It banked off the wall and clattered against the other cans in the box.

"They're bringing in someone for me to show around, then he's taking over. I suppose we should have this place changed before he gets here."

"I'll do whatever I can, Smitty. I don't know what to say."

"I might have you help us load our things after we find a place, that's about all. I'll try to talk the new guy into keeping you on. Just lay low when he shows up." The game came back on and Smitty was silent while the Bulls inbounded the ball to open the second half. "I'll give you something to do to look useful, but
the less you're identified with me, the better.”

During the period before he left, Smitty gave me specific tasks and expected me to complete them. Sweeping the sidewalks and keeping the grounds clean of paper became exactly what it was—a part time job to help pay the rent. I no longer spent hours watching sports with Smitty or riding around with him while he ran errands.

When Smitty introduced me to the new manager, I shook hands with him and tried to make certain he didn’t mistake my discomfort for shiftiness. Smitty tried to look as if he was stepping aside without rancor into an uncertain life.

That night I had a call from a man in personnel at the management company. He told me the new manager would be on an interim basis for a month, and it was possible he could train me to take over the job if I had an interest. “We think we can get by with a part-time manager now, so you could continue your education,” he said. “We'll provide your apartment and pay an hourly wage for the lawn care.”

“Smitty is a friend of mine,” I said.

“We feel we can contract out the remainder of the maintenance.”

“Why don’t you just ask Smitty to stay on?”

“We appreciate what Smitty has done. He got the place up and running through the first winter—that’s a tough job. But we have to be flexible. We’re trying to upgrade the profile of the tenants at Sherwood, and you may be better suited to deal with the type of tenants we hope to attract.”

Helen had turned down the television. “I'll need to think about this,” I said.

“Certainly. Just let the interim manager know sometime during the next
two weeks. He’s a full-time employee of ours.”

Helen knew the situation from my end of the conversation. I only had to fill her in on the details after hanging up the phone. “I don’t know if I want it anyway,” I said. “I suppose it’s about loyalty.”

“Loyalty to Smitty?” she said.

“I guess. I don’t like the way they’ve handled this.”

Helen walked over to the window and stood with her back to me and her arms folded across her chest. “Who were you loyal to when you sat up in that garage drinking beer?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you knew Smitty was in trouble. You could have helped him out then.” She turned to face me. “Don’t make up for what you did or didn’t do then with a meaningless gesture now.”

“This isn’t about a gesture.”

“No. It’s about something that will matter to us and really won’t matter to Smitty.”

I crossed the room and stood next to Helen at the window.

“I’m just saying we look at this offer on its own,” she said. “Every old man wants a young man to listen to him. You did that for Smitty. Maybe it’s all you could do.”

It was on a Thursday afternoon when Gloria called and said Smitty had gone to pick up the U-Haul. When I saw him cautiously turn off the highway and into the complex, I took my jacket from behind the door. Helen wasn’t home from work, so I wrote her a note and left it on the counter.
Gloria had everything in taped, labeled boxes. “I've only moved twice in forty years, but I'm already getting good at it,” she said.

Smitty and I carried the boxes out to the ramp of the U-Haul and started loading them. “My son-in-law should be showing up,” he said. He placed a box into the front corner of the truck and looked as if he were going to say more regarding the son-in-law, but didn't.

We had the boxes loaded and were starting on the furniture when the daughter and son-in-law drove up. The daughter was tall, blonde, and late in a pregnancy. She walked up and kissed Smitty, then went inside. The son-in-law was stocky, bordering on fat. He wore a University of Washington sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off. “Hope you know I'm missing my weight session to do this,” he said to Smitty.

“Go in and grab one end of that hide-a-bed and you won't need to lift any goddamn weights,” Smitty said. “David, this is Steve. Steve, David.”

I put out my hand. Steve nodded at me without offering his. I followed him into the apartment and we each squatted and picked up an end of the sofa. I had the end next to the door. As soon as I stood he started pushing from his end. Smitty jumped in to help me. “Take it easy,” he said.

After we finished loading the furniture, Smitty stood on the deck of the U-Haul and pulled the door down. “Let's go up to the garage,” he said. “I have a few things to pick up, then we're finished.”

Steve got in the truck and drove up toward the garage. I walked with Smitty. Steve jockeyed the truck back and forth, trying to maneuver it between the car port pillars and garage. “Don't worry about getting it close,” Smitty said. “There's nothing heavy in here.”
The T.V. sat on the refrigerator along one of the side walls. The lights were lying inside a box with the cords coiled on top. The son-in-law and I each picked up an end of the loveseat and packed it to the truck. Smitty followed with a box of lights. “There’s only one more thing,” he said after we carried out the refrigerator and television. He walked to the back of the garage.

“I’d take a few of these tools, and maybe that John Deere if I had room,” Steve said.

“That’s not funny,” Smitty said. He reached down along the back wall and picked up a long tube constructed of heavy cardboard.

“What in the hell are you taking that for,” Steve said. “I don’t know where we’ll put it.”

“It’ll fit,” Smitty said.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s a javelin,” Steve said. “He hauled the damn thing all the way from Chicago.”

Smitty stood holding the tube. “Second in the state of Wisconsin my senior year,” he said. He carried the tube to the U-Haul, then climbed into the open door and wedged it between the back of the sofa and a stack of boxes.

Smitty stood on the bumper and pulled down the sliding door until it latched into place with a click. The click reminded me of the shutter on a camera, the way it snaps, freezing an instant forever. Already someone or something is moving, and you know things will never be exactly that way again, and all those imperceptible shifts in your life will add up.

Smitty’s daughter and Gloria had already driven away in the cars loaded with clothes, dishes, photos, and everything else considered to personal,
valuable, or fragile to put in the U-Haul.

I climbed into the middle of the cab and Smitty stepped up into the passenger’s seat. Steve circled the truck once, then got in beside me and started it. He turned the wheel tight and swung into the parking lot, then pulled onto Highway 43 and accelerated through a yellow light.

We drove by old trees and moss-lined driveways up toward I-5. I thought of all the places I would rather be than sitting between those two men trying to maintain their truce.

Steve merged onto the freeway and cut the U-Haul toward the center lane without signaling. Smitty looked at him, then, like a man refusing a dare, turned toward the window.

After about a mile we exited the freeway and turned onto a road lined with warehouses which gave way to older farmhouses interspersed with new ranch homes. Gradually the road wound into the new developments. We followed a series of turns on streets named after berries, then drove along a thoroughfare intersected by cul-de-sacs named after constellations.

Steve turned left on Gemini and wound past identical houses varying only in pastel shades and numbers. He slowed and pulled past the house where Gloria and her daughter were unloading the cars, then stopped and backed the U-Haul into the driveway. “I’ll call some of my buddies and we’ll have this unloaded in no time,” he said.

“We can get it,” Smitty said as we crawled from the cab.

Steve unhooked the loading ramp and pulled it out toward the garage door. “Have it your way,” he said, “but if you’d spring for a case of beer, we wouldn’t have to do much more than watch.”

“I don’t want strangers handling my things,” Smitty said.
Steve took on a sullen look and unlocked the garage door. He spent more and more time between the house and garage until Smitty and I practically had the truck unloaded before noticing he was gone.

Smitty sat in one of the armchairs as soon as we finished. “I made the downpayment on this place, and now he bitches about me storing my things here and staying a few weeks. What do you think of that?”

When I didn’t answer, Smitty put his elbows on his knees and put his head down, running his fingers and palms over his temples and down the back of his neck. “This is only temporary, right,” he said. “Gloria and me are going to get a trailer and move it out to my other daughter’s place in the Coast Range.

It was dark outside the garage door, and from somewhere I heard a woman’s voice calling to children. “I think you’d like it there,” I said.

“Yeah,” Smitty said. “I’ll hunt deer whenever I want, fish. I’ll be able to plant things that take awhile to get established. You know--raspberries, asparagus--things like that. Won’t cost much to live until my retirement kicks in.”

“Sounds good,” I said, and stood up off the sofa.

“You ready for me to take you back, or you want to come in for awhile?”

“I better go. You’ve had a long enough day. I can catch a bus back.”

“You sure? You know, I wouldn’t mind if it was awhile before I saw those apartments again.”

I was glad Smitty didn’t insist on giving me a ride. I took the five dollars he gave me for bus fare and a beer on him. “There’s a main road with bus stops about five blocks over,” he said. “I’ll give you a lift over there if you want.”

“That’s okay. I’ll walk.”
“I'll give you a call when we get settled somewhere,” Smitty said.

And I realized Smitty wanted me away as bad as I wanted to be gone. It was if we’d recognized the brief moment when I came dangerously close to pitying him, a thing neither of us wanted and which would have left us wishing we’d never met.

Smitty and I shook hands, and I walked quickly from the garage before anyone could come out of the house and complicate it. I hurried up the broad sidewalk toward the street we’d turned off of on the way in.

I thought of how it must be for Smitty, a man at a stage in his life where for the first time he was without parameters, without a map. He wasn’t young and unemployed or a retiree, but instead someone in limbo between possibility and culmination. But I didn’t pity him finally. I considered Smitty a man who still believed in some part of the world, and in our right to see ourselves as we wanted to be, already at the point we worked and wished toward.

I marveled at the Smitty he must of been as a young athlete wearing a dark singlet and a white diagonal running across his broad chest in those sharp Wisconsin springs. I saw him flinging that javelin into an uncertain sky and watching as the tail ceased quivering and the arc flattened at the top, the spear riding the air without resistance.

And although I stood where we’d turned, hearing and feeling the dull buzz of traffic from the road Smitty had pointed me toward coming over and through the houses between, it occurred to me that I didn’t know precisely where I was. I walked toward the general direction of the noise, reluctant to give up that feeling, confident in my ability to discern the vast difference between being lost and being uncertain of my location at a given moment.
Patti was striking a cut of round steak with the pewter meat tenderizer her grandmother had given her. Glen and Ron tried to talk her into frying the steak tonight, but she’d microwaved frozen burritos, and they quit complaining once they started eating. She would tenderize the steak, then cut it into strips and marinate it for a day before broiling it in the oven.

Patti hoped Ron wouldn’t be around tomorrow evening when the steak was ready. This was the third night in a row he’d sat at the table drinking beer with Glen. Even Glen tired of him after several days straight. Ron would go to the Dodge City Lounge in town and drink there after recognizing he wasn’t wanted, then hole up at his daddy’s wheat ranch for about a week before beginning the cycle again.

Patti knew they’d hire Glen the minute they drove into Boardman. She sat in the parking lot of the coal-fired electric plant and waited while they interviewed him. The head gasket was going on Glen’s Datsun pickup, and she listened to the overheated engine ticking as it cooled.

The landscape reminded her of a spot she’d driven through in Nevada while in the Air Force; a sprawling motel complex built low to the ground with
miniature golf and two swimming pools. The motel squatted alone in the scrub land with “Future Site Of” signs lining the highway for a half-mile in either direction. The signs were white with red lettering, and had thick, glossy coats of paint to keep their sheen against the desert sun. Patti imagined the proprietor of the motel walking the highway and welling with optimism envisioning the supermarkets, banks, and housing developments that were going to sprout from seed, his motel centering and sparking it all.

“Like there was ever a doubt,” Patti said when Glen opened the truck door and said he had the job. He took her words as a vote of confidence in him rather than a statement on the inevitable. Patti imagined that motel all by itself. Tonight, she felt more like the man at the motel must sitting in his office at night, squinting out toward the back of the plywood signs, realizing he was parked in the middle of a darkness big enough to swallow him and his motel whole.

Glen sat at the kitchen table with his friend Ron, playing five-card stud poker with a third dummy hand. They played for pennies, and the dummy hand won often enough to keep it interesting.

“Hurry up and pound that meat so you can play the dummy hand,” Ron said.

“It might be easier to play yours,” Patti said. She continued hitting the steak and juice splattered against her forearm. She tried to form symmetrical dimples with the tenderizer, but it always came out ragged around the edges.

“Quit going at each other,” Glen said.

“I'm not going at it with anyone here,” Patti said. Ron looked at Glen like
Glen should say something. Ron was always ready for an ally. He talked at Patti instead of to her. She'd been in the Air Force and traveled through the states. She'd long ago heard anything Ron might have to say. He probably hadn't been out of Morrow County for over two weeks at any one time.

When Patti joined the Air Force out of high school her father told her, ‘That's nobody's dream for their baby.’ ‘I'm nobody's baby,’ she'd said, not to hurt her father, but because that's how she felt.

Patti married Glen by chance. She started going out with him after returning to St. Helens. She'd known him in high school, and was surprised he had his electrician's license. He was working in one of the lumber mills in town then. They enjoyed driving up to Portland, eating in nice restaurants and drinking, then spending the night in a motel out in one of the western suburbs.

The fact Glen had gone through electrician's school led Patti to believe he held some form of initiative. By the time she figured differently, she'd agreed to marry him. Glen wanted to have a wedding; invite people they'd gone to high school with and hold a reception with kegs of beer, but Patti convinced him to get married at the court house. She remembered their anniversary not as a specific date, but as the time when spring Chinook were running, because her father had been out in his boat salmon fishing on the Columbia. He'd driven to the court house just in time to stand behind them with Glen's parents while the judge performed the ceremony.

The fibers in the tough cut of round steak were breaking down. It would soak up the marinade. She never enjoyed cooking before moving to Boardman. Now she bought cookbooks and prepared dishes consuming entire afternoons.

Glen snapped the cards and started dealing. He couldn't shuffle a deck until Ron showed him how. They'd spent a Sunday afternoon at the table practicing,
and when Glen finally had it down, he seemed more grateful to Ron than for anything Patti had ever done for him.

"Ron and I are thinking of driving up to Yakima this weekend," Glen said. He looked across the table at Ron as he spoke. "Leave on Friday after work. Come back maybe Saturday night or Sunday morning."

It was dark outside. Patti saw lights on the transmission line towers flashing up and down, as she thought the shells over a battle field must. One night not long after coming to Boardman, she'd sat with Glen in lawn chairs on the gravel apron surrounding their trailer and watched those lights. Glen insisted they had a pattern, but it was all random flashing to Patti. Dots of light poked the southern horizon. Patti saw dull, green trucks passing by, and knew those lights had something to do with the nearby munitions depot. The lights gave the illusion this was a busy place, erupting with too much secret activity for daylight to contain. More and more this place reminded her of the Air Force and everything transitory.

Ron took a drink from his can of Olympia and sat back grinning. His face reminded Patti of a tic-tac-toe game with O's and blanks in all the spaces. Patti thought of Cathy Taylor, her best friend from high school, and how when they were girls Cathy had shown her a system of filling in the squares so you could never be beaten. It didn't guarantee a win, only that every game could be held to at least a draw. Patti lost interest in tic-tac-toe after that, but Cathy carried a scratch pad everywhere for several months, challenging anyone she could convince to play.

Shortly after they were married, Glen and Patti drove to Seattle to visit Cathy and her husband. Cathy had married an accountant at Boeing, and
Patti found it odd that she could not now recall his name. It seemed to her Cathy was still filling in her squares in a way guaranteeing a draw.

It was 1988, just before the election. They went to a University of Washington football game at Husky stadium, then to a party on a boat in Lake Washington. Glen was waiting to get in the union then, and he angered listening to Cathy's husband and his friends talk about what would happen to the defense industry if a Democrat ever got back in the White House.

"We don't have anything in common with those people," Glen told Cathy as they skirted around Tacoma on I-5.

"Speak for yourself," she answered, and they drove south in silence for a good hundred miles. She felt for Glen, but she'd been enjoying the party, working hard not to look toward Glen holding his beer and leaning over the deck railing.

"So what you think?" Glen said. "That okay with you if we go to Yakima?"

"I don't care," Patti said. "Maybe I just don't give a shit." She held up the steak. In places she could see through it, like a favorite blouse worn threadbare.

"Oh, don't give us that," Ron said. "Anybody says they don't give a shit, they care plenty."

"Who's us?" Patti said. "You can go home anytime now, Ron."

"That's a friend of mine you're talking to," Glen said. "Maybe you should try finding some of your own so you wouldn't be so damn cranky all the time."

Patti had missed the friends she had back in St. Helens when they first moved. Glen and she talked about St. Helens as if it were their life and
something they would return to following a few years of fast money, but Patti was beginning to have trouble seeing it that way. Her friends promised to come visit, asked her how far Boardman was from Mount Bachelor and Bend. Their promises lost energy when she told them it was a good three hours. She now thought of them as distant acquaintances when she thought of them at all.

Ron stood and walked through the living room and down the narrow hallway to the bathroom. He bumped one wall, then the other. “Why don’t you get him out of the house,” Patti said to Glen.

“He’s not so bad,” Glen said. “Who do you expect me to run around with?”

Ron came back through the hallway, walking a little straighter than before.

Glen had got off work at two o’clock that afternoon. He and Patti had bought a new four-wheel-drive Ford as soon as they moved to Boardman. Ron promised to teach Glen to bird hunt in the fall, and Glen enjoyed taking what he called ‘scouting trips’ on roads bordering harvested wheat fields and leading up the brushy canyons off the river. They’d been ready to take a drive up onto the Columbia Plateau when Ron had driven up to the trailer.

They’d turned off I-84 where the sign read “Blue Mountain Scenic Highway,” and Patti wondered how far they’d have to drive before seeing anything resembling mountains. The three of them started drinking as soon as they left the freeway. The cooler was behind the cab, and Patti could open the sliding glass window and reach into it from where she sat between Glen and Ron.

Once they were out of the sidecanyon and up on the plateau, Glen turned onto a gravel side road and stopped. They climbed out of the cab and Ron walked behind the cab to pee. He kept talking to them and rocked back and forth on his heels. “He’s drunk,” Patti said. She was a little high off the three
beers herself and didn't mind it so much.

"I think he had a head start," Glen said.

"I have to pee, too," Patti said.

"Go behind the truck when he's finished."

Ron walked around to where they stood in front of the truck.

"What if someone comes down the road?" Patti said.

"Looks like a hell of a lot of traffic to me," Ron said.

"It sounded like you flooded it back there anyway," Patti said. "I'm going to look for a bush." She crossed the ditch along the road. Pale, gray dust covered the scattered grass and shrubs. She found a clump of sagebrush large enough to conceal her and unbuttoned her Levi's.

Patti heard the pickup door slam, and Glen said, "I don't think so, Ron."

She heard their voices, but couldn't make out what they said over the sound of her water hitting the dry ground. She figured they were planning to turn the pickup around and pretend to be leaving her. She anticipated the engine starting, but didn't care. She'd just walk along the road until they stopped.

A rock thumped in the dust ten feet beyond where Patti squatted. She stood up and another crashed through the brush and skidded at her feet. "What are you doing?" she yelled. She heard Ron laughing.

"Come on out, it's okay," Glen said.

"Fuck you," Patti said. "What are you trying to do?" Her voice didn't sound like her own. Slowly she stepped from behind the sagebrush.

Ron stood holding another rock in his right hand. I was just showing Glen how to flush birds out," he said. He was laughing and dropped the rock. Glen
was trying to smile, but he wasn’t holding his mouth right and his eyes were blank.

Patti crossed the dusty margin to the road. “You could have hit me,” she said. “What if I’d stood up. You think that was funny?”

“I’ve got a good arm,” Ron said, feinting a throwing motion in Patti’s direction. “I knew where they were going.”

“Tell him that wasn’t funny,” Patti said to Glen. “At least tell him it’s nothing you’d do.”

“It was just a joke,” Ron said.

“No,” Patti said. “A joke is when somebody laughs.”

“Let’s go,” Glen said. He opened the driver’s side door.

“Tell him you bastard,” Patti said. She kicked the door shut with her foot.

“Be careful,” Glen said. He rubbed his hand against Patti’s footprint on the door. “Just get in and settle down,” he said, opening the door again.

Patti stood for a moment, then climbed in. She noticed her white, canvas Ked’s were the color of soot, and splattered in places.

On the drive back to Boardman Patti waited for Glen to make a gesture, any gesture, moving him toward her and away from Ron. Dropping off the plateau and toward the river and freeway, Patti saw the beginning of the Horse Heaven Hills over in Washington. All that space drained in late-summer sun, space to become lost in or somehow fill. Patti wondered if achieving any sense of compromise between the two was possible. She held no idea of any map Glen was read to conduct his life by, knowing only that if he held one it was becoming increasingly less decipherable or interesting to her.
The cutting board she pounded the steak on was covered with blood. Vibrations from the tenderizer striking the board resonated through the trailer.

“Why don’t you quit,” Glen said. “It must be tender by now.”

“It’s giving me a headache,” Ron said.

“Couldn’t be all that cheap beer causing your headache?” Patti said.

“Could be,” Ron said, “but I’m blaming it on all that pounding anyway.”

Patti picked up the steak. The connective tissue had broken down until it felt like a warm, wet rag in her hand. She laid it in the marinade and swished it back and forth with her hand until it was covered, then turned it.

Ron tossed his cards on the table as Glen curved his arm and swept in the scattering of pennies in the pot.

“Why don’t we go for a drive?” Ron said.

“We’re staying here,” Patti said. “Why don’t you go for a drive?”

“Anybody ask you?” Ron said. “I looked at Glen, and I said ‘Why don’t we go for a drive?’ Anybody ask you?”

Patti removed her hand from the marinade. She flicked her fingers once toward the table in general, then dipped them and flicked them again toward Ron in particular. He saw it coming, but sat there like he believed she wouldn’t do it.

Blood and juice centered on the top snap of his shirt, and flecked as low as his waist and as high as his forehead.

Ron bunched the tablecloth and wiped his face. “Goddamn you. This is a forty-dollar shirt you just ruined.”

“That’s a joke,” Patti said. “See, we’re all hysterical.”

Ron started to stand, but his thighs struck the edge of the table, and he sat back down. The beer cans on the table spilled from the jarring, and liquid
spread across the bare table and dripped to the floor. Ron wiped his face again. The wet tablecloth left a shine across his cheeks. “This is too damn much, Glen” he said. “What are you going to do with her?”

“He’s not going to do anything with me,” Patti said. “But you’re going to get the hell out of here.”

Glen sat with his arm still crooked around the pennies. “I wish you two would just stop,” he said. “I really do.”

“It’s a little late for that,” Patti said. “You just get him out of here. Go with him or stay, but I want him gone.”

“I’ll leave if Glen asks me to,” Ron said. “Otherwise when I’m damn good and ready. You weren’t so bossy standing in the brush today.”

Glen would do something. Patti waited. A strain would give way and their lives would realign somehow. In Glen’s expression she saw only a perfect reflection of Ron. The handle of the meat tenderizer molded into her hand. Motion could begin so imperceptibly, but with such power, the precise moment of initiation was impossible to discern.

Later she recalled being certain only that she wanted to see evidence in that face reflected in the face of change, awareness of storms passing over, and an existence of anything outside a vacuum. At what point the tenderizer began its arc Patti would not know, but she would never forget the sudden awareness of its perfection, heft, and balance.

Even with all the force required to overcome inertia, it could have been halted. If Glen’s face had given her a sign, it could have been like a freight train passing at a crossing, a train filling you a roar so all-consuming you swear the world will never be the same, then vanishing within seconds, leaving only a
vague echo filling a spot you had been hollow with a buzz you hoped never to summon.

Once Patti's arm began to move, it felt long and straight, the weight of the pewter tenderizer lending it strength she had forgotten, or misplaced and allowed to atrophy. The arc reached mid-point, and like a wave which builds and starts curling, Patti knew it would break.

The pewter tenderizer sliced cleanly through the stale, flat air of the trailer. It landed solidly and without vibration on Glen’s left ear, then recoiled several inches before Patti allowed it to drop from her hand. Patti saw the face disappear into a blank smoothness like a lake flat and stagnant.

Glen slumped against the wall. There was a colorless instant before blood started rising in the symmetrical dimples the tenderizer imparted.

Ron came around the table and placed Glen’s arm around his neck. Glen’s legs quivered, but his upper body remained motionless. Ron was cursing, but no longer at Patti. She put Glen’s other arm around her neck as Ron pulled him upright, and they half-drug, half-carried him to Ron’s car.

The tires spun gravel as the car left the driveway. Shards landed at her feet, and it surprised Patti to be standing beside the trailer rather than in the car. She stepped into the trailer and left door open so cool air sifted through the screen. The trailer smelled of ozone, gunpowder, or anything else hanging in the air after discharge.

Patti filled a bucket with warm, soapy water and wiped the splatters from the counter where she had pounded the steak. Then she wiped Glen’s blood from the table, and finally from the linoleum floor.

She was wringing the sponge, watching brownish-red liquid spiral down the kitchen drain, when Ron called from the hospital in Hermiston. He told her Glen
had a concussion, and that they were going to keep him overnight. Ron used a calculating, cautious tone, and Patti knew he considered her crazy. “He’ll be okay, but they don’t know what they’re going to do about his ear yet,” he said.

“He never listened anyway,” Patti said. “Not really.” She hung up the phone.

Patti thought of Glen in his room. They had driven the twenty minutes up the freeway to Hermiston so many times since moving to Boardman, but Patti could not envision the road. An abandoned bombing range paralleled the freeway between it and the Columbia River, and when Patti thought of what lay between her and Glen, that was what she pictured; hundreds of acres of bombed out, cratered, dead ground, with no road running through.

Patti covered the pan of steak with plastic wrap and placed it in the refrigerator. It would be tender and well-soaked for whoever cooked it. And perhaps that person would know it had been prepared by someone on her way, with the seeds and signs of her own life in the ground and ready to emerge.
Orbits

Finally, all it required to shatter Scott’s healing vision of the Peetes was a chance meeting with Billy in a mini-market north of Chehalis. Billy Peete stood in line waiting to pay for his gas. Even with a short haircut and baseball cap pulled low, Scott knew it was Billy. Scott ducked behind an aisle to the soft drink cooler, took his time making a selection, but the payment line moved slowly, and he found himself only two spaces behind Billy when he returned. He said, “Billy?” Billy turned too quickly to calculate any reaction other than recognition. They stepped from the line and shook hands.

Billy told Scott his parents had separated years ago, shortly after leaving Tri-Creek, and he was only uncertain as to the location of the rest of his family. And Scott realized he had constructed an image of the Peete family together in that timeless pear orchard, an image built as unwittingly as daydream and as carefully as an intricate puzzle. Scott had embraced the model until he became unaware of any space it occupied in his heart. Billy’s presence spun it, like a painting long admired turned upside down, revealing a different image entirely, but one instantly and and irrevocably true.

Billy was on his way back to Fort Lewis, where he was stationed in the
army. Standing with Billy next to a row of glass cubicles filled with slowly rotating, shiny hot dogs and stale, yellow popcorn, Scott discovered John Peete’s risk and vision resulted in little or nothing. John, May, Billy, and Karla Peete were scattered from each other’s orbits, lost to any gravitational pull of blood, trust, and hope.

Billy had never defended his father regarding that summer night years ago, the events and non-events which followed, never requested anything from Scott as dangerous and mutable as truth. Billy Peete had been nothing if not silent, lacking the frayed edges of defiance and confidence now marking his voice.

Seeing Billy reminded Scott of the opportunity to admit he had witnessed something that night, an admission which would have meant little to him, and perhaps a great deal to John Peete. But Scott had been a boy then. He possessed little knowledge of the small pieces of belief enabling people to hang onto the world, although he knew inherently, possibly too well, the margins within which those pieces were tolerated and abided in small, eastern Oregon towns.

The lasting, tangible memory Scott held was of floating along in the Peete’s Olds Toronado, speed parting air until it seemed the car could ascend. It had been deep summer, a night when heat, light, and movement intertwined and encompassed, until it was impossible to discern the source of any of the three.

John Peete drove fast, as he always did. Scott sat behind the driver’s seat, Billy’s sister Karla beside him, Billy beyond her, behind his mother. Scott remembered the glowing shoulders of John Peete’s white t-shirt, as likely true as anything else, since John wore a white t-shirt year round, covering it with a
plaid, wool jacket during only the coldest weather.

The air conditioner in the Toronado didn’t work, and the front windows were halfway down, night roaring past and sifting through the openings. Bubbles of tar risen during the heat of day popped like gum beneath the whining tires. The car glided through the river canyon, the dark basalt rimrock radiating stored heat.

Scott and Billy ate peanuts, cracking the shells and tossing them to the floorboards. John Peete kept the Olds immaculate, but allowed himself and the boys this indulgence while returning from baseball games. He vacuumed the car early the following morning every time. Karla stared straight ahead through the gap between the two adult heads in the front seat. She refused the shelled, oily peanuts Scott repeatedly offered her.

Karla was a year younger than Scott and Billy, who were twelve. Already she seemed bored with them, bored with everyone as far as Scott could tell, with the possible exception of her mother. Her boredom and precocious self-containment were oddly seductive to Scott, something he comprehended only partially and tenuously even years later.

John shelled and ate peanuts, too. He held a beer in the worn crotch of his Levi’s, steering with his forearms. When his beer was empty he held the bottle out the window, his tan, wiry, left arm crooked at a ninety-degree angle and his wrist cocked as the speeding Olds approached a roadsing. As John Peete held the bottle, calculating aim and trajectory, the remainder of the beer sprayed cool and sweet in Scott’s face, becoming the bittersweet taste of memory pleasant and haunting.

John tossed the bottles over the top of the car, toward the faces of
cautionary signs lining the right shoulder of the road. He usually missed, and
glass popped and shattered as the bottle struck rocks along the highway. But
occasionally, often enough to keep him throwing, John Peete connected, and
depending upon the composition of the sign, Scott heard the clatter of glass
striking metal, or the solid thunk of the empty bottle against wood. When John
Peete did hit a sign, it seemed as if he never could miss, as if every variable in
the world aligned for him exclusively at that precise moment.

The baseball diamond, and there only rarely, was where Scott sensed
alignment in his own life. John Peete told him to imagine his glove a magnet for
the ball, and sometimes at shortstop he could, and chance played a smaller
part in the game. Scott's father had been an athlete, but now hunted and fished
with all his spare time, and was more apathetic about Scott's participation
than encouraging or discouraging. John Peete coached the Little League team,
spent hours playing catch with Billy and Scott. Billy wasn't athletic in body or
demeanor. He was just good enough to hang onto his right-field position, which
suited him fine.

"What about pulling over by the river and cooling off," John said. "There's a
nice sandy spot up here." He lifted his foot from the accelerator and Scott felt
the Toronado ease to the apron, the whine of pavement giving over to the rapid
 crunch of coarse gravel.

July heat turned the world nocturnal in the river canyon. Stepping out of
the car Scott heard frogs and crickets. The night was filled with sound
compared to the indeterminate midday humming. Scott imagined deer
upstream, crossing the river, moving toward and through water.
John Peete walked behind the Olds and opened the trunk. Scott heard rattling ice as John pulled a beer from the cooler. John never drank before or during baseball games, but sipped beer steadily all the way home.

"Follow me and watch for snakes," John said. He stepped from the shoulder of the road and descended the steep trail to the beach.

The stop surprised Scott. John normally drove directly home after games. May tuned in the country station out of Pendleton with its constant heartbreak playlist of Tammy Wynette, George Jones, and Johnny Cash. John turned the radio down to offer the boys advice both specific and general in nature, then turned it back up. John had been a star running back in high school, but said he wished he had made baseball his game as a boy. He was too small for football beyond the high school level, and said basketball and football had been taken over by outsized freaks, and baseball was the only game left.

May and Karla carefully sidestepped down the bank. Scott and Billy followed. Karla Peete wore a white cotton jumper with suspender straps. Scott watched her sit on the sand as she slipped her leather sandals off in an exact imitation of May.

John leaned back on the beach, resting on his elbows. "What do you think of this, May?" he said.

"I wish we could stay here all night and swim tomorrow instead of working," she said.

Scott thought of them all swimming. He had been in the grocery store with May and Billy earlier that week, and Billy had pointed to a *Playboy* magazine and half-jokingly asked May to buy it for them. May had replied if the boys wanted to look at naked women, then she would take her clothes off when they got home. Her statement had the desired effect of silencing and embarrassing
Billy, but for an instant, before he caught himself, Scott recalled thinking that
would not be a thing he would mind. That statement alone, so unlike any his
own mother would ever make, was a small part of what made the John and
May Peete young and vital to Scott.

The Peete’s worked in an orchard outside of town. During the cherry, peach,
and apricot harvests the entire family worked together—May and the children
picking and John as foreman and general organizer. One Friday early in
February, Scott had stayed overnight with Billy. It was unseasonably warm,
and the next morning the boys walked with John while he pruned apple trees.
Billy quickly became bored. He knew everything John did and the reason for it.
It made Scott realize how little he actually knew or cared about his father’s job
with the state highway department. His father put in long hours during winter,
leaving and returning home in darkness. The floor of the orchard was spongy
that February morning, and John said it had been frozen and dead the week
before, and had “come alive overnight.”

Scott sensed Billy watching him watch Karla’s calves as she slipped her
ankles into the water. He turned his gaze toward the opposite bank.

“You made a nice running catch out there tonight, Billy,” John said. “Saved
a run.” John didn’t go out of his way to compliment routine plays. He was
matter-of-fact with his praise. Billy shrugged his acknowledgement, no more
interested in the game now than during the playing of it.

John pulled a piece of driftwood from the sand and tossed it halfway across
the river, where it landed with a splat on the smooth, black surface of the
water.
"How many more days of cherries?" May said.

"Not many," John said. He took a long pull from his beer. "A week maybe, no longer. If we don't get any thundershowers to split the fruit we may be looking at a bonus."

Scott thought of the bowl of ripe cherries his mother kept in the refrigerator. "I like them cold," he said.

"I'm sick of them any way," Billy said. "You would be too if you had to pick them."

"You wouldn't be if you didn't eat so many," Karla said.

Water rippled over Karla and May's ankles while Scott sat between Billy and John. Suddenly, John stood and threw his empty bottle across the water, where it crashed into the rock face on the other side. He turned and clambered up the bank toward the open trunk of the Toronado. Karla and May looked toward each other. As John came down the shelf carrying another beer fish began rising upstream. Their heads broke the surface film before their tails flashed in pale moonlight. "Could be some good fishing here," John said.

"My dad never fishes this far downstream," Scott said. "They're all trash fish down here. Water's too warm for trout."

"That what your dad says?" John said. "I suppose he knows everything about it, and it's all up to him to decide what fish are worth catching and what ain't."

Scott felt blood flush up his neck and pool around his cheeks.

"Be quiet, John," May said.

Scott faced the water. John stood directly behind him. He heard grains of sand crunching and shifting beneath John's feet. "I don't suppose he's ever caught and ate what was there because he had to," John said. "Probably never
canned up a mess of whitefish and waited for them to dissolve into mush so you can eat them.”

May swiveled at the waist and faced John. “That’s enough,” she said.

“Maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s not enough. He hasn’t gone to a single one of the kid’s goddamn games, but he knows everything doesn’t he? Hands me a five dollar bill for gas once in awhile like Abe Lincoln ought to be grinning just for coming from his pocket. And you know damn well what I’m talking about, May. Don’t pretend you don’t.”

Scott turned to face John. John stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like he was anxious to make a move and awaited direction. “So tell me what trash fish are, Scott. Tell me the name he has for every one of them. Did he teach you that?”

“Let’s go,” May said, standing and smoothing the front of her dress.

Scott and Billy started to rise, But John gripped Scott’s shoulder hard and pushed him back to his seat on the sand.

“Give yourself a chance to know some things on your own,” John said. “You don’t have to let anybody tell you what’s worthless. There’s plenty of that going around.” John released Scott’s shoulder, then turned and climbed the bank toward the car.

Back in the Toronado it seemed to Scott that perhaps nothing had changed. Karla had her sandals back on, and Scott smelled river water evaporating from her brown legs, smelled it deep and clean until his throat tightened and he shifted his head so air from the open window rushed into his face, pulling the flesh on his cheeks hard against bone.

Scott could not have been certain he had slept until John Peete’s palm
slapped the hood of the car and startled him awake. The motionlessness of the Olds felt abrupt after the soothing ride.

John stood in front of the car and stared at May through the windshield. “Come out and see it, May” he said. “The whole world’s opening up.” He lifted his arms. “Don’t tell me you can’t see it.”

“Get back in the car,” May said. Her voice was even and flat. “Get back in the car and let’s go.”

Scott rubbed his eyes, and remnants of violet light played around the fringes of the dark centers. The engine of the Olds was shut off, but the headlights illuminated John Peete, framed him against the darkness beyond. John walked to the passenger’s door and opened it. “Get out, May,” John said. “That’s all I want. The rest is up to you.”

John pulled at May’s arm, and she reached across and gripped the steering wheel with her left hand, straining against him. “Stop, John” she said.

Scott saw lights approaching. John released May and stood beside the car, watching as the headlights neared.

Scott heard the roar and felt the air buffeting the car as a semi-truck rumbled past, the driver blasting the air horn. The light and sound of the truck blinded and numbed him.

“Now listen.” John said after the truck passed. “Nothing. All that light and noise, then nothing.”

“John, we’re parked in the middle of the road. Get back in and let’s go.”

“You kids, get out and look around,” John said.

Scott looked toward Billy and Karla. They shifted, turned their hips on the seat, then leaned back toward sleep.
John walked around the car, climbed in and closed the door. He didn't turn the key to the ignition, but stared straight ahead with his hands on the wheel. "The way that truck went by, first the lights, they blinded me, and the air almost knocked me down," he said.

"The lights were bright," May said. "Let's just go, John. Please, it's dangerous parked here in the road."

John started the car. Scott saw the veins on John’s arms standing out like thin cables as he slipped the transmission into drive.

"That truck, it was like it plowed this darkness in half, then it sewed back up again. There are different ways to live, May."

May reached across and put her hand on John’s shoulder. "Don’t be blind to what we’re given," he said. "This may be the best thing that ever happened to us."

Scott drifted toward a dreaming half-sleep, until he felt the car slowing as it entered Tri-Creek. He kept his eyes closed, recognizing the bumps and turns by memory, connecting them to the houses and fences and trees the car passed. The Olds stopped and he opened his eyes. May did something she had never done before. As John opened the door and tilted the seat forward for Scott, she climbed out and walked around the Toronado. She put her arms around Scott’s bony shoulders and faced him. "It’s okay," she said. John stood silent.

May walked Scott to his front door like he was her own son. "It’s okay," she said again. "Don’t worry about anything John said to you before. He thinks the world of you. He’s only been drinking. He knows your father is a good man."

May kissed him on the cheek. "I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anybody about
John parking in the road tonight and what he said.” May turned toward the
gleaming Toronado idling in the blue vapor of the streetlight.

As she walked away, Scott wanted to say something proving the worth of
her reassurance. But he only turned the doorknob and quietly entered the dark
house.

The summer faded into a patina of heat, harvests, and baseball games.
Scott rode to the remainder of the away games with the Peetes. John coached,
but seemed more guarded and cautious than before. He no longer yelled about
missed cut-off men and mental errors, but seemed to doubt the significance or
effectiveness of anything he had to say.

The Peete’s worked through the cherries, peaches, and finally the beginning
of the apple crop.

On a morning shortly after school started, Scott overheard his father
talking with his mother. His father had been playing poker at the tavern, which
was something rare for him in that it was social. He said John Peete had told
them about seeing a truck that he wasn’t sure was a truck on the way home
from a baseball game; about darkness, light, and the reappearing darkness,
and how it could be a sign for them all to mend themselves and their children,
because they were all only here and then gone like that truck. And he said John
Peete had stared straight at him while he said it, and he hadn’t liked it.

Scott’s father said the men around the table had first listened to John
Peete, then another hand was dealt, and they attempted to ignore him, which
Scott later understood as the only kind of compassion they could show. But
John Peete was insistent they accompany him outside, insistent almost to the
point of violence before throwing his cards down and leaving. "It's a scary thing to see a man come apart," Scott's father said.

Word spread quickly in a town the size of Tri-Creek. At school, Scott felt protective of Karla and Billy, but gradually and imperceptibly distance spread like fluid cement, then dried, set hard and fast. Karla was much as she had always been, and Billy as alone and self-contained as her, without even his mother as an ally. Scott felt there had been a moment when he could have told his father about the truck, that there was something different.

Within a week Scott was more relieved than surprised when Billy told him the Peetes would be moving to Medford after the apple harvest. John Peete told people there was a job managing a pear orchard, and opportunity "too sweet" to pass by, and they pretended to believe him.

Scott and Billy again woodenly shook hands. Billy turned away, pushed through the glass doors into the April sun, and strided toward his car. Scott was driving north from Salem to catch the Mariner's home opener, and knowing he was traveling the same direction as Billy, he stalled, affording Billy the chance to put distance between them. That soldier on his way back to Fort Lewis was an intruder to the Billy Peete Scott had placed all these years in that pear orchard, a stranger in the way only those named after people we love, lose, and reinvent can be. Scott was consoled in that it was not Karla Peete he had seen.

Scott thought of a time his father had taken him to headwaters of the river which miles later ran through Tri-Creek. It was nothing more than a crack in a granite boulder where water trickled out, and seemed inconceivable that it
could become a river. His father told him most of the water ran underground, and it was a part of a mystery he was trying to show him, Scott later realized. Scott told his father he could feel the water moving beneath them, and his father smiled and said, "he wasn't sure about that." His father cut his eyes away, and Scott knew he felt it too, but would never hazard voicing it, even to his own son. What difference would it have made if he had told his mother and father he believed John Peete encountered something in the approach and wake of that truck? But what difference had remaining silent made? What would have been lost to those men by leaving the card table and spending five minutes of their lives accompanying John Peete out the door?

He remembered John Peete once opening a new box of baseballs, how white they had been in the long summer sun. John picked the balls from the box, tossing them to the players pairing off to play catch. And he told them a new baseball was like a small white bird that would fly straight and true if you only allowed it to rather than forced it. In that moment the throwing became effortless, and Scott could even now almost hear the leather striking leather, like intermittent bursts of corn popping.

One mystery is no more absurd than another, and Scott considered the peril of becoming entrenched in a mystery you refused attempting to speak of, of gripping the parameters of acceptability so tightly you couldn't escape. Maybe everything John Peete had done was in preparation for that night, and speaking to those men about it. Scott thought of everything within May promising silence as the only way she could protect John or he could protect himself. Scott knew how small the risk of listening to John Peete would have been, how that silence must have howled around him until it was opaque and hard, impossible to break or see through.
That summer night became one of the small, sweet chances overlooked to Scott, like a coin or pocketknife so long lost that he could rub his thumb and forefinger together and almost conjure the object, shiny and warm in his hand.