April in Sabinas Hidalgo and other stories

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The University of Montana

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APRIL IN SABINAS HIDALGO

AND

OTHER STORIES

By

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THE CELEBRATED RETURN OF SIMON LAUGHING OWL

Ambrose Two Teeth had once told him at the Valley Bar in Jocko that tires only got flat on one side. Ambrose Two Teeth had also once said that there was no 4th of July in Canada. Damn Two Teeth, Always talking. Simon stared at the tire for a long time and kept licking his lips and working his tongue around in his mouth and adjusting the stiff black derby hat he was wearing. The tire was flat. That was for certain.

The three men inside the car shifted occasionally in the sticky heat which poured in through the back window. They were sitting in their customary places: Homer, Ivan, LeRoy. Homer was holding an empty bottle in his lap. For over an hour he had been twisting the cap off and on. His bright plaid shirt was unbuttoned except for the bottom button, and there were dark, odd-shaped stains on the front of it where he had vomited on himself. He glared intermittently at Ivan whose snoring had reached a crescendo which was shaking the seat.

Ivan was bare-chested, his shirt crumpled beneath his head. On his chest moved a tattoo of a naked woman whose breasts would swell when he inhaled. There was a ring of scars around the tattoo which appeared to have been made by a scraping instrument. Ivan's wife, Rosey, had never liked the tattoo. One night he had come home drunk, with his shirt off, yelling about his beautiful bust, and dared her to try and remove the picture. A cheese grater had been all she could find.

LeRoy, the youngest of the three, had shoved himself into the other corner and curled up, his eyes closed and his hands cupped over his ears.
His black enamel hair stuck out in wide, uneven bunches between his fingers, covering the backs of his hands. Since barber's clippers reminded him of the bee that had flown into his ear the previous summer he had been trimming his hair with his daughter's paper doll scissors. The day the bee came he had driven off the road, across a field, and into the side of the Fish and Game building. Then he had jumped out of the pickup and begun to dance around. When the Fish and Game people came out, they stared open-mouthed at him for a few minutes and then called the sheriff. The bee was still in LeRoy's ear when the sheriff arrived. The sheriff began asking him questions, but he couldn't hear what the sheriff was saying. He kept shaking his head and clapping his hands and running in little circles. Later that night in the jail cell when Homer struck a match to light a cigarette the bee finally came out of LeRoy's ear.

Homer was mopping his forehead with an orange handkerchief and muttering. Suddenly he set his bottle down. Raising a ragged elbow high in the air, he gritted his teeth, and then plunged the elbow downward into Ivan's stomach. Ivan awoke with a hoarse gasp and lunged forward. He tossed his head out the window and sucked at the sun until he had revived himself. He began to curse Homer and make obscene motions. A hassle broke loose and the dead afternoon rang with the racket typical of big dogs fighting in an enclosed area. The two Indians sitting on the trunk, annoyed at the jolting the car was undergoing, stepped down. They went and stood beside the old man. One spoke a few words to him. All three sat down on the edge of the highway.

The old man pulled a pint of whiskey out of the inside pocket of his vest. He wore the vest everywhere because all of the victorious
Indians he had seen on television wore vests. He took a long drink. The sun had gotten white. The young bucks watched him. He drank the way the head of a family should drink. It was very hot, they were thinking. It was nearly four o'clock. When the old man drank, his Adam's-apple slid up and down his leathery neck like a walnut on a pulley. What a great man he was.

The gravel they were sitting in burned the palms of their hands. When the bottle was half-empty, the old man handed it to Charles, the older of his two sons. Charles took a drink and smiled and then took another drink. He had gray teeth. His brother, Adam, began to grumble about how Charles always put his slimy mouth all over the bottle, and about what a damn pig he was, and soon was shouting in his father's ear that it was hot and he was thirsty and that it was his turn and that Charles was drinking it all.

The old man, perplexed by the heat and the flat tire, although he refused to shed the vest, became outraged because their bickering had caused him to miss a grasshopper. He slapped Charles on the back of the head, snatched the bottle from his mouth, handed it to Adam, spat, spat again, all in one movement. He chewed tobacco to relieve his indigestion and had become the best spitter on the reservation since Louis Walks at Night. It was even rumored that he had once blinded a rattlesnake.

He caught sight of the grasshopper again, perched on the rim of the flat tire, sitting quite still, antennae swaying in the breeze, legs bent, wings folded. A hard shot. Ten minutes passed. The old man calculated, positioned his lips, steadied himself on the palms of his hands. The grasshopper didn't move. A thick, yellow missile, the shape of a jelly bean
arched high into the air, lengthened, and splattered on the grasshopper. The grasshopper slid down off the wheel and crawled under the car. The old man grinned a mottled grin and wiped the corner of his mouth. He had no front teeth. The eyeteeth were long and brown and curved around the corners of his mouth, like aged pillars at the entrance of a mine. He felt professional.

The bottle was empty and Adam threw it into the weeds in front of the car. The air rolled with heat. The old man was watching the tire again, trying to decipher the lettering on the side of it. Most of the letters were worn down. Charles began to tug at his sleeve and tell him that someone was coming. He shoved Charles away without looking at him and told him to shut up. S-U-P-E-R S-T-E-E-R. He'd figured it out despite Charles' interruption. He adjusted his hat and peered down the highway. Sure enough, someone was coming. He buttoned his vest quickly, the nimble brown fingers dancing. It was the first car they'd seen all day.

The car pulled over and stopped. A fat woman opened the door and climbed out. She was wearing sunglasses and a straw hat and was carrying a camera. The old man looked straight ahead. He was getting ready to spit again when he heard her approach. She walked around him twice and mumbled something about the sun at her back, something about a real one. Then she knelt down between him and the car and began to focus her camera. He looked at her only because she blocked his view of the tire.

She reminded him of a pig he'd seen on a billboard near Ronan. She snapped the picture and squealed, and then asked if he would remove the hat. He didn't answer. She prepared for a second picture, but he didn't remove the hat. He took the hat off only on special occasions, in the
bars, when he would show it to his friends and tell them it was a sacred heirloom to be worn only by chiefs. And when he got drunk enough he would say that his great grandfather had jerked it off General Custer just before scalping him. Then he would bring out a small lock of blond hair from a wig that he had stolen from the Woolworth's store in Kalispell and lay it on the bar as proof.

The woman with the camera stood up, sighed, and strutted back to her car. The car rolled back out onto the highway and disappeared. The old man spat into the gravel at his feet. He unbuttoned his vest and began to watch the dust settle.

Another hour passed. Charles got up, brushed the dirt from the seat of his pants and walked over to the car. His three cousins had passed out. They had gotten folded over one another and were now one heaving, retreating, rainbow sandwich wheezing loudly in the back seat. Charles coughed, spat, blew his nose, and walked around to the other side of the car to get in. The front door on the driver's side had been smashed. One could always climb through the window; Charles was not in the mood.

Once inside the car he pulled off his boots, lay down on his back, and stuck his feet out the window. There was no sock on the left foot. The foot was elongated and flat, and the toes were all identical in length. There was a thin crescent-shaped scar at the base of the big toe, a token he had acquired in a fight with Ramond Four Souls, a man famous on the reservation for his powerful teeth. Charles had been bitten other places, too. He lay there looking up at the white fur border around the rear-view mirror. He wondered what it had cost. His father would never tell him anything. Someday he would have a car of his own. Only it
would have red fur around the mirror, and he would hang some big plastic dice in the back window. His car would have mud flaps. White mud flaps with red studs. The old man could ride to hell on a bicycle then.

Only the one car had passed by all day. The pavement began to fade and darken with the hills as the sun eased its jaws from the afternoon. The old man was still squatting beside the road. He could see a stream of cars whizzing to and fro on the new freeway. He looked at the tire again. One side, I would make Two Teeth prove it, he thought.

Adam was stumbling through the bush in front of the car searching for the bottle he had tossed there two hours earlier. He carried a cattail in each hand. The car was snoring louder than ever since Charles had joined his cousins, and together with the swishing sound of Adam's pants legs in the tall grass it created a strange symphony. The only other sound was the jabber of a magpie which was flying back and forth over the road.

The sun had almost set when the old man heard something coming down the road. He turned his head to the east but did not get up. He could see a small square form of a car moving toward him.

He had wandered down the highway about a hundred yards. Miniature brown clouds were rising in the air from where he stood urinating his name in the thick dust. He scratched his rump sporadically with the other hand and peered around every now and then as though expecting applause from the indolent magpie drifting overhead. His back was turned. He stood there for a long while, and when he had finished, his name was engraved deeply and clearly in the dust in giant, coffee-colored letters: ADAM. He smiled at the magpie as he put his boots back on and adjusted
the crotch of his pants. Everyone in the passing car turned and looked at him except the driver. Adam waved and zipped his pants.

The screeching of the brakes subsided as the station wagon came to rest a few feet from the old man. He was crouching, still watching the tire.

The driver of the station wagon was a boney, dip-shouldered man with a mustache. He was wearing a turquoise golf cap. His wife was a pale, weasel-faced woman who showed her gums when she smiled. There were two children in the back seat, a boy and a girl, both wearing glasses. The driver got out and approached the old man.

"Hello. You have troubles, sir?"
The old man nodded.

"Flat, eh?"
The old man presumed that that was obvious, so he didn't nod; he spat.

"You have a spare?"
The old man nodded.

"How about a jack?"
The old man pointed to the trunk. With the other hand he reached in his vest pocket and drawing out the key, handed it to the tourist. Adam had returned. The old man told him to get the jack handle out from under the front seat. The tourist went to open the trunk.

While the tourist was removing the jack and spare tire from the trunk, the old man walked over and opened the back door of the car. He shook his three nephews brusquely and slapped one on the face. Then he went around to the other side of the car and dragged Charles out onto the ground. Charles slammed his head on the running board and cursed loudly,
the words echoing across the fields. The tourist's wife smiled. The old man said nothing and walked back around to the other side of the car.

The tourist looked at the spare, at his wife, and then at the spare again. The spare was larger than the other tires, devoid of tread, and covered with lumps and scars. It was mounted on a red rim. The rims of the other tires were a faded robin egg blue. The car had been painted an apple blossom pink. Charles and Adam had done the painting themselves, The old man told the tourist that. The tourist smiled politely.

Adam was telling the people who had piled out of the car about writing his name in the dust. Charles said that however big the letters were, he could do better. Immediately everyone except the old man marched down the highway. When they arrived at the spot, Charles laughed and rubbed Adam's name out with his boot. Then he wrote his name out in full. Adam became irate that Charles had rubbed his name out and accused him of cheating so that they couldn't compare the size of the letters. Charles replied that size had nothing to do with it; it was the number of letters that was important. Their cousins were about to enter the argument when the tourist's wife came shrieking down the highway and grabbed the little girl who had been observing the contest. She rushed the child away and the argument resumed.

The old man sat and watched the tourist jack up the car. The tourist's son came and danced around the old man and asked him if he could wear the hat. The old man didn't answer. The little boy began to whine and beg for the hat, and threatened to steal it. The old man stood up.

The other members of the Laughing Owl family had returned. They assembled around the old man and watched the tourist complete the last phase
of the changing. Adam asked his father what was taking so long.

The tourist let the old car down as though it would shatter upon contact with the ground. He quickly put the flat tire and jack into the trunk. The old man went and shook his hand and told him he was eternally grateful. The tourist said that he was glad to help and asked how to get back on the freeway. The old man told him there was a junction about a mile down the road.

The Laughing Owls all waved and nodded and smiled as the station wagon pulled away. The tourist's wife was scowling, and the ugly children in the back seat chattered to each other and pointed and stared at the throng of Indians. When the tourists' car had shrunk out of sight, the old man shouted an order and all the Laughing Owls climbed into the car.

A little way down the road, the old man removed his hat. The others leaned forward a little, eyes dilating, chins dropping in slow motion. The old man held the steering wheel with one hand and carefully worked a coarse brown envelope out of the lining of his hat with the other. The rattle of the paper caused a hush to fall upon the onlookers. The old man waved the envelope in the air ceremoniously. Everyone stared. The envelope was addressed to Simon J. Laughing Owl, Power River Reservation, Antelope, Montana. The return address said Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C. 20020. The old man pronounced the words ninety-three dollars and twelve cents, placed the envelope back into the hat, and stamped on the gas pedal.

Adam said it was a lot of money. Homer and Ivan shook hands. The old man fingered the rim of his hat and grinned at the dashboard. Everyone peered intently ahead. They could see the Broken Arrow Inn blinking orange streaks in the valley. All of Two Pine would be there, waiting:
Dixie Beaver in her tight red dress; Clifford Big Arm and his peanut-eating raccoon; kisses, handshakes, toasts. And later, a good fight. Charles began to sing and pound his fist on the roof of the car. Saturday night had come again.
"Johnny Walker is good scotch. Your husband's got excellent taste."

"He chose me, didn't he?"

Barney listened to their conversation in the gray room, sweating, his head aching.

Sure, Mona. You were a dream then. The easy smile. Nipples showing through a wet swimsuit. Sand on your long legs. Great in a cocktail dress. Green was the color. I remember the hips and the band at Cisco's. The negligee. Green. The white gloves you wore at the pier. The letters you didn't answer when I was up to my armpits in swampwater. Mail call. Like waiting for a scaffold shoot to drop. Even Ike Bersey got a few letters, and he was married to a nigger.

"It's pleasant here with you, Al. I feel like cotton candy inside."

"A long stretch without kicks is hard on a pretty woman. You don't deserve an empty bed."

"I wish there were some flowers in the house. I love roses, but Barney won't let me keep them around. He says they remind him of a funeral parlor."

You should have gone back to Kansas, Mona. Get into the movies. Flaunt your breasts and win an oscar. What drummer slipped you that line? Probably some farm boy wanting in your pants. He should have told you to stay away from marines in San Francisco. He should have kept you home.

"You've got the sweetest set of legs I think I've seen on a bandstand."
"Nick Treet thinks so, too. But he says some things that scare me, sometimes. It's a good job and everything. The dancing is great. But no one wants to talk much. I like to talk in bed. It's private. It makes thinking about morning easier. Do you understand?"

"You ought to skip out of here. Have you talked to Barney about a divorce?"

"Sometimes, but....."

Almost there once, Mona. The Sunday we went picking blueberries near Juniper Flats and you found the chipmunk. A pair of white shorts and a red sweater. I loved you bad that day because you were mine and the trees were green and the creek had a hell of a sound to it. But you had to draw tears over a chipmunk missing its belly and start asking why people did things like that. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown the chipmunk in the creek. I don't know. Christ, war makes a man jumpy. I had a rash of bad scenes in Korea. People begging me to do something when their legs were shredded or when their balls were shot off. I killed a lot of Koreans. Women and old men and fifteen-year-old kids. Nothing to it but practice. Once you've seen your buddy's head on a bamboo pole, it's the easiest trick in the world.

"I don't want to talk about divorcing him. Please, Al. I get a headache when I think about him sitting in that chair and chewing that cigar and being furious."

"Sorry." He struck a match. "Cigarette?"

"No, thank-you. Just hold me."

We should have cut it off the day I came home from Korea and you weren't at the airport. Your mother was sick. Jesus Christ I waited two years to touch you.
"It gets lonely at night. He stays down at his brother's bar for six and eight hours at a time. He might as well live there."

I could have gone back into the service. Gus knew better. He talked me out of it because he knew I'd like the crew at his place. But you never had any use for them. The best damn friends a man could have and you called them derelicts. I should've busted your head that night. But that would've given you grounds for divorce. Too easy for you.

"What's the dancing like?" Al's voice was coated with whiskey.

"It's a big world up there. Like running naked on a beach at midnight. Barney and I did that once."

"Could you fix me another drink? Don't use the jigger. I'll need extra fuel if I have to beat running naked on a beach at midnight."

"Sure." She got out of bed. "Don't go away."

Barney could smell her perfume, a heavy sweet smell; he could hear her earrings rattle on the glass which covered the top of the chiffonier when she came back into the bedroom and threw them there, the tinkling of ice cubes following her voice as she shifted around the room and into bed.

"Here. Hope it doesn't knock you out. I hate killjoys."

"Don't worry. I've been staring at pavement and billboards for three weeks."

"You have wonderful arms."

This bastard must be as big as Gus. Gus and the old man—there were the arms and necks. Christ, like the night Gus throws the nigger hobo through the window of his place. Just for refusing to get out of my chair. Wouldn't it've made any difference. If Gus hadn't, Miranda would. That was something. Rudy Hines saying the nigger looked like a
blackbird lost in a storm just before he hit the glass and everyone
laughing and Gus still yelling at the nigger through the hole in the
window.

"Mind if I slip this off?"

"I don't care what you do as long as it's fun."

You're going to care about something in a minute, Mona. A man's
got to have a little pride. Gus wouldn't take your playing around.
He'll be sore about everything. But he'll understand. He always under­
stands.

* * * * * * * *

Gus had baked a German chocolate cake, Barney's favorite. Forty-one
red candles with bent, shiny wicks. Rudy Hines had sent a cigar as big
as a blackjack and ringed with a five dollar bill; five dollars from
a day's digging at the cemetery; five dollars for the January night
Barney found him behind the Blue Fountain Cafe, drunk and freezing, between
two garbage cans. Barney had helped him into Gus's for a bowl of soup
and played him a quarter's worth of Johnny Cash on the jukebox. Barney
said that Johnny Cash had the biggest soul in the world.

Cigar butts and candy wrappers covered the buckled tile. A patch­
eyed man spread the debris with his pacing. He held a whittled
elephant in his fist: "They hired a college kid, Barney. They said
I wasn't able to keep up. They said the company had a new rule about perfect
vision." "Don't race your motor, Otis. You still got an eye. There's more
in the world than a damn survey crew. Try something with your hands.
You got good hands." Otis Heath tried painting, upholstery work, baking,
mechanics. Then he tried whittling. He sold a wooden monkey to a dentist
for ten dollars. That was the beginning. He carved himself out of debt.
He had a unique touch with complicated animals. Barney asked him to do an elephant sometime.

Heath walked past the backs of the men humped at the bar, winked at the bartender. The bartender fingered his shirt pocket for Barney's bow tie, grinned at the crackle of the cellophane wrapper, drifted to quiet fall mornings: mornings blooming with talk of pro football and stacked women, Ohio floods and copper strikes. And Barney clean-shaven, precision-combed, square-jawed, hugging the bar with his elbows, shaking dice for his eight o'clock shot, chasing his luck with a short Budweiser, speculating on the howls from the railroad yard, smoking a dime cigar in a hurry, grinning ear to ear in a patch of October sun, stroking his black suspenders, humming Johnny Cash.

An hour passed. Barney had never been late for the evening session. Three old men, crows on the bench near Barney's chair, searched caved abdomens for the time, their fingers quivering, their eyes wet, their purple jowls hanging over frayed collars, their stick legs vacillating in baggy wools. They watched Jake Miranda, a fat man in striped overalls, level a bowl of salted peanuts, the shells rising in a heap beneath his feet. Then he ordered a hamberger, some hash browns, a plate of sardines, and greenpepper salad, devouring them one after another, a steam shovel glancing at the front door between bites.

Miranda eyed a newsboy who was perched on the window ledge by the front door, a fine-tooth comb tilting out of his pocket. Miranda had stationed the newsboy there to watch for Barney. He would dash along the bar spreading the news, lean between the poker players huddled behind a wicker screen in the corner, alert the floor man, Gus, snap the attention
of the chefs with his fingers, race back to the front of the bar and open the door for Barney.

The newsboy looked at Miranda and shrugged his shoulders. Miranda eased around on the stool and faced the grill again, a patch of sweat the shape of a chicken bone covering his back.

Miranda worked as a brakeman for the Northern Pacific Railroad. A moody man, the father of six girls, an ex-Catholic. On New Years Eve in 1957 he had talked his brother's wife into one of the back bedrooms at a house party on the east side of Ashberry. Barney McGee, half-drunk and unfamiliar with the house, had opened the bedroom door. Never a word said.

Miranda continued to eat, the spoon, fork, and knife working sporadically at the ends of his knuckleless hands. He sheared a grapefruit, slashed the sections haphazardly, drowned them in sugar, scooped them into his mouth one at a time, bloated his cheeks, swallowed. Miniature rolls of fat bounced from below his ears onto blue denim shoulders.

When he had finished the grapefruit, he built a house with the peelings and set a salt shaker on the roof. He called the chef over. The chef grinned and nodded and scratched the grapefruit off the bill.

After his heart attack, only a winter away, Miranda would quit eating grapefruit, and he would quit his job with the railroad and spend the last years of his life dealing pan six days a week for Gus. His two oldest daughters would become prostitutes in Las Vegas and send him money which he would spend on the card games. Gus would know that Miranda was losing the money on purpose.

Miranda would have another attack Thanksgiving night, and he would die face down in a puddle behind Gus's place. He would have left
word after the first attack that he wanted to be cremated, but his wife would go ahead and have him buried at the Rose Hills Cemetery. Rudy Hines would dig the grave with a new spade, but he would feel terrible about covering up the casket because Miranda had always talked about being cremated and about how scared he was of worms.

Otis Heath shuffled along in front of the old men who sat on the bench near Barney’s chair, the strings on his patch trailing down the back of his neck. One of the old men stopped him and waved a cigar in the air without speaking. Heath tossed the old man a package of matches, spun away, and headed for the bar.

Heath flopped on the bar stool and slammed the wooden elephant down, the blunt tusks and misshapen feet a blur in the worn formica, the trunk a wrinkle of light. He threw his head back and yelled a toast to Barney at the cloudy mirror behind the bar. The bartender poured him a double shot. He straightened the patch, smoothed his hair, and spilled the whiskey onto his tongue. He held his mouth stiff, angular, as though it were sprung at the joints.

The old men on the bench watched him pour two, three more jiggers down his throat. In a few years the old men would start to fade out, a few at a time: pneumonia, cirrhosis of the liver, a broken neck. But in the meantime, they would stop and look at Barney’s chair in the window of McGee’s and shake their heads and spit on the sidewalk and walk in their own spittle and carry it into McGee’s for almost a year after Barney had died at the state prison.

But most of them would not be around the January night it would be snowing very hard, and the man with the patch would swing the backdoor of McGee’s open and announce that he was leaving on the midnight
train for Florida to join a nudist colony he had been reading about. Then he would stomp out the door and no one would ever see him again, the patch-eyed man at the bar now, Otis Heath, a great whittler.

Leo Stratton, sitting in the middle of the bench, smoking a cigar and still holding the pack of matches Heath had thrown him, pulled his green plastic gambling visor down to his eyebrows, leaned back, and squinted through the haze of his cigar, pale, statuesque, in the exact position he would be sitting in at home four years later when Heath would find him dead. Heath would go over to the house with a pint of gin for Stratton's birthday, and there Stratton would be, next to his radio, the world series blaring in the stuffy room, and he would have his visor on. His leg would be black from the ankle to the hip, and he would have a paper bag tied to his foot because he had stepped on a rake and the cut had festered. Heath would sit down across from Stratton and drink the gin and smoke one of Stratton's imported cigars and look at the leg before calling the morgue.

Barney's brother, Gus, counted the candles on the birthday cake four times, each time straightening a different one, pushing one farther into the cake, examining the wicks with tired eyes.

The poker players stopped their game, summoned Gus, and asked about the right day, the fishing creel they had bought for Barney hanging bright on the wicker screen behind the table. Gus stamped a cigarette and said he ought to know his kid brother's birthday. He kicked the cigarette butt under the table and started to walk away, but they asked him to call Barney's house.

He returned from the bar and told them there was no answer. They wrinkled their faces and looked at one another. Gus yelled them into
bowed heads, offering them the door. No one spoke. He stood there waiting, tapping his fingers on the sides of his legs. The fingers resembled bananas hanging at the ends of his arms. He offered the door again. No one spoke.

He turned and strode away, looking red and bull-necked and sweaty, not at all like he would look when a truck driver would find him in a snowdrift some seven years from that moment, stiff and blue and gaunt, dead in the snow in a teeshirt and jeans.

It would all happen after the Christian Women's League of Decency would come down to his place and demand that he remove Barney's chair from the front window because some of the children in Ashberry were coming down there on Saturday mornings, pressing their noses against the glass, huddling and whispering about the story in the newspaper.

Gus would refuse to see the women, and when they were to come back a second time with the mayor, Gus would curse at them and threaten to spray their ranks with a shotgun. The mayor would get angry and threaten to close McGee's down, but nothing more would happen because the president of C.W.L.D., a tall, silver-haired woman with a huge goiter, would die before the next monthly meeting and the club would disintegrate.

But Gus wouldn't forget the incident, and a full six years later, when he would decide to sell his place to a man named Carlton, he would stipulate in the contract that Barney's chair be left in the window.

Gus would spend most of the money from the sale on a cruise around South America. He would lose two thousand dollars on the roulette wheels on board ship, but he would still have enough money to buy a bar and grill in another town about forty miles from Ashberry. But he would never open it.

Carlton would change the name of McGee's to the Top Notch and
lower the ceiling and re-tile the floor and paint everything white. He would have a tortoise shell cat who would sit in Barney's chair, watching the leaves collect in the gutter, a light rain falling on them, and then the snow, watching the snow melt and run off the new sidewalk into the drain near the corner, watching the pollen skate around in the street and the sun ripple off the blacktop.

The newsboy limped outside and scanned the street. There was no one coming from either direction. The wet sidewalk stretched out of sight into a darkness broken only by the blue neon sign which poked at the sky above The Lion's Den. The mountains which surrounded the Montana town were not visible. A heavy fog covered the tepee burners at the far end of town and smoke billowed down the river bank from the open pit mines on the pocked gray hill across the railroad tracks. The newsboy watched the blue flashes at the far end of the street for a moment, buttoning his coat absentmindedly. Then he started toward The Lion's Den, hoping to find Barney.

Mona danced freely in the rotating lights: blue and yellow, red and green rays blending over her slender body, her firm breasts floating in the rainbow mist. The newsboy watched her sway, heard the drum beating through the glass, could see the young men gathered below her. They wore suits, and ties and they smiled and winked at her, Al Jefferson among them, eyeing her legs, waiting for nine o'clock, waiting for Mona's replacement to take over, so that he could drive her home.

Mona leaned toward the group of men and shook herself hard, and then stepped away, backwards, twisting, rocking on her heels, her white pants tightening at the hips. The newsboy pressed close to the glass, rubbed a porthole on the pane to see better, and searched the room for
Barney, But Barney was not there in the shimmering room with the tall, black-suited men who cradled their glasses in neat pale hands and slid the sweat from their foreheads with initialed handkerchiefs and squirmed in their red leather chairs as the music grew louder, more electric, and the guitars twanged fitfully, and the lights flashed purple and orange, and Mona took the pins from her hair.

The newsboy backed away from the window, wishing that he hadn't come, wanting to stay, get a closer look at her stomach. He was suddenly ashamed because of Barney, and he ran away from The Lion's Den down the sidewalk toward the streetlight in front of McGee's

He burst through the door of McGee's breathing hard, and Gus grabbed him by the arm and told him to slow down. He walked self-consciously over to the candy counter and bought a package of gum. He climbed the window ledge monkey-quick, turned to see the bartender watching him, a towel and glass in his hands and a scowl on his face, turned away, looked out the window. He felt for the fine-tooth comb in his coat pocket. It was still there. He smiled. Barney liked the line in Bill Bailey about the fine-tooth comb. Barney bought the first paper every day. On bad days he bought two. On Saturdays he bought the boy lunch or perhaps a stick of jerky "for being a Yankee fan."

The newsboy opened the package of gum and shoved all five sticks into his mouth. He began to chew slowly, letting his lips fly apart each time he pulled his teeth away from the gum, arrogant and alone, the same way he would chew his gum in the sheriff's office at the age of seventeen, accused of rape, and scoffing at the two deputies who leaned over the table and glared at him. He would be wearing boots and a leather jacket, and he would be missing a tooth from a fight with his father.
The sheriff would have to let him go because the girl would refuse to testify against him, and he would leave the jail with a smile on his scarred face. A week later he would try to beat a freight train to Copperhead Crossing.

Otis Heath slumped on the bar stool, his pointed butt sinking. He was yelling about Mona. Jake Miranda leaned away from a plate of calves' brains and called Mona a bitch.

The newsboy pasted his gum under the windowsill and bought a fresh pack. He listened to Heath curse Mona. He could not agree; she was pretty, and a lot younger than Barney. But he kept quiet because he was afraid of Heath.

Nine o'clock. The chef automatically set Barney's bowl of clam chowder at the end of the counter. A half hour passed. Some of Barney's friends from the railroad yard drifted in. There were younger men, too, mill workers in hooded sweatshirts. A few winos from the Ashberry Rooms came in, flapping their torn shoes on the tile, mumbling shakey-lipped into everyone's ear. They all kept asking Gus where Barney was, eating and drinking rapidly, shuffling up to the bar in waves, standing in noisy lines behind the grill.

Gus turned on the small television set in the corner above the bar. Two black giants filled the screen with shoulders and elbows and long white feet. No one watched. There was standing room only, except for Barney's chair.

Otis Heath was still after Mona. The bartender nodded at the charges. Gus wandered around, his hands in his pockets, shrugging at the questions of the old men.

Ten o'clock came. But Barney didn't come. Hamburger hissed on
the grill, the grease first yellow, brown, black, crust. The smoke thickened. Gus drank a beer and then checked the cake under the bar. The frosting was getting runny.

Gus slammed the bathroom door. He ran his fingers over the cigarette burns which formed a horseshoe around the toilet paper pack. Barney just didn't leave a guy hanging. There had to be a reason.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Barney drew the pistol away from the bulge in the mattress. He had fired four shots.

He slid out from under the bed and sat up. A column of moonlight fell through the curtains over the dark pools on the sheets. The two nude bodies shone waxen, ivory where the light crossed them. Barney crawled up on the edge of the bed and grabbed their wrists.

Barney got to his feet, the pistol in his left hand. He stared at the heaped bodies for a moment, cold air filling the room. Then he walked to the chiffonier, tucked the pistol under some sweaters and left the room.
Dale Drake pointed to the dotted line at the bottom of the contract. the sapphire ring gleaming on his finger.

"Sign here, Mr. Olson."

The construction worker scribbled his name. Drake smiled at the man's wife. She was holding a scantily clad infant whose eyes fell inward. Four small children with dirty faces stood quietly behind the woman's long gray skirt.

"He's a cute one," Drake said. "How old?"

"She's ten months yesterday," The woman smiled, showing a missing front tooth, and then lowered her head.

Drake detected movement on the lot. He stood up and slid around the desk.

"Nothing like a baby." He poked the child's ribs gently with a pencil and then opened the door and placed his hand on Olson's back.

"Thanks loads, folks. I just know that convertible is the ticket. Come back again some time. Gave you my card, didn't I? Good."

"Thank-you, Mr. Drake," Olson called from the window of the convertible. The convertible slouched out of the lot, its tail pipes an inch from the ground belching blue smoke.

One of the other salesmen had moved on to the lot. Drake lit a cigarette and watched him channel the customer into a Lincoln Continental. He had wanted the sale. Minnesota imports always brought a meatier commission. He turned and walked into the showroom.
The showroom floor fanned out in a wave of smooth gold carpet which flowed into the paneling below the bay windows. In the center of the room a red sports car with a white vinyl interior rotated gently on a concealed turnwheel. The chrome gear shift glittered and the dash sunk modernly away to smother the dials and switches in red plastic and strips of imitation mahogany. Drake watched the car ease around. A good scene. Chatfield knew the rules. Perhaps the only touch missing was a mini-skirted honey sitting carelessly on the front fender. But then Chatfield was an old man.

Drake glanced at the three other cars, all arranged at angles conducive to the sports car's glamour, in a starfish pattern, all of them softer colored hardtops with huge satin banners on the trunks and hoods: "Family Fun," "Save 100's," "Luxury Line."

Classical music streamed from the ceiling. Drake walked past an observer's bench, past a white wrought-iron loveseat toward the fountain in the front window. The fountain gurgled at the passing traffic, turquoise water arching from the mouth of a porcelain lion. Drake watched the water run its flawless cycle. This is class, he thought, but not the ultimate.... He stuck his finger in the water.

Over the playful strains of the music Drake could hear voices. As he moved in the direction of the voices he recognized the choppy baritone pattern of Oscar Chatfield's speech. The other voice he identified as that of Jim Geraghty, the new salesman. He opened a new car catalogue and leaned against the wall.

"We don't want another convertible on this lot until April," Chatfield was saying. "Convertibles are summer merchandise, Geraghty. This is Montana, not Florida. Try to get that through the piece of cement
you've got between your ears."

"Yes sir."

Paging through the catalogue, Drake smiled to himself. The stupid ass. I told him to discourage ragtop discards in September.

The conversation in Chatfield's office had stopped. Geraghty asked to be excused. Drake could hear Chatfield fiddling with the dish. It was an amber glass dish the shape of a woman's breast with an exaggerated nipple for a handle. He kept salted peanuts in it. He was cracking the peanuts rapidly.

"There's two things to be glad about, Geraghty. One is that I'm not going to parade you before the others. Two is that Drake unloaded the convertible this afternoon. It was like shooting mice with a shotgun. Now here's the point; if you want to become a salesman, listen to me and watch Drake."

Chatfield put the lid back on the dish.

"You like football?" he said, the peanuts snapping like miniature firecrackers.

"I love the game," Geraghty's voice danced with enthusiasm, relief. "I watch the pros all the time."

"Then you know who the Green Bay Packers are."

Drake closed the catalogue and shook his head. He could imagine the scene in the next room: Geraghty hesitating, half-insulted, starting to get frosted off, trying to act like a student, hating himself, hating the convertible, Chatfield, a handful of peanuts, chewing, watching with the salamander eyes, enjoying himself. "You know why Green Bay is king? Three reasons." Chatfield holding up three fingers, Geraghty fumbling with a cigarette, confused. "The first is pride. Bart Starr talked about pride
last weekend not ten minutes before they went out and devoured Chicago.
You get used to being number one. There's nothing else," Chatfield's
big square nose shining, the nostrils flared, peanut shells all over the
blotter on his desk. Geraghty sitting up, nodding, a regular jackass.
"The second reason is that they can smell money. Once they smell it,
Eureka! They're like a pack of starved dogs in a butchershop." "That's
a good way of putting it alright, Mr. Chatfield," "The third reason,
Geraghty, is that they don't make mistakes. None. That's where we come
in. I like to think that Chatfield Plymouth is the same way."
Chatfield's jowls folding, spreading as he talks, his new suit a brilliant
sheen in the sunlight, the big hands moving over the desk, bursting the
peanuts. Geraghty silent, alone, amateur, sweating his shirt damp."You
know what Green Bay does to people who make mistakes. That comes from
first rate coaching, Lombardi knows. He gives the boys free reins, same
as I do here. Shows faith. He knows he can't be on the field. I know
I can't be here and in Minneapolis at the same time. You make your own
deals. I have to trust you. The deals you make we stick by. It's been
that way for twenty five years and I'm not changing it now. Course if you
make too many bad deals ....." Chatfield raising the bushy eyebrows, pea­
muts jumping in his palm. Geraghty frozen, converted. "That's all I
have to say. Now get out there and sell some cars."

Drake stepped out the sidedoor before Geraghty came scrambling out
of Chatfield's office. Geraghty passed him and headed for the truck
section on the other side of the lot. Drake sat in the shade on a bench
near the door and watched Geraghty hurry into the chrome glare of the cars.
He wondered why Chatfield had not mentioned the high interest loans and
the holes in the asphalt to Geraghty. Or the sewer trouble under the shop
or the fight for the franchise, the fierceness of the new competitors, the Cadillac with the dead body odor in it, the growth of the strip. Geraghty would have really had a vision. He would have bowed and scraped all the way across the lot. There was no way for Geraghty. He was a marshmellow eater. Drake labeled anyone he considered an inevitable failure as a marshmellow eater. Once during his junior year in high school he had had to eat a marshmellow. He built an ethic on the incident.

The night the athletic club at Langford High School held its letterman's initiation, Dale Drake stood in the line of sweating naked boys who were waiting for the ceremony to begin. They were standing on the cold cement floor of one of the locker rooms. The lights were out. From upstairs came the voices and noise of the pending ordeal. The victims whispered rumor after rumor up and down the shifting, terror-ridden line. "I ain't eating no goldfish. Anderson says they make you eat those black bastards with the buggy eyes. Jesus. I ain't going to do it." "That's nothing, Phillips. Wait til they pack your balls with analgesic and toss you in the shower." "You guys are exaggerating. Christ, they can't get away with that stuff. Mr. Coburn would expell them."
"Sure. But Mr. Coburn isn't here, Randy. And when you got your hands full of what you think is just bananas in the toilet Mr. Coburn won't know diddly-damn about it."

Drake stood silent and tense near the end of the line. He had not been a football star. He had played occasionally and earned the letter. It was difficult to decide how bad he wanted the letter, what he would tolerate from the people upstairs. He had come very close to not coming to the initiation. From childhood he had detested humiliation.
He had once stolen a teacher's briefcase and tossed it in the river for embarasssing him in front of the class about his zipper being open.

Drake managed to survive the series of ordeals as the evening wore on. He ate a goldfish, stood in the toilet, sweated through fifty push-ups, with a shotput between his shoulder blades, chewed without swallowing, five hot peppers. When the line formed for the marshmellow event, a big, lump-faced senior letterman, whose girlfriend Drake had been taking out, made certain that Drake took the last place in the line.

The trick was to tuck a marshmellow in your crotch and walk to the other end of the gymnasium floor without dropping it. Drop it and you had to eat it. The first twenty-seven people were successful. Drake dropped the marshmellow ten feet from the end-line. Everyone had used the same marshmellow.

They marched Drake out to the center of the floor and the lump-faced boy handed him the marshmellow and said "When I give the signal, chum, start eating." They moved away from him across the glazed, honey-colored floor on which the ceiling lights cast white pools.

Drake put the marshmellow in his mouth. Naked and tired and humiliated and furious, he chewed the marshmellow, the row of smiling faces watching, the white stripes standing out on their arms. Chewing and hating and wanting to break their faces, he said to himself. "Never again. You pompous bastards."

When the initiation was over, Drake dressed quickly and left. Driving down the old highway which led to his home a few miles from town, he knew down in his abdomen he would never eat another marshmellow.

Geraghty entered the white metal-roofed shack behind the last
row of trucks. Watching him, Drake knew that he would be eating marshmallows forever.

While he was sitting there on the bench a young woman drove up in an old Mercury. Drake watched her get out of the car and browse through the merchandise. She was a thin, long-legged girl and standing there in the autumn sun with strings of scarlet banners flapping over her head she looked lean and firm and confused.

Drake put his sunglasses on and lit a cigarette. He watched her bend over to look inside the cars. Liking the shape of her legs, he crossed the lot and introduced himself.

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Drake. I'm Juliet Hunter."

Drake watched her lips and teeth, liked her knees.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't really know for sure. I think just about anything would be better than that heap."

She pointed to the Mercury "It's not much. My ex-husband knew how to keep it in line but I can't remember all the crazy things he used to do to make it work right. He used to do something to the cigarette lighter to make the heater work and something to the radio to get the wipers going and now that I'm working I need a decent car and I...."

Drake smiled and nodded and then guided and flattered her into a yellow Edsel Chatfield had laid a hundred dollar bonus on. They took a short drive. Juliet learned the minor points of the car, Drake convincing her that she had found a cure for her transportation problem. Juliet watched the road; Drake watched Juliet's fingernails, mouth, breasts.

During the next two weeks Juliet brought the Edsel back six times. Drake listened to her complaints: a fuzzy radio, an unpredictable heater,
They took long rides in the country. He fixed the minor discrepancies for her, listening carefully as she told him about the divorce and her job and her boredom.

Drake was talking with Chatfield one afternoon over the hood of a station wagon when he saw the Edsel in the middle of the highway, its turn signal flashing. Chatfield noticed the Edsel, too.

"Looks like you got a bucket of troubles there, Dale. Was it worth the extra money?"

"I think so."

"You think women and cars are compatible?"

"What's on your mind, Oscar?"

"Oh, nothing. Just thought I'd ask."

Juliet stepped from the car.

"Hi Dale, I mean Mr. Drake. I'm sorry to bother you but something's gone wrong with the emergency brake. Are you busy?"

Drake watched Chatfield out of the corner of his eye. Chatfield sucked on his pipe and said nothing. Drake ushered Juliet to her car.

He watched her skirt move to the top of her mylons. She glanced at him occasionally, played with her hair in the rear-view mirror, drove on. She turned before coming to the freeway interchange and took an old road which ran close to the river.

Bouncing along the dusty road which was striped with shade, Drake wanted to touch her. He asked her to pull over. She turned the ignition off and looked at him. Her perfume hung thick in the car. He moved closer to her and kissed her, putting his hand on her knee. Suddenly she pulled away.
"What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing, it's just that, well, why don't you stop by the apartment tomorrow after work."

Drake leaned back against the seat, his stomach warm with wanting her.

"I'll be there at six, he said. "I like gin."

She smiled and started the car.

"What else would you like?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that."

The next afternoon Elmer Kiakuck planted a chewed boot on the lot of Chatfield Motors. Drake was discussing a sales promotion with Geraghty in the showroom when he noticed the old man standing in the center of the lot looking around as though he was lost. Drake laid down the pan and paper he was working with.

"Who the hell is that, Jim?"

"Don't you know him? That's old man Kiakuck, from up around Split Rock. He's been prospecting up there for years."

"He got a car?"

"Not that I know of. He's gone through a lot of mules though."

Drake wondered if the old man was really interested in a car or if he wanted to use the toilet or the telephone.

Kiakuck stood there, waiting, his head bobbing, his face ruddy and glassy wherever his beard didn't reach. He was wearing a fur cap, knee-high boots, and a buckskin shirt and leggings. He had tied a packsack on his back and a handkerchief around his neck. He was carrying a canteen fastened to a leather strap which ran from his shoulder to his
hip and which swayed whenever he moved.

"He got any money?" Drake tipped a paper cup under the spigot on the water cooler.

"I'm not sure, Dale. He owns a good chunk of Whitetail Valley. They say he's got gold packed away somewhere up there."

"How long's he been mining?"

"Probably since 1849. He farms some too, though. Owns a lot of livestock and protects everything he's got with a pretty touchy shotgun."

Drake grinned as he watched the old man tip the canteen up to his mouth.

Kiakuck was fastening the lid on the canteen when Drake approached, his sunglasses like ebony saucers on his face.

"Afternoon, Mr. Kiakuck. What can we sell you today?"

Kiakuck whirled around, the canteen flying out at his side.

"Call me Elmer."

He sat down cross-legged and peered up at Drake, at the plastic banners beating in the air.

"Nice spread. Always admired O.C. O.C.'s got a plan here. Sit down, relax, son."

Drake looked at the oil-stained asphalt.

"No thanks, Elmer. Could I interest you in a Dodge Dart? We've got a....."

Kiakuck was not looking at him. He was pointing at the highway.

"Nothing but an Indian trail once. Religious folks used to move through here by the thousands headed for Utah."

"You look like a Plymouth man to me, now....."
"Once a bunch all got sick from the water near Sullivan Creek....."

As Kiakuck spoke he removed the packsack from his back. Drake watched him unfasten the straps and take out a folded sheet of newspaper. He set the packsack aside and spread the newspaper out in front of him. Drake folded his arms and stepped back a little.

".....the only automobee I ever rode was a '36 Ford and it's in the creek by my shack....."

He drew a package of matches out of the packsack. Drake stared at the matches. Kiakuck laid them on the newspaper. Drake noticed that the newspaper section was the classified ads page with the bright red print of the Chatfield Plymouth ad covering the bottom half of the page. He's after a new one, scared I'll trip him up on the price, Drake thought. But Kiakuck said nothing about the paper.

".....then I filled it with rocks and pulled down the opening of a shaft up by Coral Springs....."

He's going to burn the ad up if I don't have the one he wants, Drake thought, watching Kiakuck's hands as they moved over the matches. But Kiakuck wasn't looking at the matches. He kept rattling on.

".....that was the heaviest snowfall up Thompson River in twenty-nine years and me with no firewood....."

"Wow," Drake said occasionally, unable to sandwich anything else in. He kept waiting for the big moment when Kiakuck would leap to his feet and demand the Grand Prix listed at twenty-five hundred dollars.

Kiakuck stopped talking finally and picked up the packsack. He took out a cigar and put it in his mouth. Then he offered Drake one. Drake refused, looking at his watch. Twenty-five minutes had slipped away. The slender outline of Juliet Hunter began to slide across the window
of his brain.

Kiakuck did not light the cigar. It bobbed in his mouth, brown and ominous.

".....Whiteoaks is where they hanged Leivia Springer for stealing a horse....."

Drake climbed up on the hood of a late model Chevrolet and looked at the thickening traffic on the highway. She won't mind if I'm a little late. As soon as he gets the lonesomeness out of his system we can get this over with..... When he looked back down at Kiakuck the matches were gone. The red letters on the newspaper glared up at him through a sheet of cigar smoke.

"How about a Volkswagon ?" Drake jumped down onto the asphalt.

Kiakuck did not look up. He stuck the cigar in the top of his boot and reached into the packsack.

"Bite ?" He held a large apple up to Drake.

"What ? Oh, no I'm not hungry, thanks."

"Rome Beauty." Kiakuck grinned bouncing the bright red enamel sphere in his baked fist.

Maybe if I get on his level, Drake thought.

"You like to gamble, Elmer ?"

"Sure do, Dale."

"How do you know my....."

"Once down in Cody, Wyoming....."

Kiakuck was holding a pearl-handled penknife in his hand now. Drake had not seen where it came from.

".....a straight flush and two indians with full houses sitting across the table....."
He began to peel the apple, the narrow red ribbon winding away from the apple, dropping into his lap.

".....I hit the first one in the face with a piece of firewood....."

Drake watched the apple peeling dance up out of Kiakuck's lap, over the buckskin leggings, down onto the asphalt unbroken, red and shiny and curved, writhing on the asphalt.

Kiakuck finished the Indian story and moved into a narrative about a slot machine with one of the lemons missing in Jackpot, Nevada. Drake looked at the newspaper near Kiakuck's feet, at the cigar burning down to the lip of his boot, at the endless red ribbon of apple skin, at his watch, at Kiakuck's flushed face, the white teeth like needles. Then he lost track of the time of day and the day of the week, and he was trying to get hold of his senses when Kiakuck stopped in the middle of a sentence and asked him what he would take for the blue Ford pickup in one of the back rows.

"What did you say?"

"The pickup. What'll you take for it?"

Drake was speechless. The apple peeling was curling over the tops of his shoes. Kiakuck had pared only half of the apple.

"Let's see," Drake said, flipping the pages of a price book. He had never forgotten a price. "$55 Ford, blue. A hundred and fifty dollars."

Kiakuck shoved his bottom lip out with his tongue, giving his chin an appearance of immense swelling.

"Hundred fifty, eh?"

Drake nodded. Kiakuck continued to peel the apple, whistling.

"A hundred cash," he said suddenly.

Drake had never dickered over prices. But he wanted to get to
Juliet's apartment and it was getting late. The hands of his watch shoved him into a reply.

"It's not a policy here to change prices. But if you have a hundred cash, the pickup is yours."

He folded the price sheet and stuck it into his shirt pocket, pleased that he had been able to handle Kiakuck so painlessly. In a few minutes it would be over. But Kiakuck produced a terrific frown, glanced over at the pickup and then looked up at Drake, the apple and the knife and his hands still in motion.

"There's this problem. I ain't exactly got a hundred cash."

Drake stared at the apple peeling as it crawled along beside his foot.

"Well, Jesus, how much have you got." His voice was high-pitched. Kiakuck took a deep breath. The cigar was gone from his boot.

"Ain't got any cash exactly. But I got a first class horse worth a hundred. I though we could sort of swap?"

The apple peeling remained unbroken. Drake stared at the knife blade which glinted in the sunlight. A horse? What the hell have I gotten into here? A horse. It won't do any good to get mad at him. Maybe I should, no, that's crazy. But then Chatfield wouldn't have the finesse to pull it off. A horse for sale at Chatfield Plymouth. Why not? Drugstores are selling bacon.

"You got yourself a deal, Elmer. Something we've never done here, but we're willing to gamble once in awhile. Now where's the horse?"

He looked around the lot.

Kiakuck was working on the apple very slowly now, slitting the smooth hide like a surgeon. Drake waited and waited, wishing that the
old man would hurry up. The apple turned over in Kiakuck's palm as though it were on a spit. When Kiakuck reached the start of what appeared to be the last ring of peeling, he looked up and said, "Shoot. I forgot to mention that this horse is in a pasture just off the highway where you turn up to get to my place. Didn't have no way to bring him in, 'cept to ride him. Twenty-three miles is a long ways to run a horse, especially on pavement, so I caught a ride with Henry Grunning. You know him, don't you? He's farmed that land up past Baker Crossing for thirty years. He had a cow once that had a calf with two......"

Drake placed his hands on the hood of the Chevrolet, leaned over and stared at himself in the recently waxed metal. A sight-unseen trade. That was something Geraghty might do. Still, the pickup was no big loss. He could hear Kiakuck's magpie voice ranting the history of Henry Grunning, pig farmer. What a beautiful old man Kiakuck was. He looked at his watch. Juliet would be waiting. He was going to have to interrupt Kiakuck some way. He did it with a yell that brought Chatfield to his office window.

"It's a deal!"

Kiakuck stopped talking. He grinned and snapped the stem of the apple free with the tip of the knife blade. The peeling stretched out in front of him, a red and white ribbon pattern, coiled, cataleptic.

"Stay right where you are," Drake shouted. He ran into the sales building, located the keys to the pickup, made out some papers, and hurried back out on the lot, the papers flapping in his hand.

"Here," He laid the papers on the hood of a nearby car. Kiakuck scratched an X with the pen.

Kiakuck resembled an unkempt poodle hanging out the window of the
pickup. He thanked Drake repeatedly as he jerked the pickup out of the lot, burning the clutch and revving the engine at full throttle.

"Haven't drove for awhile," he would say with each jerk. Drake laughed. It was the most bizarre deal he'd ever made.

When Kiakuck wound out of sight in the traffic, Drake turned to go into the showroom and met the eyes of Oscar Chatfield in the office window. Drake stopped whistling and waited for the old man to do something. But Chatfield remained motionless. I'd better clean up the mess Kiakuck made with that apple, Drake said to himself. Chatfield hates litter.

But when he turned to locate the peeling there was no sign of Kiakuck's work. The newspaper was missing too. Drake shrugged his shoulders and hurried into the showroom.

In the morning Drake left Juliet's apartment early, she still laying asleep in the cool bedroom, her black hair spread over the pillow. He drove downtown and rented a horstrailer. Then he went back to the lot and borrowed one of the washboys from the service department to assist him with the horse.

He drove the twenty-three miles to the Whitetail turnoff and found that what Kiakuck had traded him was not quite a first class horse. The sag-bellied mule stood in the pasture, its long, weather-beaten head drooping, the skin on its bowed legs folding down to the ankles.

Drake sat for a long time in the cab of the pickup staring at the old mule, smiles and frowns alternating on his face. He wanted to drive up the canyon, find Kiakuck, strangle him. But then he remembered what Geraghty had said about the shotgun.

Suddenly he turned to the washboy and said, "I don't want a goddamn soul to hear about this, you understand?"
The washboy was a spindly, bug-eyed boy.

"Yes, sir."

All the way back to Langford, Drake thought about Kiakuck and the apple.

After returning the trailer and paying the rental fee out of his own pocket, Drake went and told Chatfield about the mule. Chatfield looked up from his desk, took a few drags on his pipe and said, "A mule, eh?" After a pause he said, "I'll talk to you later. I'm busy right now." There was nothing on his desk.

The following week Drake sold a record number of cars. He covered the lot like a leopard in the bush. Occasionally he noticed Chatfield in the window of the office watching him through a slate-colored film of pipe smoke.

Two more days passed. Chatfield had said nothing about the Kiakuck deal, but he was there in the window more than ever.

Juliet came down to the lot three times the second week and Drake loosed a mechanic on her each time. She would leave with a pout distorting her pretty mouth and the Edsel would roar and spit gravel for a block. He kept telling her it was over.

At the end of the second week Chatfield sent for Drake. It was a bright, crisp Saturday morning. Chatfield huddled behind the desk, the peanut dish in front of him.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

"Perfect."

Chatfield reached for the dish.

"How's everything going, Dale?"

"Beautifully. In fact I was on a sale when you called me in here."
"Another mule?"

"If you want to intimidate somebody, Oscar, pick Johnson or Geraghty. If you want a resignation I'll give it to you."

"Take it easy there, boy. I was just making a little joke. Care for a peanut?"

Drake reached for the dish, stopped, and withdrew his hand.

"No thanks."

"Tell you what," Chatfield's white hair shone in the light which poured through the window above his head, "Let's just forget the Kiakuck deal. Everybody makes mistakes."

"Not anymore. I'll get Kiakuck someday."

"I don't think he'll give you the chance. He only does this about once every five or six years. He never picks on the same man twice."

Drake stood up, his face turning red.

"You mean you stood by and let me get sucked in when you knew?"

"Sit down and lower your voice. I'm running this place, not you."

Drake flopped in the chair.

"Kiakuck pulled his last stunt just six months before you came to work here in '61. I've been waiting all these years for him to show you the ropes, Dale."

"Why? What the hell's so special about the old bastard?"

"You're being rhetorical I'm sure."

"Alright he's good. So did you bring me in here to remind me of the fact?"

"No. I wanted your opinion on something."

"My opinion? After falling for a stunt like that?"
"Just let me be the judge. Now what I wanted to ask you about was this. I've been kind of the all points man around this place for damn near twenty-five years, I'm tired and I'm old. I figure it's time I delegated a little responsibility to somebody else. What I've been thinking of is a general manager post. But I'm not sure about the man. I want to get the right man."

Drake watched Chatfield's hands search out the peanuts, split them.

"Well, I suppose everyone has to step down sooner or later. Who you got in mind?"

Chatfield lit his pipe and leaned back in the chair.

"I've done a lot of thinking and I've made what I think to be the best selection. What do you think about Geraghty?"

Drake sat up straight in the chair, his mouth agape.

"Geraghty? Oh for Christ's sake, Oscar. Geraghty? Don't hand me a line."

"I realize he's a little young, but....."

"Young? He couldn't sell whiskey to an alcoholic."

"Well, then, what about Harrison?"

"No personality."

"Fredericks?"

"Lazy."

"Miller?"

"Girl crazy."

"Johnson?"

"Too gullible."

"How about you, Dale?"

"Well, I didn't mean that I....."
Chatfield had left the desk and was standing behind Drake with the door open.

"Think about it. I want an answer in the morning."

Drake stood up, a little embarrassed about the ease with which he had damned the other salesmen.

"Are you sure? Maybe I should....."

"In the morning. I believe I see a customer out there."

Drake nodded and passed through the door.

Outside the sun bounced off the roofs of the cars. The scarlet banners leaped against the sky. An elderly woman in a dark blue suit was walking hesitatingly along a row of station wagons. Standing on the porch in the breeze Drake watched her grope around. He grinned and straightened his tie. Then he put on the sunglasses and descended on her.
SKUNKS

A woman with elegantly curled red hair gets out of a cab on Wyler Street in Canton, Colorado on a May evening in 1948. The woman is tall, dressed in tweed, her black felt beret beaded from the rain which has been falling for two days and which has turned the clay street into a red smear.

She walks into the Hotel Pierce, a two-story wooden structure, green, faded, ornate. There is a one-eyed cat sitting in the window, his gaudy yellow fur twisted into jagged tufts.

The desk clerk has dandruff. He scratches with both hands, the stubby thumbs outstretched, the dandruff falling like sawdust on the burnished desk top. He scoops it into a pile, scratches again. He is a skinny man with sunken jaws and a narrow head. His clothes are too big for him, and standing there in the dim light he resembles a sack of tools.

Virginia Norwood asks for a room on the second floor, one with a bath.

"This rain's kind of scary, ain't it?"

"How much is the room, please. I'm very tired."

"Two dollars and forty cents. The forty cents is for we got to pay the rat man. I never seen a rat around yet though. No thanks to the rat man. See that tabby on the windowsill? Bought him from a hobo. One dollar. The hobo said he doesn't even leave the tails. Here's the key. Room 206. You got any suitcases?"
"No. This is all," She holds up a lavender satchel.

"Say, that's class. You buy that in Denver?"

"No. Good evening."

"Care for a mint? They're from North Carolina."

She turns and walks to the elevator, her eyes red, tired, her delicate face drawn sober. The desk clerk watches her get into the elevator, admiring her slender legs. Then he scribbles something in a book and lights a cigar. Christ, we ain't had a looker like that in here since Hoover was boss.

Virginia Norwood drops her satchel on the bed, removes her coat and hat, and then crosses the room to pull down the shades. The radiator is hissing intermittently and the light bulb, hanging bare on a frayed wire, is flickering.

She removes her clothes and sits down on the bed, facing the door. She surveys the bathroom for a moment.... She will bathe after..... When the cigarette is half ashes, she gets up and locks the door, and then walks over to the closet.

The coat hanger she selects is new and neatly twisted together. She gradually unwinds it, using the hook for a handle. Then she walks to the bed, lies down on her back....I have to, it's the only.....and rams the wire up herself, biting her bottom lip white, muffling a cry in her throat. She wants to be sure it is done, but she feels dizzy and can't gather the strength to use the hanger again. She starts to sit up but reels off the bed and lands on the floor unconscious, the coat hanger rattling away from her hand across the tile floor.

A few hours later she crawls out into the hall and calls for help. The desk clerk tucks his pint of whiskey under the counter and scrambles
up the stairs.

"Jesus. What is this? You ain't got a stitch, somebody beat you? This just don't happen in Canton. Christ, I'll call Doc Hansen."

Doctor Hansen has Virginia Norwood taken to Community Hospital. In the ambulance he says to her, "You could've killed yourself, bled to death. There are agencies who will take the baby."

"Oh, I wish I had killed myself. I don't want Arthur to know I did this."

Arthur Norwood travels from Canton to Mesa City six days a week. He inspects eggs for the state board of health. He is a calm, distant man who looks like Virginia's father when they go to a movie or restaurant. One week after the birth of Lee Anne he gets into his car on a Tuesday morning and does not come home in the evening. He crosses the state line and heads for the west coast. Virginia Norwood does not try to find him. She has met the first of many men Lee Anne will not know.

Four years later Virginia Norwood packs her furniture and moves to Texas where her sister can care for Lee Anne while she works as a secretary. Lee Anne hates the lizards and snakes and the hot needle sun. The water is bitter. Her mother continues to bring men home and begins to drink gin with her meals.

"Do you want me to do a washrag for your head, Momma?"

"No, Lee, just turn out the light, it's okay."

One evening Lee Anne gets out of her aunt's car, runs into the house, and finds her mother on the bedroom floor, her face swollen a light maroon.

Virginia Norwood's funeral is brief and simple, one spray of roses
on the casket, a few relatives, and Lee Anne in a white cotton dress waiting for tears that won't come.

The orphanage is polished and quiet with vines winding around the windows. There are good days, mornings in the chapel watching the blue candles flicker in the dim sanctuary, watching the wax dot the feet of St. Anthony of Padua. But there are more bad days, long evenings in the kitchen, a big floor to scrub, and no books but a missal in her room. The nuns have stiff jaws and chalky teeth, and they spend their afternoons crocheting sweaters for deaf men who die with them on somewhere in Germany.

When she is sixteen, Lee Anne slips away from the orphanage on an August afternoon, spends the little money she has for a bus ticket and gets a job as a cook at the Rio Cafe in a little green town close to Yellowstone Park. The job is hard and the cafe is always busy, and Lee Anne saves her money in a curler bag. The nights are long and the coffee turns black and there are roaches in the rooms at the Big Top Hotel where Lee Anne lives alone and reads the newspaper for a better job.

The snow falls and the sunshine bleaches the shades. Then one day there is an ad for a cigarette girl at Chico's Place on Twilight Avenue. Chico likes her! "Take the sweater off, Kid." He stares, the black eyes hungry. "Yes, you're the one."

Lee Anne carries the cigarettes under the pink lights dressed in a black bikini, her hair piled high on her head. She drinks wine after hours in a plush room and hopes that Chico will stay away because the other girls have told her about him. But Chico is friendly and clever,
and he brings her candy and perfume. They drink together every night, until one night she drinks too much and Chico takes her to bed. She likes the feel of the strong, copper colored man with the gold caps on his teeth and blackbirds in his eyes.

Lee Anne draws crowds, all kinds of men who have heard about the new girl at Chico's. One of them is a young man who sits at the bar in a sheepskin coat, his boots hooked on the bar stool, watching her walk around night after night.

On Saturday nights Lee Anne talks to him over a pitcher of beer in a corner booth behind the band.

"I need you, Lee. I want you to come home with me."

"I can't do that. Chico would kill me. I owe him a lot."

"Look, I've got enough money to take care of you better than Chico can. If he comes after you, I'll break his neck. Come on, Lee, I'll own a farm west of town someday. It's a huge place. You could move around, breath. It's beautiful out there. I know you'd like it."

"But I've only known you a month."

"Let's get married tonight. There's a J.P. at Elm."

Lee Anne thinks about the apple orchard at the orphanage, about Chico's other girlfriends.

"I like you a lot."

She packs her clothes and leaves the room empty. The next day Chico calls an ad into the newspaper for a new girl and then gets drunk in his office before noon.

The skunk sidled out of the currant bushes at the edge of the forest, its white stripes cut by the shadows of the trees as it wound down the
weeded bank and across the foot bridge which connected the forest with Amos Rudyard's property. Crossing the arched stone bridge the skunk changed to a furry shadow on the face of the moon, sliding down the arc easily, the head cocked and the blunt snout thrust high, a big skunk, agile and black, moving with an icy boldness toward the grove of trees which surrounded the pheasant pen.

He had taken this path before, across the gravel and under the wire to the taste of feathers and blood and the burst that snapped the neck in his jaws. Then the limpness and the noise all around, moving away, along the creek, dragging the bird across the sandy bank, back to the bridge and into the shadows of beech trees and poison ivy, the hoot of an owl, crickets. Back to the burrow, two small mouths in the dark waiting, the black eyes of a mate. Rip the pheasant, the meat sweet on the tongue, wings and small bones for the kits always hungry, their short claws spreading the feathers. Eat half the night out of the bite of the rain, hidden in layers of leaves and feathers and fur, the moonlight bright at the mouth of the burrow. Sleep, warm and full until morning. Hunt again when the clouds gathered.

When the skunk reached the pheasant pen it stopped and surveyed the grounds, moving its head in a mechanical arc, the snout a blue spark, the tail bushy, drooped. It began to sniff along the boards at the bottom of the big pen, back and forth, pawing sporadically at the wire. Suddenly it stopped near the corner of the pen and began to dig, the dirt spewing out behind.

The skunk had hit the bottom of the pen's foundation when an owl hooted back in the trees. It drew itself out of the hole and turned to look into the forest. A shotgun cracked out of the wet bushes. The skunk
rose on its hind legs as though necktied to a rope someone had jerked. It flipped over in the gravel, the face torn away from the jawbone and the tail twitching. The pheasant began to thrash around in their shoots and cry and throw themselves against the wire ceiling, knocking their feathers loose, a few feathers floating away from the pen and touching the gravel near the skunk. The odor of skunk thickened and blanketed the whole area, drifting into the forest and hanging strong over the pen.

Amos Rudyard stepped out of the bushes on the other side of the yard, stopped, and looked beyond the pen. He was holding the shotgun and a shovel, and was dressed in a black raincoat and hat.

The moonlight bounced off his bony nose and spilled down his shoulders and feet as he crossed the damp lawn with a brisk gait. When he reached the pen, he rested the shotgun against the gate and began to calm the pheasants in a steel-plated voice: "Easy there, go slow, turn the wings down, I got him. There, don't be crazy, you'll wreck your feathers. Careful. Dead as hell. Nothing to worry about."

When the birds had cuddled in their shoots Rudyard closed the gate and picked the skunk up by the tail, swinging him out of the shadows, his neck a red stump in the light. "Hope I can stand the smell long enough to get you buried."

He walked into the wet forest, the skunk dangling from his fist, the shovel over his shoulder.

Jonathon's new wife was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee when Amos banged the screen door and stepped into the room. His boots were covered with leaves and twigs and mud.

"Why don't you hang your jacket and things out on the porch,
Mr. Rudyard? That smell is almost impossible to get out of the house."

"Oh, sorry. I forgot how bad it could get. Just a minute."

He went back outside and returned in his pants and undershirt.

"I'll wash them in the morning." Lee Anne put the cup of coffee to her lips. She was a creamy-skinned girl, fineboned, with thick blonde hair. Rudyard sat down across from her at the kitchen table, his eyes brown and fast, his face a dusty pink without wrinkles. He watched her drink the coffee, the hair easy down her back, the breasts narrow, plastic, pointing at him.

"How many did you get tonight?" She stirred the coffee, making big loops with the spoon.

"Just one. A big male. Out scouting for kicks probably. Where's Jonathon?"

"In bed."

"This early?"

"He's been going to bed this early for the last three weeks."

"When I was that boy's age, a hot bath after a hard day's work could keep me going 'til two in the morning. You sure he's not sick?"

"You must be cold from the rain. I'll get you a cup of coffee. Think there'll be any more skunks?"

"I suppose. I've got to get them all. Lost three of the big goldens last week. Bastards pulled them right through the hole they dug. Didn't leave anything but a handful of feathers."

"Why don't you get some traps?"

"Traps don't work. Skunks are too smart."

"More coffee?"

"No thanks. It puts springs in my eyelids. One cup is plenty."
She sipped her coffee, watching his hands and arms.
"Jonathon says you can still beat him arm wrestling. Can you?"
"Maybe. Johnny's a pretty strong fella. Has to be to keep up with all the work around here."
"I know."
Rudyard stood up and set his cup in the sink.
"Well, I better get to bed myself. Those bird cages out there are getting crusted. I've got to get up early and do a little rearranging."
Lee Anne nodded and brushed the hair away from the sides of her face.
"See you in the morning, Mr. Rudyard." She kissed him on the cheek.
"Have a good rest."
He looked at her breasts. Their eyes met.
"Goodnight," he said, and left the kitchen.

Lee Anne dropped the robe to the floor and got into bed. She put her arm around Jonathon's waist and put her mouth on his ear.
"Hey, wake up, lazybones. This is your wife talking."
Jonathon grunted, continued to sleep.
"John, damn it, wake up."
He turned over and looked at her.
"What's wrong, Lee?"
"Nothing's wrong, I just wanted to get close to you. We haven't loved for two weeks."
"Is that what you woke me up for?"
She moved to her side of the bed.
He looked at her. "I'm bushed, honey. Ten hours on that tractor is
"I know, but you could still just lay there and let me do the work."

"Look, maybe tomorrow night, okay? I've got to get some sleep. There's a stockman's meeting in Custer tomorrow, and I've got some calves to brand and I've got to get that fence fixed down by big flat....."

Lee Anne got out of bed, put her nightgown on, and got back in.
"I'm sorry, Lee. You understand, don't you?"
"Sure."

She sunk her fingernails into the pillow. He began to snore. She watched the leaves on the tree by the window flutter in the breeze and cried.

Lee Anne served pork chops and fried onion rings for lunch the next day. Amos Radyard ate very slowly, not looking up.
"What's wrong, pop? Not hungry?" Jonathon raised the mug of beer to his mouth.

"No, just a little tired is all. The pheasants gave me a good workout this morning. I'll get rested up this afternoon."
"I'd give you a hand if you'd say something."
"You got enough to do. I've got two hands. I wanted the pheasants."
"But it makes me a heel in front of Lee here, Pop."
"That's your imagination. She knows better than that, don't you, Lee Anne?"
"It's nothing. Don't worry about it, John. Strawberries anyone?"
Jonathon stood up and pushed his chair up to the table.
"Not me. I'm going into town. Need anything, Pop?"
"Lettuce trimmings for the birds."

"How many boxes?"

"Six is plenty. But don't go out of your way."

"You want the pheasants to starve after all the work you've done with them?"

"No, but I know you've got a lot to do."

"I'll swing by Safeway. I know the produce man there."

"Bring me some candy bars," Lee Anne said.

Jonathon, nodded, leaned over and kissed her, then picked up his hat and left.

Amos could hear the truck's motor fading as he finished the last of his coffee. Lee Anne cleared the table and piled the plates in the sink. Then she perched on the countertop and re-tied the green yarn bows on her braids.

"How long does it take to drive to town and back?" Her head was tilted, the braids swinging.

"About two hours. If he doesn't stop at Chesterton's."

"I'd like to go to Chesterton's sometime."

"It's mostly a man's bar. The farmers and loggers around here take the fish they catch down there to put in the display case. Old man Chesterton gives a sixpack for the biggest catch each week."

"Can't women enter any fish?"

"Most women can't fish."

"I can. You like to fish, Mr. Rudyard?"
"I always have. When did you ever go fishing?"

"Some nuns I knew once used to take me."

"Nuns. All their fish are in the bible."

"They're good fisherman. They can sit on a rock and wait forever. Let's you and me go fishing this afternoon."

"No, I don't think so. I have to change the irrigation this afternoon."

"Then is there a pole I could use? Jonathon said the stream by the first gate is a good one for trout."

"He wasn't lying. There's some poles in the basement. Take your pick."

"Thank-you. And you're sure you won't come?" Her eyes were big and magnetic, like glazed chestnuts. Amos rose from the chair and moved toward the door, his neck flushed.

"I'd better go get that water dammed."

"Could I help you?"

"No, it's too boring. You wouldn't like it."

Later in the afternoon while Amos was building the dam and Lee Anne was fishing Jonathon was at Chesterton's Tavern, a white stucco building which squatted in the weeds by the highway. He was buying drinks for Loretta Chesterton, the owner's daughter. They danced to the jukebox. He squeezed her, whispered in her ear, slid his hands over her hips.

It had been a long hard day. Amos Rudyard piled his clothes on a chair by the window and fell into bed. He slid under the quilt and closed his eyes. The window was open and he could feel the nibble of the
mountain air on his face. He pulled the covers tight around his neck and began to float into the early stages of sleep. He woke up when he heard the door of his room open and close. Lee Anne walked over beside his bed and sat down on the chair near the nightstand. He sat up in the bed. She was wearing slippers and a pair of panties. He could see her rose-gold breasts in the light from the window.

"You're in the wrong room aren't you, girl?"

"No."

"Where's Johnny?"

"Asleep."

"What's the matter? Isn't he enough for you?"

"Can I get in bed? We can talk better."

"Are you crazy?"

She lifted the quilt and slid next to him.

"I should march you in there and show my son what he's married."

"Take it easy. What would you say? I found your wife in my bed?"

Come on, Mr. Rudyard. You're a man. You know what a girl needs."

"I'm fifty-four years old."

"So what?" She ran her hand up his leg, "You can still raise one of these, can't you?"

"No. This isn't right, Lee Anne. You're Johnny's wife. Don't you know what that means?"

"Sure I do. That's why I'm here. He doesn't care about me anymore. All he wants to do is run errands and sleep."

"I don't believe that."

"I didn't think you would."
"Johnny's a good man. Try to understand him."

"Why don't we just forget about him. It's a long time until morning."

"You don't know what you're saying Lee Anne. Now get out of here before Johnny wakes up and finds you gone."

"Alright. I'm sorry. See you in the morning."

She closed the door before he could say anymore.

Lee Anne piled her hair up, put the last touches of makeup on her face, and hurried downstairs to serve dinner. She had cooked a roast and opened some wine and set the table elaborately.

"I felt like something special tonight."

"He probed an olive with her fork. "Jonathon said he liked roast beef. He said it was your favorite, Mr. Rudyard."

Amos held his glass up to the light. "You sure go in for the high class."

"How's the pheasants doing, Pop?"

Jonathon drank the wine, cut the beef into pink chunks.

"What? Oh, the pheasants. Terrific. They're coming along at blue ribbon speed. But I'm not trusting those damn skunks. I'm waiting again tonight."

"Want me to come along? Lee won't mind, will you, dear?"

"No, but you promised to rub my back after my bath."

"It won't take long. They usually hit around ten. One shot is all it takes. Pop guarantees one shot."

Amos looked at his son.

"You better stay with your wife. I can get the skunks."
"Lee can get along for an hour or so by herself. Besides I haven't been hunting for a couple of months."

"It's my pheasants they kill, Johnny."

"Okay, okay, Pop. Have it your way." Jonathon poured himself another glass of wine. "But if you need me, holler."

A breeze blew leaves and twigs over the spot where Amos had buried the big male skunk near a fallen tree. Farther into the forest a female skunk crawled out of the burrow and sniffed the wind, her tail wrapped around her feet as she sat in the deep grass. Then one of her kits came to the mouth of the burrow, and they walked across the clearing into the black line of trees.

Amos gently pushed the barn cat off his lap and strode out to the barn where he found a kerosene lamp and his shovel. Then he went down to the basement of the house to get the shotgun.

The lights went on in the upper half of the house which stood like an orange-eyed giant against the trees. From where Amos sat in the shadow of the pumphouse he could see Lee Anne's silhouette on the window shade. She was brushing her hair.

He looked out across the dew-covered lawn. There was nothing along the edge of the forest. The footbridge curved white into the trees. The pheasants were out of sight.

Amos took a bottle from his coat and took two big swallows. The moon had come out of the clouds. It lit up the gravel in the pen. The wire gleamed. Amos drew his coat snug around his neck. He was getting ready to take another drink of whiskey when he heard a noise behind him. He whirled around on the chopping block he was sitting on, the shotgun
sliding out in front of him,

"Who's that?" he whispered, aiming into the darkness.

"Hold it," Jonathon stepped out of the shadows, "Put that thing down.")

"Sorry, Johnny. I was thinking skunks. They make me nervous. I thought I told you not to come out here."

"I'm old enough to know what I'm doing, Pop. And if you're worried about Lee Anne, she kept hounding me to come out here and help you." Jonathon squatted in the weeds beside the chopping block."See anything yet?"

"Not yet. Pretty soon though. Something gets tight inside me when they get close."

"You really get going on these skunks, don't you?"

"I been reading up. They can wipe out a whole unit of pheasants in a night if there's enough of 'em. They'll dig for hours."

"Go on back to the house, Pop. I'll wait for them. I can shoot just as good."

"I'm not leaving. That's all. It's not right with a woman up there in bed waiting for you to....."

"For me to what?"

"Well, why don't you take care of your wife. Why don't you give her some attention so she doesn't have to be coming into my room in the middle of the night half naked?"

"That's a lie. I ought to break your nose for that."

"Johnny. Have I ever lied to you?"

"No, but what did you do with Lee?"

"Nothing. I sent her back to bed."

Jonathon stood up, his fists clenched. "I'll kill her."

Amos grabbed his son by the wrist. "You listen to me. You're not
killing anybody. If you'd give Lee Anne a little love there wouldn't be any trouble."

"You keep your nose out, Pop."
"You leave that girl alone."
"Let go of the arm."

Jonathon jerked his arm free. He started to walk toward the house.
"Damn bullheaded kid." Amos landed on his son's back and knocked him to the ground. They rolled over in the gravel, in and out of the shadows, Jonathon trying to peel his father's hands away from his waist.
"Let go, damn it, Pop. I'll have to hurt you."
"Don't be crazy, Johnny. I won't let you be crazy."

Jonathon finally pried the big hands loose, got to his feet, and drove his fist into his father's face. Amos fell back, but when Jonathon turned toward the house, Amos was holding tight around his legs. Jonathon jerked his father to his feet and tried to shove him away.
"Please, Pop. Don't do it."

Amos landed on his back, rolled, and came up with the shotgun in his hands.

"Now you listen, Johnny. You sit down on that block and cool off or by God I'll shoot your legs."

Jonathon froze, stared down the barrel of the shotgun.
"Pop, look, the skunks."

Amos turned toward the forest. Jonathon brought the shovel in a wide arc. Amos dropped to the ground, the shotgun rolling away.
"I'm sorry, Pop. I had to cool you. You just wouldn't listen. Now I'm going up to the house and shake some sense into that little bitch."

He reached for the shotgun. When he straightened up he saw the
skunks break out of the bushes across the yard, coming single file, the stripes like white paint on their backs, the salt and pepper tails weaving. They stopped at the stream and drank and then traipsed down the bank, across the footbridge, and down the hill toward the pan.

Jonathon got down on one knee and steadied the shotgun. When the skunks reached the pen, the smaller one squirmed through a tear in the wire, leaped into a shoot by the gate. The bird flapped its wings and kicked, and then the head flew off. The other pheasants began to thrash in their shoots. The young skunk crawled carefully through the hole in the wire, dragging the limp pheasant through. He dropped the bird in the gravel. The larger skunk who had begun digging picked up the pheasant and started toward the forest with it. Her kit was stretching his paw toward the gap in the wire again when Jonathon fired the shotgun.

The shot ripped the big skunk almost in half, the pheasant dropping from its mouth, rolling away, feathers and pieces of fur flying against the wire of the pen. The kit dangled from the wire, wounded, and was kicking, its tail bobbing. Jonathon fired again.

Nothing moved near the pen. Jonathon hid the shotgun in some bushes, knelt down and rolled his father over.

"You okay, Pop?"

Amos groaned. Jonathon stood up. "You'll make it, you old billygoat." He left his father by the chopping block and walked across the frosty yard and up the hard-packed road which led to the house.

"Lee Anne! Come down here." He stood at the foot of the stairs.

"Lee Anne!"

There were no sounds upstairs. He ascended, his heavy boots pounding
on the wooden steps.

"It won't do you any good to hide," he hollered down the hallway.

"I'll break every goddamn door in this house down."

None of the doors were closed. He stepped into their bedroom. The dressertop was bare, the closet door open. All of Lee Anne's clothes and shoes were missing. Jonathon ran down the hallway, looked in Amos's room, checked the bathroom. Nothing.

He stood at the top of the stairs, leaning over the rail, burning. Suddenly he jerked himself up and ran down the stairs and into the living-room.

She had left her wedding band in the wall safe and taken all the money. Jonathon picked the ring up and threw it against the wall. He sat down on the arm of a chair and stared at the door of the wall safe as it swung slowly back and forth. She would leave the truck in town. They could call the sheriff. But that would mean.....No, they wouldn't call anyone.
Miguel Antonio Pinto rocked back and forth in the wicker rocking chair and watched the clouds gather and hang in somber clusters above the cliffs on the other side of the Clarke Fork River.

Noviembre. Month of the wolf. Sneaks through the trees in the sad yellow light of the moon. Fans the land like the crickets at Cuernevaca in July. Noviembre stiffens the trees and stirs mud in the sky. The birds dip away, south, chasing the sun, and the leaves run about your feet like the orphans at Tomalín with their sunken faces and brittle teeth: "Por favor, señor, un poco de leche, por favor." What frail claws for hands, what boney feet, no shoes, and always a belly the size of a melon. They roam the plaza, steal an egg or a handful of beans, search the alleys late at night for a fishhead, a strip of pork some drunken chef has tossed in the gravel, while God sleeps. Very strange and sad. But they are the saddest when they ask for milk. At least these leaves cannot ask for milk. Still they are pitiful playing on the tongue of Noviembre when they are dead, until they are torn to pieces and scattered into nothing. Nothing. The joke of Noviembre.

Here in Montana the poison is strong and deadens the earth quickly. The vegetables stop and the work stops and the Canyon of the Hellgate turns ice.

Before you can drink two beers you are out of Montana on a bus which crawls through Los Angeles on the way to Juárez. Riding with people in fancy clean clothes who sweat like a matador at five o'clock,
who say nothing and eat colored pills all the way to the border. Then
suddenly they look at you as if you are the Virgin of Guadalupe. Want
to know all about Mexico, if Mexicans truly take the siesta for days
at a time. Questions about tribes of Aztecs that ate peoples' hearts
a thousand years ago. Questions about Pancho Villa and the rules of
Pelota and the assassination of Madero and chile peppers and bulls.
Grin and say "No ingles." to this one and that one, then go to sleep.
At Juarez get off the bus and never see the pigs again. Then start out
for Sabinas Hidalgo on the strength of a thumb.

Pinto had been eating cashew nuts and drinking beer on the porch
of his shack for most of the afternoon, a slight breeze turning the
collar of his workshirt and nudging the tips of his mustache. He was a
tall, muscular Mexican, thirty-four years old with handsomely chiseled
features and a skin glazed from sixteen years of migratory labor.

He finished the cashew nuts and washed them down with a long
drink of beer. He held the quart bottle in one hand. When he had
emptied it, he threw it into a barrel at the end of the porch. It made
a dull pop when it hit. Bull's eyes, Marshall would say. And what does
he know of the bulls? Marshall the great foreman. I can see him with
the bulls at San Juan. He would get a good look at the eyes of the bull
there.

Pinto watched an eagle curve and rise above the cliffs which
were silver now in the shadows of the ropey clouds. Tomorrow the bus,
Gasoline and cigarette smoke and perfume. The billboards. The ones with
the women wearing very little are nice. But there are not enough of them.

He kicked the empty cashew can off the porch and walked into the
shack. The livingroom was cramped and dim with a narrow red rug on the
floor. The triangular windows were dirty and without shades. Pinto had convinced Carlos at the beginning of the season that shades were for old women and priests.

In one corner of the room an iron stove squatted in a pile of wood blocks across from an old Coronado radio. Pinto had bought the radio at a second hand store in town in the spring of 1962, his first year at the Hughes Gardens. The radio had been priced at ten dollars. He had bought it on his first payday.

On a rainy April evening he and Carlos had lugged the radio down the highway and had almost gotten hit by a logging truck which blew past them, splashing mud and water up to Pinto’s chin. He had draped his shirt and coat over the radio to protect it. "Humpback whore," he shouted at the truck all the way to the Hughes Gardens turnoff.

By the time he and Carlos reached the shack the rain had bathed Pinto clean. He forgot the truck and was glad to have the radio. They turned the radio as loud as it would go and got drunk on a case of beer. Carlos had been saving for a special occasion.

Pinto stood there admiring the black tuning dial and the white station buttons. This radio was worth my sacrifice. We played it every night. It is dancing and laughter and women with big hips and Domingo throwing dice and the wind at the door. What a show I gave the old squaws when I danced the flamenco in only a cowboy hat on the Fourth of July, last year, the year of the red devil summer.

He caressed the smooth wood. There were no scratches, no stains. All the buttons worked. The tuning panel was bright with red code numbers. He turned the radio on and sat down by the stove, smiling and waiting for the soft hum which came before the music. "Forecast for Missoula
and vicinity," the radio said, "Cooler today, tonight and Tuesday. Chance of rain or snow forty per cent today and tonight....."

He switched stations. "Number nine on our country western survey, King Guitar, Chet Atkins, and his rendition of "Mrs. Robinson."

Pinto tapped his foot. He loved the instrumentals, especially guitar-dominated ones. He had wanted to learn to play the guitar as a young boy in Sabinas Hidalgo, to play the way Correa the toolmaker from Nuevo Laredo would play for drinks when he stopped at the Black Cactus Canteen in Sabinas Hidalgo on his way to market in Monterrey.

Pinto moved his head and shoulders, his eyes closed as he drew hard on a cigarette and swung himself toward the radio to turn it louder. The music stopped just as he touched the volume knob.

"Have you been thinking about a patio or perhaps about getting the curbing laid around that new parking? Then don't wait a minute longer. Call J and S Ready Mix, experts for all your construction needs. At the corner of Higgins and Jefferson. That's J and S Ready Mix, the home of careful construction."

Pinto did not understand much of the commercial. But the word "construction" evoked thoughts of an incident which had taken place his second season at the Hughes Gardens.

A customer from town had accidentally backed her car into a patch of young beets while turning around by the toolshed. Pinto had stood by and watched her ruin his chance to win a bet he had made with one of the other Mexican workers that he could baby the beets to the size of eggs by the middle of July. When the woman had gone, there was nothing for him to do but to throw away the smashed tops.
He did not get drunk that evening. He lay on his bunk smoking and thinking about the woman in the big white car and the way she had spun her wheels to get out of the soft dirt. He thought he might be able to replace the beets with some pepper plants.

Pinto was alone in the shack. Carlos had walked into town to see the bars everyone had been talking about. About ten o'clock, Ike and Domingo, two workers from the town of Nogales, burst through the door of Pinto's shack. Ike thought that Pinto was homesick and began to taunt him.

"A drink, a drink, my esteemed friend. The wife will not know."

"Not tonight." Pinto said, not looking at Ike. "Go away. I am thinking."

"I tell you the telescope of your wife cannot see this far."

Ike chuckled and sat down on the bunk. Domingo had moved to the other side of the room and was leaning against one of the warped beams which supported the roof. Ike continued in an even more friendly voice.

"A little swallow, Pinto. Come, come. The night is young and ripe as a virgin. Have a drink. It is cold from the creek. Here."

"Careful. You will spill it on the bed. I told you I do not feel for it tonight. Do not push, young one."

Ike whistled and jumped off the bunk, dancing around the room as though he were dodging a bull.

"Hey toro, Pinto toro," he whispered, holding his tattered jacket out in front of him.

"Say what you came to say and quit the clown play."

"It is only a little fun," Domingo offered from his station by the beam as he slid his plump body to the floor. "Besides, we have an
interesting piece of news. You are lucky to know us."

"As Adam was lucky to know Eve? What is this big news?"

"There are jobs with much money," Ike blurted out, the whites of his eyes rolling. "Domingo's cousin sends a letter. In Arizona, big construction job. The money is unbelievable. We are leaving next payday. You could come along for a small fee."

Pinto leaped off the bunk and grabbed Ike by the shirt, lifting him up on his toes.

"What is this talk of Arizona? This job is a good job. You are crazy. Señor Ben is a friendly man. You cannot do it. The corn is almost ready."

"To hell with the corn," Domingo said. "Besides, the crows have had a thin spring."

Ike was struggling to free himself from Pinto's vice-like grip.

"Let go of me, viejo. You are tired and afraid to go. Your ears are full of sand even now."

"You would leave Señor Ben like a sick whore."

"Señor Ben. What is he to us? The hand of God? He is rich. Have you not seen the silver in his eyes? Yet he pays us nothing. Damn you, let me go."

Pinto pushed the young Mexican away.

"I cannot believe you want to do this," He was shouting, the heavy muscles along his jaws working into knots. "Señor Ben gives you this job. He sends you tickets for the bus. He gets your asses out of jail. And what do you do? You spit on him. Do not ask me to be a part of your ugliness."

Domingo stood up and walked over to where Pinto stood glaring at
Ike. Domingo was oily-skinned and in his forties. He had worked all over the United States. He smiled at Pinto.

"That is it, then. Do not come. Maybe you are right, Pinto. Maybe you and the Hughes are great friends, yes? Maybe you act white for a few extra dollars."

Pinto's fist cut the air and sunk into Domingo's mouth. Domingo fell backwards against the door, his soiled panama hat rolling out in front of him, his mouth going red.

"I will make a woman of you," he grunted. But when he started to get up, Pinto grabbed him by the hair and kicked him in the stomach. Domingo buckled and dropped into a frozen bundle on the floor. Pinto turned to Ike.

"And what have you to say about it, yellow mouth?"

"Nothing. It is nothing. Please, Pinto. I am your friend."

Ike reached down quickly, picked Domingo's hat off the floor, and then helped Domingo to his feet. Domingo put the hat on sloppily and brushed his pants off. They backed towards the door close together.

"Be careful where you sleep, pepper heart," Domingo said.

"There is still a week until payday."

Pinto started toward them, his mouth drawn tight, his eyes big and electric.

"Come quickly, Domingo," Ike said, his voice rising. "Pinto is loco."

They turned and ran into the cricket-filled blackness which hung around the porch.

"Snakes," Pinto called into the night air. The desert will please you."

He slammed the door and went back to his bunk. He lay awake part
of the night, ashamed that they were going to leave Ben Hughes without a big enough crew for the corn. But he knew he couldn't stop them. He knew he would give no warning to Ben Hughes about it.

They were gone the night they got paid, and they took two of the other Mexicans with them, both of whom owed Pinto five dollars. It was two weeks before new workers arrived. One of them had gonorrhea and couldn't work. In the meantime Pinto worked like two men in the cornfields, cutting and boxing the corn with the celerity of a machine. Hughes offered him a bonus to stay until November. He stayed.

Every night the radio played in the hot room. Sometimes he could get stations in California and Texas. There was nothing better than the Coronado. Everyone begged him to let them come and hear it on Saturday night.

Sitting with a cold bottle of beer in his hand on those Saturday nights Pinto could not stop thinking about how wonderful it was to leave Sabinas Hidalgo in April. To leave the sun and the tumbleweeds and a wife and children at the bus station and swing north to Montana, Where radishes grew as big as a man's thumb, where the corn waved green flags in the sun like a great silent army, where tomatoes bulged orange-red, dragged the vines to the ground, Cucumbers grew long and fat, the hides glassy from the early morning dampness. At Ben Hughes's in April the earth bloomed everywhere, rich, and black, like the coffee grounds in Domingo's silver pot. The earth squashed away from work boots, cool dirt, sweet and wet. Always the birds came in April, to see that the work got done, to sing half the day and eat the last of the cherries off the little tree by the washshed. At night there were crickets and train whistles and bullfrogs croaking down by the river. No man could
not love such a place. Work there and it became a part of you.

Ben Hughes became a part of you, too. The man with the pumpkin face and the bib overalls. Strong for his age, quick. Sitting in the cab of his pickup on summer mornings, giving orders in a voice like hot steel, "Load 'em up, hurry up, vamonos." A cigarette jammed in his mouth, the boots dusty, stained, scarred. Ben Hughes in the cornfield on Sunday morning fighting with the waterpipes, cursing, stamping around in the mud, white-haired and angry, a good boss. Ben Hughes patching crates in the middle of August, sweat on his wrinkled neck, the nails sinking under the stroke of his hammer, crates piling up good as new, packed with onions, radishes, beet greens. Ben Hughes's laughter at the young pickers afraid to get dirty, his teeth tobaccoed and rough, dust on the crumpled hat. Ben Hughes playing poker in the tool shed at lunch-time, his talk of beef steaks that he loved at some club west of town, a great bluffer, scaring Domingo on the first card, winning the big pot just before one o'clock, slumped on a crate with the crazy bow tie on. Ben Hughes, walking over the land carefully, knowing its secrets by the way that he touched it and studied it and cared for it every day until dark.

Pinto rose from the hard, high-backed chair and stretched. A crisp wind was blowing against the screen door. The end of the season, Noviembre, you win. But you will not find me because I am going where your claws do not reach. This place I am sad for.

He walked over to the screen and looked out at the grounds. The wash shed had been locked up and the heavy equipment put away. The young white pickers from town had gone back to school, their names and initials abandoned on the walls of the tomato cellar. A grey film had settled on the string of crooked-roofed huts facing the river.
Pinto lit a cigarette and walked back over to his chair.

"We currently have a temperature reading of fifty-two on this fine November day."

"Such foolish talk. Noviembre is a plague."

Music burst from the radio before Pinto had sat back down. A rock song with an extraordinarily prominent drum beat.

"Wonderful," Pinto said, "It has the spirit of a colt. I must remember to ask Señor Ben to care for the radio until next spring. Perhaps I should do it now. But the music is delicious."

Ben Hughes was sitting in his office working on his books when Pinto knocked on the door.

"Come in or stay out."

Pinto opened the door and stepped in. It was warm in the room and there was the smell of hot sap.

"Oh, it's you, Pinto. Come in. Sit down. Not such good weather today, is it?"

"No. Mal tiempo. The wind is too heavy. I wish the clouds would go away."

Pinto glanced about the room and began to finger the rim of his hat.

"Something wrong?" Hughes looked at him over the tops of a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. "You're not sick? Numero uno can't get sick."

It was a joke they had about Pinto being the number one boy. Hughes had been calling him numero uno for the last three years and letting him ride in the cab of the pickup all over the gardens and when he took the crew to town to buy groceries on Thursday evening. Pinto felt special
riding in the cab of the pickup. He liked it very much when Hughes called
him numero uno.

"No, I feel just okay," Pinto said, smiling. "But I have this
favor to ask of you. I would like it if you keep the radio for me, the
big one, my Coronado, until the spring, when I come to work again."

Hughes leaned forward in his chair and opened a coffee can. He
took two jiggers out.

"Bourbon or scotch?"

"The bourbon is best."

Hughes handed him the jigger.

"Gracias."

"Sure. You know something, Pinto? My old man was a tough bastard.
Guts, you know. He used to load the wagon and go to town with the
vegetables. Two horses and a wagon load of carrots and rutabagas. That's
what he started with here."

"He was a strong man like you?"

Hughes laughed.

"I used to be. Oh, I've got a few punches left. I've got a lot
of miles on me though."

"Your father was a good farmer?"

"I wouldn't say he was real good, more like determined. He
damn near killed himself keeping up with a Chinaman down by the motels
there. "He thumbed over his shoulder. "Smart Chinaman, too. He had
two big Dalmation dogs used to scare the hell out of me and my brother.
He almost ran the old man broke because he had some Chinese friends who
had restaurants downtown and they all bought from him. If the Chinaman hadn't
drowned, I don't know. Ever with the competition gone, though, things
were rough. Bad machinery, thin crops, a lot or rocks in the dirt up
by the highway. Still, before he died he told me never to let go of
the place."

"Your father, he loved this place. It's a good place. He knew
the land."

"You never know the land. My brother died out there eight years
ago. Got mad because the cabbage was full of earwigs. Threw a fit.
Always throwing fits. He tried to chop up the patch with a hoe. Keeled
over right there."

Pinto did not understand. He was worried about the radio.

"I got to go pack a few things, Senor Ben. It is okay that you
keep the radio until the spring?"

"I'd like to Pinto. But I'm afraid it's not possible. There
won't be any work next year. I'm getting too old, Pinto, I sold the
land this afternoon. All of it."

Pinto leaned forward in the chair, his lower lip dropping. He
set the empty jigger down on the desk. Surely Senor Ben was teasing him.
Sell the land? Impossible.

"But what about the vegetables? Who will work?"

Hughes poured himself another drink. He looked spent sitting
there by the stove, a cigarette tacked on his lip.

"No one will work," He put the cigarette out and downed the jigger.

"The land is being bought for a housing project. There'll be all houses
on the land. There won't be any vegetables."

Pinto stared at the curled floor boards. He would have to tell
Carlos and the Silvas. Lucia would weep and get scared because California
did not allow Mexicans anymore.
Hughes was saying something about being sorry and about sending word to the employment service at Nuevo Laredo, something about a check. His voice was far away. There was another voice, saying "all houses." Hughes was tapping him on the arm with a coarse white envelope.

"Your check, Pinto. Here, take it."

Pinto took the check. He stared at the check for a minute, then nodded, mumbled a "gracias," and backed toward the door.

Outside the wind had gotten chillier. Pinto walked through the troops of brown leaves toward his shack.

The Coronado blared. Pinto lit a fire in the old log stove. A light rain began to dot the filmy windows of the shack. He went into the narrow bedroom beyond the stove. The planks he selected below his bed came loose easily. He reached into the hole they had covered and pulled out a sixpack of beer.

He carried the beer into the livingroom and then walked out on the porch to get the rocking chair.

The rain was pounding on the windows. Pinto broke the blue carton open and took out a bottle of beer. The water was rolling down the windowpanes. He could hear it gushing under the shack. Tomorrow Sabinas Hidalgo, it seemed to be saying. Let it come, he was thinking, let it come.

The road which wound from Pinto's shack on a knoll near the highway was a brownish-gray and lined with withered rhubarb leaves and weeds. Pinto moved slowly down the road, carving a wide rut in the dust as he dragged the Coronado with a rope which he had tied around
his waist.

The Coronado bounced and slid over pebbles and pieces of wood as Pinto passed the wash shed, Hughes's office, and the row of faded, peeled huts which nestled in the shadows of giant willow trees.

Once he stopped to adjust the rope, looking back up the road, beads of sweat falling from his chin. He ran his finger across a deep scratch on the side of the radio.

"The road cannot be responsible. It is only a road."

He pulled the radio through the dense weeds and then slid it down the hillside, over rusty cans, shoes, dead tree branches, newspaper. One of the knobs snapped off and rolled under a bush. He kept the radio moving.

The radio bobbed in the foamy green backwater, patches of sand showing here and there on the burnished wood. Weeds and grass dangled from the tuning dial, trailing in the water.

Pinto waded up to his waist and then gave the radio a push. It eased out toward the fast-moving water.

He turned around on the river bank just as the current drew the radio into the blue speed of the main channel. He lit a cigarette and watched the radio float down the river. Smaller, a brown spot, gone. He spit into the water and walked away from the bank, up the steep sidehill, black-headed, quick-legged, not looking back.

When Pinto stepped off the bus at the dilapidated station in Sabinas Hidalgo at seven o'clock on Thursday morning, there was a band playing in the public square. It was a dry and cool November morning, a
breeze fluttered through the trees that lined the cobblestone street. He
could hear the fifes and guitars and the drums and cymbals which broke
the dusty stillness in a rhythmic chorus on this, the fourth day of the
Fiesta of All Saints. Sometimes the fiesta lasted for seven days,
sometimes ten, depending on the people who came from Parina and Saltillo,
and depending on the supply of liquor. If the liquor lasted, the fiesta
would live for ten days. Pinto removed his jacket and threw it over his
arm. He smiled at the noise coming from the plaza and then turned and
walked into a bar-grill next to the bus station.

The bartender's face was new to Pinto. Round and scarred and friendly,
Pinto took a seat near the end of the counter so that he could see the
street. The sun was cutting through the wooden blinds that hung over
the window, tossing streaks of yellow across the tile floor and over an
aquarium of tropical fish.

"What pleases you, traveler?"
Pinto turned on the stool.
"Beer, please."
The bartender brought the beer.
"It is more than cold," he said. "I was treating it like my
mother-in-law."
"Gracias. It is best when it hurts the throat."

The bartender grinned and nodded and began to wipe the counter
off, his bald head reflecting the lights above the bar. Pinto watched
him clean the formica. He was a good bartender.

"Do I speak the truth about the coldness?" The bartender was
leaning on the end of the counter, the towel wrapped around his plump
brown fist.
"Excellent," Pinto said. "The coldest and the best. The beer here did not use to be so agreeable."

"That is before I buy this place." The waiter tapped himself on the temple with his finger. "I bring a refrigerator from Monterrey in back of a truck. This refrigerator has big dial with numbers. I turn it to nine. It is a miracle with lettuce."

Pinto finished the beer.

"Give me one more. It was a thirsty trip home."

The bartender hurried away. When he returned, there was a woman with him. She was big-boned and tall but very striking. She wore purple earrings and a bandana in her hair. The waiter set the bottle of beer down.

"This is the wife, Rosa." He led the woman around in front of him. "She is the finest in Mexico. She works hard here every day." Pinto smiled and took off his hat. The woman looked at him for a moment, her lips parted slightly. "Ola," she said and strode away, the purple earrings swinging.

"A good woman means everything," the bartender said and strolled down to the other end of the counter, the white apron tight over his stomach. She has nice breasts, Pinto said to himself. Nice ears. Rosa.

He drank the beer quickly, the foam soaking his mustache, smoked a cigarette, and bought a magazine before leaving the bar.

Outside the sun broke over the maroon cobblestones which wound down the hill to the plaza. Pinto had to cross the plaza to reach his house which sat against the side of a hill on one of the backstreets. He picked up his satchel and straightened his hat and started down the steep road.
The plaza swirled with people in white clothes dancing and playing fifes and selling and buying mangos and earthenware jugs and lemon-colored straw baskets. Pinto worked his way along the edge of the square trying to stay out of the path of the dancers, waving at people he knew, and lifting the satchel over the heads of the bare-footed children who raced through the crowd screaming and pushing one another into the ring of dancers as it rubbed against the booths.

"Ola, Pinto," shouted an old woman in a brown reboza huddled near one of the candy booths, "You bring me husband back from U.S.A. ?"

She laughed and shook the loose skin on her arms and showed her toothless mouth. Pinto grinned and threw her a kiss.

The music boomed. It worked into his blood like a cancer. By the time he reached the other side of the plaza, he had set his satchel down twice and locked arms with the dancers, most of whom he knew, and they skirted over the stones, the sun heavy on their heads, the music beating the blue sky. They kicked their feet at the red tile rooftops and leaped two at a time over the fountain in the middle of the square, the young women cheering them on and the children tossing them flowers. Then they began to draw more people into the circle, young boys and old men, and all of them moved slowly at first, the circle breaking into a horseshoe and then closing around a group of girls who stood giggling by the fountain in their crisp white blouses. Then the whole group swept out of the plaza, the band a few yards ahead of them, and they poured out into the main avenue of Sabinas Hidalgo. Pinto broke away from them and picked up his hat and satchel and trotted down one of the side streets, careful to stay in the shade the old buildings threw over the ground.
Lucia was in the kitchen baking bread when Pinto entered the house. She didn't hear him set his satchel down on the table. "And do you have jam to eat with it?"

Lucia gasped and dropped the spoon she was holding before she turned around.

"Who is...Miguel? What are you doing here? Why did you send no letter? Oh, I am so pleased you are home."

She put her arms around him and kissed him long and hard. He felt her waist and hair with his hands.

"It is good to be here. The bus was an oven. But it does not matter. How are you? And Juan and Linda? Here, come sit here at the table and tell me everything that has happened."

Lucia took her bread from the oven and set it in the open window. Then she took off her apron and smoothed her hair and sat down facing Pinto.

"There is no great story to tell." She put her hand on his. "I do not know where to start."

"Start anywhere. You have until April."

"I would rather not think about April."

"It is my favorite month." His voice began to boil.

"I do not want to fight already, Miguel, please."

"Then use your head, woman. April is April. The sun is the sun. Forget your ancestors and their crystal ball."

"I am sorry."

"Go ahead."

"First, then, I must tell you that Juan knows the alphabet. Father Romero taught him during the summer. Father Romero says he has a
quick head."

"Like his father."

"And that he is good with the language."

"Bad language perhaps."

"Father Romero says he is strong for his age, too."

"Father Romero probably makes him clean the church for being so strong."

Lucia smiled and squeezed his hand.

"Does Linda still act like a boy?" Pinto said.

"She is young yet. When the breasts come it will be different."

"What makes you think breasts can keep her out of trees?"

"She will be tender. And so she will be careful. No more trees with the breasts."

"Where did you learn such a truth?"

"In a tree."

Pinto tossed his hand at her in disgust.

"Where are the children now?" He stood up.

"At the plaza, of course. They talked this fiesta for a month."

Pinto looked down at his wife's breasts, bulging brown out of the brief calico dress.

"Come then. It is the right time for a man to love his wife."

They walked out of the kitchen, without speaking, leaving the loaves of bread on the windowsill.

When Pinto and Lucia awoke, it was dusk. They could hear the first sporadic bursts of fireworks that would eventually lead to the big displays. Lucia cuddled close to him in the bed, her head on his chest.

"I should get up and find the children, Miguel. It is late."
They are too young for the evening wildness."

"Perhaps they should see what goes on. They will not learn those things in school."

"They will learn them soon enough. Do you see my panties?"

"I gave them a throw. Look by the window."

He whistled when she left the bed, her naked body bronzed and taut.

"You hid them."

"Why should I need to do that?"

She bent down behind a chair by the door.

"Such pride. Get out of bed."

"Listen. I will go find the children. You stay here and fix dinner."

She sat down on the bed.

"Miguel?"

"What?"

"Did you bring some money home? I mean was Señor Hughes kind at the end again?"

"Yes. Why? Is there trouble?"

"We owe a little for some medicine I needed. And for Juan's books at the mission. I was afraid because of last year when you spent the bonus in Los Angeles."

Pinto took his wife's face in his hands.

"Listen to me. I have the money. I will take care of the debt. Now do not bother me any more."

"I am sorry. I just thought....."

"Trust me. Now go get some clothes on and start dinner." He slapped her on the butt. "My insides are like the drums in the plaza."
The evening air was chilly and noisy. Pinto walked up the hill to the plaza and searched the churning crowd for his children. A few of the younger men were still dancing, their eyes reflecting the light of the fires they had lit in the square. Most of the people were sitting at tables in the shadows of the arcades, drinking mescal or wine and waiting for the explosions that Pinto called the red octopus trick.

There was a large group of children playing around the fountain, yellow streamers dangling from their linen clothing as they dipped their fingers in the water. Many held a piece of chocolate in one hand and an ornament in the other. Pinto noticed his daughter, Linda, perched on a tree limb which stretched over the fountain. Then he saw his son just below her, at the candy man's booth watching a drunk who was trying to eat a piece of hard candy.

Pinto walked across the square and called Linda down from the tree, first kissing and hugging her, and then scolding her for climbing trees. Juan had seen his father motion Linda down from the tree and had come running through the crowd, nearly tripping a water carrier in his recklessness. He hugged his father's legs and shouted, "Is the fiesta not beautiful, papa? Is it not exciting?" and then "Can I have a sweet? There are some clay whistles over there. A man from Saltillo is selling wooden burros with carved saddles and....."

"Tomorrow we will look at the burros," Pinto patted his son's coarse hair. "Now we must eat. Then it is time for you and Linda to sleep. Come."

He led them through the crowd and down the hill.

After dinner Pinto tucked the children in bed, and then went into
the bathroom and combed his hair and put on some cologne he had won from Carlos cutting cards.

Lucia was sitting at the kitchen table folding laundry when Pinto moved toward the back door.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for the cat."

"In a new shirt?"

"You never know, I might see the priest."

They looked at each other for a moment and then Lucia looked away, out the kitchen window at the lights on Aguadore Street. When she turned again, the back door was swaying in the dusty air.

The town was quiet except for an occasional streak of fireworks. As Pinto walked along the narrow gravel road which led to the Black Cactus Cantina, he inhaled the odors of tamales and tocos cooking, odors which drifted from the front doors of scattered pink and white huts half-hidden by fruit trees and cactus plants.

Up near the bar a young half-breed began to play a guitar. The men sitting at the tables began to clap their hands. Someone with a tambourine joined the young man with the guitar, and they broke into a gypsy song which brought a volley of boots down on the stone flagging and shook the paper streamers which hung from the ceiling.

Pinto watched the room blossom with red skirts and silver studs and black leather. A young girl in a tight, low-cut blouse came to his table and bowed. She had light, long-lashed brown eyes.

"What would please you, friend?"

"That depends."

"We have four kinds of beer and many wines."
"Is Estrelita here tonight?"

"She is in the back."

"She will know what kind of beer. Tell her Pinto is thirsty."

When the barmaid returned she brought him a basket of dried pork rings to eat with the beer.

"From Estrelita."

She placed the beer and pork rings in front of him and swirled away.

He looked up from the table to watch her move through the crowd and saw the bartender waving at him. The bartender was smiling and nodding. His gold teeth glittered.

Pinto drank the beer and ate the pretzels and tapped his foot to the music. When his bottle of beer was empty, he ordered a pitcher of beer and began to pour drinks for everyone who stopped at his table. They were all childhood friends of his. Each one wanted him to go to another bar or to the plaza. But he stayed and drank two more pitchers of beer. Then the dancing started.

Estrelita Mancha came out of the kitchen and sat at his table. They laughed and watched the people come and go. Then they danced. It was a special dance because they were both determined to do it perfectly. Eventually the crowd backed away and gave them the floor.

They danced an ovation out of the crowd, whirling and dipping and arching their backs and cracking their shoes down on the flagging. There was no end to the music. Neither of them grew tired, but only looked at each other in the glow of the bar lights. They were both sweating and the guitar went faster until they were one in the center of the room. Estrelita finished the dance wrapped in Pinto's arms.

Pinto led her out of the side door into the night air.

"Is your house still the same?" He was breathing deeply, his face pointed at the moon.

"Around the corner and up the hill as before. I have some beer and a few peppers."

"Then why do we stand here, pretty face?"

They walked along the walls of the shops in the shadows. Pinto patted her butt and whispered jokes to her as they climbed the hill.

"Your house smells of oleanders."

"I have a garden of them."

"This is beer for a rich man, pretty face."

"Rich men have had some."

"I am going to get stupid drunk."

"Put your shoes over there, Miguel."

"Come here."

"My breasts are hard?"

"As rocks."

"Then put the beer away."

"Wait awhile. It takes millions of years for coal to make diamonds. Have a little patience."

"But I burn now."

"Then I will help you."

Estrelita Mancho's house was quiet and warm and her bed was soft. Pinto floated in the music of her body half the night. She was a strong, broad-hipped woman with nipples like thimbles, good with her hands, and
very lonely.

Pinto entered his house at four o'clock in the morning and fell asleep on the kitchen table.

At dawn Lucia came out and helped him into the bedroom. When he woke up, it was noon and the sun was biting his face. He sat up and looked at his wife who sat brushing her hair by the window.

"Want to go to the fiesta this afternoon?"

She continued to brush her hair, not speaking.

"Perhaps there will be some pottery. Or a knife for the kitchen. I noticed some calico at one of the booths."

Lucia said nothing.

"Women are so damn stubborn."

Lucia turned and glared at him.

"I know one who is not stubborn."

"That is finished."

"Until tomorrow night, you alley cat."

She threw the brush at him. It bounced off the door.

"I tell you I am through with Estrelita Mancha."

"You think I am crazy? Why should the noble Miguel Pinto stop being so noble."

"You will see. Give me a chance."

"I do not gamble."

"You are hopeless, Lucia. Alright I apologize. Now go to hell and leave me alone. My head is full of nails."

"Oh, I should have stayed in Monterrey. There were other men."

She ran crying from the room.
Pinto dressed himself slowly and carefully, stopping now and then to rub the back of his neck. He walked out into the livingroom and began to rummage through an old desk.

"What are you doing?" Lucia was tying her apron, watching him slam the drawers.

"Women do not understand things," he said in a dry voice. He pulled a long manilla envelope out of the drawer and put it in his shirt.

"Where is Juan?" His eyes were red.

"He is playing by the church. Please, Miguel. Do not be rough with him. He is too little."

"Who said I was angry with him? Christ, woman. I am not as insane as I look."

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

He stopped in the doorway.

"It is over with her. You have my word. All of that is over."

He walked out of the house and up the hill that led to the highway.

Juan was sitting on the chipped brick steps of the church, tucking a grasshopper into a straw tube.

"Juanito. Come here to me."

The boy ran across the churchyard, his hair flapping in the wind.

"What is it, papa?" He was panting.

"We are going for a walk."

"Where?"
"Into the country."

"But there is nothing to see, papa. It is all cactus and sand."

"We will see."

They walked in the gravel at the side of the narrow, rippled highway, the sun leaning hard on their backs. Juan caught six more grasshoppers in the weeds by the road and stuffed them into the straw tube. His father caught one with bright red wings and one with yellow wings.

"These are big ones like I don't see," Juan said.

"They are beautiful," Pinto said. "But cruel to the land."

"What do they do?"

"They eat the crops."

"But there are no crops. The hoppers do not hurt the land."

"There are too many of them."

They reached the top of a rise in the road and stopped. Pinto sat down in the gravel and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. Juan continued to look for grasshoppers in the yellow grass which draped the ditch by the road.

"Here is a big one, but with plain wings."

Pinto did not answer his son. He was looking at the rolling brown fields which spread into red clay close to the river on the other side of the basin, his fingers working open the manilla envelope. He studied the brief paragraphs which described the land sprawled below him. At the bottom of the page was the signature of his father, Eusebio Pinto.

"In case of my death, I hereby leave the land described above to my son, Miguel Antonio Pinto."
Pinto had kept the deed to the land in the desk at home all the years he spent working in California, Washington, Montana. My father's bones are in that ground, he thought. He is still waiting.

The chicken squirms in Eusebio Pinto's calloused hand.

"You must not worry about the axe, little pollo. It is but an axe."

The head tumbles into the sawdust and rolls, the beak opens into a V, the eye clear, obsidian. He sets the twitching body into a barrel.

"Bring me another, Miguel."

Nine-year-old Miguel Pinto sidles across the sawdust yard, hugging a fat chicken.

"Thank-you, Now stand back."

Miguel looks at the dots of blood on his father's shirt, at the shiny face, at the teeth, like dice without markings. Then he goes and sits on a stone stool by the barn door and waits.

The barrel is full of chickens. Eusebio Pinto and his son walk back to the house together. The trees stretch green against the pink blur of the sun. There are birds chirping high up in the leaves.

"Someday this will be a fine farm, Miguel. We will make it the best in Mexico together."

"I will learn to kill the chickens, father. I know how to do the cows. We can plant some corn, too."

When the tornado came and ruined the land, killing Eusebio Pinto where he stood in the field, the boy couldn't believe it. Not even when he ran into the field and found his father by the fence where he kept the beehives so that the family could eat honey on warm bread at
Easter.

He stands in the tangled clover and stares at his father: mouth open, hair streaked with honey, strings of dead bees across his chest, piles of them by his wrists. The hives are split, honey oozing into the dirt. The breeze blows dust and weeds across the pools of honey, over Miguel's father's chest, into the ditch.

Miguel begins to cry and suddenly turns and runs back to the yard to tell his mother. She screams and runs up the steps of the storm cellar, leaving Miguel with his two sisters. She goes into the field calling her husband's name.

When she returns she sends Miguel into Sabinas Hidalgo to tell Father Romero and to bring his uncles out to bury his father.

Miguel runs all the way into town, his chest and legs aching, his hair rooster-tailed in the wind. When he tells Father Romero the story, the words sound strange, as though he is dreaming.

Even after his father was buried he felt very odd. When the farm began to deteriorate he began to believe that his father was gone, that he was not coming home for the corn.

A woman and a boy and two skinny girls could not make the farm work. In a year everything went to pieces. Miguel's mother sold the animals and the plow and his father's rifle. They moved into a small house in Sabinas Hidalgo. Then the draught came.

Clay streets dry into sand. Wind swirls dust in the wells. Gardens turn yellow, drift into the desert. Fig trees stand bare, peeling. Their skeletons paint lean shadows on hot adobe walls. Miguel watches a toad curl white, bloat, sink into the sand near the gate.
Many people left Sabinas Hidalgo. But Miguel Pinto's mother got a job as a weaver for a wealthy merchant on Tampico Street. The draught let go after a year, but the town and the whole region remained arid, baked, hopeless.

Miguel's sisters began to parade their skimpy breasts around Sabinas Hidalgo. In a few years they had both run off and gotten married. Miguel stayed to help his mother who was sick and going blind. He was eighteen.

The bed is like a pile of hot coals. Outside starving cats pace broken walls in the moonlight. Miguel can still taste the beans his mother served for dinner. He gags. In the morning he is leaving for Monterrey. A truck farm. The first truck farm.

Pinto met Lucia Rodriguez in the orange groves south of Monterrey. She was seventeen and smart and kind. He brought her home because he loved her more than he had loved anything. His mother could no longer weave because of her eyes. He built a room on the back of the house, fixed the well, and placed locks on all the doors.

Pinto and Lucia lay under a blanket in the new room. Her body is hot and soft. In the morning he is leaving for California, the Coachella Valley. His heart won't let him sleep. In the next room his mother is dying. Her lips are pale green. The candle by her bed drips on the floor. It is April in Sabinas Hidalgo.

Juan climbed the bank of the dry ditch and scurried along the gravel roadside to where his father sat chewing a weed.

"Look, papa, this one has black wings."

Pinto blinked at the basin. Tumbleweeds covered the ground
and rows of cactus poked out of the sand, sprinkling shade in crooked lines. They have pink flowers on them now. I should go and pick a few for Lucia. She could wear them in her hair tonight at the plaza. And her yellow dress with the lace. I will buy some wine and a piece of beef.

"It is the first of the black wings I catch," Juan smiled at his father. "It has very strong legs. Look how it spits the juice on my fingers."

"We will kill them together." Pinto put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Juan looked at the grasshopper as it wriggled in his fingers, the black wings fanned out, the mouth swollen with brown juice. He did not understand his father's words.
HOT AND HUNGRY

He walked down the road in the June sun, gangly and heavy-boned, the swarthy face and neck wet. The fish dangled from a leather thong he had tied to his wrist.

He walked a mile in the heat and dust before Gillette came over the hill in the wagon. Gillette stopped the horses a few feet from him. The boy looked up at Gillette between the horses' heads. Gillette stared, hunched on the wagon seat, grizzly-skinned, bearded, the long head cocked.

"You going home, Mr. Gillette?"

"Maybe."

Gillette leaned, trying to see the fish.

"Suppose I could ride a ways?"

"Where you been?"

"Down by the river."

The boy held up the fish. Gillette squeezed one eye almost shut. The horses tossed their heads.

"Used a sapling and some twine," the boy said.

"Get in."

The boy climbed into the wagon. He unfastened the thong from his wrist and tied the fish to an iron rod on the outside of the seat. They slapped against the dry wood as the wagon rolled over the ruts in the road.

Gillette stared at the heads of the horses, a toothpick in his
mouth. The boy watched the toothpick wag as Gillette shifted his jaws to spit. The road dipped and ran along in the shade of high cottonwood trees. The boy brushed the hair away from his eyes.

"I see Saxton's got his fence fixed."

Gillette chewed the toothpick, the reins loose in his coiled hands. He didn't answer.

"It's been down a long time. But then with his wife dying last summer and the high water."

Gillette spat over the side of the wagon.

"Typical nigger farmer," he said.

"What you got against darkies?"

"They're stupid and lazy. They got thick skulls, like apes."

"How do you know they do?"

"Everybody knows it. Where you been?"

"My father doesn't think so."

"Your old man wouldn't know. He don't have to mix with 'em. He don't have to try to keep 'em in the fields."

"They come into the store though. I waited on one yesterday. He could count change, too."

Gillette whipped the horses. The wagon creaked and bounced. The fish slapped against the seat. The boy shifted his long legs. Dust rolled up over the horses backs. They crossed a small bridge.

"Did you see the dog in the weeds at the base of the hill before you picked me up?"

"I didn't see no dog."

"You must have. A big golden lab. Someone shot him. It's
Grady Halverson's dog."

"How you know?"

"Shoot, I've seen that dog everywhere. Grady never could keep him home."

"That ain't hay. He don't keep his sheep home either."

"Pancho wasn't a bad dog. He liked chickens is all. You can't blame a dog for what's in him. Our Red was that way. Only with him it was rabbits. Somebody shot him, too."

"A dog ain't got no right in a man's chickens."

"Maybe not. But whoever got Pancho could of called the sheriff instead of gunning him."

"Lots of people shoot first, then talk. That's how they get along in this country."

"It's still not the way to do. That was a good lab. Whoever killed that lab doesn't know what a good water dog means. Halverson worked with him for three years."

"If he was where you say he was, then he was on Moose Cooper's land. Moose Cooper told me himself that he'd shoot anything that came around his chickens. Halverson was standing right there. Course Halverson don't give a hang for chickens, or cows either. Damn sheepman."

"What's wrong with being a sheepman?"

"Ask any cow farmer in this valley."

"Well, sheepman or not, he won't be able to replace the dog. Makes me sick to see a beautiful dog all torn up because some mean bastard likes the feel of a shotgun in his hands."

Gillette chewed the toothpick, his chopped hair poking out from under the old hat. They came to a crossroad. Gillette stopped the
wagon. The boy stretched his legs, put his hand in his pocket, remembered.

"Hey, wait a minute. Does that road go down past the Thompson place?"

"Yep."

"Suppose you could drop me by there? I got a errand to run. I'll walk on into town afterwards if you don't want to wait."

"Nope."

"Don't you have to go by there to get home?"

"I'm takin' the old road."

"This one's shorter, isn't it?"

"You got good long legs, boy. Give 'em a little exercise. It's only about a mile."

"But you're...."

"Get out of the wagon."

"Wait a minute, I....."

Gillette grabbed the boy's arm, lifted him up, and pushed him over the side of the wagon. He lit on his hands and knees in the weeds.

"You son-of-a-bitch, Gillette. You shot Halverson's dog, didn't you? Gut shot him last night."

Gillette raised the whip and lashed the boy across the neck. He fell against the fence. The wagon creaked away. Gillette used the whip on the horses, cursing them.

The boy scrambled up onto the road rubbing his neck.

"Hey! Bring my fish back here. Hey!"

Gillette was gone. The boy dusted himself off and started down the road.
He stepped up onto the porch, the boards groaning under his big feet. He sounded the knocker.

A stooped, gray-haired woman came to the door and peered up at him through a pair of thick pink-colored glasses. He smiled.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Thompson."

"What you want?"

"I work at the mercantile in Springfield."

"You sellin? We don't want nothin'"

Her husband joined her at the door. He stood behind her, blinking, a bald old man with a stringy, milky mustache and chin whiskers.

"Trouble, Hilda?"

"Don't know. This here fella's from the mercantile in town."

The old man scratched his mustache.

"I'm the pants here," he said, the mustache moving above his lip like a small snake.

"I was in the neighborhood," the boy said. "So I stopped by to give you some money the store owes you. I short-changed you three cents Saturday when you were in."

The Thompsons stared. The boy could hear someone moving around inside the house. A fly kept buzzing back and forth in front of his face.

"Who's the company, Mrs. Thompson?"

The person had joined the Thompsons at the door.

"Don't know," Hilda said. "Says he owes us three cents."

She turned to the boy.

"What's your name, son?"
"Abe Lincoln, ma'am."

"Well, this here's Mr. Linnchester. He's a journalist. He come all the way out here from Dayton, Ohio to do a story on our ranch. We struck oil two weeks ago."

Linnchester and the boy shook hands.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Lincoln."

"It's my pleasure, sir."

"You say you walked all the way out here to bring Mrs. Thompson three cents?"

The boy blushed.

"Well, I didn't exac....."

"Then gimme the money before you change your mind." Mrs. Thompson stuck out her hand.

The boy reached in his pocket and took out the three pennies. He held them out.

"There you are, ma'am. It won't happen again."

"Better not."

She snatched the coins off his outstretched palm. Her husband's mustache began to twitch.

"That's right," he said. "Better not happen again. You can't fool me."

The boy felt the afternoon heat squeezing his body.

"I better get going. My father wants me home by six. There's some freight to be unloaded."

The three people in the doorway looked up at him. Linnchester was stroking his chin. The boy backed off the porch.
As the boy walked toward the gate, he could hear the Thompsons chattering. He felt good about the pennies. He closed the gate and started down the blanched road, hot and hungry.