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Garden of the Illuminati, Novel-in-Progress
and Ten Poems

By
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B.A., St. Olaf College, 1970

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Going Home

I think the beginning was Kathy's phone call, telling me that my brother, Steve, was dead, waking me from a stupor at 2:30 in the morning on the first day of my summer vacation, the worst possible time for me. That spring, I'd been under loads of stress: a Concerned Parents group had demanded my resignation for teaching satanism: "Young Goodman Brown." This in Missoula, Montana's most liberal town.

The phone rang three times before the answering machine clicked on. I had cotton-mouth from too much beer and, for a while, could not move. Then I thought it might be a girl that I'd met earlier in the evening; I'd slipped her my phone number as I was leaving the bar and told her to call the next time she felt lonely. I drank a glass of tomato juice and finally woke.

I rewound the tape and listened to Kathy announce, slowly and distinctly, sounding like a weather girl naming a particularly dangerous storm, that Steve was dead. Mom was in pieces. She, Kathy, was all right, but tomorrow she had to identify the body. Could I fly home immediately? Mom desperately needed me.

I turned the tape off, lay back on the bed and turned the idea of Steve -- dead -- over in my mind; I was elated. Then I thought about Mom; she had adored Steve. She saw Dad in him.

At three I returned Kathy's call, told her I'd be on the
first flight to Friendship in the morning and hung up. I didn’t want to talk to her again, ever. I’d attend to Mom and ignore Kathy.

The next afternoon, she surprised me by being at the gate as I walked off the plane, shouting my name and running into my arms. She cried against my chest. She looked lovely in her khaki shorts and an open-necked, brown-checkered blouse, her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, her blue eyes shining. She collapsed against me, trembling, and I held her up.

“Mom.” I pushed Kathy back and ran to Mom, who looked stunned. Her face was white; there were circles under her red eyes. She tried to talk, but her lips quivered, then her face contorted. When I tried to put my arms around her, she turned, and I touched her back. She was skin and bone. “I’m home,” I said.

"Thank God," Kathy said, and we stood in a huddle. She and Mom cried. I waited for them to cry themselves out. A redcap in a motorized cart, escorting a blind man and his luggage, shouted for us to move.

Mom pulled herself together, and we claimed my suitcase and walked to the car. The heat and humidity were like stepping into a sauna. Kathy turned on the air conditioner, and, from the backseat, Mom questioned me about school, my social life and my health.
We avoided mentioning Steve, and I truly didn’t care if he was dead or not; his death would purge me of the only emotion I had left: anger. As for Kathy, I didn’t know what I felt. Desire, yes. Sympathy, no. Bitterness? Not really, because I saw Steve’s death as punishment enough, for now. One day I’d tell her how much I’d hated her for her betrayal of my trust -- I’d loved her more than I’d ever loved anyone -- but the proper time would be when I could tell her calmly, if I could ever forgive her.

Before we reached the family estate in Olney, Maryland, Kathy said, "Tom, I have to go downtown in the morning and identify his body. I couldn’t go today. Come with me."

"Come with you?"

"I’m afraid. They won’t tell me anything, just that he’s dead, and that they flew his body in yesterday."

"Flew it in. Where was he?"

"Montana, somewhere south of you. Hamilton, I think."

"Steve was in Montana? Why didn’t anyone tell me?"

"We didn’t know. He was on a special assignment, working undercover."

"Doing what?"

"I don’t know."

"How’d he die?"

"They say it was a car accident. He was badly burned, but one of his hands wasn’t touched: it’s definitely Steve."

Mom sobbed, and, when I turned, hid her face in her
hands, ashamed to show how deeply wronged she felt, as if there'd been a Divine mistake. She took every change in her fortune as a sign of His favor or displeasure.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go with you." I took a breath, held it, let it out and shivered. So I was going to see him the way I'd dreamed since I was fifteen, with his face smashed in.

We drove a quarter mile through peach orchard and up a small hill upon which sat a massive, two-story, stone mansion. The second floor was actually wood -- oak logs cleared a hundred years ago to make more orchard -- but seemed as permanent as stone.

Inside, Mom was herself again. Kathy showed me into Dad's downstairs study. "Your bed's in here," she said. She took the seat cushions off the couch and yanked up on the mattress frame. A double bed sprang up. She pushed it down and replaced the cushions. "Your pillow's in the closet. Okay?"

"I can't sleep here."

"Why not?" A second later she said, "Oh shit. I'm sorry, Tom. You can have your old room back. Just let me change the sheets. I've been sleeping there."

She left, and I looked around the room. Dad's roll-top desk took up one wall. On the opposite wall, between the closet and desk, was a picture of Steve shaking hands with J.
Edgar Hoover. Hoover: he looked old, living his clock-like, bachelor life, eating dinner every night with his best friend, Clyde Tolson, in a hotel restaurant.


Blessinger. I thought about her. I’d never stopped thinking about her, really. She’d always seemed like an actress in a movie I’d seen before, and I wondered if she had a true self, or was an actress all the time.

"You think too much," Kathy said, startling me.

"I was thinking about you."

"Oh, Tom," she said, and was kissing me again; then she was crying in my arms. Fool, I tried calling myself but knew I’d be a fool if I passed her up again.

"I have to go to the store," she said, pulling away. She stopped. We looked in each other’s eyes, and I saw myself, reflected. Then I remembered that she’d called me her mirror image on the plane when I brought her home the first time, to meet Mom, when she’d met Steve.

"What about Steve?" I asked.

It was the wrong question. She looked at me as if I’d slapped her. "I’m sorry," I said, but she didn’t turn around on her way out the door.

When I heard the car start, I carried my suitcases
upstairs and walked into my old bedroom. Kathy had painted it a soft blue and turned it into a workout room. One wall was mirrored, with a dance barre on the opposite wall. There were poster-sized prints -- Monet, Manet and Mary Cassat which I recognized from the National Gallery -- on the other two walls. My bed was pushed into a corner. A wedding picture of Mom and Dad still hung over my desk. Mom was staring at Dad with a look of adoration that I knew was genuine because I'd seen it duplicated a thousand times while I was growing up.

When I glanced at Dad, looking proud and determined in his Navy uniform, my vision blurred. I thought that I'd worked out my grief; I'd only scratched the surface.

Nineteen sixty-nine, the summer Dad died, I'd completed my junior year at St. Olaf College, and Steve was midway through his Air Force tour of duty. I decided to declare myself a conscientious objector before I entered the lottery that winter, hoping to prove my sincerity by applying early.

Dad's problem with me was that he saw everything in terms of chain-of-command. The night I stood up to him -- almost exactly sixteen years ago, June 7, 1969 -- was the only time that I openly disobeyed him.

I'd told him in a whisper, fast, that I was writing a C.O., and there was nothing he could do to stop me. He began shouting: "It's still your country, right or wrong."
"You're not my son.
"You're a coward." I don't remember how I answered. Probably I said nothing. I was a coward. His anger terrified me.

Then he was grabbing his chest, his face so red from yelling that it didn't change color when he couldn't breathe. I ran to the door and called for help. When Steve saw what had happened, he hit me on the chin, hard enough to knock me out. When I woke, Dad was dead. Heart-attack. Age, fifty-one.
I needed a shower and walked down the hall. Blessinger. I thought about her while I stood under the cool water. When I held her, when she kissed me, it felt like old times, as if the past six years had only been a nightmare.

I dressed in clean clothes and walked through the downstairs. The dining room was huge, with a high ceiling, oak floors, a crystal chandelier, a round, Turkish rug, an oak sideboard, a round oak table with lion-paw feet and six pressed-back, oak chairs. A sliding glass door opened onto a patio. Ceramic birdfeeders hung from the trees, maples and oaks, and except for the grass on the hill, the rest of the backyard was orchard.

A cardinal flew onto the feeder right in front of me, nervously cocking its head left, right, up, down, ate a few seeds and vanished when a starling swooped down from nowhere. "Tom?"

She startled me. "Hello, Mom. I thought you were sleeping." I touched her arm. Again I felt how thin she was. Her hair smelled like Halo. "It's all right, Mom. I'll handle all the arrangements." She held a faded red, terrycloth robe closed at her neck. The brown circles under her eyes -- part of my inheritance from her -- were puffy. I saw myself in her eyes. "C'mon, Mom, I need a cup of coffee."

Kathy came into the kitchen with a bag of groceries and
an eight-pack of Coke. I went out to the car and carried in two more bags. We charcoal-broiled steaks for dinner. I drank two beers and felt dead tired, but after dinner, we watched two hours of news. Mom went to bed at seven-thirty. I kissed her and stood until she’d gone. Then I sat in Steve’s favorite leather chair and sighed. "Well?" Kathy asked.

"She looks twenty years older."
"She hasn’t slept. She’s exhausted."
"I can’t talk to her. I have nothing to say."
"You’ll talk after you’ve both slept."
"How do you know all the answers?"
"I’m just guessing."

I wanted her to stand, to come and put her arms around me again. I’d take it from there, but she didn’t move.

"Well, goodnight, then."
"Goodnight."

"I need a hug." It was an old line I’d used for years, and it worked again now, because there was no trick to it. She wrapped her arms around my waist and sighed, swaying, and I swayed with her, as if we heard music. When the dance was over, I kissed her, a friendly kiss, and put none of my hunger into it. "Sweet dreams, Blessinger. Wake me when you want breakfast, and I’ll make you one of my famous omelets."

"You’re on. Goodnight, Tom." She turned. I watched her walk back to the couch, on her tiptoes because she still

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thought her calves needed definition. Maybe they had at one
time, but not now. They looked like braided rope. I turned
and froze.

The door to the hallway closed quickly to a crack. Mom.
What had she seen? I flushed, then gritted my teeth. So
what? I asked myself and marched upstairs to my room and
shut the door. I stripped and crawled between the sheets.
Before I fell asleep, I thought about Mom. What should I do
about her?

What about Kathy? I didn’t hate her.

I slept soundly but, when I woke, had no new insights
into either of my questions, and decided not to worry. Some
questions are best handled like a keno game: one day an
answer pops into your mind, and that’s the winner.

When I walked into the kitchen, on her hands and knees,
scrubbing the kitchen floor, was Mom. She stood, pulling off
her rubber gloves, not looking at me. "Mom, I need a hug."

"I smell like ammonia."

"I don’t care." She cried on my shoulder, and I held
out a long time before I let myself go. When Kathy found us,
we were family again. Mom wiped her eyes and said, "I know
the Lord works in mysterious ways, but I don’t see why this
had to happen. Daddy I could accept, but this -- I’ve asked
for His help, to accept His will, but --" She cried.

"It’s out of our hands, Mom."

Eventually we ate breakfast, after Mom said grace.
Official Brush-off

I asked Kathy to drive downtown via Rock Creek Parkway, the scenic route into the city, and we talked about Mom. Kathy said that Steve would not let Mom read my letters because they upset her too much. Did I know that she had her own apartment now?

The F.B.I building takes up an entire city block between 9th and 10th streets, Pennsylvania Avenue and E Street. It’s a huge, concrete structure with six floors above ground. The top floor overhangs the lower structure like an oversized lid. Most everyone in D.C. thinks the building is ugly. But it sits in a neighborhood which I’d loved as a kid.

Up 9th Street, there’d been three burlesque theaters, including the Gaiety, once a plush showplace during the vaudeville era. The best liquor store in D.C., The Central, still operates further up 9th, among surplus stores, pawn shops and small clothing stores with year-long sales. New, X-rated theaters are everywhere. Directly across from the visitor’s entrance to the J. Edgar Hoover Building, a McDonalds and Burger King squat next door to each other.

Kathy drove down into the underground garage, past a sign which read Employees Only. A white-haired, black cop stopped us at the entrance. He knew Kathy and called ahead, nodded and directed us to a parking spot. "Someone will be right down to meet you folks."

An attractive black woman introduced herself as Jean and
escorted us to an elevator. We rode to the top floor silently. A tall man was waiting for us when the door opened. He held out his hand, and I shook it. "Harold Cox. I was Steve's S.A.C., his immediate supervisor, I guess you could say. You must be Steve's brother."

"Yes, and this is my sister-in-law, Kathy. Steve's wife."

"We've met. Harold, we came to see his body."

Cox looked down, inspecting his shoes. He was dressed like a lawyer in a trim-cut, muted brown, three-piece suit. His silver-black hair was stylishly cut, and he reminded me of George Peppard. I put him between 45 and 50. "Would you two step into my office for a moment. There are a few things we need to discuss first."

There were no windows in his office. Other than a picture of the President and the F.B.I. seal, the walls were bare and reflected fluorescent light, giving the room an efficient and clinical air. Cox sat behind his desk and motioned us to two chairs facing him. "Tom, you're from Montana, aren't you? Ever heard of survivalists?"

"Of course. The Bitterroot Valley, south of Missoula, is one of their havens. They think that our economy's going to collapse and that our cities will become war-zones, so they're learning to live independently. In some respects, I admire them."

"I know, the myth of the rugged individualist. No
wonder so many Southern California good old boys love
Montana. You do realize that most of these groups are white
supremicist, paramilitary organizations. Do you happen to
remember when the Kenicott Gold Mine outside Hamilton
re-opened a few years ago?"

I shook my head.

"Harold," Kathy said. "We want to see Steve."

Cox sighed and spread his hands on his desk. He pushed
himself up. "I'm afraid there isn't much to see. He's
burned beyond recognition."

"I don't care. I want to see him. Now."

"Well, there's another complication," Cox said. "He's
undergoing an autopsy this morning."

"Let her see him," I said. "It'll help her accept the
fact that he's really dead. Psychologists say --"

"I know what they say," Cox said. "Okay. I have to
make a call first." He picked up his phone and explained
Kathy's request. "No problem," he said, putting the phone
down. "Let's go."

We rode in his big, dark-green Buick to George
Washington University Hospital where, Cox assured us, the
Bureau's top coroner-pathologist was performing the autopsy.
When we entered the operating room, he'd already finished,
and an orderly was preparing to wheel the body out. Cox
showed his identification and pulled back the sheet.
Maybe what makes a man a coward is simply having a weak stomach. I glanced once at the charred body and looked away. It might've been anyone Steve's approximate size. I felt woozy. "Seen enough?" Cox asked.

"His fingernails," Kathy said.

"Yes," Cox said. "Fortunately his right hand wasn't burned. We were able to get some good prints."

"Steve chewed his fingernails."

"What?" Cox asked.

"Tom, that's not Steve's body. He chewed his nails to the bone, you know that."

"Perhaps he changed," Cox said.

"Those aren't his fingers," Kathy said. "Steve's are long and thin. Where's my husband?"

"Kathy," I said. "If they have his fingerprints --"

"That means nothing. Unless -- let's get a thumbprint right now. I have all his discharge papers at home: I'll match them up myself."

"That's ridiculous," Cox said. "We can take the prints they just took back to my office and match them up. In fact -- wait, I'll call ahead and have them waiting." He started to walk away.

"Forget it," Kathy said. "I want my own prints."

"Hey," Cox said. "What's the big deal? You don't think this is Steve? Tom, you were quoting psychologists. Isn't the first stage of grief called denial?"
"Those aren't his hands, Tom. Steve could palm a basketball. Look at those fingers. No way."

"She's right," I said.

"You're both crazy."

"Humor us. Let her take a thumbprint."

"What are you trying to pull?" Kathy asked.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Mayer. I know you're upset, but I'm not used to being addressed in that tone of voice.

"Tom, I'm sorry about Steve, but fingerprints don't lie. He was a fine agent and a good man. One of our best." Cox held out his hand. "I'm afraid I have to leave. I'm meeting with the Assistant Director in half an hour, and he doesn't tolerate tardiness. Let's go."

"We're not leaving," Kathy said, "without a thumb print. Then we're going to blow this whole cover-up sky-high. I'm going to scream bloody murder to the press -- count on it."

Cox glared at her and looked away. "Perhaps you'd better talk to the Assistant Director, too. Please, let's go."

"What is going on?" I asked.

"Just wait," Cox said. "Then ask your questions."
Back at headquarters, Kathy and I followed Cox through a maze of hallways until we came to a door with the name Ed Harter on it. Cox knocked twice and pushed the door open. Harter looked up from his desk, nodded and finished writing. He was a trim, balding, middle-aged man who looked a little like Dwight Eisenhower, John Glenn, Bud Grant or Gerald Ford, a look which seems to go with top-level, bureaucratic efficiency, integrity and loyalty. Determined men with a clear vision of how the world should be run, and by whom. "Please," he said. "Sit down."

His desk was a mess, books open and papers spread all over. Bookshelves stacked with law books took up the wall facing us. On the wall to Harter's right were old photographs of notorious gangsters -- Ma Barker, Baby-faced Nelson, Al Capone, John Dillinger -- and anonymous G-men. There was a leather sofa to the left of his desk, and the president's picture hung over the sofa beside a picture of Hoover. I looked behind me for Cox and saw a diploma from Harvard Law School and several commendations from the Bureau. Harter waited until Cox had finished explaining what happened at the hospital, then calmly admitted that Kathy was right: the body was not Steve but a man named Eric Johnson.

"Who's Eric Johnson?" I asked.

"He was a retired bird colonel who'd invested heavily in Orange County real estate and made a bundle. Air Force
intelligence background. We're pretty sure he was a member of the S.S.S."

"What's that?"

"Didn't Harry explain all this?"

"They wouldn't let me, Ed. They insisted on seeing the body right away."

"I see," Harter said. "Okay, I'll tell you what we know on one condition: you promise that what I'm going to tell you now goes no further than this room, agreed? No more newspaper threats."

I readily agreed because if I found out later that Harter had been lying, I wouldn't hesitate to break any promise I was making now. Kathy said, "I'm not promising anything."

"Kathy," I said. "Easy."

"They lied once, Tom. I don't trust them."

"Then stay here," Harter said. "Tom, come with me." I followed him into a library room down the hall. He pulled an atlas off the shelf and opened it to a map of Montana. "Two years ago, your brother agreed to infiltrate an ultra-conservative organization located just north of Hamilton, right here" -- he pointed -- "which calls itself The Society for Supremacy and Survival. Catch that? The S.S.S. They're backed with money, lots of it, mostly in southern California banks. Specifically, Orange County."

"Members tend to be retired military, but there are also
a few politicians, real estate men and businessmen. Everyone's loaded, and they're very low key. No recruiting. The selection process is unbelievable. The whole society numbers less than fifty. They've built an underground fortress under the guise of opening an old gold mine, and they've stockpiled an incredible arsenal."

"How do you know all this?"

"As a matter of fact, Steve sent us a detailed description of their fortress and their arsenal in his first report, and that's what they've got, Tom: an arsenal and a fortress. After Steve's first report, we heard nothing until last week; then we received his written request for personal leave, effective immediately, no explanation. Now he's incommunicado, and all we have is a body identified by the local sheriff as Steve Mayer."

"My guess is that he's arranged to disappear to protect himself. What other explanation is there?" I said nothing. "So there we are. We really don't know any more than you do."

"How long had he been with them?"

"Let's see. March. Three and a half months."

I thought about Kathy, then Steve, then Steve and Kathy together. "What's Kathy supposed to do?"

"What's she been doing?"

"Waiting."

"She'll have to keep waiting."
"I don't think she can."

"He's officially dead. She'll get his pension, and there's a Bureau insurance policy. I'll see that she gets both until this gets resolved. Will you tell her that?"

I nodded. "Do you mind if I check into things on my own back there?"

"What things?"

"How this Eric Johnson was killed, for instance."

"Why would you want to know that?"

"Just to make sure this S.S.S. bunch isn't holding Steve a prisoner."

"That is a possibility I've thought about." He took time to think again. "Go ahead. It's natural that you'd want to know more. Here's my number. Call day or night if you need, or learn, anything."

We stood and shook hands. Harter didn't smile. My last suggestion worried him, and he hadn't known what to do about it. "Two more questions, Ed."

"You're full of questions. You should've been an agent."

"First, I have to tell Kathy everything. Agreed?"

Harter considered this, then nodded. "Okay, but neither of you discusses it with anyone else."

"Second, if it's so hard to get into this group, how did Steve do it?"

Harter looked down, sat, leaned back in his chair and
studied me. Then he did smile. "You are quick. You remind me a lot of your brother, although you look much younger. The President sent a letter of introduction with him."

"The President of the United States?"

"That's the one. He has his own connections with the far right, you know. Anyway, he hand-picked Steve for this assignment. Are you aware that these survivalist groups have officially been termed 'terrorist' organizations?" I nodded. "The President wants to know what everyone in his camp is up to, I guess."

"Interesting. So if they know that the President is behind him, they wouldn't dare kill Steve."

"Or if they did, they'd have to keep it quiet."

Harter stood. "Keep in touch, Tom. I'll help however I can, but I can't send another agent in. You're his brother. Naturally you'd be curious."

We shook hands again and returned to Harter's office. Jean escorted Kathy and me to the garage. Once we were in the car, Kathy asked, "Well?"

"Drive us somewhere for a drink."
The cop at the exit recommended a place two blocks up 10th Street called Vic and Al's. Vic and Al were sports fanatics. Old photographs and assorted memorabilia covered the walls. Jim Lemon's glove, a homerun ball signed by Roy Sievers, 8 X 10 glossies of Camilio Pascual and Pedro Ramos, newspaper clippings of a game the Senators had lost to the Indians in the 9th inning after Clint Courtney dropped a strike-three, Darold Knowles' knuckleball with two out. I remembered listening to that game one hot, Saturday afternoon, clipping the grass around Mom's azaleas. It epitomized what it meant to grow up a Washington Senators fan. Cleveland proceeded to score two runs and win.

"Where're you two from?" Vic asked, handing us draft beers. He wore a referee's zebra shirt with Vic stitched in red over the left pocket.

"Montana," I said. "But I grew up here."

"Usually only tourists look at the photographs. And I know my regulars. I've hired some guys to work the hotels and restaurants around town and steer tourists my way. Who tipped you? I keep track."

"You're kidding."

"I certainly am not. I like meeting people from out of town. Washingtonians bore me. I'm sick of politics, and that's all anyone talks about."

"I thought they talked football."
"The Redskins? A bunch of bums."

"They won the Super Bowl."

"Did they? That was years ago."

Kathy looked at me and looked restless. "The cop at the F.B.I. parking lot recommended you, Vic."

"Oh, Howard. He does it for free drinks. He thinks Al and I are a gas."

"You are, Vic. Believe me, I’ll tell folks in Montana about you. Right now, though, I need to talk to this beautiful woman right here" — I put my arm around Kathy, and she shrugged it off — "before she gets angry and leaves me."

Vic laughed. "So I’m getting the brush-off, am I? Okay, but I don’t believe that she really loves you. Look at that face. That’s not love."

"All right, knock it off," Kathy said. "And get us two more beers." After we each had a sip, she said, "Are you going to tell me what’s going on?"

"You were right. It’s not Steve." I explained how Steve’s first report on the S.S.S. and its fortified, underground arsenal was followed by silence until his recent request for personal leave, and that the Bureau knew that the body actually belonged to a right-wing, ex-Air Force colonel named Eric Johnson. "They don’t know where Steve is," I said. "He may be on the run."

"Or dead," Kathy said.

"Yes." I tried to read the look in her shiny eyes.
Sadness? I didn’t think so.

"Shit," she said. "It’s just games to them. This whole espionage, counter-espionage business is just an elaborate, cowboys and Indians game, and they’re just little boys who never grew up." She looked at me. "But Goddamn it, Tom, they’re screwing up my life."

"Let’s get out of here, okay?" I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and directed us toward the door. I looked back where Vic stood watching us, his smile gone, thinking: So it was love, after all.
Confession

Walking through ninety-eight percent humidity on a hot day feels like walking through an invisible sponge. Sweat dripped down my chest, my ribs and my back. My clothes stuck to my skin. I felt as if I couldn’t breathe.

At the car, Kathy tossed me the keys and said, “You drive.” When I turned on the engine, she reached for the keys and turned it off. “I want to tell you something. I don’t love Steve. I thought I did, but now I think I never did, not really.

“And he never really loved me; he made sure to tell me that. His jealousy of you ruined everything. He hated that I’d known you first, and by the end, I was taunting him with it. I said that I’d always loved you. And always would love you.”

“Great.” I turned the key, revved the engine and turned the air conditioner to high. I adjusted the rear view mirror. I pulled into the traffic, adjusted the rear view mirror again and punched it. We switched lanes with plenty of room to spare, but the jerk behind us hit the horn anyway. I rolled my window down and flipped him off.

“What’s wrong?” Kathy asked.

“I’m back in the city. It’s ninety degrees with ninety-eight percent humidity, and now you say that you never loved Steve, that you always loved me. Tell me something: why the hell did I have to go through hell?”
"I did, too, Tom."

I looked into her eyes, saw myself as she must see me, whining, sniveling, a beaten dog, and tried to pull myself together. "What if Steve comes back? Remember, he is on personal leave."

"What if he does? Don’t worry; he won’t come back."
She grabbed my arm. "Something else." I stared. "When I told him that I still loved you, he said he’d kill you some day. I think he meant it, and that’s why he jumped at the Montana assignment: he thought he might be able to pull it off while he was working undercover."

I thought about it. What if I did return to Montana looking for Steve, only to find that he was looking for me? But why would he’ve taken personal leave?

"Tom, I want to sleep with you again." She wasn’t smiling. She looked like a poker player who’s holding a full house and has just called. "I’ll send your mother home. After all, Steve’s no longer dead, and Tom, I knew he was alive before we ever saw that body. I knew it."

"What else do you know?"
"That you’d be a fool to ever pass me up again."
"It seems to me that you passed me up the last time."
"You were the one who was afraid to stand up to Steve. Now do you really want to fight instead of make love?"

"Do you really think I left because I was afraid of Steve? I left because it made me physically sick to watch
you flirt with him."

"I didn’t flirt with him. He flirted with me."

"You didn’t tell him to stop."

"It didn’t bother me."

"Well, it bothered me."

"Then you should have asked him to stop."

You can’t reason with her; I had to accept that. She always wins. And she’s always right. And I sure as hell didn’t want to fight anymore.

"What’ll we tell Mom?"

"That I need to be alone. Then I’ll ask you to drive her home. You say that you want to be alone, too, and that you’ll check into a motel tonight. Drop her off and get back here."

"What about Steve?"

"He’s out of the picture."

I told her what Ed Harter had said about Steve’s pension and the life insurance policy. When I finished, she looked at me wide-eyed and said, "Tom, we could live on that."

"We? Mom would die."

"She wouldn’t know. You could stay upstairs when she visits. She only drops by once a week, and she always calls first."

"What if Steve comes home?"

"We’ll move to Montana."

I smiled. "Partner," I said. "You’ve got yourself a
We shook hands and kissed, my left eye on the road ahead, and when we hit the next red light, I kissed her again until the light changed, and the guy behind us honked. I honked back as he swerved by, hunched over the wheel, anxious to get home and eat.

Kathy told me that she’d fantasized about living with me in the old house, which she loved, and that together we’d read and discuss books, and go dancing, and make love all the time like we never had before. She explicitly described two of her fantasies and made me swear that I’d never tell anyone.

Then we were home.

Kathy could’ve been a consummate diplomat. She told Mom that the dead man had not been Steve, and that the F.B.I. believed that Steve was still alive. She held Mom while she cried.

I explained that Ed Harter surmised that Steve had arranged his death in order to disappear, for some secret reason, and that Ed had predicted that the Bureau would adopt a wait-and-see attitude for a while, and do nothing.

Finally Kathy said that she needed to be alone tonight, and I said that I’d stay at a motel and leave for Montana first thing in the morning. I felt a little sorry for Mom the way we hustled her out of there; she was still in a state
of shock. But in her car, she gave me brief, clear directions to her apartment, then asked, "What about Steve?"

"What about him?"

"What if he's in trouble with those people? They sound crazy."

"There's nothing we can do, Mom."

"Oh yes there is. I'm flying to Montana with you in the morning."

I tried to talk her out of it the rest of the way to her apartment, and she ended the conversation by saying that she'd rent a car and a motel room, and I'd never have to see her, but she was going. "Tom, I know you think I'm an old fool, but I know we're part of God's plan; we're in His hands." I laughed. "And remember, in the Bible, it's old fools who speak the truth. Don't forget that.

"Help me find him, Tom. I'll never ask anything else of you, ever again."

I shook my head and knew I'd say yes and wanted to kick myself when I did. I walked her to the door, saw her inside and assured her that I'd pick her up in the morning. She gave me directions to the nearest motel, which I drove by on my way home in case she asked me about it.

Clear, I told myself, at least you have tonight. And that thought was enough to cheer me on.
Departure and Arrival

"I'm leaving for Missoula in the morning," I said at the door. "Mom's coming with me. She's insisting that we look for Steve together."

Kathy shook her head. "No." She grabbed my hand and led me upstairs to my room. I don't know what it was, nerves from being around Mom again, exhaustion, or my Goddamned conscience, but when she began undressing, I pulled her close and held her, then told her that I couldn't, that I didn't know why I couldn't, but it didn't feel right.

She stared to see if I was serious, then buttoned her blouse. Her blue eyes darkened.

"I guess I'd better go," I said.

I was at the car when she called me back. She clasped her hands behind my back and hugged. "I'm sorry, Tom. Sex was always punishment and reward with Steve. If I did something he liked, he'd be really sweet and give me every bit of his love. But mostly he disapproved, especially at the end, before he left. Then he wouldn't even let me touch him, and I started fantasizing about you again.

"When I saw you at the airport, and felt your coldness, I wanted to demonstrate exactly how much I've missed you.

"But you're right. We need to go slow. That used to be my line, remember?"

I smiled. "Yeah, well, I guess I have the keys" -- I
jingled them -- "right here, and it's high time for me to hit the road. Goodnight, Kathy."

"Do you really have to leave tomorrow?"

I explained while I rubbed her back. Then we held each other without talking.

"Come with us, Kathy."

"No, Tom. You've asked her to visit a dozen times, but she's always been afraid to fly alone. She still resents your decision to live so far away. You two need to talk. Get to know each other again. You're still treating her the way you did six years ago, and you've both changed.

"Besides, if I tagged along, we'd have to sneak around, and I don't want that to be the way we start over. There are a couple of leads that I can follow up here. One of them's Annie Harter, Ed Harter's wife. I met her one Christmas when the F.B.I. wives sponsored a benefit art show. I donated a watercolor I'd done, and Annie Harter bought it. Since then, she's bought some other paintings and a wall hanging."

"How well do you know her?"

"Not at all in terms of our husbands or the Bureau. Mostly, we talk about art. She does ceramics and teaches a summer course at Montgomery Junior College."

"You never talk about your husbands?"

"Only to complain about what the Bureau does to your marriage -- how tough it is having a good, open relationship when you never know what your husband is doing. Anyway, get
this: I know Ed talks to Annie about decisions he's got to make which have political overtones. He thinks she's got her finger on what he calls the liberal pulse, being a pretty smart liberal herself."

"Have her ask Ed point-blank what he thinks Steve is really up to."

"I will."

"And call me if you find out something."

"I will."

"Let's see. What else?" I snatched one more kiss and ducked into the car.

So Mom flew home with me, clasping her hands as if she were praying during each take-off, finally relaxing just before we'd land. In the air, I tried to explain my feelings about Montana by telling some of its history, beginning with the French fur traders and Spanish priests.

I was telling her about Montana today — loggers, sawmills, environmentalists, oil exploration and power companies — when, off in the distance, I caught my first glimpse of the Utah Rockies, the Wasatch Range. Then I pointed out mountain ranges and rivers, following an airline map which had our flight route marked in red, as we flew in and out of Salt Lake. When we reached the southwestern corner of Montana, I could name mountains and rivers without looking at the map. "That's what everyone's fighting over,"
I said, "right down there. Wilderness."

We followed the Bitterroot river into Missoula, and I pointed out the area where Steve was holed up. "I can't tell you how pretty it is when you hike up into one of those cirque lakes, Mom. Even at twenty-thousand feet, you get a feel for how wild it is back there, don't you? See those two lakes, the big one and the little one? Big Creek lakes. I've been in there."

However, I didn't elaborate on that particular trip. I looked across the aisle and could almost smell the larch and ponderosa, see huckleberry bushes in bloom, bear grass, Indian paint brush, taste the last of the spring run-off and feel the hot sun at four o'clock when I took off my pack and clothes and dove into the smaller lake, Blessinger right behind me, the water so cold it gave us goosebumps. Then I pictured her breasts, nipples as smooth and hard as streambed pebbles.

Mom and I had a minor crisis when she saw what state my house was in. It's a small, square, two-story, white frame house with a living room, bathroom, study, dining room and kitchen downstairs. Upstairs, there's one large bedroom and bathroom. A Playboy was open on the dining room table but luckily to an article by George McGovern. Mom had surprised everyone by voting for him, mostly because he was from her home state of South Dakota.
I carried her bags upstairs, showed her the bathroom and started dinner. Afterwards, we went for a drive around town. At nine o’clock we were sitting in the living room. "Well, Mom," I said. "I’m turning in. Tomorrow we’ll be talking to some folks who are convinced that we’re going to blow ourselves up and that it may be a good deal if they can just dig themselves in. They’re like Noah, except this time they’re burying their arks, because this time the rains will be radioactive."

"You can’t carry your burdens alone, Tom. Have you prayed for help?"

"Never seem to get any return calls."

"Don’t mock, son. You’d do well to get down on your knees."

"Mom, please. Do you have to bring religion into every conversation we have?"

"Are you ashamed of your beliefs?"

"Ashamed?" I laughed. "God, I used to be ashamed about everything, didn’t I?" I shook my head. "All right, I’ll tell you what I believe.

"First, God is Creation -- that is, everything that exists in the natural world -- and is infinite and unknowable. Second, certain individuals throughout history have been in harmony with Creation, with Nature, and all of them should be revered. Third, the purpose of life is to live in harmony with Nature."
I elaborated on this third tenet, claiming that it was farmers versus industrialists and technocrats, and ended up sounding Jeffersonian and reactionary, envisioning a nation of gardeners and small farmers. When I was through lecturing, Mom studied me during a long silence.

"Then you don't believe in Jesus Christ as your one and only savior?"

"No, I don't." Why did I let myself be drawn into these absurd arguments?

"Then you're lost, Tom. You won't go to heaven."

Why did I continue to argue with her? "If the only ones who get into heaven are people who believe that no one deserves to be in heaven except others who think like them, it wouldn't be heaven for me, Mom." I could just picture myself in heaven with one hundred and forty-four thousand Jehovah's Witnesses. "Besides, let God worry about me. You've paid your dues. I'm on my own now, okay?"

"I believe in prayer. I'll pray for you."

"Thanks, Mom. Listen, tomorrow you can sleep in while I check with a friend who has some connections down the Bitterroot. Maybe after noon we can take a drive to Hamilton and ask around. Okay?"

"Fine. Meanwhile, I'll start cleaning up this --" she rummaged for the right word -- "mess."

"Don't bother. Tomorrow my cleaning lady comes. You'll like her. She uses a real scrub brush, not one of those
sponges on a stick."

"I hate those things."

"I know. Now get some sleep. I'm sleeping down here on the couch. The sheets on the bed upstairs are clean."

"They'd be --" she really was trying -- "Goodnight, son."
Ernest Revere wasn't home, or else he wasn't up yet. No one answered the bell. Then, faintly, I caught a snatch of violins, then silence. I found him on his knees in the backyard, weeding a big, bushy tomato plant, talking to it. A portable cassette whispered something which sounded like Vivaldi, turned low so it wouldn't disturb the neighbors. Ernest was almost fifty and in great shape from hiking every weekend. His thin hair was gray, and, with his hawk nose and black-frame glasses, he looked like a predatory scholar.

He owned one of the best antique gun collections in western Montana. Once, at lunch, Ernest told me that his dream was to live by himself somewhere up in the mountains, and his best friends could hike up and bring him supplies. "I could hike up there on weekends," I'd said, "and bring you news of the outside world." Ernest laughed. "Except you wouldn't want to hear it."

"That's true," Ernest had said, still laughing.

Now, while Ernest weeded, I explained what had happened in D.C. I left out the part about Kathy. Ernest knew all about her, and he would've said that I'd be a fool to risk making the same mistake twice.

After I finished my account, which I pretty much had down pat by now, Ernest stood and brushed off his pants. "Well, what should I do?" I asked. "I thought maybe you'd know something about this S.S.S. group. I'm counting on you.
for all the answers."

He laughed. "Wise men don't worry about answers. They concentrate on asking the right questions. First of all, what happens to your brother if you start investigating the S.S.S.?" There was no answer to that one. "Second, why isn't the F.B.I. pursuing this?" I answered that. "And third, who might know them well enough to give us some information?" He thought for a moment, then said, "There is one person who might be our ticket. Name's Clint Harris. He's about your age, and he's built himself a state-of-the-art shelter down by Florence. He's also the spokesman for a loose-knit group of survivalists in the Florence area."

"Posse Comitatus?"

"Clint? Lord, no. Clint's no crackpot. Besides, the Posse pretty much died with Loren Nedley. He was the Posse. I think our best bet would be to check the Six-Pac this afternoon. Clint drinks there sometimes before he goes home. Let's see, it's nine now. Be back here at two. I have some errands to run first."

"What does this Clint do?"

"He's a cowboy."

"No, I mean what does he do for a living?"

"He raises Arabian horses. He's a cowboy, Tom. A real cowboy." When I stared, he continued, "Leaving the East Coast, the West Coast, and the CBS Evening News behind, they now enter The American Dream: money and freedom, but most of
all, the belief that if everyone works hard, the Good Lord will provide. What better place to begin than with a genuine, modern-day buckaroo?" I laughed, and when Ernest asked what was funny, I confessed, "I've never met a real cowboy."

The Six-Pac had a large, horseshoe bar facing the dance floor. The rest of the place was tables. There were maybe fifty of those. The dance floor was good-sized. Friday and Saturday nights they packed the place from nine to two. Ernest and I joined the other three customers around the bar.

I liked the place. I knew someone else who'd like it: Blessinger, who loved to dance.

"Clint been in?"

"Nope." The man studied his watch. He was overweight and looked tired. Ernest asked about business. "Been slow, real slow during the afternoon, picks up around four and dies at six. Nights are lonely. What else d'ya want t'know?"

"What's the best way to meet a real nice gal in these parts?" I asked. I waited the man out.

He finally smiled and said, "Y'oughta get down here on Friday night, sometime. Y'get these young gals comin in wearin them thin, cotton t-shirts, little straps, y'know the kind I mean?"

"Tank tops," I said.

"Right. Well, some a them don't wear nothin underneath."
What I'm sayin is lotsa guys really like checkin those gals out. Mostly they're pretty young, though. Now I ain't sayin there's any future in them young gals; there ain't. But thinka all them wives watchin their husbands watchin them young gals, and some a them wives're real pretty, too, and you bet they'd dance with the first gentleman who asks, and they'd dance slow, and a lot can happen during a slow dance, as I'm sure you gentlemen well know.

"What do you want with Clint?"

Ernest tried to buy the man a drink. "Sorry," he said. "Don't take no free drinks." He pulled a leather cup of dice from under the bar. "However, I will roll ya for it."

I'd been wrong about him. He wasn't fat and sour, or dumb. Maybe he had a couple of girlfriends and lived happily by himself with a stack of old jazz records that no one had ever heard of in Florence, Montana. Blessinger and I used to play this game: make up a person's life based upon your first impressions.

Ernest rolled three fours, and the bartender scooped up the dice. He rolled four sixes. "Hey," he said. "There's Clint."

A tall, thin man stood at the cigarette machine beside the door. I waited to see what he smoked. Larks.

"Hey, Clint." A silver-haired woman, late forties, sitting between two older gents, yelled his name again when he didn't turn. "Get yer ass over here." She laughed at
herself until she started coughing.

Clint walked towards her a little bow-legged, slow and easy, then even slower. Stopped. "Now Rachel, whatta ya want, yellin' cross the room like that?" He wasn't as good-looking as Paul Newman, but he'd either seen "Hud," or he didn't have to see it.

"Mick," Rachel called. "Get Clint here a beer. He's thirsty."

"Damn straight."

"Hello, Clint." Clint looked over at us. He smiled quickly when he saw Ernest, then stared at me. "This is my friend, Tom. He teaches with me. Tom, Clint."

We shook hands, and he asked, "Whatta ya teach?"

"English."

"Now that was my worst subject. Never did learn t'talk except the way I was brung up." He almost smiled.

"Right on," I said, and his flicker of a smile vanished. Then he laughed. "Hell, you're all right, I guess. That cowboy there, though. I'm not so sure bout him. I think he's a tad pink inside."

"Why?" Ernest asked. "Because I don't trust the government? You're the one who's always complaining about how this country spends its money."

"Mosta it goes t'fat politicians and welfare mamas. If they ever cut taxes in half and give mosta that t'farmers and ranchers, I'd be the first man in line t'hand over whatever
my fair share is," Clint said.

"What about single-parent families?" I asked. "And children?"

"They can make a go of it just like I did." Later Ernest told me that Clint had run away from home when he was sixteen after almost beating his stepfather to death for slapping his mother around. "Anyway, I sure hope this ain't what y'drove all the way down here t'argue about."

"Actually," Ernest said, "I brought a couple of items that I thought you might want to take a look at. Tom, would you step outside and give me a hand?"

In the trunk, between a couple of olive green, Army blankets, were two long-barreled revolvers in mint condition, with rosewood handles, engraved scrollwork and polished blue steel. "Whoa," I said. "They're beautiful." I lifted one, surprised by how heavy it was. "Wait a minute. We're not going to need these."

"Yes we are. Clint's been after me for months, writing me letters, and like he said, he never did like to write. He wants these guns, and he's offered me a fair price.

"They belonged to a part-time outlaw, part-time lawman by the name of Charlie Banks. He gunned down five men in Last Chance Gulch when that was the rough side of Helena. Now it's all boutiques and restaurants. Times change."

I looked closer at the gun in my hand. "That's a Colt
.44 Rimfirer. See where Charlie filed off the trigger? It was single-action. You had to cock it before you could shoot, so Charlie removed the trigger and fanned it like this." He pulled his hand back, above the hammer, fast.

"Once the Army started buying Colts, the company changed the caliber to .45.

"Now don't worry. I've got a girl starting college next year." He had two girls. After his divorce, his wife won custody, which he referred to as legalized kidnapping. Then she'd moved to California, and he sent monthly checks made out individually to the two girls but rarely got to see them.

"I was hoping that's what it was," Clint said when he saw the guns. "I guess the last offer I made was fair enough, huh?"

"Almost," Ernest said.

"I'm not offerin any more; thought I made that clear."

"I don’t want more money. I need information."

Clint’s face froze, and his eyes narrowed. "What kinda information?"

"Know anything about that S.S.S. group down by Victor?"

"Heard of ’m. Don’t know much cept they’re diggin in, just like we are. They don’t want nothin t’do with us, and we don’t much care for them. They’re the ones who got us inta this mess. Rich men. Politicians. Fat-assed generals."

"Here, here," I said. "Gentlemen, I propose a toast:
to fat-assed generals, politicians and rich men. They got us into this mess. May they be the only ones who don’t get out."

"May I join you gentlemen?" Mick asked. "This round’s on the house. We don’t get many original toasts."

"Let’s move to a table," Clint said after we’d small-talked our way through another round.

"Fine," Ernest said, and elbowed me lightly when we stood. This was it. Either Clint knew something that would help us, or he didn’t. I decided that if anyone knew something, it would be Clint. I didn’t know the man, but I sensed in Clint the countryboy version of street smarts.

"First, here’s yer money," Clint said, writing Ernest a check. "Well, like I said, don’t know much bout that group y’mentioned. Their leader, if y’wanna call him that, is bout my age. Called me once when they first started workin on their place and asked if we could talk. So we met. Said his name was Luke Spielberg, and he wanted t’pay me a hundred dollars t’evaluate his bomb shelter.

"Told him that was a lotta money. He answered it’d be a lotta work and handed me a hundred-page book of questions written by a Goddamn computer, five answers for each question, and I was sposed t’mark each one with a number two pencil. I just handed the book back and declined the offer."

"What’s this Spielberg like?" I asked.

"Short, I’d say five-eight. Sun-bleached hair,
mustache, blue eyes.

"Giggles, like everything's real funny. But he ain't no fool. When I told'm I wasn't interested, he offered me fifty dollars t'just take a look at the place and tell him right out what I thought.

"Hell, I'd been curious ever since I heard bout all that construction goin on day and night, trucks haulin in lumber and concrete up inta them mountains where the old Kenicott mine was. Had t'use helicopters t'air lift everything in from where the road ended. Hearda that mine?" I shook my head. "Guy named Rawlins discovered a lode a gold up there; spent it all diggin further inta the mountain without findin any more.

"Like I said, my curiosity was spurred. So I figured why not? I'd take a look round and say, 'Sorry, but I ain't interested in yer hundred dollars, neither.'

"So we get there. Y'wouldn'ta believed it. They built a Goddamn underground town. I seen a greenhouse with over an acre a topsoil under artificial lights. Spielberg claims he can grow enough food t'be self-sufficient, and I believe'm.

"Got no idea how much money went inta that place, but it took two hours t'walk through it, and even then, I never seen the computer, or the living quarters, or the power plant. They were off-limits.

"What I seen, though, was unbelievable. Kitchens, health spa, underground river, grocery store, bar, video game
room. Reminded me of a shoppin mall, how all them rooms opened inta each other.

"Got facilities for a hundred people, maybe more. Wouldn’t say how many people he’s plannin for, but he did say they’re politicians and military men and rich people. Claimed he was sorta the manager of an underground condominium; then he laughed. Sounded like a loon."

"Did you see anyone else while you were there?" Ernest asked.

"Well," Clint said, "I seen four people all told. An older gent wearing a khaki uniform, another guy bout the same age as Spielberg, Spielberg and his wife."

"Could’ve been Eric Johnson and Steve," I said, looking at Ernest.

"Clint, we’re afraid these people have kidnapped Tom’s brother. Did you notice anything peculiar about the man who wasn’t wearing the uniform?"

"No," Clint said. He shook his head, thinking. "No. But I do remember that he looked strong, and whenever I looked at him, he was really checkin me out. Had gray eyes. And he had a nice, easy-goin smile, sorta boyish, a grin more like.

"Y’know, now that I think bout it, he did look an awful lot like you."

"Did he appear drugged, or hypnotized, or anything like that?" I asked.
"No."

"Remember," Ernest said, "if Eric Johnson was still alive then, chances are everything was fine at that point, and Steve would've acted perfectly normal."

"True," I said. "Then I guess we really have nothing to go on."

"Whoa, partner," Clint said. "Not so fast. Spielberg is some kinda computer whiz, totally wrapped up in his work, understand, and he's got himself this pretty, young wife, remember? Awfully pretty. Well, she run away."

"You're kidding," Ernest said. "How do you know that?"

"She run t'me." He grinned. "Yep, that's right. Showed up last night, claimin she had nowhere else t'go. Said I was the only person from the outside she met since she been here. Y'know, it's sorta peculiar. First thing she asked was whether anybody'd been askin after her husband. Then you two show up. Now I'd say that's more'n peculiar."

"You think she's setting us up?"

"For what? All I know's she won't talk t'me bout her husband at all. Says she just wants t'get out. She and Molly been talkin like sisters -- bout what I don't know -- and the kids love'er."

"May we talk to her?"

"You're invited t'dinner tonight. Make it seven, so I got some time t'cook this one goose been nippin the kids. Been waitin for an occasion like this."
I laughed. "We'll bring the wine," Ernest said.
"Fine. All's we got's whiskey."

I called Mom and told her that we had a lead which we had to follow up immediately. I assured her that Steve was looking more and more alive.
Christine

We had a couple of hours to kill, and there's a stretch of road off Highway 93 that's as pretty as any in Montana. You catch the Eastside Highway at Florence, follow it along the eastern edge of the Ravalli Wildlife Refuge and come out in Stevensville. The refuge is home to all sorts of birds, including a pair of bald eagles. Ernest and I stopped, got out of the car and looked for them. Either they were out cruising the mountains or they were nesting, high and out of sight in an ancient cottonwood leaning over the Bitterroot River. We'd canoed under it many times.

We hiked the half mile back to the river. "I always feel like a tourist in Beverly Hills when we float this stretch of the river," Ernest said. "There's where the osprey live. That's the eagles' nest. The blue heron hides hers in there, in all those high reeds."

"Ernest, I've got a feeling that this thing's breaking. Call it male intuition."

"I certainly hope so. You're in for a let-down if she's playing some kind of a game: say, reconnaissance."

Clint's earth-sheltered house was built into the side of a small hill in the Sapphire Range. Tourists tend to ignore the Sapphires because the Bitterroots to the west are so spectacular with their jagged peaks, late snow fields and massive expanses of exposed rock.
The Sapphires are softer, roly-poly, like the arms and legs of Rubenesque women. Clint's place was up a crease in one of the foothills, at an elbow or a knee. Ernest said he owned thirty acres but pastured the horses and worked them out on land he leased up Lolo Creek.

He did, I saw, keep a couple of horses around the place for the family to ride. Molly, Clint's wife, was a petite, fast-talking blonde who was Clint's age, according to Ernest, but looked years younger from riding, working the huge garden and keeping track of two small children. She had energy to burn, burned it, but instead of wearing her out, it kept her young.

She gripped my hand and squeezed. "Hi, I'm Molly." She looked past me and said, "And you must be Ernest Revere. Clint talks about you and your guns, all the time. You made quite an impression on him."

"He thinks I'm a commie," Ernest said.

"Clint'd think I was a commie, too, if we ever discussed politics, which we don't. He's always wrong."

"You've been lifting weights."

"Close," she said. "You're not gonna believe this, but I've been using a Mark Eden bust developer. I don't think my tits are any bigger, but my grip's sure improved. So's my fly fishing."

I glanced at Ernest. I didn't know whether to laugh or not. Then he started, and I couldn't stop myself. "That's
"better," she said. "Had t'see if you city boys could handle a little country talk. I lived in New Jersey until I was thirteen. On a farm."

"I didn't know --"

"They had farms in New Jersey; well, they do. Once y'get past Patterson on the parkway, drive up northa Newton sometime. That's the country where I grew up.

"Here's the living room. Sorry about the mess. Kids, y'know. Those're double-pane, passive solar skylights. Here's the greenhouse. The kitchen. That's the door t'the addition."

It looked like the door to a walk-in cooler, which is what it was. "The cooler" was a long, simply-furnished room built straight into the hillside. The walls were all built-in shelves, some books but mostly jars and jars of preserves. A few doors opened into small sleeping and work rooms. Clint was washing salad greens at the sink. A dark-haired woman, thin as a model, was setting the table for five. "The kids are visiting friends for dinner," Molly said. "This is Christine Spielberg."

When the woman turned to look at us, her smile vanished, and a small knot tightened between her eyebrows. Then her eyes widened, and she raised a hand to her mouth. As if that gesture had instantly switched a bright purple light on and off, an ultra-violet aura flashed behind her. For a moment, she'd been its shadow. "You're Steve's brother, aren't you?"
"Does he talk?" she asked Ernest. "Is he Steve's brother or not?"

I'd never seen an aura before, or since, for that matter, but I felt certain that's what it was, and it frightened me. I thought I was hallucinating.

"Yes," Ernest said. "We'd like to ask about Steve."

"After dinner," Clint said. "Dinner's for eatin and chattin. All serious talkin's outlawed."

During dinner I sat across from her, and whenever I looked up, she looked away. Once I openly studied her. She wasn't beautiful in a flawless, pretty girl sense.

She was striking. Her long, brown hair was thick and frizzy. Her tan was Indian red. She was wearing a black t-shirt with Hollywood written in pink across the chest, white shorts and pink Adidas.

Her dark eyes made me think of Natalie Wood, but Natalie's nose was small and cute. Christine's was wide and flat. Her teeth were crooked; her lips were full, and her mouth was wide. Finally, she looked directly at me, and I realized that because her irises were as black as her pupils, her eyes looked blank, and you really had no idea what she was thinking. I returned her gaze as coolly as I could, heart pounding.

Then I turned and asked Molly to pass some more of that fried chicken, it sure was good. "Glad y'like it. Took me all afternoon t'pluck em. This morning they were still
chasing grasshoppers."

"I thought we were having goose," Ernest said.

"That dinner," Molly said, "escaped by biting her executioner." She laughed, and Clint held up his hand, displaying an angry, red welt below his thumb.

"Must be gettin soft," he said. "Coulda caught'er and wrung'er neck right there, but I let'er go. Figured if she had that much spunk -- God, they run funny, liftin them tailfeathers like a skirt, them big thighs pumpin just like a fat girl in gym class."

Ernest looked at me and rolled his eyes. We'd talked before about boys who make fun of fat girls.

After dinner, Clint announced that he and Molly were retiring inside to wash the dishes. Ernest volunteered to help carry out the plates, and they left. Christine and I stared across the table at each other. "What do you know about my brother?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Did someone -- your husband, for instance -- send another man's body to the F.B.I. and say it was Steve?"

"So that's what they did. Far out. I wouldn't've guessed that. Listen, I'll tell you something. It got pretty crazy in there before I left."

"What happened?"

"Well, for starters, your brother killed our security man."
"Eric Johnson? Why?"

She shook her head. "It's too complicated to explain right now. That Johnson was a certified creep, and either Steve killed him, or he'd've killed Steve: I'll swear to that. I had to get out of there. I mean, it was getting pretty intense, you know?"

"I want to see Steve."

"No. Leave Steve alone. I mean it." She sat back in her chair. "Did the F.B.I. send you?"

"F.B.I.?" I asked. "Who said anything about the F.B.I.?"

"You did. You said Luke shipped the body to the F.B.I. Besides, how else would you know Eric Johnson's name?"

"So your husband knows that Steve's with the F.B.I."

"Of course. The first time I saw your brother, I told Luke he just had to be F.B.I. I mean, he comes across with this phony letter from the President of the United States saying he wants Steve to report directly to him and that he has no intentions of interfering in any private citizen's right to protect himself, but to cover his ass -- that's what he says in the letter, I swear to God -- to cover his ass, he's got to have a confidential report to show Congress and the Justice Department, because they have their jobs to do, too. What a crock of shit. Hey, got a cigarette? Never mind, I quit.

"You don't talk much, do you?"
"You look a lot like your brother, anyone ever tell you that? I mean he’s bigger than you, and you look pretty young, but you look pretty strong. What do you do to keep in shape, play basketball?"

I laughed. "Now how’d you know that?" I mimicked her tone. "Psychic?" Her laugh surprised me. It was low, like a growl. "When I first saw you," I said, "I saw a purple light flash behind your head."

"That’s not a bad line. Let me tell you something about your brother. He’s a real straight arrow, but I liked him a lot. Too bad he’s so hung-up about sex, and real hung-up about his wife -- thinks she’s still in love with you. You’re still in love with her, too, aren’t you?"

"Cut the crap," I said.

"Ah, touched a nerve. Steve and I had a couple of long talks. Gets a little boring sitting around with just three people in a bomb shelter. You’d have to have at least a dozen adults and thirty kids to keep from turning into a zombie, which is what I was doing. I’m not kidding.

"Anyway, we talked about you and his wife, so I know all about that. He thinks she’d’ve been a whole lot better off with you. But he’s definitely still in love with her."

"How do you know that? Did you read his mind, too?"

"Yes. We talked a long time. He realizes he had no right to force his standards onto her the way he did, searching her closets and drawers, and reading her mail."
"He was reading her mail?"

"He's been obsessed his whole life with being a straight arrow, and you can't deny your bends and twists, or you become so warped you can't see straight, right?"

"Tom, your brother almost raped me the night he killed Eric Johnson."

"Bullshit."

I stared into her dark eyes which revealed nothing, not even anger. "How was Johnson killed?"

"It was my fault, really." She stood and walked away, then stopped without turning.

"How did you get here?" I asked. I waited until she sighed and faced me.

"You think I'm lying."

"How did you get here?"

"I was sunbathing up the canyon where the shelter is, and this kid on a dirt bike surprised me. No one comes that far up the trail. The land's posted, and the old trail's been blocked by trees Luke had cut to keep trespassers away.

"So this kid wanted to know how I got up there, and we talked while I was pulling my clothes on. University student, nice kid. So I asked if I could try his bike. I told him about my old racing days -- used to race motocross in California when I was fifteen -- only girl who did back then. The kid obliged me, and here I am. Perfect timing."

"Yes, perfect. Just when we get here to ask questions
about my brother."

"Must be our karma."

I was certain that she wanted me to kiss her; she closed her eyes. Then I remembered Ernest's advice about women who play games: they have an immediate advantage because they take your mind off your best move. "Tell you what," I said. "When this is over, we'll write a book about it. I'm an English teacher. I'll just correct your spelling and grammar. We'll write it in your own words." She looked amused. "Tell me," I said. "What's your husband up to, anyway? Why'd he go to all the trouble of covering up for Steve?"

"Luke really likes Steve. And he likes solving puzzles. He's a genius, you know. What's your name again?"

"Tom."

"Ah, doubting Thomas."

"No, just Tom." She smiled, crooked teeth, full lips, wide, wide mouth. "Doesn't this survivalist business strike you as a little paranoid, Christine?"

"Not when you know what Luke knows."

"What's that?"

"He won't tell me, except he's convinced there's going to be an all-out nuclear war before this century's over. He thinks the history of this century is pointing towards total annihilation. Sure as A, B, C, World War I, and-a II, and-a III. Sure as you and me, or me and you. So tell me, sweet
man, don’t you fear it, too?

"Hey, I’ve got to write that down. Got a pen?"

"Sorry."

"Oh well. If it’s important, I’ll remember it. I’m a song-writer."

"You’re also quite an actress."
"Tell you what," I said. "Let's do this. I want you to talk to a man I met in Washington. He's Steve's immediate superior at the F.B.I. I think we can trust him."

"Think we can trust him?" she asked. "You Goddamn better be sure we can." I pictured Ed Harter. I tried to visualize the way Harter had looked when he was explaining what he wanted me to believe was the truth. Was it?

"Yes," I said. "I believe we can trust him."

"All right," she said. "Call him. I'll tell him about the murder, but let's not mention the Pentagon's involvement. That might confuse the issue, don't you think? We don't want a civil war breaking out between the F.B.I. and the Pentagon. Not just yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"Eric Johnson was protecting Pentagon interests in the project."

"What project?"

"You can't guess?"

"No."

"To survive World War III."

"Go ahead: look away, think I'm loony tunes. I'm used to it. Ever heard of the Hopi prophecies?" When I didn't answer, she said, "They predict how the world's going to end. My grandmother happens to be pure-blooded Hopi, and she told me about them. They're heavily symbolic, you know, but
there's no doubt: they describe a nuclear war.

"The prophecies were passed along orally for generations and recorded by the first Spanish priests two hundred years ago. Check them out sometime.

"In 1979 a delegation of Hopi elders went to New York to address the United Nations -- described in the prophecies as a tall tower of mica where all the nations of the world meet to talk of peace -- and the delegation was denied an audience. They were going to plea for nuclear disarmament."

"I want you to tell Steve's boss what you just told me."

"About the prophecies? Sure."

"About Eric Johnson's Pentagon connections."

I dialed the number Harter had given me, and we sat around while I explained to him who Christine Spielberg was, and she told him everything she'd told me, including the Hopi prophecies. To a question from Harter, she answered, "He's a computer programmer."

When I talked to Harter, he asked one question: "Is she reliable?" I said yes, though I had strong doubts, and Harter said he'd be on the first plane to Missoula in the morning. He said we were to do nothing until he got there. He was insistent that Christine stay right where she was. Before I hung up, he said, "Be careful."

"Don't worry," I said. "I will." Then I told Christine that Harter wanted to talk to her tomorrow, in person.
"No."

"What do you mean, no? He's coming out here."

"I said no. I'm not talking to any cops. They'll want me to testify, and I'm not going to do that. Besides, I just want to get away and get it together, man. Shit, I've been walking the edge for weeks. Everything's happening way too fast."

I grabbed her shoulders. "Listen to me. First you're going to talk to Ed Harter, then you're going to take us to see Steve."

"Where'd you get on, Asshole Junction?"

"Don't play me for a fool, Christine. I know what your game is: get me off my brother's back."

"And I know what your game is: get your brother."

I called her a liar and said that it was her husband whom I suspected of murdering Eric Johnson and trying to cover it up. We continued arguing until she asked to use the phone. "Why?" I asked.

"Because I want to leave. Every time I think it's crazy underground, I go up and discover it's even crazier up there. Shit, I don't know."

"You're not leaving until you talk to Ed Harter tomorrow afternoon."

"Who are you, Hitler?"

"Christine, please. For Steve's sake."

"For Steve's sake, hell no."
She walked to the cooler door, pushed it open and entered the house. After a while, Ernest came in. "What did you say to her? She just called her husband and begged him to rescue her. She said that you were threatening to hold her here."

"She's fruitcakes, Ernest." I told him what she'd said about Steve trying to rape her and murdering Eric Johnson. "Well, if any of it's true, no wonder she's nervous."

"I think she's playing games."

"Y'had no call t'tell'er she had t'do anything, specially in my house." Clint stared me down as coldly as a gunfighter.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I made a mistake."

"You shouldn't've called her a liar, either," Molly said.

Clint said, "That's enough."

"I'd say it's high time we hit the road," Ernest said. "Ready, partner?"

I nodded, once. I was certain that Christine Spielberg was playing us all for idiots, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it, except leave.

"No hard feelings," Clint said at the door. "Be careful." It was the second time that I'd heard that in the past half hour.

When I opened the door, someone hit me so hard that I
didn't feel a thing until I came to, in bed, a few minutes later. Ernest said that there'd been two of them, wearing ski masks and black, skin-tight outfits, carrying automatic rifles. They'd grabbed Christine and were gone in less than a minute.

I tried to sit up. My head clanged. I couldn't think. "Where am I?" I couldn't focus. Everything blurred.

"You're in bed. We've called a doctor."

"I'll be okay. I'm a little dizzy, that's all. Used to happen all the time playing football. I was too small, but I had something to prove, I guess.

"Really, I'm okay." I did feel better. I could focus but still had a grand mal headache. Mild concussion: I knew the symptoms. "Call the doctor and tell him to stay home. Really. I'm all right now."

"Clint's jaw is busted." I hadn't even thought to ask about anyone else. "Just lie back and let me tell you what happened. Close your eyes. Come on." I sighed and closed my eyes. "That's better.

"It happened real fast. You opened the door, stepped outside, and one of them clobbered you with his rifle butt. He kneed me in the groin, and then, again with the rifle, caught Clint on the chin and broke his jaw.

"He pointed his gun at me and asked where Christine was. I said that no one by that name lived here, but she identified herself and left with them. Maybe you were
"Think she knew them? Did she resist at all?"

"Let me think. One of the men was holding her arm. She wasn't pulling away, but she was walking fast, and he was definitely pulling her by the wrist."

Molly knocked and stuck her head into the room. She looked worried. "The doctor's here," she said.

The doctor made us all stand back while he felt softly around Clint's jaw and stared at the ceiling. Clint was in a demerol stupor. The doctor had a few days' growth of white, stubbled beard. He wore boots, jeans and a white, cotton shirt with snap, pearl buttons. "Well," he said. "Nothing's broken. Dislocated is all. Now if you folks'll just step outside a moment, I'm gonna set it."

Fifteen minutes later, Clint was trying to talk, and twenty minutes later, he wanted to go after them. "No one breaks into my house," he said. "No one."

The doctor tried to calm him down, partially succeeded and left. Then Ernest said that we'd better go, too.

"Hadn't you better call that frienda yours in Washington?" Clint asked.

"He'll be here tomorrow," I said. "Then, I suppose, we'll pay Mister Spielberg a social call."

Clint demanded that he be included in any visit we might pay Luke Spielberg. "I don't stand for bein hit, and I aim
t'get that point cross, one way or nother."

I assured him that we'd be in touch.
Long Distance

On the way home, Ernest and I discussed our options in dealing with the S.S.S. We could file formal assault charges, but that could endanger Steve by focusing a blitz of publicity upon Luke Spielberg and his company of affluent fascists. I tried to picture Christine cooped up underground with fifty rich, undoubtedly lecherous, old men and their withering wives. Maybe she really was fruitcakes.

"Ed Harter will know what to do," Ernest said. Before he dropped me off, we arranged to go to the airport; the first flight from D.C. arrived at two.

Mom opened the door clutching her faded red bathrobe at the neck. "I was worried," she said.

"Sorry, Mom. I should’ve called. We had a little trouble, but we’re certain, now, that Steve’s alive."

Her eyes held mine without blinking. Tears welled and rolled down her cheeks and down her neck. Again I held her. She cried against my chest like a farm girl from South Dakota. For a long while I just held her and let her cry. She finally caught her breath and said, "The Lord works in mysterious ways." I had to agree with her.

"You had two calls," she said. "Kathy wants you to call the minute you arrive; and you’re supposed to call Clint Harris -- he said the instant you arrive -- and he said it was urgent."

Clint answered on the third ring and told me that
shortly after Ernest and I left, Spielberg had arrived, looking for Christine, and had not believed his story until Molly had indignantly asked, "'Y'callin my husband a liar, mister?' Spielberg just gawked at her," Clint said, "and broke inta that loony laugha his, like a thirteen-year-old girl. Tell ya what: that fella's strange."

I told Clint that I'd call back tomorrow afternoon when Ed Harter arrived. Then I thought about the kind of human beings who'd even want to survive a nuclear war and live among the ruins. Every bombshelter would be a miniature asylum.

"Mom, why don't you go to bed now?"

"Don't forget to call Kathy."

"I will. Go to bed."

She hesitated, then asked: "Is Steve really alive?" I nodded. "Thank God." I hugged her goodnight and waited until her footsteps reached the bed upstairs. I dialed.

"Tom?"

"Yes."

"I've been thinking about you all day. I told myself that if I stayed here and got involved with Steve's disappearance I could forget; it's no use."

"Just wait until this is over: I've been remembering how good it felt to be with you, and how long the feeling lasted. I'd blocked out all the good memories, Kathy. They hurt too much. Now they don't hurt at all. Now they feel
just fine."

For a while no one spoke. Then she sighed. All she said was "Oh," but the way she said it made me want to jump in the car and start driving. Then I realized how far away she was. "Kathy, 'Steve's alive."

"I know. Annie Harter called to tell me and to tell you that Ed took a personal leave of absence from the Bureau this afternoon. He turned in his request to the Director and walked out. Someone in the White House informed the Bureau that Steve would be reporting directly to Naval Intelligence for the duration of his assignment.

"Annie said that Ed doesn't understand what that means, but he's determined to find out. However, since he has no official Bureau backing, he really has no legal authority now. He's a private citizen, just like you."

"Annie Harter told you this?"

"Yes. She doesn't think Ed really knows what he's doing. She said that he doesn't have much respect for military intelligence. According to Ed, the very fact that they're involved makes this an intelligence problem." I laughed. "It's not that funny," Kathy said. "It's an old joke."

"I'm all right," I said. "Just a little slaphappy. Did Annie say anything about Steve?"

"Not really. She said that Ed can't figure out why Steve sent the body back here. Why go to all that trouble?
It just started people asking questions."

"True, but not the F.B.I., remember? They were wondering why they hadn’t heard from him. Then they were notified that he’d been killed, and his body was sent. They checked it out: it wasn’t Steve. So they figured Steve was behind it all. Maybe Eric Johnson had to be killed. Maybe the F.B.I.’s wait-and-see attitude was exactly what Luke Spielberg was counting on. It was a play for more time."

"But he didn’t count on us getting involved."

"Hell, I’m not so sure about that, now." I told her what Christine Spielberg had told me about her husband’s belief that the next world war was imminent and my strong suspicion that she’d been spying for her husband. I didn’t tell her Christine’s accusations against Steve.

"What a break," Kathy said. "If we have his wife, we can bargain with Spielberg."

"Kathy, some people attacked us tonight and kidnapped her." I gave her Ernest’s version of what had happened, then Clint’s account of Spielberg’s visit.

"Tom, I’ve got to call Annie. There’s no sense in Ed flying out there."

"Sure there is. Tomorrow we’re going to insist on seeing Steve."

"How? Ed’s worried about this group, Tom. That’s why he’s disobeying orders and coming out there, in person. Annie thinks he may lose his job over this. Actually, she
hopes he does, except she knows it would crush Ed. He loves
the Bureau. He thinks it’s getting back to what it was
before Hoover wrecked everything by getting his personal
politics involved."

"Kathy, I realize I just said that we should cool it for
a while, but now I want you to fly out here tomorrow with
Ed."

"Already made my reservation. See you at the airport,"
she said, and hung up.

I didn’t feel so tired. Mom was asleep. I had a beer.
I had two beers; my head stopped throbbing. One more, and I
fell asleep.
That night I slept like a man in a coma and woke refreshed and surprisingly optimistic. At nine Ernest called, and by ten, Mom and I had picked him up and were breakfasting at Queen of Tarts, a French pastry and coffee shop.

Mom and Ernest hit it off immediately, and as soon as he learned that Mom hailed from a tiny South Dakota town which had conducted all its business in German until after World War II, they spoke the father tongue and laughed at each other, Mom covering her mouth like a schoolgirl.

We arrived at the airport half an hour early, and, as usual, the plane arrived half an hour late. Harter and Kathy walked off together. Ed held her arm for a moment, steering her to where we were standing. Feeling like a game-show host, I introduced everyone.

We went into the airport lounge; it was cool and empty. Ernest and I filled everyone in on the situation. Ed lost his composure for a minute when he learned that Christine Spielberg had been kidnapped. I didn't mention my conversation with Kathy about Harter's unofficial status.

When I proposed that we confront Spielberg and demand to see Steve, no one spoke. I waited for Ed to say something; he studied his fingernails. He'd chewed them to skin. "I don't know," he said. "What's the local law like?"

"Clint would know," Ernest said.
"I think whatever we do should involve the local law. You see, I'm not here officially. I was thinking about it on the plane: I'm not sure the Bureau would back me up if we got ourselves into a jam."

He looked at each of us. "We appreciate your honesty," I said. "In fact, we were counting on it."

"On the other hand, I do think that I can get the Bureau involved if we can prove that what Christine Spielberg told me on the phone last night is true. Damn. If only I'd taped it."

"For all we know," Ernest said, "Spielberg has set us up again. I agree with Ed: call Clint and arrange to meet the law in Ravalli County as soon as possible."

We found the luggage, walked out to the car and got in. I'd left the windows rolled up.

"I've got to get out of these clothes," Kathy said.

"Drop me off at any hotel," Harter said, "as long as it has a pool. Does it always get this hot?"

"Try us in July," Ernest said.

We dropped Ed at The Red Lion, made arrangements for dinner, dropped Ernest at his house and asked him to bring charcoal at five. We'd barbecue. Then we headed for home.

"So," Kathy said, "how have you two been getting on?"

"Pretty good," I said. "We haven't spent enough time together to fight."
I carried Kathy’s suitcase into my downstairs study while Mom showed her which towels in the bathroom were hers. Then Ernest called. "Clint says he can set up a meeting for later tonight. He knows the sheriff real well: drinks with him. Eight all right? We’ll take the Millenium this time." The Millenium is Ernest’s dark-green, 1964 diesel Mercedes. "By the way, I liked Ed Harter. Bringing in the local law is smart."

After hanging up, I stood staring out the window, thinking of Kathy, yes, but also of Christine Spielberg and the purple glow that I knew I had not imagined the first time I laid eyes on her.

Mom walked into the room and informed me that she and Kathy would go to the grocery store. "You don’t know where to go," I said. "I’ll drive."

"No. We want to explore. Where are the keys?"

"Here." I tossed them. "It’s a five-speed, but you won’t need the fifth gear going to the store."

"Don’t be too sure." We were loosening up a little, and she’d done most of the work. I didn’t think she’d ever let me be myself; yet here she was, enjoying herself a bit. Maybe she sensed that I’d suffered a little, thought about others.

I knew that old people had it the worst, because they didn’t have the heart to fight back any longer. I knew that most young people were worried about number one first. And
second. Third, fourth, fifth. I believed that Creation was a marvelous gift that most of us destroyed directly or by not thinking about it. I saw little hope except in divine intervention, and I didn't really believe in that.

Then I laughed at myself, remembering how I'd awakened that morning feeling daringly optimistic, and now, a few, short hours later, had no hope in all the world, except -- I believed at times -- in forgiveness. Not in love, and certainly not in sexual love, which was what you did instead of fighting because it exorcized the same demons.
Barbecue

When they returned, Mom went upstairs to take a nap, and Kathy helped me unpack the groceries. I stepped on her foot; she tripped and almost fell. We finally looked at each other.

"Can you wait?" she asked, and stepped into my arms. I tried not to think about the old times, the good times, when I'd kiss her, and she'd move against me as if we were dancing. "We can't, Tom. Not unless you really want to. You have to really, really want to."

"You little tease," I said.

"Not a tease," she said. "A cat. Wouldn't you like to be licked with a sandy little tongue, or bitten with sharp little teeth?" She half-purred, half-growled, and I remembered when she'd made that sound the first time I touched her breasts; it had startled me. Then I'd laughed, and she wouldn't do it again, ever, until right now.

"It's just this one moment," I said, "right now" -- I kissed her -- "that has me baffled."

"Don't be. Pretend we're a priest and a nun who've fallen in love and are waiting for official notification that our vows of chastity are null and void." I laughed. "You're exactly what I need, Tom. What I've needed for a long time." She closed her eyes, raised her face, and her lips parted. I kissed her and remembered that Mom was sleeping upstairs.

The next moment, as I looked into her eyes and saw that
anything I wanted to do was all right with her, I knew that I
didn't really love her, not really, not when -- at the same
time -- I could picture Christine.

At four-thirty I called Ed Harter. I spoke in a low
voice; Kathy was on the sofa taking a nap. "We're having a
barbecue. Then we're going to visit the Ravalli County
Sheriff. Good. See you in fifteen minutes."

Harter was waiting at the curb, wearing yellow golf
slacks and a white, cotton shirt. He still looked hot.
"Feeling better?" I asked.

"Nope. Haven't had a bourbon, yet. Was hoping you'd
offer me one."

We stopped at the State Liquor Store. Harter came out
with a bottle in a narrow, brown bag. I told him that Clint
Harris knew the sheriff and had set up the meeting for
tonight. "Tell me more about this Clint."

I told him what I'd observed, then how I felt. Last, I
said, "Clint distrusts the government but loves the United
States of America."

"I know the type."

"I'm not sure you do. This country's not being run the
way most people want, and that's what aggravates Clint. Too
much money goes to running the government; not enough goes to
the guy who's trying to be his own boss."

"I know a lot of people like that, on both sides of the
political fence. Dreamers and schemers." I hadn't expected Harter to understand. "Let me tell you what we should do." He waited until I looked at him. "Hike up to the shelter.

"Tom, tell me something. On the plane, Kathy said that she's divorcing Steve when all this is over. What's your reason for wanting to find him? To see him punished?"

"You have no right to ask that."

"Maybe not, but I'd still like to know."

I laughed. You have to admire any man who speaks his mind. "I'll trade one of my secrets for one of yours," I said. "But you answer my question first. What if we discover that the Pentagon's directly involved with this survivalist outfit?"

He didn't bat an eye. "We'll go straight to the President."

"And if he's involved?"

"That's two questions. Why do you want to find Steve?"

"For a million reasons. But the main one is I just want to talk to him. That's all."

"What do you want to say?" I smiled. "I know," he said. "That's two questions."

Kathy walked outside while I was lighting the charcoal, and the flame leaped up. She stepped back and watched the fire burn until it was a blue-and-gold snake that seemed to crawl in and out of the pile of black coals. "I wish --" she
said, and sighed.

I put my arm around her.

Smell of coconut skin cream. Smell of gasoline and charcoal. Smell of hamburgers, sliced onions and smoke.

Paper plates, like palettes, splashed with mustard yellow, catsup red and mayonnaise white, garnished with leafy green lettuce, red, tomato wheels and thin slices of purple onion.

Golden pearls of sweet corn. Taste of butter and salt.

I’d boiled five pounds of new, red potatoes, had not peeled the skins, and made potato salad.

We ate and chatted, mostly about how beautiful western Montana is when the sky’s blue, the sun shines, and it’s hot. Mom and Ed couldn’t get over how Mount Jumbo shot straight up just a block from my backyard. A pair of red-tailed hawks patrolled the western slope, scouting for careless ground squirrels while we ate.

After dinner, the five of us loaded into the Millenium, our battlecruiser, and took off on a cruise. Ernest served as tour guide while we sat back, listened and stared out the window.

We drove up toward Lolo and passed from mountain shadow into sun and back into shadow. Ernest pointed out Lolo Peak -- elevation, 9,000 feet -- and began telling the story of Chief Joseph, who’d led a band of Nez Perce over Lolo Pass on
a 1,300-mile journey from Idaho into Montana on his way to Canada. "Chief Joseph was one of the wisest leaders who ever lived in this country," Ernest said.

Later, Ernest pointed out where Bass Creek poured through a steep, rocky canyon and where Kootenai Creek rippled through farm land. "Look up there," Ernest pointed. "See that abandoned ranger station? On Easter Sunday, the Catholic Church in Florence holds sunrise services up there. They built a rock altar on the peak. Most years you have to snowshoe to the top."

The western horizon began to slowly break into a thousand hues of red, purple and gold.

"Big Creek lakes are back up in there," I said as we passed the dirt road which wound up to a trailhead. Blessinger's goose-pimply skin. Hard, pink nipples. I looked at her looking out the window, back at the canyon; when she turned, she looked at me and smiled. Did she remember how cold the water had been, how shrivelled and small it made you feel?

Her smile was all invitation.

"We're coming into Victor," Ernest said. "Spielberg's place is somewhere up in one of those canyons."

We watched the last rays of sun climb the Sapphires on our left. We passed Corvallis, and Ernest pointed out Bear Creek and Mill Point. Then we were approaching Hamilton, and I told Mom about Blodgett Canyon, another delightful spot,
and Sleeping Child Hot Springs, nestled southeast in the Sapphires. "Maybe we should all move down here for a week and live in Blue Star tipis," I said.

"I'd love to," Kathy said.

"Find a nice quiet spot along the river," I said.

"Learn to ignore the mosquitoes," Ernest said. "Here, I think this is the road Clint said to take."

We drove toward the mountains on a dirt road, rocks ricocheting off our wheels and rapping the steel belly of the Millennium.

"Clint worries me," Harter said.

"Don't worry about Clint," Ernest said. "He's ice under pressure. Worry about what Luke Spielberg's going to do when we trespass on his property and start making demands."
Sheriff

Clint opened the door. "Fraid we caught'm at a pretty bad time. He’n the mayor’s got a feud goin, and last night Jake slapped the mayor’s kid with a D.U.I. Second offense, so Jake kept’m overnight. Kid’s nineteen, still lives at home, and his mother was up worryin all night. Mayor called Jake at three this mornin and fired’m.

"Last time he got fired, the City Council rehired’m. Jake figures that’s what they’ll do this time, too, but they won’t get round t’it till next week. Meanwhile, he’s officially on leave without pay."

"That makes two of us," Ed said. He sighed. "There’s a lot about this that’s been unlucky. Let me talk to Jake."

"T’tell ya the truth, he’s a bit tanked up just now. Ain’t sure he could talk t’ya."

"Clint, my name’s Ed Harter."

"I know who y’are," Clint said. They shook hands; neither’s expression changed. I introduced Mom and Kathy to Clint. Harter opened and closed his hand.

A man appeared behind Clint in the doorway. "Hello," he called. "Y’wanted to see me?" He had the largest head I’d ever seen and was built like a bear. His black hair was curly and streaked with gray, sticking up in some places, lying flat in others. Purple bags under his eyes. White shirt, badly wrinkled, half tucked into his jeans. No belt.

"Sheriff Jake Taylor," he said. He looked determined to
impersonate an officer of the law. Actually, he played the part well, if you didn’t allow your first impression to ruin your second and third. He spoke in a low, gravelly voice.

"Yeah, been doin some drinkin, but I ain’t drunk. Also been doin some thinkin."

He sagged, as if his knees had buckled, but caught himself without taking a step.

"Y’came t’ask bout this Spielberg. Never met’m. But I did talk t’m on the phone this spring. Young couple got theirselves lost hikin inta Hidden Lake and ended up at his place. He’s got it posted.

"Spielberg threatened em with a gun and sent em packin. Then he called me t’pick em up and charge em with tresspassin.

"When I picked em up they were hungry and exhausted.

"And they were naked." Taylor looked at us. "The way they found Spielberg’s place was they heard piano music in one a them canyons they passed. So they followed it; led t’Spielberg.

"They said he was sittin on a sun deck on the other side a the mountain playin a grand piano. The girl said he was playin a roundup by Moses and Art -- whoever they are."

Ernest laughed, and we looked at him. "Sorry," he said, looked at me and laughed again.

"What’s so funny?" Taylor asked.

"Spielberg," I said.
"Y'aint heard the strange part, yet." He waited until Ernest managed a straight face. "The girl said Spielberg was naked, bangin away on that piano, and when they surprised him, he went berserk: grabbed a gun -- from the fella's description, probly an automatic pistol -- and ordered them t'strip, too.

"When the girl refused, he decapitated a dwarf pine cross the canyon and started laughin like a lunatic, they said.

"They stripped, and he told em how t'get out and made em leave their clothes.

"Good-lookin girl, too.

"When I picked em up, she wanted t'file assault charges. First thing I advised was they get theirselves a lawyer; then I turned the whole thing over t'my deputy. Din't want no parta it.

"Name's Chris McDonald." The name sounded familiar. "You'll like'm. Spent three years in Viet Nam and ten on the rodeo circuit. Went t'college and been with me for three years."

Taylor breathed deeply and swallowed a few times. I understood the dry, cotton taste that sent him into the kitchen for a glass of water: I'd had the same feeling the night that Kathy's phone call initiated everything.

He returned, and we watched him empty a quart jar of ice water; then he said, "Anyway, Chris got Spielberg t'drop his
charges and the couple t’drop theirs. Three days later, we got a letter from Spielberg praisin the department for its handlin a the situation. If anyone can get Spielberg t’cooperate, it’d be Chris.

"And it just so happens he’s in charge a the department. Y’know, I just might take this opportunity t’retire.

"Cept some folks round here like my branda justice. Ain’t had much trouble. Someone crosses me, they suffer. Tends t’keep a certain element in line. But times’re changin. Been watchin Chris work with the kids.

"Other night he took a coupla punks down t’Missoula t’see this other punk that’s a vegetable. Rolled his car this side a Stevensville doin ninety-five. I was right on his tail and woulda caught’m, too, and he knew it.

"I dunno. I’m sicka thinkin bout what’s right and wrong anymore. Night, gentlemen. Y’young fellas can handle it. I’m goin t’bed, and tomorrow, I’m goin fishin."

He turned and walked into the house. Down the hall, a door slammed.
Deputy

Clint held up a hand like a policeman stopping traffic. "What say we all go sit in one a them hot pools at that hot springs southa here? Get us a coupl'a beers. Relax. Then talk."

Eventually we agreed that we needed to wind down: we were tight because we didn't know each other. Clint went inside to call Chris McDonald and try to set up a meeting.

Kathy snuck up behind me, and I jumped. "Your mother's exhausted, Tom. Let's go home and start fresh in the morning."

I went to the car and explained our dilemma to Mom. "I wouldn't be able to sleep unless I knew that we had a plan for rescuing Steve. You know that, Tom." Clint returned, and I helped Mom out of the car.

"All set," Clint said. "He's meetin us here in five minutes. Jake'd already called'm right after he left us and filled him in.

"Y'know," Clint said, "I been thinkin. Spielberg showed me some spuds he's growin on a hillside outside his front door. Showed me some strawberries the size a golf balls, but it was them spuds he was really prouda. Claims t'be developin a new tater usin some South American spud don't get no diseases."

"There is such a potato," Ernest said. "In the Andes, grown by Indians."
"Maybe he'll be out in his garden," Mom said. "Morning's the best time to water. We could hike up there early and maybe catch him. Demand to see Steve."


"Clint Harris," McDonald said. "Been awhile. Jaw's swollen." He looked us over. "Which one's got the brother up there?"

"I do. Tom Mayer." We shook hands; his fingers were crooked, with knuckles like walnuts.

"Chris McDonald," he said. "Mind riding along with me?"

"I'll join you, too," Harter said and handed McDonald a black, leather wallet. He flipped it open, studied it and handed it back.

"Says you're Assistant Director in charge of Intelligence. That the section used to be known as Domestic Intelligence?"

"How'd you know that?"

"For a while, I wanted to be an agent. I read pretty near everything ever written about the F.B.I. before I decided to bag it."
"Why?"

"Didn’t want to start thinking like a lawyer."

Harter laughed, looking at the rest of us to see if we caught the joke. Someone suggested that we get going.

"I’m ridin with you," Clint said. "Dunno what kinda car y’got there, Ernest, but she looks t’be German, and them Germans’re as bad as them Russians. Wolves waitin for us t’go down."

"We’re all wolves," Ernest said. "Fighting for control of the pack."

"True," Kathy said. "So why are you four making all the plans? Looks like all the intuition and most of the intelligence will be travelling in this car," she said, walking towards the Millenium.

"With the air-conditioning turned up," Ernest said, "and Beethoven’s Piano Concerto Number Five in the cassette deck."

"I’m coming with you," I said. "Why don’t you join us, too, Clint? What we need right now is to coordinate law enforcement."

Clint thought a second, and nodded.

"Then I guess we’ll see you up there," McDonald said. He started the Bronco; Harter waved as they swung away.

We made a pit stop in town to let their dust settle.
Hot Springs

Ernest and Mom picked up their conversation in German while Clint, Kathy and I sat in the back. Clint and Kathy talked about horses. She rested her head against my shoulder and closed her eyes. I looked out the window and watched the small farms and ranches flow by. Lots of trailer houses and square, white, two-story, farm houses. Mom looked back once and, when she saw that Kathy was asleep, smiled. Tired, she mouthed. I nodded.

The Millenium climbed the last, steep hill to Sleeping Child Hot Springs in low gear and parked in the upper lot. "I’ll stay and let her wake slowly," I whispered.

Mom nodded. Ernest helped her out, Clint offered his arm, and they walked up the road and entered the office. Further up the hill was a natural wood hotel with efficiency apartments for hunters, cross-country skiers and tourists. The place did a good business despite its isolated location.

I slipped my left arm out from behind Kathy, and she sighed. She opened her eyes and looked up at me. I kissed her forehead. "We’re here?" she asked.

"Just like we always are."

"Where is everyone?"

"Taking off their clothes. Putting on bathing suits."

"Kiss me again," she said. "Kisses are nice."

"Maybe we should just be kissers.

"Just kidding," I said. We walked to the office, which
was also the bar, and paid. Behind the bar was a broiler and a deep-fat fryer. Burgers and fries were the specialty, though the steaks were tender and expensive. We walked outside, past the pool, into the dressing rooms. It had cooled off. Perhaps below sixty. "Ernest."

He turned, his white legs, skinny as a heron’s, sticking out of baggy, black trunks. "Kathy’s an attractive woman, Tom. I see what you saw in her." He let it go at that. He knew that I’d talk when I was ready.

"Clint already out there?"

"I think so. He said he was going into the sauna. That’s where Chris and Ed are, too."

We walked out together. Mom was already in the pool, crossing the width with a slow, deliberate side-stroke. "Water’s perfect," she said, "except for this sulphur smell."

As I reached for the handle, the door to the sauna opened, and Harter emerged, pink and dripping, McDonald behind him. I guessed that he lifted weights three or four times a week. "We’ve just about got it," Harter said, "as far as we can figure it. We like your mother’s plan. We’ll hike up there early in the morning and demand to see Steve. We’ll ask him to leave with us, and if he won’t, or can’t, we’ll pressure Spielberg to let us hospitalize him."

"I like it," Ernest said. "Minimum risk: we talk until we get as much information as we can, and we can always return when we’re familiar with the lay of the land, so to
speak."

"Tom?"

"Run it by Mom and Kathy."

"Fine. I went ahead and rented a couple of apartments. Each one sleeps six."

"Ernest?" I asked. "Do you have to be back tonight? What about the cats?"

"They can fast. I'm going to sit in the hottest pool they have. I'm freezing."

"I'll join you," McDonald said.

After they left, Harter said, "That deputy's a good man. Smart. Would've made a good agent. I'm going to have one stiff drink, then I'm hitting the hay. I'll get everyone up before six. I've arranged for them to open the kitchen for us." He looked at me. "About Steve: he may be your brother, but he's my agent." Before I could respond, he dove into the pool and surfaced on the other side.

"Hey, you." Kathy was hugging the pool at my feet.

"C'mon in. Water's wonderful." I jumped in and came up next to her. She looked like a river nymph.

"Tom?"

"Over here, Mom."

The three of us held onto the side. "You live in a beautiful state, Tom. I see now why you stay. I've never seen so many stars."

I explained Harter's plan. Mom and Kathy agreed; it
was good. Kathy and I tried to name constellations until Mom decided to retire. I kissed her cheek. After she left, I said, "Let’s go soak in the hot pool." I pushed myself up, got a leg up and stood. I pulled Kathy up and out. Her green one-piece was nylon and fit like a stocking. She had hard, dancer’s legs. We joined Ernest and McDonald.

"Relax, all ye who enter," Ernest said.

"Hot," Kathy said.

"That’s what they all say," McDonald said. She smiled at him, and I felt a pang in my heart that was so intense and absurd that I dismissed it instantly. Then it angered me that I could still feel possessive. I hated jealousy: jealous men are pitiful.

I sat down abruptly, scalding myself, and relaxed. I realized that I could never love Kathy the way that I once had, and wouldn’t want everything to be the same.

"Where’d you get those beers?" I asked.

"Mount Olympus," Ernest said. "But they’re not beers. They’re ambrosia."

"You have to understand," I told McDonald. "Ernest is a man of many moods. Presently, we’re entering a Greek, mythological mood."

"No," Ernest said. "Unless this is one of those islands that Ulysses landed on. Our ship is anchored off-shore, and we’re relaxing before setting out tomorrow on another dangerous voyage. Say this pool is one of those red-and-
purple flowers, lotus, which makes you want to stay here forever, under the stars, just dreaming."

"How many has he had?" I asked.

"About half a cup," McDonald said.

"He needs more. I'll be right back."

I passed Clint on his way to the pool with two pitchers and plastic cups. We soaked and talked about tomorrow, and Clint told Kathy about Spielberg's underground fortress. Ernest knew the history of the gold mine: for a few years during the gold rush, it had flourished. All Spielberg had to do was reinforce old tunnels, build some new ones, and he could live inside a mountain. "Most likely he's got a generator hooked up t'one a them underground springs what feeds Gash Creek," Clint said. "Seen a lotta pictures a shelters in magazines, but he's got the fanciest operation I ever seen."

"I wonder what it would be like to live underground for as long as you'd have to," Kathy said.

"Ever wondered what'd be like t'die a radiation?"

"I'm not sure I'd want to come out even when I could," Kathy said. "All there'd be is wind and dust."

"Enough," I said. "Tonight we're on an island, like gods, under these stars, sipping ambrosia, forgetting everything else."

"Tom?" Kathy asked, sliding her foot down my calf until it rested on my foot. "Let's try the sauna, okay?"
"One more beer," I said. I drank it fast. Ernest looked like an owl as I was getting out. I followed Kathy, and my heart quickened. A cool breeze picked up. Inside the sauna was hot. I flipped the light switch.

Kathy touched my leg, and I grabbed her hand, pulled her against me, and we kissed. She wanted more, and I wanted to give her more, more than she could count, more than the stars, but I knew that I was playing with fire, and now was the time to back off. She sensed my mood and said, "I'd like to blow some of that cool."

"I know you would. Why? Because that's what makes you feel in charge?" She grabbed hair behind my head and pulled my face down where she could bite my lips, bite my ears and bite my neck. I knew what her game was, so I played along, touching her with my fingertips as lightly as I could. She broke away, out of breath. "You'd better be willing to back that up."

I picked up a tin cup, dipped it into a bucket and threw water on the hot rocks. For a moment, the steam stung my lungs. The door opened. "Woo, it's hot in here," Ernest said.

I laughed. Kathy elbowed me. "Buy me another beer," she said. Outside, she put her arms around me. "Let's go for a walk down the road. Nice night for it."

I shivered and pushed her away. "We can't."

"Sure we can. Here comes the deputy. I'll change."

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Meet you in the bar." I watched her tiptoe away and exchange smiles with McDonald in passing.

"Pretty woman," he said. "Your brother’s wife, right?"

"Yes. Say, Chris: remember the traffic accident a few days ago -- F.B.I. agent was killed?"

"Course I remember. Ed and I went all over that. Your brother identified himself during the investigation and explained that for reasons of national security he wanted the body sent to F.B.I. headquarters in Washington, D.C., identified as himself.

"This may sound strange to you, but I trusted your brother. And I trusted Spielberg."

"What if it turns out that he’s working for the government?"

"Well, I’d have to hear his reasons and consider them carefully, I guess."

"I think the dead man -- Eric Johnson -- was dead before the car accident."

"I figured that," McDonald said. "The car went over a cliff and hit a tree head on. You don’t get gas tanks exploding like that; I figured the car’d been torched."

I took a seat beside Kathy at the bar. "What if it turns out that Steve did murder Eric Johnson?"

Her eyes hardened. "It’s not our problem. It’s Ed Harter’s. Our problem is you."
"Think about it," she said, and slapped my back on her way out the door. "Sweet dreams."
Confrontation

Harter woke us at 5:30. Low clouds had moved in during the night. He and I ate breakfast together; first Mom, then Ernest joined us. Clint and Chris McDonald came in as we were leaving. I showered and shaved. By seven we were driving through Hamilton. Kathy and Clint were riding in McDonald's Bronco, which led the way. Kathy had not looked at me once as we were leaving.

We turned left just before Victor and drove west, heading toward the mountains. The clouds thickened and skirted the canyon road we took. We turned at an unposted logging road and drove two miles in low until the road stopped. "Too bad," Clint said when we got out. We were in the midst of a warm mist. "This canyon'd be real pretty if y'could see it. Use t'fish up here when I was a kid, fore them California tycoons showed up with enough money t'buy it."

"Actually," McDonald said, "this cloud cover's to our advantage. It's gonna lift, but with any luck, not until we get there. We can sneak up on them."

"And it'll be cooler," Mom said. "The Lord has provided us with a perfect day. It's a sign." I looked at Harter and shrugged. "Believe you me, Tom. The natural world's not governed by chance. This is His handiwork." I looked at Kathy. She looked up the trail where three strands of barbed wire crossed the old trailhead, and a white metal sign hung,
"No Trespassing" painted in red.

"Let's go," Kathy said. "I want to see my husband."
She directed the order at me, almost vehemently, and Harter flashed me an inquisitive look.

The hike was less than a mile, but we had to climb over, walk around, or crawl under trees which had been deliberately cut to block the path. We rested after the first quarter-mile. The fog was still thick but getting brighter, as if it were lit from the inside, like a lantern. "Not much further," McDonald said.

"It's lovely," Mom said. "Like walking into a fairyland."

"In a Grimm's fairytale," I said. "Seven lost children entering the forest of a sorcerer whose castle is underground: that's a nasty twist."

"Quiet, now," Harter said. "We want our visit to be a surprise." The trail got better, and suddenly the clouds lifted, all at once, like a balloon rising. A shaft of sunlight hit glass and flashed off cliffs ahead of us, up on the left. "That high meadow up there is it," McDonald said. "If Spielberg's around, let me do the talking."

We walked well into the meadow before someone shouted, "Halt." A soldier in combat fatigues, packing an M-16, black smudges under his eyes, emerged from behind a bushy, scrub pine.

"Sheriff's Department," McDonald said. "We want to talk
to Lucas Spielberg. It’s important."

"Wait here."

"No. We’re coming with you." McDonald stared the kid down. He couldn’t have been much older than twenty. He was tall and skinny, with black frame glasses, and sported a faint, reddish-blond mustache. His hair was shaved to stubble. "Don’t I know you?" McDonald asked.

"Yes, sir. Sam Peetes."

"Gus’s son."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have a permit to carry that rifle, Sam?"

"It’s not loaded, sir. Mister Spielberg gave it to me when he hired me to watch the place. He’s had some trouble with trespassers, I guess." He shrugged and slung the gun over his shoulder. "I sure hope you know what you’re doing. He doesn’t like to be disturbed."

We climbed way up a staircase cut into the rock until we came to a wide, square, man-made terrace backed by a solid, mirrored-glass cliff. Peetes pushed a button and spoke into an intercom. "Visitors, Mister Spielberg. Sheriff’s Department."

We waited, and I looked around. The terrace was concrete and rock, divided by long, cedar windowboxes planted with cabbages, onions and even tomato plants. Sun bouncing off the mirrored glass must have triggered their rapid, wild growth: the brocolli were already waist-high and shaped like
wide-rimmed champagne glasses. Red cherry tomatoes glowed like Christmas balls.

"Sammy," Spielberg's voice crackled, "I'll be right out."

A section of the glass wall slid up on wheels like a garage door; the glass was at least a foot thick, backed by steel. The fog, as McDonald had predicted, had lifted fast. Spielberg emerged blinking in the hazy, mid-morning sun. He was wearing a black smoking jacket, black pajama bottoms and floppy black slippers. With a pipe, he could've entered a Hugh Hefner look-alike contest, although he was shorter than Hef and stockier.

He looked strong. He strode to McDonald and shook his hand, held onto it and started talking so fast that I found myself entranced. His Adam's apple bobbed as he talked. "Chris, good to see you again. You should've called. I would've sent someone down to meet you.

"But listen, I'm glad I can tell you personally how pleased I've been with the way you've handled everything so far; I'm certain this situation will be no different.

"Ed Harter, I presume. Steve told me about you.

"And you must be Steve's mother. Don't worry, Ruth. Your son's going to be all right."

The familiar way Spielberg addressed Mom infuriated me. I snapped, "We want Steve."

He turned. "You must be Thomas. So." He smiled,
amused; I clenched my teeth and stared him down. His blue
eyes were so pale that he looked blind.

"Please," Mom said. "Where's my son?"

"So you're here, and you want to see Steve. Well, why
not?"

I felt a spring unwind at the base of my spine and
breathed easier. Spielberg smiled. "Ruth, come along with
me. You should see him first, and alone. Then his wife and
his brother."

"What's wrong with him?" Kathy asked. "I'm coming now."

"No," Spielberg said. There was a new warning note in
his voice. Then he added softly, "Ruth first.

"Why don't you set up some lawnchairs and relax in the
morning sun. It'll be hot in an hour. The view's heavenly,
don't you think?"

"Where's Christine?" I asked.

Spielberg let go of Mom's arm and turned. "I'll send
her out."

We waited. Kathy complained about how hot the sun was,
and I suggested that she take her sweater off. She snapped
that the air was still cold. Then Christine came running
out, straight into my arms. She hugged me, leaned back,
looked in my eyes and kissed me. Brown eyes, frizzy hair,
wide mouth, eyes, hair, mouth. I pulled back.

"Tom." I tried to break away, but Christine hugged
tighter. "So," Kathy said, "that's how it is."
"Yes," Christine said and kissed me again. "This is exactly how it is." I launched into a confused explanation that quickly petered out. "Your husband needs you. Go to him."

After Kathy stormed off, Harter introduced himself as a friend of the family. "What is happening?" he asked.

"Steve tried to kill himself this morning. Took my valium."

"Why?"

"He didn’t want anyone to know he killed a man. Listen, I don’t want to talk about it, all right?"

"Who was it attacked my place?" Clint asked.

"Them? Pentagon. They wanted to know about the murder. Johnson was one of theirs. The creep.

"These guys were nice, though. Especially the blond kid with green eyes. He convinced the others to let me go. I liked him."

"How is Steve?" Harter asked.

"You’re the F.B.I. guy."

"I knew it. I can read you guys with one glance." The skin between her eyebrows creased. "But you’re disobeying orders by being here." Her eyes widened, and she smiled. "Far out. I thought all you guys followed orders -- isn’t that virtue number one?"

Harter looked at me and nodded, as if to say, you were right: she is a flake. But a smart flake, I thought.
Harter questioned her about the suicide attempt.

"First he kind of had a breakdown. Luke thinks it's all guilt-related. Your mother being here's perfect, Tom: she's the key. Goddamn sexual repression," Christine said, shaking her head. "Ruins more lives."

"Exactly how did the murder happen?"

"Start with the rape," I said, a bit sharply.

She turned, put a hand on her hip and said, "How much detail do you want?"

Spielberg's voice startled me: "He didn't try to rape her. She tried to seduce him, and it worked." He stood in the doorway. Then he dropped into a yoga position, eyes closed, face lifted, basking in the morning sun.

"I didn't ask to have my blouse ripped or to be thrown on the floor," Christine said. "I realize now I misjudged him." She turned to me. "I just wanted to make love," she said. "He did, too; I know it from the way he'd look at me and look away when I caught him looking.

"So I started teasing him." She smiled, and I looked at Spielberg. He hadn't moved. "You have to understand: Eric Johnson was a religious fanatic. He called me a harlot once because he didn't like my clothes. When he heard me scream, he came running into my room and tried to pull Steve off. 'Whore-monger,' he called Steve." Christine looked at me, her eyes opaque. "He had his arm around Steve's neck and was choking him.
"Steve flipped him and chopped him" — she touched her throat — "here, and it cracked like a branch snapping."

Harter and I looked at each other. I looked at Ernest. His face was the expressionless mask that he wears whenever the dark side of human nature reveals itself.

Spielberg stood and stretched as high as he could, on his toes, arms over his head, fingers spread. "Sun," he said.

"Says the man who's prepared to live the rest of his life underground," I said.

Spielberg looked past me. "Chris," he said, smiling. "I really can't thank you enough for the way you've handled yourself. Listen, Steve Mayer is no longer working for the F.B.I. I don't know what this man has told you, but if you'll check with F.B.I. headquarters in Washington, D.C., you can get that confirmed.

"Chris, there's something going on here that I'm not at liberty to discuss, but I'm not exaggerating when I say it's vital to the interests of this country. Steve knows too much to be allowed to leave, and he's in no shape to leave, anyway."

Mom and Kathy appeared. Mom's eyes were red, but there was an intensity in them that I'll always associate with her devotion to God and obedience to higher authority. Kathy seemed bewildered, searched me out, started forward but stopped when she saw Christine. "It's okay. I'm leaving,"
Christine said, and she walked into the mountain, past Spielberg, without a glance back.

Spielberg touched Mom on the arm. "We'll take good care of your son, Ruth. I promise."

Mom didn't seem to hear. She stared at nothing. Spielberg started to leave. "Wait," I called. "I want to see him."

"No," Mom said. Her eyes sparkled like a fever-victim's.

"Why not?" I asked. "What's wrong with him?"

"He didn't know us," Kathy said.

"Did Spielberg tell you what Steve did?" I asked Kathy. She nodded. "Mom? You know what he did?"

"Don't, Tom," Kathy said.

"First he tried to rape Christine Spielberg; then he killed the man who tried to help her. This morning, he tried to kill himself because he didn't have the guts to face us."

Mom looked at me as if I'd committed those crimes. "Judge not," she said.

"Who always judged me?" I looked around. They were all judging me, even Ernest, and I backed down. I understood: they had no memory of how Steve had berated me; Mom, too, lecturing me on pride, but never Steve, who was perfect. "I want to see him," I yelled. Spielberg dashed for the door, and I sprang after him. He darted through, and it dropped suddenly, stopped a foot off the ground and settled with a
The others left, eventually; I refused. I said that I was staying — day and night, if necessary — until Spieloerg let me see Steve. Ernest tried to talk me out of it. Kathy asked McDonald if he’d please drive her and Mom home. They left, and Harter accused me of wanting to kick Steve while he was down. "Don’t be a fool," I said. "How do we know that he’s really had a breakdown or tried to commit suicide? All we have is Spielberg’s word for it. What if Steve’s been drugged?"

They finally tired of arguing with me, but before they left, Ernest promised to return with a tent, a sleeping bag and food. "We’re still comrades," he said, and I could’ve hugged him, the truest of friends.

"I just want to talk to him, Ernest. I want to hear him say that Spielberg’s story is true. I won’t utter a word of accusation, I promise, though I can think of several. ‘Whore-monger’ isn’t too bad, actually." I laughed. "I’m all right, Ernest. Go."
Promises, Promises

It would be late afternoon before Ernest returned. I found a young Ponderosa to sit under and replayed everything that had happened since Christine entered the scene.

I was certain that her spaciness was calculated to lull us into believing her: no one that dizzy could lie so well. Was she really thinking out loud, or reciting a script?

Script, written by Lucas Spielberg: had to be. Steve almost rapes his wife, and the guy's going to be totally devoted to his care and recovery? Why?

Because Steve knew too much.

I hiked up the trail until it crossed Gash Creek, knelt, drank handfuls of ice water and splashed some onto my face. It was getting hot fast. I squinted at the sun and thought: must be drugged. Steve wasn't the type to attempt suicide; no way. Not Mister Ice.

Mom's acceptance of Spielberg's story, and her acceptance of Steve regardless of his crimes, didn't surprise me. Kathy's did. Usually she had her bullshit detector turned way up. What had she seen?

The icy look that Ernest shot me when I told Mom what Steve had done: Ernest didn't understand. No one did.

Christine. How strong and delicate she looked at the same time. I fantasized and dozed under the Ponderosa.

Ernest, followed by Clint, McDonald and Harter, all
carrying backpacks, emerged from the woods and began crossing the meadow while the sun was still high and hot. I met them halfway down. "Water," Ernest said.

McDonald handed him a canteen. "Anyone been out?"

"You returned."

"Had to. Promised your mother we'd look after you." He laughed. "Actually, we want to see Steve. Ed thinks he may've been drugged. Kathy said his eyes were glassy."

We hiked up the canyon. I scouted ahead and found the level, open spot where Spielberg had planted his prize potatoes. "Perfect spot," I said. "Soft, level ground and a panoramic view. If you brought a cookstove" — I pulled up a plant; a bunch of small, dark potatoes clung together in a dirt ball -- "we can have hashbrowns tonight. Perfect."

"Ever the perfectionist," Ernest said, and smiled. He'd forgiven what I'd said to Mom. "Except I think we'd be better off up there." He pointed to a wide outcropping of rock up the opposite canyon wall. "He won't see us, but we'll see him."

"I hate to do this," Ernest said, "but --" He began pulling up potatoes, throwing them down onto the path, while we watched, puzzled. Finally, he stood and rubbed his hands. "There. That should get his attention."

The hike to the outcropping was straight up, and this time I carried Ernest's pack, at my insistence. Half its contents was mine.
We set up both tents in case it rained -- there were a few dark clouds gathering south of us -- and talked about Spielberg's connection with the S.S.S. until the sun went down. Harter said that the F.B.I. knew very little: Spielberg had been a computer whiz-kid at Cal Tech and had made a small fortune designing computer games for Atari. Then, in 1968, he'd dropped out to work on Bobby Kennedy's campaign and had witnessed Sirhan Sirhan's hand in shaping this country's destiny. After that, Spielberg had dropped from sight. Until now.

We cooked freeze-dried beef stroganoff, which tasted great, sliced pieces off a chunk of sharp cheddar and washed it all down with the purest, coldest water that we'd ever tasted. By nine, we were cold, crawled into our bags and watched the continual, miraculous explosion of stars. The instant that I settled on my stomach, I fell asleep, like a dog twitching awake and dropping off again all night long.

In the morning I woke to the hum of bees in the lupine, Indian paintbrush and bear grass. I looked at my watch. Seven-thirty. I looked around. Harter was dressed, sitting on his sleeping bag, eating dried fruit. He waved. Smiled. It was a clear, perfect morning. We waited.

At nine o'clock, Sam Peetes stepped out onto the veranda. I motioned for the others to come look through the binoculars. This time, I was certain his rifle was loaded. When he saw the potatoes on the path, he looked around, laid
the gun down, ran up the hill, ran down, picked up the rifle and disappeared inside the mountain. Ten minutes later, Spielberg was down there on his hands and knees. Peetes stood beside him.

I waved to Harter, who was hidden below me, behind some rocks. He waved across the canyon. Clint, McDonald and Ernest began slowly moving closer, tree to bush, bush to outcropping of rock. Ernest and Clint crawled behind some brush where they were close enough to hear Lucas say -- almost in a snarl, Ernest told me later -- "They’re all going to die."

Spielberg unfolded a shovel and worked furiously. He didn’t hear a thing until McDonald said, "Hold it right there, Luke."

Clint and Ernest then stood, each holding one of Clint’s .44’s. Sun reflected off silver, and I swung the binoculars to Harter, who waved for me to come down.

"How dare you?" Spielberg asked. He looked behind him for his rifle.

McDonald raised his pump-action shotgun; it pointed at Spielberg’s knees. "Easy, partner."

"I’m disappointed, Chris. I trusted you."

"We want to see Steve. Then we’ll leave," Harter said.

"So you didn’t talk to Webster; you didn’t check with the F.B.I. That’s the first mistake you’ve made, Chris."

"I want you to leave," Spielberg said, "now. If you
don't, I'm going to ask for help, and you won't like the kind I'll be getting -- I guarantee it -- so don't try to stop us." No one spoke. Then Spielberg said, "C'mon, Sam. Let's go." They walked towards their guns.

"Oh no you don't," I said. "We demand to see Steve."

"Chris," Spielberg said. "Do your duty. I'd hate to see you portrayed in the press as the bumpkin sheriff's deputy who instigated a major, national security leak.

"Tell you what: if you leave right now, return to your office, make the call I told you and still want to see Steve, I promise to entertain your arguments for disregarding the President of the United States.

"That's how big this operation is, Chris.

"Now start believing me."

McDonald faced us and said, "Let's go." He saw the look in my eyes and grabbed my arm. I yanked it away and lunged for Spielberg, who turned and kicked me on the shins, soccer-style, with his right hiking boot. I went down writhing, holding my left leg, swept away in a flashflood of pain. By the time I could stand, Spielberg was long gone.

Though no one said as much, they thought that I deserved that kick. No way was I leaving with them.

Ernest stayed, though I requested that he leave, too. So I ignored him and sat under my tree.

An hour after Ed Harter and Deputy McDonald packed their
bags and hiked out, Christine Spielberg came out wearing high-heeled, black sandals and a red, one-piece bathing suit which plunged in a long V to her navel and arched up her legs to her ribs. She stopped, talked to Ernest, looked at me and shook her head. She handed him a glass and walked towards me, balancing a red plastic, heart-shaped tray on one hand like a practiced barmaid. She handed me a tall glass of ice, straight gin and slice of lime. "We don't have tonic. I put it on the shopping list."

I looked in her dark-brown eyes. "I want to see Steve."

"I know, but first let's talk, okay? It's all right with Luke if you take a look, but you have to promise not to hurt him. By the way, Luke said to tell you he's sorry he kicked you. He hates violence. Too much negative energy gets spread around, don't you think?

"Now remember -- and I know you've got good reason to hate Steve -- negative energy eats you alive."

"Just let me see him."

"You have to promise first. Do you promise?"

I gulped my gin, looked up at the sun through the branches, smelled pine, exhaled and sighed. "Unbelievable."

"Promise you won't do anything to hurt him."

I looked at her and shook my head. "What do you think I'd do? Kill him?"

She laughed. "No." She studied me. "Let me tell you something. Steve didn't try to rape me. We were lovers from
the day he arrived. You see, Luke's celibate when he's programming -- throws all his energy into it -- and since he knows how much I love him, he's not jealous.

"Luke really likes Steve."

"What about Eric Johnson?"

"That part was basically true. He heard me scream, only it wasn't because I was being attacked. Good God, no. I was being --"

"Knock it off, Christine."

"Transported." She smiled at me, eyes sparkling. "You know, if you really wanted to hurt Steve, you'd just have to make love to me. You know he's insanely jealous of you, don't you? I told him I can't tolerate jealousy in a man. It's a sign of weakness.

"I really don't understand it. Well, maybe I do. You're pretty cute. How old are you, anyway? Aren't you pushing forty? Far out. Peter Pan."

"Do you want me to keep talking?" she asked.

"All right. I promise," I said.
"Follow me."

She purposefully walked slowly, so I'd have to watch her closely or bump into her. She was pure muscle and bone: I love that in a woman when, as with her, the muscles tighten across her bottom when she walks. She knew what I liked and played me like a pawn, luring me forward one step at a time, always protecting her king.

We walked down a long, brightly-lit tunnel which Spielberg had left in its original state -- solid, rough-cut rock -- except for new braces. Then we rode for a long time in a freight elevator down.

Down.

Down. I asked Christine how far down we were going. "Oh," she said, "this side of hell, I guess. I'm not sure. Ask Luke."

My stomach turned as we gently bounced to a stop. The door opened soundlessly, and we stepped into the middle of a softly-lit cavern which immediately struck me as cathedral despite the full-length basketball court at the altar end, and the stage, including a hundred chairs, at the narthex.

What light there was filtered through stained-glass windows. The picture closest to me was of Buddha, sitting in a classic lotus position beneath a banyan tree. Strange, I thought. I looked up and saw banks of unlit lights over the court and stage. I followed Christine through a door stage-
left and down a tunnel which was as bright and clean as a hospital corridor. Christine stopped at an unmarked door, unlocked it, knocked and pushed it open. "See you later," she said. "I’ve got to pack."

Across the room, in a bed pushed up against the wall, Steve lay on his side, curled into a fetal position, staring through me into space, glassy-eyed. "If you can’t hear, it doesn’t matter what I say, right?" The white walls were bare; no sign of microphones or cameras. "You prick," I said. "First, for blaming Dad’s death on me."

Finally, he blinked. I stood over the bed and aimed a drop of spit which missed his eye but dripped down into it; no reaction. "Second, for stealing Kathy."

"You can forget all about her. She’s mine again." No change of expression, but he blinked his eyes quickly three times, slowly three times, quickly three, then rolled his eyes back as if he wanted me to come closer. I leaned over, loose fists at my sides, remembering Kathy’s warning that Steve wanted to kill me. He glanced twice at the floor, and I dropped to one knee, watching his eyes: no glassiness now. Hard, blue-gray steel.

"First strike," he said. His eyes seemed to fade out of focus; he didn’t blink even when his eyes must’ve stung, and a tear rolled down his nose and into his mouth.

"What did you say?" I asked.
"He said something?"

I started, and turned around. Spielberg stepped through the doorway. "Did Christine tell you we found her valium jar empty beside his bed this morning?"

"What did he say? It’s the first time he’s spoken all day."

"He wants me to take him home." Almost imperceptibly Steve’s eyes widened and his pupils constricted to bright, black dots. Then all his eye-muscles relaxed.

"No," Spielberg said. "He needs rest. Maybe in next week. As soon as he can walk, he can leave. Fair enough?"

"I don’t have any choice, do I?"

"Sure you do: you have one smart play and an infinite number of dumb ones.

"Wait. Before you leave, I have one piece of advice: play it straight with people, Tom. If you’d just called me and asked to see Steve, believe me, I would’ve agreed: Steve needs his family’s acceptance right now -- assuming, of course, that his trance is genuine."

"Why would he fake it?"

"So he can stay here."

"Why would he want to stay?"

"He’s in love with Christine, and he’s extremely possessive. I don’t want to fight him, but eventually I’d have to."

"When you get off your celibacy kick?"
He laughed, high and staccato, like a loon. "Good God, I have no secrets.

"No wonder you disapprove," he said, and laughed again.

When he escorted me outside, I looked appropriately subdued and walked down to where Ernest lay napping in the shade of an overhanging rock, leaning against his pack. He sprang straight up -- blinking and squinting up at me -- when I nudged his boot with mine. "Well?" he asked.

"Look worried," I said, "and walk me out of here. I'll tell you all about it."

It was almost noon. Sweat beaded and poured through every pore on my body. We wasted no time getting out of there. I didn't tell him what I'd said or done to Steve. I did describe Steve's trance in detail, blinking his eyes, whispering: "First strike." Ernest pointed out that Steve had blinked S.O.S. and would've known that "first strike" wouldn't make any sense to me, so he must've meant the message for someone else. "Ed Harter, perhaps?" Ernest asked. I nodded.

We discovered a surprise waiting at The Millenium. "What took you so long?" Christine asked. A blue backpack rested against the rear bumper. She said, "Luke suggested I take a little vacation. Can I hitch a ride with you guys into Missoula?"

"Then what?" I asked.
"We'll see."

She talked the whole way into town about how the sixties had shaped her life and argued with Ernest about the dangers of dreaming old dreams, concluding: "Dreaming is looking for alternatives to reality. Some dreams -- the ancient ones -- have the power to make themselves come true, don't you believe that?"

"No," I said.

I didn't answer when she asked my astrological sign, so she and Ernest discussed what it meant that he was a Scorpio. I asked them to drop me off first. The bank sign read: 2:41. I was exhausted. When I opened the car door, Christine opened hers, and we got out together. She bent over and reached across the backseat for her backpack, slid it out and set it down beside my boot.

She smiled: she knew I'd been watching. "Why are you blushing?" She laughed. "Oh, I like that." She walked around to Ernest's window, tapped, and he pushed a button. The window slid halfway down. "I'll call a cab," she said.

Ernest looked at me, raised his hands, palms up, and raised his shoulders: well?

"Call Ed Harter," I said, and motioned him to drive away.

If she wanted to play games, she could play with herself.
Temptation

I ripped open the envelope taped to my front door and read the note inside: Your mother had to leave. You blew it, buster. Why? K.

I crumpled the note and turned to Christine. "Phone's on the kitchen wall."

I grabbed a six-pack of Schaefer tall-boys and walked into the backyard. I positioned my lawnchair, stripped to black, bikini briefs and collapsed.


I emptied two more tall-boys, closed my eyes and focused on the angry chatter of a squirrel.

I pictured the scene: squirrel poised on the lowest branch of the big cottonwood back by the fence, tail whipping spasmodically, hypnotizing my two Samoyeds sitting below, staring up, panting, long, pink tongues dripping, squirrel chattering, Ha ha ha ha ha. Ha ha.

I crushed my fourth can and laughed. "Schaefer, is the, one beer to have, when you're, having, more than one." Great song. Cheap beer, but no one drinks it for the taste.

Damn it all, I thought. All of it. Damn.

God, the sun was hot. Beads of sweat boiled up through my pores, flushing me out, each laser beam of sunlight bombarding my skin until a single spear of light seemed to slide between my ribs. "I sing the body electric."
I dedicated my fifth beer to Walt Whitman.


I said "relax" a thousand times and slept until someone shook my shoulder. "Go away," I snapped. Then long, sharp fingernails dug into my ribs and hurt.

"Aha," Christine said. "You're ticklish."

"Keep your hands off me."

"You've got a phone call."

"Far out," she said. "Look at all those stars." Only then did I realize that it was dark. My head ached. My throat was dry. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"Look: the Big Dipper and the North Star, stars to steer by. I do horoscopes, you know. Want me to tell the guy you'll call back later? I will."

I stood, and my whole body felt like a hammer-smashed thumb. There was one beer left, and it was warm, but I drank it and took a few steps toward the house, stopped, breathed deeply, steadied myself, swallowed and started again.

I made it and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Is she still there?" Ernest asked.

"Who?"

"Christine. Is she there?"

"Why?"

"Just yes or no."

Christine walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and stood looking in.
"She's right here, Ernest, listening to every word I say."

"Just listen," he said. "Ed's been on the phone all afternoon with the Director of the F.B.I., with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and when I left, with someone at the White House."

"The President?"

"Not yet.

"Tom, Lucas Spielberg has written a first-strike, nuclear war simulation which takes everything from targetting to civil defense mobilization into account. It's taken him two years to complete, and with it, the President feels that he can now dictate to the Russians exactly how total, nuclear disarmament will occur, or else this nation will begin preparing for an all-out, nuclear war.

"Spielberg's convinced everyone in Washington that we can not only survive, but we can win, an all-out war."

"That's crazy."

"Just listen.

"Evidently the President has proof that the Russians have agreed to supply Iran and Libya with long-range, nuclear missiles. The President believes that either we begin total disarmament now, or we'll face any number of limited nuclear wars in the future, and he realizes that American cities will be the primary targets, not missile sites in Nevada or Montana."
"This is all top-secret, by the way. I had to promise Ed Harter that neither of us would breathe a word of this to anyone."

"It's insane."

"Yes." After a pause, he said, "Ed thinks it's crucial that we hold onto Christine: keep her there, whatever it takes. She may be our only bargaining chip with Spielberg if we have to get Steve out of there. Ed thinks that Steve's life may be in danger if Spielberg suspects that he's faking the trance."

"I don't think so. I think Spielberg just wants his wife back and Steve gone."

Christine stood in front of the stove, turned on one of the gas burners and watched it burn. She looked at me and smiled.

"Keep her there. We don't want to lose her again. We'll be right over."

"I was born on December twenty-sixth," I said. "What does that tell you about me?"

"Not much," Christine said. "I'd have to know the year and the exact time of your birth."

I told her 1947, made up a time and listened to her voice drone on and on until Ernest and Ed Harter arrived and insisted that we all move into a motel, one where no one would know us. Ernest suggested The Redwood Lodge, a
truckers' motel, at the intersection of Highway 93 — connecting Banff, British Columbia and Phoenix, Arizona — and Interstate 90, connecting Seattle and Boston.

"There's a strip joint next door," I said.

"No one would look for us there," Ernest said. He and Ed laughed. "We'd better take your car, Tom. The Millenium draws too much attention."

We squeezed into my dusty Japanese compact — canoe rack on top — like countless others in Missoula. As we headed west on the interstate, Harter said that he'd talked to the Pentagon's liaison at the White House. "The Joint Chiefs are afraid that Spielberg's conned the Pentagon and the S.S.S. out of a bomb shelter." He looked at Christine.

She smiled. "Far out. Luke was right: we're moving fast now."

"Right about what?" Harter asked.

"You'll see."

"The Bureau also knows that your husband founded some sort of religious commune right after Robert Kennedy's assassination."

"I wouldn't call it religious," she said. "'Spiritual' is a much better word." She proceeded to explain her beliefs, which were essentially Zen Buddhist, until I interrupted and asked Ed to explain exactly what the Pentagon's connection with the S.S.S. was.

"They're business partners. We also know now that a
former President is an S.S.S. member, which is another reason
the President is reluctant to launch a full-scale
investigation."

"Who?" I asked.

"Sorry. The President asked that the Director not
reveal his identity to anyone. I don't even know."

"Richard Nixon."

"That's only a guess."

"No wonder Luke wanted me out of there," Christine said.
We all looked at her; she smiled at me in the rear-view
mirror. "He knew I'd go nuts."
Field Concert

The same thing happens
sometimes
in audiences
one row
standing, followed by
the next until all are up:

Then the
process reverses
until
all are sitting down
again:

The wheat applauding
the wind.
Hummingbird Rhapsody in Lilac

This tiny violin
in a blur of broken strings

and this tinkling
purple carillon
played like a harp
by the breeze

from the mesmerizing drone
of these nuzzling bees

spring!
Escape

We make escape our way of life.
The first is hardest, the island,
the thick, ancient walls,
the long swim
and lookout for sharks.

But once on safe ground,
we click our glasses
as we click cliches.
In no time we’re restless again,
ready to make another break for it.

We take new wives,
new identities.
We change habits.
We work early, sleep
afternoons and smoke all night.

Always we have maps, elaborate
time schedules and foreign currency
sewn into our coats. Always
we look a trifle nervous, out-of-place,
trying to pull off phony accents.

We know what we’re getting into
and what we’re trying to escape.
If you’re not one of us,
you’re locked up sound.
You’ve thrown away your key.

You hum while you polish
your bars. We know one
sure way out,
but it depends on your
coming with us.
He Meets the Woman in Himself

She lives on the reflexes of shadows and loves midnight for stillness. Mountains rise to her darkness, and owls, blind with moonlight, call from her ear. With a breath, she blows the stars away.

He bathes in sunlight and believes in her as he trusts in dreams: he will never forget her. Images he paints of her hang in the four chambers of his heart.

Their meetings eclipse sun and moon. He brings a branch of lightning and kisses her lips as slick and sweet as watermelon seeds. Like a vine she unwinds around him. Each woman he loves will be one of her flowers.
Old Men Who Are Buildings

Sometimes when you’re rich and dead you turn into a building. Old men who are libraries meditate with old men who are junior high schools.

They play checkers with the poor neighborhoods in town. No one asks the old men if they like being buildings, and they wouldn’t think to ask themselves. They doze to the cooing of pigeons.

Who cares if it takes them weeks to remember who they are? It’s not easy to pull the streets tight and keep them from rolling up. And with the rain trying to get in. And the wind trying to get in.
Lovers

A certain man decided he loved an uncertain woman and changed into a wolf. On their first date he pawed her, bit her neck, got sprayed with Mace and had some teeth kicked loose. He swallowed blood.

Then he whimpered so mournfully, cringing at her feet, flinching when she tried to pet him, that she took pity on him and took him home and let him sleep outside her door. Each morning he fetched her breakfast and waited until she’d tousled the hair behind his ears.

Finally his moist, red eyes melted her. She still kicked him a few times, but gently, and let him eat at the table. Gradually, she gave him more and more leash. By the time she decided to let him stand on two feet again, he was sleeping at the foot of her bed. And when, on their honeymoon, he growled in her ear, it made the fine hairs on the back of her neck stick up, and he licked them, and again her face.
What Wrecked the Religious Program
at the Mental Hospital

Everyone was pleased
to say the least
with the religious program
at the mental hospital.

No matter that 10 patients
claimed to be Christ
following the first service.
The goal of all Christians
after all is to imitate Christ.

No matter that 3 patients
each claiming to be Judas
attempted daily to sell
the 10 Christs to guards
for a pack of cigarettes each.

No matter that 120 patients
followed the 10 Christs
around the grounds all day.

No matter that 7 Pontius Pilates
spent all their free time
washing their hands.

No matter that 50 female patients
thought they were virgins again
and pregnant.

No matter that 75 patients
especially the bedridden
wrote epistles to every Christian
congregation in the telephone directory.

No matter that a hundred patients
declared themselves to be hermits
and demanded solitary confinement.

There was no real problem
until one unidentified patient
ordained himself a priest.
He founded an order.
Soon there were more orders.

What wrecked the religious program
at the mental hospital
was the resulting period
of holy wars.
At the Spa

I. Weight Room

Atlas squats, heaves, stands with a bar of black weights,
Legs as huge, hard, gnarled as a couple old trees,
Taking long, deep breaths, and a quickly gulped one,
Lifting the whole world.

II. Sauna

Sweating lost seas, Tantalus sits beside me
Dazed in salt mines under his skin until thirst
Scrapes his thick, dry throat, and he dreams of crushed ice
Flooding his fat tongue.

III. Dressing Room

Mirrored, bright eyes staring, Narcissus strips, stands
Straight to flex, turn, pose and reflect again how
Perfect, toned, cut, beautiful he becomes when
Looked at again, now.
Each New Whisper of Wind or Desire

After spinning our love
as fine as silver silk
and wrapping thread after
thread around and down
and up and around, we're
coooned for winter,
changing in ways which can
only make you lovelier, me
love you more and us wake
from this dream together, months
from now, slowly fan our wings
and jump at the first chance
whisper of wind or desire.
"Mom, how long are we going to leave Gramma in the rocking chair?"
It was a fair question. The old woman was collecting dust.

"As long as she keeps rocking. I promised her that."
Grandmother acknowledged these words by rocking vigorously for a while, then rested until the rocking almost stopped.

"Mom, she speeded up again."
"Did you touch her?"
"No, Mom, I promise. She does it by herself sometimes."
True. The old woman picked up the pace and held it until the sun shifted from the back windows to the front.

Once, the girl touched her grandmother and a piece of skin flaked off like paint.

It worried Mom that the girl spent all her time watching the old woman.
"Isn´t there something on t.v.?"
"No, Mom. Gramma’s making the noise like a bell again."

When she first heard it, Mom thought she was imagining the deep, resonant vibration which reminded her of a church bell. But the girl heard it, too.

"Maybe it’s her heart."
"No one’s heart beats that slow."

The sun on Grandmother’s face made her skin seem to melt and slide into her sagging cheeks.

In the morning, when she moved Grandmother into the light, Mom realized that the old woman was like one of her plants. She lived on sunlight and the soup-soaked bread which the girl fed her.

At first no one noticed that Grandmother had begun humming a song under her breath.

Only the girl noticed that she was slowly moving her hands as if she were crocheting something on her lap.

"Why won’t you answer when your mother talks to you?"
The girl sat at the old woman’s feet every day without saying a word.
"I won’t have it, do you hear? Listen: I won’t have it."

Finally, Grandmother stood and marched out the door, the girl hanging onto her soft, white hand.