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Hardesty papers

John Rember

The University of Montana

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The Hardesty Papers

By

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B. A., Harvard University, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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# Table of Contents

Hardesty Goes Skiing..........................page 1  
Hardesty Does Drugs............................page 12  
Hardesty Climbs Rocks..........................page 26  
Flowering.......................................page 58  
Cowboy Dreams (play)...........................page 68
Hardesty Goes Skiing

Hardesty’s got his heart broke. That’s a name for it, anyway. Suzanne—the beautiful Suzanne he’s been calling his own—has just threatened to burn down his house, put sugar in the gas tank of his car, and tell everybody in town he has herpes. All because she thinks she’s wasted her late twenties with him. She wants something to show for those years, wants a child, marriage, wants him to get a real job because she’s tired of him being on unemployment half the year, wants him to do something with his life besides ski, does he understand, DO SOMETHING, like fix the window on the back porch that’s been letting the cold in for two winters now...

And so, an hour later, Hardesty’s out for a solo moonlight ski. He’s high above Ketchum, traversing his way up a bowl in the Boulder Mountains. A full moon is shining between patches of drifting fog. A storm has dropped two feet of soft, heavy snow, and then cleared, leaving him a bright world marked only by the dark forms of perpendicular rocks and trees. His skis sink deeply with each step, and he hears the snow constantly settling, collapsing onto itself, sometimes for yards around him.

He has a sudden grim thought. It’s below zero already, he’s out alone, the bars closed an hour ago and everybody is in bed or in a hot tub with everybody else. It’ll be Suzanne’s fault if he falls into a tree well and freezes to
death. And then there's the new snow. Its surface drops with a whump! ahead of him, and fracture lines snap out like black lightning from his ski tips. I'll probably die, thinks Hardesty. It will serve her right.

Hardesty gets warm just thinking about it. It's his house she's nagging him to fix, his signature on the marriage license she wants, his job she wants him working fifty weeks a year, his life she wants to find meaning in. He thinks of all his sad little sperms who have run into latex dams that didn't have fish ladders, or who have been crushed by her IUD's, or who believed the lethal lies of her Pills—now she's giving them names, dressing them up in doll clothes and hearing them call her Mommy. Why, he thinks, do women have to turn thirty?

Hardesty tries to articulate what he feels.

"AAARRRAAAGGAAA!" he yells, and he hears the sound echoed from across the bowl he's in, from the high cliffs above him, and then, diminished to a long sigh, from far above the cliffs.

I love that woman, Hardesty thinks, remembering a time when fucking was enough for both of them. Then he hears a sound like low-level feedback over a rock concert sound system. He looks up and sees hundred-foot plumes of boiling snow and snapping trees. Ten acres of snow, piled into a tumbling mass, cascade over the steep black rock of Galena Peak, right at him. He looks around, sees fifty feet away
the dark looming mass of a big Doug fir, trimmed of limbs thirty feet up by last year's slide. He starts toward it, not panicking because he knows—yup, he's gonna die. No sense worrying about that, just take nice long strides, that's right, halfway there now, not that it'll do any good. He manages three or four more running steps before the big wind hits him, and a half step more before it knocks him down. His mouth and nose are blown full of snow. There's a screaming around him, broken by the loud splintering popping of frozen wood. He feels his feet being twisted by his skis—something's trying to tear them off. Snow is pushing down his neck and big chunks of—ice or rock, maybe—are hitting him in the kidneys. He guesses he's under by now and tries to put his hands over his face but he no longer knows where his hands are, where his head is. His skis are twisting away, and he hopes the bindings go before the bones—

And then everything is quiet. Hardesty's face and neck and head are alive to the nauseating shock of too much snow. He knows he's buried, but he doesn't know how deep. One leg is bent under him—it's okay, it's bent in the right direction—but he can't move it. Body cast, he thinks. Of ice.

It's all over, thinks Hardesty. I'm dead. He pulls frozen air into his nose through packed snow. He knows that when he exhales, the snow will melt and freeze and melt and freeze again until in a few minutes his face will be covered
by an ice mask and he will stop being able to breathe at all. Then a straining, a convulsive shudder, and the end of his thoughts.

Suzanne. He sees her at his funeral—sometime in April or May, if they find him before the coyotes do. She’s crying, tossing a shovelful of dirt onto his coffin with a backcountry snow shovel. Lots of pinheads there too, saying things like HE SHOULDA DUG A SNOW PIT, or HE SHOULDNA GONE UP WHEN THE CONDITIONS WERE LIKE THAT, MAN THAT’S JUST ASKING FOR TROUBLE.

Hardesty realizes he’s going to belong to them all now, to the Nordic Patrol as an all-purpose bad example, brought up at meetings to prove what everybody knows, that a person can die out there at night and alone, especially when he gets hit by a climax slide coming off the spine of the Boulders. And to Suzanne, who will make a little shrine for him on the mantle, with framed telemark scenes, and maybe have his ski boots bronzed. She’ll say they wanted to have a baby, say they were going to get married. Hardesty can’t stand it.

He tries to breathe through his mouth and sucks snow dust into his lungs. Starts coughing, gagging. Lifts his head. Takes a deep breath. And another.

What’s this? Moonlight? Hardesty dares to open his eyes and it—sure enough—really is moonlight, coming in streamers through a haze of tiny frost particles still hanging in the air. He’s in a little pocket behind the big
tree, covered over by the slide up to his chest. The rest of him has been drifted over by six inches of sugary snow.

He looks up and sees the dark bulwark of another fir, two feet in diameter at least, broken over the one that's still standing. It's turned the slide to either side of him.

With a huge effort, he sits up, and the snow that had molded to his chest falls away. His legs and feet are still buried but he's able to reach down and dig them out. A ski is gone. So are his poles.

He won't make it to the car on one ski. He looks around. Nothing. He looks down the jumble of the slide, as far as he can see, and still nothing. He kicks at the snow beneath his free boot. Something's there. He kicks harder and he thinks it's the ski. He kicks at it until he touches the metal of the binding.

His lungs hurt and his shoulders and knees are stiffening. No fractures, at least none he can feel. He's very cold. He checks his hands, maybe for the second time, and only now realizes his gloves are gone, pulled off by the ski pole straps that were around them. The hands they covered are numb.

He stands up on the single ski and brushes as much snow as he can out of his turtleneck and the hood of his parka. The cloth, wet with sweat and snowmelt, is starting to freeze.

With hands that don't work unless they're watched, he digs down to the other ski and pulls it from the snow. He strips off the climbing skin, wads it up and thrusts it, in a
sticky jumble, into his pocket. He puts the ski on, careful not to kick it, skinless, down the hill—suddenly he's being very cautious. When he tries to strip the skin off the other ski he falls down. Balance isn't there yet. He gets the second skin off while he's sitting in the snow.

He gives up on the poles and the gloves. They're nowhere to be seen and he's beginning to have little fits of uncontrollable shivering.

He stands up, slides his skis back and forth a few times to make sure everything works, sticks both hands in his pockets, and eases down the broken surface of the slide in an unsteady traverse. There's smooth powder on the side of the bowl. When he reaches it he begins a quick descent, turning only when he has to slow down because he can't see what is below.

At the top of a big knoll he stops. He looks down at two hundred yards of waist-deep powder broken only by small scattered trees. At the bottom he can see black lines--his tracks--at the end of the logging road he came up on.

He counts nineteen big round turns by the time he skis onto the road. He stops, looks back, and gazes at what he's done.

Then he's shivering again. He thinks his brain is starting to cool—he could have stood there and looked up at his tracks forever. He has to keep moving. Too much energy gone in the slide. Last week, hungry on the way home from
Owl Peak, he ate the emergency chocolate in his pack.

He steps into the slots of his tracks and heads for his car. Just a mile to go and it’s steep enough that it’s all too fast. Tears stream out of his eyes and freeze on his cheeks. Here and there trees shadow the road and he slides into black corners, hoping he doesn’t end up straddling something big.

By the time he gets to the bridge across Wood River, he’s shaking and he can’t stop, shaking so violently he knows that soon the shaking will stop by itself and he’ll forget the car, forget where he is, and go to sleep.

He hits the steep ramp of the bridge. His skis slip backwards and he falls, hands still in pockets, his shoulder jamming onto his ski tip. He has to herringbone the fifty yards to the car.

When he gets there he pops off his skis and fumbles at the pocket his keys are in. Maybe the keys won’t be there. But he finds them. Maybe the door won’t open. But it does. He watches his hand, looking and feeling as if it belongs to someone else, grab the steering wheel and pull him onto the seat. The car starts and there’s gas enough to get to town.

In five minutes he’s got his skis in. Warm air is coming out of the heater ducts. Big quaking shudders are going through his body and pain is oscillating up his arms from his warming hands. I’m alive, he thinks.

He says it aloud: “I’m alive.”

Hardesty grins in the darkness, pulls the car out onto the
road, and heads for town at twenty-five miles an hour.

He should be among the dead. He’s not. He’s been to their still, snow-drifted land, has felt their sudden mindless clutch, has been caught in their cold furious violence, has known his life was over. And now every new minute is an unexpected bonus. He can spend it any way he wants.

Things he’s not going to do: Marry Suzanne, have a baby, get a real job, or fix the fucking window. Then he remembers he wasn’t going to do any of them anyway.

It’s the last few months of living with Suzanne. She’s been reading whole chapters of The Peter Pan Syndrome to him, coming home from her Women Who Love Too Much meetings and staring right through him, asking him if he thinks he’s going to be young forever, telling him he can’t spend every day skiing, can he? Some people have lives that mean something.

When he’s tried to take her out telemarking, she’s ended up screaming at him from the top of steep chutes, saying he’s trying to get her lost, trying to get rid of her, trying to kill her, when he was just wanting to show her how beautiful it was out there, and how empty and quiet. Secure men, she’s been telling him, ride ski lifts.

He remembers his last season pass at Sun Valley, used until one last late March trip down to the after ski party at the base of Warm Springs, first quickly down the big moguls
of International, then onto the sharp bumps on the high south side of Warm Springs, jumping the cat tracks, diving screaming back through the crowd until he's on the track to the top of Greyhawk, fast enough to get lots of air, a realization: THIS IS BORING.

So what isn't? Lately he's been ski jumping off the Boulder cliffs for kicks, tumbling eighty or a hundred feet before sticking into the snow, hoping no rocks or tree stumps are near the surface. He's been dancing on the cornices above the Pole Creek Burn, trying to get something started. It makes people nervous. Lately he's started going out alone.

So tonight he can remember telling Suzanne, "Wait a minute. Stop," because he doesn't care what she's saying anymore. And then walking away and into the bathroom and staring for a long moment in the mirror above the sink, wondering what he could possibly look like to her. That malleable? He's been resisting her for a long time, joking with himself about being the Passive Agression Poster Boy, telling himself she'll start liking him as soon as she gives up on him—something he's read about unconditional love.

But no. He remembers coming out of the bathroom quickly and stopping her before she can say anything else. "Get out," he remembers saying. "Get out of my house. Get your stuff and go."

He was thinking it was going to be that simple. But a half hour later she was yelling, "Three wasted years. Three
wasted years of my life. I threw it away on you."

And finally he put on his ski clothes, laced his boots, fastened his gaiters, and looked out the window for the big moon. She walked beside his car as he backed out of the driveway and shouted at him, but when he rolled up the window he couldn’t hear her anymore.

So now he’s almost warm. He can feel something other than pain from his hands. The heater’s working well. There’s a buzzing coming from the engine compartment, and he realizes—whoops—he drove all the way into town in low gear. Funny what getting cold will do to your head.

He sees the lights of town. Tea, he thinks. I’ll make some as soon as I’m home. I’ll fix myself some tea and sit. I’ll put lots of sugar in it.

But when Hardesty gets to his house the lights are all out and the doors and windows are all open. Suzanne has turned off the furnace and poured water in the woodstove. She’s stuffed rags in the sink and left the faucets running. When he steps in the front room he steps into a freezing lake, one that’s pouring downstairs into his basement bedroom. His TV, its picture tube smashed, sits on the kitchen floor with a rim of ice around it.

He runs into the kitchen and turns off the water. Shuts all the doors and windows. Starts the furnace and fires up the woodstove with a couple of wax-and-sawdust condo logs. Turns on most of the lights. Down in the basement a sump
pump is running—he can hear it, tries to remember the kind of person he must have been when he installed it. He looks around. It's going to be all right. Suzanne has insisted he keep his insurance up, and now he knows why. He goes into the kitchen and makes himself a cup of tea, with a lot of sugar.

Hardesty's got his boots off and has his feet propped up on the kitchen table--there's an inch of water on the floor and the biggest terror in his life right now is that he's going to get his socks wet. He's feeling good. He remembers what has happened to him, thinks again of the white cloud as it came over the rocks above him, sees himself in out-of-body slow motion as he hurries toward the tree, watches the chaos of ice and dirt and tree limbs as it hits, feels the hammer blow of the air again, the slicing iciness of the snow as it covers him. He remembers being stupid with cold.

I've come back from the dead, he thinks to himself. Nothing can hurt me anymore. He looks around at his ruined kitchen, at the dishmarks on the walls, and at the shards under his feet. I've come back from the dead, he thinks again, and again he remembers how.

"What a rush," he says aloud, and he hopes he can do it again.
Hardesty Does Drugs

Hardesty’s running up north of Ketchum on a cool summer morning. Somewhere below him is the Fox Creek Loop. His watch is counting the seconds from when he crossed the bridge, started on the trail, and—after running half a mile—realized he’d done Fox Creek six times in a month.

So instead he’s headed up the first ridge he’s found with a path on it, up toward the basalt cliffs of Griffin Butte. Forty minutes, he thinks. Forty minutes is what he’ll allow himself to get the soles of his Nikes above the mountaintop, and although he knows better, he’s got this fantasy going about it being flat up there, with all the trees looking like they were drawn by architects, the grass mowed, geysers and hot pools and little Greek temples and undulating fields of flowers. And a race of beautiful mountain nymphs that hangs out there, eating grapes and waiting for a guy like himself to come along and show them a good time. If he gets there in less than forty minutes they greet him with open arms and he gets a hot date with the head nymph. But if he takes forty minutes and one second or more, they toss him off the biggest piece of vertical real estate on their mountain.

Hardesty’s watch beeps off twenty minutes. He’s running uphill through broken rock. His trail has branched into rabbit runs, coyote tracks, pica paths, attenuating all the way, getting fainter and steeper, until he’s finally facing
plain hillside, rocks and scrub juniper and Doug fir. It's
become all path, and for a moment he sees the world that
way, as one giant path. Whoa, there, he thinks. Too heavy
a thought for this early in the day.

Hardesty's got a trick he plays on himself when he's
running uphill. He tells himself he'll run a hundred steps
and stop. When he does that he says no, it wasn't a hundred,
it was a hundred and fifty. I can manage fifty more. When
he counts fifty more he says to himself no, it wasn't a
hundred and fifty, it was two-fifty. I can manage a hundred
more because I've already done a hundred and fifty. So when
he gets to two-fifty he promises he'll do a hundred before
stopping. And so on, until he reaches a thousand steps run
uphill.

But at a thousand steps, Hardesty doesn't stop. He's
found if he staggers forward, his eyes blind with sweat
and tears, his thighs and calves aflame, his lungs to
months-old phlegm, his mind overcome with pain and
threatened to stop, stiffen and die, he'll still gain altitude.
He'll get that much closer to the top if he's got to make
it up there in less than forty minutes. Remember the
mountain nymphs.

Sometimes it's not mountain nymphs. Sometimes Hardesty's
running from small-arms vigilantes, game wardens, CIA,
creditors. If he makes this pass or that ridge he's safe
from their helicopters, their lasers, their cluster bombs
and their small-claims summonses. The odds are slim, but Hardesty's got the legs and knows the territory.

Other times he's the last free man in Idaho, running from a mob of zombies. Fundamentalist fanatics have taken over the government and they're forcing people into polyester suits and nuclear families. They've got this drug and it's worse than heroin—they shoot you up with it and you turn into a white middle-class male with a Volvo and a mortgage.

Hardesty, counting 216-217-218, does a difficult thing, sighs between desperate gasps for air. These fantasies have a purpose, he knows. They drive him onward, upward, into physical agony—forty minutes, he's thinking, or it's hang-gliding without aid—so his body, hyperventilated, overheated, saturated with lactic acid and CO2, covered with sweat, blood and dust, will release its internal morphines and get him higher than William Burroughs on a chairlift. Hardesty's an endorphin junkie.

He hasn't always been this way. Hardesty remembers back more years than he'd like to count, remembers being in Slavey's—the old Slavey's, before they put the windows in. He's at the bar, hunched over a beer. It's mid-afternoon. He's just had a couple of wisdom teeth twisted out of his jaw. The dentist's given him some Percodans. He's eaten a bunch of them, started on beer and schnapps and unfiltered Camels, and then the pain is gone and there are vague shapes out there in what had been the world.

He thinks he's saying, "Take 'em all out." If two teeth pulled feels this way, thirty or so more pulled will feel lots better. The bartender shape comes close and Hardesty sees eyes—at least three—peering into his own.

"You need some help, buddy," says the bartender, an old friend. Hardesty feels a coke vial pressed into his palm. He staggers by long habit to the men's room and shovels both nostrils full, using a MacDonald's coffee stirrer he keeps in his shirt pocket. Sure enough, the fuzz comes off the shapes out there and they turn into semi-abstract walls and people, urinals, stalls, and about a million cigarette butts. Hardesty checks out the mirror. Everything's fine, looks good, except for the pupils of his eyes, which seem to have been taken with a flash, and two holes he can see when he opens his mouth wide and tilts his head back. Voids. Unconscious voids, he giggles to himself, looking into them as if they were keyholes. How much surgery can a man stand? They could take it all out, he thinks, the muscles, guts, heart, bones, and blood, and you could still live.

He tries to explain this, upon his return to the bar, to the woman who was sitting beside him, Suzanne or LaVicka or whatever it was—Annie, he remembers—and she's concerned enough for his mental health that she gives him a half-dozen of her antidepressants. They won't take effect for a week or so, she says, but down they go and he feels better immediately. It's like the sun coming out. Somebody buys
him a couple of shots of Jack Daniels and soon it’s seven or eight and the sun’s about to set, although you wouldn’t know it in darkest Slavey’s or in the flickering torch-lit interior of Hardesty’s skull.

Annie’s got this idea that her life isn’t going to be complete tonight without him. She wants to take him across the street and buy him a full cut of prime rib. Sure, says Hardesty, agreeing to anything she’s got in mind. She’s been telling him about her life and it sounds perfectly all right, something about divorce and getting screwed by lawyers, new beginnings, just wanting to take it one night at a time. Hardesty dips into his Percodan bottle, grabs the plastic capsule full of desiccant, the one labeled DO NOT EAT, and swallows it. What a rush.

Annie pulls him off his stool and the next person Hardesty sees is a hostess—Suzanne or LaVicka or somebody—he’s not sure of her name but he thinks she went to Wood River High School with him, back in the sixties—asking them to wait thirty minutes and apologizing for the delay. She smiles when she recognizes him, says hello, takes a second look, pulls him aside, and says, “Hardesty, you look like you’re about to die.”


The two women seem to be arguing. Hardesty nods genially and catches snatches of conversation:
"Can't you see the man is sick?" the hostess keeps asking. Annie is screaming he's taken, he's her date, leave them alone. Hardesty grins. This morning his world was all toothache. Now two women are fighting over him. How lucky it is he just happened in here.

Hardesty's still grinning when two people in uniform grab him and stuff him in an ambulance, grinning still when they whisk him into the emergency room of the Sun Valley Hospital.

"What seems to be the problem?" asks the doctor on duty.


The doctor reaches into Hardesty's shirt pocket and pulls out the MacDonald's stirrer and what's left of the Percodans.

"Thought so," says the doctor.

Nobody wants to let Hardesty go home alone, even with a stomach recently pumped and a bloodstream full of narcotic antagonist. But he's managed to tell them he's uninsured, so they call the hostess at the restaurant--turns out her name really is LaVicka and she did go to high school with him--and she says she'll take care of him if they'll keep him until she gets off work. She shows up after midnight. Hardesty's wide awake and hungry.


"We're going home," she says.
Once in her apartment, he checks out her refrigerator. He’s horrified by what he finds. Carrots and celery. Fruit. Funny looking roots and sprouts.

"You got a steak I can fry up?" he asks her.

"I don’t eat red meat," LaVicka says. "You shouldn’t either."

He looks at her like she’s crazy, but she launches into a lecture about nitrosamines, diethylstilbesterone, pyrogens, and cholesterol. Her job isn’t being a hostess, Hardesty realizes. She’s doing missionary work.

He gives up on food for the evening and tries to climb into her bed.

"You’re too fat," she says, shaking her head huh-uh.

"Marry me," says Hardesty. "We’ll change both your names."

She makes him sleep on the couch in the front room.

In the morning she’s telling him, over bran muffins, that he’s got to stop living like he’s been living. He’s overweight, he’s out of shape, he’s doing too many drugs. She’s been watching him from her station at the restaurant.

"Why can’t you be like you were in high school?" asks LaVicka.

Hardesty looks at LaVicka’s earnest face, flashes on the same face, chubby with teen-age fat, staring out at him on the basketball court from a mass of Wood River High School pep club uniforms. Oh, God, he thinks. She’s trying to fix up her past, and I’m in it.
LaVICKA’s lost weight. She’s been telling him about her daytime job instructing aerobics. She seems to have found time to work on her tan. Hardesty looks her over. She coulda been a cheerleader, he realizes.

She wants him to stay with her until he gets his act together. Her apartment can be his halfway house. Nobody’s made Hardesty an offer like this before and he’s not sure he likes it. But he weighs forty-five pounds more than he did when he was playing high-school basketball, and the women who have been trying to save him from himself seem to be having shorter and shorter attention spans. He sighs. What the hell, he thinks.

It is an apt phrase. Over the next two weeks she’s got him off pills, off booze, off cigarettes, off street drugs, and eating an olive-drab semi-solid that he thinks is spinach, aloe-vera, wheat germ, yogurt and fish oil all done up in a blender. He makes little kneeling statues out of it and leaves them on LaVICKA’s fireplace mantle. He tells her they’re praying she’ll bring home a doggie bag full of prime rib from work.

He doesn’t miss the drugs. Enough chemicals are stored in his fat to last him years. As he loses weight, they leach into his blood. He’s been getting high on hashish he smoked in 1967.

LaVICKA has set up half a dozen jogging routes for him, one for every day of the week except Sunday when he’s
supposed to be in her aerobics class. She’s made charts for his running times and weight losses and he’s actually going along with it, shuffling up Adams Gulch or out Trail Creek, eating the goo she serves him, staying out of the bars. He even attends the aerobics class, not for the exercise but because it allows him to become a socially approved voyeur. He doesn’t seem to be changing much but he’s hoping that before long he’s going to be lean and different and she’ll stop grabbing his love handles and calling him fat boy. She still won’t let him touch her and he’s begun to want to a lot.

He finally loses it, sneaks out to Slavey’s to look for Annie and a night of skullpopping fun. He finds her but she’s sipping a Perrier and telling everyone that her emotional problems were all caused by refined sugar. She spots him and wants him to go to an AA meeting with her. Depressed, Hardesty trudges back to LaVicka’s apartment and her couch.

The next day, at the top of a nasty hill toward the end of a five-mile plod, Hardesty notices he’s not in his body anymore. He’s twenty feet over his own head. His lungs are wheezing, his legs are hurting, he’s got a side ache, he’s sweating onto the pavement, he’s getting stress fractures, ligament strains, hernias and blisters, but it’s okay. In fact, it feels nice.

He sprints to LaVicka’s apartment, pushing hard through smiling blue clouds.
"I'm cured," he says to LaVicka, and packs up his stuff.

"Stay," she says. "I'm getting tired of sleeping alone."

Hardesty realizes with a sudden start that it's happened, that he's begun his change back to her image of his youth. He can touch her now.

If he felt like it. But all he can think about is working out, eating pasta, getting in better and better and better shape. He's going to spend the rest of his life in sweat clothes. He'll graph the beats of his heart. He'll pay a hundred and twenty-five dollars for running shoes.

"Good-bye," he says to LaVicka, and bounces down the steps of her apartment. He'll buy a Nautilus for his living room. LaVicka wails something behind the door he slammed, but he's got no more need for her.

So now, years later, Hardesty runs up the dark cliffs of Griffin Butte. He's two-thirds of the way up and he's going to make it in time for a round of mountain-nymph applause. He's drenched in sweat. His heart feels like it's on spin cycle.

He's once again crossed the frontier of his skin and thinks he's five stories tall. He's not just climbing hand-over-hand up the cliffs, he's bouncing, jumping, hopping up them. The rock is squeezable. The sky has gone from blue to orange with little black dots all over it.

Over his shoulder, Hardesty glimpses a skewed and unearthly Ketchum through sweat-blurred corneas. He gets a
brand-new perception of the town as a great non-sentient colonial organism, its cells shopkeepers, waitresses, skibums, captains of industry--everyone interdependent and more or less the same but shaped by caste-specific hormones at critical stages of growth.

What an insight, he thinks. Wow. It’s what a drug-free lifestyle will do for you, he says to himself, and he likes the phrase so much he shouts it out to the rocks he’s climbing:

“A DRUG-FREE LIFESTYLE,” he yells, dancing past trees that have grown claws, on ground that has turned to quaking bog.

He’s charging upward as fast as he can, but time is no longer a worry. He’s forgotten about mountain-nymphs.

He feels leaner and lighter with every step. His body fat was down to three percent last time he checked. He has a vision of himself in a few years, whittled to just a nervous system, a transparent brain surrounded by a whirlwind of spiderweb nerves, able to drift upward, electrically awake but motionless, on summer thermals.

He reaches the steep slope that leads to the rocks on top. He speeds up, lengthens his strides, and breathes with hoarse sucking gasps. He loses track of the number of steps he’s taken. Arithmetic can’t describe his world. Nor can any words prevail against the searing agony of legs and chest or the sound of the wind screaming past the raw ends of his Eustachian tubes. He sees colors, hears sounds, and moves convulsively upward.
And then he's on top. He falls to the rock below his feet. He gazes without comprehension at a twisted landscape of broken rock and wind-bent trees. He does not feel the sun warm his skin or hear his watch as it beeps at ten-minute intervals. Ladybugs crawl from beneath the top-rocks and over his neck and he does not know their touch.

Over time, his heart slows. His skin dries. He wakes. A long time later language begins. "Rock," he says, and sees the world harden, crack, gather color, shape, and heft, watches colonies of lichen grow on it, sees it penetrated by the roots of trees and occupied by families of ladybugs. He stands up, looks toward the west and sees the setting sun. Most of a day has gone from his life and he can't remember it.

Hardesty walks slowly off the mountain, down toward Adams Gulch, where Ketchum is oozing up a golden pseudopod of big houses and vulgar foreign cars. He comes to a broad sandy hillside and begins trotting downhill and jumping an occasional sagebrush. Soon he's taking big leaps and running flat out over logs and bushes, swinging around the trunks of trees to control his speed. He knows why he's running—he's found a band of Nazis hiding out on the Butte. They're chasing him with flame-throwers and napalm. If he doesn't make it to the Adams Gulch road in ten minutes they'll feed him to their German Shepherds as a hot evening meal.
He jumps down the mountain, fifteen feet at a leap, landing and falling, scrambling up and leaping again. He looks back and it’s like he can see them, coming after him in smoking four-wheel-drive pickups with North Idaho license plates. His heart begins to race, his legs begin to pump, and all across his nervous system little pusher cells start hanging around dark synapses, peddling pharmaceutical-grade endorphin.

But the trip down is over before he gets on another real jag. He reaches the Adams Gulch road at a full sprint, sagebrush in his teeth, his running tights torn and his triathlon t-shirt contour-lined with dried salt, and immediately runs into what appear to be living, breathing mountain nymphs.

It’s Suzanne and LaVicka and Annie, Spandex-coated, aerobicized, and lean, running in a herd back to town to their health club. They’re glad to see him and greet him with locker-room arm punches and bum slaps and questions about races he’s going to enter. He runs with them to the club, where he showers and waits for them in the Jacuzzi. Over the bubbling roar of the jets he hears them laughing and popping towels at each other in their locker room.

He relaxes, stretches out so the bubbles float him upward, closes his eyes to better feel the ache of his tendons and his bones, feels his muscles lose their cramps, and enjoys the fine end of a day just spent getting in even better condition. His neuroreceptors are quiet, satiated, riding
easy, giving no hint that tomorrow they're going to be jangling for exercise, that they'll make him jitter and jerk and jump until he can get out on a steep trail and run his heart and lungs and legs and head to their limits.

When Annie comes out of the locker room, she finds him stretched out in the churning water, smiling, eyes closed, looking like a well-trimmed cut of beef. She reaches out and runs her hand along his thigh, feels the sharp definition of the muscles there, and runs her other hand down the hairs of his flat belly.

Hardesty doesn't feel a thing. He's lost somewhere in the perfectly reciprocating chemistry of his own flesh, adrift in a universe complete unto itself. It feels good in there and he's not going to come out. After a little more prodding, Annie gives up. Suzanne and LaVicka join her around the body, and while Hardesty floats in dreamless bliss, they talk about their lives and times and weights, and what they would like them all to be.
Hardesty Climbs Rocks

Hardesty's got this boat. It's a little aluminum canoe, flattened at one end so it'll take a motor, and he's mounted it with an old thirty-five horse outboard he found at a garage sale. He's trailered it up from Ketchum to Redfish Lake, put it in the water, weighted down the front end with rocks, and now he's headed up the lake to where the dark face of Cathedral Peak comes down to meet the beach. The bow of the boat is four feet off the water, rearing and weaving like a panicked horse, but he's into realms of speed men in canoes have never before dared to go. Hardesty grins into the wind, looks at blue sky and green trees, squints into the holographic suns that hang in the lake mists, and pronounces it a good day.

It is also a cold one. The blue of the sky is the brittle blue of late November and the green of the trees looks black against the snow clotted in their branches. Hoar frost covers the rocks and sand of the lakeshore. It's been below zero every night for a week. Only the great depth of Redfish, with its store of summer heat, has kept it from freezing.

Even now, the lake has the deep stillness that presages ice. The canoe's wake flattens quickly and the motor sounds muffled in the damp air. Hardesty looks over the side and sees dark water. He feels the deadly weight of his hiking
boots, the cumbersome thickness of his parka and gloves, and
thinks of long jointed limbs, pale claws and funnel-shaped
mouths moving down among slime-covered trees and lost tennis
shoes. He leans the canoe in closer to shore. If he
capsizes near land, he thinks, he can sink to the bottom and
try to run for it.

But he reaches the head of the lake without the canoe
rearing over on him or losing a row of rivets to a stray
piece of sheet-ice. He cuts the engine. The bow splashes
down and rises, and he glides in among big rocks to a short
stretch of sand. He pulls the canoe up on the beach, ties
it to a tree, and begins walking through six inches of snow
toward the registration box on the Redfish Creek trail.

At the box he checks the register, sees that no one has
been by in a month, and leaves it unsigned. What they don't
know won't hurt them, he thinks, and moves on.

Hardesty's going to climb Cathedral. The peak sits above
the lake, a great ruined mass of decomposed granite, covered
by cracks and crumbling pillars and, now, dune-shaped
deposits of windblown snow. It rises to a single tall spire
whose top is thirty-five hundred feet higher than lake
level.

It's the spire that Hardesty's remembering as he runs up
the snowcovered trail. It's a vertical shot a hundred yards
long, split by a crevice that's wider than a man at the
bottom, too narrow for a finger at the top.

Hardesty feels a whisper of summer wind come out of the
stilled and frozen trees, smells the musty, gunpowdery odor of sun-warmed rock, and sees himself the preceding July:

He’s close to the top of the crevice, squeezing his shoulders against the its walls, pulling his legs higher, jamming his feet and inching upward. He’s looking between his knees at a long stretch of empty air. He’s just imagined himself slipping first with one shoe and then the other, slowing his fall with sliding and lacerated shoulders and elbows until he slides to a place where the walls are too wide, then falling a quick fifty yards to burst like a carton of yogurt thrown at a sidewalk. He’s decided to get down if he can.

Hardesty has—he’s proud of it—an ability to put the great big fears out of his mind, wipe them out with mundane panoramas of doing laundry or making dinner or checking out housewives at the supermarket. No fall, immediate or eventual, troubles him. He concerns himself with a small crack that holds two fingers, a rough patch of rock for his shoulder, a small hard spot of lichen he dampens with his breath, and then a first downward foothold. Footholds and shoulder holds, more lichen and the small marks technical climbers have made with their pitons and chalk let him ease down the crevice and finally stand on flat sandy ground at the base of the spire, looking up.

He does not vow to conquer Cathedral. He does not consider his turning back anything but a turning back even
though it happened thirty feet from the summit of a ten-thousand-three-hundred-foot peak. What he thinks about instead is a clear and surprising perception he's had of time gone awry. Up there, the intervals between footholds ceased to be intervals, so that either no time had passed between the placing of one foot and the placing of another, or all time had passed, the sun had burnt out, the Qort Cloud had collapsed inward, life had given up its quadrillion ghosts and he was alone and still on the dark granite.

Back in Ketchum, making the rounds from bar to bar, drinking grapefruit juice and conducting impromptu T-groups for problem drinkers, Hardesty tries to explain:

"I can slow time down," he says, approaching a table where Suzanne and LaVicka and Annie are sitting. "I can make it stop."

"Do us a favor," says Suzanne. "Make your mouth stop."

They laugh.

"You've been talking about men again," Hardesty says to them, grabbing a chair and sitting down. "Telling hard-luck stories. Measuring real people against fantasy lovers. I shouldn't even sit with you."

Everybody nods in agreement with this last except Annie. I better leave, he thinks, but then he looks closely at her. She's fallen off the wagon again and is looking at him with an expression that makes him think of a lipstick ad in Cosmo. He'll try to talk her into going back to AA in the
morning. On the drive over Galena Summit, he's been thinking about making time stop completely at the right moment, making an orgasm last forever.

"No, really," he says. "I can slow down time." He tells them about being on Cathedral, hanging in the crevice, looking down at nothing.

"You're going to kill yourself," says Suzanne.

"You're supposed to use a rope," says LaVicka.

"And pitons and carabiners," says Annie. She used to be married to a man who climbed.

"Don't need them," says Hardesty. "Here." He reaches into his pocket and hands Annie a couple of pitons he's pulled out of the spire. "I found these near the top."

Everybody looks bored except Annie, who says maybe they belong to her ex-husband.

"No deals," says Hardesty, snatching them back and putting them in his pocket. "These are spoils of war."

At closing time Annie takes him home to her bed, welcomes him between her thighs, and sometime in the night he finds himself hanging spread-eagled in a crevice of the night sky, wind-blown stars bright in his flesh, his heart an infinity away from its next beat.

In the morning he can't think of anything but getting away from her and into the Sawtooths.

"When are you coming back?" she wants to know.

He shrugs. When? he thinks. When. Not an applicable
A mile up the Redfish Creek trail, in November snow that is now a foot deep, Hardesty begins his ascent. He's at the base of a steep canyon in the peak's side, one that has slashed down through the vertical reaches of rock that buttress the summit. By craning his neck, Hardesty can see all the way up the canyon to where it ends in a little round gap in the peak's spine. To one side of the gap he can see the single high spire glittering in morning sunlight. At distance, it looks featureless, polished, impossible to climb. Hardesty takes a deep breath and begins jogging toward it.

Underneath the snow, the ground slides away from his feet. Cathedral's granite is falling apart like a resort-town marriage. The bottom of the canyon is mostly sand. It is, Hardesty likes to tell people, a three-hour trip up and a ten-minute trip down.

It was, anyway, in July, when he left the spire and ran down the mountain just ahead of darkness, taking thirty-foot leaps among the rotted spires, jumping off big rocks and landing, tumbling, on the sliding slopes. In places he stood still and let the sand, in slow rivers, carry him down toward the lake. He ran along the crumbling sides of dry washes, feeling each foothold give way, pacing and placing himself so he ran on falling earth and stayed one step ahead of not having a place to step at all.

November has made it all treacherous. Here and there the
sand has absorbed moisture and has frozen into solid flat sheets. It won't hold the snow when he steps on it and he occasionally slips to his hands and knees. Giant sandpaper, he thinks. Get moving on this stuff and you'll be a streak of hamburger a hundred yards long.

But there isn't any danger of that. All he has to is stop time, halt the sun at one point in its southern sky, freeze the intertwined shadows of twisted trees, clutch the one instant of outstretched arm or dragging foot, and all momentum disappears. It sounds ridiculous but it has worked, for Hardesty, in places other than bed. Since July, he's been climbing all over the Sawtooths, up the Elephant's Perch, Warbonnet Peak, the Rakers, the Grand Aguille and Rotten Monolith, hanging onto the side of some piece of rock favored by climbers, gathering up pitons and pieces of webbing they've left behind. At home he's got a collection of carabiners, hex nuts, rock chocks, pulleys, helmets, pieces of frayed and stretched climbing rope. He's just picked the stuff up, out from under overhangs, from cracks and coulars, lying below sheer final pitches, dangling from the tops of rock fingers. He's been hoping to catch somebody in the act of climbing, thinking maybe he'll make a citizen's arrest for littering, but he hasn't run onto anybody, not even a body.

Hardesty's been his usual inarticulate self trying to explain how it is that he can hang onto the high side of a
two-hundred foot rock wall, shaking out a line of pitons somebody's pounded into a crack. He just shows up in the bars, sits down at somebody's table and fans the pitons out in front of him.

"Strong fingers," he says. People try to be polite until he goes away.

But it isn't his fingers. Once he tried to tell Annie, in a different context, what it was like. "It's like being in that time after the end of the message on the answering machine and before the beep," he said, "It's like being there forever. You can do anything."

"I'm supposed to be flattered?" Annie had asked.

But it isn't really like that anyway. He just has a vague idea of a different world, one with different natural laws, that you call up and they put you on hold.

Now, in a world transformed by snow, Hardesty's moving at a quick uphill trot and he's covered a mile and gained a couple of thousand vertical feet on his boat. Above him, where sky meets rock, there's a thin crack of pure white light. It's noon. Hardesty can't look up without shading his eyes.

He stops, pulls a marmalade sandwich from his pocket, and finds a large rock, one blown free of snow, to eat it on. He's feeling good, congratulating himself on the day and a good start, when he looks a thousand yards down the line of his tracks and sees—uh-oh—twenty or twenty-five people with backpacks coming up the canyon after him.
They're making good time when they're headed in one direction. They're running back and forth across the canyon bottom, clustering into small groups that break apart and re-form. Some of them seem to be tearing the limbs off trees. Others are rolling rocks back down the canyon, throwing snowballs and and fist-fighting. One of them, taller and fatter than the rest, is shouting something. Hardesty hears, faintly, an echoed bellow: "Slow down, you little sons-a-bitches!" It can't be. It is. It's the Boy Scouts.

Hardesty sits, horrified into immobility, while the Scouts advance to his rock. He can't even eat his sandwich. An hour—maybe longer—has disappeared by the time they reach a point fifty feet below him.

They're in winter uniform, with little olive-drab down parkas and pants, helmets and full packs and climbing gear. They keep falling down in the deepening snow. Some of them have already roped up, stringing themselves together in groups of five or six. When one of them spots him they all flinch away, like a school of startled fish.

"There's a guy up there."
"What's he doing?"
"He's just sitting there."
"Hey, Mister."
"Hey!"
"Mister?"
"Hey!"

"How far is it to the top?"

"Do you live in a cave?"

"What you doing?"

Hardesty can't speak. He looks away from them and stares at his boots. They begin to go around his rock, giving it a wide berth and not saying a thing. As soon as they get safely above him they break into screams and laughter.

"Weirdo!" one of them yells. Hardesty looks up to see them standing fifty yards up the slope.

"WeirdoweirdoweirdoWEIRDOWIERDO!" The Scouts are chanting and jumping up and down. Carabiners are jingling like sleigh bells.

Hardesty goes along with it, gets up and starts toward them, clawing the air.

"Aaaarraggga!" he yells.

The Scouts scramble upward, whooping and shouting, chopping at ancient wind-gnarled trees with their hatchets, rolling big rocks by him and spray-painting silver TROOP 108-BSA's on pillars and boulders. When they get a few hundred feet above him, they begin to climb up a small side canyon that branches off toward the direction of Braxton Peak, a big sandy knob a half-mile west of the summit of Cathedral.

Hardesty relaxes. They're not going where he's going. He shudders, remembering that the local Forest Service wilderness rangers refer to Boy Scouts as Hatchet Bastards.
He thinks he knows where all the climbing gear has been coming from.

He looks up to where they're strung out along the length of an orange climbing rope, about to disappear around a corner. Then he looks down to unbroken blue mirror of Redfish Lake, thinking that it's impossible that they could be here. No boats have come across the lake.

Maybe--he thinks--just maybe--they're not Boy Scouts. They're mutant mountain dwarves. He sees them again, as plain as if they were standing in front of him, their little corpulent bodies bulging out of their parkas, their faces all incisors and red eyes. From where he's sitting, he hears their tiny shrieks and whistles, and he knows they speak in no known language.

The scoutmaster struggles up to Hardesty's rock, wheezing and puffing. He's sweating in a long military coat and straining against his pack. It's Hardesty's high school basketball coach, older, wrinkled, fat, his nose covered by broken veins. Hardesty hasn't heard of the guy in years, since he was dismissed for a series of petty locker-room molestations. Coach looks at Hardesty without surprise.

"Where'd they go?" he yells.

Hardesty points silently to the line of tiny figures above him.

"Halfway to Braxton already," says the scoutmaster. "Hard to keep up with the little devils."
Hardesty's been on Braxton. It's as big as a basketball court up there, flat and sandy and barren. At the edges of its bald summit, it falls off five hundred or a thousand feet in three directions. Toward the north, a long eroded ridge connects it with the Rotten Monolith. Braxton's made of rock even more decayed than that of Cathedral, and its sides are covered with slumping rock columns, collapsed arches, and boulders that have melted into piles of sand. There are no sharp corners, no inorganic shapes, on Braxton. It's an easy climb, a walk-up, but it gives Hardesty the creeps.

"Where did you come from?" asks Hardesty.

"Bench Lakes," says Coach.

Hardesty nods, relieved. That explains it. Bench Lakes are on the other side of Cathedral, a half-mile away straight through the rock. They've come around the peak, down the Bench Lake Trail to the Redfish Creek Trail, then back up.

"We'll stay on Braxton tonight, and go out to Redfish tomorrow," says Coach. "Then they all get their Winter Mountaineering Merit Badges."

And what else? thinks Hardesty. Looking at Braxton tonight could turn you into a pillar of salt.

"Make sure they stay away from my boat," he tells the Coach.

Little chirps and curses come from above. Hardesty looks up to see the Scouts, bound into a ball by criss-crossed
strands of climbing rope, looking like some strange round sea-animal with a multitude of faces, rolling down into the canyon bottom.

"Oh, shit," says Coach. "I've got to go straighten them out." He sighs and struggles upward, groaning. Hardesty watches him stumble up the snow to his charges, untangle them from the rope and form them into an irregular and scuffed but apparently unhurt line. Then, roped up again, they all start back up the side canyon and disappear into it, followed by Coach, who urges them on with the point of an ice-axe.

Hardesty looks down and down, across Redfish Canyon, to see long shadows coming off the Grand Mogul and the Elephant's Perch. He's been wasting time. He shrugs. No problem.

But he's worried about something. He looks up the tracked snowfield above him, and knows that, given even the reality of those tracks, he's still not sure anybody's been by. Lately, back in Ketchum after climbs, he's been bothered by a perception that all events are internal matters. It comes on him when he's putting gas in his car or pricing running shoes.

"If they hadn't started looking like dwarves," he says. Some internal Hardesty analogue to the Sawtooths, high and pure and untrammeled, is covered by small destructive crawling things.
Hardesty gets up, shoulders his pack, and starts into snow that is, at this altitude, eighteen inches deep, drifted here and there into deeper piles. He takes one last look over his shoulder before he goes. It's a mistake.

Someone else is following him up the canyon. It's a single figure, a flash of bright red, still close to the bottom but moving steadily upward.

"What's this one?" he says. He's not going to wait another hour to find out. He turns and runs up the mountain, taking long strides in spite of the snow, not looking back.

Bullshit, he's thinking. He doesn't have to deal with any of this. He'll get to the top of Cathedral and be done with it, get down and get out of this crowded part of the Sawtooths. Next time he'll put on skis and head back the fifteen miles to the Rakers. The solitude of the summer is beginning to seem an impossible accident.

And it's dead winter at this altitude. The small seep-springs that had been marked by ferns and flowers in the summer are now the sites of giant ice-tumors, bulbous transparencies imprisoning those same black ferns and flowers. The canyon narrows and becomes choked with boulders and broken rock, full of cracks and pitfalls under a rounded cover of snow. Icicles form blue wainscots on the rock walls above him. Long black shadows stretch off the north sides of rocks. Hardesty suppresses an intimation of people he didn't know existed, people with needs for the
cold, the still, and the dark, thousands of them, coming to
the Sawtooths in winter.

He begins making his way over the boulders, slowing down
and carefully avoiding putting his full weight on either
foot. He loses part of each step to the slide of snow. The
mountain gets steeper, and he goes to all fours on the low
sides of boulders and small cliffs. Finally the snow
changes in texture, becomes hard and windblown, and in
places he can stand on it, or take three or four cautious
steps before he breaks through. He struggles up until he
can see the blue-black northern sky, close and looking more
like vacuum than makes him comfortable, in the gap next to
the spire.

He stops and turns. The sun has shrunken and is heading
down to a torn southern horizon. Hardesty names what he can
see: Elk Peak, Cramer, Snowyside, the Perch, the Mogul,
Decker, none of them very far above him, some of them below.
Below them all, a half-mile down the canyon he's come up,
Hardesty again sees red movement. A flicker and it's gone.

He shrugs. A mountain goat hunter. Somebody taking snow
pictures. Santa Claus, drunk and lost. The red appears
again, from behind a house-sized boulder, and moves
deliberately and quickly up the straight line of Hardesty's
tracks.

Hardesty frowns. He's broken a trail up through the snow,
and whoever it is down there is going to have it far easier
"Go away!" Hardesty shouts, reasonably certain he can't be heard. "Go find your own peak." He waves both hands, pushing whoever it is away, and is surprised when whoever it is begins waving back.

He hears a tiny voice. "Stop!"

Stop? thinks Hardesty. Stop? Someone's followed him. Someone he's talked to in the bars, who's actually listened to him and decided to try to go along. Someone's followed his wake across Redfish, has drug a boat up next to his and has tied it to the same tree. Whoever it is has checked the register for a signature and found nothing and has a good idea who it was whose signature wasn't there. Now he's climbing up the bottom of the canyon, trying to catch up, wanting to share something that Hardesty only wants to tell about.

Hardesty turns and starts upward again, moving quickly up the narrowing canyon. The last hundred yards have been blown free of snow. Rock shards have broken off the peak from the fall's freezing and are ice-welded to the canyon floor. He picks his way up through them gently, never putting his weight on any one hand or foot, ready at any moment for the whole mass of them to begin sliding down the peak.

When he finally gets to the gap, he discovers someone has been there since July. Rocks have been piled into a crude shelter against the chill air that blows up the north side
of the peak. Empty aluminum packets of freeze-dried dinners have been wind-creased between boulders. Hardesty gathers the packets up and puts them in his pockets. In one corner of the shelter, he finds a Swiss army knife and a small hi-tech flashlight.

The path up lies behind a horizon only twenty feet away. He is struck by a worry that he's lost his lead on whoever's following him, and he runs over to where he can see down. Nobody. If he's gained on me, he thinks, he's hidden himself behind a rock and is waiting for me to--what?--turn my back? Bring him his knife and light? Hardesty isn't going to give the knife and light to anybody.

"Hardesty," comes an echo from below. "Hardesty, wait for me."

Oh, God. Someone knows his name. He panics and begins running back and forth across the ledge, straining to see somebody--anybody--in his tracks below. The thought that someone knows him here causes a thick horror in him, inspires the same helpless dread as would the sharp and penetrating little piggy eyes of a degenerate psychoanalyst.

"Hardesty," calls the voice, closer, and there's something familiar in it, something--can this be?--feminine.

Oh, no. Hardesty remembers something he'd rather forget, remembers that Annie's just bought a new red jumpsuit to go with her season ski pass. "Hardesty," echo the rocks below, and they're using her voice. She's down there and coming up
fast.

Hardesty drops his face into his hands and wonders, with desperate incomprehension: Why can’t women leave me alone?

He runs to the spire and puts his hands on either side of the crevice that splits it. If he can get up it quickly enough, he can be back down before Annie gets close. He can duck down the dark north side of the peak to the Bench Lakes and follow the trail back to the boat. Annie’ll learn not to try to follow him into the mountains. Deliberately and easily, he puts her—and whatever reason she might have for following him—out of his mind.

He removes his gloves and starts to hang them on his belt. He instantly feels the wind, cold and with a hint of coming darkness in it, and puts them back on.

He starts up the crevice. For the first hundred feet it’s too wide for him to use his shoulders, and he pushes palms and soles of feet against the rock, finding small shelves, protrusions, and holes on which to hang a hand or foot until, a few seconds later, he moves on.

He begins to feel the air beneath him become lethal. Fifteen feet can kill you, he says to himself, but at thirty, you begin to think it might be true that you could fall and die. At ninety feet you’re almost certain and at a hundred-twenty you know.

When the crevice walls become narrower than his shoulders he squeezes out against them and hangs there by friction alone, his legs relaxed and dangling.
The rock is harder than he remembers it, and cold. It is covered with the razor-edges of micro-crystals and beads of transparent ice. He pushes against it with his shoulders until he feels pain from his bones. It doesn’t give an inch.

He stares at a few bits of lichen that dance six inches in front of his eyes. They’re expanded, open, alive for the few moments a day that the sun warms winter-wet flesh above freezing. It’s lichen-spring, he thinks. The flat orange and black spots have turned into tiny flowers, delicate and—where he has crushed them—slick.

He moves upward into narrowing space, pushing with his legs and holding with his shoulders. It’s a regular, rhythmic, swimming movement, and he does not think about it. Reptilian machinery far down the brainstem—a part of himself that stays in good shape—takes over. Besides the routine climbing, it has taken care of running, driving long distance, blind dates and now and then whole relationships, leaving the rest of him free to wander wide and far across the Sawtooths.

And so, Annie forgotten, he finds himself a few yards from the top. The crevice is narrow enough he can turn sideways in it and hold himself with chest and bent knees. He breathes as deeply as he can without falling. The rock, cold and shadowed as it is, feels good. It surrounds him almost completely. Hardesty calls up legends of odd animals
imprisoned in rocks, fish with feet, tiny dragons, and blind birds, let out into air aeons older than when they had breathed it last, and knows the comfort that, once free, they must have missed. Looking out, he sees a narrow line of dark blue that stretches from the zenith to nameless peaks on the far western side of the range. The sun has gone south.

It is only now that Hardesty lets himself remember what he's come for. On his last trip up he spied a piton stuck a couple of feet below the summit, and he's going to pull it out and take it home. Then, he thinks, the top spire of Cathedral will be clean. The top of Cathedral clean is the sort of idea Hardesty likes to think about for months. This one trip will get him through a winter of life in Ketchum.

It isn't long after he begins moving again that the crack becomes too narrow for his body. He eases out onto vertical rock, jamming his forearms and knees, and then his feet and fingers, against the closing rock walls. Wind is whistling from the north, from the high white tops of Williams and Thompson and Horstmann Peaks. He feels the sweat next to his skin congeal. Fingerholds get smaller and his gloves begin to be too thick. Looking up, he sees the last ten feet of Cathedral above him, not vertical but worse, rising away from the perpendicular so he's got to follow a bulge out over twenty stories of nothing, holding himself against the rock by the friction of jammed fingers and the twisted toes of his boots.
At the very top of the bulge where the crack finally becomes a thin line, Hardesty can see the shiny steel of the piton. He looks away from it to the grey surface in front of his nose.

Rock, thinks Hardesty. With the thought comes the urge to touch it. He sticks the index finger of one glove in his teeth and draws it off and spits it to the ground far below. Then the other.

His hands become conduits. He remembers molten beginnings, the rhythms of continents, feels the granite become flesh under the pressure of his palms. If he knows anything like gravity, it is the pull of his nerves toward a dull igneous ache miles under the Sawtooth Batholith. His points of contact—his forehead, the tips of his fingers, an outstretched leg and a boot hitched over a crumbling, downslanted shelf—spark crystalline synapses.

He feels himself crawling over himself, feels the embrace of the rock around his fingers, feels the fingers as he clutches them, feels from both sides the rough movement of boots and the scrape of cloth. He hears the sound of sand rattling far below, then feels it hitting him like hail. Hardesty knows the three million years that the rock has been solid, then, looking back, sees his own flesh and blood as the ephemeral thing it is. It is not that he stops time, but that he knows it.

He gives words to none of these perceptions. He's looking
at the piton, watching it grow closer, and wondering what
brand it is. It's been pounded in to its hilt and is going
to be difficult to remove. It's been there since the peak
was first climbed, probably, and everyone that's come up
since has used it, pounding on it a little to be sure it
wouldn't pull out.

When he reaches it he hooks a middle finger through it and
hauls himself up over the edge of the peak-top to a flat
snow-covered granite slab the size of three or four sections
of sidewalk. He's on top of Cathedral.

He remains on his knees, and looks with dull surprise at
the hands that rest on the snow below his eyes. He can't
feel them, and wonders how it is they worked to get him
where he is. He thinks of frostbite, amputation, phantom
limbs. He remembers his gloves and shrugs. In a little
while he'll climb down and pick them up.

For a long while he holds his hands up under his parka,
against his sweat-damp sweater, until they gain a little
warmth and feeling from his body. Then he kneels and crawls
back toward the piton, reaches down to it and shakes it with
all his strength. It doesn't budge.

He backs up, gets to his feet and looks around for a rock
to use as a hammer. Everything loose has been tossed off the
peak by climbers. He turns again to the piton and sits on
the ledge above it, reaches back for snowy handholds, and
kicks at it. It still doesn't move.

He has to warm his hands again. This time he reaches
under his sweater and undershirt and places them against his skin. They're as cold as the rock, and he involuntarily sucks his belly away from them. Sitting on the edge, hanging his heels over three hundred feet of air, he stares fixedly at the piton. It no longer gleams in daylight. A grey dusk is beginning to fall, and the piton and the granite it's buried in appear dull and leaden. What sunset there might have been is obscured by a line of dark clouds to the west. They're trailing snow.

Hardesty is pissed. He gets up, turns from the piton and walks around in the peak-top snow, kicking through the wind-packed crust, hoping to find a basketball-sized rock he can toss at the head of the piton. There's nothing there and he kicks ever more savagely, still holding his hands up under his parka, stumbling and staggering in small circles, swearing at anyone who's ever tossed as much as a pebble over the edge.

Finally, just about to give up, he hits something. He feels a sharp pain shoot through his jammed big toe, and hears a metallic clang.

It's the box the climber's register is in. It's the size of a breadbox, built of thick metal. It's got a lid on it that's held down by a couple of wing-nuts, and Hardesty knows that inside is a book with the signatures and thoughts of a generation of people who have climbed Cathedral. He's seen others like it on other peaks.
It weighs fifteen pounds, anyway. It'll do. Hardesty picks it up and walks over above the piton. He heaves the box at it. Metal rings against metal, and Hardesty watches the box bounce briefly back above the horizon, then disappear. A few seconds later he hears it hit and fly and hit again, then begin a long clattering roll that fades out after a minute or so. He looks at the piton. It has moved.

He lies on his belly and shakes it and this time he's able to wiggle it back and forth, pulling on it as he does. It rises out of the rock slowly, then suddenly comes free. Hardesty's arm lunges out and up, and its momentum carries the rest of him a few inches further out over the edge than he wants to be. Kicking frantically, he squirms back onto the peak-top.

"Got it," he says aloud.

He puts the piton in his pocket and begins warming his hands. Tonight, on Main Street, he'll tell people where it came from.

He stands with his hands in his parka pockets and looks around. To the west, he can see the summit of Braxton. It's covered with olive-drab tents. The Scouts have packed an entire tree up there and they've set it afire and seem to be dancing around it in a circle. The line of clouds has come closer, hiding the Rakers behind a curtain of snow. Mist is beginning to swirl off the dark tip of Cramer and Elk Peaks.

What's this? Hardesty squints across three miles of
clouding air. For a moment, he thought he saw someone standing on the summit of Cramer. He shakes his head—it isn’t possible—but in a fleeting break in the mist he sees a tiny upright figure. It’s a cairn somebody’s built, he tells himself, but there was no cairn the last time he was on Cramer. He turns to Decker and there are two or three cairns on its summit and they’re moving. Closer, on the Grand Mogul, he can distinguish four or five people and they’re raising a flag, reenacting victory on Iwo Jima. Someone’s put up a yurt on the Elephant’s Perch. There are faint tracks of skiers on the north face of Snowyside.

To the north, it looks like fifty or seventy-five people are working in the big saddle below the summit of Thompson, making igloos. A long line of people under giant packs is ascending Horstmann. Below him, in the shadowed valleys of Redfish and Fishook Creeks, he sees the tiny sharp flickerings of a dozen campfires.

Then he hears the rattling of rock against ice below him. Annie—Hardesty looks over the edge—has reached the base of the crevice, and is taking hardware and a climbing rope from a pack. She’s wearing a hood and goggles and Hardesty can’t really see who it is. For a moment he thinks that it might not be her, hopes that it isn’t, hopes that it’s someone else who’s just followed him up here by accident—but he remembers the voice.

“Annie?” he yells. “Go away.” She doesn’t appear to hear
him. She's concentrating, he thinks. For a moment he feels a kinship with her, one based of a vision of that intense aloneness Hardesty gets when he's put everything but rocks out of his mind. He sees two totally separate beings, unable to touch, feel, or know each other, but at least existing, two sparks of awareness in a universe so dark they can only illuminate themselves. For a moment he feels friendly toward her.

Then: What is she doing here? Why is she after him? All his life women have tried to do this to him, to follow him when he wants to be alone, to cling to him when he wants to be free. And now he's gotten mixed up with a woman--how dark can the universe get?--who knows how to climb rocks.

Hardesty turns and looks down the other sides of the spire, hoping against all prior knowledge for another route, some ledge or crack he can follow down to solid ground, some way to avoid Annie--Hardesty hears the faint pounding of a hammer against a piton or hex nut--and escape having to acknowledge her presence on Cathedral, her need to come after him. Hardesty again tries to put her out of his mind but this time she won't go.

There's no other way down. Perpendicular stretches of blank rock, some of it with the structural integrity of baked cottage cheese, drop for two or three hundred feet in every direction but the one he's trying to avoid. A mist has formed around the peak and snow is starting to precipitate out of it. It's blocking most of what's left of
the day's light.

He’s got to go back down the crevice. He’ll go by Annie and pretend she isn’t there. He’ll say nothing to any greeting, remember nothing of any time he’s spent with her. He’ll forget the touch of her nails on his skin, her soft breath in his ear, her sad voice when she talks to him about love. If she reaches for him he’ll duck away, into the recesses of the crevice. No conversation, he tells himself. Don’t even look her in the eye. Leave her behind.

He’ll run down the peak as if it was summer, skip over the frozen sand, dance on the boulder-tops, sprint down to the trail and get to the lake just in time to watch the solid ice of winter crystallize in the canoe’s wake. As for Annie, she got here. She can find her own way back.

He puts one leg over the edge and then the other, and turns to embrace the rock. As he eases backward, he feels the air below him and waits for the moment of connection. He fans his fingers and presses down, waiting to feel the cold of three million winters be softened by the hot core of ancient Earth. He waits, not yet searching for footholds because in a minute he’ll know where they are intuitively. He presses his cheek against the mountain. With some surprise, he feels small flakes of snow melt between him and the rock.

Nothing happens. He kicks with his feet, hoping to find the holds he found on the way up, but all he can feel is
smooth rock that slopes away from him. He slides his toes across the crevice but it's so narrow he can only feel it as a momentary drag on the toe of his boot. He looks for finger holds in front of him but there aren't any. He kicks forward again and feels his toes bounce away from the rock.

If the piton was there—but it's not. It's in his pocket. He thinks of putting it back in, but he knows he doesn't have anything to pound it in with. He'd have to use his hands. He's starting to lose feeling in his fingertips.

And then he feels the cold and the coming dark, knows the swift passage of the sun through the sky, the early end of a day too much in winter, too far to the north. He knows the thousands of seconds gone and going, the heartbeats wasted and the myriad almost-lived thoughts which have echoed, trapped and diminishing, in his skull. He sees the swift drifting of snow across the span of his arms, and feels the wind, now silent, now gusting, announce the storm. With all his might, pulling with his arms and kicking with his feet, he regains the peak-top.

Above the low whine of the wind, Hardesty hears the intermittent tink-tink-tink of Annie's hammer. She's making noise, putting more hardware on the top of Cathedral, and coming after him. He can feel her through the rock. He can't relax when somebody's this close to him. And if he doesn't relax, stretch out to feel the rock, lose his consciousness in it, melt into it, become it, he won't be able to get down.
Hardesty finds the flashlight in his parka. It’s a heavy little thing, made of machined aluminum. He hefts it in his hand and wonders what its terminal velocity is. If he drops it—he doesn’t complete the thought. He drops to his knees and crawls out over the edge to where he can see the full length of the crevice.

Halfway down, he sees the top of a head and red shoulders. He holds the flashlight between his thumb and forefinger and moves it down until it blots out the head but not the shoulders, and lets it go.

The flashlight hits the wind, curves into the granite forty feet down, skips out into unbroken air, whizzes by Annie and explodes against the base of the spire into a starburst of glass and battery bits.

"Shit," breathes Hardesty.

Annie, oblivious to anything but the next chock hold, moves upward at an even pace. Hardesty eases back and reaches in his pocket for the piton. There’s opportunity for poetry, even here.

But no. He’s realized something else.

He wiggles back to where he can stand up and look around. A faint pulsating glow is coming from the fire on Braxton, but the rest of the peaks are gone, blotted out by swirling grey snow. Fingers of frost have formed on his parka. He feels the sharp chill of his hands answered by a deeper, duller one in his body. He shivers. He needs exercise, and
he doesn't have much room for calesthenics. It isn't going to be long until dark, and the temperature is going down perceptibly.

Out there in the mist, people--too many of them to ever pretend again that the Sawtooths are pure and pristine--are huddled in tents and igloos. They're warm and they're going to live through the coming night. I won't, Hardesty says to himself. I won't because I'm going to die. He thinks he should feel fear but he doesn't feel anything but relief at having escaped something drawn out and terrible.

All he has to do, he knows, is wait for a hand to appear over the edge of the peak-top, grasp it and haul Annie on up. Use her rope to get down. It's that simple.

He would--he will--die first. It isn't only the embarrassment of having to use hardware, or of having to use Annie's hardware, or even of someday being subject to the equipment lectures of sneering mountaineering-store clerks--it's the embarrassment of being human, of being subject to love and rescue, of being like the others he talks to in bars, who drink too much and laugh too much and who don't understand time and who spend their short lives in sick dependence on somebody who's sickly dependent on them, and who finally don't have any idea what it's like to stand far above the flatland, with its gardens and its smoke, and feel one instant of cold pure wind.

But even that's going, he thinks, catching a whiff of pitch and hotdogs from Braxton. He looks up into the snow
that is falling from a sky only a few feet away. If he
could leap up into it and be carried far away from the crowd
that surrounds him—he would go in an instant.

Shivering, he walks away from the wind and the way down.
Two steps and he comes to another edge. He can leap, not
up, he knows, but out, far enough to have a long moment
between rock and sky, and in that moment have a kind of
triumph. Annie will ascend an empty peak.

And Hardesty will have known an instant of the coldest and
purest wind he can think of. He takes a step backwards,
getting ready to jump.

At that moment, Annie’s hand appears over the edge of the
rock. She’s placed a piton in the exact spot Hardesty
battered the other one out of, and is pounding it in with a
hammer. An instant later, he hears a carabiner holding a
climbing rope click onto the piton, and an instant after
that Annie is on the peak with him.

Hardesty looks at her new red jumpsuit. It’s muddy and
wet and torn in half-a-dozen places, but she looks good in
it. She pulls off her goggles.

"You asshole," she says, over the howl of wind. "Are you
trying to kill yourself?"

Hardesty doesn’t say anything. I was trying to kill you,
he thinks, a little surprised at himself that he would do
such a thing.

"You’ll need these," she says, and hands him his gloves.
He puts them on and looks at her. It's almost completely
dark but he can see that she's terribly angry at him.

"How did you think you were going to get down?" Annie
asks. "Fly?"

Hardesty gets a clue, sees Annie isn't what he had dreamed
her to be, knows his imagination isn't the only thing afoot
in the world. He shrugs, looks her over, decides to live.

He grins at her. "I thought I'd use your rope," he says.
Flowering

It's Annie. She's sitting in the mountain-top restaurant with Suzanne and LaVicka, catching the afternoon sun through the western windows, nursing a beer—on ski days she allows herself one beer—and listening to LaVicka talk about her new nose. LaVicka's not quite happy with it yet. She's got to keep the sun off it for another month or it will sunburn and really, truly, fall completely off, so she's covered it with zinc oxide and she won't take off her Vuarnets for fear some old lover—God knows there are enough of those—will recognize her and laugh. All she'd need is a moustache and a trenchcoat, Annie thinks, and she'd look all dressed up for Halloween.

So stop being a bitch, Annie tells herself, but then LaVicka gets up to go to the restroom and check the mirror.

"What do you think?" asks Suzanne.

"I didn't see that much wrong with the old one," says Annie. "With the old one at least she didn't look like Julie Nixon."


"If she was going to change something, she should have started with her name."

Suzanne laughs. "She says she likes her name."

"Can you imagine," says Annie, "parents that cruel?"

"Umm," says Suzanne, noncommittal. "What would you fix if
somebody gave you the money for an operation?"

Annie doesn’t even like the sight of knives, and the thought of surgery—she’s not going to think about it. "I’d save it for a facelift," she says.

"I have a friend," says Suzanne, "who took her divorce settlement and bought a boob job. Walked into the surgeon’s office and said, ‘Give me the biggest set you got.’ You should see her."

"I should?"

"It changed her life. Men won’t leave her alone. I mean, they’re big. She’s trying to get her insurance to pay to change them back. It’s completely screwed up her skiing."

"I’d just save it for a facelift," repeats Annie. "And it wouldn’t be for any men. Or man."

"Easy for you to say," says Suzanne.

What’s that supposed to mean? wonders Annie, except she knows. She’s been going out with Hardesty for more than a year now and he used to be Suzanne’s lover. Suzanne wanted to marry him. Suzanne is still bitter, claims Hardesty can spot a co-dependent woman a mile away. Annie’s put up with the implied insult because Suzanne’s sometimes funny and most-of-the-time smart, but she’s getting tired of being treated like she doesn’t know what’s going on. She’s been keeping a secret from Suzanne, for humanitarian reasons, she thinks, or because she’s been waiting for a moment like this one to spring it on her.
"Something's happened to Hardesty," she says.


Annie shakes her head.

"He's quit his job."

"Actually he's doing well," says Annie. "He's managing some big accounts. He's moving up."

"Whatever that means."

"He wants me to marry him and have his baby."

Suzanne goes icy. "Sure."

"It's true. He asked me New Year's Eve. I think he's going through the change of life."

Suzanne believes her. "If you would do that," she says, "it would be just about the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"I didn't say I would do it."

"The man's a child."

"An attractive child."

"You do what you want with your life. You're an adult. But don't come crying to me when it gets rotten."

"I didn't say yes."

"But you didn't say no, did you? If you marry him," says Suzanne, "it'll be the same thing as telling him you love him."

Suzanne's advice to her, for a year, has been to never tell Hardesty he's loved. "If he thinks you love him, if he thinks he's got you, it'll be all over," is what she says.
Annie’s gone along with it. Even these last few weeks, even with the roses and dinners and the I love you’s that Hardesty’s been pushing on her, all she has said has been “that’s nice.” It drives him crazy.

"Mess up your life if you feel like it," says Suzanne. Annie realizes she’s messed up Suzanne’s day. But she can’t stop. "Maybe I didn’t hear him right," she says.

LaVicka comes out of the restroom, hair rearranged, a fresh coat of zinc oxide on her nose.

"I hate this," she says. "All people look at is my face."

"Annie," says Suzanne, "is going to marry Hardesty and have babies."

"Really?" breathes LaVicka. "That’s wonderful."

"No it’s not," says Suzanne. "It’s tragic."

LaVicka misunderstands. "Wouldn’t you like a little baby all your own?" she asks Suzanne.

The ski patrolman who has been sitting at the next table looks at his watch and tells them he’s got to clear the restaurant. Everybody else has gone home.

LaVicka leads them out the door. Annie hangs back.


Annie puts her skis on. The sun is still shining on top of Baldy, even though the lifts have stopped and the tops of the runs are empty. Winter’s going. Annie loves this time of year, this time of day, on the mountain.

Hardesty’s told her he’s going to pick her up at the
bottom of Warm Springs. Suzanne and LaVicka have cars at River Run.

"Ski College with us," they say.

Annie shakes her head. "International," she says. "Got to play girl racer."

LaVicka waves goodbye. "I'm really happy for you," she says. "We'll have a shower."

"Idiot," says Suzanne, not looking at either of them.

Annie skates away from them, thinking she shouldn't have told Suzanne, wondering why it is she says the exact things that push people away. It's a bad habit. Discourages intimate girl-talk. If she had one close friend, she could tell her how she really feels about Hardesty. No, she thinks. I wouldn't want a friend that close.

Then for awhile she isn't thinking at all, because she's shooting down the cat-track to International, jumping bumps on the easy slope at the top, then making three smooth turns down the steep slope at the bottom. She hits Warm Springs Run, turns down the fall line so the compression won't drive her through the bottoms of her boots, and makes two more big turns before she's going TOO fast and has to chatter sideways for fifty yards before she can stop.

You're not getting older, Annie tells herself. You're getting faster.

She smiles, thinking of Hardesty and his sudden fixation on her becoming a mother. She's thirty-five, divorced, no kids, and she's got a job waitressing in a restaurant where
the tips are good. She's got a car that's paid off and a
season pass to the mountain. She's got a body that's coming
out--nicely, thank you--of the four or five years of heavy
drinking she did after she got divorced and this summer
she's going to do her first triathlon. If Hardesty thinks
she's going to trade all that for wife- and motherhood, he's
crazy. I'D RATHER BE FORTY THAN PREGNANT, say the bumper
stickers.

Then she's not smiling anymore, because the five years
between herself and forty are looking more dangerous by the
minute. A thought comes unbidden: I almost made it.

Forty and you don't have to worry about having kids. It's
an arbitrary cut-off point, she knows, but she also knows
the arguments against having kids at that age and is
confident they will prevail against any blind maternal
instinct that might try to overwhelm her. Among other
things, helping your kid with her homework is not something
you want to do at fifty.

Her. Her homework. Oh, God, thinks Annie. Why me? Why
couldn't have Hardesty asked Suzanne? Or LaVicka? If he'd
asked LaVicka six weeks ago, she could have saved the money
for her nose job.

Annie remembers coming out of her marriage mostly intact,
a virgin on some level, all invasive thoughts of home and
family safely locked in a hermetic vault with first love.
Her ex-husband had given her a generous chunk of cash and
disappeared back into his business career. She had come to Sun Valley. Where better to spend the rest of your life, if you’ve got a little money in the bank and a blank space on your heart where some dreams had been?

There’s a mogul patch on the right side of Warm Springs, up near the trees. Annie glides over to it and eases down through it, checking hard on the tops of bumps, jamming her skis into the troughs, getting air but not too much, hanging herself up, not out, so that she looks like she’s doing the impossible, bump skiing in slow motion. She’s smooth and perfect and she’s not even breathing hard when she comes to a stop a hundred yards above the junction of Lower Limelight and Warm Springs.

Hardesty won’t get out of her mind, probably because Suzanne’s just come a little too close to calling her stupid. Annie knows what she’s doing, choosing Hardesty for a lover, or at least she did until Hardesty proposed. Talk about secrets. She should tell Suzanne one more.

Annie’s watched, fascinated, as Hardesty’s thrown himself into lethal sports, kayaking and free climbing and extreme skiing and a half-dozen others where the score is kept by body count. The danger seems to help Hardesty stop being Hardesty and start being what he’s doing. Hardesty is spared having to answer some big questions, such as who he is or why he’s on the planet. All he has to do is look at the rapids he’s run or the mountains he’s climbed.

"That mountain," he’s told her, pointing to some White
Cloud or Boulder or Sawtooth he's skied, "is my monument."

It's the sort of narcissism--Suzanne, who's read whole books on it, calls it that--that trivializes mountain peaks and other things as well. Like women. Annie's long ago given up being anything in Hardesty's eyes but some appendage to himself labeled GIRLFRIEND. "That woman," Hardesty echoes in her head, "is my--" Uh-oh. WIFE? THE MOTHER OF MY CHILDREN? Entirely different kinds of appendages, with impossible specifications.

It's too bad, because Annie chose Hardesty for the same quality that drives Suzanne crazy: Hardesty doesn't see beyond the mirror he hangs between himself and the world. If you're on the other side of the mirror, he's not going to be able to reach you. Being with him, knowing that he can't really touch her, has allowed Annie to construct, in her solitary interior, delicate floral crystals of astonishing intricacy: a self.

There's a ski patrolman looking up at her from the very bottom of Limelight and another is standing above her, just out of shouting range, looking down. They're impatient with her, because she's keeping them from sweeping the mountain clean. They think she's a cripple, a turkey, a duck--all names they give to novice skiers who get caught on Baldy and have to spend a couple of hours sideslapping down. You never notice them when the runs are crowded but after everybody goes home there they are, skiing sideways. In a
little while the guy above will ski down and offer her a
toboggan ride to the bottom. Annie knows all this because
she went out with three ski patrolmen the first year she was
in Sun Valley and used to hang out in the patrol shack and
help on sweep, at least until ugly rumors began going around
about her being the patrol mascot.

So she'll move when she feels like it. The sun's gone
down but it's still warm and it's quiet and she likes it
here. She's paid for her ticket. Let them wait.

And Hardesty wants a baby. She should have seen the
signs. His hairline has been heading north and she's caught
him checking it in the mirror a couple of times. He's been
complaining about his knees and back and he's not planning
any more December ascents of Warbonnet Peak. He's started
this job with a brokerage firm and this time, instead of
looking forward to spring slack, when he could work it so
he'd get laid off and be eligible for unemployment, he's
putting in overtime and is up studying half the night. It's
just a new lethal sport where the fatalities come not from
missed footholds or trees fallen across rapids, but from
miscalculated futures contracts and coronaries. And this
time the necessary paraphernalia isn't climbing skins or
helmets or rock boots, it's a wife and kids.

It isn't a bad maneuver. For Hardesty, at least, it'll
quiet life's tacky questions for twenty years or so. Who am
I? A stockbroker. Why am I doing it? For them. Who is
them? "Them," says Hardesty, "is my FAMILY."
Annie, safe behind the one-way mirror that Hardesty squints into, realizes she can be safe there for a good while longer. More than that, she can have someone back there with her. She wouldn’t be mine, thinks Annie, she would be her own. I’d help her to see that. Annie remembers her pre-Hardesty years in Sun Valley, her drunken nights of dancing and hot tubs and strangers, and realizes how far she’s come. She’s grateful to Hardesty for helping her get away from that, at least. At the rate she’s going, someday she might be ready for a real friend.

No hurry, though. She’s got five years to play with. No sense in letting Hardesty have what he wants right yet.

She relaxes and lets her skis slide and run straight downhill. She’s in a tuck and going forty miles an hour when she passes the bottom of Limelight, doing sixty or better when she chatters through the short section of rough bumps under the Lower Warm Springs lift. A couple of wide turns on Lower Warm Springs, she’s thinking, and it’s across the bridge and into the arms of Hardesty, who, if he’s holding true to his recent form, will be holding flowers. She hopes they’re narcissus.
Cowboy Dreams

A Play in One Act

Cast of Characters:

Hardesty: Wearing a dress shirt and a tie and a bartender's apron.

Sonny: Wearing blue jeans, riding boots, a pearl-buttoned shirt, a big white cowboy hat, and carrying a lariat.

Annie: Wearing an elegant and sexy white cocktail dress. She is artfully but obviously made up.

Katherine: Wearing blue jeans and riding boots and a black leotard, with lots of silver and turquoise jewelry and a shawl. A mane of thick blonde hair falls down her back.

Man: Wearing golfing clothes.

Scene:

The bar stretches across the back of the stage, and is an adjunct to an unseen and expensive restaurant. The walls are decorated with Western watercolors, a framed Michelin rating, and subdued wallpaper. The barstools are padded and backed. The tables at forestage are surrounded by comfortable chairs. On the bar, a few feet away from the waitress' station, is a large serving tray covered with various hors d'oeuvres.

Stage Directions:

As the curtain rises, ANNIE is at her station, adjusting
napkins and straws. SONNY enters from left, and walks
with a gunslinger's slouch to center stage. He quickly
lassoed a chair, upends it, wraps three of its legs
together, and ties them off.

**SONNY**

Five seconds flat, folks! Can you believe it? Sonny Hogan clinches the all-around cowboy title for the third year in a-- (sees Annie, removes his hat) Afternoon, Miss Annie. Can a poor ol' cowboy a get a drink? I'm mighty dry. (pause) Mighty dry.

**ANNIE**

(sighs)
Sonny, we're not even open yet. How'd you get in?

**SONNY**

(coils his rope)
Back door was unlocked. The hors d'oeuvres out yet?

**ANNIE**

(points)
I just put them out. What do you want?

**SONNY**

.puts a bill on the bar

Gin and tonic.

(ANNIE goes around bar and makes him a drink.)

**SONNY**

(goes to bar, picks up a small plate and starts daubing food onto it with a tiny fork)

You folks sure know how to run yourselves a saloon. Free grub. Hey! What's this stuff looks like dog food?

**ANNIE**

Pate'.

(she hands him his change)

**SONNY**

Pah-tay. I'll be an ol' horned-toad.

(he scoops some up with his finger and sticks it in his mouth.)

Tastes like--dog food.

(he finishes filling his plate, takes it to the bar, picks up his
drink and change, carries everything to Annie's station, and sits down and begins eating.)

Nice of you townfolks to put on a feed for us poor ol' hungry--

ANNIE
Sonny, drop the cowboy crap tonight, okay? I've got a long shift ahead of me.

SONNY
(with his mouth full)
I thought you liked cowboys.

ANNIE
Some other time, okay?

SONNY
(goes to the chair and gets his rope.)
I was just about to ask you on a moonlight ride. A moonlight ride with a real cowboy. Silhouettes of pine trees and the river silver in the moonlight, a few strums on the ol' git-tar, big ol' mountains with snow on their tops, hoot owls and--

ANNIE
Go find yourself a cowgirl.

SONNY
Tried that. She run off.

(HARDESTY enters left, carrying a bucket of ice, and dumps it in a sink behind the bar. ANNIE walks abruptly away and begins lighting the candles on the tables.)

HARDESTY
Sonny! How's the cowboy business?

SONNY
(watches ANNIE for a moment, then turns to Hardesty.)
It's dirty, Hardesty. It's a dirty business.

HARDESTY
You look clean enough.

SONNY
I get to be in front. The dust doesn't get bad until the third horse.

Today I had nine little kids. I rode them around the loop.
behind the stables until they all had a nice even coat of
dust. I couldn’t tell them apart. When their parents got
there, they’d point to one of them, and I’d get on my horse
and cut him out of the herd.

HARDESTY
Where were their parents?

SONNY
Playing golf. No day-care in the clubhouse, so I get them.
(He pantomimes driving an imaginary golf ball.)
I herd them out on the range and herd them back. Try to
keep them from stampeding. Collect my money.
(He looks at Annie, then back at
Hardesty.)
What’s the matter with Annie? She’s not her usual cheerful
self.

HARDESTY
Hubby problems. Get close. You’ll see a good-
sized bruise below one of her eyes. She’s got it pretty
well covered up with makeup.

SONNY
He hit her?

HARDESTY
It happens.

SONNY
Any low-down polecat that would hit a woman ought to be in
jail.

HARDESTY
He is.

SONNY
He ought to be horsewhipped.

HARDESTY
Now, Sonny. Don’t go making hasty moral judgements.

SONNY
What do you mean? I’ve got to make hasty moral judgements.
It’s part of my job. You don’t go around defending the weak,
protecting the innocent, getting rid of bad guys and taking
little kids on horseback rides if you can’t make hasty moral
judgements. (pause) What’d Annie do to piss him off,
anyway?

HARDESTY
Nothing. She’s just been waiting up for him to come home
nights. It cramps his style. Makes him irritable. He came in at daylight this morning and found her asleep in a chair by the front door. She woke up and started giving him shit and he proceeded to beat it out of her. She called the cops. They put him in jail.

SONNY
Sounds like she better keep him there.

HARDESTY
Naw. He’ll say he’s sorry and she’ll drop the charges in the morning. It’s happened before. (pause) Listen. Take a hot tip from an old bartender. You want to get lucky tonight, stick around. Buy her a drink. If she gets even tonight it’ll be easier for her to drop the charges in the morning.

SONNY
(Looks appraisingly at Annie, hands Hardesty a bill from his change.)

Get her a drink.

HARDESTY
Don’t even want to think it over?

SONNY
Katherine’s been gone for six weeks.

HARDESTY
Has it been that long? Seems like it was just yesterday you two were in here, pretending you were in love.

SONNY
We weren’t pretending. At least I wasn’t. (Holds his hat over his heart.) I loved that woman.

(ANNIE returns to her station, and SONNY looks her over. HARDESTY hands her a drink.)

HARDESTY
Sonny bought you one.

ANNIE
(realizes it’s going to cost her, but a drink sounds good. Shrugs, smiles wearily at Sonny, toasts him.)

Thanks.

SONNY
My pleasure, ma’am.

(He looks at her for a moment, until the
moment gets uncomfortable)
What happened to your eye?

ANNIE

Oh, no. Does it show?
(she checks herself out in the mirror behind the bar.)
I don’t want to talk about it. I ran into a door. I fell off a horse. You should mind your own business, Sonny.

SONNY
What time do you get off work?

ANNIE
(too tired for this)
What?

SONNY
What time do you get off work?

ANNIE
Lots of men ask me that question.

SONNY
What do you tell them?

ANNIE
That I’m married.

SONNY
Listen. I’ll saddle up a couple of my horses. We’ll ride off into the sunrise together. You know what? The world looks better from the back of a horse.

ANNIE
(to Hardesty)
You’ve got to start locking the back door.
(to Sonny)
I get off late. And I have to get up and fix breakfast for my husband.

SONNY
You sure he’s going to be there to eat it?

ANNIE
(hurt by this)
I love working with you, Hardesty. It keeps me from having to have secrets. Maybe I should tell some of yours.
(turns to Sonny)
I appreciate the drink, but I’ve got just as many men as I can stand right now.
SONNY
There's bad ones and good ones.

ANNIE
They all look the same to me.

SONNY
See this white hat? That's the way you can tell the good ones. They got white hats.

ANNIE
It takes more than a hat.

SONNY
What's it take?

HARDESTY
Spurs.

ANNIE
(glares at HARDESTY)
I appreciate your concern, Sonny. But I don't think I need a horseback ride tonight. I need a good cry and some sleep.

SONNY
You can cry on my shoulder. That's what cowboy shoulders are for.

ANNIE
Forget it, Sonny. They're not broad enough. (turns to Hardesty) Why don't you ask your bartender friend if he's seen your wife?

(HARDESTY raises both palms and backs away.)

SONNY
(turns to Hardesty)
Katherine's been coming in?

HARDESTY
(with casual indifference)
We see her every now and then.

ANNIE
She'll probably be in later. Every night this week she's been in later. (HARDESTY gives Annie a deadly stare.)

ANNIE
(sweetly)
You probably need more ice.
HARDESTY
(slams the bucket on the bar in front of her.)

Take your time.
(ANNIE picks up the bucket and walks off left.)

What are you worried about Katherine for, anyway? I thought you were divorced like the rest of us. Devil-may-care, happy-go-lucky-free-as-a-bird—divorced.

SONNY
It's supposed to be final any day now.
(with some irony)
You know, I wish it wasn't.

HARDESTY
You wish it wasn't? Sonny, you're looking at open range again. You're going to be able to go to bed with women you haven't even met yet. Beautiful, exciting, professional women. Stewardesses. Freelance photographers. Cocktail waitresses. You can tell each other divorce stories. Where's your sense of adventure?

SONNY
I guess—deep down—I still just want a nice, simple country girl. A girl raised on a ranch. A girl that can barrel race. A rodeo queen. Like Katherine.

HARDESTY
Katherine was a rodeo queen?

SONNY
Burley, Idaho. 1965. She never got over it.
(pause)
One time I came home and caught her in front of the mirror in her queen's outfit. You know what? She still looks good in pink satin and lace. Snakeskin boots and spurs and a little riding whip—
(gestures with his lariat, takes off his hat, puts it over his heart again.)
I still love that woman.

HARDESTY
Sonny. Forget her. There's a whole jungle out there and it's calling your name.

SONNY
I keep going to sleep and dreaming that Katherine and I are together, out feeding the horses or fixing fence. She's touching me and laughing and everything is all right between us. Then I wake up.
(starts to rope another chair.)
HARDESTY
Take a tip from an old bartender. Don't try to get back together with Katherine.

SONNY
(finally hearing him)
You know something I don't?

HARDESTY
Every night I stand here and listen to people talk about their husbands and wives and they say hopeful and desperate things. Then they drink enough blurt out the truth. It's just three words.

SONNY
What's that?

HARDESTY
Cut your losses.

SONNY
You mean, like selling the herd before the price of beef goes completely to hell.

HARDESTY
Something like that.

SONNY
You're right. I shouldn't even think about her. Put her out of my mind completely. Forget she ever existed. Have some fun.

(turns to audience)
Katherine, it's your loss, baby. Lots of woman would love to be married to a cowboy.

HARDESTY
Hundreds. (pause) Besides, if you knew what Katherine's been doing, you wouldn't be having sweet dreams about her.

SONNY
What's she doing?

HARDESTY
She's been going out with people with generic brands on them.

SONNY
Yeah?

HARDESTY
Ski instructors. (swings imaginary ski poles)
SONNY

BEND ZE KNEES!

Tennis pros.
(swings imaginary racket)

SONNY

Let me adjust your backswing.

HARDESTY

Stockbrokers.
(uses his fingers for a bull's horns)

SONNY

Let me dabble in your market.

HARDESTY

That sort of thing.

SONNY

Anybody in particular?

HARDESTY

(gestures to indicate blatant sexual intercourse)

Her lawyer.

SONNY
(takes a low blow)

Ohhh! That's a bad one. Anybody else?

HARDESTY
(says nothing, but pours Sonny and himself drinks)

SONNY
(gives HARDESTY a long stare)

A bartender?

HARDESTY

One night she stayed after closing time. We sat and talked and did a couple of lines on the bar. Then she went home. That's it.

(gives an expressive shrug. He turns away, wipes an imaginary stain off the bar.)

She's a good looking woman. She's acting single. Everybody knows it.

SONNY
Sounds like everybody's getting it.

(gives HARDESTY another long stare, then
decides to skirt the issue.)

Any rock stars?
(gestures with imaginary guitar)

HARDESTY
No rock stars. Unless you count the guy who plays the organ in here Friday night.

SONNY
(twirls his lariat)
Cowboys?

HARDESTY
She says she's through with them. Sonny, it's hopeless. But—here's a tip from an old bartender. There's nothing to make you forget a woman--like another woman. For Annie--tonight--you're the one.

SONNY
(lariat flops to the floor)
Sure. Did you see the way she looked at me when I asked her to go riding?

HARDESTY
Did I tell you she wanted to go riding? You're trying too hard. You're trying to be somebody. All you have to do is sit there.
(pause.)
Hey. Look. Let me tell you something really sad.

SONNY
I didn't come in here to hear about your troubles.

HARDESTY
It's your troubles I'm talking about.

SONNY
I didn't come in to hear about mine, either.

HARDESTY
Everybody's troubles, then. The trouble with everybody.
(SONNY gestures, wearily, for him to continue.)
Every night I watch the same little love story unfold. I see people I first saw five years ago having a conversation I first heard five years ago. I see people I've never seen before having the same conversation.

SONNY
So?
HARDESTY
So all they're talking about, really, is getting laid or not getting laid. And then they go home and get it up or don't get it up and that's it. That's the only thing that happens in their universe. It's that way day after day, night after night, until their weary little hearts go SSSKKSCHH' and they die.

(SONNY slaps his hand over his heart and falls backward off his stool. ANNIE comes back with a bucket of ice and dumps it in the sink behind the bar.)

ANNIE
He all right?

HARDESTY
Heart attack.

ANNIE
(goes around the bar and helps SONNY to his feet and back onto his stool.)

Drunk already?

SONNY
Too many tips from an old bartender.

HARDESTY
We were just talking about love.

ANNIE
You? Talk about love?

SONNY
He's got the mechanics down cold.

ANNIE
Don't listen to him. He's interested in seeing that people are alone and unhappy. They drink more.

HARDESTY
People are alone. It's the ones who haven't realized that that are unhappy. They believe in luhuvve.

ANNIE
You don't know anything about love. You're too cynical to even halfway understand it.

HARDESTY
How about luhuvve? I know what I see.

ANNIE
What you see is the inside of a bar.

79
HARDESTY
Inside, outside—it’s all the same.

ANNIE
It’s not the same, Hardesty. Out there people can love each other.

HARDESTY
(touches his face)
Too bad it leaves marks.

ANNIE
(angry)
People can love.

HARDESTY
(chokes)
Let me tell you about Santa Claus. It’s time you knew.

ANNIE
It’s just that some of them are afraid of being loved. When you love them they start making sure you stop it.

SONNY
(turns to Annie)
I know what you mean.

ANNIE
You?

SONNY
I loved Katherine.

ANNIE
Sure you did. That’s why you’re in here, buying me drinks. All men love their wives.

HARDESTY
She calls me a cynic.

SONNY
It’s why Katherine left me. One day she said to me, ‘I want out. All I want is what I can put in a suitcase.’ I told her I didn’t want to get divorced. I told her I loved her. ‘Damn you,’ she said to me. ‘I knew you were going to be a shit about this.’

ANNIE
You told her you loved her. And she said that to you?

HARDESTY
You two should get together. You can tell each other love
stories.

ANNIE

Maybe we should. Maybe there are people out there that are happy together. Maybe it’s because they believe in each other.

HARDESTY

They believe in the same lie.

(to Sonny)

It’s a good thing, too. Keeps most people from beating up on each other.

ANNIE

Hardesty, I’ve been up half the night. My husband’s in jail and I’ve put him there. I wish it hadn’t happened but it happened and now I’ve got to make the best of it. You keep talking about it. Please stop talking about it. If you keep talking about it I’m going to go home and you can be your own cocktail waitress.

HARDESTY

I’m sorry. (pause) But it isn’t easy to come to work and seeing you make the best of it again and again when what you need to do is get yourself a damned good lawyer and divorce the son-of-a-bitch. And while you’re at it take him for everything he’s got. You’ve got grounds.

(turns to Sonny)

You’ve got yourself a lawyer, don’t you? You got to have a lawyer. You don’t have a lawyer, you can get screwed. I mean, to the wall.

SONNY

Me? I— Yeah, I’ve got a lawyer. I had to. She tried to get the horses.

ANNIE

I thought all she wanted was what she could put in a suitcase.

HARDESTY

Big suitcase.

SONNY

She changed her mind. She wanted the horses. She didn’t want the furniture. She didn’t want the horse trailer and the pickup’s broke down. She didn’t want the dog. (pause) I didn’t want a divorce.

ANNIE

She wanted the horses.
SONNY
She showed up one day and said she wanted them. I asked her
how I was going to make a living as a cowboy without horses.
You know what she said? You’re not a cowboy,’ she said.
’You’re a people boy.’ That’s when I hired a lawyer.

HARDESTY
What’s your lawyer say?

SONNY
He says she can’t touch me.

HARDESTY
Community property?

ANNIE
Hardesty’s an expert on divorce law.

HARDESTY
And luhuvve.

SONNY
She gets what she had before she married me. We split the
furniture. I get the pickup. She gets the horse trailer.
The dog don’t like her. The rest of it fills a suitcase.
It’s what she wanted.

HARDESTY
That’s not much to show for four or five years.

SONNY
I haven’t got much to show for those four or five years,
either.

HARDESTY
Maybe that’s grounds for divorce.

SONNY
So we’re getting divorced. She’s not getting my horses.

ANNIE
You don’t end up with much, do you? You think to yourself
that you’re going to have a home with someone. A place of
our own. We can go there and close the door and be in love
with each other. You don’t even think that that might not
be enough.

(to Hardesty)
It isn’t the love that’s so hard to give up. It’s the dream
of being a person that can be in love. You appreciate the
distinction, I’m sure.

(turns to Sonny)
You told her you loved her.
SONNY
Lotsa times.

ANNIE
Was it real love?

SONNY
(takes off his hat)
Of course it was real love.

HARDESTY
With a real cowboy.

ANNIE
So maybe you should tell me about that moonlight ride.

SONNY
(looks around to Hardesty, who gestures as though he’s delivering Annie on a platter.)
I thought you weren’t interested.

ANNIE
(happier)
I changed my mind. I think I might like a moonlight ride. Especially if it was a warm night with a big moon, and I was riding along with a beautiful animal under me—

HARDESTY
I’ll take you. Forget the horse.

ANNIE
It has to be with a real cowboy.

HARDESTY
(takes Sonny’s hat and put it on his head.)
How’s this?

ANNIE
(Somehow it isn’t the same.

SONNY
Gimme that.
(reaches)

HARDESTY
(ducks away, holds hat over his heart)
I luhuvved that woman.

SONNY
Goddammit, gimme my hat!
HARDESTY
Okay, okav.

SONNY
Don't mess with the hat.

(takes his hat back, brushes imaginary dust off it, and puts it on his head. He goes to ANNIE, puts an arm around her and points off into the distance.)

Out there, west of town, there's a trail that runs up into the mountains, up to a little lake surrounded by big old pine trees. It's a secret place. Found it one day when I was looking for a lost pony. We'll ride up there and build a fire and watch the big moon come up.

HARDESTY
I'll bring the marshmallows.

ANNIE
Shut up, Hardesty.

SONNY
We'd look at the stars. Gaze into the fire. Lean back against a tree and look up and wonder if there are people like us on other planets, out there in the Milky Way--

ANNIE
That's what you do on moonlight rides?

SONNY
It's in my brochure. It includes a genuine Western midnight snack.

ANNIE
C'mon! I thought you were serious.

SONNY
I was--except it's not a very big lake. And there's only one tree there. And it's dead. And it's not really a secret place. You got to build the fire in one of those little concrete fireplaces the Forest Service put there--.

ANNIE
I believed you. I was going to go with you.

SONNY
It's a long way out there. Maybe we better just ride on the golf course instead.

ANNIE
On the golf course! Forget it.
SONNY
It doesn't matter where you're riding. You're still on a
horse, running free, with the wind in your hair and--

HARDESTY
Stay away from the putting greens. I got a golf date in the
morning. You know what they'd do to you if they caught you
messing up the turf with hoofprints?

SONNY
What?

HARDESTY
Report you to the Cowboy Regulatory Commission. Take away
your cowboy license. Saw the heels off your boots.

SONNY
Don't make fun of my boots.
(pause)

ANNIE
Why'd Katherine leave you, Sonny?

SONNY
(thinks, shrugs)
She thought I was just a people-boy. She wanted a cowboy.

HARDESTY
Should have bought a cow.

SONNY
After I married Katherine we leased a little ranch south of
town. We had a dream of making a living on it. I was going
to break and train horses. We built corrals together. Bought
a brood mare. Bought a stallion. We were going to breed
Arabians--beautiful animals, fast and sleek and strong. And
gentled down so a ten-year old girl could ride them.

ANNIE
Did you make a lot of money?

SONNY
No. We lost our asses.

HARDESTY
I thought they were Arabians.

SONNY
We sold them. I took the money and bought my string of dude
horses and started taking tourists out on trail rides.
That's when things went bad. Katherine left a couple of
times. For a while she came back between men.

ANNIE
A ranch—even if it was rented—and a man who loved her and some horses. Moonlight rides if she felt like it. A lot of women would be happy with that.

HARDESTY
Katherine's happy with a good—
(checks himself)
You guys crack me up. You both believe in--love. Little campfires. Arabians. Stars. Little--Jesus.

SONNY
Did I mention little Jesus?

HARDESTY
(to Annie)
You two are making your little negotiations way too long and complicated.

ANNIE
There are worse things to make it. We could make it simple and quick. (to Sonny) Tell me more. About your dream.

SONNY
I guess it was just a stupid dream. It's funny what I thought it was going to be like. I think I was trying to do something over again--something that happened a long time ago--I was in high school, I think.

HARDESTY
That's what happens. You start out remembering high school and the next thing you know you're married with a horse farm.

SONNY
It was something I did. It wasn't any big deal. You do stupid things when you're young.

HARDESTY
You do stupid things when you're old.

SONNY
It was just that one night I climbed over a fence and jumped on a horse. No saddle, no bridle, nothing.

ANNIE
What happened?

SONNY
The horse stood there for a moment. I could feel him
breathing under me but he stood still. I don't think he knew he didn't have a saddle or a bridle on. Then I kicked him in the flanks. He gave a big snort and we took off.

ANNIE

Could you see?

SONNY

I couldn't see a thing. And it seemed like he ran forever. It was a spring night. Warm and dark and it felt like it was about to rain. It was the best feeling I'd ever had. I remember thinking that I could die then and it would be all right.

(pause)

HARDESTY

That's the story?

SONNY

That's the reason I wanted to raise horses.

HARDESTY

That's no reason at all. That's not even a story. You people are just confusing the issue. Why don't you just come out with what you're talking about?

ANNIE

I know what he's talking about.

HARDESTY

You want to die on a horse?

ANNIE

You're just being ignorant, you know. Deliberately ignorant. Or maybe you never felt anything you wanted to keep feeling forever.

HARDESTY

Once. Five seconds later it was all over.

ANNIE

(ignores him)

Just to run. I know the feeling. It's not where you're going, you know? It's the wind and the shadows and going fast.

HARDESTY

(to Sonny)

Maybe you ought to change your business hours. You'd do best after the bars closed. Anybody who was drunk and alone could just rent a horse for an hour.
ANNIE
Whatever gets them through the night.

HARDESTY
Maybe you could just rent the cowboy.

ANNIE
So tell me again what Katherine said when she left you.

SONNY
Forget Katherine.

ANNIE
No. Tell me. I need to know.

SONNY
She just said she didn’t want to be married anymore. She wanted to be free.

ANNIE
That’s all? That’s all there is to it? That’s all you do? (touched Sonny)
Let’s take that ride. Wear your hat so I’ll be able to see you.

SONNY
You’ll go?

ANNIE
Why not?

HARDESTY
Oh, man. You two are going to a lot of extra trouble. It’s dark out there. You’re going to have to put headlights on the saddle horns. Turn signals. Reflectors.

ANNIE
What’s the matter, Hardesty? Don’t you ever have foolish dreams?

HARDESTY
I quit dreaming when I got married. I never went back to it.

ANNIE
That’s funny. I started dreaming when I got married. You know what I do now? When I drive home at nights I dream about just staying on the road and driving forever. It doesn’t matter where. Just the sound of the wind and the sight of white lines disappearing under the hood and being alone.
HARDESTY
You'd have to stop for gas sometime.

ANNIE
(comes out of it after a moment.)
Yeah. Even that's part of it. Stopping for gas in strange towns just as it gets light, driving around until you find a station that's open, looking at yourself in the mirror of some grubby restroom and knowing that you're on the road.

HARDESTY
I liked it better when you were talking about being on top of the animal.

ANNIE
Sometimes I dream about a horse. She's sitting in a pasture somewhere. Her owner never lets her out of the pasture. I'd ride her around the world.

SONNY
Around the world? I used to think about that, too.

HARDESTY
You'd die of saddle sores.

SONNY
Riding on the old trails, away from the highways and the cities, camping beside the creeks, under big trees. And never stopping.

HARDESTY
There isn't any place away from the highways and the cities. They're every place you look.

ANNIE
That's why we're going riding in the dark.

(ANNIE looks at HARDESTY, who sees her.)

ANNIE
(looks over, sees KATHERINE)
Have the horses outside at closing time, Sonny. We'll ride from one golf course to another, until we go all the way around the world.

SONNY
Really?
(pause)
What about your husband?
ANNIE
He can sit in jail and rot. I’m going riding.

HARDESTY
In that dress?

ANNIE
I’ll ride side saddle. Anyway, I’ve got to be wearing a white dress. That’s how you can tell the good girls. They’re wearing white dresses.

SONNY
All right. Closing time. I’ll be there with the horses.
(he turns to go, sees his wife standing at the door.)
Katherine!
(KATHERINE walks slowly over to them)

ANNIE
(to Hardesty)
We’ve got to start locking the back door.

KATHERINE
Hello, Sonny. How are you?

SONNY
I’m getting by.

KATHERINE
It looks like it. You talk them into getting a jukebox yet? Full of sad country-and-western songs?
(pauses)
I’m surprised a real cowboy would still feel comfortable in a place like this.

HARDESTY
I thought you said he was a people boy.

KATHERINE
(looks at SONNY, a little surprised that he’d tell anyone this.)
That’s right. That’s what he is. A people boy. It explains a lot when you really get to know him.
(looks away for a moment, then back at him.)
How are our horses?

SONNY
I been taking good care of them.

KATHERINE
You take the back way around the loop every once in a while
so they remember how to turn both ways?

SONNY
I’m trying to make a living, Katherine.

KATHERINE
Running pony rides?

HARDESTY
(points toward the hors d’oeuvre tray)
Get yourself some food, Katherine. No sense being bitchy on an empty stomach.

KATHERINE
That’s all right. I can pay for my dinner.

HARDESTY
Good. Then you can pay me.

KATHERINE
(smiles at HARDESTY, walks to him, pulls him across the bar and kisses him hard on the lips.)
Later. It’s nice to see you. Too bad you let just anybody in here.

ANNIE
(to Sonny)
Just anybody’s been staying after closing time and he’s been taking just anybody home with him.

SONNY
How tacky.

HARDESTY
(embarrassed)
Maybe we should just all try to have a good time. What do you say? Anybody know any good jokes?

SONNY
My marriage. You laughing yet?

KATHERINE
We’re waiting for the punch line.

ANNIE
Why don’t you just leave him alone?

KATHERINE
Because he keeps reminding me I was stupid enough to marry him. Why don’t you mind your own business, anyway? Surely you’ve got troubles of your own.
HARDESTY
Hey, we’re all friends here.

KATHERINE
No, we’re not. (to ANNIE)
Maybe I’ve got my reasons for not leaving him alone.

SONNY
Don’t start, Katherine. I tried to go along with what you wanted. A little ranch in the cottonwoods. Horses in the fields. You wanted the pickup and the goddam horse trailer even when we couldn’t afford it, and the goddam cow dog even though we didn’t have a cow.

KATHERINE
I didn’t want what I got.

ANNIE
You had a man.

KATHERINE
Oh, no. I don’t believe it. You’ve fallen for it, haven’t you? (to HARDESTY)
I’ll come back later. (HARDESTY, behind the bar, gestures yes.)

ANNIE
Good idea.

KATHERINE
(she has started to leave, but turns and walks back. HARDESTY cringes behind the bar.)
You’re going with him tonight, aren’t you?

ANNIE
It’s just a moonlight ride.

KATHERINE
(nods, looks sadly at Annie)
You like horses, don’t you?

ANNIE
Since I was a little girl.

KATHERINE
They’re beautiful. Sonny’s got a lot of them. (appraisingly)
I can see why Sonny might be attractive to you. He wouldn’t
hit anybody.

(ANNIE gives HARDESTY a glance of angry betrayal)

HARDESTY

Small town.

ANNIE

Big mouth.

KATHERINE

But you ought to take a closer look at Sonny.

ANNIE

I don't want your advice.

KATHERINE

You might need it, if you're thinking of getting together with him. He tell you about his dream yet?

ANNIE

Just leave.

KATHERINE

Did he tell you about his dream, Annie? I could tell by the look on your face when he came in that he had.

HARDESTY

Come back later, Katherine.

KATHERINE

Did he tell you about running on a horse, wild and free? No saddle, no bridle, just letting the horse go where it wanted in the darkness? On and on forever? That's a pretty good dream, don't you think?

ANNIE

Everything you talk about turns ugly.

KATHERINE

He did tell you.  (turns to Annie)

Nothing goes on forever, not even the darkness. Did he tell you what happened that night? Riding on the horse, forever and ever and ever?

SONNY

I didn't tell her that.

KATHERINE

He hit a barbed-wire fence. Going as fast as he could get the horse to go. He was thrown clear. He landed in a ditch
full of water. He wasn’t hurt a bit. The horse was caught in the wire and it struggled against the barbs until it cut itself to hamburger.

ANNIE
(to Sonny)
Why is she saying this?

KATHERINE
It’s just a story. Sonny and the horse. It’s why he wanted to be a cowboy. First you hear the good part. Then, a year or two later, you hear the bad part. It just comes out one day. At the dinner table. In the bedroom.

(she dramatizes)
"Oh. You know that horse I told you about? The one in the dark? You wouldn’t believe what finally happened that night... We hit a fence." That’s when you start to realize you’ve been dreaming.

ANNIE
You must really hate him.

KATHERINE
Hate him? Hate Sonny? How could you hate Sonny? It was an accident. He didn’t do it on purpose. He never does.

ANNIE
Did you do this to him when you were married?

KATHERINE
Annie, I’m telling you something you ought to know.

ANNIE
I don’t want to know anything that you could tell me.

KATHERINE
Okay. Stay in the dark. Listen to what he tells you. He tells jokes that don’t have endings. Do you like his jokes? (pause) Did you like the ending? It’s true.

SONNY
It was just a feeling. That’s all I was trying to tell her about.

KATHERINE
Sonny, when you forget the punch lines people don’t know when to laugh.

ANNIE
Is it true?

SONNY
It was a long time ago.
ANNIE
You hit a barbed wire fence.
(she involuntarily touches her face.)
That was the best feeling in the world for you?
SONNY
It was just the going fast in the dark. Before the fence.
ANNIE
You just forgot that pastures have fences.
SONNY
It was an accident.
ANNIE
And that was the time it really felt good.
SONNY
Before the fence. It felt good before the fence.
ANNIE
You men love the thrill of it, you know? You love to lose control and you don’t care how you do it.
HARDESTY
(to KATHERINE)
You just cooled a hot date.
KATHERINE
She’s better off alone.
ANNIE
(turns)
I don’t see you alone much.
KATHERINE
I’ve had the disease and lived through it and now I’m immune. I can do what I want.
ANNIE
I’d rather have the disease.
KATHERINE
You would, wouldn’t you? So go with Sonny. Live with him on a string of little rented ranches. Try to make a living from horses. Go riding with him. He’ll show you.
(she looks closely at Annie)
Help him with his horses. You’ll understand then.
(looks at Sonny, then back to Annie)
Have you ever looked in the eyes of a horse that’s in a dude string? One that’s got a little kid on its back, pounding on its ribs with his heels, trying to get it to act like
horses act on TV? Look into its eyes sometime and tell me what you see.
   
   (long pause)

   ANNIE
   Everything you talk about turns to shit.

   KATHERINE
   And it's not just horses I talk about.

   SONNY
   If you've got anything more to say, say it to me.

   KATHERINE
   I don't have to talk to you. I'm getting a piece of paper that says so. It says I don't have to try to live a life that's been dead for a hundred years. I don't have to keep a garden and live out in a little log cabin with pole fences around it and horses grazing by the creek. I don't have to look into their deep dumb eyes, and I don't have to love them. I don't have to wish there was a place where the grass was green and thick, and they could run free. And I don't have to watch you turn them into machines that go round and round in a circle so somebody from New York or Boston or L.A. can say they've seen the West like it really was, when all that really happened is they got taken for a ride by some guy in a cowboy suit.

   SONNY
   (points to HARDESTY)
   You prefer somebody like him.

   KATHERINE
   He makes an honest living.

   HARDESTY
   That's me. Your friendly honest neighborhood drug pusher. Alcohol over the counter, cocaine under it.

   KATHERINE
   He doesn't promise me anything he can't deliver.

   SONNY
   What did I promise you?

   KATHERINE
   You promised somebody that could wear a hat and boots and back it up. Take away your clothes, Sonny, and your stable and your string, and there's nothing left.

   SONNY
   Remember when you used to lie on top of me and tell me you
loved me? Tears would be streaming down your face and you would be kissing my eyelids and lashes. What were you crying about? What were you kissing? Nothing?

KATHERINE

Nothing.

SONNY

You couldn't feel that I loved you?

KATHERINE

(pressed by this)

Nothing, Sonny. I didn't feel a thing.

SONNY

You never dreamed with me about Arabians, running free on a big ranch?

KATHERINE

(shaking her head)

Nothing, Sonny!

SONNY

(he slaps her, knocking her down.)

Did you feel that? Was that nothing? Did nothing do that to you?

ANNIE

(screams)

Sonny!

KATHERINE

(slowly gets up)

You finally did it.

SONNY

(sits)

Is that what a real cowboy would have done?

KATHERINE

I told my lawyer I wanted the horses, Sonny. I told him I didn't care if I didn't get anything else, I just wanted the horses so you wouldn't have them. He said there wasn't any way. But he said, 'If you could get him to hit you or something, we'd have a case.'

(to Hardesty)

What did you just see?

HARDESTY

(shrugs)

He hit you, all right.
KATHERINE
I'm going to take the horses, Sonny. I've got witnesses and a damn good lawyer. And we're going to strip that cowboy suit away so the whole world can see there's nothing in it.

SONNY
I never did anything to you.

KATHERINE
You never did anything to me. That's right. How could you? You're just a bunch of dreams, waiting to blow away. I'm going to see that you do.

SONNY
You can't.

KATHERINE
You just made sure I could.

SONNY
(starts toward her)
I'll kill you.

HARDESTY
Sit down. You've got to protect the weak and defend the innocent, remember? Save your strength for that.

SONNY
(sits)
How are you going to take care of them, Katherine? You going to keep running the string? You going to feed them? Pay for hay and pasture? You're going to have to take time out from your social life.

KATHERINE
I thought I'd sell them. I'm going to take the money from all of them and buy one beautiful Arabian gelding.

SONNY
They're a dude string, Katherine. They're gentle slow old tired horses. You buy them that way because they put up with idiots who've never been on a horse before. They're not good for anything else. Who'll buy them?

KATHERINE
Whoever's the highest bidder.

SONNY
And they'll never know barbed wire again, is that it? You'll never have to look into their eyes and you'll never have to love them again, and you'll never have to wish there was a place for them where the grass is green and deep. You won't have to see them turned into machines because the
highest bidders for those horses at stock auctions are the people that make Alpo. They’ll be turned into dog-food.

KATHERINE
(walks away, left)
I’ll see you in court, Sonny. Then I don’t think I’ll see you any more at all.
(exits)

ANNIE
(to Hardesty)
It’s time we opened up.

HARDESTY
Oh, shit. Ten minutes ago. People will be screaming to get in. Here. Unlock the front door.
(throws ANNIE a set of keys on a ring. She exits right. SONNY remains on a stool next to the hors d’oeuvre tray and Annie’s station, facing the audience.)

SONNY

HARDESTY
(pours Sonny a drink)
It’s on me, pal. What are we talking about now? Women?

SONNY
(takes the drink)
All gone. Ground up.
(he toasts them.)
I’ll still be here.
(he turns to Hardesty.)
I will still be here!

HARDESTY
Sure you will, buddy. You come in here, order a drink. I’ll make you one. That’s when you’ll know you’re still here.

(A group of men and women, wearing business or golfing clothes enter right. Some of them occupy the barstools and face Hardesty behind the bar; others occupy the tables. ANNIE enters behind them, and begins working. A man in a business suit spots the hors d’oeuvres and reaches across Sonny to smear a large dollop of pate’ on a cracker.)
MAN
I love this stuff. Can't get enough of it. Say fella, That's quite a hat you got. Where'd you park your horse? (SONNY does not reply and remains still. MAN leaves for a table. People talk and laugh, ask Annie when she gets off work, gossip about divorces, ask each other if they want to go home with each other, tell each other they're through with commitment and so on. The lights and volume of bar talk slowly go down, leaving only HARDESTY illuminated when the bar is silent.)

HARDESTY
(to audience)
Take a tip from an old bartender. It really is all the same conversation. We talk about our ex-wives and ex-husbands and say hateful and desperate things. And we forget the dreams we had and look for other ex-dreamers because we're sure that they, at least, won't betray us. And all the time, all we're really talking about is--
(at this point the lights and bar talk come quickly up, but begin immediately to go down at a steady and perceptible rate. Hardesty's speech is drowned out by--)
AND SO I SAID TO HER I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU WANT I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME WE TALKED ABOUT WHAT I WANT AS LONG AS FRED'S NOT I'M NOT I CAN STAND THE KIDS FOR SO LONG AND THEN IT'S TIME TO TAKE THEM BACK TO THEIR MOTHER FOR THE LAST YEAR OF LAW SCHOOL HATE PEOPLE THAT ARE CHEAP KNEW YOU TWO WOULD HIT IT OFF WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU JUST STOPPED SMOKING YOU JUST STOPPED BUYING AND SHE GOT TO GO IN FOR MORE TESTS THINKS ITS STILL I'M NOT GOING TO PUT UP WITH YOU BEING IN YOUR BATHROBE WHEN I GET HOME I'M GOING TO MARCH NEXT DOOR AND TELL HER WHAT HE'S DOING GETTING BY THE P AND I SHE'S GOT THIS SHOEBOX FULL OF PILLS AND SHE'S SAVING IT UNTIL SHE'S MARRIED CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT WORKOUT AT THE CLUB UNTIL YOU DROP IT I SAID TO HIS FACE UP TO REAL LIFETIME REPLACEMENT FOR HER FROM HIS LAST THREE JOBS HAS SIXTY MILLION WOMEN JUST GET THAT WAY THEY CAN'T HELP WANTED ADS BUT NOTHING WORKED UNTIL WE STARTED WATCHING HER DIET SO MAYBE IF WE TALK ABOUT IT--
(by the end of this, the bar is in darkness except for Sonny and ANNIE, who is making her way back to her station, avoiding hands that reach out of the darkness to grab her ass. Sonny still hasn't moved. When the two lights that cover them merge, ANNIE puts down her tray, hands Hardesty a drink list, and looks at Sonny for a brief moment.)
ANNIE
Are you still here?

(SONNY looks up and sees her, looks down at the drink in his hand.)

ANNIE
Look, as soon as I get off I’ve got to go home and get some sleep. I’m sorry about the ride.

SONNY
I’ll be there. At closing time. With the horses.

I know.

(When HARDESTY puts drinks on her tray ANNIE turns from Sonny and begins to take them to a table. She smiles mechanically and puts the first drink down on a table. Action stops. The light on Sonny goes off abruptly. Two beats later, the light on Annie goes off, leaving the stage in darkness. Curtain.)