Heart

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HEART

by

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A.B., Stanford University, 1970

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1979

Approved by:

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Date
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HEART
After the fight I coughed for a long time, hunched over on a chair beside the ring while Charlie cut my hand wraps off. When he finished he stared at me with his fists on his hips. "For Christ's sake," he said. He tossed the soggy wads of gauze into a corner and came back a minute later with a glass of water. It helped some.

A black fighter carrying an "Anaconda Job Corps" athletic bag nodded to me as he walked by. "You look real good out there," he said. He was wearing a wide-brim hat with a plume, patent leather boots that laced all the way to the knee, and a crimson satin shirt. Earlier I'd watched him knock out one of the toughest of the prison boxers, and make it look easy. Under his crimson shirt he had large pink spots across his belly and chest, like the drowned man I'd seen once in Chicago. The drowned man had been in the water a week before floating up on the beach, and his outer layer of skin was peeling off in places like chocolate latex paint, curling around the edges, leaving patches the color of old milk. When the fighter came closer I could smell his sweat.

"You move real good," he said. He bent forward as
he spoke, hands hanging at his waist. "I told you be-
fore, you slim. You stay away from them big fat boys you
be all right." He flipped his palms up and offered them
to me. I slid my palms across them. His grin was a
flash of white on his shiny unmarked face.

"You do all right tomorrow," he said. "You jus keep
movin." Then he sauntered on across the stage, jerking
slightly with each step.

"A plume," Charlie said. "Ain't that one fancy
nigger."

The man I'd just beaten was a three-time loser named
Grosniak. "Armed robbery, grand larceny, and assault
with a deadly weapon," he had recited to me proudly be-
fore the fight. He had only been out a week after his
second term when he and a friend got drunk and took a
Midi-Mart in Billings. The police were waiting for him
when he drove up to his house. "Eight years this time," he
explained. "There was bullets in the gun."

Grosniak's hair was bristly and unevenly cut and he
had a wandering eye that I had kept trying to circle
around. The roll of flesh above his trunks was still red
from punches. He walked up and stood too close to me.

"I got to admit, you beat me fair and square," he
said. "I dint think you could, but you did."

"Thanks," I said. Sweat was still running down the
pale loose skin of his chest and belly, collecting in little drops on the sparse hair around his navel.

"You got a hell of a left hand," he said. "Your arms are too long for me. I couldn't figure out how to get inside you. But I'm gonna work on it. Maybe I'll get another shot at you sometime."

"Maybe so," I said.

"I knew you couldn't knock me out, though. I told you that before. You can pound on me all day, but you can't knock me out. Nobody's ever knocked me out." Dried blood and snot were streaked across his chin and dark red bubbles still sucked in and out of his nose. He was clenching and unclenching his fists. I looked away and started coughing again.

"Get dressed," Charlie said to me. "It's getting late."

"That's gonna be a good fight tomorrow between you and Gus," Grosniak said. "He hasn't lost a fight in four years. That's gonna be real good to see."

"Come on," Charlie said.

"He's had two hundred fights," Grosniak said. "He's won them all by knockouts." I stood up and Grosniak stepped grudgingly back. He was still clenching his fists and squeezing his wall eye open and shut so it looked like he was winking at me. He took a step after
me as I passed but Charlie shouldered him out of the way and pivoted to face him, hands quiet at his sides.

"Too bad you're not in my weight class," Grosniak said.

"Real too bad," Charlie said. "I love to watch fat boys go down, they make such a nice splat when they hit the canvas." He turned and walked on after me.

"Maybe I'll get a shot at you sometime," Grosniak called.

"Sucker," Charlie muttered. We passed through the door into the closet-sized room with a few battered lockers in it. "Why the hell didn't you take him down?"

"No need," I said. "I knew I had him."

"I fucking well guess you had him, you could have knocked him on his ass any time after the first."

"He's just sorry," I said.

"He's a mean son of a bitch. And that doesn't have anything to do with it anyway."

"No point in hurting him," I said, turning away. He grabbed my arm and jerked me around to face him.

"Hurting him. What the hell you think you're out there for?" I tried to pull loose but he clamped down, veins standing out on the back of a hand hard from years of working red iron.

"Boy," he said, "you better straighten up. You
think that Indian's gonna give you a break if he gets you on the ropes tomorrow?" His face was tilted back and cocked to one side above his stocky body: a tight-clamped jaw, a bristly Fu-Manchu worn in honor of Hurricane Carter, and a nose that had been re-done in rings from Calgary to Salt Lake City. You knew from his eyes that he wanted to be kind, but understood when not to be. I hadn't knocked Grosniak out because I could not stand the smack of my glove against his rubbery flesh, and his look when my left came for his nose again, too quick for him to stop. In the last round, when he lumbered out with his hands at his waist trying to get enough air into his heavy body, I had hit him only to keep him away.

Charlie let go of my arm. "Get dressed," he said. "Let's get out of this place."

I pulled off the trunks and sweat-soaked cup that five other fighters had used that afternoon and bent over the sink at the end of the row of lockers. The porcelain was covered with gummy green-brown scum and matted with hair. The hot water tap wouldn't turn. There was no pain when the water touched my face so I knew I wasn't cut. I rinsed handfuls of it down my chest and groin and started shivering. "Charlie," I said, "did you bring a towel?"

When I turned it wasn't Charlie who was leaning in
the doorway. It was Gus Two Teeth, the prison heavy- 
weight champ. He was still wearing his boxing trunks. A 
wine-colored stain of acne spread down his neck and 
across his thick, rounded chest and shoulders. He seemed 
to be looking slightly to the side of me, and when I 
nodded I couldn't tell if he ignored me or didn't see me. 
Twice that afternoon I had watched him leap in with a 
left hook that knocked a heavyweight off his feet. The 
first man got up and took the eight-count. Two Teeth 
clubbed him back to the mat in seconds. The other man 
went down half a minute into the fight and stayed there. 

Two Teeth pushed off the door with his shoulder and 
went back outside. I remembered that I was cold, and I 
dried my face and chest with my jeans and got dressed. 
When I came out Charlie was sitting in a corner tying 
knots in the piece of cord he always carried. Several 
convicts were standing across the stage. The coach of 
the Anaconda club, a three hundred pounder named Fletcher, 
had joined them. We knew him from other tournaments, and 
he had acted as second for both Charlie and me today. He 
waved when he saw us.

"Looks like Fletcher's renewing old acquaintances," 
Charlie said.

"Why, is he a cop or something?"

Charlie looked at me. "He did three years here,"
he said. "I thought you knew that."

"No," I said.

"Sure, Blew his old lady away. I remember reading about it in high school." I watched the boxers and convicts on the stage step out of Fletcher's way as he strode over to us. He was built to carry his weight—it only added to the impression of his physical power. Charlie's news did not surprise me.

Fletcher slapped me on the back, which started me coughing again. "You looked terrific out there," he said. "That Grosniak's a pretty tough old boy."

"He's a meat," Charlie said.

"Well, he's no Gus Two Teeth," said Fletcher. He turned to me. "I'll be straight with you. I don't think you can win tomorrow." He sounded cheerful. "I've seen Gus fight a lot of times. I just don't think you have the experience to take him. But if you stay the hell away from him, maybe you can go the distance. He's a lousy trainer. Always wins because none of his fights ever go past the second. If you can keep him going he'll get tired." He slapped me on the back again and started down the steps from the stage.

"Come on," he said. "I'll buy you guys a hot dog."

Thirty other boxers and coaches were waiting around the small concession stand the prisoners had set up at
the back of the auditorium. I didn't feel like eating, but I drank most of a coke. After a few minutes two guards came across the exercise yard.

"Everybody here?" one of them asked. He had small shoulders and wide fleshy hips, and his pistol and night-stick seemed too big for him. They clicked together as he moved. He yelled into the auditorium that this was the last call for the boxers to leave, "Anybody still here's gonna spend the night," he said. He grinned, and the convicts running the concession stand grinned too.

The guards led us across the exercise yard through the raw windy twilight. Dead grass sprouted through cracks in the concrete where the snow had blown off. There were a couple of basketball hoops with scraps of rusty chain nets hanging from them, tinkling in the wind. The fence around the yard was eighteen or twenty feet high, chain link topped with barbed wire, and I could see the guard towers at all four corners of the old brick building, a silhouette in the window of each.

At the end of every corridor was an iron door with an armed guard sitting on a stool behind it. After looking us over, he would press a button and the door would slide back. Nobody pushed to be first through, but nobody lagged behind. Finally we came to the last checkout point, a little booth with an iron grill across the
front. The guard inside examined each of our hands under a fluorescent light for the stamp he had put there when we came in. I was glad I hadn't taken a shower.

It was almost dark when Charlie and I reached the outskirts of Deer Lodge and passed the last of the signs that read: "Warning--state penitentiary and mental health facility are located in this area. Do not pick up hitch-hikers between these signs." From there we drove eleven flat miles through soggy hayfields to the Highway 12 turnoff at Garrison Junction. The car was warm from the heater and I cracked a window, but the wet air started me coughing again.

"You got tuberculosis or something?" Charlie said.
"Just a cold."
"We'll get you some cough syrup in town."
"Shelley's got some codeine," I said.
After a moment he said, "So you're going over to Shelley's tonight."
"I told her I would." He nodded his head slowly.

We passed an Indian woman walking alone by the road. She was old and hunched over and her ankles were thin. The wind blew her coat open as she turned to watch us, clutching the bundle under her arm. There were no houses in sight.

"I think you can take that son of a bitch if you
just stay away from him," Charlie said. "Don't listen to Fletcher's bullshit." I watched the old lady fade behind us into the dark of the Warm Springs Valley.

"That's the smallest ring I've ever been in, Charlie."

He shrugged. "That just means you have to work harder. He's a tough bastard, you don't want to go in and mix it up with him. But you got six inches reach on him, and you're in shape."

"And he's got twenty pounds on me and he's twice as fast. Jesus, I never saw anybody go at it like that."

The high-pitched drone of the Mazda engine dropped as we climbed a small rise, and then I could see the lights of Garrison far ahead.

"At least you made it to the finals," Charlie said. "You won that fight, Charlie."

"Lost it to a Butte street punk," he said disgustedly. "It was a bad decision."

"No, he took me, the little bastard. I'll get him in the Golden Gloves." And I remembered my first time there: the grinning face of the Samoan, absorbing my hardest punches the way a pond absorbs pebbles thrown by a small boy.

"You think Gus could take that Samoan?" I asked casually. Charlie scratched his jaw.
"It'd be a hell of a fight," he said. "Gus is faster, but that Samoan's got about the hardest head I've seen." The road from Garrison was narrow and pitted, with black ice on the curves. Charlie concentrated on driving and I leaned back and closed my eyes.

When we reached the outskirts of Helena, Charlie said, "Shelley's, huh?"

"Right," I said. A few minutes later we pulled up in front of the one-bedroom house she rented in the part of town called Moccasin Flats. The streets were dirt there, and what was left of her fence was always plastered with wind-blown paper. A cat's eyes glowed in the headlights, then disappeared into the abandoned chicken house across the road.

"About ten tomorrow, hey?" he said.

"Okay," I said. He leaned across the seat as I got out.

"You let that woman suck all the juice out of you, you ain't gonna be worth a bleeding fuck tomorrow." He settled back low in his seat and looked straight ahead.

"I'll make her sleep on the couch," I said. He snorted.

"Eat some eggs in the morning," he said.

The faint smell of marijuana smoke hit me when I pushed open the door, old, like it was in the curtains
and furniture. "Don't move," she said. I turned slowly to the corner where she sat cross-legged. She stared at me, pupils dilated in the deepest blue-green eyes I had ever seen, then abruptly began working a pencil across the pad on her knees. "The conquering hero returns home," she said. The pencil zigzagged swiftly, her eyes still on my face. I tossed my bag on the couch and pulled off my coat.

"Hey," she said.

"Another time."

"But I've got to catch you in your moment of glory."

"Later," I said. My voice was sharp. The pencil bounced once on the old plank floor. She folded her hands in her lap and watched me.

"Sorry," she said. "Your face isn't smashed up for a change, so I thought maybe you won." The walls were covered with her sketches and charcoals. In what was supposed to be the dining room, a table was piled with paint palettes and brushes soaking in cans of solution. She had just started painting seriously; I thought her drawings were still far better.

"I did," I said. I was tired but I didn't want to stop moving. "You got any beer?"

She nodded. "Okay," she said, jumping up. "The sketch can wait." She put her hands on my cheeks and
turned my face both ways, then kissed me. "Tough fight?"

"No," I said. We kissed again, longer this time, then she led me into the kitchen. She took two bottles of San Miguel out of the refrigerator and laid a huge sirloin steak on the counter.

"Celebrate," she said. "Victory in the last fight of the season. If you lost you got Buckhorn and tunafish."

"Shelley, where'd you get the money for this?" Her eyes widened in mock surprise.

"I keep telling you, I've got a sugar daddy." I snorted, but I thought of all my out of town construction jobs. She opened the bottles and raised hers. "To heroes," she said. There was an edge to her voice.

I took a long drink of beer, so cold it made my teeth hurt, sharp but soothing to my raw throat. "It wasn't the last fight of the season," I said.

"Christ," she said, setting the bottle down. "Don't tell me you let Charlie talk you into that stupid Golden Gloves thing."

I shook my head. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

"This was just eliminations. I've got to go back for the finals."

She turned away. "I thought maybe we could do something tomorrow."
"If I hadn't won." After a moment she shrugged. When she turned back she was looking at me from a long way away.

"So how do you want your steak?"

I came up behind her and put my arms around her. Her body was tight and resisting. "Look, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not too crazy about this either."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"I told you, I won." She reached out to the bottle on the counter and drew a face in the moisture that coated it. "I've got to go back and finish," I said.

"Who's going to give a damn if you don't?" I felt her shrug again. "I'll tell you who," she said. "A bunch of fucking jerks who can't get off on anything but beating each others brains out." She leaned back against me and stroked my hand that still rested on her belly, warm and tight under my fingers. "You hate it, don't you," she said. Her hair smelled of lemon and it tickled my nose as she moved her head back and forth. "I mean, I guess I could even see it if you got paid."

"That's not the point," I said.

"So what is the point?" She reached up and caressed the back of my neck. "If you're trying to prove something, lover, I can think of better ways." She straightened up and I let her go. "How do you want your steak?"
"I don't care," I said. "Medium."

After dinner I took a long hot shower and stretched out on the bed. It was too short for me, so I always ended up sticking my feet through the iron posts at the end. The phlegm rose in my chest and I started coughing again. The stereo was playing quietly in the next room; I could hear the dark rhythmic chords and lonesome harmonica of Blonde on Blonde, and during breaks in the music, the bubbling of her water pipe.

She pushed open the bedroom door and lit the kerosene lantern on the dresser. I watched her take her earrings off, burnished copper teardrops that glowed dully in the flame light. Another night I would have asked her to leave them on.

"My God, you sound awful," she said. She half-turned toward me as she slipped her shirt off.

"Do you have any more of that codeine?"

"I think so." She rummaged through a drawer and came up with a small brown bottle. The stuff was cherry flavored, but you could tell there was something under the sweetness. Shelley put on a robe and walked down the hall to the bathroom. I watched a small dark shape move patiently, in silhouette, down the wall. It fluttered toward the candle.

The Golden Gloves finals had been in February that
year, on a Saturday night that reached eighteen below zero. Afterwards Charlie and I drove home from Great Falls in an old Volkswagen bus with no fourth gear and no heater. I was shivering, taking shallow breaths to keep the ends of my ribs from cutting into me, trying to sip beer through a jaw that did not quite work, the beer dribbling down the side of my face, while Charlie sat in the passenger seat with his head back, making small whistling sounds through his shattered nose. "He may beat me," I'd told Charlie before my fight, "but he's not going to knock me out and he's not going to knock me down." The Samoan was the northwestern light-heavyweight champion. I remembered the amusement in his eyes when he took the hardest punch I could throw, the right cross that could buckle the heavy bag and make it snap so the other athletes in the gym would stop and watch. And then the moment when he slipped that right cross, stepped in, and planted his feet.

For the first time then something hit me so hard that my eyes shut. When I opened them again I was looking at the lights that hung from the auditorium ceiling. The referee was on "three."

I got up and started circling again, trying to breathe. I threw two or three weak jabs to keep the grinning face out of reach, then watched it bob in under
my arm again. I couldn't tell if the roaring I heard was from the crowd or in my own ears. I got up again and circled. The lights were hot, the dark forehead that danced in front of me was shiny with sweat under kinky blueblack hair, and there were rust-colored stains on the mat. Like in the dream I sometimes had when I was younger, I knew that the thing I needed to do more than anything I had ever done, the only thing that could possibly save me, was to drive my fist into that grinning face. But I could not. There is a moment when you realize that you are not what you have thought.

The fourth time I got to my feet the ref took my arm and led me back to my corner. It took me a few seconds to realize where I was. It had lasted just over a minute and a half.

You can drive in cars all your life and never think a thing about it until one night on some narrow road a drunk doing sixty miles an hour comes across the center line and you go through the windshield and spend some time in a hospital sucking glucose through a plastic tube. The next time you get into a car, things are not the same. Getting knocked out was a little like that, only it was not the pain. It was just something I never wanted to happen to me again.

When Shelley came back she smelled of clean warm
skin, scented soap, and toothpaste. She draped her robe over a chair and said, "Lie on your stomach." She straddled me and slid cool hands up and down my back, pressing her thumbs into muscles sore from hours of tension. Later she said, "Turn over." I watched her sway above me while she kneaded my shoulders and then my chest. In the dim room her face looked dreamy, absorbed in the movement of her hands. When she leaned forward her hair brushed my skin.

After a while she rested her cheek against my belly. I stroked her hair, rounding the curve of her skull with my fingers. "What's the matter?" she whispered. It was a long time before I answered.

"That Indian's going to beat the piss out of me tomorrow," I said.

"Then why are you going?" She sat up and put her hands on my shoulders. "For God's sake, what's the matter with you? Ten minutes ago you're coughing like you're going to die, and now you tell me you're going to drive all the way to Deer Lodge to get beat up." She pressed me back into the bed until her face was inches from mine. "Don't go," she said. The scent of perfume was strong from the soft place where her jaw met her neck.

"Charlie's coming for me tomorrow at ten," I said. She jerked back upright.
"The hell with Charlie," she said angrily. "Some friend, always dragging you off to fight. Call him and tell him you're not going tomorrow. We'll stay in bed all day. You're sick anyway. Tell him he can fight the goddamn Indian himself. Call him." I didn't move. She slid off me.

"Then I'll call him." Her feet thumped on the wooden floor.

"No," I said. I hooked my arm around her waist and pulled her back. She twisted my fingers.

"Let me go, goddammit!" She broke free and strode across the room.

"Wait," I said. "I'll call him in the morning." She stopped, silvery white against the dark passageway.

"Promise?" she said. I hesitated. She jerked the door open.

"If I'm still coughing like this I won't go."

"Promise me," she said. "Say it."

"I promise."

"Now you're talking sense." She flopped back down on the bed and stretched across me. "Honey, when are you gonna understand, you're just not a fighter."

My hand stopped moving on her back.

"You're just not like Charlie and those others," she said. "That's okay. You don't have to be. I like you
anyway."

After a while she said, "I'm sorry, I guess I shouldn't have said that." She watched me for a minute longer, then turned so that her back was snug against me. Later her breathing became regular. For a long time I listened to the ticking of the pendulum clock and explained to Gus Two Teeth and Grosniak and all the other prisoners who lay alone in their cell bunks night after night why I could not make love to this woman.

*

They stamped our hands again the next morning and the same heavy-hipped guard led us down to the gym, his keys jangling and echoing in the corridors. The prison kitchen had fixed a lunch for the boxers, spaghetti and garlic bread. "You eat any of that shit," Charlie said, "you're gonna be wearing it first gut-punch you take." I wasn't hungry anyway. We sat on a wrestling mat rolled up against the wall and watched the job corps fighters shoot craps. The one who had spoken to me yesterday still had his crimson shirt on. He waved and called from across the room, "Say, Slim." They were laughing and jiving like they were at a party.

When I'd gotten out of bed I was still coughing, long hopeless wheezes. Shelley scrambled some eggs for
me and while I was eating she said, "You're going, aren't you."

"Yes," I said. Those were the last words we'd spoken. I couldn't finish the eggs. As I was getting into Charlie's car she ran out and handed me the bottle of cough syrup. There wasn't much left and I drank it all on the way to Deer Lodge.

The weigh-in room was small and crowded, though there were not so many boxers today. Five or six prisoners were standing by the door joking with each other and with the guards. Grosniak was there with Gus Two Teeth, who was wearing prison grays and a navy stocking cap, like a logger. They stopped talking when Charlie and I came into the room. I nodded to Grosniak but he just stared at me. Two Teeth again seemed to be looking to the side of me.

I took my clothes off, laid them on a bench, and wrapped a towel around myself. The man at the scale put his hand on my back to help me up the four inch step. "What do you think it'll be?" he asked as he slid the balance weights around.

"One ninety-three," I said.

"One ninety-three on the nose," he said. "You look bigger than that." Two Teeth and the convicts laughed at something one of them said. I started to step into my
"You might as well just put your trunks on," the man at the scale called over. "The fights are almost ready to start." He watched me while I waited for Charlie to get some trunks. I wrapped the towel around me again.

One of the black fighters trotted in the door, sweating but breathing only slightly hard. He was tall and rangy; I remembered that he was a middleweight finalist. He dropped his trunks and stepped naked onto the scale. The trainer's hand lingered on his back.

"One sixty-six," said the trainer. He shook his head. The fighter's forehead wrinkled. He stepped down and slowly picked up his trunks.

"Try and take a shit," someone advised. "That ought to be worth at least a half pound."

Charlie came back with a cup and a pair of green trunks. I put them on. "Come on," he said. "I'll wrap your hands." When we got to the door one of the convicts was blocking it, his back to us. Charlie said, "Excuse me, pardner." The man turned and stared at us and one by one all the other convicts turned too and then my eyes met those of Gus Two Teeth. They were black and shiny and calm, set deep in an acne-scarred face the color of an old saddle. I had never felt so white.

Out in the gym I put my robe on and Charlie and I
sat facing each other, me facing the wall. He took two rolls of thin gauze and a roll of white athletic tape from his gym bag. I watched his hands as he pried out the little piece of metal that held one of the gauze rolls together. His fingers were short and thick, his knuckles misshapen.

"Left hand," he said. I rested my left forearm on my thigh and extended the hand. With his Buck knife he cut a two-inch slit in the roll of gauze and hooked it around my thumb. He started wrapping the gauze around my wrist. After each turn he would pull it snug and say, "Okay?"

"Okay," I would say. Charlie worked slowly and carefully. Little beads of sweat were forming on the skin just below his hairline. I could see the carotid arteries pulsing in his throat. He opened his mouth slightly each time he inhaled, and his nostrils distended as he forced the air back out, making a small whistling sound. I looked over his head at the wall.

"Too tight?" he asked. I flexed my fingers.

"No," I said. I was having trouble taking deep breaths.

Someone yelled, "Let's have the flyweights and lightweights out in the auditorium." I could hear the job corps fighters get up and walk across the gym. Then
it was quiet.

Charlie cut strips of tape with his knife and ran them down between my fingers. "How you feeling?" he asked.

"Okay," I said. For the first time I noticed a bald spot on top of his head. I started to tell him about it, but then decided to wait. The skin of his scalp was pinkish white, paler than the skin of his face. I could smell the morning's coffee on his breath.

"Okay, when you go out there," he said, "I don't want you to stop moving for love, money or fame." He kept his eyes on my hand like he was talking to it. "You got one chance, and that's it. Keep him the hell away. Keep your left hand in his face. Every time he comes in, stick him and move." He ran a final strip of tape around my wrist. "How's that feel?"

"Fine," I said.

"Good. Give me your right." I counted the turns he took around my wrist. At eight he worked the gauze up to my knuckles.

"You got the feet," he said. "It's a small ring, so you got to use your left more. Don't let him into you. If he gets next to you he's gonna break you up." The wrap on my left hand was tight and it made the veins stand out on my forearm. I wondered if that was what was
making the blood throb in my head, the way it sometimes
did against my pillow when I couldn't sleep.

Far away a bell rang.

"You get the chance," Charlie was saying, "throw
your right. It's your best punch. Be careful, though,
he's got a hell of a left hook. You drop that right too
much, you'll set him up. Use that circling hook you
worked on that kid in Lewistown that time. Use that a
lot. But mostly jabs, and if you get a good clean shot,
throw your right."

My throat was dry. When I swallowed there was a

He glanced up anxiously. "Too tight?" he said. He
loosened the tape between my fingers. "That better?"

I looked into the eyes with no fear in them. "Yeah,"
I said. "Thanks."

When he taped my wrist he said, "Take an easy lap,
just to get the blood going. Then I'll warm your hands
up." I slipped the robe off and trotted slowly around
the gym. Someone yelled from the door for the welter-
weights and middleweights, but they were all out watching
the fights. I shook my arms as I jogged. They were
heavy. I couldn't swallow, so I spat. It came out in
small flecks like tiny balls of cotton and floated to the
wooden floor.
Charlie had on a pair of sparring gloves. He held his hands up above his shoulders and I took my stance. He called the punches. "Right. Left. Left. Cross. Okay, tear em up!" The yelling from outside got loud and then the bell rang several times, the way it did when a fight was stopped in the middle of a round. Charlie watched me while he pulled his gloves off.

The auditorium was quiet. The middleweights were about to begin. Since there were no light-heavyweights, my fight was next. All around the ring the boxers and inmates and trainers sat or stood with their arms folded. Some of the boxers were holding trophies. Across the stage, surrounded by other convicts, Gus Two Teeth sat in a chair. He was wearing white trunks and no robe.

"Time to glove up," Charlie said. He held up a pair of ten ounce gloves, about the size of ski mittens, still soggy from the last fight. The referee was calling out the names of the two middleweights. One of them was the black fighter who had been running earlier. The other was a convict who looked Mexican. He stood in his corner with his head down. Charlie pointed to an empty chair behind me. He stepped between me and the ring and held the right glove out.

The bell rang.

I wriggled my hand to get it all the way into the
glove. They were always tight, especially when they were wet. From the ring I heard thuds and grunts. The crowd was murmuring. It took me a long time to work my hand all the way into the glove. Charlie let go and my hand dropped into my lap. He held the other glove out. This one was a little easier than the first. I watched his thick fingers as he carefully pulled the laces tight and knotted them. The bell rang. Charlie took the roll of athletic tape out of his pocket and ran a band around the wrist of the glove to keep the laces from flying loose. The bell rang. There were thuds and grunts from the ring. Charlie ran a band of tape around my left wrist. The crowd started to yell and kept on yelling. Some of them were on their feet now. Charlie tugged on my gloves to make sure they were tight. Then he stepped out of the way and I watched the black fighter throw hook after hook into the convict, who was crouched against the ropes covering his head with his forearms. With each punch his arms dropped lower until the referee stepped in and pulled the black fighter back. The convict sank to his knees, waited there, then fell forward onto his face. The crowd was still yelling and I could taste bile in my throat.

Charlie was staring at the ring and shaking his head. "Fuck that ref," he said quietly. He was still shaking his head as he pulled the sparring gloves on.
"Better take a couple more shots," he said. I stood up and started throwing punches at his hands. "Come on, make em snap." I punched as hard as I could, but there was not much snap. The convict walked slowly by us. Someone was supporting him under one arm and his head was hanging. I stopped punching and Charlie let his hands down slowly. He pulled off the sparring gloves and looked at me until I met his eyes. His face was grim.

"Remember what I told you," he said.

They were all watching me as I walked to the ring, the convicts and boxers and people who had come from the outside. I glanced out over the rows of faces but there were none I recognized, just cowboy hats and the high-piled hair of the few women. The black fighter with the crimson shirt was nodding and grinning at me. He was wearing a black robe with white stripes instead of the red shirt, but I knew it was him. Someone slapped me on the back and started rubbing my shoulders. I turned and it was Fletcher's face, the size of a pumpkin, his fatman sweat oozing out through the dark oily pores in his skin. He was close to me and I smelled cigarette smoke and liquor on his breath. His eyes had yellowish pupils and they were laughing.

"Stay in there long as you can, kid," he said. "We'll have the towel ready." Charlie climbed the three
short steps to the ring ahead of me and held the ropes apart. I took the first step, the second, the third, and stopped.

I stepped through the ropes.

"Loosen up," I heard a voice say. It was Charlie's voice. Pretending to loosen up, I paced the length of the ring. It took me four and two-thirds normal strides to reach the opposite rope. To make sure, I paced back. This time it took me four and one-half normal strides.

"Bounce a little," Charlie's voice said. "Get loose." I started bouncing on my toes, one hand on the ropes. Behind me I heard the referee clear his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The feature event of today's exhibition. The heavyweight championship of this tournament." There was a pause and a rustle of paper. "From Helena, wearing green trunks, weighing one hundred and ninety-three pounds..." My name was called. I heard a few cheers from the audience and some more from around the ring.

"Go git him, Slim," somebody yelled.

"...weighing two hundred and eight pounds, the defending champion of this tournament, Gus Two Teeth!" The crowd hooted and howled, and as the noise died a single male voice screamed, "Flatten that ski jump, Gus!" There was some applause and more yelling.
"Come on out here, fellows," said the ref. In the center of the ring I stood close to Gus Two Teeth. He was several inches shorter than me and several inches wider and he had calm black shiny eyes.

The ref was a small man with neat sandy hair and a bowtie. "Punches below the belt," he was saying above a dull steady murmur from the auditorium. "Break clean... either of you go down, the other goes back to his corner for the eight-count..." The time-keeper rang the bell three quick times. "Good clean bout. Shake hands and come out fighting." Gus Two Teeth and I touched our four gloved fists together and turned back to our corners.

"Water," I said. Charlie got the squeeze bottle into my mouth in a hurry and Fletcher held the bucket up. I swished the water around and spat. The taste was still there.

"Seconds out," the time-keeper called. Charlie pulled the stool out and I held the ropes and bounced, trying to force air all the way into my lungs. I watched a man in a cowboy hat walk up the aisle of the auditorium. Halfway, he stopped and raised a fistful of popcorn to his mouth.

The bell rang. I turned and trotted out. Two Teeth was already loping around to my right, his fists held loosely in front of his chest, his face exposed. I
circled with him. I was stiff and standing up too straight. My arms felt locked into position. Like with the Samoan, I could not keep my eyes off his, but in Gus Two Teeth's eyes I saw no amusement, nor any hatred, nor fear---only a calmness that told of something I had never felt. We danced around and around that tiny square of canvas, and I felt that at any second my legs would give out from under me.

He shifted his weight suddenly and I leaped back, almost against the ropes. He closed the distance and I slashed at his face and jerked to the right. His left hand stung my ear as it brushed by. In the center of the ring again, we circled. I felt him moving closer. I threw my left and it flopped out from me, a thing with no strength or bone. He made no attempt to slip or block it. A fine trickle of blood started from his nose. The skin on his face was drawn back tight over his cheekbones and I saw glints of white teeth at the corners of his mouth. I backed up, almost running, until I brushed the ropes, then threw my left and this time before my fist was halfway to his face he was in the air between us. I didn't see the punch, but I remember that it was like being touched with something very hot.

When I came back everything was almost the same, but I knew I had been gone. I bounced off the ropes with my
forearms covering my head and bulled past him, trying to get clear enough to see. When I looked he was there and it landed on my right temple. I was in a corner, crouched, lucky to be stopping some of the punches with my elbows and gloves because my eyes were down. I knew I had to watch his hands, but I could not make my eyes stay up.

Then a punch to the forehead really hurt me and somehow I pulled my eyes up to the blur of brown face and brown gloves and brown body that was swirling in front of me. The right hand was coming at me again and I ducked to my right and caught it on my glove and at that second the face came into focus, looking thoughtful, and I understood that the next punch I took would be the last. My body was twisted far to the right, my hands beside my head. I dropped my knee and drove my fist at the center of those shiny black eyes.

I felt it all the way to my shoulder. The face was gone and nobody was hitting me anymore. I came off the ropes and dropped my gloves enough to take a look. There was a lot of yelling and the ref was dancing around with his arms out. Gus Two Teeth was across the ring, his back to me. His arms were stretched out over the ropes and he was walking slowly along them. When he rolled around to face me his mouth was open. He didn't seem to see me.
"Kill him," a voice was screaming. "Take him! Finish him!" I waited. "For Christ sake, GO GET HIM!"
I dropped my fists and bounced on my toes. Two Teeth shook his head and straightened up. The ref grabbed his wrists and tugged on his gloves. Two Teeth began his lope again, slower this time. The eyes were not quite so shiny now.

The bell rang.

Charlie was yelling at me before I was halfway to my corner. "Jesus motherfucking Christ, you had him! What's the matter with you?" I dropped onto the stool and he pulled my mouthpiece out and shoved the bottle in my mouth. Fletcher held the bucket up but this time I missed and spat onto the pointed toe of his cowboy boot. There were bloody streaks in the glistening thick saliva. I could feel his eyes on me. Charlie was sprinkling water on my chest and talking hoarsely into my ear.

"He's got a glass jaw," he was saying. "He's shook up now. All you got to do is nail him one more time and then finish him off." The ten-second whistle blew. I wanted to explain, but talking was so much effort.

The next round lasted longer than I'd expected, over a minute. I felt loose and cool. I was moving well and I stung him with several jabs that got the blood flowing from his nose again. But then I planted my feet and
cocked my right, and in the time it took my hand to shift three inches he was in the air. The hook dropped me to one knee. The ref had to push him back to his corner while I took the count, and at eight Two Teeth shoved by him and leaped at me again. This time I went down to a hand and a knee, and while I was getting my feet under me something smashed me on top of the head. I rolled onto my back and turned my head from side to side. When the ref reached ten he grabbed Gus Two Teeth's arm and raised it. The crowd was yelling for Two Teeth and Charlie and Fletcher were yelling at the ref and I got up and walked back to my corner. As I reached for the ropes to steady myself I heard my name called. A gloved hand touched my shoulder and I turned and looked for the last time into those black eyes, almost shy now.

"Good fight," he said. We put our arms around each others waists and someone handed us each a trophy and took a picture.

Charlie was furious as we walked back to the car. "The son of a bitch hit you when you were down," he said. "He clubbed you on top of the head and drove you to the mat."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "He beat me anyway."
"You could have knocked him out."
"That was just a lucky punch," I said.
"You could have," he said. "You didn't go in on him when you had him." I exhaled slowly into my cupped hands.

"Whatever that takes, Charlie," I said, "I just don't think I've got it."

"Well you better learn, or you're going to keep on getting hurt." He unlocked the car door, and I turned for a lost look at the old brick building. Flashes of sunlight gave it a warmer color than yesterday, but it was no place I ever wanted to spend any time.

"They still should have given you the fight," Charlie said as I got in.

"He'd still be the better fighter."

"You got a funny way of looking at it."

"I guess I do," I said. We passed some of the Anaconda boxers getting into a station wagon with Fletcher. The man with the red shirt grinned and waved and I waved back.

"Well, we start working out for the Gloves on Monday," Charlie said. "You gonna make it?" Main Street in Deer Lodge was empty and closed up tight, without a person or a spot that looked warm; no place to be on a Sunday afternoon in an early Montana spring.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I'll just wait a couple of weeks and try to kick this cold." I realized
that I hadn't coughed in hours and I took a deep breath. There was only a slight raspiness in my throat.

"You could probably take the state easy," he said. "Only guy you'd have to beat is that Simmons from Great Falls, and he's just big and slow like that ape yesterday."

"I think maybe I'll just sit the rest of the season out, Charlie," I said. "See how I feel next Fall."

"The regionals are in Vegas this year," he said. "That'd be a good trip."

"I'll think about it."

Charlie was quiet for a minute, then he said, "You know, two years ago I went up to Edmonton to fight some spade from Tacoma, and about ten seconds into the first round that little bastard sucker-punched me and knocked me right on my ass. After driving all that way. I laid there and listened to the ref count and I could of got up again, but I was so pissed off and disgusted that I didn't even try. I thought that was it. Thought it was my last fight." We passed the "End Speed Zone" sign at the edge of town and Charlie accelerated smoothly to seventy-five.

"You'll be back," he said. "It gets in your blood." He started whistling softly between his teeth a tune I had never heard.
I put the seat back and closed my eyes. "What time is it?"

"About three."

"Run me by Shelley's, will you?" Charlie rolled the window part way down and spat out his gum.

"If you hadn't been so busy fucking last night, you'd have had enough in you to finish old Gus off," he said.

"That must have been it," I said.

When we turned the corner at Garrison, the clouds broke and we saw the peaks of the Flint range, high craggy masses of snow that usually stayed hidden from October to May. I had never been up there, but I'd heard about the fishing. The snow would still be deep even in mid-June, and it would be a good day's climb into the Trask Lakes. I knew I'd find pan-sized cutthroat where the streams emptied in.
The following section is from a novel in progress titled

JOURNEYMEN
The office building stood on a hill, and as he walked across the parking lot, Daniel Drennan could see the Helena Valley spreading out like a horseshoe-shaped sea of dusty yellow hay. Waves of southwesterly wind rippled its surface. Twenty miles north, the rocky nose of the Sleeping Giant jutted out of the Belt range; to the southeast, the blue-green Elkhorns opened into parched clearcuts and ragged limestone outcroppings; and behind him rose the massive skyline of the Continental Divide. Below, in the bend of the horseshoe, ranchers and businessmen---in no hurry to get anywhere on a Friday afternoon---moved along the streets of Helena. When the wind changed briefly, Drennan caught the ripe sweet musk of fresh-cut hay over car fumes from the town.

Under his arm he carried a thick manila envelope. The title of the manuscript inside read:

A PROPOSAL TO AUGMENT EXISTING HEALTH PLANNING FACILITIES IN TWENTY-TWO COUNTIES OF WESTERN MONTANA SUBMITTED TO THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
The August sun was hot. Sweat dampened his armpits, especially where the manuscript pressed. Shifting the envelope to between his teeth, he shrugged out of his herringbone sport coat—too heavy, but the only one he owned. He slung the coat over his shoulder and tucked the envelope back under his arm, resisting the impulse to see how far down the hill he could sail it. Taking work home for the weekend was considered mandatory by the Planners. He was sure they never did any either.

Beside him, his co-trainee, Alton Little, tapped his thigh with a similar envelope in time with his steps. His manuscript bulged thicker than Drennan's because of the Louis Lamour western concealed among its pages. With his thick black glasses, slender fingers, and pale complexion, Little had the appearance of an accountant, but he had spent eighteen months as a medic in Viet Nam and claimed he could come seven times in an afternoon. Drennan was impressed on both counts, and even more impressed by the way Little had of grinning at him that made him want to hide behind the nearest piece of furniture.

They reached Little's car, a VW bug that was powered by a Porsche 912 engine. Drennan leaned back against it,
feeling weary, although he'd done nothing but slouch in a chair all day. Little unlocked the door.

"How about a beer?" he said.
Drennan hesitated. "I'd like to, but I told Julie I'd take her to dinner tonight."

"So what?" Little said pugnaciously.
"She doesn't like it when I show up drunk."
Little's eyes became tender. "Well, excuse me. I guess you can't hardly take a drink if your girl doesn't like it."

"Last time we went out for a beer I got to her house two hours late," Drennan said defensively. "I stank so bad her mother left the room." Little sighed and fluttered his eyelashes.

The glass office door flashed in the sun. Howard Belton, the director of the agency, and Wade Arndt, the Head Planner, stepped out and walked to Howard's car, deep in conversation. Howard saw the trainees and waved. His blond page boy hair-cut and granny glasses made him look like an obese John Denver, Drennan thought. Little leaned over and spat on the asphalt. Howard said something to Wade and climbed into his LTD. As the car pulled away, Wade stomped across the lot towards them, big and shaggy and virile. Drennan always imagined him on a horse riding to hounds. Wade was industrious and cheerful and
he believed fervently in the value of the work he did. Drennan sort of liked him anyway, but he flinched at the sight of so much unrelenting optimism approaching full speed.

He glanced down the hill to Last Chance Gulch Avenue, the main street of Helena. Among the people crossing the intersection beneath the marquee of the Capri Lounge, Live Music Nightly, one figure caught his attention—a steadily moving white-haired man with a canvas sack slung over his shoulder. Drennan squinted into the afternoon sun, thinking it was the old drifter he'd given two dollars to outside O'Toole's the weekend before. But that man had carried his bedroll under his arm, and was leaner. Drennan watched the man with the sack make his way unhurriedly across the street, back bent, chin pointing straight ahead.

Wade eyed their manuscripts approvingly and hefted his briefcase. "How goes it, men?" he said, or rather boomed. He addressed Drennan because Drennan was one-half inch taller than himself, a fact confirmed by impartial panels of employees in at least five coffee-break measuring contests during the eight months Drennan and Little had worked at Comprehensive Health Planning. These occurred whenever Wade awoke feeling especially tall of a morning. Drennan couldn't get around the feeling
that Wade's friendliness toward him was an attempt to get even for that half-inch.

"Going to the party tomorrow night?" Wade asked.

"I guess so," Drennan said. Little stared aloofly over Wade's shoulder.

"Free booze, compliments of the state," Wade said, puffing on his unlit pipe. "Can't lose on a deal like that. I don't know about you guys, but I've got a feeling I'm going to get snookered." Drennan examined the postmark on his envelope. At the New Year's party, Wade and Howard had worn paper hats and tooted horns.

"Well, work hard," Wade said, clapping Drennan on the shoulder. Within seconds he was in full stride up the Eighth Street hill, walking like Daniel Boone on his way to discover what lay west of Kentucky.

"I had this second lieutenant in Nam once," Little said after a moment. "Straight out of OCS. Fucker kept volunteering the unit for recon patrols and the rest of the time wanted us to have our boots shined."

"I'm sure that went over big," Drennan said.

"Yeah," said Little. "For about two weeks. One morning he was on the crapper and somebody rolled a smoke grenade under it. Blew him right out the door."

Drennan was genuinely awed. "Jesus. Did it kill him?"
"Naw. They transferred him to a supply unit in Cam Ranh Bay."

"Did they ever find out who did it?"

"Never did," said Little, with a distant look in his eye. The old man with the sack was gone from the intersection. Buildings blocked Drennan's view of the rest of the Gulch. Haze from the smelter in East Helena blurred the outline of the Sleeping Giant, whose nose was a favorite practice ground for beginning rock climbers. To the east, Drennan could see the road to Hauser Dam, where he had spent many Saturday afternoons, alone or with Julie, drinking beer and lying in the sun. He glanced back at the office.

"Sounds like you're going to have to lay off Louis Lamour for a while," he said. Earlier, they'd been lectured at a staff meeting about the approaching grant application deadline.

"I've read them all twice already," Little said. "Besides, I'm so fucking sick of westerns I could puke." Little had brought Ride The Dark Trail to work his first day, prepared, as he later explained, by three years in the army. Drennan was envious and considered Little's bureaucratic career more rewarding than his own. At least Little had read some good books.

"How about that beer?" Little said.
"I better not." Little shrugged and turned his gaze upon the dwindling figure of Wade. Soon after the train­ees had started the job, Wade had invited them both to dinner---a sort of gesture of noblesse oblige. His wife was big, pleasant, and child-weary; the three boys were smart and full of hell; and it was clear that Wade loved them in a way that made something inside Drennan ache. After they ate, Wade took them down into his basement and showed them his projects: an extensive model railroad set-up for his sons; an old BSA Victor for which he was perpetually waiting for parts; and his antique gun col­lection. Drennan remembered the look in Wade's eyes as he explained the intricacies of a cap and ball pistol he'd built himself. And he remembered what Little had said outside as they walked to their cars. "That poor son of a bitch will spend his retirement talking about the things he wished he'd done. Just like my old man."

Little spat reflectively and swung himself into the VW. The engine roared, smoothed out, and settled into a slightly ominous purr. He leaned out the window.

"You going tomorrow night?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Sure," said Little. "Never know, you might snag a social worker or something. How about I come by and pick you up?"
I was going out with Julie, Drennan started to say, but Little's eyes stopped him. "Okay," he said.

"About nine." Little raced the engine and eased ahead. "You want a ride home?"

Drennan shook his head. "This is the only exercise I get." He watched the VW idle to the edge of the lot, wait for an old GMC pickup to pass, then swing out up the hill.

Gravel flew and rubber screamed for thirty yards, leaving a cloud of stinking smoke. It was a performance Drennan had seen before.

He started up towards the Cathedral of Saint Helena, which dominated the town from the hilltop like a ruined abbey on the cover of a gothic novel. The Cathedral had been brought piece by piece from Ireland by a copper king to please his restless wife, and lovingly assembled by old world craftsmen at great expense. She left him shortly thereafter and moved back to Boston. The crosses which topped the twin spires were rumored to be plated with real gold. Drunk, Little had more than once talked of importing two South American condors to perch on those crosses and training them to attack bishops.

By the time he got to the top of the hill, Drennan was sweating and breathing hard. His skin was pasty and he'd put on twenty-five pounds since college. He'd been
meaning to start working out, but he always came home
from work exhausted, with barely enough energy to crack
a beer and fall on the couch. All the beer didn't help
his weight any more than the dinners Julie fixed him two
or three times a week, he supposed. Sucking in his gut,
he patted it reassuringly. He didn't look that bad, he
knew—just over two hundred pounds, and at six foot
three, he could handle it. Up until this year, he'd
been able to eat and drink whatever he wanted and stay
lean as a fence rail. He'd been more active back then.

He took off his tie and stuffed it in his back
pocket, resisting the urge to sit on the steps and rest.
The office building stood below, a monument to human pre-
tension and ineptitude. The most beautiful summer of his
life was ending, and he had spent it in an old concrete
building with flat green walls. When he'd pulled into
town on a Greyhound a year before, with seventy dollars
in his wallet and everything he owned in the pack on his
back, he'd felt older than he did now.

The growling of an engine brought his eyes back to
the street. A silver four-wheel drive Ford Ranger
cruised by, high suspension jerking as it lugged down
the hill. Inside the cab, two cowboy-hatted heads
swung towards him. The driver had a nose that was flat
across the bridge and eyes the color of fog. His gaze
started bleak and ended thoughtful, and Drennan saw those eyes long after the truck disappeared. He looked at his wingtip shoes and dacron slacks. But he knew it wasn't the clothes. It was something he gave off like musk, so powerful that a stumpy-legged rancher in frayed too-long jeans standing across a crowded street would raise flaring nostrils into the air, turn his head slowly back and forth, and stop when his flat gaze came to rest on Drennan.

He started walking slowly, thinking of the old drifter he thought he'd seen earlier. The Saturday night before, Drennan had been on his way into O'Toole's for a beer when he'd seen the figure leaning against the bank at the corner of Sixth and the Gulch. His bedroll, neatly tied, lay on the sidewalk. Although the evening was warm, the man had on a fleece-lined sheepskin coat that had obviously seen years of hard service. He was lighting a hand-rolled cigarette, taking his time.

The man looked up as Drennan approached. Drennan's gut tightened. He never knew how to deal with being panhandled. But the man only dragged on his cigarette and watched Drennan walk by, eyes clear, steady, hard. The stubble on his jaw was white, but in his hair, long and pulled into a knot at the back, were streaks of gold. Drennan nodded. The man made no move.
Before he reached the door of the bar, Drennan slowed, then stopped. He walked back, uncertain. Finally he said, in his best deep western voice, "I don't guess I could buy you a drink, pardner." The man dragged on the cigarette. The first thing Drennan's fingers touched in his pocket were the two silver dollars he'd gotten earlier at the Rialto. He held them out. The man's eyes narrowed, and for a second Drennan thought he was going to have to fight. Then the man reached for the coins, and Drennan felt the hardness and strength in the hand that brushed his own.

"Preciate it," the man said in a voice like a flat-bottomed boat dragging over a gravel stream bed. He nodded his white head once, abruptly, and Drennan understood that he was dismissed. At the door of O'Toole's, he glanced back. The old man was ambling down the Gulch towards the Buckhorn and Palace saloons, bedroll clamped under his arm.

One year before, not long after his twenty-third birthday, Drennan had spent his first night on the road to Montana nestled in tumbleweed outside Wells, where Interstate 80 intersected with U.S. 93 north. Often
that night he'd awakened to the sound of a big rig making miles across the sparsely policed Nevada flats. Each time, the constellations had moved a little farther in their appointed rounds, until Orion touched the western horizon and he sensed that dawn was near. He had never seen so many stars.

Two days later, an appliance salesman from Salt Lake City dropped him off in Butte. Drennan could still remember standing on the curb, watching the salesman's big Oldsmobile pull away, mud-spattered from a rain squall near Pocatello that morning. When the car disappeared, he walked up the hill to the Greyhound station. After 1200 miles of paying his fare with patient listening, he wanted the last sixty to himself. While he waited for the bus, he'd paced Montana Avenue, remembering stories of the old strip in Butte, where on Sunday mornings in winter you could find blood in the snow in front of every bar.

The streets and buildings were dark with grime. The people looked old and tired. Mountaintops visible above the roofs were barren, and the sun was hazy through air he'd expected would be clear. But none of that bothered him. He had a growing sense that for the first time in years, what he was doing was right.

Later, the bus passed through a narrow, tree-lined
canyon. Sometimes when it dipped around a curve he could see the river below—a rapid black stream that would run with the road a while, then wander off into another section of forest too thick to see into. Two or three times they passed tiny ranches set into small stretches of flat land between the road and the base of the mountains across the narrow canyon. The air was cold and sharp.

Then they started to climb. The sky got lighter, and in twenty minutes they topped a final rise and the sky was glowing with purple and red in the last light of the vanished sun. Dark, pine-covered mountaintops extended in every direction, as far as he could see. He leaned back and felt the engine throb as the first stars appeared in the east.

Maybe the desire was rooted in the TV-western consciousness of his youth. A few times he'd had a distant sense that it went much deeper—back to when his Celtic ancestors swung bloody axes against invading berserkers and legionnaires. He shrugged. He was on his way to becoming a full-fledged health planner, planning the health of the people, as Little put it, whether
they wanted it or not.

Again Drennan caught the sweet scent of hay from the valley. This street was unfamiliar, lined with elms and maples. Old frame houses, the kind he loved, were set well back from the pavement---two and three story Victorian, with bay windows and dormers and crazily intersection hip and valley roofs. He never saw houses like that being built any more; just square cracker-boxes, like the subdivisions creeping into the flats below town.

Drennan forced all thoughts of Comprehensive Health Planning out of his mind and concentrated on his surroundings. In a couple of minutes he felt better. A cold six-pack and a change of clothes awaited him at home, and in a few hours he'd be with Julie.
She was unsympathetic.

"I think you're expecting too much," she said. "Nobody likes what they do all the time."

"I don't like what I do any of the time," he said.

She shrugged impatiently. "Look at all the people who spend their whole lives doing stuff they don't like. My parents. They don't sit around and complain. They just do it. They have to." With a single, precise motion, she cut a tiny bite of steak. "For their kids." She held the bite up on the end of her fork and, after examining it, picked it daintily off with her teeth. "Danny, you can't always have it your way," she said between chews. "You've got to realize that. It's part of growing up."

Julie's dark hair curled to her shoulders, brushed back on one side so he could see a beaten gold earring against the light tan of her neck. Her intensity made her sparkle when she was happy; when angry, she would argue fiercely. Drennan found this infinitely preferable to sullen pouting. But she had the habit of dropping
into the tone of voice she used with the second graders she taught, which never failed to make him bristle. He forced himself to continue chewing methodically, crushing tender prime rib to liquid between his teeth.

He had grown up surrounded by people, like his own parents, who'd spent their lives doing what they didn't want to. He was genuinely sorry for them, but mixed with that sorrow was wariness, such as you might feel for a derelict groaning in an alley whom you suspect is nursing a razor under his coat. That generation spoke of the Depression in hushed voices, as if it were the Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse. Drennan didn't doubt things were tough then, but he didn't quite believe that **all** those sour-faced people who spoke of what they might have become if they hadn't been forced into the prosthetic limb trade had really fought it. It was a damn shame, but he didn't figure that was reason enough to let it happen to him. Not if he had another option.

"Besides, what else could you do?" Julie said. "You're lucky to have any job with just a BA. If you quit, you'd end up clerking in a Circle K, or back in the warehouse." Her eyes became thoughtful. She knew Drennan had loaded enough trucks to last him the rest of his life.

"Unless you went back to school," she said.
The interior of the restaurant was chinked logs, with a vaulted rough pine ceiling and a stone fireplace. Heads of various large animals protruded from the walls. He watched the waitress, a pretty, dark woman with a bouffant hairdo, whirl around the room, obviously in complete control. She didn't even seem to slow down when she poured water.

"I was thinking maybe something like construction," Drennan said.

Julie had a pretty laugh. "My father was a carpenter all his life, and all he ever got out of it was cirrhosis of the liver," she said. "No pension, no retirement, working out in the cold. He was always falling off ladders and nailing his hands to boards."

"I can't help if if he was clumsy," Drennan said. Her eyes narrowed and he realized that calling someone's dead father clumsy was probably in poor taste, but he was too irritated to back down. They glared at each other across the candle-lit table. He could see her mother in her face—the fine bone structure, out-thrust chin, tight-lipped determination. It made sense that the old man drank, but which was cause and which effect, he couldn't say. Beneath the glare in Julie's eyes, though, was a look of uncertainty, vulnerability, almost like that of a wounded buck he'd once seen in the lee of
a fallen bull pine, watching the hunter bolt and aim his rifle a second time. He supposed Julie's mother had that same look when she was young.

"Construction," she sneered. "You wouldn't know what to do with a hammer if you tripped on it in the street."

"That's not true," he said coolly. "I worked a summer in college helping my roommate and his father build a house. I'm no carpenter, but I know some of the basics."

"You'd never find a job anyway," she said. "It's all union around here."

He finished his wine and poured what was left in the decanter into his glass, feeling her eyes, taking his time. "Maybe," he said. "I've heard they're crying for men."

"Who told you that?" she demanded.

"I've just heard it around," he said.

A few tables over, a voice several octaves below bass drawled out, "Yes, ma'am, Ah would. Ah'd like a double shot of Wahld Turkey on the rocks, and a Bloody Mary for the lady here." Drennan glanced over at a rancher with an upper body like a truck cab sitting with his slender, graying, smiling wife. The man's eggshell white going-to-town Stetson rested on the table beside
his elbow. The hair on top of his head was short and brushed straight back—clearly used to being covered. His bearing suggested dignity, power, and gentleness; "grand" was the word to describe him, Drennan decided. He had seen many like this man since coming west. They all looked unfinished without their hats.

Julie's glare was less certain now. He could feel what was coming next. Mostly to stave it off, he gestured at her untouched wine. "You going to finish that?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

She shrugged.

"Is there something wrong with it?" Arguing about alcohol was the surest way to keep her off balance.

"The glass is smeared," she finally said.

"Well, shit oh dear, we'll get you another one," he said, exasperated. He turned in his seat and spotted the waitress.

"No," she said, catching his arm. "It's all right. I don't want it anyway." He resisted the impulse to say something about her father and set the glass in front of his own plate.

"Do you know what people would give for this glass of wine in China?" he said. "This glass of wine would probably keep a Chinese family alive for a month." Her
tight-lipped expression didn't change. He rubbed his jaw and turned his attention back to his food.

She stared at him for two or three minutes while he ate, then leaned back in her seat. "Look," she said. The second grade tone was gone from her voice. "I grew up with this construction business. It's miserable. We never knew from one week to the next if Dad would have a job. About half the time he had to go work in Butte or Great Falls or someplace."

"I think I might like moving around," Drennan said between bites.

"Oh sure," she said bitterly. "Spend a winter in beautiful Anaconda. Fall off roofs in Boise." She paused. "Strange talk from the man who couldn't take the Peace Corps."

"Give me a break," he said angrily. "The Peace Corps was like moving the Department of Comprehensive Health Planning to Korea." He thought it over. "No, maybe it was a little better. None of us could read or write the language, so there weren't any grant applications."

Silent, drumming her fingers on the table, she watched him finish off his baked potato. Half her filet mignon was left; she had finished her salad, but barely touched her potato.
"Come on, finish up," he said. She shook her head. His jaw tightened. He'd only been half kidding about her wine—he hated to see food wasted.

"You may have it if you like," she said. Second grade again.

"Get a doggie bag," he said. "Take it to your poor old mother." He caught the waitress's eye and sipped wine while he waited for the check, abruptly conscious of the activity around them—clinking silverware, muted conversations, and occasional bursts of laughter.

She leaned forward, voice low and intense. "Why don't you quit this stupid talk? There's no future in construction."

"Why the hell should I worry about a future?" he said. "I can get by."

"You can get by," she said heatedly. "That's all you think about—you. What if you have a family some day?"

Drennan flexed his shoulders uneasily. He held the wine glass in front of the candle and swirled it, watching the flame through the glowing burgundy.

"When Dad died," she said bitterly, "he didn't leave Mama anything but a junker pickup truck and an unpaid mortgage. She had to borrow money to bury him. Now she's old enough to retire, but she's got to keep working." She crossed her arms and hugged herself as if
she were cold.

"It's lucky I was old enough to get myself through college," she said. "I never would have gone."

Drennan shrugged. "Myun hamnida," he said.

She waited. "So what's that mean?" she finally asked.

"It means 'I'm sorry,'" Drennan said, "'but it's not my fault.'"

She glared. Then she cocked her head to one side. "Mom and Dad paid your way through school, didn't they?" she said, knowing that made him uncomfortable.

"I worked," he said defensively. "If my folks hadn't had the money, I would have gotten scholarships."

"Okay," she said. "Go ahead and waste a 20,000 dollar education. It didn't cost you anything." Drennan finished his wine.

"For God's sake," she said, bringing her palm down on the table. "If you want to do something different, go back to school and get a master's."

"Yeah, a master's degree in Planning," he said. People at the surrounding tables looked at them. Drennan lowered his voice. "Eight fucking months I've been there, and I still don't know what they're planning, or for who. Or what difference it makes." He pointed his finger at her and leaned forward. "And you know what?"
he said. "They don't either."

She shrugged impatiently. "So get a degree in something else. You can always get a job with a master's."

"Even if I wanted to, I couldn't afford it," he said. "No way am I going into debt with school loans."

"You'd need someone to support you," she said. Their eyes met briefly.

"I'm not going back to school," he said.

The waitress walked briskly to their table, slapped the check down in a wooden dish, and stopped moving just long enough to ask if everything was all right.

"Fine," Drennan said. She smiled and strode away. He figured her tip and counted bills onto the platter. For no reason, he added another dollar. The waitress waved as they walked out.

"You all come back," she said.

Outside, Drennan climbed into his old VW van without opening the door for Julie. He started the engine and leaned his forearms on the wheel, staring straight ahead. He wished he could get rid of her and go get deeply drunk. He was trying to think of a way to say so when he felt a hand on his thigh.

Her eyes were soft with concern. "I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to pick a fight," she said. "Let's go out to the lake."
He glowered at the windshield.

"Come on," she said, squeezing gently. "I'll make you feel better." After a moment of not very real deliberation, he nodded and put the van in gear.

At the edge of town he stopped at Louie's and bought a six-pack of Rainier. She watched disapprovingly, but said nothing. The memory of her father was kept fresh by her mother. On those rare occasions when Julie took a drink, she chew gum before she went home. Drennan let the beer sit until they passed East Helena and moved into the flats that stretched all the way to the Crazy Mountains, over a hundred miles east. Herds of antelope grazed on the foothills to their right, unconcerned with cars that passed well within rifle range.

He pulled a can loose from the plastic beer wrapper, glancing at Julie. She pretended not to see. Her world, he felt, was simple—some things were right and others were wrong. Drinking was clearly wrong. He was sure her black-and-white outlook had a lot to do with the way she spent her days—marching seven-year olds around a playground and drilling them in the four R's. She loved children, she loved her work, and she had a hard time comprehending the idea of dissatisfaction with a job. She had wanted to be a teacher as long as she could remember, she'd told him. In a way, Drennan envied that,
just as he'd envied eager pre-professional students in college who had their lives plotted for the next fifteen years. But he'd long since despaired of attaining such certainty, or even understanding it. How could you have your life figured out when you were eighteen years old?

To her, a job was a job. They were all more or less alike, and they were simply what you did. She seemed firmer in this and similar opinions now than she had when he'd started dating her, several months before. You become what you do, Drennan thought. He had an uneasy conviction that the affairs of adults bored her. Kids were far more interesting. If everyone would just have a couple and devote their days to raising them, the rest of the business of the world would take care of itself. Maybe she was right. He had nothing against kids. He just wasn't very comfortable around them, perhaps because he'd been an only child. And deep down, the look of young mothers rankled him---a complacency akin to the idiot narcissism of body-builders, laboring to add pounds to already thick torsos, exuding unreasoning arrogance about what seemed to Drennan little more than biological necessity. He finished the beer with a long swallow, dropped it between the front seats, and popped the top on another can. The whole business made him nervous.

"You know, it would do you good to get away from
that classroom once in a while," he said, and took a long drink. "You spend so much time there, you start thinking like a second grader." He glanced at her, registering the hurt in her eyes. It sent a pang of lust through him. The van sped up a little.

"You should quit drinking so much," she said reproachfully.

"Just because your old man was a drunk doesn't mean I'm going to be." He raised the can to his lips, deliberately.

"Lay off my father, will you?" she said angrily. "What is this all of a sudden?"

"What's this about me drinking all of a sudden?" he demanded, lowering the can and glaring at her. "You been having heart-to-hearts with Mama again?" She was silent, and he knew he'd hit something. He twisted.

"You ought to quit listening to her," he said. "She's getting senile."

"You bastard," she said, in a tone of voice he'd never heard her use before--low, hard, and filled with real loathing. "Turn this car around and take me back to town."

Drennan knew he'd gone too far, but he kept driving, forearms crossed on the wheel, leaning forward.

"Right now."
"You wanted to go to the lake," he said grimly, "we're going to the lake." He tipped the beer and drained it, half expecting her to slap it out of his hand. Instead, she grabbed the door handle, but they were doing fifty, and the road was straight.

"This is kidnapping," she said in a choked voice. He accelerated. The van raced down the highway at full speed, swaying slightly, bouncing and rattling on bumps. He glanced at her. She was rigid, staring straight ahead, hands on the dash. For some time, they'd been tentatively exploring the pleasures of fighting before making love. It had never gotten this serious before, and he was a little worried. But he was damned if he was going to give up now. He glanced at her again furtively. His cock shifted in his jeans.

She grabbed the door handle again as they started the turn to the lake, but he took it at thirty-five. The tires screeched and the van fishtailed, and for a second he was sure it would break from the road and roll. He managed to downshift into second and pop the clutch. The van's tail end straightened, and by the time Julie recovered her balance, he had the speed back up to forty. She shot him a look that he didn't turn to meet, but could feel.

"Bastard," she hissed, but with less conviction. He
wondered if she was secretly pleased at being abducted. The road was narrow and pitted, filled with dips and gentle curves, but basically straight. He kept the speed around fifty. After a couple of minutes they topped a small rise. Thirty miles to the left, the sun was disappearing behind the Divide. No matter how clear the day, clouds always seemed to gather over the Rockies as a backdrop for the sunset. Bold and pink flamed into bright scarlet, then slowly darkened into amethyst. He dropped their speed and cruised, swiveling his head as much as he dared. There was no other traffic. He could sense Julie stealing glances when she thought he wasn't looking at her, so he slowed even more and drove with one eye on the road. Soon she was staring out his window, lips slightly parted. When they emerged from a dark tree-lined hollow, Drennan was reminded of coming out of church on summer mornings when he was a kid, blissful at the prospect of a whole week without having to go near the grim, dark, evil-smelling old building full of unhappy smiling people.

The air turned cooler when they reached the crest of the hills. He shifted into second and let the van lug down. Around the first curve they lost the sunset, but the lake came into sight, opaque, gunmetal black in the fading light, surface almost untroubled. Julie seemed to
remember she was angry; she was sitting straight again, hands in her lap. This still wasn't going to be easy, he realized, but it wasn't the first time he'd been operating under less than optimal circumstances. Actually, he kind of liked it, and he was sure she did too. If he could just get her going. That was the one thing about her that made up for her lack of humor. Maybe it had something to do with liking kids.

Drennan glanced at her again and felt a twinge of guilt. He shook his head once, angrily. It was guilt she had planted there, he thought, by making it tacitly clear that she felt used. Frequently, she told him she loved him. Drennan never said the words back. That she was really in touch with something he had never felt, he found hard to accept. Nor did he believe he was using her any more than she was using him--or would if she got the chance.

Right now, Julie's mother would be sitting in an armchair watching re-runs of Perry Mason, waiting for her daughter in a house that smelled of old age. Every time he took Julie home, Mrs. Clark looked right through her daughter's casual exterior, eyes raking Drennan like he was a child molestor. He supposed that to her, he was. He also knew there was only one thing he could do to change that--make it legal. He sucked nervously at
his beer.

The promontory was at the end of a rutted dirt road, known only to a few locals. Drennan coasted as near the edge as he dared and cut the engine and lights. With the windows down, they could hear the gentle, rhythmic slapping of waves on the beach below. It was almost dark; the clusters of summer houses along the five-mile shoreline to the south were turning on lights. From far away, the purr of a diehard speedboat drifted to them. The van engine clicked as it cooled.

Offering the throat was the obvious solution, he knew, but he hesitated—he wasn't in a mood to back down. In the dim light, he could see her profile. Her hair curled against the ivory skin of her neck. She was looking straight ahead, hiding her eyes so he wouldn't see the wounded deer look. Blood surged restlessly to his groin. He briefly considered cold distance; it almost always worked, and would allow him to save face. But it would take too long.

Drennan held the beer can out before him and regarded it with disgust until he was sure she saw. Then he sighed and emptied it out the window. He shook his head several times and slumped in his seat. She turned to him, eyes dark and luminous, unable to resist any more than a kitten could yawn at a crumpled tinfoil ball on a
string. Again he felt a pang of guilt. Maybe he was using her.

"What?" she said caressingly.

He squirmed, struggling for words. Finally he said, "Sometimes I feel like a real shit. You know, when I take it out on you. I don't mean to do that." Her eyes remained on him, encouraging. He squirmed, started to speak, waited.

"I'm not very happy with this job," he said. "I feel like---I'm being wasted."

She moved closer. "We all feel like that sometimes," she said. "You just have to put up with it."

"Yeah," he said. "But it gets me down. Then I take it out on you."

"It's all right, baby," she said. "I know you don't mean it." Her hands kneaded each other in her lap until one of them escaped and slipped over to his thigh. He covered it with his own, squeezed it, and gradually relaxed his grip. Her hand began to move. Hairs on his neck lifted. He looked at her shyly.

"Could we talk later?" he said.

Her smile was faintly triumphant. She squeezed him and took her hand away.

"Come on, lover," she whispered.

With great effort, Drennan restrained himself from
tearing clothes off—both his own and hers—and undressed at moderate speed, kneeling on the rickety old bed one of the van's former owners had built. She took her time, aware of his urgency, tossing her hair as she slipped her shirt off her shoulders. Pants still on, she reached out to him. Her mouth was slightly open, and her long gold earrings glinted in the faint light. After seeing her clothed, he was always surprised and excited by the fullness of her breasts against her slender rib cage. The way she knelt, beckoning, made him feel like a sultan. He shivered when his chest touched soft cool flesh.

Soon they were naked and side by side on the bed. Drennan stroked and kissed, forcing himself to wait until he was sure she was ready. Finally he rolled onto her, using his last restraint to be gentle, and hunched forward.

She grimaced. "Wait," she said.

He buried his face in her shoulder and probed hopefully.

"No, not there."

Lips pressed against her neck, he pushed.

"Dammit, will you wait a minute?"

Drennan drew back and hovered for agonizing seconds. Then he was in and they both sighed deeply. The van
started rocking, a slow, gentle motion like wavelets in a tidal pool.

How long the bedpost screws had been working loose, Drennan was never to know, although later he seemed to remember a squeaking he didn't think was coming from him. The squeaking gave way to a cracking, and then a rending. Then the right front corner of the bed dropped eighteen inches.

Julie's sharp intake of breath was like a shriek. Drennan let out a grunt of pain. With his legs still in the air and his torso almost on the floor, his back was arched like a ski-tip. Teeth gritted, he managed to turn to the side and relieve the pressure on his spine.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. His voice was muffled in her armpit. "I might have broke my back."

She struggled to raise herself to her elbows. "My God," she said, with real terror in her voice. "Don't move. Let me—I'll go for help." She got to one elbow and tried to work herself out from under him.

"Wait," she said. "Wait. Danny. What are you doing?" He managed to pull himself up enough to cover her mouth with his. She dropped onto her back again to push him off. He drove in, reaching for something deep inside her. She twisted and tried to talk. One of her
heels scraped over his buttocks. He caught that leg and held it.

Weakened by the loss of its mate, the remaining post shivered, cracked, and finally gave. In a flailing mass of arms, legs, bottles, cans, blankets, rolled up sleeping bags, and discarded clothes, they crashed to the floor. Drennan groaned. She stared at him. Then a peaceful smile settled on her lips and she leaned back, legs curled around his waist. For a long time she rubbed his neck where his head nestled between her breasts.

"We could get married," she said.

Drennan opened his eyes.
III

The van worked hard climbing MacDonald Pass, even though at 1 A.M. there was no other traffic and he was able to cheat on curves. At last his headlights flashed on the sign that said: Continental Divide—Elev. 6325. On a knoll to the left of the road, the red warning lights of a TV tower blinked. Drennan turned up a side road toward the tower and climbed another half-mile. In the empty parking lot, he swung the van around facing east, cut the engine, and popped the top on the first can of a fresh six-pack.

Below him, the clump of lights that was Helena glowed at the base of the mountains, then spread in a thinning belt through the valley towards Great Falls. The night was clear, but a gust of wind rocked the van. No matter the weather in the flatlands, you could always count on wind at the top of the Divide. The beer didn't taste good; he shivered as the cold liquid went down his throat, wishing he'd had the sense to buy some whiskey. He'd sat in the van with the engine running while Julie stood on her porch and waited for the door to open. Drennan had just glimpsed the shadowy figure behind it
as he pulled away.

Mother-in-law.

Like the lights in the valley below, he could see it all laid out for him. Sunday dinners at Mom's house---yes, they would insist he call her Mom---without a beer or glass of wine. Sometime during the first two years, Julie accidentally becoming pregnant. A few years later, Mrs. Clark retiring and coming to live with her daughter, surviving to ripe old age like his own grandmother, whom his mother had waited on hand and foot for sixteen years because she could not bear the disgrace of sending the old lady to a nursing home. The First Commandment of Drennan's youth echoed through his mind: What would the neighbors think? And the Second was like unto it: Stay with what's safe. His father, a man at least as intelligent and far more capable than most university professors Drennan had known, had spent forty-five years laying water pipe for the city of Chicago.

Naturally, they'd wanted him to be a doctor, so they sent him to a Prestigious University on the west coast. There he found himself among the Wealthy, the Brilliant, and the Beautiful. More of the men were Beautiful than the women, but more of the women were Wealthy than the men, and almost all of them were Brilliant---except for some of the Very Wealthy. Drennan was None of the Above.
It took him a while to figure out that they had to have a few Averages around to make the others look good.

He dutifully took pre-med courses, but he could never work up much interest in stereo-isomerism and protozoan appendages. His grades reflected this. He spent most of his time either hating his course-work or hating himself for doing poorly, or both.

One day in early spring of his third year, he checked into a quantitative analysis lab. It was rumored to be the toughest course in school—three four hour labs a week that invariably stretched into five six-hour labs a week, because doing the work in the allotted time was impossible. Prestigious Universities liked to foster a spirit of competition. The course was deliberately offered only in spring. None but the truly dedicated survived.

Chemistry labs were held in a building erected in 1905. The sickly sweet smell of acetic acid made him gag as he walked from spring sunshine through heavy wooden doors scarred by generations of kicking students. In the lab, he found a seat by the window. For most of the next hour, a squeaky-voiced TA named Rex paced around in his lab coat and chewed on his glasses while he lectured the class on what infractions would cause them to lose points. There were many. Then they were issued slips
for their lab deposits, and they went to stand in line at the stockroom window and wait interminably for rude clerks to fill their orders for impossible amounts of glassware, bottle brushes, bunsen burners. The faces in line with him were familiar—he'd been seeing them for three years—and grim. Back in the lab, they scurried to get their equipment organized precisely. Many consulted sheets of notes they'd written up. Silent ferocity was in the air, broken only by the clink of glass and Rex's increasingly frantic admonitions.

The Bay Area winter had been one of constant rain and gray skies that felt like they were forcing him into the earth. Spring had arrived almost exactly on the first day of school, as if someone had thrown a switch. The temperature was about seventy-five, the sky a lucid blue. Drennan sat on an ancient black stone table and stared out the window at girls walking by in their summer shifts. He remembered stories of people sitting in this lab all night with their experiments for fear someone would destroy them in order to lower the class curve.

Then he gathered up his glassware in his arms, dropping a couple of test tubes in the sink by accident, and started for the door. Rex spotted him and swooped down like an avenging pigeon.

"Where do you think you're going," he squeaked,
hands on hips.

"Out drinking," Drennan said. Their eyes met in an instant of perfect understanding. Rex stepped aside. Drennan bought pitchers of beer until closing time with his lab deposit.

He enjoyed his last year in college. He had a notion that there was a big world out there, and now he was free to discover it. He'd been sheltered from it all his life, he felt. In the seventeen years he'd lived at home, he had never heard his parents exchange harsh words. Their favorite adjective was "nice." It wasn't that he didn't appreciate it---he'd had friends whose parents fought. But he didn't believe it, any more than he believed the endless series of "thous-shalt-nots" at his Irish Catholic high school.

Drennan knew the meaning of words like "ambivalent" and "supernumerary." He had read The Stranger in French, understood the basics of behavioral psychology, and had been a near-Olympic quality water polo player. On the other hand, his knowledge of auto mechanics was limited to how to change oil. He was terrified of horses and barely knew how to load a rifle. He had never used a power tool bigger than a quarter-inch drill.

Something was missing from his education that had nothing to do with the wealthy, professional, fulfilling
life-style towards which his college oriented its successful graduates. In their eyes, and in the eyes of his family, he knew he was a failure, and that hurt him more than he cared to admit. But he also knew there was more to it, and he wasn't going to find it in graduate school.

* 

He stepped out of the van with a fresh beer. The wind had a distinct feel of approaching winter. He pulled his jean jacket tight, wishing he'd brought his down coat, and reached back inside for his gloves. Twenty feet down the moutain he found a rock that sheltered him and sat with his back against it. The sound of the wind in the pines was elemental, stirring a response buried deep in his consciousness. Even in daylight he could never hear it without the feeling that something universal, and terrifying, was about to be revealed to him.

From this height, the lines of the Big Dipper seemed almost straight ahead. The two end stars pointed to the fainter Polaris, hovering over Great Falls and Canada. To the east, above the Elkhorns, he recognized the belt of Orion appearing, and he remembered watching
it fade into dawn over the Sierra Nevada that morning he'd stood shivering by the road outside Wells.

*

At one of the last classes he'd attended, Drennan heard a famous population biologist deliver what was called his Doomsday lecture. The message was that with pollution, over-population, and imminent nuclear holocaust, the world didn't stand much chance of surviving the next fifteen years, so there wasn't much point in getting excited about anything. This fit in with Drennan's state of mind at the time—what he thought was an attitude of mature cynicism. When riots closed the campus a few weeks later on the occasion of Nixon's orders to bomb Cambodia, it seemed an affirmation of approaching chaos. He felt continually more justified in scorning those who chose security, status, money—all things he knew he didn't need. But he didn't understand what he did need.

He drifted, looking for the adventure he'd dreamed about when he should have been studying. For a while he lived with an old girl friend in Santa Barbara and loaded trucks in a food warehouse, but it didn't take him long to realize there wasn't much adventure in that, unless
it was driving home through rush hour traffic. The working man's life he and his friends had romanticized was, he finally had to admit, hard, dirty, and boring. He didn't mind the hard and dirty parts, but the lack of satisfaction in the work made him feel that he'd simply fallen into a lower grade version of the trap he thought he'd eluded: an exchange of his life for money and security, nothing more.

Back in San Francisco, he looked for a job to avoid joining the ranks of hippies who nicked him for spare change twice a block. He found out in a hurry how much a BA in psychology was worth, even from a Prestigious University. Soon he went out less and less to look for work, or for anything else. Instead, he spent most of his time in his rented room near the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park, smoking pot and sleeping thirteen, fourteen, sixteen hours a day. He grew to hate sunshine. Only after hours of debate would he walk two blocks to the store, at night, to buy a pound of hamburger.

When his money ran out, he was forced to think his situation through. He had done literally nothing in months but ingest drugs and strum a guitar. His health was bad. He was paranoid and in a permanent daze. But he was finally able to realize that adventure and meaning weren't just going to drag him out of bed some morning---
it was up to him. The Army would supply plenty of the first, he decided, but little of the second, especially with Viet Nam still going on. The only other option he saw was one he'd thought of often in college—the Peace Corps.

He got himself together enough to meet with a recruiting agent, and within two months was being drilled in language thirty hours a week by undersized but aggressive Koreans. Twelve weeks later his training group flew to Seoul to undergo final cultural acclimatization. The airport looked like the Greyhound depot in Pittsburgh. Two weeks of lectures followed, stressing again the importance of harmony with native culture and living like the people. To celebrate the end of training, a party for the volunteers was held at a top staff member's house. They'd been in the city long enough by this time to know about the families who lived in cardboard boxes, shitting in the streets; the thirteen-year-old boys who pushed loaded horse carts up and down the packed, hilly streets from dawn to dusk; their sisters, who rubbed the thighs of junked-out GI's in the bars around the I Teh Won army base.

When the taxi wound up streets higher and higher in the hills behind Seoul, finally passing into a fenced compound guarded by a uniformed Marine, Drennan was sur-
prised. He was more surprised when they passed an Olympic-sized swimming pool and several tennis courts. The staff member's house was bigger than the rooming house they'd been staying in. Delicate Japanese-style sliding wood panels separated the immaculate rooms from each other and from the elaborately maintained garden in the courtyard. The Peace Corps volunteers were served chilled cocktails by Korean houseboys in white coats. It was the first time Drennan had seen ice in Asia.

Soon enough, he realized that the village health center to which he'd been assigned had no real use for a foreigner ignorant of customs, who could barely speak the language. They were polite people, though, and genuinely concerned. They quickly set him up in a tiny room for a lab, and gave him boxes of sputum samples, collected from villagers, to examine for tuberculosis bacilli. This he did diligently, nine hours a day, six days a week, peering through his 1930 vintage monocular microscope until his head ached and his vision became permanently blurred. At last, he felt, he was doing something that mattered.

By the time he'd been there a couple of months, his Korean was better than they realized. One day he thought he heard someone refer to sputum samples that were going to the main provincial lab for a chemical test that was
vastly quicker and more efficient than the one he was running, but which he hadn't realized they possessed the technology to do. Later he asked the head of the health center if he had understood correctly. Impassively, the man informed him that he had. The samples from which Drennan was making his slides had already been tested at the main lab and the TB positive patients were already being treated. He remembered bitterly his elation at discovering his first positive case, an elation shared by his co-workers: he had taken a step towards saving a life, or so he thought.

It was a long time before he could understand that the Koreans had honestly been trying to help him out, to salvage a difficult situation for both him and them, rather than to trick him. But he was actually glad for a reason to leave this country where the population was so oppressive, there was literally no place to be alone. Soon he was back walking the streets of San Francisco, longing for something that didn't seem to be anywhere within reach.

In Seoul he'd met a man who'd talked a lot about Montana. There was space there, he said. Other places, you drive to get to the country. There, you drive to get to town. Drennan spent many nights sipping rice beer in Korean taverns, listening to an unending supply of
stories about Butte and Whitehall and the ranches and bars and railroads in between, while tame brown rats picked food scraps off woodchip floors. Montana became, in his imagination, a place where things were possible, where still there was something clean and open and honest about life, even if it was sometimes rough. It seemed the kind of place a man could find out who he was, what he was capable of, in relation to real and simple things.

One September morning, a couple of months back from Korea, he'd loaded his gear into his backpack and walked out of his tenement apartment near Fillmore Street. He left the door unlocked and the key on the rickety table. As he walked, he took out his wallet and counted seventy dollars Peace Corps severance pay. At the Oak Street ramp to the Bayshore Freeway, he stood with his thumb out until he got a ride to Berkely. His second ride took him to Sacramento. The third dropped him at the outskirts of Wells near sundown.

*

Not quite a year ago, Drennan thought. The beer can was long since empty; he held it with stiff fingers inside his coat, shoulders hunched for warmth. He got
up slowly and brushed dirt and pine needles off his ass. Inside the van he pulled another beer loose from the plastic wrapper, decided he didn't want it, and opened it anyway.

Maybe she was right. Maybe the whole Montana dream, like his fantasies of adventure, was just an attempt at perpetual adolescence. Maybe you had to be born into things like ranching and construction. He was probably foolish to imagine they'd be more satisfying than truck loading, anyway. It was clear by now that if he couldn't find something he liked, the fault lay in him. The thing to do was to use the talents you'd been bred and trained for, and it seemed he was best at sitting at a desk writing documents. In six months he'd be a full-fledged Planner. With the promotion came a substantial raise. No doubt he'd soon have subordinates like Little and himself to shunt his work onto. He could take home a comfortable fifteen or sixteen thou for doing nothing.

They were good people, he reminded himself---Wade and Howard. Julie was right; he had a tendency to call people who didn't agree with him assholes, and let it go at that. But there was no denying that Wade had found something---the closest thing to satisfaction Drennan had seen. Writing them off because he didn't
think what they did was important was too easy. It was important to somebody—-to them, if no one else.

Maybe that was it. Get a good job, get married, surround yourself with family. He'd been avoiding that, but maybe it was what he'd been looking for. Maybe he'd known so all along, and he'd only been pretending. It seemed the only thing left.

Drennan felt sleepy, lethargic---perhaps the relief of coming to the right decision after long struggle. He pointed the van back down the pass and let it lug along, thinking about Julie. He remembered hearing that women lost interest in sex after a couple of kids; but he couldn't believe that of her. And coming home to someone would be nice. Maybe Mrs. Clark would like him if he were legal. Maybe he could even get to like her. He swung drowsily around the curves and only came wide awake once, when he imagined the look that would come over Little's face.
State office bashes were held in a World War II vintage quonset hut at Fort Harrison, the VA hospital outside Helena. Drennan wasn't sure why this was so---maybe because the rent was cheap. Nevertheless, he felt it was fitting. He slouched in a corner, nursing a beer and shot of whiskey, unnoticed in the dimly lit, noisy, smoke-filled room. On the bandstand against the opposite wall, Buck Wilson and the Rocky Mountain Boys were giving an energetic rendition of "In The Oklahoma Hills Where I Was Born." Seventy-five to a hundred couples were jitterbugging frantically, spurred on by cheers from another hundred spectators. Potbellied executives in red pants with white belts and shoes manhandled nineteen-year old secretaries with fixed smiles on their painted faces. If nothing else, Drennan had to admit, it beat watching them do the Bump.

A shadowy form clutching several bottles and glasses moved towards him, then set two double shots of Jack Daniel's and four beers on a table.
"Any luck?" Drennan asked.

Little shook his head disgustedly. "Nah. These broads look good, but try to talk to them. Average intelligence of a young cereal box."

"I didn't think that bothered you."

"It usually doesn't," Little admitted. He downed half a glass of whiskey, glared at the remainder like it was an unshaven recruit at a boot camp inspection, and finished it off. He wiped his forearm leisurely across his mouth, glanced once more at the empty glass, and sidearmed it into the corner behind Drennan. The shattering noise went unnoticed under the whine of the pedal steel guitar.

"Way down yonder in the Indian nation..."

Drennan was looking at the glistening shards of glass in the corner when Little nudged his arm.

"What time is it?" Little asked.

"Almost twelve."

"...rode my pony on the reservation..."

"What do you think?" Drennan said, raising his voice over the music.

"...in them Oklahoma hills where I was born."

In the group of dancers nearest them, a combination of red, yellow, and purple lights from the bandstand caught Howard Belton's flushed, round face. He had
arrived rather conspicuously without his wife, and now was wagging his hips enthusiastically at a girl half his age. Noticing Drennan and Little, he waved and said something to the girl.

"I think all the free booze in Montana isn't worth this," Little said, so quietly that Drennan had trouble hearing him. But he understood clearly. He downed the Jack Daniel's in two hard gulps, grimacing at the flood of sharp oak flavor biting in his throat. He took a step after Little, staggered, and straightened up. Then he remembered the glass in his hand. He turned and hurled it into the corner as hard as he could. It popped like a light bulb. This time, though, the music had stopped, and several people stared. Howard was not one of them. He was leading the girl towards them by the hand, talking happily at her.

"How's it going, guys?" he yelled. He pulled the girl forward. "Lee Ann, I'd like you to meet Alton and Dan, our two hot-shot trainees at CHP. Lee Ann's in the School Lunch Program."

She glanced at them disinterestedly, said, "Nice to meet you," and looked away.

Little stared at Howard the same way he'd stared at the glass before he'd thrown it. Howard seemed not to notice, but when Drennan looked deep into Howard's
eyes, he recognized something he'd seen but never identified before: a weakness, uncertainty, that would never quite be covered over by the well-dressed, aggressive, competent exterior. Drennan's belligerence dissolved in pity, though whether for Howard or himself, he wasn't sure.

Little turned his back and moved easily through the crowd,shouldering people aside. Drennan mumbled, "See you Monday," to Howard, and followed. On the way to the door, he received glares and angry remarks from Little's shoving. His moment of compassion wore off quickly, and he started doing some shoving of his own.

Near the door they met Wade, who was having visible trouble standing upright.

"What say, men?" he slurred jovially. He swung his arm in an expansive gesture and sloshed an amber half-circle of liquor on people around him. When Little showed no sign of stopping, Wade grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Where you going?"

"To shoot up," Little said. Wade nodded and started for the bar. As Drennan followed Little out the door, he glanced back and saw Wade pause thoughtfully.

The heavy metal door swung half shut by itself. They leaned against opposite sides of it. Little handed
his bottle of Pabst to Drennan. They passed the bottle back and forth silently for a couple of minutes. The night was clear and turning cold. Drennan searched the eastern sky for Orion, but the lights of Helena dimmed the stars. The corrugated steel siding of the quonset hut against his back made him shiver. He'd left his jacket in Little's car. He pushed off the building with his elbows and stood while Little drained the beer bottle. Little hefted it, stepped away from the wall, and turned toward the building.

"No," Drennan said. After a moment, Little heaved the bottle far out onto the lawn.

"Always holding back," Little said. His voice was harsh in the stillness. "What did somebody ever do to you?" Drennan couldn't think of an answer. He could only remember the look of fear he'd seen in Howard's eyes.

"I'll buy you a beer at O'Toole's," Little said, more softly. He started toward the parking lot, and once again, Drennan followed.

Little glanced back over his shoulder as he walked. He stopped so suddenly Drennan ran into him. He was staring at the door. Drennan followed his gaze and then he saw it in the single light above the doorway: a padlock the size of a man's fist, hanging---open---on a hasp
that looked like it was cut from an I-beam. Slowly, he met Little's eyes. His stomach went weak.

"Well, would you look at that," Little breathed. Instead, Drennan looked at the windows. They were of uniform height, about twelve feet off the ground. He tried to remember other exits. There were only the huge garage doors at the ends of the building. Both were firmly bolted and piled high with tables and chairs that had been cleared for the dance.

He caught Little as he was reaching for the lock and wrestled him back.

"Wait," Little said. "I just want to see it."

"You're crazy," Drennan said. Holding him by the wrists, he shoved him back toward the cars.

"Just for a second," Little pleaded. But Drennan was too big. He got Little by the upper arm, marched him to his car, and held the door while Little got in and started it.

He raced the engine. "Let's think this over," he said.

"Nothing to think over," Drennan said, watching him closely. "After you drop me off you can do whatever the fuck you want."

Little shoved the car in gear and eased out of the lot. Just as Drennan was starting to relax, he swung
the VW around with a squeal of tires, drove up over the
curb and lawn, and stopped twenty yards from the door.
The quonset hut was on Drennan's side of the car.

"Think it over," Little said. "You'll never get
another one like this."

"Me?"

"What a story for your grand-kids."

"Come on, will you get out of here?"

Little raced the engine again. The car didn't
move. Drennan couldn't see his face in the darkness,
but he knew the expression.

"They'd know who did it," he said weakly.

"They sure would," said Little.

He sucked in a deep breath. The air held the faint
rubbery reek of a car heater warming up. Then he jerked
the door handle. He banged his knee hard when he swung
his legs out, and it throbbed as he sprinted across the
lawn. Behind him, he heard the engine revving furiously.

Flattened against the wall, he peeked inside. The reek of cigarette smoke filled his nostrils. A figure
with a drink in its hand stood a few feet away. Drennan
heard voices, loud laughter, the shriek of the pedal
steel. He hovered, waiting for the figure to leave. It
started moving toward the door. Drennan pulled back. It
came closer. He shot a panicked look at the VW and stepped
back again.

Then another noise drowned out all the sounds from inside. Just as he realized it was a Volkswagen horn, the figure stepped up to the door. A tall gray-haired man, as distinguished-looking as it is possible to be in an acetate leisure suit, looked curiously at him.

"Is there something going on out here?" the man said. Drennan slammed the door in his face. He slipped the padlock through the hasp, jerked on it once to make sure, and ran like hell for the car.

Halfway, he slowed, then stopped. Without the VW horn, the night was quiet; he could hear a muffled pounding on the inside of the metal door. Unzipping his jeans, he pissed leisurely, feeling only a momentary touch of regret because of Wade. But he knew if he had the key, he'd throw it as far as he could.

He strolled over to the driver's side of the car and leaned his hip against the hood.

"How about that beer?" he said.

"On me," said Little.