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Hooker's Odyssey and other stories

Mark E. Clemens

The University of Montana

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HOOKER'S ODYSSEY
AND OTHER STORIES

By
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B. S., Iowa State University, 1973

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spring 1978
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for Karen
Fruit
Fruit

That night she dreamed she was in the parking lot down by the river. She had just locked the door and started away from the car when she felt the air jump beside her ear and then heard the report of a rifle shot. It was only a dream, but as she put her hand to her ear a white cloud of pigeons erupted from the roof of a nearby hotel.

The next day she drove to the parking lot, to the spot where she had parked in her dream. The space was open and she pulled in. The river, swollen with spring run-off, drowned out the noise of the traffic streaming across the bridge above the lot. A breeze ruffled the grass between the vacant benches along the river bank. She turned in her seat to look at the hotel rising overhead and there were three pigeons perched on top of the dirty gray limestone facade, but no one in sight around the hotel or on the bridge or the stairway down to the lot or among the scattered parked cars or on the grassy bank. Far across the river she saw a man, his raincoated figure dwarfed by the bulk of the old railroad depot, but he was only standing there with his hands in his pockets, no high-powered rifle to be seen.
When she opened the door to get out, there was a spent shell casing lying on the pavement where she would have put her foot. She leaned down and picked the casing up. It was warm and she turned it over and over in her hands, feeling as if she might have just created something, that perhaps her dreams were finally bearing fruit.
Möbius
"Utah, Idaho, Montana."

It was snowing and he was on his knees in the shed. His tears dropped in small clear pools on the smooth dirt floor. The snow fell in a white apron over the rotted wood of the door sill and he could barely see his house across the alley. The town clock began to chime.

"Good morning."

Only then did he realize he was shivering and begin to rub his shoulders. For how long? The desk looked the same as it had before. The dictionary in one corner with his black folder on top. Three paperbacks, open and piled face down on one another in the middle. His coffee mug sitting on two hardbacks stacked in the other corner.

"Anybody there?"

He had heard the voice before. Smoke trailed from the cigarette in the ashtray by his right hand, curling under the hood of the fluorescent light over the desk. The radio crackled on the ledge beside the door.

"Utah, Idaho, Montana. Hello?"

His hands were spread flat on a sheet of stationery directly under the light. The paper was white and blank, the brightest thing on the desk.
"Hello?"

"Well there you are. Didn't think we were going to get anyone."

"Hello?"

"Hello. May we have your name please?"

"Oh, are there three of us on the air?"

"Mam, do you have your radio on?"

"No, I don't think so."

He had often heard this story before. When he was still a boy of ten or so--perhaps twenty years ago--he had had a room up in the attic of the old house. It was a snowy day and he heard cries outside. He saw sleds shooting down the alley beneath his window. He crept down the stairs. His father was asleep on the couch in the living room, his mother washing clothes down in the basement. He stole out the back door.

"Now then, can you hear me better?"

"Well yes. I had my radio on."

"Yes mam. Could I have your name?"

"Orpah Swan. I live in Paradise, Montana. What was your name?"

"Frank Harmon. I'm sitting in for Mel Gibbon tonight."

"I was going to say...I haven't talked to you before."

"No, I'm new on the show."

"I thought you must be. Maybe...I don't know if I should fill you in on all the details."
The backs of his hands were white with faint blue veins running into the sleeves of his rust-colored sweater. The last joint of each finger was dark pink, matching the color underneath his fingernails. There was a black felt-tip pen sticking out from under his left hand. He found the top in the curled fingers of his right hand and capped the pen, setting it at the top of the stationery. His fingers stood out clearly against the white paper. It was still blank.

"How's the weather up that way?"

"Windy, Frank. There's a lot of wind up here."

"Oh."

"I called about that lady a while ago. She was talking about restoring her old house."

"Yes, that was Eva Bridge of Last Chance, Colorado."

"It sounded so beautiful the way she described it."

"Yes, it did."

"It made such a beautiful picture."

It was a winter day and snow was falling. He crept out to the garage where his sled hung from a nail in the wall. It was varnished bright and trimmed in red with black letters slanting down the middle that said PRO RACER. He took it down and went out into the alley. Dropping the sled behind him, he started pulling it up the hill. A strange boy with red hair whizzed by on a metal saucer, just missing him. The top of the hill was lost in snow.
He opened his eyes and looked down at his hands. They were pressed down on the stationery. He took a puff of the cigarette and ground it out. The radio snapped and popped on the ledge and, glancing up, he caught sight of something moving in the darkness of the basement outside the door.

"Isn't it nice the way people all over this country are fixing up the older homes?"

"Oh yes. It was such a beautiful picture."

"Uh huh."

"My doctor says to keep a beautiful picture in my mind, and that's what I always think of--the old house where I grew up in Klamath Falls, Klamath Falls--"

"Oregon?"

"Yes. It was so beautiful in the autumn with the trees bright red and orange and yellow. Whenever things start to bothering me, I just concentrate real hard on the memory of it."

"Oh."

"I'm almost totally blind, you know."

"Ah, I see."

He passed a hand in front of his eyes. Smoke hung in the air. He realized he was not alone. In the corner of his eye there was a silhouette in the door only three or four feet away.
He had heard it all. It is snowing and he is flying down the alley on his sled. His house is a yellowish hulk at the bottom of the hill. Halfway down, three boys step out of the blurring white into his path. He turns his sled into a pile of snow and flips over on his back. Grabbing his arms, the strangers hustle him into a gray shed beside the alley. One boy pins his right arm behind his back while the red-headed boy he had seen before stands in front of him.

See that? the red-head snickers and points. They turn him so he can see a gutted deer hanging head down in the dim light of the shed. Snow blows in through a window covered with ragged burlap.

See that? We're going to do that to you if we catch you in our alley again.

His lip begins to tremble.

See? the red-head sneers in his face. We'll hang you up by your thumbs and cut you up and leave you here to rot. The other boy twists his arm until he is on his knees and crying on the dirt floor. Then they leave and he is alone and snowflakes blow through the burlap, landing on the deer like white flies that melt into red.

"I live all alone in a small apartment here in Paradise. But I can feel my way around pretty good."

"Well fine."

"You don't have to worry about me, Frank."
"You certainly sound well, Orpah."

"I have a tape recorder that I record beautiful things on the radio with. Like your programs."

"Well, thank you."

He heard a faint tinkling of bells. It was snowing and he was on his knees in the shed and the town clock began to chime. He opened his eyes. The radio was ringing with bells.

"Oh, there's Tinkerbell already. My time must be up."

"Yes, that's too bad, but the news is coming up pretty quick. It's been nice talking to you, Orpah."

"It was nice talking to you, Frank. I think your show's just wonderful. I've been listening since 1965 and I love all the Nightlifers, and I love you too, Frank."

"Well, we love you too, Orpah, and, oh, there's Tinkerbell again."

Snow blew through the door into his tears on the smooth dirt floor. He heard a voice calling up the alley. He heard bells very far away and passed his hand in front of his eyes.

"I'm seventy-six years young, but I'd love you anyhow."

"Well call us again soon, Orpah. Got to say good-bye now."

"My love is just as great as some of these young ones."

Someone was calling his name as the town clock began to chime and he jumped as something cool touched the nape of his neck. Someone was bending down next to him. The radio
crackled on the ledge. A cheek against his. It was as if no one had heard. The stationery was still blank.

"When are you coming to bed?" She kissed him on the cheek. "It's three in the morning, you know."

He picked up the pen in both hands and turned to her. "I'll be up pretty quick. Okay?"

"It looks like you haven't even started."

He shrugged. "Well."

"Just say anything," she smiled, "They'd be happy to hear from you."

Her face came to his, blotting out the darkness. Then she was gone, her nightgown rustling as she went up the stairs.

He turned to the desk again. A wisp of smoke threaded out of the ashtray into the fluorescent light. There was news on the radio. The stationery was blank white. He uncapped the pen.
Hooker's Odyssey
OVERFLOW ON THE KUSCO

The river was two miles wide in places. It was called the Kusco-wim and it wound between vast bars of mud and sand and gravel and boulders, twisting back on itself as far as the eye could see. Dark and cold, it chattered underneath the shelves of ice extending out from shore. In places pressure bubbles had bowed the ice into domes fifty yards across and higher than a man's head. There were great piles of tangled downfall logs beached by high water all along the banks and bars. It was a warm March day, almost up to 20 degrees, and a crosswind of about 15 mph blew over the valley, whispering in the pines beyond the fields of snow and whistling through the strands of grass that hung like human hair from the limbs of snarled logs. From upstream came a sound then, a faint sound like a raccoon scratching at an egg, and gradually it grew until it was a rasping in the wind.

A pair of dogs burst around a gigantic logjam, then a whole string of dogs running side-by-side, fourteen in all, their breath coming in even puffs as they leaned into the gangline pulling a sled that scrabbled crazily over the gravel, its runners resisting every step the dogs took. A man in a blue parka stood at the back of the sled on the ends of the
runners, his hood thrown back and shed of his mittens on this warm day. Jack Hooker's silver-gray hair plunged into a bushy salt-and-pepper beard that blew back over his shoulder as he urged his team on in a loud, steady voice. He yelled hike twice, then again and ran for a way as he held the high handles of the sled. Then hike, hike and he hopped on the runners for a rest, then off again, lightening the load as much as he could for the hard-working dogs. His face was that of a man in his mid-forties, but healthy and toughened by long hours in all kinds of weather. His gray eyes watched the dogs for any signs of limp and searched out the easiest path along the banks of the Kusco. They also searched for a sign of the trail he had lost miles back upstream. For now Hooker had to content himself with following the track of two solitary runners that led downstream through the gravel and mud—the tracks of one other sled that had passed before him—and hope he was going the right way.

The Kusco began to spread out—two miles, three, four—until it was a lake stretching across the entire valley. At first, Hooker guided the team over the glare ice that covered the slower-moving water; then he came to the dark water creeping back over the ice—overflow—the Kusco was flowing back over itself.

He tried to stay as close to the shoreline as he could, but soon there wasn't any shoreline and the dogs were swimming
all over the place and getting tangled up in their lines and
the brush choking the way. Hooker worked his way up to the
snarled dogs, holding onto the gangline as he went, for with
the heavy boots and clothing he was wearing, one step into
deep water could mean trouble. He would go under and that
would be it. He struggled through the process of freeing
the dogs several times, and then he realized it was useless.
Brush clogged every possible path; the lake stretched out of
sight over the horizon; he turned the team around.

Later Hooker would find out he had gone twenty miles
out of his way--the wrong way--along with Joe Redington, the
other driver whose tracks he had followed. Backtracking to
dry land, he unhooked the dogs and built a fire. The huskies
dried themselves by rolling in the snow on the river bank.
Hooker put on dry clothes from the sled and hung the wet ones
on sticks beside the fire. Hands out to the flames, he looked
back up the Kusco and thought of the miles and winding miles
he had come that day.

THE KIDS OF MCGRATH
The signs began to appear fifteen miles from the checkpoint
in McGrath. The letters were crooked and scrawled in brilli-
ant red and green and blue paint and said things like, "Keep
on Mushin'" or "Keep on Truckin'." The dogs were running
good, at full speed as they always were at the end of the day.
Lucky and Ranger, in lead position at the head of the team, had been going hard and fast all day long. Hooker felt great.

McGrath was the first real town since he'd left Anchorage at the start of the Iditarod Trail Race some 400 miles ago. Except for the Kusco, the trail had been downright monotonous most of the time. For a while it would run straight over pretty low-rolling hills, and then he would be riding rum-dum over those same hills. He would come to a beautiful river winding through the trees and everything would be fine. Two days later the river would still be winding through the trees and Hooker, just plain bored, would be praying for a change, any change at all. There were stretches where he didn't see another dog team for days and even when he did, the native drivers were a quiet crew because he was an outsider, a Montanan in what they considered an Alaskan race.

But now Hooker thought of hot coffee and a hot meal with real food, not the dehydrated stuff he had been eating for a week. More signs flashed by and he thought of a hot shower. The team topped a rise in the trail and a few of the dogs started yipping as they sensed what Hooker saw down the corridor of trees--smoke rising out of the wilderness from a dark cluster of buildings far ahead that was McGrath.

A bed, a warm bed. Hooker smiled. Then he thought of his wife and three children over 2,000 miles away. He hadn't seen them for more than a month. The smile stiffened.
Then they started to materialize out of the pines along the trail. In red and orange and blue parkas, brown and white faces beaming, laughing and shouting, the kids of McGrath waved at Hooker as they ran out of the trees and piled one-by-one onto his sled for the last miles' ride into town.

POORMAN

Night had fallen and Hooker still had miles to go before he reached Poorman. A full moon was on the rise and the dogs' breath trailed back in thin streams of silver. Hooker had already strapped a head lamp on over the bill of his cap. The head lamp was his only source of light when running at night, but with the moon he thought of switching it off. The trail, a deep rut left by the sleds ahead, was a dark line in the white snow that led straight on beside a low ridge to the right. Hooker had just turned off his head lamp when a wolf appeared on the crest of the ridge. Hooker saw him silhouetted against the arctic night, black and lean beneath the moon riding the treetops, and then he heard him. The wolf raised its head to the sky and a long howl echoed out over the countryside.

"Hike," Hooker said, almost whispering to his dogs. He heard a low growl from Polar Bear, the pure-white Siberian Husky who ran in one of the wheel slots nearest the sled. The hair on Polar Bear's back bristled in the moonlight.
As the sled passed the wolf, Hooker saw it reach up for another howl then swing into motion, striding along the ridge slightly behind the pace of the team.

"Hike!" Hooker said louder and with a sense of urgency as the wolf howled again.

Wailing all the way, the lone wolf followed Hooker and the team until the lights of Poorman came out of the night. Then it swung off the chase and back into the wilderness although Hooker was still haunted by its howls faint and far away.

Poorman was asleep. Hooker coasted through the small town looking for a house with a light where he could ask for lodging. It was then he spotted the old deserted cabin. On closer inspection he found it didn't have a door or any glass in the windows, but there was a pot-bellied stove and the rats scurried back into the shadows when he stepped inside. He hung burlap over the windows and lit a fire in the stove. He fed the dogs and hung their harnesses inside to dry and then fixed himself a bowl of soup. While he made minor repairs on the sled late into the night, the wolf howled twice more and the dogs stirred and growled outside as Hooker laughed with his shadow on the cabin wall.

At the first sign of dawn, Hooker woke the team and made ready for the day's run. The huskies always started each day slowly, leaving every stop that meant rest and food
behind with a great reluctance. For the first mile they kept whining and looking back over their shoulders sadly as Poorman and the old cabin dwindled in the distance. This time Hooker found himself watching with them.

A FIRE IN THE CANYON

The trail had come to an end. Hooker and another driver, Dick Mackey, stood on the banks of Bear Creek looking to where the trail should have started up again on the other side. There was only snow—three feet of fresh powder from the night before.

Hooker looked at Mackey, whose dark eyes darted back at him from under a blue wool cap pulled down low. He was about the same age, but taller and more wiry, almost scrawny-looking in his tattered gray parka. Hooker knew Mackey was a native Alaskan and a tough competitor who'd run in all three previous Iditarod Races, finishing seventh the last time out. This time he'd been the frontrunner for much of the race and, today, first to Bear Creek. Tugging at his beard, Hooker pulled a battered can of Skoal out of his coat pocket. "Looks like we'll be stuck here for a while," he said, offering Mackey a chew.

Mackey looked at him and nodded. "Yeah," he said, digging out some tobacco and nodding his thanks.
Hooker took a pinch for himself and stuffed the can back into his pocket. Working the wad under his lip, he gazed across the snowfield into the trees and tugged at his beard. "How long," he asked over his chew, "do you suppose it'll take the snowmobiles to get here?" He knew it would probably take the snowmobiles until tomorrow or the next day to break a new trail from Ruby, 100 miles to the north. But he waited for Mackey.

Mackey shrugged and spit. "Don't know."

They stood on the creek bank awhile longer and then parted for their separate camps without a word.

The dogs were staked out at the end of a long narrow canyon that ran below the dilapidated buildings of a ghost town. More than half of the drivers had already caught up with the leaders, and all had bivouacked in the shelter of the canyon, even though there wasn't any wood or water. Most men were busy settling in, and the canyon echoed with the snarls and barking of huskies.

Hooker broke his team down and climbed out of the canyon in search of fuel for a fire. There was plenty of wood for a scavenger in the ghost town. Hooker was ripping boards off a caved-in shed when he saw a tire inside. It was huge—as high as Hooker's head when he rolled it out—a huge old tractor tire. Grabbing an armful of wood, Hooker began rolling the tire back toward the canyon.
The first musher came over just as the fire started to roar, shooting flames high into the air. A dark man in mukluks and sealskin, he ambled up and stopped at the edge of the heat, looking at Hooker all the while as if inspecting him.

"Howdy," he said and held his hands up to the warmth of the flames.

"Lo," Hooker replied. He tossed his last load of boards into the tire.

"That's a good idea, buildin' your fire in that tire," the other man said. He motioned toward the ghost town with his head. "What d'ya suppose it was doin' up there?"

"Don't know," said Hooker, tugging at his beard. "Maybe they did some roadwork or mining around here at one time. I don't know."

Then the musher stepped around the fire and offered an open hand. "My name's Warner Vent."

Hooker was surprised: up until now none of the native drivers had gone out of their way to be friendly, and here was this man.

"Jack Hooker here," he said, and they shook hands.

Soon every musher in the canyon was milling around the bonfire. Hooker finally felt accepted and was putting names with some of the faces for the first time. Vent was there of course, and so were Mackey and Joe Redington and
Terry Adkins, Ford Reeves, Tom Mercer, Harry Sutherland, Jerry Riley, Rudy Demoski and his cousin, Bill, to name a few. The canyon reverberated with human voices instead of barking dogs, and somebody had a bottle of whiskey, and everybody had their stories from the trail.

A young driver with a bristly blond beard passed along some news from the last checkpoint everyone was glad to hear: Norman Vaughan was alive and well, although he'd had to drop out of the race. Vaughan, who had been a dog driver in Admiral Richard Byrd's assault on the South Pole in 1929, was the oldest entrant in the Iditarod at 70 years. Last year he's been forced out with frostbitten feet, and this year he had taken a wrong turn and been lost somewhere around Rainy Pass for four days.

Some of the other drivers recalled how tough the mountain pass had been and Hooker joined in, telling how he chose to run on a frozen river instead of the trail, even when it headed downhill in a long rapids. The dogs were sliding out of control when the sled glanced off a rock and they flew up a bulging pressure bubble of ice and, shooting down the other side, he saw the boiling blue hole at the bottom of the hill and shouted gee, gee, gee at the top of his lungs as the dogs, slipping and scrambling wildly, just missed a headlong plunge into the open water.
Everybody shook their heads, passed the bottle and another tale began. Many of the drivers were talking shop: a few dogs had split pads or diarrhea, their sleds were coming apart at the joints or harnesses were cracked and wearing through, fox or wolf fur was the best lining for coats and gloves, and mukluks made the best footwear. Others talked of the trail ahead and how the race should really open up when they hit the flat country around the Yukon River at Ruby—only 500 miles left then to the finish line in Nome. Some told of their jobs around the state, their families, their wives, their children. Hooker got to talking about the dude ranch, the White Tail Ranch, he owned and operated near Ovando, Montana. A few men spoke of the hardships and loneliness out on the trail. A few murmured between themselves of dropping out.

The next morning bush pilots circled overhead like buzzards, and one plane dropped supplies for the waiting drivers. No one knew for sure how soon the snowmobiles might arrive at Bear Creek and, since there was nothing else to do, Hooker and Harry Sutherland decided to snowshoe ahead to meet them. Some of the other drivers thought it was a good idea, but nobody offered to go along.

By mid-afternoon they had snowshoed fifteen miles from Bear Creek and there was still no sign of snowmobiles. The only sound was the swish of their shoes through the powder
and an occasional rush and flurry as a nearby pine dumped its boughes of snow. Hooker talked about shaving his beard off because it was always getting snagged in his coat zipper. Sutherland, a native musher also running in his first Iditarod, showed Hooker the sores and blisters on his neck. He was telling him how he'd made the mistake of shaving off his beard after the race had started when they heard dogs in the distance behind them. Hooker and Sutherland turned in their tracks and waited in disbelief. One-by-one the whole group of drivers approached and passed them standing there, some laughing, some looking the other way.

"I'll be dammed," said Sutherland.

"Guess they decided to get a headstart," said Hooker.

The long line disappeared into the pines and Hooker and Sutherland began the long trek back to Bear Creek.

As he trudged into the canyon, snowshoes dragging, Hooker came to his dogs and sled and stopped beside the bonfire of the night before. It was still smouldering inside the charred sidewalls and the trampled slush around the tire had turned to ice. Hooker bent down to pick up a bottle, then paused, stooped over and listening to the far-off buzz of snowmobiles.

PTARMIGAN SNOW

It was bright behind the white gauze and he had to cut it. Hooker opened his eyes. Last night's fire had sputtered
into a black hole in the snow and Hitler, one of the Alaskan huskies who ran point, lay curled up on the other side. Beyond that stretched the pines, dark teepees scattered to the horizon of a cloudless, deep blue sky.

Brushing his crusted eyelids clean, Hooker struggled out of his sleeping bag and stepped out of the sled, flapping his arms as the early morning air—still hovering near 20 degrees below zero—snapped away his body warmth. He zipped his parka up, careful to lift his beard out of the way, and began rummaging through the sled.

Hitler raised his head and barked for breakfast. Hooker had pulled him out of line and put him by the fire when he refused to bed down, keeping the other dogs awake and restless with his yipping and whining. The rest of the team were black balls of fur along the path out to the main trail a hundred feet away. To camp for the night, Hooker had tromped out a wide arc off the trail with his snowshoes and driven the dogs and sled into rest like a train on a siderail. Polar Bear stirred, black nose flashing out from under his bushy white tail, and stood up at the front of the sled and Lucky was on his feet stretching at the far end of the line and then they were all up and barking as Hooker started down the line, tossing each his morning ration of meat and rice patties which they gobbled down whole and frozen.

Hooker's hopes were always for good weather, and it looked like it was going to be a clear day. He had come
250 miles since McGrath, north through Bear Creek and Poor-man to Ruby and then down the Yukon through Galena and Koyukuk and Nulato, down the Yukon where the trail ran along the side of the river banks the whole day long and he had to ride on the top runner to keep the sled from slipping and jerking the wheel dogs into exhaustion. Yesterday he'd left the Yukon basin at Kaltag and cut overland toward Unalakleet on the coast of the Bering Sea. With a good run today he could make Unalakleet by nightfall.

Things went well for several hours. The trees were becoming sparse as Hooker neared the ocean and the land flatter, gently undulating in and out of wide shallow valleys. Then, as the team broke over the crest of another valley, a shadow fell over the sun and it was lost in a whirling snowstorm. Hooker grimaced--suddenly it had started to snow, which meant slower going and maybe another night on the trail. As the team began their descent into the valley, Hooker took a second look at the snowstorm and blinked. It wasn't snow but a swirling vision of birds, a blurred blizzard of birds, ptarmigans, thousands of pure-white arctic ptarmigans fluttering up the valley en masse.

INTO THE WIND

Hooker looked back over his shoulder but there was only wind-driven snow closing down fifty feet behind him. He could
barely see the towering pile of ice he had just guided the team around. Ahead was more ice and snow and the light was fading rapidly from gray to black. A jagged ridge of ice loomed up overhead and Hooker shouted hoarsely to the team. "Gee! gee!" he shouted as loud as he could to reach Lucky running at the head of the line. The ridge slid by on the left.

Head into the wind, they had told him, head into the wind.

He had started out from Unalakleet early that morning, looking for clear weather and, by nightfall, Shaktoolik, another tiny coastal town to the north. The villagers at Unalakleet had told him the easiest route to Shaktoolik was over Norton Sound, an arm of the Bering Sea. Forty miles of ice—it had sounded good, but this wasn't any skating rink. He had to steer the dogs on a winding course through the mountains of ice heaved up by the massive pressures of the shifting ice pack. He watched constantly for the cracks the villagers said might appear in the ice, dark crevices down to cold water that could swallow one or all of the dogs. And they had warned him that, in the event of a big storm, the water could blow over the ice far out to sea and come rushing inland in long deep waves. Overflow—he's had enough of that on the Kusco, but the big storm had come and black water lurked in the back of his mind.
Head into the wind. The wind always blows south out of Shaktoolik.

"Haw!" Hooker shouted as Lucky wandered off course. "Hike!" he yelled, "Hike!" as the lead dog righted himself. Jumping off the runners, Hooker ran for a way and jumped back on, tightening his grip on the handles. Adkins and Riley and Reeves had let him lead the way out of Unalakleet into the ice fields and then followed his trail. They were catching up---Hooker had heard them calling to their dogs---when the storm came down and now they all might be caught for the night. Hooker had an idea of just how cold it really was, but knew he could stay out on the ice all night in the blizzard if he had to, even without a fire. It was true his fingers were a little stiff inside his light trigger mittens, and that his face ached from the freezing air that pressed in the long tunnel of his parka hood like an icy hand and frosted his beard and eyebrows white. But otherwise he was warm, and there were even heavier clothes packed in the sled. After two weeks in arctic weather he had grown accustomed to never being totally warm but never cold enough to worry about.

Hooker looked over his shoulder, but there was nothing. He listened, straining to catch what he had thought was the voice of another driver, but there was only the long incessant rise and fall of the wind.
Head straight into the wind if a storm comes up, they had told him. The wind will take you to Shaktoolik.

But the wind was a 30 mph blizzard and, with the temperature around 40 below zero, the dogs would not go straight into it. Again, Lucky turned away from the biting, stinging snow, and Hooker decided to quarter with the blizzard, angling to the right and then back to the left, hoping somehow he ended up in Shaktoolik.

It was completely dark now outside his tunnel hood, and time to put on the head lamp for what little light its feeble beam could provide. "Gee!" Hooker called and the team swung into a gap between two walls of ice. They swooped out in the open again, down through a depression and—Hooker gritted his teeth—bumped over a yard-wide crevice. Passing over, he saw that it was filled with snow. Then he tromped on the foot brake, a board that hung underneath the length of the sled, and yelled the team to a halt. He walked down the gangline, checking to see if any of the dogs had thrown their booties, the rough-weather foot coverings of canvas and leather hand-made by his wife, Karen, months ago. None had, and they all looked to be in good shape. Lucky and Spider had already curled up with their tails over their noses. As he trudged back to the sled, Hooker fumbled in his coat pocket for the head lamp, flexing his other hand as he did so.
It was then he realized his hands were colder than he had thought. Unable to grasp the lamp, he withdrew the hand and tried to flex it. He tried to flex both hands. He could barely feel them inside his mittens. His hands were numb, too numb to move.

THE LAST MILE

Quickly Hooker tipped the sled over and, dropping down in its shelter, yanked his mittens off with his teeth and shoved his frozen hands into his pants. With his teeth he clamped onto one of the leather thongs that held the sled tarpaulin shut and pulled, but the knot was frozen and he had to jerk until his jaws were sore before it finally came loose. He broke more knots until the tarp fell open and he reached in, feeling nothing in his fingers after they were out in the air for a few seconds. The first thing he came to were a pair of heavy woolen coveralls. He began to wiggle them on bit by bit, but they snagged and caught on his bulky white rubber bunny boots and, fingers useless on the frozen laces, he had to rest. He tried again, hooking his thumbs under the belt and tugging on the coveralls as he bucked and rocked on his back in the ice and snow. Then he lay exhausted and panting, every breath a stab of sharp frigid air, every heartbeat shooting needles into his hands thawing like chunks of marble on his sweating abdomen while he watched the wind through iced-over eyelashes, the wind
raging over the edge of the sled as if it were trying to get at him, screaming and wailing like something furious and alive. He took several more breathing spells, each one longer than the last until it seemed hours had gone by. Then, with the last of his strength, he had the coveralls up to his waist.

He scraped the pair of arctic mittens he had in reserve out of the sled onto the ground. The heavy leather gauntlets were filled with down and lined with nylon and came almost to his elbows when he had them on. Hooker picked one up and put it between his knees. He had thought his hands were beyond pain, but when he first touched the nylon lining it was the coldest thing on earth. Pushing a hand down into the forearm sheath was agony, and then his fingers curled and jammed in the narrow elastic opening above the mitt. The mitten fell in the snow. Hooker stuck his hands in his pants and bent double for a full minute. Then, as gingerly as a carnival crane, he picked the mitten up with the heels of his hands and gripped it between his knees. He straightened the fingers of one hand and lowered it into the mitten quickly before they curled up again, sliding into the nylon searing his naked wrist like gasoline as the wind tore at his bare skin, freezing the tears that dripped into a clenched grin and the hand slid home. The mitten was on. Hooker's
breathing was a little shakey. He put his bare hand back in
his pants, the mitten up under his arm and waited for blood.

Gee, haw, gee, haw, gee—Hooker kept driving on through
the wind and snow. He had started running the dogs over the
ice ridges instead of around them. Repeatedly, he had to
untangle the dogs' gangline, but he still hoped to save time.
He had given up on working straight into the wind and was
quartering to the right, so that if he missed Shaktoolik at
least it would be to the landward side.

Then the team stopped and would not start up again despite
his commands. Hooker ran up front to investigate and there
in the beam of his head lamp sat Lucky at the foot of a low
icy wall. Hooker saw he was completely confused from the
constantly changing commands and that he'd had it with leading
the team. He put him further back in line, but Lucky refused
to run at all; he was finished for the night. Hooker put him
in the sled then and started the team off with Ranger at lead.

After several miles of rough going, the dogs ran into a
stretch of smooth snow-covered ice. Hooker relaxed and gave
the team its head. By the time he saw the crack it was too
late. The dogs were plunging across and the sled dropped,
landing on the far edge with a crash, and Lucky bounced into
the air. Hooker grabbed for him, but he fell back into the
crevise as the sled moved out of danger. Hooker stopped the
team and ran back. Lucky was sitting on the snowy bottom a
few feet below, his tongue hanging out in a dog's smile. Hooker pulled him out by the scruff of his neck, and they started off again.

Hooker was riding half-asleep on the runners when he saw a light in the darkness ahead. Shaktoolik! He urged the team on faster. The light disappeared in the snow, but he knew he had seen it and it looked like it was only a mile away. Gee, haw—the light appeared and disappeared, seeming to shift every time he came to the top of a ridge. Hooker realized it was further away than he had thought at first, but still, it was there. Gee, haw, gee . . . Four hours later he was in Shaktoolik.

In the morning the blizzard was still blowing. Groggy after only four hours' sleep, Hooker watched the snowflakes feather against the window pane and fall into a pile on the sill. His host, a native fisherman named Emmitt Towarok, appeared at the table with a pot of coffee and filled both their cups. Hooker thanked him and blew on his as he thought back on the night before. It was hot in the small, three-room house, and the Towaroks were very friendly. Mrs. Towarok was fixing breakfast in the other room. The smell of caribou filled the air and it was hot like a steam room, but he had to feed the dogs. Then he could sleep. With the storm he and the drivers who had made it to Shaktoolik would have to hole up and the others would catch up anyway. A big, dark-haired man in a red-and-black checked coat came out of the
snow and knocked on the door of the house. He said something to the woman and she came into where they sat and spoke to her husband. He nodded and she went back into the kitchen. Emmitt Towarok took a drink of coffee and burned his tongue. He looked at Hooker. One of the villagers, he explained, a young native boy, had been lost out on the ice in the blizzard for three days. They had found his body this morning. The funeral would be tomorrow. Hooker looked out the window and saw the man in the red-and-black coat walking down the hill into the snow. It was the only window in the house.

SHAKTOOLIK
Later in the afternoon, Hooker stood on the hillside overlooking Shaktoolik. The storm had let up enough to see the houses huddled at the bottom of the hill along the edge of the ice-locked bay. He had just talked with Sutherland and Riley who were staying in another home close by. Blizzard conditions were forecast for the next several days, and they had debated whether to start out during this partial lull. But there was another 40 miles of ice from Shaktoolik to Koyuk over the northern arm of Norton Sound, and the villagers had warned them not to cross to Koyuk in a storm, afraid they might lose their bearings and go round in circles until they perished. Close to half the drivers had straggled into town during the day, and the grapevine consensus seemed to be for waiting until the blizzard passed over.
Hooker pulled the can of Skoal out of his parka and dug out a chew. Shaking the snow out of his hood, he pulled it on and, as he did so, gazed back up the hill at the Towarok house. Snow drifted halfway up the tarpaper siding. Through the window he saw the woman moving about inside. Last night she served him a steaming bowl of caribou stew which he wolfed down, then threw right back up before falling asleep on the floor. He had realized time and time again on this trip how soft and spoiled his own people were. Even he, who made his living guiding dudes around the rugged mountains of western Montana, didn't know if he could take this way of life. The natives had a full time job just staying alive. While he had barely won his struggle to survive last night in the blizzard, a nameless boy had lost. And nearly every family in Shaktoolik had lost at least one member on the ice pack. They had to be a hard, tough people. It seemed instead of growing old, they all died out on the ice.

As the moments drew on, Hooker experienced the letdown that set in when he wasn't racing on the trail. He was doing well in the race, especially for an outsider, and had a good chance to finish high in the standings. But now his thoughts roamed homeward, back over ice and mountain and the dark miles of the AlCan Highway to Montana and Ovando, the White Tail Ranch, kitchen warm of a morning when he had just returned from an early training run with the dogs, Karen at the stove
and the kids stirring upstairs, getting dressed for school as she set the plate before him, ham and eggs with bubbling whites.

The blizzard had drawn back, lifting its gray veil so Hooker could see the bay. It looked like there was another village dotting the ice, but the dots were only the outhouses of Shaktoolik, all facing out to sea. Hooker spit out some tobacco and started down the hill, leaving a brown spot in the snow.

He scrambled over the rough ice along the shoreline and made his way to the nearest outhouse. Rounding the corner of the little shack, he stopped in front of the door. Inside the shadows of the outhouse a mountain rose toward the roof. Hooker closed his eyes and opened them again. It was a frozen pile of human waste. He shook his head, then took his first step onto the notched stairway that led to the top of the pyramid.

A LONG TIME TO BE

Hooker put his hand in front of his face again, reassuring himself with the sight of his dark mitten. It seemed like hours had passed. The trail to Koyuk had been well marked with willow stakes leading straight over the surprisingly smooth ice pack; but then the low heavy clouds had come rolling in from sea and, even knowing what was to come, Hooker couldn't escape a feeling of dread. The natives had warned
about whiteouts. Polar Bear was invisible ten feet away, his pure-white fur blending into the surrounding whiteness. The natives had described perfectly what it would be like, but even with that he still felt like a tiny gnat in an enormous white balloon. Claustrophobia clutched at his throat. He could barely see the dark hindquarters of Lucky and Ranger churning away at the head of the team while the fronts of their bodies vanished steadily into the white wall that rose up and over, everything was up and over in dense absolute whiteness and he saw a bright spot rising overhead and looked away but the sun was in the sled like it had been there all along and it burned into his eyes, the sun above, dark water below spinning, yea though I walk through the valley, dark fingers in white. "They're gone!" the voice shook him and he sat up, rubbing his eyes, and Emmitt Towarok swayed above him in the dim room, "Everyone's gone," he said, "The last driver's pulling out now," and he tore out of his sleeping bag as Towarok moved to the window, "No, there's another team; you won't be too far behind if you hurry," as he rushed out of the house into the darkness of pre-dawn and a wet heavy snowfall slanting into his face, and panicked when he couldn't remember which way the dogs were, his frantic eyes searching the dark shapes of buildings for the one he would recognize and then he saw it—a long low building down the hill—and he ran, hearing something in the wind, or above it, mingling
but different, swelling and fading as he slid into the wind-
carved trench between the side of the building and the drifted
snow, some of the dogs lifting their heads and the sound was
coming from inside the building, it was singing, some ritual,
and he began hitching up the dogs, getting halfway down the
line before he understood the low throbbing under the singing
was an organ, they were singing hymns, the building was a
church and--wailing high and moaning low--it was the funeral--
sobs and crying--they were putting the boy to rest, so, hushed
he took Lucky by the harness and led the team up and out of
the trench into the calm air where snowflakes twirled down
in the light of the salmon sky over the flatlands east of
Shaktoolik, hearing the drone of shadow of death in green
pastures beside cool waters, and the organ throbbing, the
voices rising, " . . as he walks the last mile . . " as he
whispered hike and the dogs were off into the sun rising for-
ever white.

"Whoa," Hooker yelled in terror, thinking he had fallen
off the sled or the dogs had broken loose. He covered his
eyes for a long time, but when he opened them the whiteout
seemed to have intensified. All he could see was the sled;
then, gripping the handles, wanting to get out of this night-
mare, he yelled, "Hike!" and felt the team pick up speed.

"Polar Bear," he called then, and saw the nose and slitted
eyes turn to him beautifully black.
AIRLIFT

Hooker felt every bump of the sled go straight to his bones. The dogs were flying over the low hills on the trail to White Mountain. Their pace was too fast for Hooker to run behind the sled, and he was too tired anyway.

After Koyuk he had raced neck and neck with Rudy Demoski for sixty miles. He'd slept only three hours in Koyuk, and had to sleep when they reached Golovin. He asked the old woman there to wake him after four hours and then passed out in her armchair. Through some misunderstanding she woke him only two hours later. Stiff and still in a stupor, Hooker decided to continue anyway and went outside to roust the dogs, but when he picked them up and folded their legs down, they just curled back into a ball. He stumbled back in the cabin for two more hours of sleep, this time on a couch covered with furs.

Up to that point, Hooker thought he could finish as high as fifth or sixth. The dogs were all in good shape, and it was just 97 miles to Nome from Golovin. But when he woke up, the old woman was calmly knitting in her armchair. Eleven hours and twenty-six teams had gone by.

To add to his troubles, one of the younger dogs, Alabama, had lost his pep and was of no help to the team at all. He lay in the sled now, sleeping under a corner of the tarpaulin.
The team was racing across a flat just outside White Mountain when Hooker heard a buzzing overhead and looked up to see an airplane gliding in for a landing nearby. He recognized the plane as it touched down, sending up a spray of snow. The bush pilot stood up on the wing of the plane and waved. It was Larry Thompson, whom he'd talked to several times in the course of the race. As always, he was wearing Air Force sunglasses and a red hunting vest with stickers and badges plastered all over it. He helped a woman in a blue parka down to the ground and they started toward Hooker and the team.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," Hooker said as they walked up.

The woman began petting the dogs as Thompson, sunlight glittering in his glasses, strode over and shook Hooker's hand.

"You're still alive," he said, "We thought you were lost."

"Nah, I just fell behind," Hooker said, trailing off, He pointed at Alabama. "There's something you could do that'd really help me out. Alabama here started running like a zombie all of sudden. Maybe you could take him on ahead to Nome."

"Sure, glad to," Thompson said. The woman moved up to the sled and said Alabama's name. The dog perked up his ears.
"I wish you could take me," said Hooker.
"You look a little down in the mouth."
"I'm just tired," Hooker mumbled. "I don't care anymore.
"Hey, don't give up now," said Thompson as the woman wandered between the two of them. "You're doing great and there's not that far to go."

"Ah, I blew it back at Golovin," Hooker said, trying to look around the woman. Then she shook him by the shoulders.
"Don't you know who I am?" she asked.

The hood of her parka was trimmed with white fur and she had glasses on. "Oh my god," he said, and drew her into his arms. He could see Thompson grinning. It was Karen.

HOW THE STORY ENDS
Miles away, the lights of Nome sparkled on a low cape jutting out in the ocean. Hooker smiled and lay back in the sled, cradling his head in his hands and content to let the dogs finish the race on their own. Karen had flown ahead with Thompson and Alabama, and soon he would be there, too. At times it had seemed like the Iditarod would never come to an end. At times he had been mad, depressed, lonely, afraid, ready to give up, too tired to go on. But now, with Nome in sight and 1,049 miles under his belt, Hooker could even afford to chuckle.

He had caught up with Demoski near Solomon, the last town before Nome. Scooping up handfuls of snow, he threw
it at the dogs and felt the blood galloping out of his heart in rhythm with their charging pace. Demoski and his team were a black speck running toward the setting sun.

When Hooker barreled into Solomon, Demoski's team was standing outside the general store. Even though he was near the end of the race, Hooker knew the dogs could use some vitamins and he slowed them down.

He met Demoski in the door with a package under his arm. They nodded to each other and Demoski smiled. Hooker hurried in and asked for a bottle of B-12 as he dug in his pocket for the money.

"Dogs need a pick-me-up, eh?" the young clerk said as he rang up the purchase.

"Yeah," Hooker said.

"They must need it real bad."

"No. I just figure they'll be that much faster with a shot of this stuff." Hooker started for the door.

"That other guy must have some real hungry dogs," said the clerk.

Hooker stopped. "Why's that?"

"He just came in here and bought twenty-five pounds of fish."

Hooker ran out the door. His dogs were where he had left them, all engrossed in choking down the fish Demoski had scattered over the ground. Hooker knew they wouldn't
budge until they were finished. He looked up to see Demoski disappearing over the crest of a hill.

Faint horns carried through the sound of the sled's whizzing runners, and Hooker raised his head again. Now he could see streets and buildings strung with lights and a brightly-lit arch that would be the finish line. But the lights of Nome were still dim by comparison to the blazing show he had been watching overhead with awe.

Green and purple, yellow and blue, the Aurora Borealis snaked across the whole northern sky in shimmering bands. They were the brightest Hooker had ever seen. Tomorrow he would collect $300 for placing 19th, which wouldn't even pay for the gas to get home. But now the dogs were yipping with excitement as the flashing colors danced in Hooker's eyes, filling his head until he felt as big as the sky. It seemed a fitting way to finish.
Down an American Alley
Down an American Alley

1. Face of the Drifter

A man with a guitar slung over his back came into the cafe. He stood by the door, blinking under the brim of his brown felt hat, and then slid onto a seat next to the cash register. The two girls on the other side of the register glanced at him and, looking away, leaned in the opposite direction. Outside the street shimmered in the sun and turned to black ooze, but he had the hat pulled down low and his coat, a heavy gray parka that hung almost to the floor, was zipped up to his throat. He lifted the guitar over his head and laid it carefully on the stool beside him.

Canfield crushed his cigarette in an ashtray and nudged Maxwell in the ribs. Maxwell sighed and turned to Canfield, who nodded toward the man. Maxwell nodded back.

"What is it?" Canfield whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Transient with guitar," said Maxwell, and turned back to his sandwich. One more bite of egg salad was all he could take, so he took it and put the sandwich on his plate.

On the other side of the horseshoe counter, an old man paused over his cold cuts and potato salad and stared at the
newcomer. He wore a white shirt with short sleeves and a black bow tie and was completely bald. He chewed while he stared, his temples flaring in and out. There were four or five empty seats and then the girls, who were picking at tossed salads and talking about a new car. One had a blond afro and the other long brunette hair. While the brunette talked, the blond peeked around her at the man. The cash register stood at the bend in the horseshoe and then there was the man, who was staring down at his guitar, and then three vacant stools covered with shiny red vinyl coming around to Canfield. There were two more stools and then two men in green uniforms at the end of the counter. They were both smoking and the closest man, the heavier of the two, had taken his cap off and laid it on the counter. He had a carrot-colored crew cut and was drinking a bottle of orange pop. The last man still had his cap on, wore dark glasses and had a glass of lemonade in front of him. They took turns leaning forward to look up the counter at the man. As they did, the patches above their shirt pockets showed that the first man was named Vern and the last, Larry. Larry settled back on his seat and said something to Vern. They laughed. Besides the man, they were the only people in the cafe Maxwell had not seen before. The white-stitched label on Vern's cap said MEYER TRANSFER.

Maxwell washed the egg salad down with some iced tea and looked at the clock above the kitchen door. There was a good
half hour left, so he shoved the plate away and pulled a cigarette out of the package on the counter.

"Must be like a goddam furnace inside that coat," Canfield said. He was twirling a point of his long black handlebar moustache as he watched the man out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah," Maxwell said, "but you'd never get cold."

He lit the cigarette and leaned back, blowing a long stream into the blue smoke that undulated over the people around the counter. A fly was combing the surface of a pie case on the service island in the middle of the horseshoe. It soared off abruptly, buzzing up through the layer of haze to the yellowed ceiling, where it wheeled a lazy loop around the lone light fixture. The room seemed as high as it was long. White light flooded in the high wide windows that flanked the front door and, mingling with smoke and shadow between the rose-colored walls, became amber. Red letters across the windows spelled out SAL and SALLY'S in reverse and a smaller AND on the transom above the door.

Maxwell tossed the book of matches over next to Canfield's plate and blew another stream of smoke into the air. A stain around the base of the ceiling light spread out in widening brown rings. He had been taking a late lunch at Sal and Sally's for almost a week now and had yet to see anyone he knew, at least, anyone he knew anywhere outside the cafe. There was Canfield.
Canfield began playing bongos on the counter top with his thumbs. He was tall and thin, nervous, and the hairiest man Maxwell had ever seen. Curly hair bristled out of the sleeves of his t-shirt and down his arms to fuzzy black tufts on the backs of his hands that became a blur as he bent to the beat, his long slick hair falling forward over the moustache and a heavy five o'clock shadow to make his face even darker and more gaunt. Maxwell had seen him at the cafe several times before and yesterday they had nodded to one another. Today, just as Maxwell had begun eating, Canfield walked up and sat down beside him. "How's it hanging, fella?" he had said, "Mind if I sit here awhile?" It had not been much more than ten minutes ago, but already Maxwell knew he was a pressman at the daily newspaper, married, the father of two children, a boy and a girl, and that he had a new 16-foot flat bottom he was taking fishing for the first time next weekend. He had talked non-stop, chain smoking the cigarette he had when he sat down and one more. In the tenth minute, he lit another cigarette and moved to a new subject.

"God, I'd like to get into that," he said, looking across the counter.

"What's that?" Maxwell asked.

"That blond," he said, "She's driving me crazy just sitting there."

"Got the seven-year itch?"
"Seven-year hell. Try seven times two, pal. I been married and itching for fourteen years."

"Long time," Maxwell said.

"Too goddam long. I'm ready to cut the knot and git unhitched," said Canfield, pausing for a puff of his cigarette. "I know that other girl," he said. "They both work at that boutique over on Main Street."

"You really getting a divorce?" Maxwell asked.

"Damn right," Canfield said, "next week."

"How old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-two," he said. "Got married right out of high school. A month before graduation, in fact."

"High school sweethearts?"

"You got it," Canfield said. "But I'm busting out, fella. And I'm getting some of that strange stuff just as soon as I do."

"It wouldn't be strange if you did."

"You know what I mean," he said. He took a long drag and his cigarette inched back toward the filter. "That blond's probably got a boyfriend for every night of the week."

"Yeah," Maxwell said, "I suppose. What about the kids?"

"They got to grow up sometime," said Canfield as he turned. "I'm dumping the old lady while there's still time to enjoy it."

Then the man with the guitar had come in, causing a stir in the cafe and distracting Canfield from his divorce. Maxwell
had felt relief and now he felt it again as Canfield finished his drum solo with a frenzied, though nearly silent, flutter of his thumbs on the formica.

"Sandy Nelson, 1961," he said.

"Nice," Maxwell said. He drew on his cigarette and flicked the ash on his plate.

Canfield tossed his hair out of his face and looked at the man again. Then he turned to Maxwell. "I couldn't live like that," he said, "Could you?"

"No, I couldn't," Maxwell said. "Not even for a second."

"Wonder where he's going?"

"Denver, maybe, the capital of the world," Maxwell said, "I don't know. Wonder where he's been?"

As quickly as a drop falling in a pool of water laps the edge, the air of the cafe stiffened and was still. Down the counter, the man was spinning on his stool. Behind him, Maxwell heard the moving men mutter.

"Shit," Canfield snorted and reached for his iced tea.

The man turned around three times and stopped facing the front windows. The old man was glowering now and the girls glanced once more. Sunlight spun and shone in the blond's afro as she looked from the man to her friend and back again. Beyond her golden halo, heat waves rippled out of the switchyard across the street. In a hallway at the back, an air conditioner strained, humming throughout the
building and up into the tea glasses in a shimmy that jiggled the ice cubes.

Suddenly, the man whirled around, raking everyone in the cafe with his gaze. The girls turned away like pigeons going to sleep. The old man fumbled at his tie and passed a hand over his bald head. Maxwell squinted into the blinding glare around the man's silhouette. Sweaty, weltered hair stuck out from under his hat. Gray whiskers covered his cheeks. The man was staring at him. Maxwell felt his heart beat. The man stared openly and then he grinned.

"Max," said Canfield, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "You ever been to New Zealand?"

"I've been to Hawaii," he heard himself saying. "Twice."

2. A Fifteen-Cent Cup of Coffee

The kitchen door swung open with a bang and the waitress, whose name was Inga, came out carrying a large jar of ketsup on her hip. She saw the new customer right away and frowned. Larry said something to her and she smiled. "Yeah," Vern added, "I hope it ain't blood." Ignoring him, Inga set the jar next to the gleaming chrome coffee pot at the end of the service island. Looking over her shoulder, she went back into the kitchen.

"Blood," said Larry. He and Vern laughed.

"Where's my food?" Canfield asked.
"I don't know," Maxwell said. He held his cigarette in front of him, looking at it lengthwise. Then he closed his eyes and tried to remember the man's face.

All he could see were teeth. The man had stared and then he grinned, his lips drawing back to reveal teeth that went from yellow to brown to black up at the gums. He could not bring the face into focus, but the grin was an afterimage that faded away then snapped back sharp and clear to taunt him.

Maxwell rolled the cigarette back and forth between his thumb and fingers, watching the smoke curl and thread into the air. It had burned down past halfway. "Did you see that guy?" he asked Canfield.

"Sure I did," Canfield said. "Just ignore him."

"But you didn't see what I saw."

"You see nuts like that all the time on this side of town. They go with the place. Like I said, don't pay any attention to him and he'll just fade back into the woodwork."

"But he's crazy."

"You knew that the second he walked in."

The kitchen door opened again and Inga appeared with three plates. She came over and set them in front of Canfield. Maxwell had seen Canfield eat before, but not this close. There were three cheeseburgers on the big plate and side orders of cottage fries and sliced tomatoes. Canfield smiled.
"At last," he said.

"Eat much?" Inga asked. She stood smirking down on Canfield with her hands on her hips. She was tall and husky, her broad shoulders straining at the seams of a tight white dress. Her hair was a mass of dark curls that were piled high on her head and beginning to tumble. Then she turned and her nose seemed even more hooked in profile, the tip curving down toward her lips, which pressed together as her jaw jutted out. Her black and piercing eyes fastened on the man, who was looking out the window again.

"Could you grab me some ketsup?" Canfield asked.

"Oh Jesus, honey," Inga said, "Aren't you ever happy?"

"Hell no," Canfield said.

Inga walked around the horseshoe collecting red plastic bottles. She paused as she picked up the bottle beside the man. He remained perfectly still with his back to the cafe.

"There you go, you big hairy ape," she said, handing Canfield the fullest of an armload of bottles.

"Thanks," he said, "but I'll need more."

"Jesus Christ," Inga said. "You're going to break us yet, all the ketsup you take. I'm going to have to start charging extra."

"Ten cents a bottle," Canfield said.

"No no, honey," she said, "Grocery store prices. Two bits a hit."

Canfield laughed.
"Are you done?" Inga asked.

"No," Maxwell said, but she was already walking away with his plate. "Yes," he said, "Go ahead."

"You still had some sandwich left," Canfield said. "Make her bring that back."

"It's all right," Maxwell said. "I don't care."

Inga set the plastic bottles down by the jar of ketsup and pushed Maxwell's plate into a narrow window next to the kitchen door. A hand came out and took it away.

"Pass the mustard," Canfield said. He sat with his hands on either side of his plate, gazing down at the open burgers with their tops neatly arranged alongside. A pool of ketsup was spreading over the rest of his plate.

Maxwell handed the mustard bottle over and, sliding Canfield's ashtray back to him, stubbed out his cigarette. He watched as Canfield squeezed out a yellow spiral on the first patty, squiggling from the center of the melted cheese to a perfect circle around the edge.

"Pretty," Maxwell said.

"Yes sir," said Canfield, proceeding to the next patty. Inga swayed toward them, sloshing water out of a glass. Larry and Vern watched her from the rear and poked each other in the ribs.

"Ketsup, if you got any," Canfield said.

"I forgot," she said as she went by, "You can wait."

"I know it," said Canfield. "Don't I know."
The man still had his back turned when Inga set the glass down. She pushed at the back of her hair three times.

"Would you like something?" she asked finally. Blinking as if he had been asleep, the man revolved his stool to face her. He clutched the collar of his coat together and coughed.

"A fifteen-cent cup of coffee," he said, sounding like an old shoe scuffing gravel.

"Coffee on a day like this?"

The man nodded. "The sign says coffee for fifteen cents," he said.

"That's right, dear," Inga said, "Sal prides himself on that." She leaned forward and looked over the counter. "You going to sing for it?"

The man put his hand on his guitar. "No," he said. "I'll pay."

"Sure thing," Inga said, straightening with a shrug. She swung around and down the aisle to the coffee maker. Grabbing a mug from a nearby stack, she jammed it under the spigot and flipped the lever.

"I just got a peek at him," Larry was saying. "He came out of that draw in a blur and he was the one Millie had neck-shot up on the road."

"What did you do?" Vern asked.

"I'm telling you," Larry said.
"We get all the kooks in here," Inga said in a not-so-low voice and looked over at Larry and Vern. They nodded sympathetically and she shook her head.

"He better be careful," whispered Canfield without raising his head. He was applying a curlicue of mustard to the last patty. Inga rustled past with the mug of coffee in her hand. "She'll tear him a new asshole so fast he'll think it was a white tornado. I seen her do it before. One time she grabbed a trucker by the seat of his pants and threw him out that door on his head. He didn't come back either."

"Take cream?" Inga said. She was rummaging under the counter for a spoon. The man stared into the steam rising from his mug.

"I did say a fifteen-cent cup of coffee, you know," he said.

Inga let the spoon clatter on the counter and put her hands on her hips. "Yeah, there it is," she said, "A fifteen-cent cup of java, just like on the sign. Sal might as well give it away, but it's all your's for fifteen cents."

The man nodded, bobbing his head up and down.

"All right?" Inga asked him.

Nodding, the man lifted the mug to his lips.

"Now," Inga said, "Do you take cream?"

"No," he said. "Thank you."

Inga was towering over him. The man blew on his coffee and smiled. There was a glimpse of his teeth. Just as Inga
was about to explode, the girls rose from their seats and, fluffing their skirts, came over to the cash register. Inga's hands drooped to her sides. The man took a slow sip of coffee. The blond was fumbling in her purse and Inga stepped over to tend the register.

"Lucky guy," said Canfield, pointing at a jar beside Maxwell's napkin dispenser. "There any onions in that pup?"

"I think so," Maxwell said, and passed it to him.

Canfield took off the lid and peered inside. The girls went out the door whispering to each other. Glaring at the man as she brushed by, Inga walked down the aisle to the kitchen. "What's wrong, honey?" Vern asked as she pushed through the door. A man's eyes appeared in the window by the door. He had bushy eyebrows and slicked back hair.

"Could I borrow your spoon?" Canfield asked.

"I already used it to stir my tea," said Maxwell, sliding it over.

"That's okay--hey, eyes right," Canfield said, swinging to the window. "Check that out."

The blond was kneeling in the gravel across the street. The brunette had gone a few steps past her and was coming back. The blond slid a finger into her sandal and pried at something.

"It's driving me crazy," said Canfield, "and she knows it, too."

The blond's top slipped up a little further, showing a sliver of skin and white panties. Then she stood up.
"Sweet Jesus," Canfield said.

The girls started off walking, crossing behind the silhouette of the man as they headed back to town. The man was blowing on his coffee and looking satisfied. He caught Maxwell's eye and dipped his mug in a small toast. Maxwell tried to pretend he was looking out the window and then he tried to smile. Then he looked away. The girls reached the edge of the window and passed out of sight.

"Lord, lord," said Canfield. He shook his head and looked into the onion jar. "Hope I hold out til I'm forty."

The man winked and pointed at his head.

3. A Penny for the Governor

The cigarette was fresh and white and waiting to be lit. Maxwell put it in his mouth and looked into the mirror. He groped for the faucet and shut it off and, crooking his finger, touched it to his temple. Water rushed in the toilet beside him.

Either the man was crazy or he was smart. He had winked and there had been a gleam in his eyes that intimated they knew each other or, at least, that the man knew him. Then he pointed at his head as if to say they shared a secret no one else was even slightly aware of, that they were long lost brothers perhaps, or someone had been murdered and the body butchered and only they knew where the pieces lay.
It was another life, Maxwell thought, the cigarette jiggling as he moved his lips. I knew him in another life. He felt in his shirt pocket and then his pants. Dropping the cigarette into his shirt pocket, he turned and opened the door. A wave of heat and noise hit him in the face.

"Millie hollered out from the truck," Larry said, "but he came out of there so fast I never had a chance to shoot him broadside."

"What happened?" Vern asked. He had his cap back on.

"Just a minute," Larry said. "I couldn't get set right and by that time he was topping the ridge."

"Got away, huh?" said Vern.

"No," Larry said.

Maxwell picked up the matches beside Canfield's plate and sat down. Canfield was sitting with what was left of his first cheeseburger in both hands.

"Who's Millie?" asked Inga, who was pouring ketsup into a bottle through a funnel. She looked at Larry. "Millie your wife?"

"Grab your thumb by mistake?" Canfield asked.

"No," said Maxwell. "Took a nap."

Larry and Vern were laughing. "Hell, it's none of my business," Inga said and laughed herself.

"Millie's just a friend," said Larry. "From right around here, I believe."
Canfield dipped the burger in ketchup and put it in his mouth. There was a second empty bottle beside the plate. Looking at the clock, Maxwell lifted the cigarette out of his pocket. It was a quarter til two.

"Anyway, I managed to squeeze off a quick one," Larry went on. "it was only a prayer, though, and he kept on going."

"Boy, I hate to see them get away like that," Vern said.

"Goddam it, I'm telling you," Larry said, "he didn't get away."

The cigarette was slightly bent. Maxwell struck a match and lit it. Across the counter, the old man had a newspaper up and was holding his tea out to the side.

"Finish your wild ass hunting story and let's go," said Vern.

"No," Larry said. "Goddam it."

"Come on," said Vern. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"You don't want to hear it."

Maxwell dropped the match in the ashtray. The man was sitting at the front of the cafe, as motionless as the cash register next to him. He seemed entranced by the reflection in his coffee.

"Say mam?" Larry said and held his glass up high. "Could I get a bottle of coke? My lemonade's run dry."

"We ain't got time," Vern said.

"We don't have the bottles," said Inga, wiping her hands on a rag. "How about a big cup with crushed ice?"
"Sounds good," Larry said.

"Jesus Christ," Vern moaned, holding his head.

"You know, Max," said Canfield, "what we were talking about before--I hear they need geologists in New Zealand."

"I said I was a geographer," Maxwell said.

"I'm just kidding," Canfield laughed. He took an enormous bite out of the second burger. "What I have heard," he said slowly, "is that they need pressmen down there."

"That's fine," Maxwell said, "but I'm not moving to New Zealand. Not in the near future."

"I know it," Canfield nodded. "But I sure as hell am. Just as soon as I cut the knot and get out of this burg."

"A free man in New Zealand," Maxwell said. Inga came out of the kitchen with a red paper cup and threw open a cooler in the back counter. Scooping the cup full of ice, she slammed the lid down and moved over to the soda fountain.

"Why don't you take it with you?" Vern asked.

"No," Larry said.

"Yes sir," said Canfield as he loaded his fork with cottage fries. "Single and free in Wellington, New Zealand. I knew a guy once who was stationed there during the war. Said it was pretty."

"I've seen pictures in National Geographic," Maxwell said.

"Pretty, ain't it?"

"Beautiful," said Maxwell. "Nice and green."
"Yeah, yeah, yeah, just don't be butting in," said Larry. "Like I was saying, I came over the ridge and there he was, halfway down, kicking on his side. I shouted at Millie to drive the truck around to the bottom and ran on down. When I got there, he was already dead, but I couldn't find where I'd hit him. I was beginning to think Millie's neck wound had finished him until I found it and, you know what?"

"What?" said Vern.

"I'd shot him right in the ass," Larry said. "Pardon me, mam."

Inga nodded and pressed the cup against the switch under the coke tap. There was a dry sputtering.

"Come on," said Vern.

"It's true," Larry said. "Right in the asshole."

"Goddam gorgeous," Canfield said. "They won't let you in New Zealand if you're over forty-five, though. But I'll only be forty by then."

"Forty?" Maxwell said.

"That's when the girl gets out of school," Canfield said. "She's my youngest."

"You're not getting a divorce til you're forty?"

"Hell no," said Canfield. He seemed surprised as he turned to Maxwell. "Have to wait for the kids to get out of the house," he said. "Then they're on their own."
"Hey Nickie," yelled Inga. She hit the top of the soda fountain with her hand. "Nickie," she yelled, "Come out here, would you?"

The eyes appeared in the kitchen window. "Yeah?"

"You know how to change the coke machine?" asked Inga, pressing the cup against the switch again.

Nickie shook his head. "No."

"I don't doubt it one bit," Vern said, his face beet red. "But there's a lady present."

"Ah, she don't mind," Larry said.

"All right," Vern said. "But enough." He touched the dark green ring under the arm of his shirt.

"Does Bill know how?" Inga said.

"No," Nickie said.

"Hey," said Larry, waving his hand. "It's all right."

"Canfield," Maxwell said, "Why don't you get a divorce now?"

"The kids," he said.

"People do it when their kids are still in the cradle." Canfield laughed and speared two slices of tomato with his fork. "Yeah," he said, "but there's still a little matter called child support."

"People do it before their kids are born, for Christ's sake."

"It ain't so long," Canfield said.

"Eight years?"
"I can wait, Max," Canfield said and swallowed the tomatoes. "It could be worse."

"Yeah," Maxwell said. He kept nodding as he ground out his cigarette.

"Maybe Bill knows," Inga said. She left the soda fountain and stepped over to the window. "Bill--" she shouted past Nickie's face. He stood back out of sight.

"Bill run to the bank," he said.

"We need the coke changed," Inga said.

"It's okay," Larry said. Inga looked at him. "Forget the coke," he said, "Just put some water in that cup so I can wash out this lemonade. Otherwise, I'll pucker up."

"It's okay, Nickie," Inga called through the window. She filled the cup with water and brought it to Larry. "Nickie's my boy," she said, handing it to him. "He used to be a boxer."

"Bing, bing, bing," Canfield said. "That's how fast it goes."

The man stood up to leave. Inga saw him and headed up front.

"That'll be sixteen cents, please," she said.

The man stopped digging in his pocket and watched Inga until she was at the register. "What?" he asked.

"Sixteen cents," Inga said. "We got sales tax in this state, honey. Three cents on the dollar."
Not saying a word, the man pulled a trembling fist out of his pocket and rested it on the counter.

"Come on, honey," Inga said, "We have to charge tax, that's the law."

"The sign said fifteen cents," said the man.

"There isn't any such thing," Inga said. "It's fifteen cents and a penny for the governor."

"Did you know the governor of this state is a homosexual?" asked the man.

"Look," Inga said, "Just forget the penny."

"Is it really so hard?"

"What's wrong with you?" Inga shouted and reached out for the man's hand. "Ain't you got the money?"

The man jerked his hand back and flung his coat open. Inga screamed and Canfield choked on his cheeseburger. The man was waving two pistols in the air. He pointed them at the ceiling and fired a half-dozen shots and the old man staggered back off his stool against the wall. Canfield ducked and fell against Maxwell's leg.

"Nickie!" Inga yelled.

The old man slid down behind the counter and Canfield's cheeseburger fell on the floor. The man was backing toward the door and then he came back for the guitar.

"That's a cap pistol," Vern said.

He jumped off his stool and started up the counter. The man paused halfway through the door and fired a shot over
Vern's head. He stopped cold, sinking into a crouch next to the wall. The man tipped his hat and bowed to the cafe.

"You could have done it," he said to Inga.

Then he backed out the door and ran around the corner of the building. The door eased shut.

Vern went out after him and Canfield ran around the counter to the old man. Inga stood by the cash register. Larry was looking at the broken bow of his dark glasses. Nickie came out of the kitchen door. He had one arm.

4. The Tip

Inga stared at a coin on the counter where the man's hand had been. It sparkled in the sunlight on the black-and-white swirled formica. She picked the coin up and looked at it in her palm. Then she dropped the quarter into the drawer of the cash register. Vern limped in the door.

"Get away?" Inga said.

"Yeah," Vern panted, "Went down the alley. Never did see him."

Inga slipped a dime out of the drawer and palmed it into the pocket of her apron. She pushed the drawer in and it clicked softly.

"Hey, Nickie," she called, "Forget about the police."
One of the secretaries from down the hall poked her head in the door. "Are you going down for late coffee, Maxwell?" she asked and then, "Hey--when did you start smoking again?"

Maxwell looked at the cigarette burning in the ashtray on the windowsill. It was the seventh cigarette of his day. "I don't remember when it was," he said. "Sometime last week."

"That's too bad," she said. "You quit for quite awhile, didn't you?"

"Almost six months," Maxwell nodded.

"That's a shame," she said and looked around the office. There was an open pack of cigarettes by the phone on Maxwell's desk. "You coming to coffee, then?"

"I'll be right along," Maxwell said, looking out across the town. Low in the north there was a gathering darkness that had not yet formed into storm clouds. On a clear day you could almost see the mountains. The girl stuck her head back in the door.

"Where were you after lunch, anyway?" she said and winked.

"Just took a walk," said Maxwell, smiling.

"Oh, we thought you had taken the afternoon off," she said. Then she was gone again.

Tomorrow it would rain and when the rain came down the trees and streets of the town would look clean and fresh
again for a couple of days. Today, the radio had already announced that the temperature had broken a record set in 1899. Open range stretched out from the town to the horizon, making a perfect tan line beneath the brooding gray that faded into the scorched blue sky.

Inga stared at the coin on the counter. The quarter glinted on black-and-white formica. She picked it up and put it in the register. Vern came in. Inga took a dime out of the drawer and put it in her apron pocket. Softly, the drawer clicked shut.

Maxwell took a long drag off his cigarette. Far out on the rim of the sere brown earth, so far away he could barely see it, so small it seemed about to disappear like the dwindling memory of a dream, there stood a single tree.

The telephone rang.