New Canaan

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NEW CANAAN

By
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You aren't really aware of the canyon until you're in it. You're following the river and suddenly it crowds the railroad tracks and the highway against rock cliffs and you wonder for a moment what happened to the sun. The cliffs grow higher and higher above your car as it twists around rock buttresses, sneaks past near-vertical slopes of slide rock, and once in a while darts across a brief patch of horizontal earth desperately demonstrating its fertility. Sometimes little farms cower under the cliffs in these wide places, gray little clusters that you can hardly tell from the rock. You suspect that the people inside are gray too, and that their faces are as immobile as stone, that the family dinner table is a miniature Mt. Rushmore. At one point, you slow to 25 and ease the car around a rock tower protruding from the cliffs. There is a local Indian legend concerning the tower. A beautiful maiden had leaped from the rock when her lover failed to return from a hunting expedition east to the Blackfoot country. It is said that if you stop your car and look to the top of the cliff, you can still see her spirit, immortalized in stone, poised to jump. I've never stopped because there is no place to pull off the road, but I plan to sometime. So you keep moving—winding, twisting, crawling, rushing with the river, dropping imperceptibly with the afternoon sun. You continue to think of the maiden and her beautiful legend and her immortal flight,
and how bright blood on the gray rocks must have been incon-
gruous and profane. But you know it washed away with the
first rain. And you like to think that above the dark chasm
on her golden tower she still stands, poised in time, star-
ing down into the rising afternoon shadows that can never
again quite touch her. But they can touch you and night in
the canyon is truly night.

Many gray miles later, you emerge onto a grass-covered
flat a little larger that the rest and shaped like the print
of a cowboy boot. The main current of the river hardly
slackens its pace through the flat but a deep hole at the
heel diverts part of the water in a large, slow circle.
Streaks of foam reveal the invisible agitation under the
surface of the eddy. Bark and driftwood dive and reappear
in a seemingly random pattern. But they are always being
drawn toward the center where they disappear in a whirl of
foam. The vortex has never been known to surrender anything
that comes within its pull. Some children once threw a
sealed 55 gallon drum in the eddy and it was never seen
again. No doubt it surfaced somewhere down-river but local
myth holds that the eddy is bottomless. The implications
of a bottomless whirlpool are fascinating and terrible, but
of course, science saves us from having to contemplate them.

You can visualize your own legend of the eddy's cre-
ation. Perhaps you can see some ancient cowboy god, awk-
wardly afoot and headed West, pausing here for a moment, a
god bigger and tougher than even Pecos Bill. He sticks his
index finger in his mouth to wet it and then holds it up to
the wind, testing its direction. He pivots slightly on his
high riding heel, digging a deep hole, and then moves on
West, while the hole fills with water and becomes the eddy
that lends its name to the little town on the flat. So he
leaves his mark, this cowboy archetype, and heads West into
the setting sun and the dark Pacific and the kind of immor-
tality that allows you to go West indefinitely. And maybe
you're one of the hoarde that longs to follow him toward
whatever it is he sees in that setting sun, but you stop in
Seattle or Portland or Los Angeles and pile up with the rest
and grumble about the pressure at your back. And meanwhile,
back at the eddy, the water circles endlessly and the wind
swirls back from the narrow toe of the flat to ripple the
grass along the base of the south cliffs and creak the old
buildings of the town.

As I approached Eddy the day of the accident, the
afternoon sun glared from the tin roof of the railroad tool
shed and I had to squint to see through the bug-splattered
windshield. The little town seemed to float in a yellow
liquid light, the buildings bobbing and shifting like shapes
underwater. I decided this was caused by the heat waves but
that, anyway, no one would want to send a post card from
Eddy. It lies at the mouth of a small blind canyon on the
edge of the flat. Two highways meet in a "T" junction
there—the major cross country highway, and a secondary road that bridges the river at the instep of the flat and winds northward up a side canyon to a couple of tiny communities and the Indian Agency. The cliffs hold Eddy in deep blue shadow until late morning. Like huge horse blinders, they direct the orientation of the people down-river. But the view ends at the toe of the flat where the cliffs close together again and their eyes travel up the rock walls to the remote streak of pale blue and white above. The people of Eddy don't even know the size of the sky and probably don't even wonder about it. They don't know that they're trapped in the footprint of a god.

The town, officially deserving of the title because of the post office located there, is supported by two industries. One is the railroad, which employs five men on the section crew. The other is the mercantile empire of Gordie Sutter. Across the face of Gordie's large, false-front store is printed, for the convenience of passing travellers, an announcement of his facilities:

EDDY STORE-GORDON SUTTER, PROP.

"THE BIGGEST STORE IN TOWN"

GROCERIES-HARDWARE-SUNDRIES-GAS-OIL-RESTAURANT-BAR

POST OFFICE-NOVELTIES & TOURIST INFORMATION-MOTEL

Not advertised are Gordie's freight agency, real estate, and insurance business, loan fund, and gambling interests. For the sign to have stated that Gordie's store was the only one
in town would have cost Gordie good money un-necessarily. Aside from his emporium and adjoining buildings, the town consists of two weathered white frame houses occupied by section-men and their families, two trailer houses, the abandoned depot building and tool sheds, also weathered but painted a drab brown and tan, and two railroad houses, cheerlessly fashioned according to the Middle Period Railroad style of architecture. Murf had lived in one. All of these last buildings lie across the highway and the railroad tracks from Gordie's, a circumstance giving rise to many of Gordie's witticisms concerning slums, suburbs, and the wrong side of the track.

I stopped on the gravel parking area in front of Gordie's store and gathered my stock lists. As I got out of the car, I noticed a figure casting a lure into the eddy and I was reminded of the queer Indian. Anyone who knows the area has heard of him. I know that Indians are supposed to be Noble Savages and that I am dancing on the grave of poor dead Fenimore and on the toes of many Romantic liberals, but none-the-less, Duncan was a homosexual. Gordie thought that Duncan had been in the army. To Gordie's mind, this fact alone was enough to account for any act of deviation. Duncan—'Brown warrior'. The name probably came from the early invasion of what is now the Reservation by Scotch-Canadian traders. He had some white blood, revealed in the auburn tint in his hair. His mother must have held high
hopes for him. Brown warrior—perhaps even an Indian Moses. But Duncan was a queer and made no effort to disguise his preferences. He sometimes scored on sympathetic young men who stopped at Gordie's, and occasionally a hobo weathered a storm inside the abandoned depot building where Duncan made his home while in Eddy. Periodically, he disappeared and it was assumed that he visited up at the Agency, although no one knew whether or not he had any family. He usually returned with some pelts to sell to Gordie or a venison to have auctioned in the bar. He sold huckleberries in season and supplied the local housewives with fish from the river. His sales approach never varied—he would come up to a prospective customer with his product, jerk it out to arm's length, point to it with his other hand, and stand silently waiting.

I remember several transactions I witnessed. The thing you noticed about Duncan was the look in his eyes. Even when he was drunk, it was the same. It was as though he could see through you and the wall and the cliffs outside and nothing made any difference but what he saw or didn't see beyond everything you could name. The eyes were like black rocks and when you looked into them, you knew that the last man on Earth will have eyes that look like that. Maybe he had gods. Flickering, vague, barely apprehended forms, like the bowed back of a priest in candlelight, the obscure figures carved in stone through the gloom of the apse, all
indistinctly remembered from a childhood spent in the arms of the Church. The fathers had come early and worked late on the Reservation. But maybe those forms eluded altogether the flicking, searching rays of those blank stones. Maybe they danced laughingly away and he saw nothing at all.

As far as I know, Duncan was absolutely free--free of name, of family, of race, of sex, of situation as any man can be. But poor Duncan, freest of all, was nothing, was trapped in limbo. It was somehow appropriate that he die in the eddy. Some of the section-men's children were playing along the river and saw him fall from the rock bar where he had some set lines. They said he never surfaced once, like the 55 gallon drum, and his body was never found. Nobody came to Eddy to ask about him or his death and the sheriff from New Canaan could find no relatives up at the Agency. Duncan could have invented the old joke about the Fugarwe Tribe, whose members went around asking 'Who the Fugarwe?' He wasn't anything or even part of anything. He needed to belong to something. He needed possibility. I often wonder what it was that cut Duncan off from his people and from his gods and myths and legends that would have told him who and what he was. And I wonder why, if he couldn't return to those spirits, he didn't invent some of his own to sustain him.

That Thursday, I stared at the circling waters that had claimed Duncan and thought that there is something terrible
about dying in an eddy. The currents swirl and churn to no purpose. The main current, at least, has purpose, has a direction and a destination. Even in death, Duncan is a Fugarwe. I can see him still tossing and turning in fluid limbo, bumping the rocks on the sides of the eddy, still sinking and drifting with each current, still with no purpose or direction, still alone. And his black eyes are still staring, trying to pierce this new obscurity in which he finds himself, trying to find meaning in the weird forms seen through his shifting, cold-green limbo. Maybe he sees something at last. Maybe he and the cowboy god are sitting down to an eternal game of poker, their battles in the movies forgotten.

But maybe someday, eons from now, when the river dries up and some scientists explore the hole in the canyon, one will find two black, obsidian-like stones lying in the sand that will defy all attempts to identify them. He will remark upon their seemingly empty quality. He will point out to his colleague how they are hard, yet they seem to be composed of only black space. And though they both are trained, sophisticated scientists, they will be uneasy about the stones. They sense that to perceive nothingness is to turn it into something. And to animate nothingness through perception is to unleash a frightful god which devours perceptions until everything is nothing. And nothing is everything. So finally only the black stones have a separate
integrity. They are emptiness within emptiness. The men will drop the black stones in the sand and climb for the sky, which offers, at least, more room for possibilities.

My eyes came up from the water and swept with the wind around the flat to the little town. I was very glad, as usual, that I was a man of the current instead of the eddy, that I had a direction. And that I would spend only one night in Eddy and would continue down-river tomorrow. I gathered some new volumes for the display and went inside.

So the traveller creeps down the tortuous canyon, past the gray farms and the Indian maiden's petrified spirit, and enters Eddy Flat. He stares at the pulling, swirling waters and at the nodding bunch grass and at the cowering little town. He reads the sign on the front of the store and wonders how Gordie Sutter makes a living. Then he enters the store and finds out. Inside, he might see the residents of the town or the several families spread up and down the canyon who eke out a living on the tiny spits of flat land along the river. Or he might see cowboys or Indians or loggers or railroad officials or businessmen or hoboes or soldiers or just plain tourists. They often stop, as perhaps he stops, for assurance that the highway will, indeed, carry them to their destination and will not peter out to a game trail and then a dead end. The world stops for a moment at Gordie's and then moves on.

He might, if he looks like a tenderfoot, be urged to lay
in supplies from both the bar and the store for the next leg of his journey. Gordie will thoughtfully warn him about the hazards of travel in the mountains. He might become convinced of the necessity of buying gallon jugs of water, reasonably priced at 50¢, after hearing Gordie's account of people stalled on the road with a vapor lock or a boiling radiator dying of heat prostration or perhaps of utter loneliness. If he is one of those who unwise snorts in derision and proclaims that he will get his water from the river, Gordie will no doubt warn him of the strange infestation of rattlesnake that has developed along the river. Mice and gophers have virtually disappeared from the canyon and the snakes are extremely hungry. They will strike at the slightest movement. And even should he be fortunate enough to escape the snakes, the water he secures will be extremely toxic, for a variety of reasons. But if he still insists, Gordie will have a special on buckets.

In the winter, the traveller will be cautioned against venturing out on the highway without a wide variety of driving aids. Among the products essential to winter travel in the mountains is the fusee, which Gordie acquires from the railroad at cost or less, depending upon which channel he approaches. He might be led outside in a blizzard wind for a demonstration of the fusee's effectiveness. Gordie will dramatically ignite the flare while shouting above the wind the many uses to which it can be put. Obviously, it can be
used as a danger signal in case of road trouble. But what he probably didn't know is that it can be used to free frozen brakes, to thaw frozen gas lines, or to start a life-saving fire, (since it will burn in the highest winds) should he face an extended stay in the elements.

Possibly the traveller will be puzzled by Gordie's pricing system. None of the items in his store bear a price tag. The prices will vary with the familiarity of the buyer's face, his dress and manner, and the make and model of his car outside. Gordie especially discriminates against Cadillac owners. If the traveller drives an Imperial or a Continental and was aware of Gordie's pricing system, he might resent paying less. Strangely, Gordie himself drives a Cadillac on his monthly trip down-river to deposit the month's proceeds in the bank, to get a haircut, and to visit the Rose Rooms where a scrawny young thing, new to the profession, had caught his fancy. The remainder of the time the big car sits concealed in an old shed adjoining the rear of the store, out of sight and out of mind. After servicing a Cadillac, Gordie inevitably assails the ears of his more humble patrons with a furious description of those snooty rich bastards.

If the traveller cares to ask, the citizens of Eddy will speculate quietly about the size of Gordie's fortune. No one will claim to have seen his books or his bank statement but everyone will agree that Gordie will lend almost
any amount of money, providing that adequate collateral be offered and that a note be signed at an interest rate commensurate with the risk Gordie takes. No one remembers of a loan that Gordie had made which had forced him to write a check or go to the bank in New Canaan. He always has enough cash in the safe back in his private quarters. The proceeds of his many enterprises accumulate for a month between trips to the bank and the citizens of Eddy remain convinced that the safe contains many thousands of dollars. Or did before the robbery.

I entered the Eddy Store and checked the paperback book display. It is surprising how many books are sold through this outlet. Everything from cook-books to the latest best-seller. I haven't any idea who buys them—perhaps tourists or lonely farmers' wives seeking to escape for a little while or to prove to themselves that their brain had not petrified and still had integrity from the rock around them. I'm certain only that Gordie didn't buy the books.

Gordie has a natural resistance to ideas. "I don't worry about anything I can't see, hear, touch, smell, or taste," he said once. "There's no sense in it. The crap in your books just wastes people's time—it don't help them make a living or give them peace of mind either. If I was a reading man, I'd read the Bible."

"Great literature is the same thing as the Bible," I replied and regretted instantly saying anything.
"What do you mean?" he demanded.

Unable to reclose the can of worms, I tried to explain as simply as I could the beauty of believing in mystery, a faith that the limits on human perception signal something beyond. The books reveal it, I went on, by what they try to reveal and can’t, by the regularity with which they are thwarted. That limit, I informed the frowning Gordie, is a something, not a nothing—nothingness cannot conceal itself. Only the myths and legends and mysteries and paradoxes of life somehow penetrate through and we hear only echoes through them of something on the other side. And all we need is possibility. That, I concluded with relief, was why men could build churches of books.

"That," replied Gordie, "is the biggest crock of shit I've heard in all my life."

He was no more understanding of mobility. Life without deep roots in one place was suspect. It was too tenuous, too open to chance. One night we talked until nearly closing time. The bar was empty except for the two of us and Murf, who sat a few stools away drinking steadily and listening and nodding his head. During a lull in the conversation, Gordie's eyes closed.

"You look tired," I said. "You ought to take a vacation. How long has it been since you took some time off?"

His eyes popped open. "Vacation! What the hell do I want to take a vacation for? There's nothing I want to see
or do. A man stays busy, he stays out of trouble."

"Don't you get tired of the same old routine, the same scene? Don't you ever feel like selling out and trying something new?"

"Hell, no. Why should I? I'm making a living here, a damn good one. Anything new wouldn't be any better than this."

I noticed Murf watching us intently, his glass forgotten in his hand. "Sure, you're making money," I said. "But what good does it do you? You can't spend it or enjoy it here. What's all your work for?"

Gordie frowned. "What do you mean, what's it for? The same thing yours is for."

"No...No, it's not.... But don't you have some secret goal, some dream of going out in the world and finding what makes it tick? Don't you ever think that out there somewhere you can find out why you're alive. My God, don't you even wonder about that?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Gordie bellowed. "What do you mean, you don't work for the same thing I do? What do you work for?...and don't give me any of your fancy bull-shit, either."

How do you tell a man like Gordie about loving motion and new sights and sounds and smells, different places and people. And about experiencing eons in the few miles between the mill smoke and exhaust fumes of the towns and
cities and the wild places no one has ever been. The diversity of the land and people—pure physical energy and spiritual calm, horizontal space and the lack of it. A place where everything is possible, except for those who don't believe. How do you explain to Gordie that the West is huge, and yet as elusive as a dream, and a man has to run as fast as he's able just to catch a glimpse of it now and then. That only once in a while does he capture the extremes in one vision, and get a sense of what he's a part of.

"I guess you could say that I work to stay alive," I said.

Gordie looked puzzled for a moment and then shrugged. "That's all anybody does," he said. "But it sure seems like you could find something in Helena so you could stay home with your family. I don't know how you stand being on the road all the time."

My route takes me in a large circle from Helena across the Continental Divide, down the canyon through Eddy to New Canaan, then southward into Idaho and Wyoming, and back to Helena. I cover it in two weeks and spend alternate weekends with the family. I sometimes feel like a stranger, interfering with their plans, and wonder if it might not be better to stay away completely. They are busy with their affairs, and I've often thought, only half in jest, that as long as I regularly deposited a check in the bank, they
wouldn't even notice. Ann's desk at the Capitol, around which the wheels of government turn, keeps her very satisfied. Edward, Jr., 16 yrs. old and politely distainful of the tall, slightly paunchy man who intrudes once in a while for a place to read his books, is what is known in the high school circles that count as a 'stud', which refers, logically when you think of it, to his athletic prowess. Mary, 12 or 13 now, I can never remember, is developing a taste for clothes, cosmetics, and boys—I'm not sure in what order. A depressingly typical family, all in all. I decided to let Gordie's comment go. There was no use trying to explain to him how a man could have roots in thousands of square miles.

"I'd better get some sleep," I said. I nodded good-night to Gordie.

"No cribbage tonight?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Good night, Murf."

"Oh...yeah...good-night," he replied, and returned to studying the bottom of his glass.

I finished stocking the display and waited at the cashier's counter to conclude my business with Gordie's trusted assistant, the ancient wife of one of the canyon's farmers. She came to work daily at 1:00 p.m., freeing Gordie to open the bar. She had been carefully trained and could be depended upon to charge at least near what the traffic would bear. She also took care of the mail for the post office in
the back of the store, and now she was across the highway on the railroad track, hanging the mail bag on the arm of a post, from which the American Star would soon snatch it. She came back across the highway, shoulders bent, eyes on the ground, shuffling hurriedly, one who has much business to do and little time left in which to do it. The wind stirred wisps of gray hair and held her baggy dress against her thin, angular body. A dust devil danced along the edge of the highway and followed her across the gravel parking area but she didn't turn to look. She nodded to me and took the slips I offered her without a word. Her quick little eyes flitted across them, the rest of her lined, gray face as impassive as a rock. Finally she spoke, and the thin voice was always a surprise. "Thank you," she said as she paid me the money, never quite looking at me. Perhaps she couldn't see me. Maybe I was just a shadowy form to her that briefly impinged upon her real world of routine and rock. I was glad to be finished.

Other than the Cadillac hidden in back, Gordie made only one concession to personal comfort and I moved toward it. Half-way down the hall leading to Gordie's tiny sleeping quarters is a modern bathroom, the only indoor plumbing in town, which serves not only Gordie's private needs but those of the patrons of the store and bar as well. There are two entrances to it. One is Gordie's private entrance and is always locked. The other is barred by a coin-
operated door Gordie had purchased from the bus company when it renovated its depot in New Canaan. The door had formerly restricted the use of a stool in the men's room to those who were willing to pay for the privilege. Because both sexes used his facility and because he was unwilling to discriminate against women, Gordie saw to it that the door was placed to force payment also from the urinal trade. In the bathroom is a bathtub-shower. This, too, is available to the public at a cost of $1.50, it being necessary to defray the loss of toilet business while a customer takes a bath in private.

I knew it was after 5:00 p.m. when I entered the bar because Murf was there already, trying quickly to quench a great thirst developed during the hot, dry day on the track. I sat beside him. His stool had a back rest, a present from Gordie on his 40th birthday. Gordie had taken the stool all the way to New Canaan to have it welded on. A few other people were scattered along the bar and in the booths around the room. Gordie had all the glasses filled and lounged motionless on a stool behind the counter, cowboy boots propped on the garbage can and shoulders against the backbar, looking a great deal like a large toad cruelly turned on its back and awaiting a resurgence of its energy in order to flop itself back over. His stomach rose and fell in a slow, measured rhythm, each time testing the pearl snaps of his red western shirt. He was somewhat sensitive about the
stomach, especially since self-inspections between two mirrors had shown him, he had once confided in a weaker moment, that he was not fat and that the stomach could go unsuspected in a back view of his wide shoulders and slender legs. The mound that concealed the fly on his jeans was due mostly, I suspect, to the menu offered by his grill. I ordered my choice between canned soup and chili, between hamburgers and cheeseburgers, and between coffee and beer. Gordie dined from this menu twice daily. The stomach and the puffy, jowled face were the cumulative effect.

Murf tossed off several shots of whiskey, chased with beer, while I ate. Each time Gordie came to fill his glass, I felt a strained silence between them. It puzzled me. The faces in the bar changed from night to night, except for Murf's. He was always the last customer, usually weaving slightly on his stool—probably part of the reason Gordie had the back rest welded on—his round, red face shining with perspiration, his eyes trying to focus on anything that moved. He was always quiet and no trouble to Gordie. Finally, if he could walk, Gordie would send him home to the smaller of the railroad houses. If he couldn't, Gordie helped him across the highway and railroad tracks and put him to bed. Murf's gold-framed glasses, an accurate barometer of his condition in their tendency to slip further down his nose the drunker he got, had to be carefully removed and placed in his pocket. If they became lost, he missed work
on the section until he found them. In return for this personal service, Murf spent nearly his entire paycheck at the Eddy store and bar. For fifteen years he had existed on the goods and services provided by Gordie, but it was only during the last several that he had taken to drinking so heavily. I have since heard that Gordie had been building a savings account in his name.

"God damn it!" Murf exclaimed and slammed his hand down on the bar. "I'm gonna do it." His voice was beginning to show the effects of the liquor.

"Do what?" I asked, amazed at the explosion.

"Take that new job." When my bafflement showed on my face, he explained. "The track supervisor told me that somebody was retiring at New Canaan. He said I could have the job if I wanted to bid on it. But I have to be there tomorrow if I take it."

"It sounds like a good deal, Murf," I said. "Why aren't you getting ready to go?"

"Because he ain't going." I hadn't seen Gordie approach.

Murf looked up at him. "Don't be too sure, Gordie. I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Why isn't he going?" I asked.

"Because he's got everything he needs here. He wouldn't know what to do in a town like New Canaan. This is his home."
"God damn it, Gordie. I could get along just fine. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, shit. You'd get drunk and rolled the first night in town," Gordie scoffed.

"No I wouldn't," Murf shouted. He was more excited than I'd ever seen him. "This is a chance to get out of this hole. I could work hard and maybe work myself up. There's a lot of jobs in the New Canaan switch yards." He turned to me. "What do you think?" he asked. "You're always saying a guy should pack up and move on before he gets stuck in a rut and dies there. What do you think?" He and Gordie both watched me closely.

I knew how Murf must have felt. Once I was driving down a stretch of highway paralleling the railroad tracks. I saw a section crew, its equipment set off the track, watching the westbound passenger roll by. A man, probably a man like Murf, stood leaning on a shovel staring up into the briefly glimpsed faces in the windows of the train. Like exotic petals pasted on glass, faces going to and coming from. In a few seconds they were all gone--gone to somewhere, it didn't really matter where. In those few seconds the man must have sensed, in his inarticulate way, that he was close to something wondrous. It must have stirred his insides, the thing he wanted to catch and hold but which ebbed away like the whistle at the distant crossing. He must have felt a deep sadness, almost to tears, at the
brevity of those seconds' beauty. And the putt-putt of the motor car must have effectively wiped away the vestiges of this fine moment and harshly returned him to the smell of creosote ties and the angular sharpness of crushed ballast. Yes, I knew how he must have felt and I sympathized. Perhaps he would find what he was looking for in New Canaan. Maybe Gordie was right, but Murf owed himself the chance.

"I think that if you really want to, you should go ahead."

"See, Gordie, he thinks I should," Murf said very seriously. He hadn't slowed his pace with the drinks.

"I know what he thinks. But what the hell does he know? I'm your friend. I know you. You're better off here."

"I'll think about it some more," Murf said. "I may go whether you think I should or not."

"Aaaah shit!" said Gordie with a gesture of dismissal. He moved away to serve the other customers.

Murf continued to drink and his voice became louder and louder as he carried on a lengthy monologue listing the pros and cons of the decision.

Gordie moved in front of him. "Drink up, Murf, and quit your yelling. You're not going anywhere and you know it," he said quietly.

"Oh yeah? Oh Yeah? Well, you just wait and see, God-dammit, Gordie," Murf yelled back. "You just wait and
see.... And don't hold your breath 'til I come back, either," he bellowed as an afterthought. But he quieted down and the murmur in the bar resumed. He sat glowering at Gordie for a time and then stormed out of the bar.

Gordie came over to me. "What the hell's the matter with you, telling him to go ahead and leave? You know he wouldn't last there." He was very angry.

"I don't know that, and neither do you," I replied.

"We both know he can't take care of himself. He has everything he needs here. This place is as close as he could come to a home. Why the hell do you think he keeps wanting me to tell him to go? He'd get to New Canaan and some bastard would size him up and work him for everything he has and everything he ever will have."

As I said before, I didn't know about the savings account, and Gordie's yelling irritated me. "You mean some other bastard would size him up and take him for everything," I said.

He looked at me for a long time, then shrugged and began to absently polish bar glasses. He was still at it when the rumble of the American Star could be felt through the building. No one paid it any attention until the first torpedo explosive sounded. The second, two rails down the track, quickly followed. The sequence was standard railroad procedure to signal to the train crew that there was an emergency flag ahead.
"Oh Christ!" exclaimed Gordie, staring through the front window. He jerked into motion around the bar and ran for the front door. We all followed. Outside, we saw Murf weaving between the rails of the main line, waving a red flag above his head. He obviously planned to stop the train and board it for New Canaan. But he had miscalculated the distance it would take the Star to stop and had not set the torpedoes far enough up the track. The engineer braked the train as soon as the explosive charges warned him of trouble ahead, and blew the whistle as soon as he saw Murf, but he had no chance to stop in time.

"Get off the track, you stupid bastard! Get off!" screamed Gordie.

But Murf stood waving the flag and his fist at the train. We could hear him screaming and cursing over the roar of the engine.

"Stop, you sonofabitch...Whooca...You cocksucker, stop...."

The blaring diesel horn attempted to blow him aside but he stood his ground. He realized too late that the Star wasn't going to stop. He was perhaps in the act of leaping when the engine struck him, carrying him plastered on its front like an unfortunate moth, which, for a blazing second, thought that it had finally reached the source of the irresistible light of the onrushing auto. Then he slipped down the face of the engine and across a rail. The heavy wheels
rolled over the hulk, severing it except for a thin paste on
the rail. Objects protruding from the undercarriage of the
cars jerked the two pieces by inches westward down the
track.

It is still a blur to me even now—the small crowd that
gathered, the sheriff's car and the ambulance with flashing
red lights, the train leaving, the red blood on the ballast
of the track, the dying sun spilling a strange reddish light
on the high rocks of the canyon, making the promintories
into hunched gargoyles relieved by deep shadow, leering down
from the parapets of the world on the blood and tears of the
faithful, swirls of evening air, moist and fetid, cooling
and darkening the splash of red and then returning to the
river, the eddy circling slowly and relentlessly and to no
purpose, glinting red from the bellies of the currents,
Gordie's shirt, bright red but smeared with dark stains from
Murf's head, his eyes bloodshot and vacant, staring at the
empty track.

I recall returning to the bar where the people sat or
stood in groups drinking quickly and discussing the accident
in low tones. I remember noting the strange process each
account of the accident underwent. Each speaker inevitably
recounted where he had been standing and what he had said
and done during that moment. With each retelling, his role
grew and finally Murf was mentioned only briefly, as an
object of importance equal to the train or the flag or the
ambulance. The storyteller proving to himself and the world that he still lived, and better still, that he prevailed. The self ordering the world in terms of itself. Art arising from death to explain, to shield, allow the artist to survive. Gordie said nothing and kept the glasses full.

I counted several times the different brands of liquor on the back bar. Thirty-seven. I stared at the familiar Charlie Russell prints around the room. Colorful paintings of cowboys and Indians and animals, and the vast land. Old Charlie was fond of gold, I noticed. But that was as it should be. Everyone has faith that there is whatever kind of gold he seeks in the glow where the Great Cowboy disappeared. There is always gold on the horizon, just like Charlie saw, but it is difficult to catch the horizon.

"You lie!" he cried and ran on. And so you run on, and on, and on, until your feet are covering with the darkening water and you realize that you must have run past it, that somewhere behind you must lie a blazing second when the gold was under your feet and neither ahead nor behind. But you never doubt, even then, that to find it was possible and you understand about freedom and purpose and destiny as the existence somewhere of simple possibility.

Gordie still spoke to no one and attended to pouring drinks almost frantically, sometimes even forgetting to pick up the money for them. During slack moments, he tossed off frequent neat shots of vodka, something I'd never seen him
do before. When he came to fill my glass, I suggested that he close up and get some sleep.

"No," he said shortly, and rushed away toward another empty glass.

I began to feel light-headed. I needed to move around. Outside, it was nearly dark. The streak of red and gold sky looked very remote above the dark walls of rock. I could hear the quiet splash and wash of the river and could still faintly see the black water of the eddy circling silently around its churning center. The damp night wind gusted its way around the flat and tugged at my clothing and returned to the river. I shivered and returned inside.

Someone had taken my stool, but I noticed that the one next to it with a backrest was still vacant. I bought a quart of beer and sat in an empty booth opposite the bar. What unexpected sensitivity kept the people from using Murf's stool? I wondered if they were honoring Murf's memory or refused because they were afraid that death was somehow contagious and Murf's stool would expose them, would put them too close to it.

The room was dim, illuminated only by two small ceiling fixtures with covers gone that gave off a weak, watery light. I drank my beer and watched several moths that had come in through holes in the screen door circle the lights. Around and around they swirled in an erratic course. Almost hypnotized, I stared at their gyrations and wondered why they
were drawn to the light. What fulfillment of what instinctive need did the light represent? What did they think they could do if they could reach the force that attracted them? It would inevitably kill them. Even the heat of the bulb could do that. I watched one that had come too close flutter in a spiral to the floor. Maybe they tried to reach it, risked being killed by it, just to reassure themselves it was there and that they were too. Life defined by risk, by the danger of death. Or perhaps life defined by the chase that could never end, whether around a bulb or over a huge circle of highways. Either way, the reasons and the results were the same. I began to feel dizzy and nauseous from the moths's circular motion and staring into the light. People and objects began to weave and distort as if under water, light and shadow began to exchange places, the whole building was awash in motion. I remember searching frantically with my eyes for something stationary. I saw a motionless figure in the bar mirror, looking at me. It was fixed, sitting in a booth like me, and it mocked every move of my head. The face was in shadow, the eye sockets like dark pits, but I saw somehow that the figure watched me with eyes of black stone.

...I was spinning, spinning, being drawn closer and closer to the center, and falling, falling through the eye that would deliver me down to knowledge and death on rough, black-rock shapes... why should I fight? Let go, it was too
late now... floating in blue-green space, planets and fiery stars racing past, according to unknowable plan... floating in gigantic seas of cold, distant green... langorous, indolent peace... alone... alone... Duncan drifting by, eyes staring but unseeing... Murf dividing himself like a cell until the universe was filled with Murfs clogging everything, redness choking and gagging all other life, assimilating it....

... faster and faster, the stars and voids and debris being convulsively forced through an unseen orifice, compressed and spawned with incredible velocity... terrible pressure bearing down on every cell in relentless spasms, cosmic labor... rhythmically squeezing out, disregarding gravity, all the universe to a stinking, multi-colored, foam-streaked puddle... a voice calling my name echoing faintly down the corridors of the world... Gordie's voice....

"Take it easy--you'll be alright," I heard Gordie say. I remember the ring of shocked faces, some staring in repugnance at the vomit, and another voice saying 'He must have the d.t.'s.' I had to get away. I tried to stand but collapsed back in the booth. Gordie helped me over to the bar and forced me to drink some tomatoe juice and beer.

"That's better," he said and almost smiled. He was a little drunk. "You just sit still there and when the crowd thins out, maybe we'll have a game of cribbage."

"No thanks, Gordie. I have to go."

"Go? Go where?"
"I'm going on into New Canaan. I'll leave my car windows down and the air will do me good."

"Bullshit. You're in no shape to go anywhere. If you're tired, go on out. The cabin's ready."

"No. I have to go."

"But you won't get there till the middle of the night. Come on, stay here and get a good night's sleep and take off tomorrow."

"No."

As he stared at me, his face seemed to sag and crumple into a grotesque mask. He leaned across the bar, close to my face. "Please," he said. "Stay until morning."

I shook my head and stood off the stool.

"Wait!" he cried and grabbed my arm. "It's on the house. It's all on the house."

The room began to spin again. His head swam in a sea of glass, the mouth grimacing, eyes red and moist, hair disheveled. I pulled away and made for the door. "No," I called over my shoulder. "No." A glass exploded against the wall near the door.

"Go on, you bastard...leave, hit the road...fuck you...and don't come back...who do you think you are, you cocksucker...get out!...get out!...GET OUT!..." He was still screaming, standing in the bar's doorway, as I got my bag from the cabin and started the car. I last saw him wildly giving me the finger. "You chickenshit, you chickenshit,
you chickenshit..." followed me for a long way down the highway.

I heard about what happened after I left from another salesman. Gordie had returned to the bar and bought drinks all night for anyone who would stay. At the closing hour, he simply shut out the lights and continued serving drinks. He drank straight shots until he was raving. Some who knew him thought he had gone insane. Two unidentified men outlasted everyone else, forced the combination of the safe from him, took several thousand dollars from it, and beat him terribly. I often wonder how he is and am tempted to stop on my trips by. But of course, that would do neither of us any good now. He will survive without me, I'm sure.

I checked into a barren motel room early that next morning. The trip had cleared my head and I felt only exhaustion as I tumbled into bed. I remember hearing, just before I went to sleep, a train whistle faint and mournful in the distance and I wondered where it was going and what wondrous sights it would see.
The Going Down of the Sun

They presented their demands early in the afternoon, just after he had returned to the mill office from lunch at home. Thorson Berg sat at his desk in his favorite straight-back chair, musing about the importance of a good lunch in making a man productive. A box lunch, no matter how ingenious the preparer, was still a box lunch. It was bulk in the stomach, but after a man had eaten so many, it was no pleasure for the spirit. A man needed three meals a day and that meant three warm, carefully prepared meals served on dishes. There was something important about the ritual of sitting down at the same time every day to a table spread with the abundance of God's grace and a man's hard work giving off heat and delicious smells. Eating regularly and properly made the day whole, rewarded the work and gave it meaning. It provided sustenance for the body and the spirit. That was why he always walked home for a hot lunch and strongly urged his men to do the same.

They burst in past the office girl and laid their petition of grievances, signed by over half the men, on his desk. Two of the men he knew as professional union organizers but the other two were his own men. They were newcomers,
not of the original crew he had assembled to found the business. They had no sense of personal loyalty to him, no sense of what this place was and had a chance to be. The spokesman of the group, one McGuire, summarized the demands: recognition of the union and its local in New Canaan, a closed shop, a forty hour work week, two paid holidays--Christmas and the Fourth of July, a standardized grievance procedure, and wage increases. While McGuire described the demands, Thorson stared at his two men. They studied the floor and refused to look back at him. A long silence followed and the men began to fidget under his gaze and scuff the floor with their heavy boots.

"Well?" inquired McGuire.

"Get out," Thorson said quietly, his rapidly blinking eyes the only sign of anger. "Get out before I throw you out."

Thorson's two men quickly turned toward the door but the organizers were not finished. "We'll strike and we'll break this company if we have to," McGuire said. "The men are waiting in the mill yard for word. What shall we tell them?"

"You tell them...better yet, I'll tell them. You just tell them to wait there. I'll be over and we'll settle this."

"Alright, Mr. Berg. You're hereby officially notified that the employees of the Evergreen Lumber Company are on
strike."

"We'll see, McGuire. We'll see," Thorson said to their backs.

So it had finally come. He had heard rumors of labor agitation in the mill but had discounted them as just talk. Even when he had read of labor riots in the industrial and mining areas of the country, he had felt safe; his men were too content to listen to the utopian gibberish of the unions. They were paid as well as any in the industry and they received many benefits beyond what most men have a right to expect from their jobs. He tried to be more than an employer—he entertained them in his home, helped them when they needed it, supported some of them until their paychecks enabled them to support themselves, advised them in areas they knew nothing about. And now they were telling him they would rather have him as simply an employer, the opposition, the man on the other side of the economic fence who had to be forced to be generous.

He looked up as the office girl hesitatingly walked in. She, along with the rest of the small office staff, knew what the delegation's business had been.

"I'm sorry, sir. They just walked past me."

"I know," Thorson replied. "It's all right." His eyes went to the grievance petition and he absently read it. When he looked up again, she still stood in the same place, nervously tapping her pencil in the palm of her hand.
"What is it?"

"Excuse me, sir, but... what's going to happen now?... I don't mean to pry but... you know... my Leroy works over there and..." She flushed and seemed ready to turn and run.

"Don't worry, dear," he said. "Your job is safe and so is Leroy's. They won't strike. As soon as I talk to Ted, I'm going over there and straighten this out."

She beamed gratefully, thanked him, and walked out. He watched the others, half-heartedly pretending to work, note her smile and visibly relax. They had confidence in him, believed that he could handle the situation. He hoped their faith wasn't unfounded. And he wondered if he had any right to reassure the girl about her Leroy's job. He was one of the newcomers who hadn't had time to understand what a job at the Evergreen Lumber Company meant. He was probably in the middle of the strike movement and would have to be disciplined when it was all over. There were more and more Leroys at the mill as the older men retired or died. Perhaps more now than he could reach. But he would not allow his life's work to fall before a faceless, anonymous mob demanding what it had neither the courage nor the justification to ask individually, a mindless mass whose aspirations far exceeded its collective greatness and whose only power came from the crush of resentful mediocrity. Too much was at stake to even consider the demands. He pondered what was at stake.

He remembered his first sight of the Evergreen Plains.
from a bluff at the mouth of Bad Rock Canyon. The wandering Scandanavian from the Mid-west had set his pack down and just simply stared at the tremendous expance of trees on utterly flat ground. The Plains had once been covered by an immense, glacier-fed lake, and its rich, sandy soil was ideal for the growth of the several varieties of evergreen that seeded in the mud of slowly ebbing water. The green darkness stretched away uninterrupted for hundreds of square miles. Perhaps it was this scale that prompted him to see the promise in the Plains. Here was unending bounty that a man couldn't walk around in a day, a week, or perhaps even in a lifetime—that is, if the man was Thorson Berg, who could see bounty in evergreens when other men rushed across the Plains with their heads down, looking for the quicker but more elusive riches of metal. Perhaps it was the trees in such infinite numbers on such an expance that gave a man freedom and room to carve out a destiny that called him to end his wanderings here. He had never been able to put it into words.

Down-river from the mouth of the canyon, at nearly the center of the Plains, he found the abandoned trading post. It had been built at the confluence of the main river and its major tributary several decades earlier by a Scotch trapper and explorer working for a Canadian fur company. The Indians had been peacable, the fur market prospered with the pop-ularity of beaver coats and hats, and the Scotsman was a shrewd businessman. The post created several fortunes in
Canada and Europe and endured for some time after similar houses were abandoned. It was the only man-made structure on the Plains when he arrived. He lived in it during the early years and after the mill and New Canaan were firmly established, he had overseen its restoration to what it had been during the Scotsman's tenure.

When he came down off the bluff that first day, he noticed some kind of trail marked with blazes on the trees and stakes driven in the ground. It hadn't taken long to understand that he followed the trans-continental railroad right-of-way. Several days later, as he sat on a log near the post, it occurred to him that railroads need ties under the rails and that millions of unhewn ties stood on the Plains. It had all begun very simply with this idea. He had no trouble obtaining a contract to furnish the railroad with hand-hewn ties for the Evergreen Plains section. And with a letter home, he quickly had a crew working for him. They hewed ties until the track was laid. They stayed on and built the mill, and with the first lumber, built the huge Lutheran church that still filled to overflowing every Sunday. But that first year, it stood without a pastor. After building his tall, two-story frame house, Thorson left the business in the hands of Ted Christianson and disappeared eastward, returning several months later with a plump bride and a young pastor recently graduated from St. Olaf's.

The town grew slowly but steadily, its economic base
quite stable. The trees were the town's crop and so they had not given way even to the town itself. In their haste to build homes, the early settlers of New Canaan neglected any systematic clearing and built their houses beneath the trees too large to be used as logs. Several paved streets, laid upon the old tracks through the forest, still curved around tall fir. Although the need for tree removal was recognized with the coming of electricity and its overhead lines, the job was felt to be too expensive for the limited resources of the city budget. The major streets were straightened and the individual property owners were left to reckon with the rest of the great trees. So they continued to tower over the houses and even the businesses of New Canaan, giving shade in the summer and some protection against snow and wind in the winter. They were, quite literally, the horizons of the town.

Thorson refused to allow the forest to be exploited. He moved quickly to buy all the land he could, including many sections on either side of the railroad that had been given to the financiers by the Federal government as incentive to build the track. The rest of the Plains had become a part of a national forest and since the Evergreen Lumber Company had the only mill in the area, it monopolized this timber also. When horses were used to drag the logs, no roads were built and the forest around New Canaan experienced only a subtle, almost imperceptible thinning that recovered completely in a few years. As roads became necessary with
the mechanization of logging, they were open only long enough to harvest the timber. Afterward, they were closed with piles of dirt and fallen trees and allowed to return to production. Thus, the growing town was constantly surrounded by a pattern of dirt roads raveling the forest like errant threads in the dark fabric. In time, each was overgrown and another took its place. Only the railroad and the highways that followed the rivers and met at New Canaan remained permanent, man-made slits in the dark green of the Plains.

Thorson gradually came to regard the forest as a part of God's trust to him. It was food and shelter and clothing for him and his workers and all their descendents forever if all respected it. And it was more than a source of a livelihood; he loved the forest almost as a being. Frequently, he disappeared into it and walked for miles, allowing the feeling of awesome power and magnificence to seep into his soul until tears came to his eyes. When he stopped in the perpetual shadow of the great trees and looked up at the little piece of sky visible through the foliage, it seemed to him that he could feel God's Presence in the strength and stature of the trees and in the unseen expanse of the forest. He often sank to his knees at such moments, finding comfort and inspiration in his very insignificance. From his humility in the forest somehow came strength, a sense of power and purpose. His walks under the trees were followed
by periods of re-affirmed conviction and increased fervor. He went among the workers, speaking of the great forest and its blessings, of how it provided freedom from want through lumber, freedom from uncertainty in its omnipresence, freedom to live as a man chose within the laws of God and the Founding Fathers in its expanse. Through the years, Thorson's message came to be gospel among the families of the mill, and even among the families that came to provide services for the mill community.

In return for all his benevolence toward his workers, he asked for only one thing—a faithful attendance of church on Sundays and other important religious celebrations. Employment in the mill hinged a great deal upon this same factor and upon its implicit condition: obedience. His name for the town revealed his personal and spiritual vision, which became inextricably interwoven in the fabric of life in the town. He was not a ruthless captain of industry. As he often remarked sternly to his wife, his men fared better economically than others in the industry and they needed a strong hand to guide them spiritually. God had seen fit to favor him and he would do the same for his workers. But God demanded obedience. The stout little woman never commented, and he almost suspected that she had some thoughts about using economic leverage to obtain obedience. But if she did, she kept them to herself, as a good wife should.
Thorson looked at his watch and was amazed that it read 4:35. He had wasted an entire afternoon because of this damned labor business. He'd better get down there before the men left. But no. There was no hurry. He'd told them to wait, and they would wait because they knew he'd come. The longer they'd wait, the stronger would be his position. He might even go home for supper first, since it was so late now.

Ted Christianson, the mill foreman, came into the office and flopped tiredly into a chair. "You've heard?" he asked.

"Yes, I've heard."

Ted shook his head. "I didn't think it had gone this far. Or ever would." The rare frown on his usually placid face revealed how unfathomable the situation was to this simple man.

"I didn't either," said Thorson. "But it did and that's the concern now. How many men are really behind this strike?"

"Maybe ten...ten of the younger ones. The rest are just following along because of the excitement and because they don't know what else to do."

"Who are the leaders?"

"Well, the organizers are making the most noise—you know, McGuire and Silensky. Of our men, I'd say Olson, Markham, Hagerman, and maybe St. Claire."
Markham and Hagerman had been in the delegation to the office. Thorson knew he would have no trouble with them. That left Olson and St. Claire. The latter was the office girl's Leroy and would listen to reason with two jobs at stake. That left Olson. Johnny Olson, second generation employee, son of Sig, the original ratchet setter in the mill. Thorson wondered what had happened to the boy. The army, perhaps.

"What are you planning to do?" Ted asked. "I was just over at the mill yard and the men are getting worked up because you said you'd come and you haven't. McGuire and the others are making the most of what they call your broken word."

"I'll go and talk to them. Later, after supper. Let them wait."

Ted opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. "I'll be there," he said finally.

"No," said Thorson. "You stay home. There's nothing for you to do there and you'll need to work with them when it's over."

Ted nodded, his relief visible on his face.

The meal was eaten in silence. Thorson supposed that they had heard of the strike at the mill. But of course they said very little in his presence anyway. He watched his son pick at the food—always upset at the slightest sign of trouble anywhere. Thorson had been unsuccessful until late
in life in impregnating the stout little woman and, therefore, looked for a great deal in his only heir. But the things he looked for were lacking. He blamed the mother. She had shamelessly weakened the boy, somehow drained him of the competitive spirit that forced a boy to grow into a man. His gentleness drove the father to rage because it quietly and successfully resisted any effort to goad him into any form of contention. There was so much the boy had to learn before he assumed the place due him as son of Thorson. But he refused because what he had to learn demanded that he assert himself over others.

"I have to go to the mill," Thorson said. "Balder, you will come with me."

"But there will be trouble," protested the mother. "It is no place for a boy."

"He is ten years old. It is time now."

They walked to the mill in silence. The men still waited in the yard in front of the mill. They stood in small groups talking. A laugh or a curse occasionally drifted over to the man and the boy.

"We'll go around and come in the back way," said Thorson. They quickly skirted the mill clearing, staying back in the trees, and entered the mill through a door in back. "Wait," Thorson ordered. He rummaged in a corner until he found a bucket of tar, kept to patch holes in the roof. He broke a six-foot piece from a long edging and dipped the end
in the tar. "Alright." They went out through the large double-doors in the front of the mill.

The men fell silent and gathered closer together behind their leaders. Darkness was rapidly approaching and it was difficult to pick out individuals in the group.

"Why are you men waiting here?" Thorson shouted. "If you are on strike, you should be home making other arrangements to feed your families."

"I told them you said to wait," said McGuire. "They waited."

"Ah, but why did they wait? If they're on strike, they don't have to follow orders. But no matter.... Why didn't each of you come to me and explain why you deserve what you ask? If you deserve it, I would give it. You all know that."

"Because they would have to depend on your opinion of what they deserve," said McGuire. "And they deserve to not be at your mercy."

"My mercy...my mercy." Thorson smiled ironically. "My mercy wasn't so hard to take when most of you needed help. Loans, gifts, food for your tables...I don't need to point out who I gave these to--you know who you are, and you're feeling ashamed inside."

"Your mercy makes us slaves."

Thorson looked quickly at the speaker. He was hard to make out. Yes, it was Olson. "Who said that? Be man
enough to stand out."

"We all say that," said McGuire. "Don't try to separate us."

"I said it." Olson stepped forward around McGuire. "And I'll say it again if you didn't understand the first time."

"My mercy doesn't make you a slave, Johnny Olson. Your spinelessness does that. To hide behind the group, to be afraid to come to see me on your own—that's what makes you a slave."

"I'm here now, face to face. I'm not hiding."

"Yes, and I respect you for that. What about the rest of you? Will you speak up for yourselves or will you stay in the mob and let McGuire speak for you?"

There was a shuffling and murmur in the group but no one said anything loud enough to single himself out. "Stay quiet, men, and stick together," said McGuire. "You all see what he's trying to do."

"Tell me, McGuire. Why this mill? You know these men are paid as well as any in the industry. They have more benefits because I take care of them. Why this mill?"

"Because this mill is an example. The world is watching and if these workers get their just share of the profits, others will take heart and sacrifice to get theirs."

"Maybe the workers in other places need protection. But not here. These people have plenty and were content
They need protection here. Even if you're as good to them as you say, what guarantee is there that you won't change, that you won't exploit them if your profit is threatened? They need something in writing, some guarantee."

The muscles in Thorson's face twitched. "They have my word," he exploded. "And a man's word is all that is important in the world, all that can be depended upon, except for God's love and justice. Your contract is just paper words, to be interpreted and gotten around and twisted. It shows a lack of trust and faith. And then all there is is force. Yours and my freedom to choose to cooperate is gone. For you, it becomes only another job. For me, only a business. You are all surrendering your rights as men for the security of sheep."

"What if I want what you have? Would you help me to get it?" Johnny Olson still stood out in front of the men.

"I'll tell you honestly, Johnny Olson, that if what you want threatens what I have built and choose not to give up, I will fight you with every breath of my body. But if you went to a place where there was room and worked hard and built up something of value, I would help you and praise you."

"Everything you say sounds good," said McGuire. "But
we still have only your word. Words are cheap and they
don't fill an empty stomach. Unless you're prepared to ne-
gotiate in good faith, the strike's still on--right men?"

They murmured their agreement.

Thorson stood still for a moment, staring at the group.
"You poor fools--you poor fools," he said. He began to pace
back and forth between the group and the mill, his caved
chest heaving, his white hair and full beard waving as he
moved. "You can't understand reason and order. That is why
there must be men like me. You are like animals that only
understand force. All right--force it is."

Thorson struck a match and lit the tar on the end of
the stick. The torch burned brightly. His long shadow
reached half-way up the mill wall and exaggerated his ges-
tures as he spoke.

"I am a man and with God's help built this mill from
nothing. You didn't come here when there was nothing and
see the possibility and work hard to make it real. And you,
you band of sheep, are not going to tell me what to do with
this that I have built. I will destroy it before I let you
force your control over the smallest part of it, you ungrate-
ful, whining, incapable pack of dogs." Thorson's voice had
built to a roar that echoed from the mill walls and made it
seem that the shadow, too, was speaking.

"Do you see this?" he raged, and held the burning torch
above his head like a javelin. "I will lock the doors of
this mill and burn it to the ground and stand laughing as you see food for your babies' bellies go up in smoke. I will laugh as you leave your homes to look for work. I will make a hell-fire of your life for your ingratitude, for your demanding more of God than He has seen fit to give you, though He gives you abundance. I will torment you for your failure to respect Him and His order as soon as you bunch together." He paused for breath, the torch still above his head and reflecting from his eyes.

"You have five minutes to cast McGuire and his men out and move over behind me, or when you go home, it will be to pack your belongings and leave it."

"Don't listen to him," yelled McGuire. "He's bluffing. He won't do it. He stands to lose the most."

"I give you my word I will do it. And now you must decide whose word is the best." Thorson's eyes glittered as he smiled ironically. "'...stands to lose the most.' That is truer than even McGuire knows. McGuire doesn't understand any reasons but economic ones. He considers me a capitalist but he thinks only in terms of profit and loss himself. You decide who is right. You have four minutes."

McGuire disappeared into the group and argued quietly but feverishly with a few who were beginning to weaken. All the men moved restlessly except Johnny Olson. He stood where he had been and stared at Thorson as if trying to see within him.
"Three minutes," intoned Thorson.

The discussion in the group became louder. Several of the men were openly arguing with McGuire. Thorson and Johnny Olson continued to stare into each other's eyes.

"Two minutes." Thorson's arm wavered with the strain of holding the torch aloft where all could see it.

Then Johnny Olson looked down. "He'll do it. He'll burn the thing to the ground," he said, turning to the men. "I'd like to make him do it and watch him. But we've got to think of your families."

"No, no," shouted McGuire. "Nobody would burn their own business. You fools—he's bluffed Olson. Can't you see that?"

"One minute," said Thorson.

"Save your jobs," said Olson. "There'll be another time. The old man won't last forever."

The men began drifting away from McGuire. He screamed and pleaded until they all stood behind Thorson and he, his colleague, and Olson were alone.

"Get out of here while you still can, McGuire. And tell the world you said was watching that there is a place left where men are still men." Thorson spoke softly and lowered the torch. "The rest of you go home and be to work on time tomorrow."

The men drifted away until only Thorson, Balder, and Johnny Olson were left.
"Johnny Olson, you understand, don't you?" said Thorson. The younger man nodded. "Yes."

"You also know why you can't work here anymore?"

"Yes. There's room for only one of us at a time."

Thorson smiled and offered his hand. "Humility is a virtue, too."

"You must have read that somewhere," Johnny Olson said, taking the old man's hand.

"Good-bye son. And good luck." He watched Johnny Olson out of sight and then snuffed out the torch in the loose dirt. He set off for home with his long stride and Balder fell in behind, nearly running to keep up.

"Papa...Papa," he called as they neared the white, frame house.

"Yes," the old man said over his shoulder.

"Would you have...done it? Would...you have...burned down the mill?" Balder panted.

Thorson stopped short and spun around. The boy nearly ran into him. He stared down into the gentle blue eyes barely visible in the darkness.

"Ah, boy," he said, shaking his head and turning toward home. "You have learned nothing."
II
That the Tender Branch Will Not Cease

Balder sat in the darkness of the living room, staring at the closed bedroom door and fearing it. There had been a day when he had loved closed doors. The world behind them was unknown and full of possibility. He had loved the giddy, half-fear of anticipation, the surprises, the scares. Behind a door he might find wondrous creatures and enchanted places, and sometimes he had hated to finally look in and be disappointed. More than once, he had been disciplined for stealthily opening one, to the embarrassment of some adult. But he no longer believed in closed doors.

The doctor was with her—there was some kind of comfort in that, at least. It was the only comfort the night had so far. The pains had begun just after the dinner guests had left. Marian had insisted upon going through with the dinner. She had never once failed since their marriage in entertaining both sets of parents for Sunday dinner. She informed him that she wasn't about to start now. He had helped as much as he could and the dinner turned out well. But after, she had become ill and had to lie down. When she began to hemorrhage slightly in the early evening, he left his dishes in the pan and rushed for the doctor. The world outside was strange with winter. Wind from the north always
meant a terrible storm that even the trees couldn't block or diminish. The familiar pattern of streets was disguised by heavy snow blown into drifts at odd angles. Lights from the houses were rarely visible through the whipping snow and he thought several times how silly it would be to get lost in his own home town. He had finally found Ben Blackwell's house and blurted out his problem to the tall, gaunt man who had practiced in New Canaan for 25 years and was still a stranger. The doctor calmly donned the long black coat he had worn since anyone had known him and ordered Balder home to make preparations while he drove around to pick up his mid-wife assistant.

Balder had returned home to find that a branch from the pine on the north side of the house had smashed through the bedroom window. Pictures had been blown from the walls and snow covered the floor and the bed. Marian had managed to reach the living room, where she twitched and moaned on the hard, narrow sofa. He quickly shut off the wind with a piece of cardboard tacked to the sash. Then he nailed an old, heavy blanket over the entire window to hold back the cold. He wondered what to do. This was the only bedroom and the living room furniture certainly wasn't adequate. And time was pressing. Quickly, he changed the wet bedding and dried the room as much as possible. By the time the doctor and his assistant arrived, he had made the necessary preparations and had moved Marian back into the bedroom.
The pale doctor eyed the bulging blanket in the window and the arrangements, and slowly nodded his approval. He carefully removed his coat and asked Balder to leave the room. At that instant, the power went off. Probably the relentless wind had toppled a pole somewhere.

"Find some light," the doctor's deep voice called through the darkness. "And bring it quickly."

Balder stumbled and felt his way to the cellar. He found two kerosene lanterns and brought them to the bedroom.

"It's not enough light," said the doctor. "Try to find something else."

Balder remembered the box of Christmas decorations he had recently repacked and put away in a closet. He added the light of several holiday candles to the bedroom. It was still very dim. The doctor shook his head in disapproval.

"We can't wait any longer."

Marian's cries and moans behind the door seemed a part of the shrill whistling of the wind and the groaning of the trees outside. He wondered why pain was usually accompanied by sound. Even animals bleated or growled or hissed. Every living thing seemed to resist death with every cell and found some way to make the strain heard. Maybe each thing was trying to comfort itself by listening to the sound of its own voice. Falling silent meant that death moved an inch nearer. Marian screamed and the trees groaned in the wind. And for what? Why did anything strain to stay alive
when it only meant they endured to endure some more? He didn't understand it.

He thought of his mother, thin now, with a terrible cough. Why did she force herself up every day to cook meals and clean house and carry on as she had always done? What was left for her? "All life is sacred, Little One," she had said once as she sat on the edge of the bed. "And there is magic in it if one doesn't look too close to be able to see." He wondered if she remembered saying that to him and what she found magic in spitting up blood.

He had believed her, more strongly perhaps than she had wanted him to believe. It was hard to understand how he could have been so naive. As a boy, he had often gone into the forest to watch the animals and attempt to talk to them. He had been sure that they spoke, but in a language that humans couldn't hear. Once the wind carried the conversation of browsing deer to him as he sat unmoving beneath a tree. He hoped the wind wouldn't change directions because the deer would flee if they smelled him. He knew they were speaking; the words swirled around him and even went into his ears where he could feel but not hear them. He wished with all his might to hear, and then he remembered his mother telling him to pray to God if he wanted something that wasn't selfish. It certainly wouldn't be selfish to want to talk to the deer, especially if he shared with the others what they said. And so he prayed and then he could
hear the words. They had known all along that he was there and they were talking about him. The deer said: "I'm certainly glad the wind is blowing toward him so we don't have to smell his scent. I'll take a skunk anytime....Yes, that's true, but at least he doesn't have any of those noisy sticks to point at us....Maybe he's different than the rest of those creatures....Yes, he does seem to be more like us; he isn't going around ruining the forest, anyway....Before the rest of you get carried away, let me remind you that he still walks on two legs, and clumsily at that, he lives in a house, and he smells simply awful. I, for one, don't trust him." At that, Balder exclaimed, "But I wouldn't hurt you!" and shook his head. The deer swiftly disappeared into the trees. On the way home he practiced walking on all fours and sniffed himself to see if he could detect his own awful scent, but to creep on all fours hurt his back and the only odor he could isolate was the smell of home-made soap. He asked his mother why the deer thought he smelled bad and didn't trust him.

"Maybe you only imagined that they talked to each other," she said.

"No," he said. "I heard them as plain as anything. Don't you believe, Mother?"

"Yes, of course I believe." She thought for a while. "Maybe the deer couldn't really tell you from other people. You can't tell one deer from another, you know. Maybe, in
time, when the deer recognize you and understand that you know that all life is sacred and the animals are just as important as the people, they will trust you and tell you what they know."

He had also believed that there were other creatures in the forest that no one could even see, much less talk to. He thought they were probably little men--elves or fairies--that lived under the roots of the trees. He didn't know why they lived there or why they were at all. As far as he knew, they didn't do anything, like work in a mill or build houses. And it seemed to him a very good way to live. He wanted very badly to talk to one to ask him how it was to live in the ground and not do anything and be invisible. He wondered if the fairies could talk to the animals and if the animals could see the fairies. They always followed him in the forest, sometimes large groups of them. He practiced springing around in an attempt to see them but they always managed to slip under the trees before he could focus his eyes. He thought they enjoyed the game as much as he did.

It was odd how childhood beliefs clung on, long after a person thought he had forgotten them. Perhaps no one ever really shook their childhood and completely grew up. No, everyone found out sooner or later about life. It just came later than most people knew. For him, childhood ended at eighteen.

He had always known who Marian was but had never really
noticed her, like a person never notices a familiar piece of furniture. She wasn't like the other girls in school. She wore no makeup to help out her plain face and her clothes were always straight and dull colored. She studied hard, and while the other girls were dating and worrying about their hair styles, she was worrying about the economy of the country and the situation in Europe, which Wilson had failed to make as safe for democracy as she had hoped.

He had never given girls much thought, and had never even considered that one would be interested in him. He was surprised when she prevented some classmates, by threatening to tell the superintendent, from placing in their female English teacher's desk a prophylactic full of spit and a love note signed with his name. He had admired her nerve and had begun to really look at her. She had not been as homely as everyone said. They had dated the rest of their senior year and were considered by everyone to be going steady.

On the night of their graduation, an unseasonably warm May evening, she had led him on a walk into the forest with a picnic lunch and a blanket. After eating, they lay quietly under a huge fir. It had seemed to be a night of magic to him. They listened to the night sounds of the insects and animals, and watched the tiny patches of moonlight that filtered down through the trees dance like fairy fire in the soft wind. It must have been just the mood of the moment.
He thought of all the living creatures and remembered that they were out there doing things that no one had ever seen nor would believe. Perhaps the four-footed creatures were flying among the trees and the insects talking together. Suddenly, he was aware that Marian, with typical economy of motion, had moved her hand onto his genitals and was briskly rubbing them. He lay still, amazed, and tried to see her eyes. She stared fixedly at his face and said, "Do it to me, Balder." When he failed to respond in any way, she sat up and unfastened his trousers. "Lift up," she commanded and slid them down below his knees. Then she stood and quickly undressed before him. A spot of moonlight, put in motion by the swaying branches above, searched her thin, straight body. She stood frozen, like a snow goddess glowing coldly against the dark trees.

"You'll get cold," he said.

"Make me warm, Balder. It's all right because I want you to." She knelt and began rubbing him again. "Please do it. It's the time and I want you to."

Perhaps more from a sense of wanting to please, of wanting to make her happy, than from any sense of passion, his body began to respond. She lay down on him and ground her thin, hard lips on his. She had to sit up to put it in, but returned to his lips and squirmed until she moaned and quivered. Then she squirmed again until he began to feel a strange sensation. He ejaculated with his eyes wide open.
and somehow noticed that a cloud moved in front of the moon and the fairy fires were extinguished.

Yes, he had believed and he wondered how his faith in his mother's word could have made him accept pain and suffering without question for so long. Maybe it was because he had never known any other way to live. It had seemed as much a part of his childhood as the magic and he had never questioned the rightness of it.

"Come into the parlor," his father had said after supper. "I have something to discuss with you." They went into the dark, lifeless room. "Now. I have heard that you let one of the boys push you into the river. Is that true?"

Balder nodded. The other boys had been poking hollow grass stalks in frog rectums, inflating them, and throwing them out into the river to shoot at with BB guns. He had tried to stop them and one of them had pushed him out of the way and he had fallen in the water. They had agreed not to shoot the frogs if he wouldn't tell his father.

"Do you know who pushed you?" his father asked.

"Yes, sir. But he didn't mean to. I was in his way."

"Who was it?"

"I'm sorry, Papa. I can't tell you. I promised."

"I already know who it was...Harold, the sawyer's son. What are you going to do about it?" His father sat looking sternly at him.

"Nothing...what is there to do?"
"What is there to do? What is there to do! There is only one thing to do. You must humiliate him as he has you. You must fight him. One day he will work for you and he must learn to respect you."

He had felt real fear. "But Papa! It will do no good to fight him. It will not make me better than him. And what if I should hurt him?...please don't make me fight him." He burst into tears. "I will not fight him, Papa," he said between sobs.

"You will fight him or I will strop you," shouted his father.

He only shook his head.

"Come!" his father said. He led the way to the washroom, where his razor strop hung from a nail. "Let down your trousers and bend over," he commanded. Staring at the gleaming white, then reddish-purple, then blood red buttocks, he administered the disciplinary blows, counting as he proceeded: whop..."one", whop..."two", ...whop..."twenty". Balder whimpered and groaned with each blow, but did not scream or plead. He was embarrassed by the erection that sprang up with the first blow.

"This will happen every time you allow one of the others to insult you," his father bellowed. "Unless you learn to fight back like a man." His mother flew in at that moment.

"My God, Thorson, what have you done?" She bent to
examine his wounds as he leaned over the washstand. His father turned to leave.

"Papa...Papa...," he had called from around his mother's agitated form. His father stopped and looked back. "Thank you, Papa, for not making me fight him."

His father had stared for a moment, then spun on his heel and left the room. His mother had gazed at the retreating back and said nothing.

There had been many more beatings, whenever his father heard of what he considered further insults to the family name. And the insults had become more frequent when word somehow got out that he would take a beating from his father rather than fight. Everyone had picked on him in those days--older bullies and even some younger boys who aspired to bullyhood but were too small or weak. It would be funny if it weren't so maddening to think about now. But he had endured the abuse and had thought little of it. Even the last beating at home.

He had returned home from an episode in Oscar Jacobson's garage with shirt torn off and the words 'Chickenshit Berg' kalsomined in green across his chest. His mother hurried him into the washroom. Their manner aroused his father's suspicions and he entered the room in time to see her vigorously scrubbing his chest and hushing his quiet sobs. His father looked for the razor strop in its usual place but it was gone.
"Where is the strop?" he demanded ominously.

They said nothing. She resumed her scrubbing, her back to his father, while he stared at the angry man.

"Where is it?...answer me, woman!"

There was no reply.

"By God, you will obey!" he screamed. "You are my wife and you will answer!"

"Please, Mama, tell him," he said. "It will be all right."

Still she said nothing. His father ripped his belt from around his thin waist and doubled it in his hand. "I will deal with you later," he said to her. "Now get out!"

"No." She turned to face him.

He raised the belt above his head, towering menacingly above her, his eyes blinking rapidly in his rage.

"Go ahead," she said quietly, staring up at him with no expression on her face.

"No, Mama!" he cried. "Go on, like he says."

Thorson grasped her arm and drug her to the door. He flung her into the hallway, where she tumbled to the floor. "I said get out! Now stay out!" His father turned to him. He had anticipated the command and was lowering his trousers. His father landed one blow before she rushed back into the room and stopped his arm. "Stop it, you beast. Stop it!" she cried.

With a roar, he shook free from her and lashed out
back-handed with the belt. The blow caught her on the cheek and she staggered backward. All three froze in position, like a tableau in a play.

"If you hit him again," she said in a low voice, "I will kill you."

His father stared for a moment almost in bewilderment, his rage suddenly vanished. Then he dropped the belt, strode from the house, and disappeared into the forest. She stood staring at the floor, her hand absently rubbing the bright red streak across her face.

"Are you all right, Mama?" he whispered.

She looked up at him as if just being reminded of his presence. He saw memories and emotions flit across her broad face and right themselves in her mind.

"Yes. I'm fine." Suddenly, she lowered her face and began to cry softly. "I'm sorry, Little One...and so ashamed...."

"Don't cry, Mama," he said with tears coming to his eyes. "Everything will be alright again. You don't have to be sorry."

"But don't you see, Son," she wailed bitterly. "I would kill him." She turned to the wall, her shoulders heaving with the sobs. Hobbling with the trousers forgotten around his ankles, he moved beside her and tried to comfort her with awkward pats and boyish reassurances.

"Love will make everything right," she finally said,
regaining her composure and drying her eyes. "We've got to love him, Balder, no matter what he does."

This had been hard for him to understand even then. "But how can you love someone that hurts you?" he asked.

"You just can, that's all. You can do anything if you set your mind to it."

And he had believed that, too. The beatings ended so it was easier. But the abuse from the other children didn't end until he met Rudy. Rudy. It was painful to even think of him now.

He had known they were Rudy's box traps, but that made no difference anyway. Rudy was just another boy then, and he'd have done the same thing, knowing. He moved along the trap line he had found, releasing the rabbits. He had been doing it for several weeks that late fall and knew where all the traps were. He knelt above one and a voice froze him for a moment.

"What do you think you're doing, you bastard?" Rudy barked as he stepped from behind a tree.

He grinned sheepishly up at the scowling face for a moment and then reached for the trap.

"Get away from there! Leave that alone!" Rudy yelled and pushed him over. He got to his feet and moved again toward the trap.

"You take one more step and I'll whip your ass," Rudy warned, and watched, amazement on his face, as he leaned
toward the rabbit. With a roar of rage, Rudy leaped on him and hit him several times in the face. Already, at sixteen, Rudy was nearing 200 pounds and the charge completely overwhelmed him. For a moment, he sat wide-eyed and dazed on the ground with blood trickling from his nose, then got up and made for the trap. Again Rudy hit him with a flurry of punches, and again as soon as he could get to his feet, he moved toward the box. After several repetitions of the strange, dance-like ritual, Rudy stood panting and watching him, his face cut, his nose bleeding, and his eyes nearly puffed shut, crawl on the ground, groping blindly for the trap. He found it and felt for the latch. He noticed Rudy, near tears, take one step toward kicking his hand from the box and stop short.

"You don't know it, but you're a tough sonofabitch," Rudy roared, his voice a mixture of frustration, pity, and awe. He had smiled up with his bloody face and released the rabbit.

Rudy had helped him home and had gone around afterward spreading the word that they were friends. His fights became Rudy's. And so the abuse had stopped. They had been like brothers until his marriage to Marian. He had often wondered what he gave to Rudy, in return for friendship and protection. He had tried to repay the big lug in as many ways as he could— with school work, in teaching him social graces he wouldn't have learned in his rough home, in taking
care of him after the drinking bouts he began at an early age, publicly defending him for the over-exhuberance and boastfulness that no amount of advice could quite dampen. But they never seemed adequate. There was no way to show another man, especially a rough, blustering one like Rudy, that he was appreciated and even loved. There was no way to mention love between men and that maybe was partly what was wrong with the world. But perhaps Rudy sensed it and considered it payment.

It was still sheer agony to remember that last scene with Rudy. They were walking home together from work.

"I'll stop over tonight. We'll play some cribbage," Rudy said.

"No. I have some painting to do on the house."

"Oh, well if you have two brushes, I'll help."

"No, don't bother. I can do it. It's not much."

"What the hell's the matter? You've been acting funny for a week. Don't you want me around your house?" He said it as a joke.

How could he tell Rudy that Marian had decided soon after the marriage that he wasn't to set foot in the house? 'You tell that loud-mouthed slob to stay away from here. I don't like him hanging around here, wasting our time.... If you don't, I will.' How could he tell Rudy he'd had to choose between duty and friendship and, of course, friendship lost? And how could it be done to protect Rudy's
feelings and Marian's image as his wife at the same time? If he chose to stay married to her, he owed it to her and to himself not to complain.

"Maybe you'd better not come anymore, Rudy."

"Why not? What's the matter?" Bewilderment distorted Rudy's face into a frown.

"Well, now that I'm married and all, we don't have much in common. I've got responsibilities I never had before and I won't be having much time to go fishing or chasing around anymore. It's just not the same."

There was no way to express the look on Rudy's face and in his eyes. Anyone would have looked away. They walked in silence for a time.

"We'll still see each other at work. And maybe when I get things straightened out, we'll get together and do some fishing." He'd said it, but a sense of futility was budding in him.

"Sure," Rudy said, looking at the ground. "Sure."

They separated at the corner, each toward his home.

"See you, Rudy."

"Yeah, take it easy."

Marian had somehow known what had happened. She went into one of her gay moods and joked and kidded through supper. As they were doing the dishes, she reached up with her sudsy hand and poked a wet finger in his ear.

"You know what that means, don't you, husband?"
"No," he said.

"You'll find out later." She smiled at him with what she thought was a coquettish grin. He didn't reply.

"You know, Balder, your father and I are very proud of you, the way you've taken hold and accepted responsibility. He thinks you could start working some evenings and Saturdays with the millwright and learn about the business from the ground up."

"Do we have to talk about that again?"

"It's your golden opportunity. You know your father. He'll make other arrangements for the business when he retires if he thinks you can't take care of it. This is your chance to show him you can."

"I'll think about it."

"Don't take too long, sweetheart. It's never too early to start preparing yourself."

They made love that night and she showed him the slight rise in her stomach. "Your graduation present is beginning to show," she said and giggled. He tried not to show the apathy that blossomed, guarded like a hot-house plant, within him.

She didn't know the drudgery she asked him to endure. Or maybe she did and wouldn't allow any thought of it to interfere with the plans he was discovering she had made. She was a great one for planning. He came home from work each day exhausted, his sweat-soaked clothing clinging to
his body. He was always tired anymore. After supper on the
nights he didn’t work, she directed the home improvement
projects she found in women’s magazines that could be adapt-
ed to the house. Then he sat and fought sleep through the
coffee chat time, when they could communicate their problems
or just talk about their day. The Sunday dinner was his
time to learn about being a congenial host and he had per-
formed as usual today. Today was only slightly different
from other Sundays. The baby had taken her away from the
dishes, which they usually did together, and spoiled marital
togetherness hour. And he would not have to perform his
weekly obligation to her determined bucking, fulfilled until
last week. But he was missing the much-needed sleep anyway.

She screamed louder than usual and he immediately felt
guilty about thinking such things at a time like this. She
was suffering and all he could do was feel sorry for himself.
If he couldn’t love her, he at least owed her the respect of
one living thing for another and that included sympathy.
He wondered why it was set up so that women endured all the
pain of childbirth. He would gladly accept some of it on
himself. But he couldn’t. Everyone had to do their own
suffering. The baby would when it grew up and maybe before.
Was it right then, knowing this, to create a child? Might
it not be better off to die now? He shook his head. What a
terrible thought! But then if he was repulsed by the
thought, there must be something in people that made them
clinging to life like it was precious. Even in him. There must be something somewhere to make it all worthwhile. He thought of his mother again and what she had said. It was too bad that the world's suffering couldn't be assumed by a few—there were people more capable by training and circumstance of enduring it. It was too bad Jesus couldn't come along every few years.

Between fierce gusts of wind that shook the house, he could hear the measured murmur of the doctor's instructions to his patient and the assistant. Marian's cries were becoming increasingly desperate and angry, at times almost like a growl. And the trees creaked and groaned outside. He wondered if she was strong enough to take this. Poor thin Marian—it must have been tearing her apart. He suddenly wondered, since pain was all the world offered, if it wasn't somehow its own reward. Few people could understand such an idea, certainly no one he knew. Maybe that was the answer. An angry urge to feel pain and revel in it, enjoy it, bloomed within him and its heavy sweetness seemed to hang like the fragrance of tropical flowers around him, intoxicating and nauseating.

Suddenly, the door opened and the doctor appeared.

"Would you help control the patient?" he asked unhurriedly. "It is a breech presentation and we are having some difficulty." His black trousers and vest were barely visible and the words seemed to be coming from white arms and face,
floating in the darkness of the living room. He didn't wait for a reply and disappeared back into the bedroom.

Balder hesitated in the doorway. A vault of flickering light and smoke from the lanterns and candles surrounded the bed. Grotesque shadows of the doctor and his old assistant vaguely moved on the walls, blurred by the haze. The doctor bent over Marian, murmuring something to the hag on the other side of the bed. The shadows met and conspired over their bowed backs. Marian screamed and thrashed, her naked body running with sweat. The doctor lifted his head toward the doorway, his pale, bony face reflecting the firelight like a painted mask.

"Come here," he commanded. "Try to hold the legs."

Balder gripped the ankles and gritted his teeth while the doctor worked. Marian screamed in agony. "Get it out!" she growled. "God damn it...God damn it...God damn it..." she repeated over and over in a rhythmic chant. She screamed again "Get it out!...get it out!...kill it, kill it if you have to, tear it to pieces...the bastard, the sonofabitch...out...out...out!..." She roared her rage somewhere deep in her throat. Balder could hardly restrain her legs.

"Ahhh, it's turned," said the doctor. "Push, Marian, push!" He rhythmically pressed above the baby to help. They struggled together, with brief periods of rest as Marian weakened. "Out...out...out...." she chanted between screams. Balder nodded his head in time with the spasms and
took up the doctor's words--"Push, Marian, push...push, Marian, push...." The words lost their meaning and became a strange incantation. "Push, Marian, push...push, Marian, push, push, Marian, push...."

From far to the north over the roofs of the world, a powerful gust of wind slammed into the frail cardboard in the window and blew it aside. In an instant, it searched out a thread weakened by mildew and ripped the old blanket from end to end with an explosive crack. The blast of wind and snow trailed straight across the bed and the sweating woman. She screamed in terror and heaved convulsively. The baby's head began to emerge. The lanterns flickered and withstood the wind but the candles went out. Balder stared, as if in a trance. This was an old scene, older than any of them could think about. The baby moved a little more and a little more until its head was out. The doctor's shouting voice finally penetrated the roar of the wind and Marian's screams and Balder's consciousness. The mid-wife was struggling at the window with another blanket but she couldn't fasten it across the opening. Balder rushed to help her and together, they shut out the storm. A thin layer of snow covered the room.

With a last heave, Marian expelled the baby and fell unconscious. It was a boy. The doctor severed its tie to the mother, cleared its face, and held it upside down. Fine particles of snow still drifting in the room settled on the
tiny, red body and it thrashed in indignation. With a few pats on the feet, it wailed its first thin little noise in the world. To Balder, the little noise was huge, larger than anything he knew. It simply was, now and eons of time ago, and his questioning of it was absurd. Its power, greater than passion or circumstance, withered all questions like orchids in the clean north wind.

They hurried to move the mother and child into the living room on a blanket litter. Balder's eyes never left the baby. There he was, on his mother's belly, a magic creature that had fought his way in the flesh of men through all of time for this moment. He was a part of everything, he was holy. Balder knew he would have to choose and narrow himself someday, and he would make the wrong choices as perhaps all choices were, and he would suffer, and he would die. But he had had his time. They both had. And maybe that was enough.
III

The Pillars Whereupon the House Stands

The 50th Annual Evergreen Lumber Company picnic by midday had attracted most of the residents of the town. As be-fitted the occasion, the park along the river was decorated profusely with American flags, commemorating both the birthday of the nation and Thorson Berg's institution of the annual celebration on the day he donated the park to the city. In his will, he had left funds for the perpetuation of the picnic so that his natural and spiritual heirs could continue to celebrate through their fun, noise, and happiness the bounty and freedom of America. The freedom of America was symbolized by the statue of Patrick Henry in the center of the park, imported from the East at considerable expense to Thorson, his ardent admirer. Patrick's right hand was upraised in an orator's gesture and his stirring words were engraved on the pedestal. The statue, park, and annual celebration on the Fourth of July were only token payments of the debt Thorson felt he owed his country.

Today, only the brief speeches, bracketed by the invocation and benediction, subdued the picnickers for a short time, and then the dizzying whirl of motion and bright colors and sound and smell resumed around the statue in the hot, shimmering afternoon: children running and rolling on
the green grass, a baseball game off at the other end of the park, pastel summer dresses swaying and whirling as if in dance, tables covered by dazzling white cloth and decorated in red, white, and blue motifs, yells of children, murmurs of conversation, laughter, thoks of axes striking wood in the logging contests, odors of chicken, meat balls, fresh pastries, coffee, and of fresh-mown grass, pine sawdust, and river mud—everywhere, a swirling feast for all the senses.

The older people, many of whom had attended all 50 of the celebrations, sat in groups at the tables under the spruce trees languidly fanning themselves with hats and handkerchiefs and commenting, as they always had, on how quickly the children grew up, and no wonder, look how they attacked that food. The food, however, always seemed to outlast the appetites. Always there were huge quantities of chicken, potatoe salad, ice cream, pie, fruit, and various special dishes left over. And the old people took as much pride in the quantity of the left-overs as they did in the amount consumed.

One group of oldsters watched Eric Berg and Mary Ann Alstead spread a blanket in the shade of a tree near the statue and eat their lunch.

"That looks serious," declared Ted Christianson, the long-time mayor of New Canaan and retired foreman from the mill. Only now beginning to relax, he had nervously
delivered his annual address to the picnickers a short time before, citing the progress that the city had made since the first picnic and the debt that the town owed to the Evergreen Lumber Company and the memory of Thorson Berg. His interest in the young couple on the blanket stemmed from his unofficial position as historian of the community and its people. "What do you think, Ed?"

Edison White pondered the question, his thin, drawn face threatening to crack open with his concentration to see the couple. His eyes were victims of his many years of keeping company books. He was Eric's maternal grandfather and therefore entitled to speak definitively on the relationship.

"Yes, it does look serious," he wheezed in his high voice. "Can't say as I think much of that girl, though. Seems pretty whimsical." He paused for breath and the others waited. "The boy isn't exactly rock solid either, even if he is my grandson."

"Now, Edison," cried Pastor Paulson, who had delivered all fifty invocations and benedictions at the picnic. "There's a lot of you in him."

"Haaa...you know better than that." Edison was a very literal man.

"You're too hard on them," the Pastor said. "Mary Ann may seem to have her head in the clouds, but do you remember what it was to be twenty? And the older we get, the younger
twenty seems...."

"You're darn right I remember what it was to be twenty. I was married and supporting a household, and had...."

Edison himself was interrupted.

"You were never twenty, Ed," Harry Angle said with a smile.

Edison refused to acknowledge the remark. "Well, he's not very responsible and he's older than twenty."

"Maybe not in our way," replied Pastor Paulson. "That handsome head full of strange ideas. Strong willed, stubborn, some of us would even say perverse. But in his way, very strong. He looks for truth, Edison. And I think that search will bring him back to the Church. He's not bad... there's too much of his father and grandfather in him for that."

"Truth!" Edison snorted. "That's preacher talk. You call burning half the school truth? Or running away every chance he got, or being disrespectful to his mother and me and any other adult who tries to draw the line?" Completely winded, Edison paused again for breath. "That's not my kind of truth or Thorson's either. If he takes after anybody, it's his father, you're right about that. If there was ever anybody that didn't know which way was up, it was Balder!" He was warming to his topic and nearly shouted the last.

"Please, Edison. Don't yell," said the Pastor, concealing the depth of his annoyance. The group fell silent.
"No, the boy's father had no common sense," Edison resumed in a lower voice. The others at the picnic table started from their own thoughts. "And neither does he. It's too bad he didn't get at least that much from Marian."

"There's your mother and that Wind River man," said Mary Ann. She watched over Eric's shoulder.

"Are they coming over?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stared silently at the ground, plucking blades of grass one by one and shredding them.

"Eric?" Marian Berg came up behind him. She was expensively and tastefully dressed. Time, frequent trips to the hair stylist, and the artful use of cosmetics tempered the severity of her thin face and, at forty, she was as lovely as she had been in her life.

"Yes," he said without turning.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

"Yes, I've heard," he said, pivoting on the blanket. He looked up and down the large man accompanying his mother. The man, out of place in his dark business suit, looked him directly in the eye and waited.

"Eric, this is Stanton Ford." She hesitated while they nodded at one another. "We're going to be married."

"Congratulations," Eric said. He saw she was flustered. He hadn't thought it possible.
"Stan is a representative of the Wind River Logging Company. I'm selling to them."

"Of course."

"Your grandfather's trust fund will still be intact, you know."

"Good. I was worried."

She hesitated again. "Stan would like to make you an offer.... Listen to him, please."

Eric looked at the big man inquiringly.

"I've heard you're a very good timber faller," Stanton said.

Eric thought he had a beautiful voice. "The best," he corrected.

Stanton smiled. "Because you're such a good man and have Old Thorson's blood in your veins, we'd like you to work for us." His face became serious. "Frankly, we'd like your name in the business. But you wouldn't accept an office job, right?"

"Right."

"Then we'd like you to take over as saw foreman. Beginning next week, you'd start cutting right-of-way. You can name your salary."

"Right-of-way for what?"

"We're going to organize this logging. Bring methods up to date. We plan to put a road down every section line we own."
Erlo got to his feet. "That would be a mistake."

"Why?"

"Our timber is already set up on a sustained yield without roads. There's no reason for them."

"Yes, but it's expensive to log that way. We'll double profit margins."

Eric looked away, his face blank. His eyes eventually settled on Mary Ann and she smiled up at him. He studied her face, and then, as if having come to a decision, he faced the big man. "I'll work for you on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you don't open up the Plains with all those roads."

Stanton laughed. "My God, you must have an inflated notion of what your name is worth to our company."

Eric turned to his mother. "You sold, knowing what they were planning to do?" he asked quietly.

"Well, yes," she replied, reddening. "As he says, Eric, it just means the modernization of the business."

"You greedy bitch," he said, spitting each word. "All you understand is money. It's your first love. I'll bet you made the deal in the sack."

"Eric!" Marian protested.

"Just a minute, you..." Stanton began.

"Shut up!" Eric turned again to his mother. "You married into a good deal with Father, didn't you, Mother?"
Endure a few years and you're a wealthy widow. Two men work all their lives building something and you try to peddle it to the first smooth talker that pats you on the butt. Well, you can't sell what you don't own." He spat on the ground.

"Your mother has every right to sell to us," said Stanton, visibly restraining himself. "Your grandfather came here and bought the land and he had every right to sell it. And the ownership passed down to her and she chooses to sell. But that's not important. What kind of a man are you? That's your mother you're talking to. You certainly owe her an apology."

"What do you know? My grandfather would have been the first to tell you he had no right to sell any of it. And so would my father. Because they knew they didn't own it. And neither does she. But she can't understand that because she couldn't understand them. How could she with a soul the size of a dollar?"

Marian's red face twitched in anger. She opened her mouth to speak, just as Eric turned again to her. He spoke with elaborate sarcasm, as if she were a small child.

"Let me give it to you straight, Mother. You can't own what you can't eat." His voice grew vicious. "You'd better not go through with this. You've got no right to sell this town out."

"You god-damn punk," Stanton said. "What right have you got telling her her rights." He poked Eric's chest with
his forefinger. "I've heard about you, too." Eric's fist caught his nose squarely, breaking it, and knocking him to the ground. As he was trying to get up, Eric's foot landed solidly in his ribs, knocking him down again. Eric stomped several times on the bloody face and then stepped back. Stanton lay still. Marian, her face pale, stared down at him and absently wiped at the specks of blood on her expensive clothing.

A crowd of picnickers quickly gathered. Eric held out his hand to Mary Ann, who had not moved on the blanket. "Come on," he said. They gathered their things hurriedly and broke through the onlookers.

"Where are we going?" Mary Ann asked as they left the outskirts of town.

"I don't know," Eric replied, not slowing his pace.

"Do you think he's hurt badly?"

"I don't know. I hope so."

They turned off the road and entered the forest. Eric walked furiously in silence. Mary Ann, gasping for breath, struggled to keep up. Finally he slowed and took her hand. They continued on until they came to a small hollow created by the uprooting of a huge fir that was nearly rotted away. The depression was covered with mossy turf, damp and cool from the nearly perpetual shade of the big trees above. It was screened by alder and huckleberry brush.

"Let's rest," she said.
They spread the blanket over the spongy moss and gratefully sank down on the softness. He sat with his head on his knees and for a long time said nothing. She waited, knowing it would come soon.

"The bitch," he said, and then began.

"Why are we here, Grandfather?"

"You have to learn something and I do too. This is the place to learn."

They were several miles from town in a fir thicket in the forest. The day was bright and sunny but in the thicket were deep shadows that never disappeared. The ground was damp and bare from the lack of warm sunlight.

"Wait here," Thorson said. He walked nearly out of sight and turned to face Eric. "I've got to go now. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, you go on home." He disappeared into the trees.

"Grandfather!" Eric called but there was no answer.

He waited in the thicket, wondering where Thorson had gone and what he would do if the old man didn't come back. On tree-covered flat ground, it was easy to get lost. The trees all looked the same and there were no ridges to mark direction. They had come further out in the forest than he had been by himself before, although he played in the forest frequently. But his grandfather would come back; there was no doubt about that.

The fifteen minutes passed and he was still alone. He
gave his grandfather another fifteen and still there was no movement in the thicket. He began to be frightened. He had heard of men wandering around in circles on the Plains until they dropped dead of hunger and exhaustion. And there were always stories of bears and wolves in the forest, ready to devour a dog or a man, let alone a boy. Who knew what was watching him from the shadows of the thicket? He quickly moved to more open ground and sat down in a patch of sunshine. He remembered Thorson asking him on the way out if he knew what direction they were going. He had replied north and the old man had nodded. All he had to do was go south and he would eventually reach the river. But which direction was south? And why did his grandfather leave him? He began to feel anger toward the old man. All the talk about how his hopes were in the boy and then to leave him lost and alone in the forest. It didn't make sense. Maybe he should pray. But Grandfather said that God helped those who helped themselves. Suddenly he hated the old man. He would find his way back and when Grandfather said how sorry he was, he would just stare at him and not say a word, like he did to people to make them uncomfortable. And he wouldn't cry, no matter what. But how to find south?

The moss. Grandfather had said that moss grew on the north side of trees because it got less sun. But there was no moss on the trees around him. He wandered along searching for a tree with moss and then remembered the moss in the
thicket. He found his way back. There were many mossy
trees at the edge of the thicket but they had it growing all
the way around. It did seem to be thicker on one side of
several trees. He feared to start walking on such weak evi-
dence. As he was thinking, he began to see things because
he imagined that he saw Grandfather pull back behind a tree.
He watched the place and saw no further movement. Probably
a squirrel. "Rrrraaarr," he growled in its direction, feel-
ing better hearing the sound of his own voice. Then he re-
membered the sun. Of course, he had only to watch which
way the shadows of the trees moved and he would know east
and west. He scratched a mark at the tip of a tree shadow
and sat down to wait. After what seemed like a long time,
he could see that the shadow had moved from the mark. It
moved toward the east as the sun moved west. If he faced
south, east was on his left. He stood with what he hoped
was east on his left and checked the moss. The moss and the
sun agreed. His fear vanished and he laughed aloud.

Taking out his pocket knife, he made a mark in a nearby
tree. Then he picked out a tree to the south and made for
it. He marked it, aligned the two marked trees, and picked
out another on the same line. Continuing this way, he cov-
ered distance rapidly. Once he looked back and was pleased
to see the line of marked trees was nearly straight. He was
so engrossed in his work that he didn't notice the old man
sitting on the log until he was nearly on top of him.
"Grandfather!" he exclaimed. He hesitated and then threw himself on Thorson. The old man patted him and murmured 'good boy, good boy'. After a time, Eric pulled back.

"Why did you leave me, Grandfather?"

"I didn't leave you. You just thought I did."

"Then I really saw you?"

The old man nodded. "That was my fault," he said.

"But why?"

"Think hard, son. You already know why now, don't you?"

Eric nodded. "You said it was a place to learn. You wanted me to learn to get around in the woods."

"More than that."

"To take care of myself?"

"More yet."

"To not be afraid?"

"And more. But everyone's afraid. Those who say they're not are stupid or lying. But not everyone has to give in to their fear. And you didn't." He smiled one of his rare smiles.

"What more, Grandfather?"

The old man's smile died. "You are alone, son. You have no one to depend upon but yourself. Even your old grandfather, though he loves you, can't help you through your life. You have to get used to being alone if you're to be like we talked about."

"A great man?"
"Yes." Thorson paused and added, as if not wanting to forget—"Of course there's God and the forest, but you already know about that. What I'm talking about is other people. Great men are always alone. Their worry about other people is a weakness to them. You have to learn to lead people and yet be alone. You have to do and accomplish for their sake and still not let them drag you down." He paused. "They will try to drag you down."

"Why?" the boy asked.

"Because they resent needing you, and like to think they don't. They will pull you down and then build a monument to your memory."

Eric tried to organize and make sense of all Thorson said but he didn't understand most of it. But he liked to hear the old man talk even when he couldn't understand.

"You said you had to learn. What did you learn, Grandfather?"

"That you could do it. And that you will never run the business."

Eric was shocked. "But Grandfather--you always said I would take your place someday." He had often imagined himself the boss of all the men and liked the idea, even though he couldn't visualize the situation with Grandfather gone.

"I know what I said. But that was before I knew. Now I know that I can't let you have it, even when it makes me sick inside. I have built the business and I have saved
"This"—he motioned around him—"and so you must do something else. It is too late for you here. Those who only seek to hold onto what was given them cannot be great. You must find a new way, where no one else has been before. The time when greatness can be built on land is done." He looked hard into the boy's eyes. "Do you understand?"

"No," the boy said.

"You will, son. Someday."

Mary Ann listened without a word and felt the ghosts of the boy still within the young man fighting to take shape. She knew that all she could do was listen.

"He's alright, Marian. Be thankful for that and please don't scream at him." Balder led Eric to the sofa and sat him down. He spoke more firmly than usual and emphasized his request with a glance while he tucked the blanket closer around the shivering boy.

"Why did you do it, Eric?" she said, ignoring Balder. The boy stared absently at her long, bright red nails as she clenched her fists.

"Answer me. Why?"

"I felt like it," he said sullenly.

"Don't you answer me in that tone of voice," she said through gritted teeth. "Now tell me why you did it?"

Balder went to get a towel and Eric watched him, ignoring his mother. She grasped his wet hair and shook his head violently.
"Answer me," she hissed. "You could have been killed, and half the town on the riverbank watching. You stupid, stupid idiot. The town already thinking you're a criminal and now they must think you're insane. What on earth would possess you to jump off the bridge except stupidity or insanity? You've caused trouble from the day you were born. Now answer me--why did you do it?"

"Maybe I wanted to kill myself to get away from you," he said on one burst of breath.

Her right hand left a print on his cheek. He sat and looked calmly back into her eyes full of hatred. Suddenly further enraged, she flailed at him with both hands and screamed curses until she was incoherent. Balder rushed back into the room and pulled her off. He dumped her in a chair and led Eric away from the house. The boy was near tears but refused to break down. They walked silently through trees until they were beyond sight of town, and sat on a log.

"Father, why can't we leave here? Why can't we get away from her and live somewhere else?"

"She's your mother and my wife, Eric. Going somewhere else wouldn't change that."

"We could just forget her."

"No--she's a part of us and our lives and she always will be."

"I'll run away. Grandfather says this is a free
country and we can choose how we want to live. I hate her, Father, and I can't stand to live here anymore, even for you and Grandfather."

"Freedom is a hard thing to talk about, Eric." Balder looked off into the distance. "If you refuse to fight her, like I've told you, you are free because you choose how you act. Even when she beats you, you are free because you choose not to fight back. But if you fight or even run away, you are not choosing, you are reacting and you aren't free of her at all. She's still controlling your life."

"I don't care about all that, Father. I just want to get away."

Balder went on as if he hadn't heard, as if he were talking to himself. "You can't get away. No one can ever really be free all the time. Every choice you make traps you by limiting the number of choices you can make afterward. And if you don't choose, you aren't free either because you aren't exercising your freedom. Freedom lies in choice, certainly, but you're only free in the tiny part of a second it takes you to choose, and when...."

Eric felt like he was drowning in a sea of words. He didn't want complicated reasons to stay--only simple agreement to go. Everything was rolling in on him, threatening to cover his head. He began, finally, to cry.

"I want to go away," he wailed. Balder jerked and blinked his eyes as if trying to focus. "I want to go
away," Eric repeated, sobbing.

Balder gathered the boy in his arms and rocked him, silently. "Is that why you jumped from the bridge?" he finally asked softly.

"I thought you would understand," Eric mumbled into his father's shirt-front. "And they dared me."

"I think I understand." Balder patted his back gently until he stopped crying.

"Father..." the boy said, looking up with red eyes suddenly bright. "It was something, jumping off the bridge." The words came out in a rush. "It was like flying in a place all alone and it was like sleeping when you're really tired...."

He waited but Balder said nothing.

"I had to know what it was like, Father."

Balder was silent for a long time, staring at the ground.

"Let me tell you a story that I heard as a little boy." Eric watched his father concentrate on something far away. His voice, when he began, was very quiet. "Once upon a time, there was a little girl who wished to know everything in the world. Her fairy godmother heard the wish and came to see the little girl.

"Why do you wish to know everything in the world?" the fairy godmother asked.

"Because if I knew everything in the world, I would know
how to live forever and be happy," the little girl replied.

Because she was a beautiful little girl, and pure, the fairy godmother wanted her to have a chance to live forever and be happy. So she granted the wish. Everything in the world stretched out in bright colors before the little girl. She was very happy.

"Before I leave, I must tell you two things," said the fairy godmother. "First of all, once you start, you can't turn around and come back. Secondly, take your time and enjoy just looking."

But the little girl didn't listen well and rushed from thing to thing, grabbing to know them and make them hers. As soon as her hand touched them, their brightness faded and they melted into little pats of boredom. And so she grabbed other things and they did the same. She soon saw that there weren't so many things ahead of her.

She began to feel tired but she didn't want to sleep for fear the things left wouldn't be there when she awakened. Slower and slower, she knew the rest of the things in the world.

There was one thing at the end of the others that she looked at more and more, although she tried to ignore it. It was a strange shape with a black cloth draped over it. Finally, it was the only thing left and she was almost glad because she was so tired. She tugged at the corner of the cloth and it slid off. Under it, there was just a mirror.
She was greatly disappointed because this was the last thing and she had hoped it would teach her how to live forever and be happy.

She could see behind her in the mirror all the things in the world. They lay strewn like Christmas wrapping along the way, glowing through a mist in brighter colors than she remembered them. But she could not go back.

Then she saw herself in the mirror. Her body was bent and crooked and scarred from the sharp corners of the things in the world. Her beautiful face was as rough and lined as carved stone. It was hard to tell if she was girl or boy, woman or man. And she was not happy. She screamed as she reached into the mirror.

Mary Ann felt she had known the little girl and cried inside for her. And for the burning ghosts of the boy that consumed each other beside her.

The Fourth of July fell on a Sunday. Despite the double significance of the day, Balder felt he had to work. The head rig had broken down at the mill and if he didn't fix it, the whole crew would miss work. Many couldn't afford that, he said, and the loss would be his responsibility. Rudy Loeken would help him. Thorson missed him in church.

"Where is Balder?" he asked Marian in a whisper before the service began.

"He said he had to fix something at the mill. He'll
try to make it to the picnic."

Thorson strode out of the church just as the pastor was moving to start the service. The departure so un-nerved the plump little man that he sat back down. Murmuring began as the congregation stared at the vacant places in the first pew. The noise increased to a conversational buzz and then fell silent as the door in the back opened and closed loudly. No one looked around as Thorson stomped up the center aisle and took his place. He jerked his head at the pastor and the service began. All through it, he twisted his fingers and the muscles in his jaw worked. Eric wanted to cry.

The long service was nearly over when the door burst open and Rudy Loeken staggered in. He was nearly naked and his flesh was a charred black. "The mill..." he croaked. "The mill's afire and Balder's...still...inside...."

All the men and most of the children, in their Sunday best, followed Thorson on a run out of the church and toward the sawmill. With all the congestion, it was quicker on foot than by car. Some of the women squealed and others sat in shocked silence, watching Rudy turn and stagger up the center aisle, bumping pews as he went, leaving a repulsive fluid on the polished wood. The women followed him outside and whispered their fear as they watched the column of smoke at the river's edge.

By the time the crowd reached the mill, it was completely ablaze. Through the flames, its outline seemed
almost untouched. To Eric, it was as if a veil of fire had
fallen between the mill and the men for some unknown reason
and would disappear just as inexplicably, leaving the mill
as it was. For the mill to burn was impossible.

Rudy painfully moved up to the group and it made way for
him. Thorson, fists clenched and face working, saw him com­
ing through the crowd.

"What happened, Rudy?!" he screamed. "Good God, what
happened?!"

Rudy didn't even look at him but only continued to make
his tortuous way toward the mill. He fell, got up, and fell
again. Then he began to crawl. "Balder," he moaned.
"Balder...."

With a great roar of pain, the old man ran for the fig­
ure slumped on the ground. Several others ran after him.
Shielding their face from the heat with their arms, they
reached Rudy and carried him back to the edge of the trees.
Two men, nausea showing on their faces, restrained Rudy's
feeble attempts to get up again.

"Balder... he's inside... help him...."

Thorson knelt beside him. "Why didn't he get out
Rudy?" he asked in a low, hoarse voice. "Rudy... Rudy!"

"The welder... caught on some... sawdust. The fire just
exploded... and... I was trapped.... He... carried me out... and went back... with an... extinguisher." Rudy shuddered and
suddenly tried to sit up. "Balder!... it was too late... he
knew it was too late.... Too late, Balder!...." His attempt to shout ended in a rasping cough and he fell back to the ground.

"The smokestacks are going!" someone shouted. They all turned to watch the huge pipes buckle from the heat and fall across the roof of the mill. With a great noise and an explosion of sparks, the entire structure collapsed and settled to earth.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiii...." The long scream of agony from the depths of the old man chilled the hearts of the crowd.

"You see now!" he screamed. "You see now what disobedience means!" He shook his fist above his head. "We must all be punished for the disobedience of one man! The great and the small alike! IT IS UNJUST!" His caved chest heaved and he trembled like a great silver aspen in the wind. His blazing blue eyes fixed on Eric at the edge of the crowd.

"We did nothing and we received that...." He gestured at the heap of still-flaming wood and twisted steel.

"...And we are helpless." Pounding his thigh with his fist, he paced back and forth. Suddenly, he stopped and looked up at the sky.

"YOU ARE...A COWARD...AND A BULLY!!" he roared. "WE ARE HELPLESS...AND YOU MURDER...AND SPOIL...." His hand went to his chest and he coughed until he was out of breath. "I...spit...on you....," he gasped, and drool ran off his chin. Clutching his chest with both hands, he sank to his
knees, then toppled on his face and was still.

The torrent of words ended and Mary Ann waited silently. The afternoon had passed and the shadow under the great trees had deepened—soon the coolness of the forest would be uncomfortable. But she felt rooted here, in the shallow, mossy depression left by the ancient tree. It was as if she had always been here and always would be here. If she moved, time would intrude and force back into ranks the generations of men silently moving around and through them. Moments would descend like axes and carve their lives, bonded for now into one uncertain shape, into two separate points on two separate lines. So she waited motionless, like the trees, and there were no barriers between what had been, what would be, and what was now.

She looked into his red-rimmed, inflamed eyes, and reached for his hand.

"We've got to go," he said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. But I've got to try to do something."

His hand trembled in hers.

"Yes," she said shaking her head. "I know."

He stared at her for a long time and didn't reply.

"Where is the answer, Mary Ann?" he asked bitterly.

"Where did I miss it?"

"There is none," she said simply. "Questions are their own answers." In the shadow, her eyes looked enigmatically
back at him, taunting and frustrating him, while they seemed to offer comfort and invitation. Their green-ness had darkened with the lowering sun and become veiled like an arbor of lacey cedar at dusk.

"I love you," he growled helplessly. "I love you, Mary Ann." He crushed her beneath him, his mouth and teeth pinching the skin of her neck and face, as if he was attempting to devour her, his fingers bruising her flesh as he fumbled for the fastenings of her clothing.

"Eric?" she said softly.

He raised his head and looked down into the dark green eyes that seemed to lead down into the earth. His face was distorted with agony. "I have to," he cried hoarsely. "I have to."

Eyes aflame, he watched her beneath him as he savagely explored and knew her. Her eyes closed and she receded behind a darkening red veil of licking, burning flames. He plunged into them and for an instant, before everything collapsed into smoldering ashes, he thought he had reached her. They lay together for a time and he watched her eyes open, eyes narrower and somehow not as deep. He rolled away from her and sat up. He saw all the triumph and sin of men in the small, dark stain on the blanket between her legs.

He stood and walked a short distance away and waited for her. He knew now what he had to do. They walked back to town wordlessly. At her gate, he kissed her forehead. "I'm
sorry," he whispered. "You'll never know how sorry I am."

She, newly limited, smiled uncertainly. "Don't be sorry, Eric," she said softly. "It couldn't be helped."

He nodded and kissed her again on the forehead. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye..." she replied, almost as a question, and watched him out of sight.

Eric returned to the mossy depression. It was a beautiful spot. Perhaps one of the roads would go directly over it. A grid of roads, reducing the forest to finite squares. And Mother drinking her expensive bourbon in her elegant house and panting over the smooth-talking Wind River man and never knowing nor caring about the roads. There were all kinds of corruption, and all kinds of destruction, and all kinds of greatness. As the sun disappeared behind the trees, he walked in a circle around the mossy spot in the forest, lighting afire piles of dry brush. Then he sat in the center and watched them grow together and become a cleansing, scouring redemption on the land.

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It was near mid-night. Pastor Paulson walked slowly through the park and thought that it was a far different place than it had been earlier during the picnic. It was silent and still and the smells of the day were replaced with the acrid odor of wood smoke. A hazy full moon allowed him to find his way among the trees and across the playing
area toward the center of the park. He was deep in thought when a voice spoke through the darkness from a bench.

"Out kind of late, aren't you, whoever you are?"

"Ted?"

"Yes. That you, Pastor?" The plump little minister joined Ted Christianson on the bench.

"I couldn't seem to get to sleep," Ted said. "You neither, huh?"

The Pastor nodded. It was enough said about their reasons for being there. "Have they got the fire controlled?"

"They will by morning. Thank God, they caught it soon enough."

"What started it?"

"No one seems to know."

"Have they located Eric yet?"

"Not that I know of. The sheriff was looking for him this afternoon. That boyfriend of Marian's filed charges, I understand."

The Pastor shook his head. There was very little certain anymore. The Berg family openly ripped apart. Rumors of the mill being sold. It was not a time for the peace of mind of an old man.

"Well, I think I'll go home and see if I can get some sleep," Ted said, standing up. "You coming?"

"Not quite yet. See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight." Ted moved away into the darkness.
There had been many bad days for the town, the Pastor thought. He sensed that this was another. It was frustrating to not be able to isolate what had gone wrong, to not know why all the old dreams were crumbling before one's eyes. It made one feel so helpless and even useless. But perhaps better dreams would take their place. One must have faith, at least.

He stood to go and glanced toward the statue of Patrick Henry. He had to look closely to see it. It lay in the moon shadows, veiled by the haze of smoke. If he hadn't known what it was, he might have thought it was an illusion.
The Preacher walked toward the mill and tried to analyze his feelings about this new twist his life was taking. First, there was the need to earn a greater portion of daily bread for himself and his family. His was a family of plump spirits and protruding ribs. (A nice phrase, he thought.) He often pondered the strange plan that took a young farm boy from the South, educated and ordained him, and placed him in a small lumbering community where the citizens were either Lutherans or whiskey drinkers and sometimes both and where a young fundamentalist preacher ministered to only a few old ladies, two cripples, several families from the backwoods who lived on poached meat and the proceeds of illegal furs, and one old man who found Jesus every day at the bottom of a wine bottle. The collection each Sunday had become so embarrassing and so futile that he had ceased offering the plate. His Church, a new and struggling denomination, subsidized him only with small checks at random intervals and he soon recognized the need for a steady, dependable income. The sawmill offered the only jobs in town; therefore, necessity dictated that he be, as well as a man of the cloth, a man of the denim. (His wife had laughed heartily at this remark.)

They had discussed this new job and she had understood his trepidation. He had become singularly unsuited for
manual labor. In his youth, he had labored mightily in the hay-yards of his father but since had fallen victim to a certain flaccidity on which his weekly exertions in the pulpit seemed to have little effect. She had replied with a smile that she had been noticing and that she thought it strange that his bold little stomach had withstood his recent privations and still, like Cyrano's nose, preceded him by several inches. (Such little jibes were good. They taught one humility.)

God's ways were strange—it was difficult to see what purpose was served working in the mill helping to produce lumber when all his training and thought and energy had been devoted to producing spiritual comfort for others. He liked to think that he was a namer of things, an interpreter of God's mystery to a rational world. He was a man of language but the new job required no words. However, there was a purpose for him here; he was certain of that much.

The mill lay on a cleared point of land along the river a quarter mile from town. It was a long, two-story frame structure of rough wood turned a brownish-gray by the weather. Connected to the mill by the waste conveyor was a teepee burner, its metal skin warped from the fires inside. Three large smokestacks arose from a building a short distance away, flatulating thick black smoke into the air from the boilers below. Somewhere the Preacher could hear what was the whine and muted growling of a generating plant.
Nothing about the mill had been designed or built to be aesthetically pleasing. It was alien to the river and the surrounding trees, a disfiguration of the landscape. Its strange profile hunkered to the ground was, in fact, he decided, absolutely ugly. But there was another sense it seemed to convey— one of self-sufficiency and indifference to his concern for beauty and to the threatening overcast skies. He felt as if he were stepping into one of those terrible paintings unconnected to reality that portrayed clocks drooping over the edge of a table like balloons filled with fluid, into a world from which all the familiar reference points had vanished. The only movements around the mill were wisps from leaking steam pipes rising in the chill of the early winter evening, and his thoughts turned to the farm and the smell of horses and fall mornings when soft rain turned to bright sunshine and the big Percherons heaved against the harnesses, blowing and snorting puffs of mist while their bodies steamed in the sun.

As he entered the lunchroom of the mill, the Preacher sensed that the other employees had learned, in whatever mysterious way such information was conveyed, that he was a preacher and that he was to join their ranks. All conversation stopped and the men turned to stare. He felt uncomfortably conspicuous in his new bib overalls. Their cleanliness seemed to be an affront to the dinginess of the room and the dark, sawdust-covered clothes of the men.
"Could som...", he squeaked. He cleared his throat and began again. "Could someone tell me the whereabouts of the Foreman?"

Several of the men shook their head and shrugged. Someone murmured "Haven't seen 'im." The Preacher leaned against the wall, glancing around the room with nervous non-chalance. The silence was broken, however, and there followed an outburst of profanity and obscenity unparalleled in his memory. The men loudly discussed each other's masculinity, aberrations, and origins, and carefully avoided looking toward him. He knew his face was reddening, not because of the oaths, some of which he didn't understand, but because of the position in which his profession placed him, the distance which it created between himself and the others. What did they have to offer that could make one embarrassed about one's profession, make one wish for a short moment that one wasn't a preacher? But the calling within him was soon resurrected. The poor devils need me here, he thought. He determined to pick up the verbal gauntlet, to stay until the men tired of their sport. However, when the display did not threaten to abate and some of the constructions were being repeated, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor. "I'd better go find the Foreman," he said to no one in particular. He left the men casting side-long glances in his direction.

The Preacher was somehow shocked at the mill's interior.
He had expected an ordered production line, an antiseptic factory with shining steel machinery. What he found was a huge shed of wood with structural ribs exposed, covered high above by a corrugated steel roof which vanished upward in the darkness. The wood had turned a dull brown with age and dirt, and absorbed the light from the dim electric bulbs. Corners hid in shadow. Machinery, black from an accumulation of pitch and grease, stood stolidly waiting. Over everything was a neutral colored layer of sawdust, knots, chips, and bark, all damp from the water that had to be run on the saws to keep them from overheating. Wandering through the mill, he tried to make sense of the maze of belts, chains, and rollers that sprawled in a seemingly random pattern in all directions. There was, of course, an order to this place; it only seemed to be a chaos of damp wood wastes and dark machines. In fact, he decided, under the dirt and grease, the mill was like a problem in mathematics. If one only knew the formula, one could solve the problem even if one didn’t fully understand it. (A good analogy, he thought.) There was always that comfort with mathematics and no doubt with this place too. There was always the beauty of order in math. It was simply an abstraction of nature. The numbers were always what they seemed and responded always in the same way to manipulation according to laws. If the formula was properly applied and the proper functions assigned to the numbers, the solution was painless.
and inevitable. Perhaps the Foreman could provide him with the formula.

He moved outside and watched the Pond-man scamper over the narrow booms that kept the logs from floating away downriver. The logs were being poled into position to be carried up into the mill by four synchronized log cradles affixed to continuous chains. He tried to visualize the logs in their majestic stature before they were felled and daydreamed of mountain tops on which he had held Easter sunrise services and of sparkling streams running through brilliant green forests that boys fished. Boyhood was play in the forest and work on the farm and perspiration and the odd smell perspiring children have, like an old aunt’s medicine cabinet. Life was simple on the farm—hot work in the fields, lemonade for dinner, feather ticks to make one perspire in the summer, snuggle down in the winter. When one lay by the river, one wished the fish away from the hook and found familiar faces in the clouds above. It was all part of a recognizable whole. One worked, ate, slept, played, all according to the daily and annual dictates of nature. But now the fast-settling darkness reminded him that he must work at night and a yawn told him that he had not lost his youth’s devotion to diurnal and nocturnal rhythms.

He noticed the chains begin to carry the logs in their great steel fingers through a gaping opening in the side of the mill and he fancied briefly that he was watching a meal
of some giant gourmet. He chuckled to himself as he realized that what had momentarily flashed on his mind as teeth were, of course, the machinery inside reflecting the brilliant, purple-blue flickers of an arc welder.

The increasing noise from the mill gradually caught his attention. A shrill toot of a whistle warned that the night shift was about to begin. As he hurried toward the mill, he was aware of a cold tingle in his toes from the thin layer of snow on the ground, gray with the ashes of the burner.

The evening was perfectly still, breathless, under a shroud of gray clouds. The shiver that skipped up his back as he entered the mill was not, he admitted to himself, entirely attributable to the cold.

The door shut behind the Preacher.

"The little bastard won't last," said the Trimmer-man.

"He better not try preaching around here," said the Tail-sawyer. "Preaching doesn't mean nothing to a guy in dirty clothes. You got to dress up in clean clothes on Sunday for it to do any good." He laughed.

"We were here first," said the Edger-man. "He can't expect us to watch our mouth just because he's a preacher. We were here first."

"He sure is soft looking and pale."

Time. There was never enough time to do the countless
repair jobs around the mill. He came early, went home late, worked weekends, but still never seemed to catch up. She required a lot of attention. She. He didn't remember when the mill became she. The men made ugly jokes about his being married to the mill and about his struggles on the wedding night. They seemed to take special interest in his private life and watched and commented and sometimes interfered. Tonight, as he came into the mill:

"Hey, Boss, I hear Mary Ann's getting married," the Trimmer-man had said, as the others all watched closely.

"You going to the wedding?"

He had stared the other down and then quietly replied "No." The nerve of the bastard. But it was typical of their nosiness. They couldn't seem to accept the fact that a man liked his job. He was good at his and they knew it. That should have been all that was important to them. A man was his job here, his name was a description of it. They all had real names when they first came. They were remarkable because of their lack of skill, and so they had to have a name. But as soon as they developed skill at their job, they were defined by it and called by it. It was a matter of pride among them to be distinguished by what they did and to be valued for how much they did. The system simplified everything, reduced the human variable to a minimum. Production went down when a boss had to deal in personalities. So it was irritating that they made jokes about his sense of
responsibility and about his personal life, which was none of their business. Their respect for his work should have been enough to shut them up.

Finishing the task at hand, he moved to help the Sawyer change the huge band saw on the head-rig. They thought he was a fool, a little bit nuts. They had no right, but it figured. They watched and waited, like all the rest had always done, to see how much of the parents was in the son. Would suicide or alcohol get him first? Shit! He wondered how many of them had ever eaten peanuts and candy bars from the tavern for supper. There had been a string of crappy jobs until now. The owners had given him a chance and he had taken advantage of it, and done a good job for them. The men had no right to laugh. He belonged at the mill. It was all there was.

He adjusted the tension on the saw. She was a hard bitch, honest and open and tough, not tearful and secretive. ("You think love is a weakness, that real men don't act warm and gentle....") Sometimes he even wished there was somewhere to turn for help. But he had learned about her through the years and could always prod her into action. In time. Always the race against time that was worth lost production and money. Time that moved on rough wood through all the saws in an endless stream of seconds used up and spit out like sawdust. But no complaints. He was proud of the responsibility, the way the owners left the operation to
him and questioned only slumps in production. He didn't expect it to be easy. Nothing was easy. But he did his job well and they knew it.

As he started the head saw and slowly brought it to full speed, he noticed the Preacher come up the stairs into the mill and remembered that he had hired the little fellow to start tonight. The Preacher stood gazing uncertainly around the mill as if lost. The Foreman noticed again the obvious softness of his body. And the paleness. He remembered the cool softness of the well-groomed hands, like a woman's, that made him uneasy. And the quiet, gentle manner of the Preacher when he had asked for a job. ("There's part of you missing...I have to get away...you'd better stay...with your...mill....") And the face. It was the first face he had really seen in a long line of faces that had come to work at the mill. He wondered at himself for saying yes. If his long experience with men had taught him anything, it said that the Preacher didn't belong here, wouldn't be able to stand up to the job. The Foreman shook his head and moved toward the blonde little fellow. He really needed a job. Everybody deserves a chance. ("You fool...you poor fool....") Loudly clearing his throat, he reminded himself that if the Preacher couldn't produce, it would be down the road with him.

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"Where'd he go?" asked the Trimmer-man.
"Down by the river," answered the Chipper-man, staring down through the old dirt and grease on the window.

"What the hell's the matter with the Boss, hiring him?" demanded an Edger-man.

"Jesus, yes," said the Trimmer-man. "He's fired lots of guys that needed the job worse than the Preacher." He shook his head.

"Well, it don't make any difference," said the Tail-sawyer. "If he don't try to preach to us and can do the job, I don't care if he's God, himself."

"Maybe the Boss got religion."

The Preacher was very grateful for the simplicity of his job. His station was a small box suspended several feet above a large rectangular, steel-sheeted pit. At the bottom of the pit, rows of chains carried waste wood to a trough running the length of the mill, in which moved a large cleated chain. It collected slabs, wane, and sawdust and dumped them into the teepee burner outside. The box was located directly behind the machine which the Foreman had called the edger. He had explained that the edger cut the lumber to selected widths and that the Preacher had only to catch the slender spears of wane and other wastes which the saws cut from the sides of the boards and cast them into the pit. The job required little strength but much quickness and alertness. The boards were to roll past the box on both
sides, and in the case of wide planks, over part of it. Along with catching the edgings, the Preacher had to stay out of the way of the lumber.

As he waited in his box for the shift to begin, the confidence which he had felt when the Foreman described the job in his strong voice and sure manner ebbed away, and was replaced by the strange sense of unreality returning. Below, the darkness of the pit, and vague shadows behind each machine and among the rafters above. The lighting was adequate for doing the job and no more. Light and dark melted into a twilight world, robbing everything of its color and warmth, leaving only dullness. One knew what was to be done in daylight and in the darkness, but what should a man feel in perpetual half-light? He understood the ancient and the not-so-ancient peoples during an eclipse of the sun, when it must have seemed that the world had stopped in a neither-nor place where everything existed in half measure. What could happen to a man's mind when the rooster crowed at noon? He longed for the sun to stream in through the windows and cracks in the walls to begin the shift. His eyes darted around the mill searching for a splash of brightness that relieved the drab neutrality.

He became aware of a building cacaphony of new sounds as the machines were started. He stood at the podium of a strange, dim concert hall while unshaven, dirty musicians tuned their grotesque instruments. They would soon play
some chaotic modern piece and they would not respond to his hands and arms. They would not stop. The great band saw of the head rig screamed as it ripped into its first log. The thick slab it cut banged down on rollers and the scream died, replaced by fierce hisses of steam and the deep rumble, like tympanies, of the carriage returning the log for another cut. Quickly, the flood of newly-cut lumber moved through the machines toward the edger. He jerked with each bang of slabs, boards, and squared cants hitting diversion gates as they swiftly travelled their pre-destined routes on the bewildering tangle of roller casings, belts, and conveyor chains. CHUMP-CHUMP-CHUMP-CHUMP. The tall machine the Foreman had called the gang saw shook the whole mill as its heavy rollers forced a cant through its row of vertical blades pounding up and down. Twelve boards, leaning together like sliced bread, emerged from the other end onto a conveyor table and toppled on their sides. CHUMP...CHUMP.... The machine idled to a slower rhythm and waited, massive as an organ, for the next cant. A sharp reedy cry, the miniature of the scream of the head saw, came from the re-saw as it swiftly cut through logs too small for the carriage. Everywhere, pedal-operated gates popped up with a clang of metal to stop a slab or board, and chains or rollers raised up seconds later to snatch it in a different direction, each framed by violent hisses or air or steam. He could still make no sense of the mill's design, no more than he could
follow a rhythm pattern in the bombardment of sound. And looming over all the distractions was the rising whine of the edger, like the electronic squeal of computers. It leveled off at a high keen, a chilling, vibrating wail, and he thought of the wind over temples in pale ruin.

The sound of the first board through the edger startled a whimper from him that was quickly engulfed by the seemingly visible sound waves. RRROWRR. He was surprised that the noise was nearly like a growl. RRROWRR RRROWRR RRROWRR.... The boards sped by and he grabbed at their edgings frantically, flinging those he caught wildly into the pit. The spears caught and tore his shirt and drove splinters into his flesh. Several times he threw usable boards into the darkness below and those he grasped that were too heavy to throw carried his fingers over the power rollers. The pain distracted him even more. For five, ten, fifteen minutes the noise pounded his brain and the wood tore at his flesh and equilibrium. Then an odd terror struck him. There were no words for this torment. The world had gone beyond the power of words to order it, accelerated faster than words to define it could be invented and learned. Or perhaps there were no more new words.

At once he noticed the change in the tempo of the mill. He vaguely wondered why the operation was slowing until he realized that he, too, moved languidly. The world had slowed; perhaps it was stopping, or even turning back.
machines shifted on their bases as if they were nearly fluid, bulging and narrowing slowly in time with his arm movements...noise crawling lower and lower, like an old fashioned phonograph left to run down...image of the Europe-bound ocean liner floating past, its fog horn faintly sounding in time with the Tail-sawyer's slow pulls on the signal whistle cord...his arm, performing smoothly and more than adequately, grasping edgings and slowly dropping them in the pit...grasping reeds and leaves, a caterpillar, leisurely at work. He lay on the bank, ostensibly fishing, but mostly watching the fluffy clouds drift and drowsing in the warm sun, turning occasionally to check the progress of the caterpillar. What sort of pretty butterfly would the wooly fellow become? It was odd that this crawling, working, almost-ugly creature could toil the earth, building, and thus enable himself to someday fly as a butterfly. Father would find a lesson in that somewhere...Father...Foreman...Fishing...FPFFFFFTTTTTTT.... The idle speculation drifted away in a doze.

Suddenly, the pole was jerked out of his hands and with a snap somewhere, the process in the mill raced furiously. The other men moved like demons, forcing more and more lumber at him, while the Trimmer-man, behind, screamed for him to catch the edgings, which were fouling with the lumber on the trimmer table. RRROWRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR.... Now his arms moved at a fantastic clip. It was too fast! Too fast!
There was no time to think. The Edger-men grinned, their eyebrows in huge arcs, their eyes in shadow, their teeth gleaming sharply. Pulsing and glowing blood-red, the machines and the men performed to some strange rhythm. He knew that now. Under the hissing and screaming, the banshee wails, he felt shuddering deep vibrations, as irregular and as unpredictable as the spasms of tortured men. He hated the mill and the men and their Godless practices, their unnatural existence—hated, hated, hated, hated....

Recognition dawned in the redness. The teeth! Ripping, tearing, chewing the soft wood. Of course! What was happening was basic, a story as old as the Fall when men went naked and frail into the world and could speak of their fear of beasts. The world had come full circle. But this place was no less terrible for being named. To know what wasn't to know why. Trapped in a hulking primeval creature, a beast hunkered down, devouring God's work. Why should he and the others be punished in the belly of the thing? No, not the others. They were part of it, enzymes in the giant digestion and he was the only foreign particle. He would be expelled, not vomited to safety on a beach but excreted down into the chaos of slabs, edgings, and sawdust being carried by the steel chains to the fire in the burner. The worst terror was that he could not repent for he knew not his sins.

Faintly, through the noise, he heard the screams of
anger. He turned and watched the Trimmer-man's mouth move simultaneously with them and his left arm gesture wildly. A heavy plank struck the Preacher's hip and spun him to the side. Another forced him over the low wall of the box and as he toppled backward, he recognized wooden ribs and gray corrugated skin.

"The Preacher's in the pulpit, waiting," said the Tail-sawyer.

"Like my sarge used to say, 'His soul might belong to God but his ass belongs to us'," replied one Edger-man.

"We'd better go out and join the congregation," said the Chipper-man. They all laughed.

"The poor bastard."

The Foreman watched the Preacher in his futile effort to keep up. He had known from the dazed look on the little fellow's face when he explained the job that the mill was too different from what the Preacher was used to, that he didn't know how to work around fast production. It was too bad. He would show up every day, could be counted on. And he really needed the job. But production was what the owners looked for, not a pale little man's chance to take care of his family. There was no way to explain a strange something that was so out of place here, that couldn't be put into words. Something that couldn't be seen, like a man's
breath, but that the mill could destroy. It was really too
bad.

Now, puzzled by the Preacher's odd actions and wild
stares around the mill, the Foreman moved toward the box to
help. He heard the Trimmer-man's screams over the noise,
and he broke into a run, shouting for the men to stop, as
the Preacher fell from the box. The Trimmer-man quickly hit
the emergency switch. The mill, except for the conveyor
system, ground to a stop as the Foreman clambered down the
ladder into the pit. He was in time to see a chain catch
the Preacher's right sleeve and carry the enclosed arm
around the teeth of a sprocket, severing it at the elbow.

"Jesus!" The Foreman was shocked by the splash of
bright red blood—it had somehow never occurred to him that
the Preacher had any. He dimly realized that the severed
arm was moving up the trough toward the burner, the fingers
flexing. It looked like a caterpillar that had been partly
smashed and was desperately crawling away. The Preacher,
his face pale and serene, (Mary Ann, wait...Mary Ann....)
(Madonna in shadow.... Did you light a candle, my son, yes,
Father....) was draped over the side of the trough, watching
the spurting stump passively, picking at the bits of sawdust
clinging to the flesh that had not been blown off by the
force of the blood. The Foreman quickly fashioned a tourni-
quet with his belt and slowed the bleeding to a seep.

The whole time the Preacher lay still--there was no
pain yet, no fear now, no hatred, no moves to make, no words to say. One couldn't curse the tiger's fangs, no more than one could understand why it attacked. A scream would describe but not explain. Grayness moved in from the edges and surrounded the Foreman's strong face until it, too, faded away.

No one acted this way when they were hurt. The Foreman recalled other lost limbs and the screams of agony and fear and curses of rage and frustration. But the Preacher seemed to feel nothing. It was as if everything of the man had leaked out with the blood, leaving a pale transparency that couldn't be touched though it stared fixedly at him. He checked the Preacher's wrist for a pulse and was vaguely surprised to find it solid. The pulse was very weak. As he gathered the small body in his arms, the eyes closed and the head slumped backward.

The men rimming the pit peered into the dimness and saw only the vague, dark form of the Foreman bending over the glowing apparition of the Preacher's face, sometimes moving in front of it, blocking it, as a priest obscures a candle. The Foreman's harsh orders stirred them into action and they lifted the Preacher's limp body up out of the darkness.

As the ambulance howled out of sight, the Foreman told the men to go home for the night. They drifted away slowly and uncertainly. Those who sensed in the Foreman's manner, for the first time that they could remember, a preoccupation
attributed it to his concern for the loss of working time. One or two suspected that he had a weak stomach that reacted to the sight of blood. No one, not even the Foreman himself, could have voiced a better explanation.

"The silly shit should never have turned his back on the edger," said one Edger-man.

"Balls! I never saw so much blood," said the Chipper-man.

"Did you ever see anybody so pale?" asked the Tail-sawyer. "This place gives me the creeps now." All fell silent, staring at their boots.

"Jesus, he was like a ghost."

Early on a gray Saturday morning, several weeks after the accident, the Foreman busied himself with the many repair jobs that had been put off until the weekend. The mill was again dormant and silent and he worked alone by trouble light. The few windows in the cavernous structure couldn't admit enough light to dispel the dusk of day that took refuge inside. His movements around the head rig disturbed a small knot lodged atop the band saw casing and it fell, pinged off of the steel carriage rail. He jerked upright and grunted involuntarily. Jumpy again this morning. It seemed they all were anymore. It wasn't just the accident—there had been accidents before. Whatever it was, the mill
was not the same when a man spooked at a little noise. Or maybe the man wasn't the same.

A crack in steel required welding and the Foreman kneeled to return to his work, his vision shielded and narrowed by the mask he wore. With the touch of rod to metal, the current flashed. Around him, the giant, grotesque shadows that he unknowingly created danced on the walls and the tin roof. They frolicked in a circle, each mimicking and exaggerating a massive machine, around the bent, still form of the man. Like shadows on a cave wall, they produced patterns he couldn't see as part of the machines. As he disengaged the rod, extinguishing their brittle, cold-blue ceremonial fire, they ran and hid inside the machines and his raised mask revealed only the dark stolidity he knew so well.

A movement caught his eye and he watched the Preacher walk to the pit and stand staring at the edger and then down into the darkness below. The stump of his arm nestled in its sleeve cocoon neatly tucked in the dark coat pocket. The Foreman made his way toward the little fellow, planning how he would phrase the offer. A man was needed in the boiler room. Firing the boilers was merely a matter of pushing buttons, but it was a job of great responsibility. And it was hot work. Why he should make this gesture was a question he had wrestled with during many sleepless days since the accident. He had decided that the mill owed the
Preacher something—yes, an arm, but that couldn't be re-
placed. The least he could do was offer him another job.

The two exchanged small-talk. The Foreman was consider-
ering how to raise the subject of the job and was unprepared
for the Preacher's question.

“What happened...to...to it?” he asked as he stared
into the darkness toward the now-silent chain.

The Foreman finally caught the meaning of the question
and dropped his eyes. "I guess it went into the burner," he
replied quietly.

The Preacher nodded dumbly. He bit his lower lip, his
soft eyes moist. "Into the fire..." he murmured and his
voice trailed off.

The Foreman looked away. There was nothing to say. A
long silence brought the sound of dripping water somewhere--
regular, like the tick of a clock. Evidently the water to
one of the saws had not been completely shut off. The sound
seemed to become louder in the great structure and the Fore-
man noticed the Preacher's eyes blink with every drip. He
nervously cleared his throat, just as the Preacher spoke.

"Why did you let it happen?" he cried in a high thin
voice. His face trembled. "You're the foreman--why did you
let it happen?"

"Me?" the larger man exclaimed. "Me? There was no-
thing I could do about it. What's the matter with you."

"I don't know...I don't know." Tears began to run down
The smooth cheeks. "There has to be someone to blame...what did I do?"

The Foreman's face reddened and he nervously looked around the mill. "There's no blame. It's just the way things happen."

"No...No, you're wrong. There's always blame. But it doesn't make any difference, now. We're leaving town."

The Foreman was silent for a time. "What will you do?"

The Preacher shrugged, gradually regaining a dull composure. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know anything for certain anymore."

Again the drip of water, louder, louder, marked the seconds—time leading away in two barren, straight lines to a vanishing point. Or to a point of convergence.

"Well...good luck," said the Foreman, offering his hand.

The Preacher awkwardly took it with his left. "Thank you. But don't worry. We'll make it, somewhere." Their eyes met and each man felt a vague emptiness, as when a man craves something and cannot name it.

The Preacher, walking toward town, stopped to look back at the place where, he thought, he was quite literally leaving a part of himself. The mill was still ugly. It still hunkered to the clearing on the river bank, indifferent to the landscape and to the flakes of snow beginning to fall from the gray skies and to the fear and pain of men. A
rough beast, born out of the minds of men, but no longer controlled by them. It had its own life now and the men obeyed it or were pushed back from the tasteless succor of its cold teat. He hated the metaphor, and the fact that it seemed the only way to define the creature. Why didn't the others see in those terms? How could the Foreman not see what he obeyed? But what if he did? What if he saw and saw no other choice? But there was another choice and his failure was that he hadn't been able to show it to the Foreman. He looked up into the snow, exulting in its gentle touch on his face and in the clean order the soft crystals represented. The motion of the snowflakes drew him. He was rushing through white space, faster and faster, the flakes landing in his eyes, blurring his vision. He raced into the infinite white, beyond any reference points, until he felt dizziness and nausea. The few seconds stretched away, becoming white space, and he was suddenly frightened. But a part of his mind was aware that for all the motion, and even the motion sickness, he had not, could not have, moved at all. He staggered, lost his balance, and fell to his knees in the snow. Fragments of evergreen and white spun around a gray-brown hulk. His eyes fastened on the mill, impassive, solid, unmoving, and the nausea subsided. He got to his feet and turned toward town, knowing he understood the creature a little now.

The Foreman stood for a long time after the Preacher
had gone, looking around the mill. He noticed the gloom behind each machine, the dirt and grease and pitch and sawdust over everything. The persistent drip monotonously marked off time—drip...drip...tick...tick...tick.... Time wasted, time that should be spent working, like he was getting paid for. But he couldn't force himself to move. Tick...tick...tick.... The drip built to a thunder in the great building, which suddenly seemed to elongate and narrow into an endless tunnel. To return to where he had left off work would require, it seemed to him, the rest of his life. Tick...tick...tick.... The machines mixed with the shadows, becoming shapes strangely unfamiliar, like vague rocks in a mine. Now he heard voices—laughing, cursing, shouting, murmuring—echoing from the walls, voices he knew and some he had forgotten. What a waste of time! He cleared his throat and the voices stopped. But he still couldn't move. Tick...tick...tick.... They stood beside the machine they operated...the Trimmer-man...the Sawyer...the Edger-men...he shook his head and they disappeared like spirits. Tick...tick...tick.... He saw their faces, each scar and mole and wrinkle, very clearly against the shadow. Norbert...Leo...Duane and Orville....

"The hell with it. I'll take the weekend off," he said aloud, and the words pierced through the darkness, echoing from every corner of the cavernous structure. Outside, it was snowing hard. The gray snow was gone, covered by clean
whiteness. This will stay, he thought, as he followed the Preacher's faint footprints in the snow up the path toward town.