Nylons and Neon

Bryan Di Salvatore

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NYLONS AND NEON

By

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE TERRIBLE NIGHT OF MARCH 29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. FOLKS</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. EVENING</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NYLONS AND NEON
I

THE TERRIBLE NIGHT OF MARCH 29
THE TERRIBLE NIGHT OF MARCH 29

It had been one hell of a night.

At 6:30 a.m., two ambulance attendants from Joyau d'Foret hoisted the stiff, drained, blanketed body of Delbert Deedman onto a piped aluminum stretcher and stumbled the fifty feet to their waiting ambulance while two state police balanced the dumb load from the midriff handlestraps.

The leader dug his boots carefully down and up the steep trackside ditch banks while the two sidemen bent at the knees and clawed slowly with their free hands until the cot rested on its wheels in the tramped snow on level ground in the lot between the Norge Village and The Aloha Bar in Kline, Idaho.

The snow was deep enough to feather over the outside supports, and by the time all four had caught their breath, the strapped, covered form was spotted with the small, hard flakes which had been falling for almost twenty hours.

"Get him out of the snow. He's not a log."

The two attendants nodded at the state police sargeant's order, lifted the light load toward the ambulance, and backed to the cracked curb of Kline's only paved street.

Once again they lay him in the snow while the first man swung open the door. They lifted the stretcher again and rolled it into the rear, while one crawled in beside it and snapped down the locks by the front two wheels.
He crawled out and jumped lightly into the snow.
"What's a little snow going to matter?"
"Let's get out of here. I knew they'd call. I knew it. No one snuffs on regular duty."
"Not till Saturday. We're getting plenty overtime. I'm gonna buy those mags now."
"I'd rather a wet my willy. You wanna get breakfast after we get to town?"
"They outta give us danger pay with these roads. That old fart Olsen goes too slow. Danger Ranger, flashers and all. Yeah. I'm hungry as hell."

They walked toward the sargeant.
"This the last one?"
"Yeah, Olsen's bringing the pick-up around."
"Good."

The sargeant looked at the driver like he wanted to knock him flat.
"Listen. You got five dead. You got a wrecked train and two burned houses. I don't want to hear about how hard you got it. You got that straight, punk? Huh? You got that straight?"

He was knocking the driver's chest with his gloved index finger.

The driver shuffled back.
"Now get the hell out of here. And don't go into the
ditch unless you're sure you'll kill yourself."
The two attendants walked toward the idling ambulance.
"Up yours, Douglass," the driver muttered, looking back
in the side-mirror. The two of them got into the cab. "Cul!"
"Come on grandpa, get that junker moving."
The two shook cigarettes from packs and lit them as a
battered fifty-four Ford pickup truck with OLE OLSEN'S
GARAGE painted on the side and a five-foot blade in front
crossed by them and headed down Main.
"Give us a chance, gramps, jeez." The driver pulled the
shifter down, snapped on the lights and hit the siren
accidently, immediately flicking it back off, as a short
brutal quack split the air.
"I'm spaced."
"You got the bubble working?"
"Yeah." The white ambulance pulled out to its right,
two car lengths behind the truck.

Most of the crowd, the wrecker crew from the railroad,
the half-dozen sheriffs and state police, jerked at hearing
the siren, then stopped as the two vehicles slowly moved
down the middle of Main along the two blocks to the post
office and turned left to pick up the paved country road
across the twelve miles of Kline Flats.
Jackhammers stopped their punching at the frozen earth and the distant pumph pumph of the compressors was soft and muffled. No one spoke.

When Cletus Field, about to pour a drink behind the bar, stared, a half-dozen customers scrambled to the curtained windows and the cops rose from their typewriters and coffee cups. They stood at the window, watching the body being slid in and the two vehicles roll silently out of town.

It was as if, with the removal of Deedman's body, nothing else could happen, that with his exit, his control had been displaced, his power weakened, his mess mopped and scrubbed into memory.

But the memory did remain, as after a thunderclap is a ringing, after lightning a yellow-purple retinal invasion, after a blizzard, only the quiet carpet of snow, or the morning after, a wet miserable yawn of memoried confusion and disgust.

Drinks were held unsipped, cigarette smoke coiled smoothly above stiff heads. There was no shuffling or talk. For a few seconds, the only movement was the Blink Blink Blink of the yellow and red neon palm tree over the rough concrete facade of The Aloha Bar.

The two attendants smoked as they followed the pickup, whose cab was cluttered with odd wrenches, pliers, wires,
papers, fan belts and a thermos of coffee, all disappearing under the thick blue-grey smoke of Ole Olsen's pipe.

"Guess they don't need the siren anymore," a voice broke into the Aloha's silence.

"I thought it was a law. But there's no traffic."

"Least it stopped blowing," the first said, "Least it stopped blowing. Maybe it'll all stop pretty quick. Hope so," and turned to the bar.

The convoy was clouded by the time it turned left, only the blip blip blip of the flasher and the taillights could be seen, made a dim, bloody pink by a gauze of snow as the thick cold powder fell behind them, mixing with the brushed veil of white dust that streamed from the top of the ambulance shell, the dry unstable grit flying back, then lifting and finally arching to tuck under the rear bumper, seeming a pale parachute stretched taut and shattered in place.

Across the prairie, Olsen drew a slow and steady bead along the arrow of snow-drifted concrete. His blade dropped to the road as the truck nosed into the thick falling. Only occasional reflectors marked the road across the four-mile flat bottom, an ancient lake bed to the soft river gorge which led into Kline from the northeast, as the tires rolled with a soft whirr of deep cleats and poking studs.
Olsen's outside thermometer, fastened to the bar of his side mirror read 5 below as near as he could see through the creviced frost over the glass face.

He was glad the siren was off. There's too much misery and human suffering, no need to advertise it. God have mercy on us.

He kept on, spotting dim ranch lights and dark chimneys to pick his way across the drifted road. He slowed to a crawl by the Kline Co-op elevator and the UP tracks, looking both ways, goosing the throttle involuntarily, with a shudder that began at his shoulders and ended at his toes.

When they hit the state highway, two miles from the hospital, he lifted his blade and pulled over to let the ambulance roll by. He tooted and didn't wait to watch for the return wave the attendant never made, then swung a u-turn to get back to Kline and eat some breakfast.

The last body. Across the prairie through the thick white storm that had closed all roads through a windless silent downpour, the flakes fell straight and hard, like frocked pebbles, without drift, float or sway.

It was finally quiet. Finally calm and almost pleasant to those who had been out all night in the wind that had dropped just before dawn. The wind that flung glassy pellets of snow into eyes and ears and nose, that stung the neck and
cheeks and forehead, that would have had no human targets if all hell hadn't broken loose, if the biggest crowd in Kline's history hadn't spent the worst night in Kline's memory stamping and talking and high-stepping through drifts, in an endless parade, in and out of the Aloha, where they drained the huge coffee urn, or standing around the fallen engine, or running uptown when the flames suddenly shot through even the bullet-like flakes, flakes that bit like slivers of mica, on the worst night of the worst winter ever recorded.

The winter so bad that midnight tamaracks split wide open and shattered dreams like a baseball through sliding glass doors.

The winter so bad that Lynch Nolan had sworn he'd seen two arctic White Owls in a tamarack just a week before, the only ones he'd seen since he had been stationed in Alaska.

The winter that had already dug into the chipped, split Main Street sidewalk, had shoved and muscled its cold into the crevices and POP POP POP'ed one night along the concrete, snapping it wide open in half a dozen places. The whole line of Aloha drinkers had dived that night, sure that someone was shooting the place up.

The winter so cold, that it made people wish they had never wasted their superlatives. Afraid that they wouldn't be believed, now that they were sure this was the worst ever.
It was bad enough in Joyau d'Foret, but Kline seemed to be especially cursed, had suffered the constant smacking wind that gathered on the winter waste of Alberta 80 miles to the north and funneled to shoot through the narrow Sushlack Valley, taking aim at the town which stood immobile in the crosshairs of its numbing bore.

The wind didn't rush straight through town with a precision snap of whipped fury, but seemed to, finding itself looking out on the long flats, become hysterical, and rollercoaster around the houses and stores like a crazed anarchist baserunner, through windows, down chimneys, slicing off corners of bricks and hoses, throwing doors open one second and slamming them shut the next.

A newspaper thrown overhead from the principal intersection of Kline would rise like a kite, then dive toward the bar, cut across to the banksteps, cattywhomp to the drugstore and skim the lot before flattening itself against the wall of the Texaco Station, across Main and a long block west.

It had not been newspapers last night, but B-B's of scratching, pricking snow which forced the train crew back to their silver pullman time and time again in an inefficient rotation, had the police keep their helmets on, broke windows, and made the crowd, with its intermittent persistence, seem an arctic fraternity, with woolen masks and deep gloves, with only their eyes visible, squeezed shut against the snow,
and red puffed disembodied lips, whore red behind thick steamy blasts of breath.

With the exit of the last body, the crowd, in stragglers of two and three, began to stomp and shiver and suddenly note the cold. Cars were started and left idling where they had been parked the night before, angled against Main Street's high cracked curb. Windshields were brushed and scraped, shovels worked behind tires, and large clouds of exhaust hung shoulder high beside fenders, as if unable to rise against the falling sky.

Some walked east by the tracks, past the four cars of the wrecker train, to turn and cross Highway 37 and return to warm unlit kitchens of two-story frame houses, and double-wide trailers with their slick metal handrailless steps.

Dogs sniffed in circles through the snow, lifted legs against the Aloha back wall and the trackless engines, and licked at a dark red stain between the engine and the building.

Sargeant Douglass returned from the sidewalk and broke into a half-run at two dogs facing off before the stain.

"Get. GET the hell out," he yelled, a tired anger cutting his deep, loud voice as he kicked the ribs of the closest, sending it yelping after the other, who had turned at the sargeant's approach.
"STEVENS," he yelled. "STEVENS, ANYONE. Get a shovel and pile this over. We're gonna be shooting wolves and coyotes before long." Maybe we should leave it, he thought. Charge admission when everyone else in the county comes around. If there's anyone left who hasn't seen it already.

For the moment, there were few gawkers.

Simply, there was little else to see. Later a circuit would be established, a walking tour, beginning at the two charred houses, now nothing but sooted, streaked chimneys, and bent, twisted plumbing, softened, distorted, limp pipes rising to a second story that now lay collapsed on top of the first, in a knee-high, smoking bundle. The county fire crew would be out later that Sunday, but the houses had gone up so quickly and completely that no one who had run to the houses while they were still burning had expected anything to be saved.

Several calls had gone in to Joyau d'Foret, but Douglass had radioed in not to hurry. No danger of anything spreading, no chance for miracles. They had listened to him, and only one small pumper had skidded cautiously across the prairie.

It threw a couple thousand gallons of water over the mess, which sat in a diabolical pattern of frozen drips and wax-like mounds, but left most of the work to the snow and wind and self-suffocating squeeze of the collapsed second
story. There was nothing left to burn a few minutes after the fire had begun. The gasoline and diesel had been scattered generously, and the spilled trail to the basements had stopped near the furnaces. The WOOMP WOOMP of explosion had been sharp and hard even through the wind and snow.

The tour would generate at the two houses, then tramp across the highway to the scattered congestion by the tracks, where the thirty man railroad crew from Arlington worked, in thick gloves and hardhats over woolen caps, dark boots and insulated jumpsuits.

The half-mile string of cars had separated from the derailed engines and scraped to a clanging, explosive halt, clapping and clapping as knuckle rammed against knuckle and the heavy sloshings of tank cars kept up their liquid back-and-forth, shaking the conductor, first out of his drowse, then jarring him time and time again as he dropped on the ladder to pick up the phone to the engine, to find it silent.

The cars themselves had suffered little damage, only a jammed, cracked knuckle on the front car, which had been replaced, and the string, which stood dumb as cattle on a hot afternoon, had returned west behind auxiliary engines from Arlington.

So except for the huge green and black engine on its side, plowed into a bank, and the three trailing units upright, but not parallel to the tracks which lay twisted and
sprung from the spikes, like frozen, reaching snake tongues, there was little to hold a frozen man's interest in the five-below weather.

As the gapers either returned home or walked to the Aloha, the crew worked on, beside the rotating golden engine lights and the floodlight battery wagons, the pistoning hum of the gas generator and the throb of the engines, with their occasional long loud spits of air released from the wheels, in an invisible beam of movement which tumbled flakes before puffing into a bushel-basket genie cloud of steam.

The work was slow and tedious, no more interesting than that of a city crew patching potholes. While the bored engineer gazed through his window, sipping coffee and munching on a sandwich, two jackhammers ripped into the frozen ground by the tracks, loosening the ground to place the squat grooved metal frog down to rerail the wheels of the still-upright units on the mainline.

Welders cut into the coupling between the second and third engines, so the last two units, front dollies no more than a foot from the track, could be eased backwards and taken to Arlington for inspection and repairs.

Others wrestled with struts, measuring and supposing where they would best support the first crane, already in position to start lifting and scraping the fallen unit out of the ditch. Men were walking around the engine, inspecting
wheel assemblies, fuel lines and hoses, while others made exaggerated gestures, sweeps and dips and dives and stretches of arms, pointing and circling, trying to decide where the cables would be best placed, sometimes jotting notes and diagrams on clipboards protected from the snow by sheets of clear plastic.

Groups of children and families appeared occasionally, and paraded close to the work, to be waved off by a state trooper. Others grouped on the sidewalk, talking and pointing, while the dogs chased and sniffed and pissed and disappeared in the drifts, as the crew ducked in and out of the Aloha or the silver Pullman, listening to the crackle and snuff of the cloudy radio filled with the over-modulated Southern bass of the dispatcher rerouting trains through Joyau d'Foret, switching them across teamtracks from the big yards of Arlington. As long trains cut slowly across street after street in routes of amazing slowness and complexity, brakeman flew on and off the engines every few blocks, throwing switches, waving engines on and placing fuses across empty Sunday morning avenues.

As the snow fell, the sky lightened, from dark grey into a dismal light, and the bouncing lanterns of the trainmen became useless. The terrific blinding sun-gun, a 40,000 candle-power windowpane of pure glare, was shut off, and
the super-heated elements dwindled from a vast white to a soft orange and finally to a cool metallic silver, a polished, shining rectangle of space-technology that seemed an oddity among the ancient, beveled pullman, the dark, worn, chipped, dullness of the huge swivel crane, and the flatcars, piled high on either side with irregularly cut rail sections and melted monstrosities of lead, which, topped and creviced with snow, seemed ferrous wads of giants' gum.

Orange, red and blue flashing lights were the only unnatural illumination of the morning, as the sun, above the thick sky, spread its light into the infinite diffusion of bloated moisture, and day began, one clue that the entire world had not been turned on its head and throttled into concussion.

Alice Flores did not open the Kline Cafe that Saturday night, and did not plan to open it that Sunday morning just because of a few extra people drifting through town, and the two score of railroad men burning calories through the night, and most of the day. She knew the wrecker had its own facilities to feed the crew, knew that the food was good, and doubted, when she was waked at one-thirty by Bert Casey, that she would sell enough of anything besides coffee and leftover pie and rolls to warrant disrupting her weekend.
She told Casey where the coffee urn was, had him sign for five pounds of coffee charged to the Aloha, gave him the cafe key, told him that if she found the door unlocked or the lights left on, she would never let him in the cafe again, and returned to bed.

If her air-conditioning hadn't been almost paid for, she would have opened. But, there was no need to go out of her way now.

She had long ago figured that she would be done paying for it by mid-summer of that year, most of the down-payment coming back to her through that first summer in thirty-five cent homemade pies, and fifteen, twenty-five and forty cent soft drinks, during the still, yellow, hundred-degree dusty summer, when anyone within a ten-minute drive would find an excuse to sit in the icy comfort of the five-table, fifteen-stool rectangle next to the Post Office along Main.

It was eight-hundred dollars well-spent. The greasy humidity of her summer kitchen became a thing of the past, and it would make a good selling point when she got around to that. Which wouldn't be too damn long from now, if these winters keep up. Each one worse than the last.

Bert Casey, who would come in at eleven a.m. to drink coffee to sober up for lunch before returning to the Aloha, told people she had spent a grand at least.
Bert knew that for a fact, plain as the nose on his face. Bert's brother-in-law used to install air conditioning units in Pasco, Washington, a few years ago before he hurt his back and had taken a position as custodian with the Tri-Valley School District. Bert would visit his brother-in-law and family every summer for a couple of weeks, and he listened closely to reports on the state of the trade. He would have liked to get in on the deal with his brother-in-law too, but Hell. He got that Vets Disability and there was no reason to go and start the back kicking up on him again. It had been real good for a long time now.

Bert spent his days at the Aloha, sipping on short beer after short beer, never wanting to start too heavy until later in the day, when he would alternate red beers and shots of C.C. until he collapsed in front of Walter Cronkite.

When the truck from Arlington had arrived, with ELSON'S AIR CONDITIONING "Don't Burn Up Before We Cool You Off" block-lettered on the sides, when the snow was still on the ground in frozen packs along the curb of the late-April main street, Bert Casey had predicted to the day-drinking Aloha regulars, a steep, swift rise in prices.

"Oh yeah, sure we'll be cooler, but we'll damn well pay for it."

Bert spent an hour and a half in the Kline Cafe every noon, drinking five cups of coffee, reading Mrs. Flores'
Arlington Argus, and finally eating a sixty-cent hamburger with onions. He then returned to the Aloha, ready to talk.

"I don't mind heat. Dammit." he said, ordering a short beer to wash the taste of coffee and mustard out of him. "I mind the rising prices. Things hasn't stood still since the war."

Mrs. Flores knew what Bert Casey said, because Virginia Allman, the day bartender at the Aloha, would call up her lunch order and arrive to pick it up fifteen minutes later, after locking the cash register, plus making sure the drinkers were set up before she walked the two-hundred feet to the cafe to spend a few minutes with Mrs. Flores before the lunch rush began.

Mrs. Flores knew most of what everyone said around Kline. Most of what everyone said, and what everyone did. The night's events DID take her by surprise, but she had long ago known about Suds McCallister and Shelby Deedman.

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes after Bert Casey had knocked at her door. She stood a foot from the sill in her light-blue robe, as Casey blurted out the sequence of events! She gave him the key and the admonition, turned off the light and slipped under the covers.

It's the weather, she thought. The awful weather, the blisters and frost-bite. Burn or freeze.
She saw the weather just then as a long row of thick books with boring titles, brown and red and green, like those in the lawyer's office in Joyau d'Foret where she had drawn up her will. And the book ends, those two steel balls, too tiny to keep all those volumes in place, that's spring and fall. Two tiny weeks each season. I'll sell this summer. I'll clear out, take these tired old legs and move to Eugene. Why keep cooking for a bunch of cheap drunks? I'm tired.

For a moment she thought she should get up, go downtown and find out what was happening. But her eyes closed. She'd find out soon enough. And Bert told me most everything I didn't know already. I'll hear about it soon enough. Five pounds ought to hold half the county. I should have told him not to come back even if they run out. He'll sure come to ask. I'll be up before they run out anyway. I'll hear it soon enough. Over and over and over again.

Cletus Field, owner of the Aloha, opened his mouth in a tense, huge, conscious yawn and shook his head violently back and forth a half-dozen times. His mouth closed, his head stilled, and his hands rubbed the back of his neck as he looked out the window with a resigned rage and weariness. His hand slipped from his neck to his forehead and furrowed
through the thin grey hair that lay long and straight and unparted over his scalp.

"Ears backed up again, Clete?"

"Goddamit Sam, every time I get the least tired."

"Hell of a deal."

"I swear to God, I'm going to Arlington, or even Seattle and get some Chink to acupunch the piss outta me."

"If you tried everything else." the big overalled man said to him. "Laura's sister's husband, down in Tucson, he kept having warts, all over, legs, arms, pecker even. He got hypnotized about three years ago and hasn't seen one since. He'd tried everything he thought, too."

"All I want is to get home. Virginia said she'd come in early. That's what I need. Sleep."

"Whenever I got a cold," Sam said, "I used to just hole up with a jug. Booze and sleep and I have that sucker licked in twenty-four hours."

"This ain't a cold. This is a condition. I can't sleep my whole life away."

Sam started at Field's quick tone. He hid behind the can of beer he lifted over and upside down to his mouth and asked for another.

Clete bend behind the bar, opened the cooler and slid a can of Lucky Lager towards Sam, unopened.
"Put it on the tab, Clete, I'm going to get some shuteye myself. Those guys aren't gonna get that engine up till late."

Field had already added it to Sam's bill on the filecard he kept in alphabetical order in a small plastic flip-lid box next to the cash register, and was staring out the window once again, rotating his neck and head in wide, stiff, reaching circles.

Real definite, but nice as you please. And he smiled at their grumbling evacuation. I'd like to see that typewriter peck away in one of the back seats, or maybe to the pullman, and see how the crew likes that damn pluck plack pllick all day, especially with the crew coming in snow-covered, dripping all over this in triplicate and that in triplicate and not enough room, and ketchup on the forms, and pancake syrup and all the bulls with nothing to say.

That'd be fine. And, with half his whiskey gone, Cletus Field started chuckling at the whole scene, the chuckle turning into a laugh, and the laugh becoming a roar, a shoulder-shaking, tear-welling, lean-against-the-bar-for-support absolute howl.

For a few minutes he had forgotten why he hadn't done it in the first place, had forgotten the punch cards he kept on the first shelf above the coolers, forgotten the three warnings during the last two years for serving after
hours and the one phone call from Douglass six months ago about the minor who they had picked up DWI who had bought the beer at the Aloha.

But if there was anything he hated, it was grinning and bearing it, especially from those damn cops, with their noses in the air, hands on their guns, big badges, little dicks and...the laughter had drifted back to a hiccoughing chuckle...their fingers up their butts.

He looked at the thick-numerated school clock through the mirror and yawned. Virginia will be here in a bit, I might just as well stay open. Too damn cold out there.

He though of making a ten-cents-a-cup sign for coffee, then shrugged, knowing he had made enough during the night to lose a little in heat and light and coffee.

He looked out the window. Coming down harder than ever.

The snow made him remember how cold it was outside, and the thought of the cold made him remember his ears and throat, and quickly the smile dropped from his face and he began yawning and rotating his head and neck in exaggerated stiff close-eye circles.

It was a dull bleat of pain, one he had lived with for years. He blamed it on the cold, though he suffered as deeply during the wilting, still, summer heat.

It was an indefinite throb and swell under his ears. They seemed, his ears, to be blocked, not enough to interfere
with his hearing, but enough to notice, to press against his whole being in a sob of persistent discomfort like his finger used to feel when he would wrap rubberbands around it to get the finger good and blue, then take the rubberband off, and rub real hard on the red groove of skin.

He wanted to go south, and west, to Acapulco, or Hawaii, where he had been stationed during the war. To sip tall punches under swaying palms, wearing only his swim trunks, to finally find relief from this pain, relief from the pain itself, and from the worry of knowing that it will return at any second, at breakfast, during the night, in the middle of drawing a beer.

Maybe Deedman had some quiet, private ache, that's what made him so damn sour. But still, that's no excuse. Not for what he done. None at all. An old woman and his own boy. I guess he didn't do it on purpose. Why else would he kill himself, though. The autopsy'll find it. Find something really wrong with him, and I don't mean his head. Pain can drive a man crazy, and he ain't always responsible. I'll find out. I'd bet money he had a dozen brain tumors. Yes I'd bet.

He finished his whiskey, then turned to the cash register to count the nights take and put it on the books.
Outside, through the full wash of the storm, the railroad crew kept busy, welding, banging, shouting and pointing, wrapping cables from the swivel cranes while jack hammers still tore at the trackbed, to loosen the twisted rails, bent like strips of clay, to remove the broken, splintered ties and spike down temporary rails on the mainline.

The Arlington trainmaster and three investigators had arrived in a new pickup, orange light flashing, chains slapping against the deep-cleated snow tires. They asked questions and inspected the switch while the trainmaster wandered around, occasionally asking questions and jotting down notes in a soggy spiral notebook. He spent a lot of time in the silver Pullman, drinking coffee and looking out the window, shaking his head and telling anyone nearby that he never, in his life, seen a worse storm than this, except perhaps...

The Church was almost empty at the ten o'clock service. Barret Bolle, the minister, had been up early to trudge through the thigh-deep drifts.

In the spooky shadows and half-light beyond the crews floodlights, he ran into Tommy Tucker, who, along with Bert Casey, was an elder in the Aloha's morning congregation.

Tucker was trying to lift a small metal plate that had been sheared off from one of the engines when he saw Bolle approach.
"'Lo, padre," said Tucker, assembling himself into some woozy stance of penitence, lowering his head and shifting his quart beer bottle to the opposite hip.

"Little late this time, but you might see what you can do about this storm. Biggest, wildest sonbitch I ever, pardon my French, seen. It is. Worst I ever recalled."

Tucker had been recalling for thirty-five of his fifty-seven years. At twenty-two, after a summer of baling on one of the flat's ranches, he decided he was tired, worked his back into a condition, went on Veteran's Disability, and had found it restful to look back, to justify his weariness by recalling all that had gone on before he locked up shop. He attended the Kline dump, where summers would find him, sitting under a ragged and bleached Sea and Ski umbrella on a gutted, sagging recliner, directing loads of trash and rummaging in them after they had been dumped, scooping out brass fittings, lead pipe, old magazines and paperbacks, battery cores, soft drink bottles, lumber scraps, old lamp-stands and shades, to put in his pickup and shuttle them to his backyard and eventually to Northwest Hide and Salvage in Arlington.

When he wasn't busy at the dump, he would shoot rats with a British Enfield .303, putting the casings in a large paper sack for eventual reloading.

"You ever see one this bad, padre?"
"No. No, Tommy, I haven't." Bolle was impatient, distracted, half-listening to Tucker, listening, like most people did, only to the half that rose and lowered, indicating some need for response, a nod, or grunt at most.

Bolle tried to move on, his rough-wool mittens clapping against each other with soft whoomps that shook spiders of snow from them like cartoon sailors leaping from the decks of a burning ship.

"You gonna minister last rights?"

"I saw an ambulance leave. Anyone hurt?"

"Nope. They're all dead. You're gonna be busy, padre, five of 'em. Maybe you can double up. Don't think any of 'em were churchers, and Suds was...you bury Catholics no matter what their religion was?"

"Who?"

"Suds McCallister, and the whole Deedman bunch, Shelby, Deedman, and Dayton. And Nolan's wife."

Tucker cocked his head for a second and took a long pull from the quart, offering it to Bolle, drawing it back.

"I just thought maybe, on special occasions..."

"What happened, Tommy, I just woke, that siren."

"Suds and Shelby got it first, kind of kicked it all off and then the train, but no one knows why, I sorta think that it wasn't the snow, but it might have been, or the switch or the rails themselves, hell they're in such bad shape, I
already picked up two dozen spikes, they ain't worth nothing, but you never know when you might need...then the fire, and everyone's running round like the end of the world and Deedman comes back and does it right on the engine, in front of everyone, right there. Before anyone could stop him.

"I just hope they all don't go to hell. I didn't like Deedman, but I'm not one for wishing fires and brimstoning on anyone.

"Padre, you figure there's any excusing this? You think praying for them after they go they still have a chance. I was pretty religious in the war. You know what they used to say, there's no atheeuusts in a foxhole. Now, I wasn't in a foxhole, except for basic training, and that was in California, Fort McCarthur, mostly driving truck, but I always said, you didn't have to be in a foxhole to see the damn shells hitting all over you, right in front of the truck once, if I had had my lights on, you were supposed to drive without 'em, so they couldn't see you. But if I had had 'em on, I would of been going a little bit faster, not real fast, because we had radios and syringes in the back, but fast enough to be right where one shell hit. But you forget.

"You get to celebrating about being the hell home, and you just kinda slide away from it all, but I been planning to come and get to church real soon, maybe even this morning, but it's one thing and another, you know what I mean, Padre."
You think they're gonna be needing those spikes? You see it as stealing, Padre? If you do, I'll put 'em back."

Bolle had drifted away, toward the blinking palm tree, raising his legs high with each step to angle across the deep tracks which had already formed a casual trail from the top of the ditch along the west side of the bar and into the front door. He could get the story from Cletus Field.

The three dozen parishioners attending the ten o'clock service were spread throughout the pews all the way to the baptismal font at the front entrance. A few clusters broke up and slid apart as Bolle entered. The whispers and hums dropped as heads raised and shoulders turned.

He stood silent on the top step in front of the alter and motioned the congregation forward.

"Let us join in this moment of grief and shock in a spirit of Christian Love."

They sang "Rock of Ages" and Bolle said they would abandon the usual service.

He began a prayer for those on the highways, for those isolated in the weather, that God may be watching over them during this storm. He reminded them that the storm had a purpose, that the inconvenience and even misery was for a better end, for strong, full crops in the summer, for a
greener, richer, gentler spring, that storms were part of God's cycle, a cycle man can never hope to comprehend.

God's ways, he continued, were sure and true in all things, and it is not our place to question them, as painful and brutal as they may seem. Let us turn our thoughts to the souls of the departed, that they may be delivered to the throne of God. Let us Thank God for delivering these souls, let us restore our faith in this our hour of deep mystery and questioning, and let us rise to the test God has put before us, not forgetting Job and his miseries.

Lastly, let us pray for those who remain on this sometimes sad, troubled world, let us pray for comfort and understanding of those closest to the deceased, that they do not lose their faith, that they remain strong and that they do not question the working of our almighty Creator and Benefactor.

In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, that we might be allowed, unworthy though we be, to ascend to heaven, and know the glory that is God Almighty's and of his son, who lives and reigns with Him evermore, world without end. Amen.

The congregation looked up. His strong voice had made them, for the moment, penitent, had, for a moment, stilled the tongues, scrambled the speculation and chunked the dams of self-righteousness.
Bolle moved to the pulpit and cancelled the evening service. He suggested that each parishoner telephone someone who wasn't there, to make sure that all was well.

He said that he had been downtown, and that everything was under control. There was nothing to be done but pray, and to gawk and sightsee would do nothing but interfere with the salvage crew's work. He did not recap the tale, knowing that the congregation had heard it all by now and were involved in in-depth analysis and background, busy dredging up hard stares, mysterious actions, real and imagined. He knew they were busy piecing and collecting, bridging years-old anecdotes with last night's events.

They sang, "High O'er the Lonely Hills," not omitting the starred verses, ending with

Bid then farewell to sleep:
Rise up and run!
What though the hill be steep?
Strength's in the sun.
Now shall you find at last
Night's left behind at last,
And for mankind at last
Day HAS BEGUN!

Bolle asked them to bow their heads as he gave the Benediction:

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face to shine upon us, and be gracious onto us. The Lord lift up His countenance upon us, and give us peace, both now and evermore, Amen.
They gathered their coats and mufflers and caps and hats and gloves and walked out the door, asking how each other had weathered the storm, how deep the snow was, and at least, they agreed, the wind had died.

They gathered in small clumps under the narrow entrance roof. Some left and immediately ducked to the snow and clopped to the right or left, while others made quick plans to join for coffee, hoping the walk would make them just forgetful enough of the solemnity and anguish of Bolle's prayer to have a nice talk.

Thelma Olsen walked home with Joanne Field, Cletus' sister. The big-boned women in their coats and boots and gloves and sweaters and hats, swayed and picked their way along the five blocks of street to the Olsen house.

"Let's go along the highway."

"It's longer," Joanne said.

"It's more packed down. Get under my umbrella, Joanne."

The two large women followed the prow of Thelma's transparent cup of umbrella, with locked elbows and hunched frames.

"Oh, you can see from here."

"I told Ole last night, that wasn't the wind. I had to shake and shake him. He just didn't want to get up."
"He wasn't in church."
"He had to lead the ambulance to town all night."
"Well, Clete did too. Kept open. I said, 'brother, you don't have to.' But he said, 'They need someplace to keep out of the wind.'"
"Is that a body? Oh, I can't look. What a shame, what an awful awful shame. Young Dayton."
"No, that's just the crew working. Some equipment. We don't dare go over."
"Ole should be back now. He hadn't walked in the door when they called him back to lift that Volkswagon and tow it home. We wouldn't be able to see much anyway. Ole will know more than the crowd. He was there all night."

They hurried, lifted their feet a bit higher with each step, anxious to listen to Ole, glad, secretly, that they wouldn't have to disobey Bolle's admonition to not gawk and hang on. There was a difference, Thelma Olsen sighed, a real difference between that and finding out if Ole was all right, and just what he had to do. That wasn't...well, a person has a right to find out. As long as it isn't just prying, there's a difference, just like reading the newspapers. He couldn't possibly mind that.

Thelma and Ole had often wondered about the Aloha. Neither drank, although three Christmas's ago Thelma had two cups of egg nog at Joanne's and felt positively giddy,
laughing at the silliest things, and finding herself folding and unfolding Joanne's Christmas cloth napkins as she half-listened to the conversation around the dinner table.

She and Ole knew that cars were always parked in front of the Aloha, and wondered what, exactly, went on in there. Sometimes, sitting before the television on Saturday nights, she would hear the siren from McCallister's patrol car, could follow the wail to the front of the Aloha. She would shut the television down and look out the window, though Main was blocked by trees and houses and the church. Eventually the siren would begin again, and she would hear it fade across the flats. Something had gone on, she knew, in the back seat sat some bloody, beaten face, the battered loser of a battle with a pool cue. She would sigh, and feel the fine warmth of a martyr once again shouldering a load of ignorance concerning the sloppy washing sins of the Aloha. Once again she would have to pick the news up secondhand, from Joanne via her brother Clete. When she heard the news, it would only be the barest bones, of a fight between such and such and so and so, or a bit of gossip, who was there without their mate.

It was a Christian's duty, she supposed. To be ignorant, and the next morning she would pray, pray for the impious world of the Aloha. Pray for deliverance from...something vague, and sinful and dissolute. That was all she knew, for she had never ventured in that place, that world of off-color jokes,
and too-loud, too-long anecdotes, that world of clicking racks and one-more-rounds, that haven of abdicated responsibilities, guiltless behavior, and broken families.

She was a little mad this morning, a little unwilling to be a martyr, as she shot quick glances at the bundled figures across the highway, still pounding and pointing and shifting and straining at track and engine and coupler and switch.

She knew she had missed something, some event of a lifetime, something as close to apocalypse as she ever wanted to come. She had been barred from a phenomenal night, and could never savor its sweet juices.

The effectiveness of Bolle's prayer battled with her envy of those who were on hand for it all. She wanted to be there, darn it, just this once, and wondered why the unworthy, the freeloaders and dissolutes of the Aloha, why they got front row seats.

Why, she thought. Why was God so set to work in mysterious ways when it really mattered, when she wasn't around.

"I'll be ready for some coffee when we get home, I know that, Joanne."

By three that afternoon, the twisted track had been replaced by temporary rails. The three trailing engines had been coaxed onto the track and were being pulled back to the Arlington roundhouse.
The cables were tight over the front engine. The crew stood in the deep snow in a distant, tense circle as the foreman gave a signal to the cranes to keep up the pressure. The foreman would have preferred to wait, lifting an engine was awful tricky, with this snow, well it shouldn't make any difference, but...I'm tired, that's it. I want to get the hell home. I just wonder if we've forgotten something. Dammit, I can't think of it, so we'll find out soon enough.

The big engine rose, slowly, first to its wheels, but before it was perfectly upright, it lifted off the ground and creeped along the bank, a foot above the snow, as the cranes edged it toward the track and the sky in a jerky unison.

The green monster came over the tracks. The east crane lowered slowly. As the front wheels touched the rail then the lip of the wheels snugged against the inside of the rail, the crane neck itself sank, and half the engine was righted.

With even more caution, the west end descended, then inched to the left, then to the right and finally on the tracks. The cranes quickly let out slack and men scrambled to loosen the cable while the crowd shook their heads and pointed.

In ten minutes, the two cranes, sandwiching the engine, headed toward Arlington, the last crane followed by the pullman, the two flatcars with cable spools, heavy metal wedges and thick wooden blocks. The caboose's lanterns were swallowed by the snow before it was 200 yards west.
By four o'clock, the streets were empty as any winter Sunday afternoon in Kline. A half-dozen cars were parked on Main, four of them unmoved since Saturday afternoon, all dug in, surrounded by window high drifts. Two pickups joined them, four-wheel drive units, their chassis high above large-knuckles tires. They had made it into town from less than a mile away in little under a half-hour, their owners pushing and winching them along in some rough sledding but hell, really, piece a'cake. You'd never wantta go out in this, but it's good to know you can if you have to.

The palm tree continued its blink, and, for a few minutes once again, it was the only movement in town. For the wandering dozen people that had descended upon the huge gouge the wayward engine had made along the tracks had been satisfied, had made their estimates of how many yards of frozen earth had been pushed into a curled lip by the engine, had whistled at the looping disarray of rail that the crew had left by the switch, and had shook their heads in marvel and wonder at the power and bulk of the trains that they had not really noticed for years. They walked over the small line shed, now no more than an aluminum puddle, almost covered by snow.

Ole Olsen had towed the mangled Volkswagon back to his garage on small dollies, and for forty-five minutes, even the snow had stopped. The thick curtain had become a veil,
dropping only a few drifting flakes. The sky had lifted, and, far to the south, along the Gemini Mountains, skimming the snow-packed ridges, a small light appeared, bringing soft shadows, as an ice-pick sun poked feebly through the marble sky.

At four-thirty, the wind returned. To the drinkers at the bar, to Virginia, who had finally come to relieve the weary Field, it was a final straw, a last slap to an already battered face.

At first it puffed occasionally, sweeping across the tops of cars, then stopping. It would pick up again, then stop, then keep up for a bit longer, dropping to street level, and pushing a thin, airy avalanche of stinging whiteness before it. The pickup owners weren't worried at first, but by six o'clock, with the sun gone again, there was no longer any question as to whether they were to drive home. The question now was whether the goddam trucks were still parked or to hell and gone, bouncing around the county like every other damn thing that weren't tied down.

As the darkened fury of the Alberta plains shut the small town off from anything but itself, people were speculating on who'd be the new policeman, whether he got appointed or elected. Several people suggested Tommy Tucker, but Bert Casey was damned if he'd let that old drunk take over.
Everyone agreed that something had been going on with McCallister and Shelby for quite a while. But that was their own business.

Some thought that it was all the wages of sin. Others, in secular agreement, said simply if you gambled big, you lost big, sometimes. Others berated McCallister's sheer stupidity at driving right through town, while Deedman was standing right there, no he was sitting, he was standing goddamit, I was watching, I felt something was gonna happen.

Hell, he was a rotten son of a bitch, but no one should find his wife playing around with his best buddy, especially after she was dead and you couldn't woop either of their asses.

It was too bad for Nolan's old lady, but she wasn't much more than a vegetable anyway. Lynch was pretty hard hit, his daughter and wife, all at once like that. The insurance would pay for the house, but the damn shame of it all was young Dayton. Just a kid, and burned, that's the worst way to go, even more than suffocating or dying of thirst. But the furnace blast, he was right in the basement next to it, it must have knocked him out. Hell, any time a youngster goes, like that Anderson kid, ending up with his tuba wrapped around him like a snake. Exactly one year ago, close to, well, almost eleven months to the day. A waste. Dayton was wild, sure, but who wasn't at that age. They aughta put barricades in.
By six o'clock, the Inter-Mountain Network had picked up the story and on all its stations. KLINE NIGHTMARE. FIVE DEAD. The morning Arlington Argus would not have a picture, but Kline would be headlines and first column right.

Tennyson Brady had called the cops by eight that night, on his own, and said he had been with Dayton, about the switch, but Dayton had thrown it, and didn't tell till later, before he hid at his grandma's house.

Lynch Nolan had been sedated and was in Joyau d'Foret Hospital. His sobbing had become silence, and the silence had erupted into screaming. No one had seen Cletus Field throw a punch before, but no one remembered seeing a harder punch. It brought Lynch to his knees, out in a second.

No one knew if they would hold the funerals together, with the circumstances being a little tricky. But they did know, there'd be a damn party after. No one returned to work after funerals. There would be a rush to the Aloha for that first round on the house. Then everyone'd be real quiet and respectful for a while, then some'd say that Suds wouldn't a wanted it that way, and a pool game would start, and a quarter would slip into the jukebox, and it'd be a brawl before supper.

The drinking would last quite a while. There was nothing Kline liked better than a party.
"One hell of a night," Bert Casey mumbled at nine that Sunday evening, "One hell of a night." His head fell forward and rested on his forearm. Virginia started when she heard his first gargling, liquid snore.
II

FOLKS
Until Delbert Deedman punched Mrs. Grace Booker in the face and stomach during her fifth period American History class in May of his junior year, breaking her nose, four teeth, and two ribs, causing her to retire one month and one school year before her 65th birthday, no one had really thought of him as especially incorrigible.

He had been in trouble before, playing hookey; driving too fast across the flats in a '51 Ford Victoria with four shiny babymoons, twin glass-pak mufflers and the remains of a case of Coors bouncing on the carpeted floorboards; shooting insulators off the telephone posts; siphoning gas from cars parked along Main; breaking a few windows of selected enemies; and burning a litter of stray kittens.

The people of Kline knew about the enthusiastic extravagance of some of Deedman's pranks after Halloween night of his sophomore year. No one in Kline would have done much more than shake their heads at a large pile of dog shit, carefully mixed with water into a thick, slurpy stew, placed on Barret Bolle's front porch. It was a time-honored stunt, one that could not fail to bring private smiles to old trick-or-treaters.

But Deedman had just gone too far. He waited in hiding until the minister opened the door with a plate of ginger-
bread and jelly beans in his hand, ready to be surprised, or scared, or overcome with mirth at whatever assortment of goblinery he was to see. But nobody stood on the porch. Barret called out, "Hello? Hello?," looked to his left, then his right, and scratched his head for a second. That was exactly his stance, plate of homemade goodies in his left hand, soft folds of hair in his right, when he heard, from behind the large rock a few feet from the porch.

"Trick or treat, preacher man," and was hit square in the face by a paperplateful of the stinky, dripping paste.

It wasn't so much the act itself that was taken into account, but rather the fact that Deedman seemed to have absolutely no motive. The victim didn't matter. He had scouted around until he found a suitable hiding place. That, and only that, guided his actions. People would have understood a grudge, some vengeance, some smolder of hate, ill-founded as it may have been. But to just pick out a victim for pure convenience? That was, well, crazy.

They thought that Deedman might be still not totally recovered from the death of his parents. Although the car crash had been two years earlier, had been his father's fault completely, since it had been established that the truck loaded with grapefruit had, indeed, been using its headlights, and since Bolle had had nothing to do with the funeral, both of Deedman's parents, being returned, on wishes
of THEIR parents, to Brookings, South Dakota, maybe, they figured, maybe the youngster felt that God was responsible, that Bolle being a man of cloth, God's agent, deserved some retribution.

Deedman, in his five years of living with the McCallisters, had never been forced to go to church. When he had first moved in, after a few weeks in Brookings with his grandparents, they had deferred, thinking that, with the shock of his being orphaned, he had best be catered to, that he would come around. But after several months of returning home after services, to find Deedman either asleep or downstairs reading comic books, the pattern had been established, and although Marcia McCallister, an overweight, gently overbearing woman, would ask every Saturday at supper whether he was planning to go to church with them the next day, the answer was always the same. "I think I'll hold off for a while."

Suds McCallister resented Deedman's privilege even though he wasn't sure what he would do during the one hour of church and one hour of Sunday School every week. If the two of them went fishing overnight, there was no problem, neither of the McCallisters asked for perfect attendance. In fact, George McCallister thought maybe the boy should have his own say as to whether he went to church or not.
"Quickest damn way to turn his head from any good at all."

"What, George? I'm counting stitches."

"Suds asked my why he has to go to church every Sunday."

"Un huh."

"He didn't ask, really. He wondered if I got tired, going every week, seeing as I'd been going for a lot more weeks that he had."

"What'd you say?"

"I said, yes, sometimes. I figured though, it had become a habit that I didn't feel like breaking. And insurance.

"I just figured the truth is what I should say. I told him I felt good after going to church, that it was nice to see everyone, that Bolle had some decent things to say, some good rules to live by, even if you didn't believe in heaven."

She stared at him, the napkin-sized patch of yarn drooping on her lap.

"Well, don't say you don't ever doubt," he went on. "Well, I just think we could let him skip every once in a while, even when he isn't gone. That's what I was saying, it's the quickest way to turn one sour, keep forcing it on someone." He lifted the newspaper in front of his face.

"Hell, he spends his time fiddling there, anyway, and I'm sure all that goes through his head in Sunday School is girls and fishing."
"Help me up, George. I trust the Lord, and I'm going to have to start praying for three of you now instead of one."

By the time he was sixteen, church was an occasional thing for Suds, and more than most Sundays were spent in bed. In the winter, he would sleep off the beer and wine of the night before, or sit in the living room, reading comics. When it was warm, he would be out front, working on cars, washing, tuning, sweeping, tinkering with tachometers and oil temperature gauges, or fishing with Deedman.

Before they had gotten their licenses, church had been a place to hang out. The youth group had its dances, and the parish hall basement its dark corners. Deedman went to some of these dances, had, like Suds and most of the boys his age, felt up Georgia Taylor in the chaircloset. Deedman had had, in fact, his biggest scare from this situation.

One night in September, a month before he got his license, during a Fellowship Dance with a church from Joyau d'Foret he had herded the thin, bespectacled Georgia outside and into the back seat of a parked car of one of the chaperones. He had been drinking wine, his breath was thick with spearmint and Lavoris. With few preliminaries she was blouseless, her yellow bra loose at her waist, its cups hanging open like pockets on a carpenter's belt.
Georgia started shaking her head slowly, eyes closed, chin up, as Deedman's fingers slid to her knees and began to spider up her thighs.

"No."

"Why not?" he mumbled, breathing heavily.

"I can't. No."

"It's okay. It's okay."

He had gained the nylon of her panties and was reaching under the material when she slapped him.

"Keep off."

"Stop screaming."

"I'm no whore. I'm not a whore."

"Shut up you rag."

"I won't shut up. I won't shut up. I won't shut up. Let me out."

He smacked her against the window.

"I'm gonna tell." She had squirmed into her bra, broken-winged the straps onto her shoulders and reached for her blouse. "I'm getting and telling."

"I'll just say that everyone's been taking you back here for a lot of times. Look, it's just because...I like you...not that...I...because I wanted to, you know. That's how guys are."
"How come you never talk to me at school, or anywhere, except take me here or in the closet?" Her hand rested on the doornob.

"I don't know, you know. Shit. Let's go back in. I won't say anything if you don't. People give a guy gas. Not because it's you, just they do."

But for weeks he had worried. Every time he saw her, in school, at the cafe, drinking coke and laughing while he played pinball in the game room, he was afraid she was telling somebody, that all the other girls knew that he had tried to go too far, that they would be afraid of him. He never tried anything else with a girl until he took up with Shelby, and even then, not before many dates, and much indecision.

She had been at many of the church dances, had seen him go off with Georgia, knew what went on, had seen all of them go off with her, and had turned up her nose at the whole business. She didn't care, she said, what anyone else did. She could wait, and they'd have to too and that's a period. I just want to make sure. Besides, all they care about is That.

She wasn't quite sure she understood it all. But above anything else, she didn't want to miss her senior year, and college, to walk around wherever they would send her with a puffy belly, unable to keep her balance, and look all round.
It wasn't just the belly, but everywhere, you got...fat, round. You just puffed out all over. When I go into Arlington, I get just about sick, seeing these girls all bent back and their ankles all swollen and veined. They can't do their hair right, it just sticks out of pins, or sits in those blah pony tails, with no color, and their eyes, it's like everything goes to the stomach for the baby, and they just look so horrible, so uncomfortable. God, imagine getting around with a basketball tied to you.

The other girls laughed, and nodded, and couldn't wait. Elsie Mansing left by junior year, and no one knew why. They knew why, but not who why. And doubted she did. Then Nancy Nielsen, only three months before graduation, so you KNOW she had to, or else she would have waited to graduate, even though it was eight months before the baby came, and it was small so I guess it COULD have been early. At least she got married, but to such a creep.

Ugh, Bobby Varner never used to wash and those cruddy tee-shirts, greasy hands, and he wasn't even working full time then, and I've seen him a couple times and he's worse than ever. I went to see her in their trailer...I figured she would want to come to the party,... It was awful. There were magazines and coke bottles and newspapers all over, the sink looked...it wasn't that there were dirty dishes in it. Who likes dishes anyway but it smelled. Pee Yuu. It was
filled with cold water, and you just knew it hadn't been less than a week since it had been touched, big green and white molds floating on this grey water, a ring all around the sink. UGH. She always was a slob, but not me. If I'm gonna get married, I'm at least gonna keep the place clean. I can't stand dirt.

Delbert Deedman kept clean. Every night after working at Thane's Feed and Fuel on the prairie road, a half-mile into the Flats from Main, he would take a shower. He fussed about his creases, and wanted Mrs. McCallister to iron his tee-shirts, not just fold them. His boots and oxfords were always shined. No matter how hard he played or worked, it was as if he had just arrived. Even during the hottest summer days, loading sack after sack of cement and alfalfa pellets and energized oats, after wrestling with yards and yards of chicken wire, rolls of barbed wire, after standing in the windy dust from the trucks that rolled into the elevator next door, and sweeping the ancient smooth floors, he still looked fresh and smooth and unruffled.

He would go to the bathroom before lunch, and return five minutes later, wringing a paper towel while the others munched at dusty whitebread sandwiches and wiped their mouths across sweaty wrists and fingers. He would unwrap his sandwich and eat with a constant and mincing rhythm, bite, chew, flicking occasional crumbs from his lap and lips, folding his wax
paper and daring any of the other lean-waisted, wide-shouldered boys to accuse him of something. Anything. By the time he left for the day, he was cleaner, fresher, less worn or wasted than any of the others had been when they arrived, in the cool light of morning.

For Deedman, the hardest part of dating Shelby Nolan was the time spent in the living room listening to Lynch Nolan puffing and hooting about himself.

Shelby was rarely on time, so he'd sit drinking a coke, wanting a smoke, tapping his fingers on the white doily of an overstuffed chair, half-watching television and half-listening to Lynch bellow about everything under the sun; capital punishment and water rights, high school basketball the price of land, Kennedy and the New Deal, where to fish, how to fish, what to fish with, how to smoke the fish after you caught it, World War II and the Roman Empire, automatic transmissions and power steering, how he fared in high school and why he couldn't go to college, how he pulled himself up by his own bootstraps after his parents died, leaving him an orphan just like you Del, but he didn't have anyplace to go really, oh, a few people would have put me up, but, well, things were different then, in some ways a little easier, at least they understood if a fella was wandering around looking for work, everyone else was too, they weren't suspicious like they are today, and if you was single, and
willing to work hard, you could usually keep something in
your belly, you wouldn't get fat, oh no.

He would close his eyes and start to smile, shaking
his head, leaning back, forgetting, it seemed, that there
was anyone else in the room, spinning adventure after meal
after odd job after experience after acquaintance, until he
came back to earth, and shook his head, opened his eyes,
and looked at him, Del thought, like, you dumb worm, you
punk, you don't know nothing and I'm trying to tell you about
REAL life and it's all you can do to keep it in your pants
until you and little Shel walk out the door. If you listened
a little more you'd learn something but you're like the rest
of them, too smart and itchy and know-it-all to do anyone any
good until it's damn near too late.

He'd look at Deedman, and begin his wheezing laugh.
"Those were real learning times, boy, I'd not give 'em up
for the world, even though they weren't always easy."

Deedman would nod. I bet. Lynch closed off conversation.
Not by hushing or saying 'Wait a minute, just one more thing,'
but with a rapid-fire drone, every sentence ending on an
upslant, frantic for breath, assuming a next. By the time he
had finished, Deedman had withered under this scattered
persistent biography. Mrs. Nolan, doped in her wheelchair,
would continue to move her knitting needles in a constant
irregular tap, while she smiled at nothing in particular.
He would ask where they were going that night. To the show, or the game, or a dance at Joyau d'Foret Community Center. Out to park. Deedman always wanted to say that.

"Well, what's on the agenda for you two tonight? She's always late. You just better get used to it, it isn't just little Shel, her mother too, right dear? The girls at the office...don't get me wrong, they do their work, they wouldn't be there if they didn't, it isn't easy finding good employees, I guess I go on instinct more than anything, a hunch, a tuition, you know a sort of sixth sense, and the way these gals dress, if you used anything else you'd be hiring all kinds of trouble most likely. Like this fella told me once, in Tulsa, I was trying to get down to see if I could maybe ship out from Houston or New Orleans, that might be something to think about, best damn way to see the world. He said he hired people without even looking at their qualifications. Two things he noticed--how they shook hands, and whether they looked him in the eye. He didn't care whether they were shabby or not, in fact, a little threadbare the better, probably hungry, going to do a good job, a better job than someone who's just out looking to work because he thinks he aughter work, since he can't quite make it without.

"But these gals at work, I can't for the life of me get them there on time. Three four minutes late every day, and that adds up. I know they get their work done, but you
can't let it get out of hand. But I guess there's nothing to be done, I guess us fellas have just gotta get used to it. Where did you say you were going?"

"The show."

"We used to find our own entertainment no no not just that either, heh heh heh."

Deedman always wanted to interrupt. You know, Lynch, I was wondering, did any of the girls you took out have real big nipples like Shelby has. Boy, you get her all hot, and she breathes so short, almost like you just before you stick that wheezer in your throat. She whispers "more more" and can't help but rubbing me, the right way, heh heh heh. You ever do it in the back seat? How come she takes so much time getting dressed just so she can get undressed? How come she puts so much perfume on and still ends up smelling like... fish.

But he never did. And if he did, it would have been a lie. She had never let him see her breasts. He had felt them, and only them, never able to go below her waist, and she always pulled her hand away from his lap if he nudged it there.

How come? How come you won't let me? How come that's all you want to do? Because you won't let me. And then thank you goodbye. No. Go find Georgia Taylor. Maybe I
will. You don't own me. You don't own me. You'd go and tell everyone wouldn't you? You think I would? You really think I would? I don't know. Thanks a lot. That makes me feel just fine. I outta bust you. You do and I swear I'll never talk to you again. That would just kill me. I'd tell dad. He wouldn't do anything, he'd just sit me on his damn knee and sling some more bullshit, try to teach me a lesson, some crap like that. He would not. And you shut up anyway about dad, he'd tell Dave Hanson and you'd be in jail, or out of the country soon enough. I'm just shaking. You should be. And how do you think your folks would feel about it? They're dead. You know, the McCallisters. Who cares? You're sick, Delbert Deedman, you're sick. You're sick. It's unnatural to not want to go further, I ain't even talking about all the way. Shut UP! I'm just saying we gotta stop acting like kids. Look who's talking. You're just like the rest of them. How do YOU know? You been out with the others? Maybe. Maybe shit, I know you haven't, if you did, I'd hear about it and so would he and so would you. I can date who I want. I know you can, once. You don't own me, Del. Take me home. Half-way there.

Shelby Nolan had returned crying from their dates more than once. She hated him. At least she hated the way he kept after her. She didn't mind a little. Her breasts were far enough, though. Everybody lets them and nothing
happens, but, ugh, I'm not going to touch...that. And he wasn't going to get...there. No way. They all want to.

She and Donna Tillotson were driving on 37 from shopping in Arlington past that old place with the junker cars and old rusted farm stuff, and the pigs. Donna had screamed, "Look," and in the rocky, sloping pen, while thirty or forty pigs lay scattered under slices of post and barn shade, a sow was squealing across the middle at full speed with a boar mounted and keeping up, somehow, on his hind legs. The two girls pulled over to watch as the sow made a tight U-turn at the west end of the pen and flew pell mell towards the east. The second turn upended the persistent boar. He smacked ribs, rump and head into a post. He stood and watched the sow watching him from a distance and took three steps toward her. She turned, he went over to three sleeping animals and started rooting them out, digging his feet, stepping on legs, butting and grunting. They all snorted and locked legs for a second, but didn't accept his challenge. As the girls laughed, he went over to another corner, muscled a young boar from sleep and bellied in the dust for a nap.

They didn't speak the ten miles home after the first snickers and 'That-was-the-funniest-thing-I-ever-saw's' and 'Maybe-he-had-bad-breath's.'
Shelby was trying hard to keep the scene just as it was. She was trying to keep the animals pigs, not humans, but try as she would, the sow would gain a skirt pulled over her rump, and the boar would be scurrying along on a pair of oxfords, with pants, belt and underwear around his ankles, his large hands dug into the sow's shoulders.

It should have been comical, and she wanted to tell Donna. But it wasn't comical. She shivered as steamy apparitions floated in her mind: a diseased dickie from a medical textbook someone had found and left in the school library, where everyone knew where it was except the librarian; the sex education film shown in eighth-grade to the girls, with the thick pencil drawings, and the girl with the round stomach and flat behind; the man in Arlington, who had asked her the time. When she turned to tell him, proud of her new watch, he had exposed himself.

With a final shiver, she began to count fence posts. She could feel the tingles and drowsy goodness of sitting on posts, talking and rocking, and how when she let Ron Tillotson feel her up last year, her nipples had gotten hard. It felt like slipping into the bath when it wasn't too hot, and getting close to the faucet, and it just running all over, how dizzy she would get, as she closed her eyes until she heard her mother and she'd have to scoot back, pushing with her doubled
up legs, splashing all over and trying not to blush when her mother asked her why she always made such a mess.

She didn't know for sure, and wouldn't ask Donna whether that sow was just playing hard to get or if it hurt that much. Did they have to force you? She tucked it in the back of her mind until her wedding night, at the Navajo Motel in Klamath Falls, Oregon, on that night, after the long drive, when she remembered it before she remembered that not only was she not a virgin, but that she wasn't anything like a virgin, that she had been slapped and bumped and rolled and entered so many times that she was...her...it was...like...a baked apple.

That wedding night she laughed at how simple it was, finally, and kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner, lying there, after, looking at the white ceiling and the round glazed-white fixture in the ceiling. She was exhausted, and sorta swelled, from the shower and all, and for a while, naked under the sheets, not afraid, not sad, not glad. Full. Just full. Full there, down there, in there, all over where he touched her and she didn't have to worry because he was so clean.

In that motel room, she remembered the sow and the boar, and Donna's 'Maybe-he-had-bad-breath.' She remembered her question, and not asking Donna, and lying there, putting
her hand over her mouth, to stop giggling from thinking she had cloven feet. This little piggy, she thought, right then, like the light fixture had become a neon sign, just for her, it was suddenly very very clear. She rubbed herself, and looked at the sleeping Deedman, and thought, which is it? Hah. A little of both.

She could handle his hands. But she didn't like the way Deedman kept such close tabs on her. Even though he was nice enough, and made her laugh, and had a car and money, even though he was the cleanest of them all in town, and real strong, and it didn't matter that he didn't play football, because he had enough trouble with his grades as it was, even though with his mean streak and fighting, he probably would have done us a lot of good. She would have liked to go out with some of the others. She used to watch Suds McCallister, with his red hair and face so thin she wondered how he fit all those freckles on it, and John Whiston, the basketball player, who could hold a ball in one hand it was so big when he stretched it out.

But, she was Del's girl. It was no wonder, she thought, she had never been asked out after that homecoming fight, when she wanted so bad to go to the dance, and Del was sick with a 103 temperature. Charlie Dee, the quarterback, didn't have a date either, since Virginia Rutherford had broken her
arm in gym that afternoon, so she figured it was a good way to go to the dance. Charlie's best friend, Steve Krauzer, had told Roz Kaplan to tell her that if she wanted to he would take her, after she mentioned it out loud to Donna Tillotson that afternoon.

They had a fine time although Charlie kept talking to Bill Rossbach, the halfback, about how they could have gotten a couple extra touchdowns, no one was that interested because they had beaten the Carter Miners by two touchdowns.

She called Del to tell him, but Mrs. McCallister said he was asleep. She thought for a minute to talk to Suds, have him tell Deedman. Suds was easy to talk to, and would understand, and be able to tell Del real easy. Even though they were so different, Suds smiling and laughing and a good student, they were close as brothers.

The dance ended at midnight. She and Charlie and Steve and Roz had gone to Joyau d'Foret to find some beer and sit by the lake. Charlie kissed her a few times but she never thought anything of it.

She had to go to Arlington the next day. When she returned, late that afternoon, she told her mother she was going to visit Deedman.

"I wouldn't right now."

"Why not?"
"He's been here three times, with his face all red one minute and pale the next. Marcia McCallister called and said he went out this morning after Suds told him about last night and picked a horrible fight with Charlie Dee."

"Oh no! Nothing happened." She was sobbing. "I just wanted to go to the dance."

"That maniac," Lynch had walked in from the other room. "I told him that you weren't going to see him for a while, and besides he better get home with that fever, and he told me... he swore at me and threatened me. I don't want you to see him; I knew a fella in the army a lot like..."

She ran to her room and locked her door. She vowed never to see him again, knew that she'd have to, would tell him it was HER idea, not her dad's, tell him he better not come around and hurt her dad.

She called Virginia Rutherford, who screamed at her. "He's not ever gonna see again."

Finally she called Donna. Suds had told Del when he woke up and Del just left the room, almost without any clothes on, dragging Suds and his folks half out the door. He had roared towards Charlie Dee's. Suds had followed, stopping by to get Ron. By the time they got to Charlie's house, Del didn't even look human, his face was red, you couldn't even watch his fists they were going so fast. He finally beat Charlie. It would have been no contest at all if Del had
been strong, but he kept kicking and kicking Charlie after he was down, yelling stuff until Suds and Ron pulled him off. Del reeled out in the car, all bleeding and puffed, and Charlie had a fractured skull and he might not even see again because his bones were all shoved around.

Deedman returned to school the next semester after failing the courses he was supposed to take at the county continuation school. It was too easy to pick up extra hours at Thane's each week, and since a small storage barn was empty during the winter, he could work on his car in heated, isolated comfort. His books stayed in the back seat, unopened. After a month, he saw them as part of the car, as immovable as his two speakers on the rear window shelf. He would tell Suds, "I'm gonna get cracking, right away." But something would come up, always, just in time.

He didn't date. Once or twice he went into Joyau d'Foret to play pool, and ended up in a back seat fumble with a town girl. The books would be thrown onto the floor, or over the seat onto the front. On a double date, with Suds and a friend of a girl he had picked up on Friday night at the Arctic Circle Drive-In, Suds asked him where he should put the books.

"Chuck 'em. On the floor, up your ass, I don't care."

Suds wedged them under the passenger side of the front seat and began to strip an overweight sophomore who had just
moved from Oklahoma, who was anxious to make friends, or at least meet as many boys as possible before she allowed herself to become pregnant.

When Deedman enrolled for the second semester of his junior year, he had no idea where the books had gone, and decided to swear up and down that he had returned them. The vice principal wouldn't issue one new book until the old ones were returned, so for the first month of the semester, Deedman sat in the back row of his classes, slouched in furious boredom.

One day in early February, rummaging around under the front seat for a screwdriver, he found the books. Within two weeks he returned them, received a lecture from the vice principal, the new set had found their way to the back seat shortly after.

After he hit Grace Booker and was suspended for the rest of the year on a strict probation, which included working along the side of various county roads, picking up litter and tying it off in feed sacks for a dump truck to pick it up, he was for all purposes, through with high school.

The McCallisters were quiet.

They consoled themselves with the fact that he wasn't, really, their son. They weren't to blame, the damage had been done much earlier, although they had always thought the
Deedman's to be good parents... At least Shirley Deedman. Roger drank too much, and they would have been surprised if he hadn't been drunk the night they hit the truck.

Marcia McCallister was even more generous. He was a good boy gone bad, right under her skirts. It wasn't that he was any worse than any other boy, Suds, for example. But the fact of his being orphaned, it affected him. It must have just been such a shock, well, it was liable to make anyone act a little wrong. You just, you just never can tell about an orphan. And with the help of God, she would weather this storm. Barret Bolle said that no one blamed her, when she spoke with him. Suds was her product, and he was doing fine, with almost a B- average and everyone liking him as much as they did. He never had trouble, and was always dating someone. He'll settle down with some gal soon enough, but for right now, he's a boy any mother would be proud to call son.

Grace Booker was the oldest teacher at the county high school. She had been teaching American and European History for over forty years. For the last score of these, she had been confusing presidents regularly, finding it hard to remember that the course did not end with World War I. She often rushed through the last twenty-five years of events in a helter skelter, reminiscent way that relied more on her
interpretation of social history than actual sweeps of power or emergent political trends. She would get through World War II by talking about rationing, and the biggest parade Joyau d'Foret had ever seen on V-E day. She was a staunch anti-communist, a member of the John Birch Society, and had much to say about the cold war, the Rosenbergs, John Foster Dulles and the back-stabbing, cold-blooded, double-dealing Russians.

If students left her class with a slightly imperfect interpretation of the course of twentieth century American politics, they did benefit in some ways. Never again would they run into someone as strict and demanding about posture, handwriting, the value of skipping lines on assignments, crossing tee's and dotting "i's." They also knew exactly what to do in case of an air raid.

Every Friday she would drill each of her classes. Forget your books, take all pencils, pens, knives, keys and sharp objects out of your pockets, remove your glasses if you wear them, loosen belts, ties and shoe laces, and it's hands and knees under your desks. Stay away from windows, and if you find yourself at the blackboard, or some distance away from a desk, then curl into a ball. A good reason, girls, for wearing your skirts long enough to reach below your knees. She urged all students to keep a fresh canteen of water in their lockers along with a supply of raisins, peanuts, or dried fruit.
Every day she would lecture. Her lectures consisted of readings from a two-volume history of the United States she had bought in 1954 during a two week vacation in Washington, D.C. She would have the students write answers to the "Questions and Suggestions" in the back of their own texts, America, Land of Freedom. Her book was supplementary, and since it had nothing to do with the exams, very few students listened at all.

Those in the back of the room were able to read, draw, pass notes or drowse, shielded from the occasional glance of Grace Booker.

Deedman sat in the last row. It was fifth period, just after lunch, and for him, the last class before he would go to work at Thane's. He hated being placed with students a year younger than he, and he hated Grace Booker.

Early in the semester, she had singled him out, as she did one student each year, as a prime example of the product of a permissive society. Grace Booker lived in Joyau d'Foret and had only the merest knowledge of Kline society. She did know that he was orphaned, and living with the McCallisters, but crowding any suggestion of sympathy and understanding from her rigid and discriminating mind was the knowledge that many had been orphaned before, and that many of America's ablest citizens had either been orphaned or paper boys, or both.
He slouched. She could hardly keep her eyes on the page from sheer annoyance at seeing one booted, bluejeaned extremity resting upon the other, stretching across the aisle, touching the undercarriage of another desk. She followed the thin, strong leg up to the waist, which was almost supine, perched on the lip of the scarred wooden seat. His arms would droop, one over the back of the desk, the other forward, holding a pencil, drawing what seemed to be lazy circles, or more likely, the tires of cars, for every once in a great while, he would push himself to an almost upright position and hunch over his desk, turning a piece of notebook paper this way and that.

She had never asked to see the drawings, fearful of finding either her name under a monkey's face or a horribly well-proportioned body, resplendent in its nakedness.

She worked on his posture. Her early arguments, that the straighter one sat, the better one thought, she soon realized, had little effect on Deedman. She just as quickly abandoned her 'destroy the natural curve of your spine' argument, not because it wasn't perfectly true, but because he just didn't seem to care. Since he hadn't turned in one assignment, and had gotten less than thirty-five percent on his last exam, neither did he seem to care about his grade. He wasn't disturbing the class, really, and although she was tempted to just let it go, admit defeat, she realized that that
was, in fact, at the heart of a lot of society's problems today. People were just too darn willing to admit defeat too easily. She knew that if her students learned nothing else in her class, they would remember the importance of standing up for their rights.

She started picking on him. With no explanation, no reasons given, she began to stop her reading and tell him to get his feet out of the aisle, to sit straight in his desk. She never forgot the pained expression on his face, the religious indifference and exaggerated slowness in his every move. She heard the long, loud sighs that preceded his rising and sitting.

Every day he came in and slid to a slothful, indolent loll. Every day she told him to sit up, and every day he would comply, a little more slowly, she thought, a little louder, with a bit less patience.

In late March, he began standing. He would bend his knees and slide out of the seat, tug at his pants, first down, then up, leaving them just over his hips, brush his shirt, run his right hand through his hair, wink, smile broadly at her and sit down, rustling the sheets of paper he had on his desk.

"There's no reason to stand. All you have to do is straighten up."

"I figure if I stand, it'll make me remember to not slump. I'm trying...Mrs. Booker."
She kept reminding him, and he kept standing. By the second week in May, the rest of the class was taking bets as to the exact moment of the dialogue. There was no real pattern. It never happened during the first twenty minutes. He would slide little by little down to rest. She was afraid he would change his tactics, slouch upon arrival, and she would have to ask him a second time in one period. She saw this as dangerously close to admitting defeat. She had little time for police actions. She wanted it ended, and ended quickly.

By the fifteenth of May she had begun hitting below the belt. Four weeks of school were left and she was hungry for victory. Suspension was out of the question, it meant dealing with the principal, and she was distrustful of any higher authorities, except God. She was a believer in settling her own scores, with as little dependence on others as possible. Failing him would not matter, that question had been answered irrevocably by the mid-term exam. Only a little reluctantly, for if she let the truth be known, she was wearying of the battle, she decided to start pestering him about a few things.

She rounded up a posture article in the "Reader's Digest," and made mention of that fact that very few athletes are known for their bad posture. With few exceptions, the article went on, a straight back marks a good athlete. Even the
athletes in school kept their posture up. Even Charlie Dee, and it was a shame that he couldn't play baseball this year. She mentioned grades several times, and, for the first time in her forty years behind the podium, mentioned the lowest grade in class.

"It was a stellar thirty-five percent. But I'm not going to say who got this mark," she said, one day.

Then looking right at Deedman, "I'm sure he is well enough aware that one has to pass American History to graduate from high school. At least I think he is. But perhaps he feels that if he puts in enough extra years, they will award him an honorary diploma. Sit up straight, Delbert."

She saw a change come over him. She saw how he hated being called Delbert, and that, that simple fact had escaped her for so long, that the night she thought of it, just as she was turning out the light, she couldn't go to sleep, for three hours past her normal bedtime.

She began calling roll. Her voice rang out with a sing-song, she stretched the syllables of his name into a nasal taunt.

"Deedman, DEL-BERRT."

On the twenty-third of May, he asked her for the first time to please call him Del. She was ecstatic. That night she smelt victory for the first time. She would be able to
call him Delbert, and then apologize. She could apologize for at least a week longer. By then he would be sitting up straight and she would go through a day, just one was all she asked, without him spread all over the classroom in open defiance of her orders. Already, she noticed, the tips of his shoes did not reach quite so far across the aisle, and when he did stand, he did not sigh so much. She saw the resignation in his narrowed eyes, the clench of his jaw, the whitened lips.

She set herself a goal. She would succeed before the first of June. She smiled to herself, knowing that when the time was right, she had one last weapon. One final arrow with which to pierce his insolent hide.

On Friday, the twenty-eighth of May, she was sure the moment had come. She knew that due to a shoving match at lunch that day, he would not be able to go to the school dance that night. She saw his face grim and set when he walked in that afternoon. He had no notebook, no text, nothing except a ballpoint pen sticking out of his mouth.

He was breathing hard and steady, his eyes were blank, and when he sat, he did not take the pen from his mouth, or borrow any paper from the desk in front of him. He sat in a half-slouch with his hands folded in a tight double fist in front of him, his eyes still.
With five minutes left in the class, she had not had to say a thing. She was giddy with achievement and disappointment. She was going to make it. But she wanted to dig. She had to twist her dipped knife one last quarter turn. It wouldn't be the same. Victory was not enough, it had to be complete destruction. A scorched earth policy. Hiroshima, not Korea.

The class itself was worthless. A warm, breezy Friday, the prospects of the dance that night, and the fact that nothing had been said about Delbert Deedman made even the best students fidget and fuss. Some looked nervously at the wall clock, others passed notes and spoke in stage whispers, others glanced back at Deedman. There was a general twitch and sway to the group around and toward his immobile form.

With one minute remaining, Grace Booker closed her text and looked the group over.

"That should just about be enough for today, but I do have one thing to say." She didn't even hear herself. She felt as if her blood, rushing violently through her, had become carbonated. She was trembling, like she did when she drank too much coffee. The faces were only shapes. She gripped the podium.

"I hope all of you that are going to the dance tonight have fun. Remember, don't drink. It is possible to have fun without drinking, and authorities will be watching for this kind of thing."
"I'm..." She took a deep breath. She realized she was about to step beyond all bounds.

"...I'm sorry you can't go tonight Delbert, Del. Especially after you've been such a fine boy today. You've, uh, straightened up considerably, in these last few weeks." She thought she heard an isolated underchuckle, but couldn't be at all sure. His eyes were widening.

"I hope that it doesn't go to your head, though. You're still failing, of course. But what I'm really worried about, is that, well..."

The bell rattled. No one moved. The silence was huge when the ringing ended.

"...that you don't take it too badly if Shelby goes to the dance without you. After all, Charlie Dee only has one eye left now."

He sat, his mouth open, his eyes full and deep and wide. He stood without a sound.

"Mrs. Booker."

"Yes."

"I'm going to kick your ass."
III
EVENING
EVENING

Delbert Deedman ran a wet spiral on the bartop with his rough, thick index finger. From the outside circle, an inch in diameter, to the center tail, his finger would press along the dark wood, then back out again. Once at the center he would lift the nail and snap at the dollop of wet which he had pushed to the vortex.

The stab sounded brittle and sharp, a clean, final sound, like that of a new chalkstick becoming two against a silent classroom blackboard.

Again and again his finger plowed the shape to its center, tapped and returned. Slowly the liquid was pushed to either side of his trail, and slowly, pattern after pattern, the spiral became drier and broader, until not just his finger, but his knuckles and other fingers joined in the absent-minded exercise, then his whole hand, and finally his wrist and lower forearm.

But the logical extension of these actions never occurred. Never did Deedman contribute his elbow, his shoulder or whole torso, for his finger, somewhere in its tracings, would slide into another puddle of liquid and begin again with a similarly etched coil, and with that controlled indifferent viciousness, the pattern expanded and contracted, like the sure, almost imperceptible breathing of a cat about to spring.
The action continued with the same deliberate sureness and unthinking steadiness of a lover, whose fingers roll over the back of a partner, as they both breathe and disrecall slowly into sleep.

His left hand strangled a can of Lucky Lager Beer. He held the can midway between lip and bar, a Lucky Strike jabbing from between his index and middle fingers, a tangent to their curve, a branch to the tourniquet of his knuckles.

As if paced by a clock, he would lift the can to his lips and drink, deep and strong, his adam's apple pistoning slowly, puffed to the size of a toilet float, and continuing its way, like a mouse in the belly of a snake, for a second or two after the can was replaced, the grip loosened, the cigarette raised and drawn to the lips and the smoke thrown out his nose, anvilling across the bartop.

All the while he stared straight across the barwell, over the bottles on the far ledge, into his image in the mirror. His glare was at once blank and savage, as if he was trying to smash his very eyes with his own trenchant fist of sight.

He started suddenly, and unhooked the heels of his boots from the tubed shine of the barstool. His hands lifted, the left from the can, the right from its tense, wandering patterns and pushed him away from the bar, the rubber caps of the stool sliding easily along the damp, puddled floor.
He turned to the door, as if expecting it to be flung open, staring for a second at the thickly steamed windows' translucent sheen which turned yellowred from the periodic illumination of the neon outdoor sign, and then black.

As he sat frozen, the door was thrown open. Behind the knitcapped head in the black gape, he saw the snow slant by, heard the distant scream of the wind, reckoned that the snow and wind was as thick and cold as five hours ago when he had walked in. As quickly as his initial spin, he returned to face himself in the mirror, this time slamming his empty can on the bar, and not watching the bartender supply him with another.

2

Lynch Nolan stood just outside the door the The Aloha Bar, and stomped his loose green rubber boots several times into the black rib mat before wheezing deeply with that soft spiny cavernous wax scream of an asmthatic. The heave of his chest did not relieve him, and his second was less deep, his third more shallow yet, his fourth and fifth, coming upon him in quick succession, like a collapsing patrol of marching soldiers, whose line space edges together suddenly nose to nape, groin to butt.

He fumbled in his green parka'd overcoat, his glove slipping underneath the flap into the soft fur pocket. His
hand banged around for his respirator with the frantic blindness of a traveler searching for the wallet he knows he left on a coffee shop counter fifty miles back.

He grabbed the cylinder and held it close to his yawning mouth. He pushed the plastic saddle down again and again as he sucked and heaved, his eyes roving wildly, his body frozen in the panic of suffocation, his trunk bending forward and whipping upright, his shoulders raising and shivering, as slowly, the wheeze of his lungs became softer than the mist of his spray, until that too stopped, and Lynch Nolan was once again a burly figure about to enter a bar on a blizzarding Saturday night.

He forgot for a second the whipping horizontal bullets of snow, peeled his stocking cap back off his head with his left hand and wiped the sponge of sweat off his forehead and crown with his right. The yellow and red neon palm tree, bent and full with invisible coconuts, spread over his glistening skull, as flakes slapped and spread and melted above his ears and neck, and the soft depressions of his temples.

Lynch Nolan stamped his boots lightly, thrust his hand into his pocket to make sure his respirator was there, slid his cap on, took a deep, clear breath, twisted the knob of the door, and stepping over the sill, cut a large block of silhouette just without the steamy light of the bar.
Suds McCallister and Shelby Deedman lay parallel and still under a twisted, starched sheet in the Gem of the Woods Motel.

In the bathroom sink, a sixpack of beer stood half-buried in a tumble of knuckle-size ice cubes. Two plastic nooses stood straight out and empty, touching the slick white porcelain slope of the basin. By Suds' side of the queen-size bed, on the floor, was one of the empties. He held the other in his hand, and took quick, constant, almost mincing sips from it, his head propped up against the headboard which rose in a soft arch against the wall.

As he sipped, his brow furrowed between his sandy, unbrushed eyebrows. McCallister seemed on the precipice of speech, ready for the vocalization of some slowly churned and final consideration that reluctantly, almost as if it had a force of its own, would exhume itself, into the air before his face, to hang quietly etched, with a sort of blind portage across the thick, spiked swamp of possibility, to the next clear water of some thick-headed and adequately logical river, a river without forks and twists, a river straight as an irrigation canal, functional and placid, without that terrific meandering which seems at first annoying, they mysterious, but is finally accepted, appreciated, celebrated.
No words arrived to shatter the still hum of the heater, which billowed the long skirts or curtain. He continued sipping, until he tipped the can high to reach for the final drops, threw the sheet toward Shelby and brushed along the curtains toward the bathroom, stopping in front of the basin with two soft slaps against the linoleum squares as he ratcheted the can from the pliant milky noose of plastic.

He returned to the bed, sat facing the curtain and snapped the tab off the can, flicked the ring and tongue towards the wastebin, reached for a cigarette on the night stand, lit it, lay back once again, propped up on the flimsy headboard, and covered himself with the single rustling sheet.

Shelby Deedman had not moved. She lay, hands flat under each opposite armpit, elbows tight to her ribs, as if protecting herself against some personal cold in that overheated, still, stale room. Her long smooth neck was twisted toward the middle of the bed, her chin resting on her collarbone, her eyes drooping, the outside of her lids almost slumped, almost pained, almost worried, focusing on McCallister's chest and the wall beyond, her lower lip covered and uncovered by the constant slow scraping of her upper teeth.

Their separate piles of clothes were opposite the foot of the bed, Shelby's in a casual folded tower; a bright patterned turtleneck sweater, two bands of red, a deer in full leap, and two bands of blue, each pair of bands separated
by a thin gold weave, wide wale soft green cordorouy pants, cupped by the collapsed peaks of a bra. His pile drooped over the dresser, the cuffs of his grey slacks a foot from the rug, his flannel plaid shirt askew on top of them, a long sleeved undershirt above that.

Their coats, thick and woolen, lay atop each other by the thin, unchained door. On each side of the bed lay their underwear, his striped boxer shorts, her pink, insubstantial panties, limp and fisted, with a bright red rose blossoming toward the ceiling.

Dayton Deedman, bundled to twice the size of his stocky twelve-year-old frame, prepared to keep the promise he had made early that afternoon while playing pinball and sipping out of a forty-cent coke in the game room of Mrs. Flores' Kline Cafe.

His grandmother had just walked out the front door, leaving him to watch television. He peered out the window, brushing the curtain aside and sticking his nose close to the frame, allowing just enough room for one eye to squint through the glass at her car, idling in the driveway, thick billows of steamy exhaust rolling up and around the back fenders before being picked and slung into the darkness to
disappear, as if absorbed by the swirling snow which raced crazily in the twin tiaras of brake lights.

The wipers pushed spiers of moisture to the banks of the windowshield. Inside the car, his grandmother, Barbara Deedman, applied lipstick, craning towards and adjusting the rearview mirror.

The interior light disappeared, the headlights poked yellow through the snow, the car moved forward, turned right along the white pack of road, and was soon swallowed as it moved towards town.

Dayton waited, sitting in front of the television set, watching the delicate gold hands of the clock above the screen. After five minutes of shifting on the sofa cushion, rapping impatiently with quick fingers on the yellowing doily on the sofa arm, he rose, headed toward the television, pushed in the volume stem, froze for a second, pulled it back out again, the picture yawning back to focus, and headed out the front door, neither locking it, nor looking back to see if he had closed it well.

He walked swiftly, sometimes skipping the wind and snow pelting him in the face, then in the back, then the ribs, as he angled the seven blocks of houses, then across Highway 37, down the soft deep ditch, up the other side, across the double tracks, which alone in his journey were not hidden under the white freeze of snow. He finally stood, panting, on the lee
side of the small equipment shack, a long stone's throw from the back of The Aloha Bar.

In less than a minute, another bundled figure emerged from the dervish of snow, from roughly the same direction as Dayton had come.

The second figure, in the weird shadowy storm visibility, crept with high, raised steps and hinged torso, towards the opposite side of the shack, bent to pick up a breadloaf size rock, and heaved it against the ribbed metal wall.

It hit with an instant soprano followed by a thundering moan of metal, which cut across a momentary lapse in the wind's shriek.

Dayton screamed and leapt forward, as if catapulted by the deep round soundwaves of the explosion, and slipped on an iced stone. As he fell he twisted himself and landed on his shoulder, already turned, like a cat on his back, with fists clenched under the thick mittens, his face tight with shock and fear.

He saw the other figure round the shed wall, and heard shoulder-heaving laughter.

Dayton was up in a second, running. He buried his head into the other's stomach and pommeled wildly against shoulder, air and ribs.

In gasping, sobbing blurts he cried,
"You son of a bitch. You son of a bitch, Tennyson, You son of a bitch."

5

The long staple-shaped bar of the Aloha was too deep and awash with the spillings of a thousand beers. A southern accent slid across the hidden melody of a song from the jukebox, but was only loud enough to fill in any relative silence from the many conversations in progress, both along the bar, and at the eight round tables reaching back randomly to the pool table at the far end of the room.

Lynch Nolan had barely seated himself at the last stool on the streetside of the bar before he called for a house round.

"Everyone's been nursing theirs for an hour and a half, Lynch. It's about time you got your fat butt in here."

The barmaid, a slight, hard, fast-talkin' woman of thirty-five reached above the cash register and pulled hard on a nylon cord, attached to a cowbell swinging from a large bent nail in the wooden ceiling.

As the loud, clear ringing, a needle sharp soprano to the unfocused bass of voices, turned sudden heads and halted glasses midway to mouths, she yelled out, "TIMMMBEEEERRRR," with a dusty, corner-of-the-mouth squeeze of a voice.

She had already reached under the bar for a tall pile of Dixie Cups, placing them in front of the barristers. She
was three-quarters down the bar before the general movement from the tables had reached her, and soon, the already overtaxed bar space was filled with clusters of three and four glasses, clinking together at the rims held by careless, pinching fingers attached to arms which pushed and apologized between shoulders of sitters and over black round plastic ashtrays, salt and pepper shakers, books of matches and packs of cigarettes.

When she was done placing the Dixie Cups she took a quick glance at the tables, another at the newly arrived glasses, counted out a portion of the remaining cups and threw them to a young woman who sat resting her incredible bulk against the wall. The cups landed by her side, and the barmaid called,

"Maureen, hand those around. You know."

The woman reached down, and, using the table for balance, rose to glide in a bouncing, blubbery, bloated way, among the tables. The muted pastel checkerboard pattern of her pants billowed north and south, her rump stretching the outermost squares into a pinched topographical puff. The squares seemed overstuffed suitcases, or drops, endlessly hanging from early morning faucets, screaming, crushed, squares bobbed and trembled with a cohesive bashing, like a jello mold against the cabin space of a small ketch pitching through a tropical storm.
"One for you. One for you. One for you." Maureen chanted as she swayed from table to table, with the voice of a small child passing out cookies to her menagerie of stuffed animals.

Thick stuffed smiles greeted her. When she had scattered the cups with a random thrust of her hand to the three or four men standing around the pool table, she turned to Delbert Deedman, sitting near the opposite short leg of the bar from Lynch Nolan.

"Dellsy Welly," she sang. "Why do you look so sad as usual?"

He stared at her in the mirror, with a look of disbelief and maniacal rage.

"Oooh Poor Dellsy. All alone and drunk."

By the time he had whirled around to her, Maureen had walked back to her table, with an exaggerated raise and drop of her shoulders.

Deedman turned back to the bar, and stared at Lynch Nolan, who was busy handing out mock imperatives, yelling with a gleeful and rich baritone. In between his joking gruffness, he waved thanks and muttered my pleasures to the stream of accolade directed at his largesse.

"Hey Lunch. I mean Lynch." Deedman's voice shot across the bar.
Nolan turned quickly, and stared at him a second, his face dropping into a deadpan.

"Thanks loads, Lunch. You're just heaven on earth," Deedman said, quietly enough to be heard. As he finished his sentence, he raised his Dixie Cup, crushed it and chucked it softly over his head.

"It's your beer, Del. If you don't want it, I just don't have to pay for it."

"That's right, Lynch. That's exactly right."