On the Lake and other stories

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The University of Montana

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ON THE LAKE
AND OTHER STORIES

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The author would like to thank the Antioch Review, which published an earlier version of "On The Lake."
These stories are dedicated to my parents, and to Deborah.
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Bolly was their watcher buried in wind, huddled in his seat at the stern. He hummed with the engine and scrunched down into the hard wood and studied them with the keen scrutiny of trapped light. He decided they never did look angry, never, never at all. His father stood erect at the wheel, rising higher than anything in sight, higher even than the tower at Put-In-Bay. His back was rigid and square, ending in a thick neck and a cropped military haircut. His brother had the same square back, but his hair blew wildly and his back was fluid as he held the top of the windshield with his hands. They were leaning toward one another, heads cocked together. They looked as if they were about to embrace. Bolly couldn’t hear them as he rested his cheek against the engine hatch, swallowing the vibration that ran through his teeth and jaw like electricity. Only when Bolly lifted off the hatch could he hear the shouting.

"But it’s wrong, don’t you see?" his brother kept saying, his voice outraged and hoarse. "I’m not going to register and I’m not going to go."
From his father came a low grumbling that slowly gained in volume until it peaked with "and you aren't any god-damned" and then his arm thrust out, palm flat, a sharp flourish, and his voice lapsed, meshing with the other sounds, and Bolly lost him. Though he wanted to hear more, he wasn't allowed to move while the boat was underway.

They had begun arguing in East Harbor, where the reflection of the Marathon fuel sign smeared for a hundred yards across the still water. As the boat burbled out the breakwater and eased past the red and green flashers onto Lake Erie, the bow began smacking the choppy waves, and their voices raised. When Bolly moved to his seat, their words dropped into tones that revealed no more emotion than the different threads within the engine's roar. Bolly wrapped himself in the jacket and watched the tower, a pale spear in the dark, dart up and down.

Flickering like stars, lights rimmed the lake, marking the islands, but Bolly couldn't be sure where the water ended and sky began. Starting with the tower, Bolly traced an invisible horizon by following the lights, leaping the gaps of open water in an instant, saying to himself and here's the winery dock where I fell in and he pulled me out and there's the marina on Kelly's with the talking dog and here's Put-In-Bay where I got lost in the park and none of them came looking I know I watched.

One of the dock lights began cutting diagonally across
the lake toward their boat. Bolly saw it was another boat, and his imagined horizon dissolved. There was no way to tell between low stars and shore lights and boats that move. Then the reflection of lightning glowed in the west, back lighting all of the Bass Islands. Bolly began counting, but by fifteen there was no thunder.

He staggered forward and tugged at his father's arm.
"I saw lightning," he shouted.
"We got rough water," his father said. "Go sit."
"Okay," his brother continued, ignoring Bolly. "I understand that, but you're not even thinking . . ."

Bolly pitched back into his seat and stayed there while the argument ran them past the old stone pier off Kelly's and around the point and across to the buoy marking Gull Reef, just south of the Canadian border. During the last, Bolly decided the border rode the waves, never in the same place except on hot windless days in August when the lake went flat as bath water.

His father throttled back and the boat dropped off, a wave overtaking the stern. They fell silent. The buoy's light blinked twenty yards away. The boat, a low 21-footer with seats on copper hinges and a deck of cracked varnish, slipped silently toward the buoy. His brother scrambled onto the bow as his father heaved the anchor over the stern.

"I want to do it," Bolly began, but his father had already, wordlessly, passed the anchor line over the wind-
shield. His brother, crouching on the bow, took the line without looking, beginning to drop to his knees even before his father released the rope. He then looped the line through the chrome eyelet at the center of the bow and ran it diagonally across the wet surface to the grommet near the bow's tip.

As the boat swung around, waves lapped the side with tiny plinking sounds. They took their fishing rods and their identical metal tackle boxes and separated, his brother to the bow, his father to the stern. Every few minutes, a swell would roll under the boat and disappear, then rock the buoy and its blinking light downwind. The tower, and the long coast of the Bass Islands, was now obscured. Even Kelly's, three miles south, was gone. There was a wet smell in the breeze.

Bolly fished with them for a while, then grew bored and began wandering back and forth across the deck through a silence as thick as the water beneath. They were both named Tom after a pioneer ancestor whose gravestone they could not find but Bolly was named for his mother's father Bolton who, as his mother always said, had been a polite, even-tempered man who dressed for Sundays and never raised his voice.

"You're a smart one, like my father," his mother had told him. "So don't let them bully you, either of them."

She was small, bony woman with intense eyes and a crooked smile and a habit of standing with her wrists folded
against her hips. Both his father and brother usually ignored her, though they often lowered their voices when she was present. Yet once Bolly had seen his father heave a balled-up coat into the dining room, where it slapped the wall and slid to the floor.

"Jesus, Maggie," his father was shouting. "So that's what you think, is it? Is that it?" He pounded his fist on the table.

"No Tom," she began, "that's not what I said."

"It sure as hell is what you said." He swept a stack of newspapers and letters and the phone book from the counter to the kitchen floor. He glared at her in the silence, his eyes wide enough to show white in the middle of his florid face. His mother suddenly folded her arms in a tight knot across her chest, and Bolly found himself exhaling, hungry for air. Then Bolly's brother Tom emerged from the stairway, holding his arms stiffly out from his body.

"What the hell's the matter?" his brother said. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Mind your own goddamn business," his father said, then stepped toward Tom who was already backing up. Bolly could see his brother's face scrunched up, stubborn with fear. His father took another step and his mother threw out her arms.

Bolly tripped out into the room, opening his mouth to speak, but making a chirping sound. The three of them
glanced at him, then looked away.

"This is enough," his mother said. "Don't you yell at him," she said to his father, then turned to Tom. "And you, don't let me ever, ever hear you say 'hell' in my house."

Then she cried and Tom and his father stood across the room from each other, frowning at the floor.

"Mom," Tom said.

"Go on," she said. "Just go away." Then his father touched her shoulder, pawing it, the fingers rigid.

"Mom," Tom said again. His father looked over.

"You go on, like she said," he told him quietly.

"No one ever listens to me!" Tom shouted and bounded up the stairs. Neither his father or mother looked at Bolly as she moved into his father's arms. Bolly slipped back down the hall into the room where his sister watched television.

"Television's just light from tubes," he told her. "It isn't real." She looked at him sullenly. But he had read it in one of his books, so he knew it was true.

He trusted books and he felt, uneasily, that when he grew up he must do great things, become a doctor or a scientist. He was ten, but he already knew. He loved books and in his room were the World Book Encyclopedia and natural history picture books and a set of astronomy books with prints of alien rocky planets and binary stars and pinkish spheres depicting the expansion of space and the demise of galaxies. He thought, sometimes, he would be the first
person to travel through time.

Once he saw light move. With butterflies in his stomach, Bolly had repeatedly turned on and off the light bulb off the back porch to see the wave rush into the dark and dissipate into the yard. Inside, their voices raised and fell, his brother's high-pitched, his father's deep and drunk, his mother's camp and upset. They were arguing behind the door while he was on the verge of something, a discovery that could change things forever.

He had dreams that night of light and color, and the next day, he told his mother about them and she murmured unthinking approval as she sliced skins from potatoes.

"Where's Tom?" she asked.

Bolly ran out without answering. His father lay beneath the pick-up, wrenches and a hammer in the gravel nearby. His long legs seemed as thick as pythons when Bolly squatted alongside.

"I've seen light move," Bolly said.

But his father wanted to talk. "You've got to try to do something more than just make a buck all your life like me," he said. "When I'm gone, nobody'll ever know I was here."

He used the same tone as when he told him to never trust a jack or always replace the oil before you turn the key. If Tom had come up, his father would have scooted out and ordered him to do it. But Bolly was supposed to watch
"You ain’t going to have to work with your hands like this," his father said. "I don’t want neither of you to have to scrounge for a living like me, but Tom, I don’t know. He ain’t like you. Sometimes I think he don’t have a brain in his goddamn head."

Tom read too, but it was different. He didn’t care about galaxies and how things worked. His room had several shelves of books, but they were useless books, his father said, because they were about things that had never happened and weren’t real. Bolly thumbed through them, but they didn’t make any sense to him.

"What do you read this stuff for," he had asked his brother one night.

Tom set his book down and pulled another one out of the shelf. There were several slips of yellow paper in the book.

"For books are not absolutely dead things," he read, "but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are."

"What does that mean?"

"It means books have got the same balls as whoever wrote them."

"That’s dumb," Bolly said. "Books don’t have balls. Books are made of paper and cardboard and sometimes leather and are stuck together with glue or thread."
"You're a worm," said Tom. "Get lost."
"You're stupid."
"Get the hell out." Tom rose up.

Bolly ran, but he knew he was the smart one. His parents had told him. Tom never wondered how things worked though he could climb the rope in their yard hand over hand and once, when they were younger, knocked down a boy who had smacked Bolly with a bat. Bolly tried to climb the rope, but it had hurt his hands. So he asked questions, as many as he could think.

"Asking questions, that's the way you learn, Bolly," his father lectured. "The dumbest people I know are the people who think they know everything already."

"Like Tom?"

"Naw. He's just a little mouthy, maybe."

On the reef he struggled for questions, rehearsing them to himself while his brother and father bickered over lures. His brother had insisted on fishing with a diver even though it was shallow and rocky. His father had told Tom he'd better change to minnows.

"You'll get snagged," he had said.

"Nope," Tom called.

"Well, I guess he knows everything," his father said to Bolly. They had rigged with double stringers.

"I'd rather know nothing than do what you say," his brother answered.
His father said nothing and began fishing. Bolly tried fishing too but fishing bored him and he had begun eating crackers and walking back and forth across the deck. He finally went to the gunwale, stretching with his arm until the hard wood cut into his chest and his finger tips brushed the cool lake water. It was opaque and he could smell wet.

the black, he thought he could see schools of walleye and perch and Lake Eries slicing gray and sleek beneath the boat, hundreds of them, turning in unison first one way and then the other.

If you could swim under the water all the way back to the harbor, he thought, it would be like flying. The surface is the sky if you're a fish. He looked up, leaning backward over the gunwale, but the sky was as black as the lake.

A swell suddenly cantered the deck. Bolly leaned backward over the gunwale, but caught himself when the boat righted itself. He turned and reached over, bracing himself. Another swell tilted the deck, and his arm shot into the lake. He scooped a handful of water and pressed it against his face.

"Get off there," his father said.

"Are they biting?"

His father stirred but said nothing. He sat on the engine hatch, his feet propped on the other gunwale, holding the fishing pole out from his body in one hand. For a
moment, the tip of his cigar glowed bright red, and his reel clacked several times. Bolly smelled the pungent smoke.

"Are we over the reef?"

"Better not be." His father took the cigar from his mouth and called to the bow, "Hey, Tom. You watching that line?"

Bolly could see that Tom stood in the open bow hatch, casting silently to port, his torso a darker mass breaking the edge of the bow.

"Hey, Tom!" his father yelled. "You hear me boy?"

"It's all right."

"Check it."

"It's all right, Dad."

"Check the damn line."

Tom's form rose out of the hatch and sprawled across the bow. Bolly felt the boat rock to port and he knew Tom was leaning off the bow to pull on the line, feeling if the anchor had broken loose from the rocks and was dragging deadly through the mud, letting the boat drift slowly toward the reef.

Don't ever trust this lake, his father liked to say. She's a treacherous mother who'll turn on you when you least expect it sometimes the wind'll spin right around from the nor'west to nor'northeast in a second sweeping right down from Canada with nothing to stop it except one hundred miles of open water and it will sail you right over your anchor
break it lose and put you on the rocks before

"I told you," Tom called, his voice disgusted. "It's all right."

His father puffed on the cigar and slowly reeled in the line. Bolly watched the double stringer slip out of the water and the rod rise and the stringer glide over the side into his father's waiting hand. His father fingered the minnows.

"Something's been nibbling, Bolly," he murmured as he replaced the bait. Bolly was suddenly filled with hatred for his brother.

"You won't catch nothing on a spinner," he called out.
"Shut up," Tom said.
"Unless you snag it."
"Shut up, worm."
"Coward!"
"You little asshole!" Tom cried. He struck the wooden bow with his fist. "What do you know about it?"

"Both of you, shut your damn mouths," his father said. "You're the one that ain't going to catch nothing," he said to Bolly. "I never seen anyone catch a fish by talking."

Bolly spun away and leaned over the gunwale. Another swell came from the west. Bolly's hand suddenly shot into the lake up to his wrist as the boat leaned into the trough. For a moment, his legs dangled off the deck and he rocked toward the water crying out: "Hey!" But he suddenly felt
his father's hand grasp his pants and pull him back onto the
deck.

"Dammit," his father said. "Now sit down."

Bolly felt his face grow warm in the dark, and he
scooted onto the seat next to the hatch. He watched his
father toss the stringer five yards out.

"When will the school come?" Bolly said finally.

"Don't know."

"Are they down there right now, just swimming around?"

"Suppose so."

"How can they see in the dark?"

His father said nothing.

"How can they see?" Bolly began again but was cut off
when another swell, larger and rounder, rocked the boat.
Bolly hugged the engine hatch next to his father's legs. He
realized that the wind had been getting cooler and wetter
for a long time.

"Do you see it?" Tom called.

"Yeah," said his father.

"See what?" Bolly said.

"Well," said Tom, "what should we do?"

Something in his voice startled Bolly; he felt the hair
on his head rise. "What?" he cried. "What is it?"

"What do you think we should do, boy?" His father said
to Tom. "You know all the goddamned answers. Answer this
one."
Lightning flickered in the west, running along a squall head. The orange light flashed hellishly at one end, then spurted along the harsh chiseling of the clouds. Then the horizon was black again.

"Get your jacket on, Bolly," his father said. A line of sparks dribbled from his cigar stub as he spoke. The swells were coming one right after another now, and when Bolly climbed out of his seat, he had to keep one hand on the gunwale. He couldn't believe how fast it was changing.

"Dad?" Tom called from the bow.

His father stood up, bracing his legs between the hatch and side. He quickly reeled in the line and carefully fixed the two hooks in the eyelet nearest the reel.

"Reel in," he yelled to Tom.

All at once, the wind gusted. Bolly could feel his hair flipping straight up as he gazed into it. The lightning flickered again, and he could see the clouds were very close. He counted one, two, three, four, and the crackling began. It started with a metallic snap that lapsed into grumbling. Even as it grew fainter, another flash hit in another spot. One, two, three, another snap.

His father had moved to the wheel and was pumping the throttle and Tom was crouching just the other side of the windshield. Bolly could see they were talking and he staggered across the deck toward them.

"Coming pretty fast, hey Tom?" his father was saying.
"Just like that time out by Niagara Reef. Huh?"

His father was chuckling and sucking on the dead cigar as he ran the bilge and checked the lights and pumped the throttle and Tom was grinning at him as he held the top of the windshield and rocked to the bucking of the bow.

"All right," his father said. "When I tell you, undo that line and pass it back to me."

"Let me do it," cried Bolly.

"Shouldn't he have on a life-jacket," Tom said over the wind to his father.

"No!" yelled Bolly, "I don't want one."

His father was turning the key and instrument lights were dimming. He was pumping the throttle and turning the key. A tarp, wrapped around the posts for raising the canvas roof, began flapping. The engine was not firing.

Bolly saw that the cigar was gone.

"Dad?" Bolly said.

"Dad?" Tom said.

"I don't want to," Bolly cried.

"Both of you, shut up," his father said. He was pulling out and pushing in the choke. There was no sound from the engine.

"Jesus!" Tom shouted. "You always made me wear one."

The engine fired in the back; Bolly could just hear it over the wind. Lightning crackled again and drops, caught in the wind, began to hit him in the face.
"Get your jacket on Bolly," Tom shouted.

"Just shut up," Bolly shouted back. "I don't have to do what you say."

"Get it on Bolly!"

"No!"

"Why don't you shut up and let me worry about your brother," his father said without looking up.

"Jesus!"

His father squeezed Bolly's shoulder with his big hand, then reached out toward Tom.

"Okay," he said. "Give me the line."

Holding onto the windshield with one hand, Tom sprawled out over the bow, reaching with one hand to the center eyelet where the anchor line was looped. He pulled at the outgoing line, but it stretched as taut as an iron cable across the bow and over the edge into the lake.

"I can't do it," he shouted.

"I can do it," Bolly said.

"You're going to have to let go!" his father called. Large swells were rolling under the boat, one after another. The bow was rising and smacking down. "Wait!"

His father stood up on the seat and reached over the windshield and grabbed Tom's belt. "All right," he shouted. "You're going to have to pull in the slack first, then undo it."

"I think we should pull the anchor in first," Tom
shouted, "then undo the line after we have it in the back."

Tom hadn't let go of the windshield.

"Goddamn it, boy."

"Dad! It could pull me over!"

"Do as I tell you."

"Dad! It's better to take it back first."

"It's just a goddamn squall. You're not afraid of a little goddamn storm too, are you?"

"The line in the back first."

"That's it. Get off."

"Dad! No!"

"Get off the bow."

"I'll do it."

His father lunged and grabbed Tom by the shirt and dragged him over the windshield. Tom came over back first and landed upside down on the deck. He pulled himself to his feet. He was crying. The canvas cover was unraveling from its posts and flapping wildly behind them. Large cold drops of rain began to splatter them. Each drop seemed to bore into Bolly's skin as if he had been shot.

"Stand by that throttle," his father was shouting at Tom. "Why won't you do what I tell you? Why won't you listen?"

Bolly suddenly scrambled onto the seat and over the windshield onto the bow. He crouched, wincing into the rain.
"Jesus H. Christ," his father shouted. "What goddamned sons I have. All right. Do as I say. When you get slack, take the line out of the eyelet."

Bolly crouched low on the bow. It was slippery and wet. The rain was pouring in sheets. Drops ran into his eyes.

"Lay down," his father shouted. Bolly went flat and reached for the eyelet with both hands. His father had his pants in his hand but he slid toward the edge a few inches. He looked back, saw them on the other side, together. Strange fear swept through him.

His father was motioning Tom to throttle forward and was using hand signals. Tom was still crying, but he moved to the wheel. Even now, even as Tom cried and his father's face twisted with anger, they worked silently, automatically. Bolly suddenly wanted to crawl back. He was shivering and he wanted off the bow, but no, he thought, don't let them. His father motioned him out. Without hesitating he scooted out and grabbed the outgoing line in his left hand, his right still on the eyelet. He pulled on the line as hard as he could. It grew slack as his brother throttled the boat forward and Bolly let go of the eyelet and unlooped the line out of the eyelet and it was free and limp in his hands and he looked back at his father and his brother.

"I got it," he shouted.

His teeth were chattering as he pulled the slack in and
began wrapping it around his hands. He lifted the line to show them, but they didn’t see. His father had turned to Tom and they were again leaning together as his father shouted, "Throw her into neutral."

The boat shifted and Bolly fell flat and then was suddenly jerked to the edge of the bow. His father shouted something behind him that Bolly could not make out as he balanced there, his knees hooked on the edge, his hands snarled in the rope, which he held like a chalice over the lake. Poised there, he understood: it had gone into reverse. Then he flipped headfirst into the lake.

After the cold rain and the wind, the lake was warm as bath water. Bolly sunk through it for a moment before he realized he had lost the rope. He scrambled for the surface, but it wouldn’t come. He kicked his heavy sneakers as hard as he could and broke the surface but a wave smashed down. His father and Tom and the boat were gone. He couldn’t find where the air began and lake ended. He gasped for a breath, took in water, coughed, got a breath, called out "Mama!" Then he was under again, in the soothing water, and the terror dimmed gently. He wondered if they had heard him cry.

He was the smart one. There were things he didn’t know yet, but he had read about that too. There was pressure building in his chest and it was all swirling around him, the rude red faces of his brother and father, their hands
clasping too tight, his mother whispering in his ear to the throbbing, the water cooling, growing smoother. The pressure became urgent, and he felt the fish crowding around, snuggling tight, turning him in unison toward harbor.
Midway into the first morning, Peter Knowles could not find his deluxe set of screwdrivers, though he could easily visualize the plastic case. The black and yellow striped handles would ascend from the tiniest Phillips head, as delicate as a jewel, to the blunt flat head, good only for opening painted-shut windows. I used them last week, he told himself as he sat in a lawn chair at the kitchen table. And I said that I wanted all of the tools left here. I specifically said that the tools were mine and it was agreed that it would be part of the settlement. Knowles laced his fingers around a fresh cup of coffee even though the porcelain felt unpleasantly hot. He wondered whether the cup could shatter or, if like an egg, would never break as long as pressure were applied evenly from all sides.

Knowles had already looked in the cupboards beneath the sink and in the junk drawer, so he resumed the search inside the utility closet, where a wooden crate of extension cords and light fixtures and super glue had been stored. It was gone. He ransacked the garage, still cluttered with frag-
ments of packing paper and masking tape. He squirmed on his belly beneath each of the three, stripped beds. Under the children's beds, he found a blue metal toy car, scraps of colored paper and a doll plastic arm standing flat, its palm facing Knowles. Under his own, he spotted a brittle red package that once held a condom and one brown-handled brush so packed with dust and snarled hair that for one startling instant, Knowles thought it was a mummified mouse.

He examined the open drawers in the oak dresser, but, except for one pair of panties, they were empty. He fumbled through his own clothes and discovered an envelope laying atop his sweatshirts. The word "Peter" was written on it in her handwriting. He held the envelope with the tips of his fingers, as though it were a bomb, then tore it in half. Outside the room, Knowles kicked through the laundry piled on the floor. On the stairs, Knowles lifted his foot so that it launched a stack of paperback books and papers and utility bills into the air. The books skittered down the carpeted stairs and the papers fluttered out into space, but that was all.

He strode through the kitchen and entered the garage, slapping the switch as he passed. The garage door shuddered upward, and Knowles ducked under its rising edge to emerge into the blinding sunlight. Up the street, in front of a boxy aluminum-sided house, children were riding skateboards. The grating of wheels on pavement harmonized with the dis-
tant drone of a lawn mower. A child's cry rose from somewhere out of sight: "Give it back to me! No!"

Knowles crossed the grass between his house and the nearly identical clapboard next door. He unlatched a red-wood gate taller than his head and entered a garden of overgrown stone paths and rotting wood and glass hotbeds that looked like tiny, deserted greenhouses. Garden tools lay strewn about in the unkempt grass. An old woman, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat and men's coveralls, knelt in the grass, digging inside one of the hotbeds.

"Mrs. Fletcher?" Knowles said.

The woman's nose was long, and she blinked at him in an alert bird-like fashion. "Oh Peter," she said. "Hello."

"I was wondering if I could borrow some tools. Actually, I just need a screwdriver. I can't seem to find any of mine."

"He's in the shed."

Knowles smiled his thanks.

"Peter," she said. "Are you quite well?"

"Oh yeah. I'm fine."

"I don't believe you."

Knowles edged backward toward the building. "Believe me. It's nothing. I'm OK."

"Don't tell me that." The woman pointed the spade at Knowles. "You don't feel well at all. And if you do, then you ought to be ashamed, young man."
"Well."

"I'm going to make you something. Not cookies because the sugar has a depressing effect. It's the wrong weather for soup. I think a nice fresh tossed salad would do it, cucumbers, lettuce, spinach, all of it from my garden."

"That's all right, Mrs. Fletcher."

"It's my pleasure. Remember: if you want to feel better, you must eat food while it's still alive."

"Please don't, Mrs. Fletcher."

The woman dismissed Knowles with a wave of her spade. The sunflowers brushing his legs, Knowles walked down the white-stoned path to a miniature red barn covered with ivy, knocked once on the door and entered.

Facing Knowles was a ceiling-high pegboard bristling with glinting angles and points. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to resolve individual items. Hammers balanced on prongs next to a rack of variously contoured chisels. Coils of extension cords dangled overhead and rolls of different kinds of tape perched on hooks. A combination hand-axe and hammer hung by itself, but most of the tools were clearly arranged by category: racks of box-end wrenches or open-end wrenches, a long shelf holding three sizes of sockets, a large section devoted to screwdrivers.

Off to one side, an old man wearing safety goggles sat in a swivel desk chair at a work bench. He gripped a soldering gun and the innards of a blender lay before him.
When he saw Knowles, he gingerly set the soldering gun on the table and gently pushed the goggles onto his forehead. His eyes, sunk in his wrinkled and splotchy face, were clear and friendly.

"Hello Peter," he said.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you had a screwdriver."

"I do have one. What do you need it for?"

"I was just going to tinker with a few things. I mean that I guess I need more than one. I don't know, I guess one of each kind."

The old man slipped a pocketknife from his breast pocket and snapped open the blade. He began cleaning his fingernails.

"Well now," he said. "The first thing I've got to tell you is that there aren't just two kinds of screwdrivers. You might say that screwdrivers come in two broad categories, but everything else about them -- their size, stem length, handle, thickness, even flexibility -- can be different."

"Oh, sure."

"Some screwdrivers come sturdy enough to break the seal of the headgasket in my Chevy. There some are so puny that you wouldn't want to bear down too much while picking your teeth. The key, the essential concern in choosing the right tool, has always got to be the job at hand."
"I think I need a medium Phillips and a medium flat-bladed one."

"That might be best, that is, if you don't have anything special in mind."

"Yeah. I'm just kind of tinkering."

"Help yourself. The mediums are in the middle."

Knowles awkwardly slid two screwdrivers from the rack. The shiny handles reflected the yellow light bulb overhead. Knowles lingered before the pegboard.

"You've got a lot of stuff here," he said.

The old man, moving systematically from cuticle to cuticle, nodded without looking up.

"I have got something for just about anything that could come up." He motioned to a large case holding scores of tiny drawers.

"In there are fifty kinds of bolts, screws, and nuts. I have both flat and lock washers, in all combinations of exterior and interior diameters. They come in different hardnesses and alloys. Fasteners, you understand, have got to be tailored exactly to the work."

"It's impressive."

"Of course, I've got nails too," the old man added with a deprecatory shrug.

Knowles gazed at the racks and cases and alignment of tools. "It's kind of nice in here," he said finally.

"Soothing."
"Yes." Knowles eased himself down onto the motor of an old lawn mower jammed into the corner beneath the sockets.

"Everything is where it belongs here. By having the tools all spread out where you can see them, they can talk to you. When you need to do a job, you can sit here and see all of the ways of getting it done. Problems, in here, become a snap. You do A, you do B, you do C."

Knowles was struggling to keep from crying, his lips and cheeks shuddering with effort. An sob escaped explosively, like a hiccup, and he cupped the two screwdrivers before his mouth. The old man shut the pocketknife and pulled a square bottle with a green label from beneath the work bench. A metal cup balanced on the neck.

"This is straight bourbon," he said. "It hasn't been aged long enough to taste good. And the cup is filthy."

The old man poured whiskey into the cup and sipped it. He smacked his lips loudly, his face furrowed in concentration, and shook his head.

"This isn't for you," he said. He raised the cup, toasting Knowles, and drank it down.

"God," he said. "That's just awful."

While his breathing slowed, Knowles watched the old man pour himself another and toss it off. Suddenly, he had to get out. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands as he stood.

"I'll bring these back later today," he said.
"Take your time."

Knowles opened the door, letting sunlight flood the compact room. He hesitated before entering the brilliance ahead.
Early in the spring, just after Arch Wickman moved to his tree thinning camp, he received a letter begging him to come home. Arch could read enough of his sister's feathery script to know that she thought their father was dying. He didn't believe it, and he wouldn't go home even if he did. The new contract covered more than 250 acres above Hungry Horse Reservoir on a Montana mountainside that burned in the '30s and had grown up thick and tangled in stunted fir and pine. To finish within contract time, he would have to work 14-hour days for the next six months. So he read the letter over and over, and then drank for two days at the Elk Days Bar in Martin City. When he finally got back to camp, he tucked the letter inside the leather pouch hanging from the ridgepole of his wall tent. The next day, Arch cut trees until dark, and crawled into his sleeping bag only after his head reeled with falling trunks and the grating of his chain saw. But exhaustion failed Arch that night, and his sleep muttered with voices and machines.

In the morning, it took a long time to wake up, though
Arch dressed at first light. He pressed the frosted coffee pot against his cheek to chill the static from his brain. He fried bacon and boiled oatmeal and coffee on the Coleman, going slow so that he would not miss the smells. As the food cooked, he began working the stiffness from his left hand. It always froze up overnight, and he could never make a true fist until midday. In seasons past, Marianne would hold his fingers between her palms, massaging each one with smooth firm strokes while she gazed at him, her bright green eyes all worried and teary. But Marianne was gone, and now Arch found his stiff hand annoying as he would any other equipment failure: a thrown chain, a fouled spark plug.

As he piled his food on the plate, Arch remembered how his father delivered sermons on the virtue of preventive maintenance and the sin of ungreased fittings. "Don't trust these people to do it for you," he would tell Arch in the gravely voice as the boy sat on the semi-tractor's high bench seat, feet dangling above the greasy chains on the floor. "They forget to grease, they forget to oil. And there you are with nothing to drive but your cock."

The plate and cup in hand, Arch tottered on sore knees down the reservoir's steep slope. He shivered as he descended past stumps as bleached as bones, mud sucking his boots. The gray surface stretched smooth three miles across to the Swan Range, and the scrapping of spoon against plate
echoed like a gunshot. When he finished, Arch yanked the stick and twisted it into the mud at the new water line, two inches further uphill. It was something he and his father would have done together.

And then Arch heard the faint mutter of a engine. The sound hung in the air so faintly that he wasn't sure if he'd really heard it. He lunged up the slope to his camp, and heard it again, unmistakably the sound of a chain saw, now fading, now getting louder, coming from the direction of his largest thinning unit.

"Those bastards," he said out loud.

He knew the saw must belong to someone from the work co-op that he and a handful of others had founded years earlier. Arch had quit, but they wouldn't let him go, and believed that the contracts Arch had bid belonged to the co-op, and that Arch himself was theirs too, as though he were common property like the 10 acres the co-op owned up the North Fork of the Flathead River. Tommy Mellon, whom Arch had taught how to cut trees and rebuild short-blocks when you had no money for parts, and others, like the new president, Banyon, had stalked Arch from one Canyon bar to another, and finally caught up with him just before he had returned to camp.

Arch had been drinking R & R at the single uncovered table when they entered, gathering around him with the skin of their faces all stiff, as though they had all just been
slapped. Arch ignored them and gazed through the legs of upturned chairs that crossed like branches in the seeping light. Across the dance floor, the jukebox glowed red and green.

"Isn't it a little too early for this, Arch?" Banyon said.

"Early?" Arch said. "It's a little too late."

Banyon's mouth worked like he was chewing gum.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Mellon said.

"Just took the hangover cure, Tommy."

"In advance?"

"You got that right, buckwheat."

Arch's head was beginning to wheel, and he had to return to camp. He felt the back pocket of his jeans, where his sister's letter was folded, damp and creased.

After a moment, Banyon said: "Well...Uh, how does the book say it, guys? 'As long as there is enough work for one, then all of us will work.' Right guys?"

"Right on," said Mellon.

"Remember Arch?"

Arch glanced up, intending to leave but hesitating when his eyes met a woman's steely eyes glittering within wire-rimmed goggles. Her blond hair was tied back taut and her mouth pursed into a slit.

"If we don't stick together, then it'll be fifty cents to the sleazy contractors and forty cents to workman's comp
and only ten cents for ourselves."

"That's smart."

"They're your words Arch. You wrote them down when you and Kohler and Manning founded the co-op. It's on the first page of the book. It's always been your idea."

"You're the founder," the woman added harshly.

Arch eased back in the chair and regarded the faces surrounding him. "Sure," he said. He straightened.

"Listen," he said. He tried to frown, but it was hard to focus on their faces, as though he were left with only peripheral vision.

"Can't do it," he said. He shook his head. "Here's why: I need to do myself. I need to leave the trees all in straight rows. Got to do it alone. Or it's no good f'me."

Arch staggered out alone, and the sunlight was too bright, bleaching color from the boarded up storefronts lining Martin City's street, and he tripped on the boardwalk's loose planking. Coming too fast, a logging truck rumbled up with its jake brake shuddering like a colossal fart and lurched to a halt at US 2. Swirling dust obscured the tilted sign that read: "Broasted! Chicken! JOJOS! Maps! Tourists!" Arch tried to identify the trees and estimate where along the reservoir they had been cut, but the truck pulled out onto the highway. He crossed the gravel lot toward his pickup, where Mellon overtook him, first grabbing and then letting go of Arch's shoulder.
"I know you told Reed at the Forest Service that you were bidding for the co-op," Mellon said, his voice plaintive. "That means this work belongs to us too."

"No."

"What's happened to you?" Mellon's face was flushed, his lips working against each other. "You know that nobody has any work without this."

"It's my contract," Arch said. "You got to grow up sometime."

"But Banyon says..."

"Tell Banyon..." Arch hesitated, realizing that he didn't have time to talk about it, that to waste even one moment explaining might let it all collapse, and he couldn't allow it, not then, not when he had so much work ahead. He shook his head, and with his fingers, pushed Mellon back from the truck.

That had settled it, and Arch had continued working the contract alone. Yet, as Arch scrambled up the mountainside, he could hear more saws, a dozen of them, engines accelerating as they were gunned and thrust, raucous and harsh, into the finger-thick trunks of mangled trees, sounding as a group like the hacking of rotors, the screaming of flight. Arch bounded toward them, sliding through gravelly bald spots, leaping rotten trunks. He got closer, tripping once and tumbling to his feet, seeing the flash of a red case, a hard hat, a man's arm, the tentative shift of a tree's crown
before toppling. And then he was in the open, grabbing the shoulder of a man he'd never met, twisting him around, shoving him backward so that his hard hat fell off and eyes widened with alarm above a thinly whiskered face. Mellon, working ten yards away, set down his saw and approached.

"Now Arch," he began, his eyes pained.

Arch pushed past him to the next man, and the next, shoving and yelling, knocking one man down when he feinted with a shoulder, kicking a pack downhill, coming up on Banyon who was gazing up into the tangled crowns of a split larch and Doug fir. Arch jerked the chain saw from Banyon's hand even before Banyon had fully turned and pitched the idling saw, blade over handle, into the slash. Then, palm to shoulder, he knocked Banyon backward.

"Get off my work!" he yelled down into Banyon's shaved face. "Who the hell do you think you are? Get off of here or I'm going to kick your butt down the mountain!"

Banyon, who had been trying to interrupt, looked astonished, then threw back his head and laughed. The others joined in, some nervously but others with uninhibited hilarity.

"You're going to kick my butt?" Banyon said. "You're a real tough guy, Arch. Do I have until sundown or, uh, do I need to flee right now?"

Tittering ran through the group, and Arch glanced around, meeting their younger eyes.
"This is my work," Arch said, almost choking.

"No," Banyon answered, his voice firm, a stage voice, buttressed and echoed by the others saying: "That's right" and "No way" and "Oh come on."

"It's mine."

"Who says Arch?" Banyon's voice was getting softer, almost whispering. "You tricked everybody: the Forest Service, the co-op. I went and looked at the bid, Arch. You understand?"

"I bid the work, my name's on the contract."

"Your name, and the co-op's name," Banyon said. "Just like on 20 other contracts. If the co-op doesn't get this work, then everything turns to shit, and you know it. Besides, what the hell did you think you were doing, telling everybody this was yours? Without the co-op, they never would have awarded you all this work. Alone, you couldn't cut all this. It would have killed you. Don't you see that?"

Arch almost struck Banyon then, his guts clenched so that he could scarcely breathe. But in Banyon's face he saw something, and he glanced around at the others. Some were nodding and even Mellon was poised on the balls of his feet and others tensed and leaning forward, arms stiff and outstretched. One of them, a tall skinny kid with red and blue beads dangling from his left ear, even licked his lips as he quivered in his eagerness.
Arch could almost feel their hands pinning his arms, twisting him back, immobilizing him off his feet. And suddenly, he was so relieved that he almost sat down in the gravel.

"I don't care," he said. "Keep it."

He turned from their silence, adding once over his shoulder as he began moving downhill through the deadfalls of newly killed trees. "Just stay off the other unit, that's all I want."

"But Arch, wait!" Banyon yelled and Mellon called too: "Don't leave it like this, Arch. Come back!"

But Arch was concentrating on the chafing of his big toe. For him, boots, even custom-sewn Whites, never broke in properly, and clothes fit him poorly, pants always too long and sleeves never reaching his wrists. Like his father said, "They broke the mold on us, Arch boy," but it was no brag, too bitter, yet Marianne had always seen it as a challenge. "When I'm through," she'd say as he waited impatiently for her to pin up his cuffs, "either these pants will fit you or you'll fit these pants." And then she'd stand, biting her lip to keep from smiling, meeting his annoyance with her startling green eyes, gripping his jaw to pull his face down to hers as she added, "And I don't care what I have to snip off." But Marianne had been gone since winter to her little cabin in Coram, and that made things harder in ways Arch had not expected. He often wished he
weren't thick and gangly so that his clothes would fit.

Nearly seven years before, Arch and Manning had founded the co-op as a way to fight the black-suited men who peered over broad desks and shook their heads. Almost right away, they selected the co-op's 10 acres, on the North Fork Road just south of Polebridge, thinking the stand of mature lodgepole and the pasture with a spring-fed creek would support a new life. While the others finished winter jobs in Whitefish, for the down payment he and Manning had cut trees 25 days straight in a cold April on a dense, steep unit that paid only eight dollars a tank, less than $5 per hour after expenses. That spring Arch's father got laid off for the last time, and he came West to camp with them on Big Creek. Through the chilling spring drizzle, he kept the fire hot, and served them sausage and beans and fingerling trout in the 10 p.m. dusk as their soaked work clothes steamed.

"You boys are a helluva pair," he said finally. "You're working as hard as I've ever seen it."

Manning told him he was just an old man retired to the lawn chair life, but when he just nodded, his eyes fixed on the flames, Arch squatted alongside to poke the fire with a green stick.

"I've been worried about you for a long time," he said
to Arch. "But now you're working."

He spoke harshly, as though saying each word were like hacking off fingers. Manning backed from the fire, stretched, and walked into the dark.

"I can see how much you've grown up over the past two years," he continued. "You're now at the trough yourself."

Arch shifted a burning log. His face grew hot as he bent to the fire and blew on the coals.

"After your discharge, I just couldn't understand why you wouldn't work. I still don't, but I was brought up different, I guess."

"Drop it, Dad."

"I was wrong, maybe. I was too hard—I admit it. Goddammit, I can say it! I was too hard on you! I was. I've often told myself I should have let you stay at home as long as you wanted."

"Let's don't talk about this."

"But goddammit, you weren't a boy anymore. Twenty-three years old and you wanted your Momma and Daddy to buy your groceries and change your diapers. Jesus Christ. I did what I had to do, and now look at you."

"Shit."

"But I'll say one goddamned thing, your mother really gave me hell. That was the beginning. Things were never the same after that."

"That wasn't my fault," Arch said, struggling to sound
neutral and calm. "That was coming for a long time and you know it."

"I went to bat for you, my own son, and I lost my wife because of it."

A catch of self-pity in his father's voice shot Arch to his feet, his hands clenched, shaking with the urge to seize the old man.

"You liar," he said, and his voice was tremoring with self-control. "How can you blame me for that? That's not how it happened. It wasn't my fault."

His father looked up alarmed. "No, Arch," he said. "I didn't mean—-

"You drove her away. And now it's the same as if she were dead."

Arch walked a few paces off, anger twisting onto himself. Earlier in the day Arch had led him up the mountain and showed him the uncut forest of snarled branches above and the colonnade of erect trunks rising from the bushy slash below.

"The idea is you pick the best trees, the leave trees, every twelve feet or so, and you take your chain saw and mow down all brush and crooked little trees holding them back," Arch told him. "You take a jungle and you leave a garden, see? It's like a plantation. But not really because it's still going to take them 60 or 70 years to grow."

His father had nodded and spat, then grinned at Arch
and clasped his shoulder.

"We'll be long gone," Arch said, embarrassed and pleased. "Hell, the stuff you cut stays green for weeks anyway. It probably takes the trees 10 years before they realize they're free and all the crap holding them back is dead at their feet."

His father patted a larch trunk, and Arch had felt that something was shifting between them. Yet his father now squatted immobile, as though he had been filled with concrete. Arch wanted to touch the red plaid of his jacket, reach out and rest his hand against it.

"Your being here has made the difference, you know," he said instead. "It's been a lot of help."

His father's back did not move, and Arch finally walked off to his tent and fell asleep listening to Manning and his father murmur to the crackling of burning logs. Two days later, Arch came down and found his father had gone, leaving only a note on the back of a gas receipt: "time to hed home hope I haven't been too much trouble."

But it didn't matter so much, because of all the things built in the following years. First there was the original log cabin Arch and Manning and McGrath threw up Hudson Bay style, and though the upright lodgepole shrunk and they had to stuff the cracks with fiberglass insulation, they spent a warm winter skiing and added a makeshift balcony during breakup. And then there was the first solstice party with
100 people from the Canyon and Whitefish and five of them chased a bull moose on foot until it bounded into the North Fork hardly breaking stride in the shimmer of standing waves. And there was always more work and they began running three crews and the co-op had fifty people and $250,000 worth of contracts, and there was talk of forming a village with gardens and greenhouses and a store, and in the midst there were moments when people would stop Arch and Manning on the street to listen, and Arch was quoted once in the Pilot, and the forest supervisor himself came to inspect their work and grinned and shared a beer on the bed of green regulation truck. All during that time, Arch pursued Mari-anne in Whitefish, slowly nursing Olys during her shift at the Great Northern, waking her with the thunk of a maul spitting larch rounds outside her lakeside cabin. And finally, one night after her shift, they talked half the night in the Downtowner Inn and drove out the North Fork Road before color spilled over Mt. Chapman of Glacier National Park and as he described his plans she stared with her lips parted and eyes green enough to startle and always seem verging on tears and she threw her arms around him cutting him off and he had massaged her tiny shoulder blades through his borrowed sweater and they held each other without speaking until the wind came up and Manning stumbled out of the cabin wearing only unlaced Sorels and he was already pissing on the big thick lodgepole and scratching himself
when he saw them and said sweet creeping jesus have you been waiting out here all night for the bed?

Within three years, the lodgepole began dying from the pine beetle disease and the cabin burned. Before they could rebuild, Kohler had been trapped in a West Bowl avalanche and most of the others might as well have died too: Manning, who never believed warnings, got five years in Deer-lodge for sale and later they heard he'd been released after serving two. Williams joined the ski patrol at Big Sky and McGrath drove off somewhere in his school bus without Jenny, who moved to Missoula. In their places, others came, some of them barely out of high school, many living communally on the land in treated canvas tipis illuminated by decorative Aladdin lamps, forming what Marianne called the "kiddie co-op." Arch gradually felt the land wasn't his anymore, and he found himself staying in town, hungover and worn out.

He held on to Marianne as long as he could, but even she finally slipped away after a lonely Christmas at the summer cabin they had rented on Whitefish Lake. Her sisters and her mother had called repeatedly, but Arch refused the drive to Seattle. As he studied his coffee mug's stained rim and listened to the cast iron stove draw, Marianne turned down each invitation in a voice more tired than sad.

"No one calls me because I was the one who stood up to him," he told her later. "They all blame me for the family breaking up just because I was the one that took all
the shit. Even for my mother, who probably deserved every-
thing he dished out."

"Fine," she said. "Great."

She was clanging pots in the kitchen and slamming
cupboards and snapping folded newspapers into the kindling.
Then there was silence and Arch finally looked up from his
book and saw that she was staring at him, her arms folded,
her eyes harsh.

"You've never told me just what happened," she said.
"I always hear about what a tough little bastard you were
and what a hell of a hard time you had but I never hear just
exactly what happened. You know what I think? I think your
childhood was just like everybody else's. The only differ-
ence is you."

"You want to tell you the whole story? Is that it?"
"Yeah. Tell me."

They sat at the kitchen table and while she gazed at
the wall, he told her about careless accidents and finding
his father drinking in crossroad bars and once knocking on a
motel door where his truck was parked and how he'd once
almost lost his little brother and how his father once shut
down his mother's shrill voice by sweeping half the Sunday
spread to the floor. While they watched frozen in place,
their mother squatted and, every so slowly, picked up each
bit of glass and beef and carrot and potato with an index
finger and thumb and dropped them precisely into the hollow
of her outstretched apron.

"All right all right," Marianne said. "You’ve made your point. As usual, you really have got the great, perfect excuse."

They sat in silence. The cloudy plastic tacked over the lake-facing windows inflated with a snap. Her face was pinched, her hands cupped in her lap as though she were holding something fragile and sheer, and it seemed to Arch that the last whole piece of his life was crumbling around him.

"What I told you isn’t... I don’t know. It makes it sound worse than it was."

"What do you mean?"

"It’s all true, in a way, but not all of it happened like that. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like there might be other ways to say it that are just as true."

"So you’re telling me none of it happened, that it’s all crap, that you’re a liar."

"That’s not what I’m saying."

"Why can’t you just admit it? Why do you have to twist everything?"

"It’s not that simple. You live, and then later you have to decide what happened and how it happened, and once you decide, you’ve got to stick to it."

She frowned, her mouth twisted in disgust, and slowly shook her head. "Bull. Shit," she said softly.
"Damn it. What's the point in even talking to you?"
"You're a liar, Arch. You're lying to yourself."
"I'm not!" he yelled, rising, raising his hands. She flinched, and Arch sickened as he realized the fear in her eyes. He pulled back, but his mouth tasted metallic as her face turned away.

"Maybe I don't really know how it was," he said finally. "But no one else does either and my version has worked so far and I can't change it now. It hasn't been so bad, has it?"

"No," she said, her voice remote. "You're not so bad."

But within weeks she was gone and later, in the spring, after she had moved to Coram and his family began trying to contact him, she wouldn't even open the door of her cabin for Arch but left the letters and even once a telegram on the stump by her porch.

"You're scary, Arch, you know that?" was what she finally told him, and that only after reluctantly rolling down the window of her Beetle as it sputtered on the highway shoulder. "Your own father is dying, and you won't even write a postcard. Even if I could, I would never want want to trust you."

When Marianne came, Arch was cutting deep in a ravine crisscrossed by a soggy deadfall, his hobnails biting the
needled earth, cockeyed trunks tangled around him like the fragments of dreams. He didn't see her at first but squeezed the trigger and pushed on the trunk while the saw spit yellow dust on his legs. With a lurch, the crooked lodgepole went down and, as he turned to the next, he caught sight of her standing above him on the slope. He snapped off the saw.

"Marianne."

She nodded down at him, a queer preoccupied expression in her eyes, and thrust her hands into the pockets of Arch's Army jacket. It hung on her as loose as a poncho, sloping off her shoulders to hit her at the knees. He had left it in his tent.

"I heard you got your ass kicked," she said.

"Is that right?"

"Oh yeah. They kicked you off the unit, gave you something to think about. In the canyon, Banyon's been talking of your pending reform into a cooperative kind of guy."

"Banyon's a . . ." He shrugged.

"Yeah," she said. "That's right."

The muffler scorched Arch's knuckles. He hefted the saw and flicked his thumb along the cutters in the chain. They would go another tank before sharpening, but it was almost noon already, the day half gone.

"I need to keep working," he said. A sour cast came to
her mouth. She folded her arms.

"I suppose you came out here for something. Or is this just---"

"Yeah," she said, almost spitting the word, her eyes now trained on him, sharp pinpoints of light. "I came out here for something all right. This morning, your sister called me."

His insides went as flat as the surface of a freezing lake. He began clicking the trigger on and off with his finger.

"Last week, your father was released from the hospital, or that nursing home, or whatever it was... No, that's not right. He wasn't released, he left, just walked out even though they thought he'd pop off any second. They had the machines right down the hall and working together they could maybe keep him around, you know what I mean, Arch? But hell, he didn't want their help, and he moved back to that motel that you said was a dive even when you still lived there."

"What happened?"

"Well, a lot of stuff happened, Arch. For starters, your sister says she visited him two or three times, trying to get him to go back. Your mother even called him up... Yeah, that's right. It must have been the first time they talked in years. Of course, he won't listen to her either. All he wants, he says, is to be left alone. This is really
breaking your sister up, Arch, because she thinks he's going to start drinking and that'll end it. But he doesn't give a shit. Oh yeah, your sister said he did say that he wouldn't mind seeing you again."

"Jesus Marianne. What happened?"

"What do you think happened?"

He stared, unbelieving, at her mocking eyebrows. She had placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head, waiting.

"He started drinking," she said at last, matter-of-fact, shrugging. "Sure. Of course he did. But the thing is, his heart couldn't handle that, and just last night, when he was down at some bar he'd been going to, it got him."

"He died."

She remained silent while Arch eased the saw down on a stump, braced the blade in a crook, and lowered himself onto the ground, where he sat with his head bowed and hands open.

"No no," she said. "That's not what happened."

"What?" he cried. "He didn't die?"

"Arch, I'm trying to tell you. He was just drinking at this bar and then he starts staggering around, knocking things over. His buddies didn't know what was wrong, but they couldn't hold him because he was clawing the air like he was on fire or something, throwing them off, turning all blue and red, holding his shoulder---"
"Jesus Marianne! Just say it!"

"Oh sure. He threw those guys off and he ran. A guy with his heart blowing out on him, and he runs right out the door into the parking lot. His buddies just kind of look at each other for a second. I mean, what the hell? Right? And then they all pour out into the parking lot in time to see him tear out of there in his pickup truck, the gravel slinging all over the place. A real lone ranger. You bet."

"Knock off the game!"

"But this is best part. About 45 minutes later they found him on the freeway, parked in the median strip. And the weird thing is, he had passed the exit to the hospital. Your sister couldn't figure what the hell he was doing, but then it dawned on her. Your mother lives near there. Two more miles and he would have made it to her exit."

Arch sat scarcely breathing, the sheen of sweat almost searing his face in the cold air. After a moment, he tried to speak, having to clear his throat, and Marianne waited.

"I wanted him to come here," he said dully. "I thought if he was going to die, I actually thought he'd..."

His voice trailed off. Marianne stared at him, frowning, her cheeks indented with strain. She leaned closer and gripped him with both hands, and he could feel her fingernails dig into his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It doesn't matter. He never would have come and if he
had, I probably wouldn’t have let him stay."

"That’s not why." She gazed right into his eyes, so close that for a moment Arch thought she might press her mouth against his.

"It’s bullshit, Arch," she said finally. "It isn’t true."

"What?"

"It didn’t happen like that. I made it up."

Marianne was studying him, her lips parted, expectation widening her eyes. "I guess," she began, her voice soft and hesitant, "that there are other ways to say it that are---"

Arch was on his feet, clenching the coat and shaking her and yelling right into her face: "He’s alive? He’s alive?"

She twisted from his hands, suddenly furious, out of breath.

"Let go of me, you bastard."

"It’s... It’s all a lie?"

"Most of it’s true. Almost everything."

"Is he alive?"

She had been backing away from him, edging toward the slope. "Don’t count on it, Arch," she snapped, her eyes flashing green, and then she ducked into the brush and was gone.

"Wait!" he cried. "I have to know!"

There was no answer. After a moment, Arch started
walking, and when he felt he would burst from the urgency of terror, he broke into a run, and soon he was scrambling and bounding down slope through the waist-deep slash of dying trees.
PHOTOSYNTHESIS

The day Anna saw a moose just outside her kitchen window, she announced that she would not go outside the four-plex until breakup in the spring. Though Raven tried to reason with her, she was adamant.

"You can do the shopping because you always complain about the bill anyway," she told him. "You can do the driving because I can't drive these icy roads. Moving to Anchorage is an event in your life, not mine."

Before he could protest, she disappeared through the bedroom doorway, which cast enough light to illuminate the entire living room. The lamps were missing from the rack of brittle, browning plants, sitting in bony shadow along the wall behind the couch.

Raven shut the apartment door and hung his coat on the knobs screwed into the wall. He unlaced his shoes and set them, side by side, on the towel beneath his jacket. He slipped a beer from the refrigerator and decided he'd cook hamburgers for dinner again. In the freezer were two 16-ounce bags of Tater Tots and a stack of hamburger patties,
each one neatly wrapped in plastic.

He entered the bedroom and found Anna sitting cross-legged on pillows. She gripped a thick paperback novel folded back on itself and was adjusting the shade of a floor lamp above her head. Surrounding her were other lamps, only two of them dark.

"I couldn't get them all on," she said. "There aren't enough outlets in here. We need a lot more extension cords."

Raven saw spots of orange as he squatted next to her. He was careful not to knock over any lamps as he drank.

"I know you think I'm crazy," she added. "But I just need it to be brighter."

"It's all right," he said. "But, it's just, kind of weird, Anna. You see a moose, then---"

"Raven! They're out there wandering around in the dark, looking in windows."

"OK. It's OK."

"Yeah. Sure."

"It's our place and they're our lamps. You can do whatever you want."

"They're not really all ours. I borrowed those two from Malcomb."

"Oh. That's fine."

"You're jealous again. I can tell you're mad---"

"---No I'm not---"
"You always grit your teeth when your mad," she said, "and you've started grinding your teeth at night."

"What?"

"I can hear them. It sounds like this---" She clopped her teeth together.

"That doesn't have anything to do with this."

"It scares the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. It sounds like something sneaking around outside the window."

"You're just trying to divert this from the real issue."

"And what, according to you, is the issue?"

"I think you're bored. You sit here all day with nothing to do except think up things that bother you. You need to go down to Northern Flora Nursery."

"I tried."

"Keep trying. And you ought to get rid of those dead plants and buy some new ones."

"You ought to stop telling me what I ought to do."

"You're just bored, Anna."

"What do you think I do here all day? I clean your dishes. I clean your toilet. I clean your whiskers from the sink."

"Well you sure haven't cleaned anything today. And besides, I'm the one who cleans the toilet. Remember? That was the agreement, that no matter how busy I got, I would
clean the toilet."

"So what? Why shouldn't you?"

"Well I'm doing it, aren't I?"

"You act as if it's a big deal. Do you actually think it's some kind of revolutionary feminist act for a man to clean up after himself? I suppose you think it changes my whole life?"

"I don't know. That's not what I mean."

Anna stared at the bright pages of her book. It had become so important that Raven be happy, really happy, that she was always jittery at the clicking of his key in the lock. When they had begun dating, years before, it had been his appearance she first loved: his broad jaw, his full lips, the way his fingers cradled a camera. He had been given to dramatic gestures with his arms, but his fingers struck her as finer things, delicate and expressive. Yet those same fingers now reminded her of tendrils, and his face seemed alien, like a mask carved into a tree. She thought she still loved him, in fact she knew she loved him more than ever. She loved him so much that she could no longer bear to say _I love you_, but his energy and even the tone of his voice seemed stolen, as though it all depended parasitically on her.

"Get out," she said. "Just leave me alone."
Raven discovered that his leg had gone to sleep. He stood up, and the blood returning to the limb prickled. As he experimentally shifted more weight to it, he rested his hand on her head, sifting her hair with his fingers. The fineness of her hair had always surprised him. He thought it ought to be more like her voice: thick and wiry, sinuous.

"I'll take Malcomb's lamps back, OK?" he said, inflecting the question as though he were speaking to a child. When she didn't answer, he took the two lamps from the room.

Across the hall, Malcomb's door swung open when Raven knocked, and he carried the lamps into the dark apartment. Malcomb sat on the single couch, his shirt buttoned high, a stack of dishes resting beside his leg. Before him flickered a 25-inch color television in a massive walnut cabinet that had hinged shutters. The image of zebras bounded across the blue-green screen while a voice heavy with an English accent said: "The savana boasts bountiful life."

"I thought we had enough lamps, so I brought these back," Raven said.

"Does Anna feel better?" Malcomb said.

"Oh, she's fine."

"Sometimes the darkness can make you see things strangely," Malcomb said. "Sometimes a person will get violent, or maybe they set fire to their trash and shove it
in the cupboard and then sit at the table, have a cup of coffee, and wait to see if it goes out or burns down the house."

"Well," said Raven. "Yeah."

"Of course, Anna, she's not like that. I don't think."

The two men nodded. Malcomb peered at Raven with a studious expression. He had come to dinner twice, sitting in his pin-striped shirt buttoned so tight that his larynx pressed against it, resting one hand in his lap while forking deftly with the other. He had thin red hair, combed wet to the side, and high cheekbones scarred from adolescent acne. His age was impossible to guess. On Anna he would fix his solemn eyes and speak with a soft Ohio Valley twang, his voice at once boyish and very old. He told them he'd been a crane operator for river barges at Ironton before coming north during the construction of the Alaska Pipeline. When the economic boom slowed, he'd taken a degree in Petroleum Technology from the community college and been hired to monitor consoles controlling the pumping of North Slope oil.

"Say," Malcomb said at last. "Want to see something?"

From the pocket of his shirt Malcomb pulled a vinyl bank book and flipped it open, thrusting it up as though it were a police badge. Raven saw that the balance was "$81,756.43."

"Not bad, huh?" Malcomb said.

"It's sure getting up there," Raven said after a pause.
Back in his own apartment, Raven found Anna curled up asleep, the lights burning white on her skin. He kneeled beside her and combed the hair from her face with his fingers. She stirred and frowned. Raven climbed over her, slipping his knee between her legs, leaning down as he supported himself on his elbows, pulling gently on her cheek to turn her face up. When their lips met, she twisted away.

"Don’t," she muttered.

Raven sat back. Anna again breathed evenly and deep. She hadn’t even woken up.

"It’s not fair," he wanted to tell her. "It’s not my fault."

But he just sat there, noticing the play of light on her hair and face. The overhead light dominated the other lamps, which filled in what would have been a sharp shadow on her cheek. She’d be 31 in the spring, and the skin beneath her eyes had roughened with age. He’d forgotten that she was older than him, though it just more than a year, hardly any time at all. It must have been half their marriage since he’d taken her portrait, though in the beginning, he had done almost nothing else.

They had met when they were both students at the University of Michigan, a time when Raven still scrutinized everything he loved through a Nikon lens. It was late
summer, and Raven had driven to the eastern shore of Lake Michigan to climb the Sleeping Bear Dunes. With his cameras, Raven had scrambled up the 400 feet of sand from the shore and she, standing with her friends at the top, was gazing out over the lake crawling with white caps and an occasional sailboat. Raven came over the lip churning the sand, then sprawled out, panting, his camera bag flung out to her feet.

"Well!" she exclaimed over him, giggling, looking down. He rolled over. The wind was stirring her blond hair and her lips pursed, and with the bright blue above her and the sheer amount of light washing out the green of the trees behind, for an instant all that Raven could see was her face.

"You," he said, still panting as he reached for his camera bag, "You..."

"Yes?" she said, smirking at her friends. "What? This should be good."

But he couldn't think of what to say, so he took pictures of her and her friends instead, and haltingly talked her into coming with him. They bounded down the sand, arriving on shore flushed, out of breath. Raven took her hand, avoiding her eyes as he reached out, and she, bemused, her head cocked, let him take it. The surf broke around their feet and they did not speak until they came upon a stretch of beach crawling with millions of lady bugs.
Laughing, Anna scooped up a handful of the red and black bodies, and Raven tried to take her picture, but the bugs landed on the lens. The sand underfoot shifted with bugs and a breeze flung bugs onto them until their hair and shirts and arms were spotted. And then a wave surged up on the beach, the crest boiling white as it washed over their feet, sweeping dozens of bugs into the water where they paddled madly and tried to fly.

"Oh!" she said. "We've got to save them. They'll drown."

And Raven began taking pictures of her, the motor drive of his camera whirring as she scooped bugs out of the water and flipped them above the wave line.

"You've got to help me!" she cried, and he put down the camera and together they splashed dozens of lady bugs onto the hot sand, shouting and laughing until they sat down in the water to catch their breaths, the waves rising above their cutoffs and sucking at their bare legs, bugs foundering around them, bugs clinging to their shirts and hair, bugs clapping their red wings to gain flight from the surface but not rising off.

"It's no use," she said. "There's too many."

Raven reached out and brushed lady bugs from her face and hair, and she did the same, picking them off his eyelids, the act of grooming each other bringing them closer until he could see faint freckles on her tan nose and then
they were kissing, each cupping the other's cheek, their mouths meeting so softly that their tongues touched without pressing and the only movement was the play of fingertips. Only after a long moment did Raven become aware of sunlight beating down on his closed eyelids.

Beginning there, they had finished college together, broken up and restarted, married, almost purchased a house, and once, for two months, believed Anna was pregnant. She had worked at Lansing-area plant nurseries and he at photo labs, and their life had fallen into a rhythm of workdays and weekends that finally deadened Raven with its monotony. Toward the end, his mind had been wandering and he'd lose track and later come to himself without truly remembering the slippery feel of the developer or the metallic click of the enlarger light snapping off. And one day he realized that he had been printing photographs without experiencing it, simply acting by rote in a reddish fog of safelights. Panic saturated him like a stark blast of sun, and he had to sit down on the bench by the wash tank.

As a photographer, Raven understood the rapidity of time, and how an image can settle onto the white photo paper, its outline darkening into detail, hues adding depth, everything falling into sharp resolution until there are eyelashes, cheekbones, whorls of skin in leathery grain. But if not slipped into the stop bath, that same image will blacken, all detail burnt away and gone.
"I'm almost 29 years old and I've never done anything," he told Anna that night after work. "I was born here and I work here and sometimes I take good pictures, but never great pictures. In all this time, I've never even had a show. I'm starting to think that this is it."

Anna sat with her back to him.

"Well you aren't exactly everything I thought you'd be either," she said.

"It's not you," he said. "It's just that everyday I print all of these blurry, underexposed or washed-out pictures, all of them just stupid snapshots: a kid unwrapping a present, a woman your age holding a baby in front of a old pickup, two guys standing together in sweat pants and T-shirts, one of them holding a basketball. As bad as they are, every one of them is better than anything of mine. And when I try to think of taking pictures like those, I just can't. Nothing happens to us."

"You get what you give," Anna retorted, and they left off.

But a few nights later, he shook her awake. Looking into her guarded eyes, Raven told her that he had been printing a roll of someone's vacation snapshots of the Columbia Glacier and Valdez, and it suddenly came clear. They would move to Alaska, where people off the street, doing anything at all, made their fortunes on a daily basis. It was epic, pure drama, and for a trained photographer like
himself, even a picture of someone sitting at a traffic light would be pregnant with artistic significance. And besides, he could earn thousands of dollars shooting and selling pictures of polar bears, whales, grizzlies, seals, musk ox, wolves, moose.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about doing something, just once. It almost doesn't matter what. I've got to or I'm a dead man."

"It's like moving to the moon," she said, faltering. "My god, it's so far away. We don't know anybody there, and besides, what am I supposed to do in a place like that?"

"You don't understand. We could build a log cabin in the wilderness and still commute to work. Fry cooks make thirty grand a year. It'd be like becoming a pioneer. There are 10 pages of jobs in the Anchorage newspapers. I'm sure there'd be a lot of nurseries."

"In Alaska?"

"Of course."

"It might be interesting," she conceded, unsure. "For a while."

"You'd never be sorry."

"And if we did it, my turn would come later. Right? Sometime we'd move someplace for me."

"Absolutely," he said. But he knew he would have said anything, and when they hugged, there was a difference, a stiff reluctance, in the way he held his arms.
After they got to Anchorage, it took three months for Raven to find a job, and then it was as a darkroom technician, the same thing he’d been doing all along. As he gazed at Anna’s sleeping face on the pillows of their bedroom, it suddenly occurred to him that he was still spending his days with other people’s dreams, just as though they had never left Michigan. No where in the apartment or in his files did he have a decent photograph of Anna. He couldn’t remember why, but Raven had never even printed the negatives of the day they met. He must have considered them throwaways, mere snapshots. And now, as he studied her on the pillows, he could not remember what had happened to those negatives.

Careful so that he didn’t wake her, Raven took his tripod from the closet, screwed the camera into the base and fixed a 85 mm lens in place. He shifted some of the smaller lamps, accentuating the texture of Anna’s skin, and framed a shot tight on her sleeping face.

Moose filled Anna’s dreams. A herd of them grazed on the white hardpan surrounding the building, scrapping at snow as stiff as concrete. For a while, she rode them, galloping through frigid air that seared like fire. And then the moose were gone and she was inside, staring at her reflection in the dark kitchen window. Her image was colorless, a muddy gray, and she suddenly realized that her blond
hair had been browning for months. She flattened the white skin beneath her eyes with fingertips, but found no trace of the outline once drawn by sunglasses. The pigments were abandoning her to translucency, and she could almost make out the flow of blood within.

A ripple inside her reflection caused her to snap off the overhead light. Just outside the window, two spindly legs rose from the frozen dirt ridged with tread marks. The moose’s snout lowered into view, lips flexing as it nuzzled a pot of taffeta marigolds. The equine head was misshapen and bulged at the nose. It was close enough for Anna to notice a magenta gash torn into the skin above the nostrils.

The head rose from sight and the moose passed from view and Anna ran for the bedroom window, where, through the darkness, she could just see moose across the yard. It tore at the tips of a small bushy tree, chewing ponderously and bobbing its head. Then it spotted her at the window and began trotting toward her, its eyes human and brown. Suddenly afraid, she cried out and woke up.

It was still dark, early in the morning. She reached for Raven, and not finding him, called out his name. She crawled from the covers, cross with herself for not changing her clothes when Raven carried her to bed and angry that Raven had left again for work without waking her. With a start, she saw the tripod and camera, crouching amid the dark lamps like some cyclopic animal preparing to spring.
At first, she couldn't make sense of it, thinking that Raven had been cleaning it or that he had forgotten to take it with him. Then she understood.

"Raven," she said. "Oh my god."

Anna knew the intensity Raven could bring to bear for portraits, and she imagined his eyes grazing her focused face with a touch as indistinct as breath. She tried to visualize what he had seen through the lens, but all that came to her was the image of her face in the window over the sink, and she felt that Raven had dirtied something luminous and pure. The musty smell of loam rose around her, and the hulking shape of the dresser and the pile of laundry made Anna feel she was trapped far underground.

They had lived in the apartment ever since the ground froze and Raven found a position at a photo lab. It was at the head of a paved cul-de-sac with new curbs broken at intervals by ramps for future driveways, a developing area where back-hoes dug out the swamps for the balconied four- and six-plexes, the low-slung concrete buildings of business parks and Qwik-Stops with automated pumps for gas. From the beginning, the pastels of the carpet and walls struck Anna as unnatural, and a yearning grew in her for green things and light. She desperately applied at both of the Anchorage commercial greenhouses, but there were no openings. So she bought a metal rack and lights and a good selection of plants: African violets for the dark corners, coleus
splashed with the colors of wounds. She tended them with vigor, cutting and repotting, her face intent while adding lime for acidity or mixing in charcoal to retard fungus. In Lansing, where she had worked in a nursery for six years, her boss had called her touch "Manna from Anna," and though it was a joke, she had come to believe that under her attention any common house plant would thrive---roots bushed out, leaves expanded, stems thickened.

But as she tried to rear plants beneath ground level four thousand miles away, she realized that something had gone wrong. No matter how she worked the soil and shifted the plants, they eventually sickened, leaves mottling into a mosaic of splotches. She suspected virus, but she also told herself it might be some disease from the grocery store, or the mildewed air in the apartment, or red spiders, nematodes, bad vibes. The sunlight grew even more feeble, and Anna took to sleeping during the short day, dreaming fitfully of Lake Michigan's great dunes and the dense beach underbrush. At night, when Raven chattered about his new job, Anna sat with her eyes fixed on his forehead, listening to death creaking through the stomata of leaves. One by one, the plants died, and though she told Raven the Latin name of a disease, she believed the infection had spread from within her, as though she had been invaded by the same fungus that crumbles trees into punk.

Remembering, Anna began to cry. Those plants still
filled the apartment, their stems rising without foliage, off-white, like old bones. Still crying, she turned on one light after another. In the living room, she halted by the shelves and fingered the dead stems, and the hunger in her for plants panged stronger than ever. She hadn’t thrown any away, and their sight unexpectedly enraged her, choking off her tears. She began snapping the stems off, gathering them in her fists as though she were pulling weeds in a garden. Several small pots tumbled to the floor, but she didn’t stop. She jerked on the large philodendron, but the whole pot lifted from the floor. She shook it until the plant slipped free, its roots still vibrant and springy, and she tried snapping the stem across her knee. Dirt splattered the carpet as she twisted the stem in her hands, but it would not break, so she heaved it at the lemon-yellow wall, where it left a ragged print of black dirt.

At the lab, Raven had already decided the pictures were no good. Despite careful exposures, some portion of Anna’s face -- the very tip of her ear, a stray hair on the pillow -- always remained faintly blurred. He also found, with growing resignation, that the reflection of the plant lamp had burned the negative and would leave a dot of absolute white on her cheek. Though Raven could have dodged the hot
spot with his fingers, resisting the light to create detail, it would have been a lie, not Anna's skin at all but a trick of chemistry and technique.

That day Raven avoided the sun entirely and even ate his lunch to the suck of drains. On the drive home, he scarcely noticed the two feet of brown slush jamming streets, and his own pickup bounced when he hit the berm of snow blocking his road. A moose stood stupidly in the middle of the street, snow clinging to its back. Raven braked savagely, and the empty bed swung forward until the truck was sliding sideways, but the moose lurched into the safety of the trees. Before going inside, Raven listened to the engine ticking as it cooled and watched snowflakes whip against the four-plex's clapboard siding.

When he opened his door, Raven found the four other tenants in his living room, all sitting in stark light usually found only within lamp shades. He halted, confused, right in the doorway, and everyone stared up at him with their mouths open, as though they wanted to speak but could not.

On the couch sat a younger couple, Jim and Jan Peckum, legs crossed toward each other, alike with short noses and tight eyes. The couple rarely left their upstairs apartment, and once Raven had even knocked on their door for ten minutes, leaving immediately when he saw the flicker of a shadow inside the peephole. Clarence Boswell, who lived
across the landing from the Peckums, filled the single easy chair, his face flushed under the John Deere cap. Boswell, a long haul trucker who drove spare parts and steel from the Port of Anchorage to Prudhoe Bay, spent his days off playing Conway Twitty on a reedy tape player and drinking Ancient Age. Swaying on the balcony off his kitchen, Boswell liked shooting his rifle at the little birch trees, one round at a time, until they toppled onto the tread marks in the yard. Malcomb sat beside Boswell in the straight-back antique chair, his back not touching the wood, a little plate balanced in his hand. And then Anna strode into the room in an ankle-length skirt. Her hair was pulled back on one side, where she had pinned the taffeta marigold. On her nose rested a pair of red, wing-tip sunglasses sparkling with rhinestones, and she carried a china tray crowded with Tater Tots and meatballs, all punched with colored toothpicks.

"Oh, you're here!" she cried when she saw Raven.

Anna set the tray on the coffee table and pushed the sunglasses up into her hair and came to Raven, her eyes at once reckless and preoccupied. She kissed him on the cheek and took his arm, squeezing it too hard.

"I thought we'd have a little get-together," she said grimly, leading him to a kitchen stool by the couch. Without taking off his coat, Raven perched on it, able to see the bald spot just off center on the back of Malcomb's head.
"Uh, Anna," he began. But she was already whirling from him, patting Malcomb and Boswell on the shoulders with hands that fluttered like falling leaves.

"Would you like a beer?" she asked them. "Oh I know you will. Raven always has one. And what can I get you two?"

"Can I help?" asked Jan Peckum.

"No, no."

"Beer's fine," said Jim Peckum.

"Me too."

While Anna was in the kitchen, Raven exchanged glances with the others, smiles flashing onto the Peckums' faces, Boswell's eyes narrowing to fleshy slits as he grinned, Malcomb's lips tightening briefly.

"This is so nice," said Jan Peckum.

"Isn't it?" Anna called from the kitchen.

"So," said Boswell, the chair creaking beneath him as he shifted to Malcomb. "How long you worked on the Slope anyhow?"

"Bout four years," said Malcomb. He was craning his neck at the kitchen. His eyes, Raven noticed, chased Anna as she strode into the room, a five-can sixpack of Schlitz swinging from her fingers.

"Been hauling since the pipeline days, myself," said Boswell. He winked at Raven, the non-winking lid flexing in unison.
Anna was passing out the cans then, almost cooing at each person. As she handed Raven his beer, she lifted the sunglasses and rapidly arched her eyebrows up and down, then spun away to Malcomb, saying "and heeeer's yours" in a musical voice before Raven could react. Raven's and Boswell's cans fizzed explosively, and when Raven turned away to avoid showering the top of Malcomb's head, some of the foam sprayed Jan's lap. The woman was already saying "it's all right, this is dirty anyway" as Raven leapt to his feet.

"Don't worry about it," said Jim Peckum. "It's no problem."

"Jesus," said Raven. "I'm sorry."

And then Anna was there, almost yelling "For godsake's Raven, sit down. What were you going to do to her, anyway?" She turned to the group, who could not see past the sunglasses, and shrugged. "No use crying over spilt beer or semen."

Raven sat down. He studied the tab on the top of his Schlitz while Jan Peckum tittered and Boswell laughed in a deep voice. Anna glanced back at him then, the hint of a smile playing at her mouth, but he could only give her a pleading look. Behind her, Malcomb's larynx was jerking up and down within his collar as he gulped down his beer.

"That damn moose," Jan Peckum said. "He just scares me to death. When I went out to the truck yesterday, there he was, standing right by it, like he was going to bite it or
"He was peeping at me through the kitchen window," added Anna, sounding delighted.

"Honey," said Boswell, "that ain't a he moose, it's a cow moose. It used to have a calf, but, if I remember right, it got hit by a bread truck last month out on Lake Otis."

"Oh that's so sad!" said Jan Peckum. "The poor thing."

"Stove in the radiator. Totalled it."

"What kind of bread?" called Anna from the kitchen.

"This is a town now," Boswell continued. "Moose don't belong in a town. I probably would shoot the damn thing, but can't ever seem to get a clear shot." He winked again at Raven.

"Can you do that?" asked Jim Peckum. "Isn't it against the law or something? Can you shoot them to protect yourself?"

"Well, let me put it this way. If I kill that moose, and state fish and game comes snooping around, and I want to plead self-defense, I had better have moose prints all over me."

"I'd like to take its picture," said Raven, surprising himself. He had not thought before of photographing the moose.

"That's right," said Boswell. "Malcomb told me you were a photographer."
Raven glanced at Malcomb, who had been staring at him. From the kitchen, Anna called, "He’s a great portraitist."

"That’s really neat," said Jan Peckum.

"I don’t do it anymore," Raven said to Jan. Then, looking at Anna, he added, "I haven’t really done it since we left the lower 48."

Anna, pulling another sixpack from the refrigerator, hesitated, then slowly shut the door. She pushed her sunglasses up on her head and looked at Raven, her expression very tired.

"I don’t know," Jim Peckum was saying. "I just think they ought to come and get these moose out of here. Can’t they come and shoot them with darts, and then transplant them to the wilderness?"

Frowning, Boswell studied Jim Peckum. "Where did you come from, son?" he said sadly.

"We came up from Spokane," he said. "We came up the highway thinking we could get good jobs because Jan has taught second grade and I’m a trained office supply store sales representative but no one wants to even talk to me and Jan is about 100 down on a huge waiting list and now we think she might be pregnant. Of course, she’s only two weeks late and I guess you can’t even test yet, but see, the problem is, we used almost all of our money on the highway and we don’t have any insurance or anything."

No one spoke. From across the room, Raven watched
Anna's face shift rapidly through different emotions: surprise, sadness, annoyance.

"We don't know yet," Jan Peckum snapped.

"Come on," her husband said. "We're in trouble."

"Just shut up," she said. She fingered a spot of beer on her jeans. "Please shut up."

"Myself, I got a place in Missouri," said Boswell. "It's about 25 acres just south of Springfield. My wife and three boys live there. I visit them four times a year: at Christmas, in March, for the whole month of August and on Thanksgiving. My oldest, he's now 14, he was born on Thanksgiving."

"These are really tasty," said Jan Peckum, who had stuffed several Tater Tots and meatballs into her mouth. "Did you make them from scratch?"

"They were frozen," Anna said, her sunglasses in her hand. "From a bag."

Malcomb was clearing his throat and had scooted forward on the chair until only an inch of creased blue corduroy crossed the threshold of the wood.

"I guess this is a good time," he began. "I'm in love with Anna, and I want her to move in with me. I think she's better off with me than with Raven here, and I can take care of her very well, as, I know, Raven could confirm to everyone present."

The tone of his voice was so matter-of-fact and conver-
sational that Raven found himself confused.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I wanted to be up front," Malcomb continued. "I didn't want to go sneaking around. I thought we could speak plainly and settle this, here, in the light of the day."

The Peckums had stopped chewing, the shadow of mashed potatoes visible within their mouths, and Boswell, his face compressed into wrinkles and slits, was frowning inscrutably at the floor. And Anna, standing so far across the room that Raven wanted to reach out and bring her against him, had turned to Malcomb, her face pained and incredulous.

"Well Malcomb," Raven said. "We sure can settle this. I think something must have snapped in your brain. As you probably remember, Anna is my wife..."

"I know it," Malcomb said. "But that doesn't mean she's better off with you, now does it?"

"You're out of your mind."

"Why do you keep saying that? Why shouldn't I ask for her if I love her? There isn't enough time, don't you understand? Why do you deserve her more than me? Why you? Hell, Raven, I think it's a damn good question."

Malcomb was earnest and serious, as though they were discussing the price of a pick-up truck. Behind him stood Anna, looking right at Raven, her eyes wondering and astonished, far more wide awake than Raven had ever seen her before.
"I. . ." he said. "We. . ."

He couldn’t think of anything to say, his mind as blank as a strip of celluloid, and then, suddenly, he was furious, almost shaking with it.

"I'm not going to do this," he said. "I don't need to and I don't have to bargain with you for my wife."

"I think we'd better go," said Jan Peckum.

"I think everybody better go," Raven added, standing. But Malcomb was theatrically reaching toward Anna, his palm up. "There's no reason why you can't come with me, Anna," he said. "Raven just doesn't love you like me."

Everyone halted, but Anna spoke very slowly and gently, as though she believed that Malcomb would not easily understand.

"There is one good reason, Malcomb and that's that I don't want to go with you."

"D'you understand?" Raven said. "She wants to stay with me."

"I didn't say that," Anna said. "Whatever is true, that's not what I said."

"Oh? You want to leave then?"

"What did I say? Didn't you listen?"

"Then you want to stay. With me."

"God!"

Anna glared at Raven, her eyes so angry that Raven again found himself confused.
"What's wrong now?" he cried. "I don't get it."
He looked around at the others, who were stiff and
poised, like people preparing to step from an elevator.
"You dense bastard," Anna said, her voice hoarse, al­
most a whisper. "The only thing you ever see is yourself.
You're not even here."
"That doesn't make any sense."
But Anna had walked from the room, and the others began
filing for the door, the Peckums out first, Jan saying "bye,
bye, thanksalot," and Boswell lumbering behind them, waving
his paw in a salute, and Malcomb, holding himself erect,
offering his hand to Raven, and Raven taking it automatical­
ly.
"Well," Malcomb said, smiling only with his lips. "No
hard feelings?"
"I don't know," Raven said. "Just go."

When she heard him coming, Anna leaned over the kitchen
sinks, pushing herself away from the sound of his footsteps.
Raven began kneading between her shoulders with his thumbs,
and she arched her head and clenched her eyes. Her spine,
she feared, might be too brittle in his hands.
"What a weird thing," Raven said. "About Malcomb and
all."
After a moment, he continued.
"You didn't, I mean, of course you didn't want to leave, that's ridiculous, but still, I don't know, it was such a weird thing, and I don't think I handled it right. God, I actually kicked them out. I feel bad, like I made an ass of myself."

More than anything, the agony in his voice grated on her, and she imagined going to bed in silence. She considered agreeing with him too, for at that moment, to confirm his real and affected fears, whatever they were, would make him leave her alone until breakup. But before she could respond, she jumped at the crack of Boswell's rifle, a metallic sound more like the launching of a rocket than a gunshot. Through the window Anna saw the darkness shimmer with the promise of a body shuddering under a great blow, and a sickening emptiness settled into her, as though she had seen a child struck down by a car.
John Garland grew up haunted by tools. As a youth in St. Louis, Garland would seek refuge among them at a Standard station just off the ramp to westbound I-70. He ran there after slugging neighborhood kids, who taunted him unmercifully, or in the mornings while his step-mother drank Bloody Marys and smoked at the kitchen table to the sound of his father’s fitful snoring. As only a boy could, Garland pestered the mechanics, all sharp-boned men with names like Walt and Lou and Bud, who folded packs of non-filter cigarettes into sleeves of greasy T-shirts and slicked back their hair while the radio whined with an Ozark twang. Finally the owner, John Hargan, put Garland to work sweeping the floor and dipping inner tubes for leaks.

Although Garland admired the racks of tires suspended from the ceiling and the orderly ascension of sockets lined up in the red Snap-On tool chests, it was how the tools felt when hefted that fascinated him. Their cool metallic smoothness seemed alive, almost intelligent. The curve of vice grips and the slippery texture of an oily box-end
wrench as it fit over an engine bolt and pulled snug made him feel he gripped a single strand in a vast web. When he put together his first carburetor, he was baffled to find a jet so small it could disappear into the compressed flesh of his thumb and forefinger.

"Only one tool for that," said Walt, the mechanic overseeing his work.

Walt produced a screwdriver with a handle and stem so tiny that it was a delicate jewel in Garland’s palm as he inserted the trembling point into the nearly invisible groove on the head of the screw. When the screw snugged up and Garland brought it out one-half turn and withdrew the screwdriver, he was electrified. He promptly took the bus to a department store auto section and slipped a tiny screwdriver into his shoe.

As a boy he had wanted a dog only once, though years later he raised sled dogs and ran professional races in Alaska and came to think of dogs as living tools. This dog was a yellow mutt with floppy ears and an open sore above its eye. He had found it one evening crouching in a vacant lot and had coaxed it home to the brick half-double, where he tried to make it sleep in his bed. But the yelling downstairs frightened it into barking, and when his stepmother tripped into the room, the dog bolted out the door and down the stairs. Garland ran after it, crying, half-expecting the yelp cut off by a thud when his father swung
the baseball bat kept by the front door.

"What the hell?" his father kept yelling, the words slurring. "What the hell?"

His father's stomach bulged over the work pants, his shock of steely hair danced wildly as he grabbed the sobbing boy by the arm and shook him. Garland looked once at the dog and exploded into hopeless rage, kicking and scratching his father until he released his arm, and Garland fled five blocks to the deserted station and waited, crouching, beside the humming Coke machine until dawn cast faint light on the brick warehouses, and a fleet of milk trucks began rumbling past.

By the time Garland reached sixteen, he was working full time and had moved from home and had dropped out of high school where the endless fights had plagued him even in the classrooms. The mechanics began calling him Little John, and he stayed for six years, leaving only when Hargan fired him for shoving a burly accountant who had only wanted his windshield rewashed.

"Johnny," Hargan had said while Garland loaded his tools into the back of his 1952 Chevy pickup truck. "This tears me apart, but what am I supposed to do with you? This ain't going to stop until you get shook up a little bit."

Hargan, a former regular army motor pool mechanic from World War II, was near tears, rubbing the back of his neck with his calloused hands, but Garland didn't even look at
him once. His face sullen, he pursed his lips and combed his hair back and shook out a cigarette that he didn't light.

"Goddamn you then," Hargan said, and turned away. Garland slid onto the seat and drove off toward the Mississippi River and the road north to Springfield.

It was the beginning of four years of wandering. As Garland gradually acquired the skills of a master mechanic, he worked at a succession of shops, always non-union, always small. It would begin quietly, everything snug like a wrench in his palm. Once, in Peoria, he even had girlfriend named Kathy who was still in high school and talked marriage with her back flat against the bench seat of Garland's pickup. But there, too, it happened and Garland found himself punching her father senseless after the man had tapped on the window of the truck, parked in the street before the girl's house. Garland left town that night.

It might have gone on but for a short, puffing salesman who brought in a Buick sedan with a broken starter to the remote highway station Garland managed. As Garland worked on the Buick, the little man bombarded Garland with a monologue on the economic opportunities of Alaska, which, the year before, had become the 49th state.

"I tell you, a man, and I mean a man, a man like you, or like me, a man with ambition, one who's willing to sweat a little, could make a million bucks up there," he said,
pacing beside the car. He kept clicking a ballpoint pen in his hand. Garland, on his back underneath, said nothing.

"A million bucks," he said. "I'm not kidding. You could do it in sales. You could do it in land development, farming, oil, fish. You name it boy."

Wiping his hands with a red cloth, Garland stood and looked down at the man, whose scrunched pale face looked as though it had been scribbled on a cue ball. He grinned and nodded at the same time, though he stepped back from Garland.

"Oh yeah," he said. "You'd do fine up there."

"Thirty-five bucks," said Garland. He shook out a cigarette and shrugged away.

But that evening, before locking up, Garland wandered off the gravel lot and watched the sky over the late-season field corn. Cicadas and crickets chattered rhythmically in the humid dusk like engines with thrown bearings. To Garland, the insects sounded manic and sad. Inside he played his fingers over the metal surfaces of his wrenches and screwdrivers, but they felt gritty, unwashed. He could hear the distant whine of a truck through the open garage door, and he winced, fearing it would stop. Suddenly, he decided he would go to Alaska.

From the shop phone, he called the station's owner, who was angry and disgusted.

"Where the hell did you come up with this damned idea,"
the man kept asking.

"No traffic," Garland replied. But later, as he loaded his three tool boxes and a floor jack into the back of his truck, he realized he believed that Alaska would not put owners between him and his work. Somehow he would be alone, surrounded by engines and tools in a place without people.

Garland reached Edmonton in five days of hard driving, then followed the gravel roads onto the Alaska-Canada Highway. By Whitehorse, his Chevy's windshield was criss-crossed with cracks from flying gravel. Outside Glennallen, climbing out of the Copper River Valley, the glare of an on-coming truck's lights saturated those cracks with light. Garland drove blind for an instant, then swerved off the road to avoid striking the moose that appeared in the vanishing light as the other truck passed on. While the moose loped away into the dark spruce and the pickup idled with its right wheels off the shoulder, Garland took his three-pound, ball-peen hammer and knocked out the glass. He arrived in Palmer the next day at noon, sitting in glass shards with the June drizzle pelting him in the face like a storm of ice.

On the road to Anchorage, near a large hill rising abruptly from the land, Garland decided he'd had enough. He pulled into a tiny service station right off the gravel. His soaked white T-shirt pressed his skin as he stepped from the cab and ran his fingers through his hair, smearing it
back. A bearded man about 60 who wore a greasy wool cap and chewed an unlit cigar watched without expression from the doorway. Garland glanced at him, shoulders back, then squinted away, shook out a Lucky Strike, inserted one between his lips, flipped on and off a steel lighter, tucked the pack into his shirt sleeves. He peered up at Pioneer Peak, still streaked with snow and covering most of the southern sky, and picked the cigarette from his mouth and let smoke drift out his nose. A large wet husky gazed mournfully from the side of the garage.

"Had some trouble on the road," said Garland, still squinting up at the peak.

The man in the doorway snorted and spat.


"Yeah," the man said, saying it harshly. "It'd have taken a rock slide to smash out your whole damned windshield. You damned cheechakos don't even know enough to screen it. Jesus Christ."

The man shifted the cigar without touching it and folded his arms. Both he and Garland squinted up at the peak.

"Got a windshield?" Garland said.

"Have I got a windshield? If I had a damned windshield every time one of you damned cheechakos pulled in, I'd be living on the damned park strip in town."

"I need a windshield."
"Yeah you do. And you need a damned set of rings too for all the oil you’re burning."

Garland nodded. "It’s number six, mainly."

"Is it now?" the man said gleefully, almost thankfully, as he bit off a large piece of the cigar and stepped from the doorway and wiped his pants on the baggy gray overalls. He walked to the pickup.

"I see you got some tools," he said.

"I can fix anything," Garland said.

"Shit," the man said. He spat out a mass of cigar, then motioned gleefully at the truck. "But you can’t fix your windshield, can you boy?"

"Nope," said Garland, drawing on the cigarette. "Busted it out myself."

"Haw, haw," the man said in harsh mockery of real laughter. "You stupid damned cheechako. You all got rocks up there instead of brains."

Garland threw down the cigarette and turned to him. He felt relief instead of anger as he slowly exhaled and relaxed his shoulders and arms. But when he looked full into the man’s face, Garland hesitated. The man’s eyes were yellowed and bloodshot. His skin was pockmarked and scarred, and inside the white-flecked beard, thin lips curled back into a sneer. Garland could see one yellow tooth was darker and chipped. As they stared at each other, the man’s tongue kept flicking out and massaging the ruined
tooth, his eyes narrowing at the same time.

"I need a windshield," Garland said finally.

The man looked away and bit off another piece of cigar. With his cheek bulging, he said, "Well, I'd have to order it from the dealer in Anchorage. Maybe they won't have it and it'll have to come from Seattle. Maybe even Detroit. Hard to tell."

"Maybe they even got to pour the glass too?"

"Maybe." The man spat, then said: "Listen. I could use a mechanic."

Garland said nothing.

"I ain't been feeling so good lately and my daughter ain't worth a shit on engines. Even a damned cheechako mechanic like you could do it better. Could start out by trading work for the glass, figure something else out later."

Garland began to say no, but hesitated. He looked the place over: clapboard one-car garage marked with a faded "McClain's Gas & Towing," two hour-glass gas pumps, a log cabin with brown gingham curtains in the window, another cabin off in the weeds, two ruined outhouses and one in repair. Scattered through the yard lay the familiar carcases of engines and axles and rusted cabs. A hundred yards off, through the brush rising as high as a man, Garland could see several other cabins, spaced out as if on lots. From one rose smoke. Garland followed it up, his eyes
topping the brushy alders to follow the chutes carved into
the mountain.

Then, from around the corner, came a plump girl about
19 with long black hair and a round moon face. An oversize
army jacket was draped over her shoulders, and there were
strips of blue cloth tied into her hair. She was carrying a
white bucket that pulled her to one side. When she saw the
two men, she halted, staring hard at Garland, then darted
into the office with the bucket. Garland looked back and
saw that the man was watching him closely.

"You McClain?"

"That's right."

"All right," Garland said. "I'll work out the season."
McClain guffawed with a hoarse, deprecating laugh.
"I'll drink to that, cheechako," he said. "There's a damned
jeep in the garage that's got a damned short in it some-
place, so you got plenty to do."

McClain tilted toward the office, spitting, leaving
Garland in the lot as though he had been working there for
months, not even offering to shake hands.

"Listen asshole," Garland called, the profanity out
before he realized it. McClain stopped, his back stiff.
"What's a cheechako?"

McClain looked at Garland. "A cheechako is any body
that has to ask," he said.

Within one month, Garland was operating the station by
himself, silently patching tires or running north to Palmer with the tow truck, getting begrudging acceptance from the homesteaders and dairy farmers living in the area. A few tourists limped in, most with cracked windshields on battered sedans or wagons. Occasionally someone arrived in a loaded pickup, excited and talking loudly, exclaiming over the mountains and the black earth and the air pure enough in the morning to make the mountains seem close. Garland would grin, wiping his hands on one of the rags that seemed to be McClain's used long underwear, as the excited man chattered and waved his arms.

Garland's tools lined up in the rear of the garage in his three red boxes. McClain's tools, at first scattered haphazardly all over the garage under benches and behind cabinets, had been piled by Garland in a stack on one unused workbench, where they lay like fossilized bones. McClain haunted the small office, drinking whiskey at a deliberate pace designed to put him down for an afternoon nap. Over the summer, his jaw and collar bone jutted out as though his skin were shrinking. His long underwear hung loose on his angular frame. In late afternoons, McClain sang to himself in a rasping voice that never made sense, then passed out in the red swivel chair patched with gray squares of duct tape. Garland ignored him, stepping around his sleeping body to ring up gas or a job. He even paid himself right from the till, but only at the end of the week.
The first evenings, Garland had remained at the garage for nightfall, but instead of fading, the sunset spun behind the large hill called The Butte by locals. With no traffic coming, Garland would nod off in the office chair, and finally one night he sat upright, waking to the realization that darkness would not come. The cool, dusky air took on an eerie cleanness, as though the station and the empty gravel road had been transformed. Night after night, Garland waited for the empty quiet before crossing to his cabin, where his clothes lay sprawled out of Quaker State boxes. There he would squat on his haunches in the doorway and study the pale pink glow kissing the shrinking fingers of snow on Pioneer Peak.

From McClain's house, there would be no noise, none at all. After McClain woke up from his nap about 5 and stumbled home, there would be sporadic yelling, but he never reappeared. About 6, Garland would put a sign in the window and go to the house, where McClain's daughter, Marlene, silently served him supper at the table, then smoked at the sink. Garland ate bent over, intent on the food, smelling the pungent smoke of her cigarette. Though the food was passable, potatoes grown a quarter mile away and moose shot down by the Knik River, Garland did not taste it. When finished, Garland would push back his plate and light his cigarette, and they would look at each other for a long moment. Her expression was cold, but she never left the
sink unless McClain's snoring, always rough, erupted into coughing.

Then Garland would finish alone, listening to McClain swear at her, knock over furniture, as she helped him into the bedroom, cooing gently, patiently, "It's all right, Daddy. Bedtime."

"Bitch," McClain would cry, the word coming muffled into the kitchen, where Garland watched the glowing tip of his cigarette and braced for the fight that did not come.

Once, when Marlene brought a bucket of drinking water to the station to fill the cooler, he asked why she didn't fight back.

She looked at him quizzically. "He's my father," she said.

Then she turned to pour the water and, as her shirt pulled tight over her back, Garland stared hard at the knobs of her spine showing through. When she came to the station to pick up the receipts or go through the till or straighten the office, Garland often watched her. Though she was heavy in the legs, her neck rose delicate and smooth from her shoulders. Under her hair, Garland caught sight once of her ears, perfectly formed and fragile against her skin. But her eyes were sullen, halting Garland in mid-sentence when trained on him in the kitchen, in the garage, on the path leading around the side of the garage to the newest outhouse. Garland felt reluctant to begin conversations and
nervous at the idea of dinner under her stare. Once he had picked up his windshield from the dealer in Anchorage and the crate sat along the wall, he began thinking of moving on, though the locals had become friendly and McClain spoke to him hardly at all, and Garland was running the garage as though it were his own.

Then, as always, it happened. As Garland squatted in the cabin doorway during the pale twilight that, by July, was smearing every so slowly into a hint of real darkness, he heard McClain yelling from the garage, where he had passed out. He listened disinterestedly until he also heard Marlene cry out in pain. Garland was almost glad as he flipped his cigarette into the brush and trotted up the path to the garage.

McClain had Marlene's hair in one hand and was slapping her backhanded with the other. She tried to crouch down under Garland's clean work bench, but he pulled her up, and her shoulder jammed against the bench, a carburetor tipping over as she cried out. In three steps, Garland seized McClain by the hair too and jerked him back and away. McClain yelled in outraged pain, letting Marlene go and spinning around. Garland jabbed him in the face, once, twice, McClain's head snapping back. He then hit him with the other fist, knocking him backward onto the bench. McClain scrambled to rise, but Garland shoved him down and closed his fingers around his neck and banged his head
against the metal top.

"Whore," the old man gasped. "Punk cheechako."

Garland pushed his thumbs onto McClain's larynx and squeezed, a score of faces sneering up, taunting, yelling, all of them twisting with contempt. His rage was a binding thing that poured the breathless spinning in his chest into wrist and fingers, making them as stiff as steel claws. McClain's eyes bugged out of his flushed face and his hands grasped Garland's biceps gently, almost in a caress, and his lips moved soundlessly. Garland suddenly knew that he was close, as close as he had ever been, the idea of it startling enough to freeze his fingers and stop the pressure of his thumbs. Then Marlene's hand was gripping his shoulder and her voice, hoarse and scared, came: "John. Please. Don't. He thinks I'm my mother. Please stop."

Garland met her eyes, which shone wet and terrified in the dusk. His arms relaxed and his fingers released the old man's throat. McClain lay back and panted. Garland stood there with his head reeling, sick to his stomach, his hands trembling. He seized the old man by the shirt, jerked him up and shoved him across the swept garage so that he bounced off the stack of tires and sprawled out onto the black stain of grease.

"Whores," McClain wheezed.

Garland walked out of the garage into a twilight droning with mosquitoes. His head was ringing and the crunching
of the gravel beneath his boots seemed too loud. He reached for his pack of cigarettes, but his sleeve was empty. They must've fallen out, he thought. He turned at the sound of gravel and saw that Marlene had followed him. She offered him one of hers.

"I think I'll let him lay there," she said, her voice shaking. "He's out like a light anyway."

They stood for a moment smoking.

"I could have killed him," said Garland finally.

"Yes."

"I almost killed him."

Her hands shaking, Marlene lit another cigarette from the one in her mouth. "Yes," she said. "I know."

The mosquitoes floated around them in a speckled cloud. A car, overloaded with suitcases strapped on top, drove by on the gravel without slowing. Garland held his own wrists, which were beginning to tighten with soreness. He rubbed his hands together slowly, turning them over, studying the grease lines etched across his palms.

"So he thinks you're his mother," Garland said.

"No, he thinks I'm my mother."

They both laughed softly, and she stepped close to Garland, resting her palm against his cheek. Her dark eyes were still cool as she said in a flat voice: "Thank you for stopping him."

Garland could smell her. He took her shoulders with
his hands and kissed her roughly. Their tongues touched, and then Garland was pushing her back, a pitiless determination choking him, sinking its fingers into his will.

"No," he said.

And Garland turned and walked away before he could see Marlene's reaction, before she could be hurt or angry or glad. He walked to the cabin feeling as though each step were planned and placed with care, as though he were consciously deciding each movement of legs and feet, stepping around droppings from moose, into a patch of sloshy mud, swinging his arms, closing his fingers around the smooth wooden handle on his door. He crawled into his bed with the same grim poise, thinking to himself as he fell asleep that I could have but I didn't I could have let go but I stopped it I didn't

From then on, Garland was under a vehicle even before Marlene had fixed breakfast at six. When cars pulled in for gas, he trotted out from the garage. He tried to get jobs stacked up, so that he was in the garage until the twilight began to darken and faint stars flickered. Work had never gone so well. Into his hands flew the ice cold wrenches, jumping from the tool boxes almost of the their own volition. Without looking, he picked the right screwdrivers. His perception of size narrowed to sixteenths, and then thirty-seconds, and he seemed to select the correct socket simply by the way it brushed the tips of his fingers. He
changed oil while he patched tires. The puttering of broken engines spoke to him, and he was able to diagnose worn rings or maladjusted valves with such speed that it seemed immediate. In one continuous motion, he could twist the distributor of a Ford sedan with a snap of his wrist and tighten the nut and point the timing light that flashed perfect alignment between the marks on the case and flywheel.

"Hell's bells," said one colony dairyman whose car Garland tuned. "I've watched and I've watched, and I just don't see how you can do that."

Garland shook his head and shrugged. "Practice pays off," he said, wiping his hands and shaking out a cigarette that he did not light.

But late at night when he lay sweating in his bed, he would have to grit his teeth and clench his hands into fists and shudder with effort to keep from howling into the dark. He tried to force himself into sleep, telling himself all right, fall asleep, fall asleep, do it now. But sleep was the only thing he could not control, coming secretly, and Garland would know it only when he awoke shivering in the 5 a.m. twilight, the covers and sleeping bag piled on the floor.

He ate his meals in silence that was stiff and forced, but Marlene had begun touching him absent-mindedly when she walked near him, resting her palm upon his shoulder as she passed toward the sink or the stove. Garland would scramble
from beneath a car to find a plate of biscuits or soup in the office on the desk. They scarcely talked, but he could feel her following him with her eyes as he strode through the work.

After the fight, McClain had remained in his room for days, then one morning stormed into the garage swearing, already staggering drunk. Garland wiped his hands on a rag and listened to the oaths without answering. When McClain told him to draw his wages and get out, Garland felt the anger twinge within and he began walking toward McClain, who backed up rapidly and bumped into the wall.

"You can come out here if you're going to work, otherwise stay in the house," Garland said. "Don't come out here drunk again."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" cried McClain, his voice cracking. "It's my place. I built it, not you. You're just a damn cheechako kid, for chrissakes."

McClain's eyes were wide and pleading and sober, but Garland met them coldly. "Drink in the house," he said evenly, turning from McClain and going back to work. When he looked up, the old man was gone.

A week later, when Garland was lying awake in his bed, he heard faint footsteps just outside his cabin door. Without getting off the bed, he reached over and pulled the door open to see Marlene in the dusk. Before he could protest, she slipped into the bed beside him. Her hair fell over his
face and they embraced as they squirmed out of their clothes. Their mouths pressing together, they each struggled briefly to get on top until Garland flipped her to her back. She cried out, gasping, saying "John, oh damn, damn." Afterward, when they lay breathing softly, their faces chilled in the cold air, Garland listened to her fall into sleep as calm as a child's.

From then on, they held hands after meals and rode in Garland's pickup on Saturday to the movie house in Palmer or 40 miles south to Anchorage, and her friends accepted him as though he had grown up in the valley. She met his eyes with frank joy, and he found it impossible not to smile back. But there were moments when a resignation fell over him, making him feel as though the long twilight would never again break into night or day. Box-end wrenches would drop from his hands to clatter on the concrete beneath the cars, and he sometimes left his tools scattered over the benches at night. As he lay awake listening for Marlene's light steps, the urge to flee in his truck would rage through him like panic, but he always resisted long enough for her to come.

McClain himself never said anything about Marlene sleeping with Garland, though he did sober up for several months. He began helping Garland in the garage and pumping gas and carrying on a garrulous bantering that Garland guessed had been his trademark before the booze. He took to
calling Garland "Johnny" and "son" and "partner," never mentioning the fight until he pitched forward onto the new November snow outside the garage as he walked to a car at the gas pumps.

Garland and the driver, a middle-age man in a tailored wool suit, carried McClain to the office and laid him across the desk.

"Open his shirt," the man said. "For godsakes, what do we do now?"

"Marlene!" Garland yelled. "Marlene!"

Garland kept yelling for her as he tried to dial the phone but he kept dialing wrong and getting some kind of buzzing so he gave up to loosen McClain's clothing. McClain panted, his face purplish and his eyes half-open. Suddenly he reached up and seized Garland's flannel shirt, pulling them together.

"You beat me," he gasped.

"Forget it, McClain," Garland said, his words running together. "You're going to be all right."

"You done it," he gasped. "But they will beat they will beat you."

"Calm down," Garland said. "Don't talk."

"Uh, I'll be right outside," the man said. "I mean, uh, if you need me."

"You're going to be all right," Garland said.

McClain muttered something and closed his eyes. His
breathing was very shallow. Marlene burst into the office and cried out, clapping a hand over her mouth. As Garland pulled McClain's hands from his shirt, the old man's eyes opened again and fixed on Marlene.

"Always." His voice was a raspy and faint.

"What Daddy?" she said. McClain's eyes were glazing over as he stared, frowning, up at his daughter.

"I tried Marlie," he panted. "Jesus Christ... my neck, can't breathe."

And then his eyes closed and Marlene sat in the swivel chair next to the desk, her hands folded in her lap. His breathing was shallow.

"I've been trying to call but I couldn't get through," Garland said.

She didn't move. Garland shook out two cigarettes as he stared out the window. She lit hers with a wooden safety match that she scratched across the stove's cast iron door. She sat back into the chair and waited. Finally, without looking at the old man's body, she stubbed out the cigarette and calmly dialed the co-op hospital in Palmer and asked for an ambulance.

After another 10 minutes, the man in the wool suit, who had been waiting by the pumps, came trotting into the office calling: "It's coming! It's coming!"

Garland looked over at Marlene, startled to see her face calm and unmarked by tears. She shook her head. Gar-
land heard the siren, and suddenly noticed the icy draft coming through the open door. He lit his cigarette. He followed silently as the attendants rolled McClain out. He didn't wave when Marlene lifted her hand as she sat in the back of the ambulance just before they shut the door. He pumped the chattering man some gas and gave change without answering. He closed the door, shook down the grates in the coal stove in the corner, added several chunks, then wandered around the garage, brushing his hands over a tool box, the air compressor, a Firestone tire, a rack of Atlas fan belts, the chaotic pile of McClain's wrenches, until he found himself slowly turning around and around in the exact center of the building, right over the hydraulic lift. From where Garland stood, it was the emptiest garage he had ever seen.
MOTHERING

A thousand times the sun warmed my face through the plate glass, and the drivers took my hand into their rough palms. For years I saved what they gave me, the nickels and quarters, the crumpled bills. I ate pinto beans instead of steak, and sewed my own clothes though I hated it because Mama had done the same. I banked my waitress wages, and one day I finally leased my own diner near the Lolo truck stop, put my name on a sign, and discovered my black hair strung with gray. My baby boy grew up, got old enough to pour coffee for customers and talk of the college up the highway in Missoula. He had his father's furious eyes, but he would listen to my talk when the highway lay empty and doubt ached inside me like hunger. That boy was the whole world to me, and I could always speak right to his face. And then one day he leaned toward me like he was wading upstream in the Bitterroot River and asked, his voice brittle as new ice, just where exactly did I figure his Dad was at anyhow.

"Come again?" I said, though I had heard him plain. I carried the bucket of pickles into the walk-in cooler,
slammed the door and wiped my hands on my apron. He was waiting.

"I said, where do you think my Dad is? Right now, I mean?"

Through the doorway chattered the lunch crowd, and I knew Amy and Dack had fallen behind on the sandwiches and soup and fries. I had been taking orders and frying myself, and I really couldn't talk, not then, not with people eating my food in the next room. But there he stood, arms folded, scuffing a stain on the linoleum with the toe of his boot.

"Your timing's real bad, honey," I said. "Don't you think as a general rule we ought to tackle the big questions after the lunch rush?"

I tried to see his eyes, but he had turned his face from me and was chewing his lip. All of a sudden, I felt I had done something truly bad, not just wrong but kind of dirty, like I had hit an animal and drove off. I hadn't felt that way since I was a girl, and my hands got clammy so that I had to wipe them again.

"How the hell would I know where he's at?" I said. "This is the damn lunch hour. What makes you think I got time to chitter-chatter about that man during the damn lunch hour?"

When I passed, I could see the tickets had stacked up, curling on the clips like dead skin. The odor of fresh fries hung in the air and the hot oil sizzled and that
burble of a room full of men, noise that means I'm making payments, drowned out the sound of my own heart. Amy sang out to Dack: "Two fries, cheese burg, chili burg" and spun to a new table, but I could see people who had not yet been served.

So I took the pot and stalked the room. I smiled into men's hooded eyes and filled their cups. I did not think, but rang up tickets and took orders and filled cups until I came upon my boy. He was sitting at the two-seater by the door, grinning up as he scooted an empty cup across the surface.

"No such thing as strong coffee," he said. "Hey Mom?"

"That's right," I said as I filled his cup. "Just weak people."

Then our eyes met, and his grin faded. I held the pot with both hands.

"I just wanted to know," he said. "You've never told me much."

"Michael," I said. "Not now. Please."

"You said he was rich, with lots of trucks parked in his yard. That he had a Peterbilt and a Mac and an Autocar, that a dozen men drove for him up and down the coast."

"No I didn't."

"I remember you told me they know his name in every truck stop between Seattle and LA."

"Come on, Michael."
"And another time you told me they said he was such a mechanic that he could make dead engines come alive just with the parts he had laying around his shop."

"Michael, I never told you any such thing."

"I'm just now remembering all the crap you've told me, years of it, and I don't know what's bull and what's true."

"Watch your mouth."

"Come on, Mom," he said, his voice trailing off. "You can tell me, can't you?"

"Why is it you have to talk about this now? This is the damn lunch rush."

His eyes widened a little, and I knew he'd heard the tremor in my voice. I started to turn away, and I even took a step back, but the corners of his mouth were turned down and he was so like a little boy then, that I wanted to set down the pot and hold his face. But the murmuring of the men pressed against my back like a hand, and I couldn't shake the feeling that they watched. Then Michael sighed and began tapping the spoon on the table.

"Stop that, Michael," I said, relieved. "This ain't a garage."

"Sometimes," he said, "I just want to see him, not even talk to him, just see him walking around by all those trucks. And other times I want to grab him and hold him down and smash his face."

He pounded the fist holding the spoon, as though he
were stabbing the table, and his coffee cup jumped enough to spill. I knew then that I would have to tell him something more. I opened my mouth, but I could not speak because of the knot in my stomach.

"I'm out of high school, but you treat me like a damn baby," he said loud enough to draw glances from the men nearby. "I know you know where he's at."

"Knock it off now."

"You worried about him? Is that it? You think I'll hurt him or something?"

"Hurt who?" said Jack, who had just entered the door. He was a big-shouldered man from the truckstop who took me dancing sometimes and once insisted that he was the best hydraulic man between Missoula and Boise. He rubbed his beard and grinned down at Michael and glanced sideways at me.

"You got troubles with some of these Lolo punks, you talk to me," he said to Michael.

"Oh no," I said, laughing, wiping the table. "He's just talking. Come on, Michael, you get up and let Jack sit down." I glanced around the room, seeing that a stool was empty at the counter.

"Let him sit," Jack said. "I don't like to come between a man and his dinner."

"He's eaten," I said. "Michael, you get up now. Did you hear me?"

I turned from the table, dipping my shoulder away from
Jack's hand, touching my hair to make sure it was still in place. By the time I looked back, Jack sat alone and had spread out a used shopper over the table's surface. Michael's cup had been scooted to the far corner.

I didn't know a lot when I got pregnant with Michael, but I knew this: I would raise the boy without the fear that used to bend my back. Yet I had seen his father's expression cross his face, and sometimes, especially when someone got loud in the restaurant, he would stand with his head down, his eyes flat and mean, and I would see so much of his father that I wondered if he had any of me in him at all.

"I did it for him," I always told myself. "For the boy."

But I'm not sure anymore, though I was once. You see, I was still a girl when I left home, but I had already seen enough. Think of one of those San Joaquin trailer parks with the double wides lined up like moving vans ready to haul. Our metal door opened onto gravel, and the floor sounded hollow when you walked. The windowless hall tilted, and at the end was the door to the big bedroom where Mama and my step-dad slept, but that door wouldn't shut tight. Through the space at the bottom you could hear just as though you were in there with them.

They argued a lot, and a couple times a month he'd walk
out, knocking Mama's magazines off the kitchen table as he went. There'd be the same sounds: the snapping of gravel under tires, the rustling of clothes as Mama got up from the floor. If I went in, Mama would just stare at me with her fat arms folded, cigarette in one hand, lighter in the other. Mama was almost as big as him, and her face was like a man's as she squinted at me through the smoke. Finally she'd draw, her cheeks pinching, and I could see that her thumb was massaging the shiny lighter as though she wanted to rub the etching of the pine tree right off. Then she'd stab out the cigarette and set the lighter on the stand.

"Get back to bed, Lucy," she'd say. "At least he treats us decent and doesn't drink up every little dollar like you know who."

I'd do as she said, but sleep was hard because my door jiggled in place even if I locked it. If shoved real hard, the lock would slip and the door would slam open. Sometimes he would be there in the opening, his breath just loud enough to be heard. In a moment that lasted a hundred years, I would lay with the sheets pulled up to my chin and my eyes squeezed shut. I would know that he had crouched beside me when I smelled the smoke from his T-shirt and the bitter odor of his sweat. When the sheet slipped from my chin and his scratchy hand began to scuttle up my leg, I would listen hard to the smacking of tomato-field sprinklers and the whine of LA-bound trucks out on I-5. As his
thorny fingers dug into me, I would ride those sounds into the suffocating air above the irrigation wheels to find the hope in highways and cool night.

When I was seventeen, I walked. Nothing had happened. It was just a regular afternoon with Daddy sleeping and Mama gone someplace. Into one of Mama's vinyl suitcases I packed two blouses and jeans and a dress and the year book and her lighter from the nightstand, and I stepped out the hollow door into the bleached sunshine. I looked back once, and there was my little brother, his son, pressed against the screen, not wearing a shirt, kind of crying after me. I waved him back. I had told him to go to the neighbor's trailer, but I guess he was too scared. I've not seen him since.

Over the next years, I worked as a waitress at cafes outside Modesto and Stockton and on up the highway toward Sacramento. I had friends and even bought a car once, but a man always spoiled everything, and I would have to run all the way to my girlfriend Sandy's and spend the night smoking cigarettes and drinking gin and tonics while she watched out the window. Sometimes the man came and stood outside in the yard, shirt undone, raging like a bee you squirt down with the hose: "Lucy! I know you're here! I'll give you one more chance, baby!" We would duck down and giggle on the floor until he left, or until he began pounding on the door.

As I grew older, I learned to watch hands, the hands
that pat your ass and rest on your shoulder and clamp down on your arm. Some of them are cruel and rough, all calloused from the lifting and grabbing they do at work. But Michael’s father seemed different, and he had soft hands because he always worked with gloves. With him, it had been OK for almost a year, and at night I’d lay in his arms and just hope that he’d keep those hands pressed safe against my back. But even his hands would turn my face up so he could press my mouth with the stale and sour taste and then I would kiss back, because that’s the way it was. Down inside I would want to scream, but I muzzled my feelings like they were strange birds, all claws and wings. I had this feeling that I was better, and if I just let go, I could leave all of it behind.

Michael’s father always took good care of his gloves, hanging them on hooks like they were hats. I wasn’t supposed to use them, but I had taken a pair to weed my garden and then left them in the yard when I irrigated. When he came through that door, I looked at his hands and I knew he would hit me. They were clenching and unclenching as he walked.

Later on, I trotted up the highway in my pumps, walking backwards when the headlights caught the signs. In my purse, I had forty-five dollars from his wallet, my cigarettes and my Mama’s steel lighter. A trucker hauling shiny new cars picked me up right away, and I told him I was
called Jean Anne Radene, Grandma's maiden name. His hands were large and fleshy and rested on the wheel as round and large as a table, and he looked like Captain Kangaroo. In Redding, he bought me eggs and sausage and introduced me to another trucker on his way north. I took that ride, and then another, and by the next day, I was halfway to Seattle, and I didn't stop moving for half a year. You understand that I figured Michael's father might be dead, and I was beyond scared, beyond feeling anything, though I shriveled up every time I saw one of those highway cops with their broad-brimmed hats. I know now that they would have gotten me before I made Sacramento if they'd wanted me. But I was still naive then, and had some idea I could run away.

You can go a long time between big lies. So maybe some of what I'm telling here ain't quite right. I do want to be fair because, the thing is, I don't think Michael's father was a bad man. His thick shoulders stuck through his T-shirts like truck fenders, and he worked as a handyman-dock foreman for some fruit wholesaler near Turlock. He looked kind of dumb, and if he got mad, he would walk at you with his head slung, eyes dull, trembling like he was going to just explode into limbs and chunks of hair. His jaws would clench so tight that you'd think he'd swallowed his teeth, and those soft hands of his opened and closed like wings on
a moth. Yet just before he'd get to you, he'd stop himself. He never did hit me, not once. At home, in the evening, he'd leave me alone for hours while he sat at the kitchen table and screwed together little radios and things from kits. In his arms at night, I'd feel wrapped up in a straitjacket, but it was like being a little girl, awful and safe. When he touched my face, I always felt how soft the skin had been kept under his Big Mac gloves, with their wide stiff cuffs and greasy, leather fingers.

The whole thing happened because I told him I was pregnant. Afterwards, I had lit a cigarette and I kept snapping the lighter on and off. I remember that we both watched that flame shoot up, and I could smell the fumes of lighter fluid. Then he asked if it was his, and I lied to him.

"I'm sorry, but it just ain't," I said, "and there's nothing I can do about it now."

I think I also told him something like "Jesus, what do you expect, you were gone 16 hours a day for months" or "I'm doing you a favor" or "I'm telling you because I love you. Another girl would have never said nothing."

I'm pretty sure I told him that, because that's when it hit him and he went out into the yard where he found the gloves soaking wet from the sprinkler. He stood there and studied those gloves like they were some strange thing he'd never seen before. He squatted by them and reached out and
turned them over in the yellow grass like you would a cat that had died in the road. He didn’t move when the sprinkler splattered him, and I almost screamed at him to get out of the way. A long time he stayed there, with the sprinkler slowly rocking away from him and then back. When he stood up, his hair plastered his head, and his shirt clung to his chest. Beads of water ran down his face. He bent over and gathered those gloves up and slapped them against his jeans, and I knew he was a long ways past regular anger. I started trembling all over, like I was freezing cold. He came through the door and flung the gloves down on the kitchen table.

“All right, then, Luce,” he said. “I guess we’ll just have to deal with this too.”

His voice was so quiet and sad that I knew something terrible would happen. He came at me slowly, his face flat as a giant face on a highway billboard, his arms spreading apart like he would wrestle me to the floor. But I would not let him get me, and when he reached out, I jumped past him into the kitchen, opened the cupboard over the stove, pulled out the hammer or a pan or God knows what I can’t remember and smacked his head. He slumped to the floor with a bruise spotting red and he grabbed my ankles saying "Jesus Lucy why?" and he tried to pull down and so I stomped and kicked until he let go and kind of lay there face blank and I left and took a ride from the guy who looked like Captain
Kangaroo with fat hands resting on my knee and breakfast sausage in Redding and half a year passed and I still could see his face at the screen door where he must’ve crawled crying after me why why and I screamed just leave me alone and I have never, never let it happen again.

Almost a thousand weeks have passed since I left that man laying there, and I don’t think about him much. I did what I did because inside my belly I could feel the stirring of the baby, and he was so like a tiny animal caught in a net, kicking and wriggling in my belly, that I believed he was too special for any man. The whole time I was on the road, until I ran out of steam in Missoula and delivered as a charity case at St. Pats, I had this feeling the baby would have bones as fragile as butterfly wings, so sheer that a man like Michael’s father would crush them without even trying. One thing in my life had to be safe. So I did what I thought best, and I will not regret it, not even now. I can’t change it anyhow.

I guess I had decided that I might tell some of this to Michael, but I couldn’t think of how to begin. So I drove around for a while after I closed the restaurant, and I could hardly light up because the steering wheel seemed tricky and needed both hands. Our trailer, up a brown draw five miles out of Lolo, caught the setting sun on the white
metal siding, and the glare through the glass blinded me as I turned up the drive. Then I saw Michael standing behind his old Chevy pickup, backed right to the front door. I pulled into the drive fast, and I slammed the door too hard.

In the bed of his truck he had laid a bulging duffle bag and a backpack and a wooden box with an old coffee pot and metal dishes and a plastic crate of books, all things I had never seen. A scratched and dented Coleman stove lay open on the bed. I had never seen it before either. Michael was fooling with a red fuel tank, and his jaw was set, like he was gritting his teeth. But his face was so smooth and clean in the orange light that I wanted to hold him against me.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm going to go on a trip, I guess."

"A trip?" I said. I kept my voice regular.

"I'm going to go to California," he said. "I'm going to go drive to the ocean."

"Oh? You just going to walk out on the station?"

"I quit."

"You quit? When did you quit? You didn't ask me about that."

Michael was staring down at the tank. All of a sudden, I was real mad, but it was cold and hard, like headlights reflecting off snow.
"I don't think this is very good idea, Michael," I said. "You are only 18 years old and I am your mother and I'm not going to have you driving away like this. Besides, I don't think this truck would make it that far."

He turned from me, and I found myself looking at the back of his head, where his ragged hair covered his thick neck, almost a man's neck.

"It's running fine," he said softly, like he was talking to himself.

I grabbed a hold of his shoulders and tried to twist him around, but he was stiff and firm, and I could not turn him.

"Michael," I said. "You turn around now."

I jerked again on his arms, digging my fingers into his skin, which felt sweaty and sticky under my palms. He placed his hands on the bed, leaning away from me, using his weight against my strength. I pulled as hard as I could, but he just flexed against me, now gripping the edge of the pickup with both hands. Finally, I let go, and he moved forward as I released.

I stood there a moment, catching my breath, and I decided.

"You want me to tell you about your father," I said. "Is that it?"

He shrugged, but he straightened up. "I don't care about him," he said.
"I never told you the truth about your father because I never knew who he was."

Michael did not move.

"Do you hear me?" I said, and there were tears rolling down my cheeks and my voice cracked. "There's no one out there, Michael."

"You never knew?"

"Oh Michael, it wasn't my fault, don't you see? I was just a girl. For godsakes, what was I supposed to tell you? I didn't want you to grow up without a father."

Michael turned and stared at me like he had never seen me before. His mouth was open and stiff, like a gash hacked into the smooth skin of his face. His eyes were fixed to mine, dull and a little sick, a drunk man's eyes.

"I don't believe you," he said at last. "You just don't want me to find him."

"There's just me, Michael," I said hoarsely. "Tell me that you love me."

At that moment his face screwed tight with such disgust that it kicked me all the way back to when I was a girl and the words "Yeah, I love you, Mom" were barely out of his mouth when I slapped him hard enough to knock him back against the bed of his truck.

"Oh my baby," I cried. "I'm sorry."

I jumped forward to throw my arms around him, but he stopped me, his open hand striking me flat against my chest.
His splayed fingers and thumb dug into my breast so hard that the pain almost took away my breath. I stepped back so that he wasn’t touching me, and I gaped at him, I was just shocked, but his eyes were so flat and mean, just hateful, that I couldn’t talk. He held his other hand against his cheek, and I could see where grease had etched in black the wrinkles of his skin.

I turned and went into the trailer. I lit a cigarette and waited just inside. I was trembling, but I was wrung too dry for any more crying that day. I could still feel the imprint of his hand, and I knew I would be bruised in the morning. As I listened to Michael’s footsteps on the gravel and the thud of things landing on the pick-up’s bed, I began to feel like I used to, that there had always been something wrong with me, something real bad. For a moment I didn’t know nothing for sure, and all I wanted was to hear him calling for me. But I got a hold of myself. I had done the best I knew how, and I wouldn’t let anyone, not even Michael, tell me different. Then the truck door creaked and slammed, the engine rumbled, and the gravel snapped as he drove off. I went on into the kitchen for a beer. I couldn’t tell you if he looked back.