1988

Pack of dreams

Jerry A. Schneider

The University of Montana

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PACK OF DREAMS

by

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for the degree of

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PACK OF DREAMS
CHAPTER I

Jimmy Walker kept pace with Alicia through the cemetery, in and out of the shade of ash trees and hickory trees, in and out of the August heat. At the intersection of paths next to the caretaker's hut, they veered right, down the asphalt road overtaken by sumac and pipevine, where butterflies lifted up, up, up into the trees. Evening shadows stretched across large, elegant tombs in the oldest part of the cemetery. Some of the tombs had emblazoned crucifixes, or setting suns. An angel wept over one of the stones. Walker had always been struck by the angel, the way it wrapped itself around the stone, cradling it like a mother with child.

At the Irish neighborhood, a mausoleum held firmly to Jack O'Hare. Walker remembered from local documents O'Hare's round face and bushy eyebrows. Three times the man had run for mayor, successfully, and once had tried for governor and had lost by a few thousand votes. The mausoleum was the largest in the cemetery, housing O'Hare and his wife and one of the two children. Walker looked at the name, etched in handsome letters, bringing to mind the photos, the eminent figure waving from a limousine,
radiant smile, silver hair, kissing babies. Now it was all behind him. R.I.P.

The road hummed with insects, grew thick with sumac, swept past Irish, German, Polish and Italian plots. Every name was recognizable—Mueller, Kowaleski, Waggoner, Caparelli. Every bit of the ancestry still ran around the streets down the hill.

Those who left Fairport in body, Walker thought as he jumped a log, keeping up with Alicia. Some came up the hill and stayed quiet. Others stayed in touch, and some haunted.

Walker's mother's grave was further up, by a locust tree where he had gone the day before and planted astors and told her he was leaving. Both he and Alicia had gone, and he had told Alicia about the accident, how he had little memory because he had been only four years old at the time. The two of them had stood by the grave a long time. Alicia had stayed quiet, then planted a flower before they left. She understood death. Two of her brothers had died trying to swim the river outside of Pecos in '78.

They took the low road, moving through a cloud of gnats and sour, fermenting odors of poison oak and fallen leaves and rotting wood. Walker looked up the way, to the rows of flags at the military graves, where his cousin Bobby Ray kept his peace. Bobby Ray with a perennial baby face, only twenty years old when he died in 1969. He had
stepped on a mine, or the jeep had rolled over, or they had run into an ambush. Walker was only eight when the stories had gone round and round. He remembered the funeral, the crowds, the huge casket draped in red, white, and blue.

Adios, he thought. He followed Alicia who ran down the hill that opened into a field of goldenrod, thistle and wild rose. He could smell camomile and weeds of late summer. He wanted to stop and take it all in, make sense of it, but he was running hard, down to the apple orchard. Alicia stopped in front of one of the trees, took two apples, and gave one to him. They kept moving, toward the river, down Mechanic Street, to River Road. They ate, and the juices rolled down their chins.

"You'll miss the river," Alicia said. They went as far as the middle of the bridge and stopped where they saw the sun descending over the dam. Light glinted on three tiers of rapids between the bridge and the dam, where a fisherman stood knee deep in current, casting his lure toward willows on the south bank.

"There'll be rivers out west," Walker said, trying to be nonchalant. On this last day of all days, he wanted to be cool about everything, about leaving. He didn't want to get sentimental about the river. "There'll be towns like this, with rivers," he said. "There's one running right through the place where grandpa would have lived."
They moved across to the other side, toward the path that climbed through hardwoods and vine, up to the dam. Alicia carried a woven Mexican handbag. She wore her favorite jeans with the hole in the knee from bending in tomato fields. She was poor, but she transcended dirt and holes and frays, made her poverty bright with orange and yellow embroidery on the jeans and on the blue cotton shirt. There was a yellow sun and clouds across the chest of the shirt. Clouds broke out over her small breasts. The shirt tucked underneath a leather belt. Long black braids tied with leather made her look Indian.

"Maybe you can come visit," Walker said. "I'll show you everything. Maybe I'll have a car and we can drive and see the whole country."

Alicia laughed. "Restless spirit," she said. She and Walker found the big rock and sat down next to the thunder of water falling over the dam. Younger kids were standing on a barren mound next to a large oak tree with a swing rope, trying to get a skinny kid to swing out. He refused. He would take hold of the rope, then lose courage. The others called him chickenshit. They laughed and picked up dirt clods and threw them out over the kid's head. "Just hold on and swing!" one boy yelled. The kid finally let go of the rope and sat on the grass, then the biggest boy took hold and swung out, dropping into the dark water. The sun was on the horizon, sinking into the
water line. The boys became silhouettes.

"Funny," Alicia said. "Seeing you driving a car."

"You learn out there when you're fourteen," Walker said. "I'd have to wait 'til I was eighteen here. Dad says people shouldn't drive until then, but out there it's a different place." Walker tossed a rock into the water. "I'll get a job," he said, "have my own car, won't have any piddly little busboy job, won't need school for awhile. I told the old man I'd go to school in Montana, but I think I'll just try for a job. Earn some money, then maybe get a GED or something."

"You'll miss it here," Alicia said.

"Maybe the river, but I won't miss anything else."

"Not even Eddie or Sky or me?"

Walker blushed. "Yeah. I'll miss you guys. I'll write you letters from Montana. I'll get a car and come visit."

Walker thought about the best things, mostly of summers on the river. He remembered summer evenings, with the sky paling orange and the trees darkening, and all the losers from town, who got away and hung out above the dam. Out beyond the rules of town, out beyond parents, beyond any expectations, where the smells were river water and beer and tanning oil and lust. Walker was a romantic about summer nights. He had watched it all, a romantic sight-seer. He was a shy, fearful romantic. Once he had sat up
next to a girl, but the thought of love had made him panic. He remembered that horrible silence, the girl waiting, her knee right up touching his, everything perfectly set, and then he had started talking nonsense. He had panicked and talked about anything that came to his mind, about summer ending in a month, about school and about football and how he had been so good when he was eleven, and then he had grown clumsy. The girl had laughed, drank another beer, and picked up another guy.

"Remember that night we had to run through the graves?" Alicia tugged at Walker's pant leg. She pulled two bottles of beer from her carrying bag, twisted off the caps, and gave one to Walker. She eased into the rock, and he smelled beer and river water and felt the mist of crashing spume. The sound of the falls blocked out everything, blunted the sounds of the city. "Had to get our asses home before my father killed me?"

"You had to catch that last fish," Walker said. "I remember. I had to go up with you to the house so he wouldn't yell."

"Remember Frank Carr?" Alicia asked, making the sign of the cross, looking out toward the catwalk. Madre Mia, Hijo de Dios!"

Walker took a slug of beer and looked across the river to the catwalk up by the dam where Frank Carr, Fairport's most notorious hood, had jumped to his death.
Walker had not seen it, but he imagined the whole scene. Carr with his coterie of groupies that tagged along, cheered him on in fist fights, stood behind him en masse to help intimidate. Most of his gang were kids from the eastside junior high school, who hung out 'til midnight and didn't seem to have parents at all. They roamed Fairport, the parks, and the river like wild dogs. They had followed Frank Carr out onto the catwalk, past the danger sign. Maybe he had figured he could jump out beyond the rocks, as a show of strength. Maybe he had ordered each one of the kids to follow him. Who knows. The story in the paper had claimed nothing, no reason. The kids told the reporter he had walked out, said nothing, and jumped. The catwalk had given enough sway to blunt his projected arc, and he had fallen head first onto the rocks just below the water. After that, there was no more Frank Carr gang. No one else had risen to take Carr's legendary place in gang history.

Walker did not want to criticize the dead, so he swilled beer and focused on the swimmers, who were getting ready to leave. The sun was down. Alicia pointed to the first star.

"Vámanos," she said, getting up. She had to leave because she worked the next day and had to get up at five.

Walker pulled a bouquet of goldenrod from the thicket, held the flowers, then tossed them into the river. "Out
west, there'll be rivers like this, only cleaner," he said, leading the way back.

The streetlights were on. They moved through the cemetery, up the boulevard past the hospital, past the Baptist church, out to the little houses by the Sunoco station. Alicia's father and mother were on the porch swing. Three of the boys rode bicycles in a lot next to the house, their white shirts all that Walker could see, like ghosts. Alicia stood a moment, then said goodbye. "I'll come see you tomorrow," she said, turning to leave. She waved again and hurried down the drive, moving like a grown woman.

On his way home, Walker did not think about his town, but saw instead pictures of mountains and plains and imagined towns west of the Mississippi River. He smelled ketchup from the factory, caught on a wind off the lake. He walked past the smell of tires from the rubber company and saw the blaze of fire through the windows of the foundry. Three men stood on break, smoking cigarettes out by the drydock. Smells tried to draw him back, but he thought ahead, to places of bright colors, yellows and blues, wheat and baled hay.
CHAPTER II

Morning dew glazed the grass, the hickory leaves next to the apartments. Blackbirds and starlings cackled and ate seed and waited for the first cat. At five, the lights came on, first in the bedrooms, then in kitchens. Soon the smell of coffee and bacon. Later came the sound of the factory whistles.

Peter Walker trudged in boxer shorts down the hall, past the quiet of his daughter's room. Elizabeth slept like a log. The radio was left on in Jimmy's room. After all the times he had been told. Some day his son would pay electric bills.

In the kitchen, Peter opened the window and let in the smell of grass and, with it, the redolence of tomatoes. Northeast wind, he thought. Then came the ketchup smell that blanketed the town and pushed all the way out to Ballville. Peter got out the can of Folgers, popped bread into the toaster, then he went to the frig for milk and brought out ham and cheese and lettuce for his lunch. No tomato. It was too much to smell it and work around it all day, then also to eat it. He made coffee, filled his cup and filled the thermos and looked out the window at
the yellow arches of McDonalds. One billion sold. He tried to imagine one billion hamburgers. They would fill up the whole ketchup plant.

He stirred cream into the coffee and kept twirling the spoon. Twenty-two years, and now another day, he thought. Let him think I'm stuck. Peter felt renewed anger, remembering the fight with his son two days earlier. Twenty-two years, paying the bills, paying his way. Now maybe he'll see. Now he's on his own.

Peter took the jeans and the white shirt from the chair, put them on, and he argued as he ate his breakfast. He argued through the sounds of the birds and the news­caster's voice on the radio. He argued through the sound of Smitty and Tubby's voices in the hall of the apartments, going out together on their way to work. A car door slammed, the sound carrying heavily through humid air. Then there were more doors, and engines winding. Peter gulped his coffee, got up, put the cup in the sink and rinsed it. He fastened his lunchbox and left the house. "Just let him go, then," he said aloud. He wanted to be patient and not try to control things. Let the boy go. Let the hard licks bring him back.

He tried to pump gas, but the engine stalled, then he waited, pushed slowly on the gas, let the pedal rise, and he turned the key and felt it catch. He revved the engine hard and looked to see smoke billowing in back. Won't
work in the factories, he thought. Wants a job on a ranch. He'll find out. Get hisself kicked in the ass a few times. Bump into a few hard times.

Peter clutched the steering wheel as the Buick jumped across railroad tracks. The sun rising up next to the large brick stack of the ketchup factory nearly blinded him. He drew down the visor and followed a line of cars that turned onto the private road of the plant, through the chain link fence, into the parking lot. He parked away from the other cars, usually under the cottonwood tree, where in the heat of afternoon, the Buick stayed cool. Now the space was open, and he veered into the shade, turned off the key, and watched other workers maneuver for places.

"Won't go to the games," Peter said, looking out at the factory smoke rising from the great smokestack. Thursday was the downslump of the week, and, with the weekend off, Peter began thinking about baseball. He remembered going with Jimmy and Elizabeth, taking the turnpike at Sandusky, driving the mileage to Cleveland for Saturday games. After awhile, Jimmy stopped going. Peter thought awhile, waiting in the car for the factory whistle. He thought about his own father, how Abraham had run away. I could have run, too, he thought, getting out of the car.

Billy Camp was high on his perch with a water hose, washing down tomatoes piled in red trucks with white Xes.
The tomatoes were dumped into a bin, where Billy hosed them down before they fed onto the conveyor belt and headed up toward the kitchen. Billy waved. He had put in fifteen years at the plant.

Peter stood in line, stepping slowly toward the time clock. Person has to find his place, he thought. He found his card and punched in. Can't just go running off. Just like Abraham. Peter winced, adjusting to the dark hall, then flashes of light going from the assembly lines to the warehouse. He tried not to think about his father, but the thoughts reeled in, all the arguments, some of the sympathy the town had had. Peter was not able to forget.

Those were sorry years, and Abraham had gone off with a big heart. First to Missouri, then across, up into mining country, going for gold. Abraham was not the kind of man to sit still and take anything. He had taken '34 up to '37, three good years of sitting, then he had to move. Look at those fierce eyes he had. He was not the man to wait for the Depression to make its move.

Peter Walker argued with voices. But you can't run off when there's a family to feed! he thought.

Abraham did have that wild streak. He took that torch and gathered people up and took them down Main Street in protest. Imagine that. Took a thousand people marching out of this sleepy town! Or the time he demanded in a public letter, the folks up in Bently Hills come down
and share their wealth with the needy. Was he mad? Who can say. He and his wild streak that would not be subjugated, that would not wait in soup lines or in rooms cold through the winter.

Peter argued back. The end of all those letters. He wrote he was coming back. GOD'S SPEED, LOVE ABRAHAM. But he stayed. He stayed in Nebraska, in Wyoming, then in Montana. Writing letters all the time, telling us he missed us, signing each letter, God's speed. Then the corpse that rode back on the mail train, and all of us huddled in that house in January, forever abandoned.

Peter found his way to his locker, sat on the green bench, and wiped away thoughts about his father. He took out his hard hat and put the lunchbox inside, fastening the lock. Jimmy trying to be just like his grandpa, Peter thought. On the run. But I have faced this town.

Peter took long strides past the assembly line where workers checked labels and made sure white caps were fastened securely to chili bottles. He took the steps down to the warehouse division, strode across the cement, to the sugar bins where he had worked three years. All this he knew. The warehouse was like home. It smelled sweet.

"She's all your, Pete," Davies said. He was the night shift, a big man in bib overalls with an engineer's cap. Davies looked like a bear climbing up and down his
ladder. He was a tired bear who saluted Peter, removed his cap, rubbed big hands through thinning hair, then he swung over to the dock and took a deep breath. He leaned his face to the sun and yawned. "Gotta get me some sleep," he said. "Run over to the Buckeye for a couple beers, then hit the sack." Davies waved and ambled up the steps toward the lockers. Peter laughed, wondering how it was to drink beer at seven in the morning. He was glad he did not have the night shift.

First Peter checked the sugar level, then he climbed down and moved across to the vacuum hose. The next sugar car would be in at nine, so there was nothing to do but clean up and wait. If the foreman came by, Peter would clean up glass, or check rail ties, or do general inspection. Some of the new kids liked to goof around. They were just out of high school. Some were just out of jail and Peter had to keep watch, make sure they weren't loafing, or stealing ketchup or sacking out back behind the plywood. But first, he would clean up.

He took his broom and swept sugar into a pile. No rain in weeks, he thought. In September the rain would fall. Then the bees would come to the sugar cars and interrupt his work. For now, it was blue sky. Now he could work freely, hitching the large coiled tube to sugar cars, turning the switch, watching the system suck sugar from the cars into the bins. On breaks, he could take his
lunch outside, eat under the blue sky. He could join the
girls working in the box department who had their particu-
lar picnic table, but made room for him. There was one
new girl, Sally, who was fifteen years younger, but had
shown an interest. She was quiet, and she liked baseball.
Someday soon, Peter thought, he would ask her to go to a
Cleveland game with him.

He swept, then he finished and climbed the ladder to
check the sugar levels. They were fine. He moved to the
dock and stayed, enjoying the clear day, glad he could
work right beside it.

Saying I'm stuck, Peter thought. He kept his gaze
at the sky, out past the fence that surrounded the plant,
over the roofs of white houses in rows on Ohio Avenue. He
thought about his son leaving, then coming back. Jimmy
would be tired, ragged, maybe even apologetic. Peter
imagined it, like the story in the bible. He saw the
father coming out to meet the son, then the embrace, then
the feast.

I'd take him to a ball game, Peter thought. Maybe he
would change his mind about baseball. Or, we'd go out to
dinner. I'd let him tell me how he sees things. He would
see it different. See if he'd ever tell me again I'm
stuck.
CHAPTER III

As the sun rose, the square of light moved down the dresser. Walker knew from the position of light the time of morning. If the square lay on the middle drawer, then it was nine o'clock. When his father awoke and trudged down the hall, just as the sun was still in the trees, the splintered square of light normally rested on the photograph of Abraham, atop the dresser. Jimmy Walker had awoken to his father, had gone back to sleep, then awoke again with the light square on the middle drawer. He listened to birds, then he heard the sound of footsteps quickly across the grass, then saw the figures of Sky and Eddie at the window screen.

"Come on!" Eddie banged at the screen, his mouth-guard in his hand. "First day of practice!" Eddie called his high pitched voice. At fifteen, his voice had not yet broke.

"I'm not going," Walker said. He rubbed his eyes, drew down the sheet to his stomach, and propped himself up against the headboard.

"We'll be late," Sky called. He loomed, over six foot, taking up the whole of the window.
"Not this year," Walker said. "Remember, I'm going to Montana this year."

They both laughed, the same way they all laughed when things were too big to understand. Sky and Eddie, and even Elizabeth had laughed when Walker had first mentioned going west. They laughed all together realizing they were loners, without girls, and Eddie had joked about being gay, and they didn't know what to say, so they laughed. And, it was a big joke that they laughed over, the idea they might spend the rest of their lives working in a factory. "Like the old man," Walker had added. It was nervous laughter. Hollow laughter. Now Sky and Eddie were laughing.

"You guys go on," Walker said. "You'll be late. You'll have to run extra laps."

"Come on!"

"No. Football's a joke."

"No, it's not," Sky protested. "This year it won't be a joke."

"I'm leaving. This afternoon. Worked it out with the old man. He says, ok. Told me I could do what I wanted."

"You liar," Eddie said. "I can't believe he'd let you go."

"I told him I'd go to school in Montana. I'm almost seventeen. You think I can't do that stuff on my own?"
"He just let you go?"

"Well, he didn't just let me go. I mean, we had this big fight. I don't want to go into it. Let's just say, I got the green light. I'm not going to practice for sure. I'll be packing this morning, and I'll be gone by this afternoon." Walker looked at Eddie. "You're welcome to come, too, if you want," he said.

"He can't," Sky said. "We're both making the cut. We're staying out. It builds character."

Walker laughed, then bit on the pillow case. "Hook, line and sinker," he said. "They've suckerked you."

"It's not funny," Sky answered, drawing away from the window a step. Walker continued to laugh. Eddie suddenly disappeared beneath the window sill. "I'm not going either," he proclaimed. "I'm with Walker. I'm not putting up with the crappola any longer."

"Where's your character, for Crissakes?" Sky said. He lifted Eddie by the back of his jersey, up to the screen.

"I don't want to," Eddie said, slouching, leaning face first into the screen.

"You going to tell that to Moreno? That what you going to say, you don't want to? He'll kick your butt."

"Screw Moreno," Walker said.

"Easy for you to say," Sky shot back. "You take off on us. You don't have to face him anymore."
"Make me feel guilty, Sky. Thanks. I faced the bastards all last year. I had my share of it. Don't forget that."

"One year," Sky started to say. Walker put up his hand.

"Please, Sky," Walker sat up, leaning his legs over the side of the bed. "This is exactly what those bastards would want. Divide and conquer. Like putting hot salve up each other's asses, right?"

"Exactly," Eddie said.

Sky took Eddie by the arm, then turned. "It's late," he said. "We'll have to run laps." Eddie resisted, then Sky let him go and he left without saying goodbye. Eddie stayed by the window a moment with an agonized look, then he wished Walker good luck.

"Send you a postcard of the wild west," Walker said.

"Fuck," Eddie grunted. He turned and ran to catch up with Sky. The two of them were walking fast. They cut through Mrs. Washington's rose garden with the sun dial in the middle, then were out of sight. Walker removed the sheet, got up, put on jeans, then climbed back in bed and faced the wall. He tried not to think about football or about his friends. Sky and Eddie and him. It was breaking up, gooey and messy, like glue. He pulled the sheet back up, over his face, and fought the memories, but images flowed in. Mostly the old images, back to the games in
the open lots, mostly the past when he could fly down the sideline faster than anybody, catch passes, score on any of the other neighborhood teams. It was before he began stumbling over his own growth.

He remembered sitting in the limbs with ripe fruit, looking out through apple leaves, sweat down his back, the taste of victory. Eddie was thinner. Eddie took apples and bruised them and sucked the juices, and taught everybody in the neighborhood that eating bruised apples was the best way. Eddie always sat higher in the tree, but then, he was quarterback. He was the primo passer, and Walker was the town's best receiver, but the town didn't know.

Sitting in the limbs in '75, eleven year olds tasted victory and tasted the glowing anticipation of their own emergence, some day. They saw heroes of the day on the sports pages of the Fairport Register. The split end named Steve Young who was the talk of Fairport. 285 yards for Young, the headlines read. Woodville 17, Young 24. At the age of seventeen, Young was a hero. In the news every Monday morning and in the hearts of every eleven year old kid in an apple tree.

"Next time you be the quarterback," Eddie said. "I want to be Young."

"But you're the best. You'll be the next Terry Bradshaw! Eddie Pesto completes 22 for 30 passes, 350 yards!"
Pesto to Walker combo takes Fairport to state!
"Just one game I want to be Young, ok?"
"You can't run, Eddie. You're all hands. Besides, who'll throw the ball?"

Sitting in the limbs, they felt the glow, tasted victory and bruised apples all at once. Back then, everything was sweet.

The gauntlet was the dread of underclassmen, and, while he should have been a junior and all through with it, Walker had failed the second grade, and was only a sophomore. He would not face it again. Two years was too much.

The bus would roll along Wilson Avenue, over potholes, past the bakery, past the foundry and the tire company, back to the school parking lot where the coaches told seniors, the worst seniors, to make sure they locked the doors. Then the coaches took their clipboards and made their way to the office. Underclassmen watched the coaches every step across the playground, watched them open the silver doors and disappear inside the building while, inside the bus, the seniors and juniors were laughing under their breath.

"Ok, little piggies!" Moreno shouted. "Down on your hands and knees!"
The front of the bus, the prosecutors, erupted with laughter. The prosecuted were on their knees, holding the chinstraps of their helmets in their teeth, crawling down the aisle, receiving whacks and pinches and hair pulls. Moreno was always the general who took over the driver's seat, cupped his hands and gave the orders. He ordered one freshman to stop crawling, ordered the player behind to keep moving until he had crawled up on top of the other. Prosecutors erupted into laughter. Sky and Eddie and Walker got down on hands and knees, biting their chinstraps, moving with the herd.

Afterward, waiting for Sky's mother in her green Fairlane, the three of them gathered on the asphalt underneath the fire escape, while Eddie, cross legged, buddha-like, complained. "This is a bunch of shit, folks." Eddie, chewing candy and advising, "Should we take a whole season of this shit?"

Walker felt vengeful. He watched the square of light almost to the floor, glanced to the photograph of his grandfather, with fierce eyes, staring over his head, and he thought about what he might have said to any of the players who ever treated him like dirt. He imaged how he would have told them he was leaving for Montana and they could have their gauntlet. They could have their derision. They could have their little lives, do whatever they
wanted, but he was going, and they could not stop him. He was storming out, away from the bastards. With the power of his dreams, with the force of a train, they would not dare touch him.
CHAPTER IV

Elizabeth cried. She felt cheated. She knew the story about Abraham going off on trains, being shot in the saloon, and now it was her brother. It made her angry that he had hardly brought her into the decision, never thought about her end of the deal. After he left, it would be only her and her father and she did not know how she would handle it. How would she keep him company? How would she sit down at the table with him, being just fourteen? What would they talk about?

It was more than fear. Elizabeth felt like a mother holding everything together, and Jimmy was busting everything up. Then it was also Alicia. "She's sending me off," Walker had told her. He had taken her out for dinner. For once they had sat down together a good long time and she had wanted everything to go right, then he had gone and said that. "She's taking off work and walking me out to the highway," he had said, sheepishly.

Elizabeth gripped the handle bars of her bicycle, with Alexander beside her on his own bike. Alexander wore clothes from the fifties, a white collar shirt, black pants, white socks, red ball jets. He was starting a new

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fad that had not caught yet. Elizabeth liked the whole idea and found herself enjoying his company, his blond curls. They had been seeing each other three weeks, going to the duck pond on their bikes, going home together. She used Alexander as a wall for her anxieties.

"He's leaving this afternoon," she told him. "He'll say goodbye, probably be thinking about mountains, not about anything around here. Then he'll slide out and meet her." Elizabeth looked straight at Alexander. "That's how boys are, huh?" She threw back her hair. "That's the way Jimmy's been. Used to be the river. He was never around. Now it's the mountains. We're having dinner together and he pulls out this magazine page, a picture of this guy from Montana on his ranch."

Elizabeth stopped her bike at the walk entering the apartment complex. She leaned and held Alexander's handle bar. "Can you say, I love you?" she asked. Alexander flushed. He blinked. "Go on," she said. "Say it. I love you."

"I love you," he said, feeling like somebody had pressed a huge thumb to his chest.

"Was that so hard?"

"No," he answered. It was not like his dreams, where everything was water smooth. Alexander had dreamt about Elizabeth the past eleven nights. It had never been like this.
"Why can't Jimmy say it?" she asked. "Fourteen years together in this place, and he won't say it. Won't even hug. I have to force hugs out of him."

"It's hard for guys," Alexander said.

"You'd think he'd want to say it, if he's leaving forever."

Alexander pulled at his socks. He desired to say it again, that he loved her. He wanted to say it without her prodding and feel it water smooth and kiss her, like in his dreams. He wanted Elizabeth to say she loved him. "Say you love me," he blurted out. It was all wrong. The words had stumbled out. He felt hot. Elizabeth laughed.

"It's only been a few weeks," she said. "I like you, Alexander, but we're buds."

"Sorry," he said.


"I guess," Alexander said, following her to the front porch. There was an old couch facing west, and two bicycle tires leaned up against the wall, and beer bottles.

"I can't believe he's going," she said, parking the bike against the porch. "I thought it was all talk."

"I should go," Alexander said. "I'll call you in a couple days." He wondered if he could wait that long.
He would have to. He would wait for everything to blow over, for Jimmy to leave, for the air to clear. Then he would have Elizabeth to himself again.

"Thanks," she said. She went up the steps, held to the porch rail, and watched Alexander go. He turned the bike, spun his tires on the stones and rode off.

"I'll tell him!" she called out. "I'll tell him I love him and see if he can say it back!" She watched Alexander get smaller, the bike crossing the street, veering past apartments down the block. A tear rolled down her cheek.
CHAPTER V

Rock and roll blared out of the apartment above, bounced off buildings close by, and entered the window. Out on the parking lot, one cat perched by the tire of a station wagon, the other, a kitten, rolled on a grasshopper in the dirt where the asphalt dropped off to earth and stone. Walker went to the back steps and began reading the history of Fairport that his father had thrown on the bed after their last fight. There was an old photograph of the ketchup factory, photos of the county fair, the river and the dam, buildings and people. Walker paged through quickly, deciding he would put it back under his bed rather than carrying it. He felt no connection to anything in it other than the river. His father wanted him to take it along. "To remember Fairport, where your roots are," his father had said. Walker had countered that his roots would have been out west. He had stood face to face with his father, trembling, saying they all should have been in Montana if Abraham had lived.

Walker returned to his room, making sure it was clean. He had everything done, except he wanted to talk with Elizabeth. He would make it quick because she was in
one of her moods; she had been edgy since breakfast; she was in her room, being too quiet. He would give her a big hug before he left, and tell her he would write soon.

Alicia's face turned up at the window. "Carrajo," she said playfully. It was something her father and uncles always said to each other when they wanted to sound bad, but mean good. Alicia came inside. She stood in the sun by the window.

"Give me a bag to carry," she said. She stooped to take the pack.

"That's too big," Walker said. He handed her the smaller bag that held the letters from Abraham. He told her about the letters. "They're like the Mexican stories your grandfather told you," he said. "These will help me on the way."

"Bueno," she said, smiling that he remembered the stories from her grandfather.

"First we say goodbye to Elizabeth, then I guess we're ready."

Walker left his bags in the room and went down the hall, where the door of Elizabeth's room was partially open. She was inside, humming, lying on the bed. The room smelled of bedding and perfume. Colors of the room matched Elizabeth's hair and eyes--blue, yellow and brown. She had a large stuffed elephant and a snake in the one
corner. Beside her dresser was a cork board with photos of her best friends and classmates, a class picture from eighth grade.

"Hi," he said. She had been crying and her eyes were watery. It was easy for her to cry. She was fluid, more sanguine, and could erupt easily into tears or anger or love. Walker watched her get up, wipe her eyes, then she stood.

"You going?" she asked.

"I'm leaving now," he said. "You want to join us?"

"No. You go on."

"You sure? You can come, too."

"It'll be the same there as here, so I may as well stay here. Let you two alone."

"I just wanted to say goodbye and I'll miss you. And I'll write to you all along the way."

"Thanks." Elizabeth stood awhile, then moved toward him. He felt awkward. Goodbyes were always awkward, the few he had had. He wanted a quick hug, then a quick goodbye, but when she put her arms around him, it was long. He thought he could smell the tears, and a trace of perfume. He felt the hair against his face, auburn, the color of his mother's hair. She was like their mother, people said. She had inherited the face, the eyes, the disposition. Walker felt the warmth, then heard her whisper, I love you. He could only answer, you too.
He had never said the words, and she said them easily. He felt her release. He stepped back, told her again he would send her postcards; he could not find the proper mood or the words. He stepped back through the door, out to where Alicia was waiting.

"Write me a letter," Elizabeth said, standing in the doorway. "Write me a long letter, Jimmy. And write one to Dad. Ok?"

"Promise," he said, crossing his heart.

Lousy, he thought. Alicia and he passed the dying hickory tree, the cat perched by the station wagon, kids having a baseball game on the front lawn of the house next door. Not the most graceful exit. Not like in the movies. Everything was mixed up.

They passed houses and apartments all clogged together, and lawns with kids' toys and balls and bicycles and tricycles, the grass worn to dirt. They passed the old Dodge with the flat tire that had been sitting since May. It was rusted and beaten. The whole neighborhood was beaten up. Walker had longed to leave it, but now he wanted to scoop everything up and take it along with him. They passed one car with a Cleveland Indians cap on the dashboard. So long to another losing season.

"I'll write a good long letter," Walker told Alicia. Sun reflected on her hair, black like November fields.
"I'll write from every state, send a letter."

Alicia laughed. "You can get through a state in a day," she said. "You won't have time. You can get through three states in a day. You could be all the way to Saint Louis by the end of today."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Me and Ruben hitched through four states in a day one time."

Walker envied her. He had heard all the stories of hitching rides, how Alicia and one or the other of her brothers sometimes hitched all the way from Pecos up to Fairport. It was nothing to her.

Out by the tomato fields, Alicia waved to the workers near the road. She called in Spanish and one of the women called back. One of the men yelled something and everyone laughed.

"What's going on?" Walker asked.

"He said you're my novio. Boyfriend."

One of the women called out, and there was more laughter. "She says they're all jealous because you're tall and cute." Alicia laughed, then she took Walker's hand playfully and the workers sang out in laughter. "We can let them imagine," she said, squeezing his hand.

The last time, Walker thought. He looked from the road, upon the rows and rows of tomatoes, and hampers piled red on dry paths. Workers in straw hats or with no
hats and black hair and dark skin were in constant motion of bending, reaching, picking, filling the hampers. Red trucks with white Xes moved along the aisles twice a day, hoisted the baskets of tomatoes, took them to the highway. Everything done like ants. The ketchup factory was the anthill. Hose 'em down, up the conveyors, into the kitchen, into bottles, out to the A & P.

"Dad said I should play the cards I was dealt," Walker said. "I told him Montana was in the cards. That's what I'm playing."

"If you have to do it, you have to do it," Alicia said. "My family has to come up here from Pecos. Lorenzo had to go into the marines. You do what you have to."

It was hard. He did not want to think. In his room he had planned, and the trip had seemed like mathematics. In the warmth of his bedroom, it was one direct line out to Montana. Now he had changed his mind and wanted to go south first, following the path Abraham had taken. Down to Columbus, over to Saint Louis, out to Denver, then up. Now, facing the highway, the plan did not seem so neat.

They reached the point where the road edged along beside the river. Alicia pulled off, followed the weeds to the river bank. Walker stood looking out to the place where he had spent a decade as a river rat.

There was the black woman, Isabella. She had her lawn chair and the grey cat on the white rock beside her.
How many times Walker had seen the woman trudging through low current, hauling her poles and the chair, with the cat on her shoulder, out to the small island, to the deep pool off the main current. Every day Isabella came to fish. She had her coffee cans submerged on the shallow rocks. Overnight traps. In the morning, she lifted the cans, took crayfish that had backed into the cans, and she severed the tails for white meat. Some of the fish she caught she fed to her eight or nine or ten or eleven cats. The grey cat, Brenda, she liked to take along and feed right there on the rocks.

"She is fishing late," Alicia said. They both waved, and Isabella waved back. She was too far away to hear, so Walker just waved and said his goodbyes to himself. He moved with Alicia out through thistle and camomile, back to the road. They walked another half mile before coming to the main highway going south, toward Columbus. Walker set down his pack.

"You'll get a ride in no time," Alicia said, placing the small bag next to the pack. "Keep walking, no matter what. If you stop to sit, they think you're a bum. They like you to earn rides." Alicia removed a chain and cross from her neck and handed it to Walker. "For good luck," she said, then added in Spanish, "bueno suerte."

Walker did not want to accept the gift. "It's yours," he said, trying to push back her hand. She took hold of
his wrist.

"Listen, pendejo," she said. She opened his hand and forced the gift, folding his fingers over it. "Now you put it on and you'll have luck. It was blessed by the bishop of El Paso."

Walker allowed her to put the chain and cross around his neck, then she fastened it. He felt her hands brush the back of his neck.

"I have to get back to work," she said, "or they'll all be jealous." She laughed. She stepped closer and kissed his cheek. "Write me a letter, too," she said. "When you get to Montana."

"I will." Walker put on his pack, fastened the clips, then he grabbed the bag of letters. Alicia turned, went a few paces, and turned back. "Hay te watcho," she said, waving to him.

"Hay te watcho," he answered. He stood and watched Alicia, her long braids swinging as she walked away, taking the gravel shoulder, following weeds back toward the river. She turned one more time and waved, and he waved back, then he tightened his straps, took a deep breath, and moved south on the highway. He simply walked. It was not until a dozen cars passed that he began to turn and hold out his thumb, hoping the driver of the car did not recognize him. What if the driver were Moreno, or one of the seniors? What if somebody he knew drove past
and saw him with his bags? He wanted to talk all the way to Tiffin and not have to face traffic. That was twenty miles down the road.

The car that was his first ride was a rusted Buick that had passed him earlier and must have turned around. It had a broken headlight. The car was full of cigarette smoke, with beer cans on the floor, and newspapers covering the back seat.

"Goin' to Tiffin," the man said, opening the door for Walker. He had the radio playing, country and western music coming out of a small speaker over the ashtray full of cigarette butts. "Used to do what you're doin'," the man said, "when I was in the service." He offered Walker a cigarette.

"Don't smoke," Walker said.

"Usually I don't pick up people, but you looked ok. You're cleaner than a lot of 'em. You can't trust people nowadays." He flicked ashes from his cigarette into the ashtray. Other ashes jumped out, some blowing onto Walker's pant leg.

"Where ya headed?" the man asked.

"Down to Columbs," Walker said. "Then out west. Montana."

"That's a pretty long way. Never been that far west myself."
"It's my first time," Walker said. "Going out to see my grandfather." Walker wanted to make the story easy. It was too complicated otherwise. "He's giving me a job on a ranch," Walker added. "Baling hay."

"Sounds like fun," the man said, puffing, letting the wind take the smoke out the back window.

"It's pretty hard work," Walker said. "But it's out in the open. You're not all cooped up."

"That's good," the man said. He turned up the radio to a Kenny Rogers song. The song took them into Tiffin, where the man dropped Walker off at the gas station.

"I'm goin' thataway," the man pointed east toward downtown. "You'll catch a good ride here. People can pull over."

Walker climbed out, thanked the man, then got his pack from the back seat. He went to the pop machine and bought a Pepsi, and sat beside his pack out by the road. The intersection was large. He would catch both avenues going south.

It was better, he thought. Now that he was out of Fairport. He would set small goals for himself. By nightfall, if he could make it to Columbus. Then find some where to camp. He could take trains from Columbus, like Abraham had done. Abraham had gone by car, south to the capital city, looking there for work. When he did not find work, he tooks trains west, to Springfield, then to
Indianapolis, then he had moved on toward the western states.

Walker wanted to follow. If it were so easy as in his room.

He rested against a large tree. His shirt was drenched from hiking in the heat, with the weight of the pack. He was tired. By nightfall, he thought, I'll be there. No more than a few hours to Columbus, then a little time to find the rail yard. Then the train pulls out and I'll be on it.

Walker had closed his eyes and then awoke and thought that maybe he was still in the midst of sleep. It was like a dream. The blue Plymouth rocked through the intersection, pulling to an abrupt halt at the gasoline pumps. Was it Eddie at the window? Waving out the window, then getting out with a huge green army bag and a pink suitcase? If not a dream, would his mother sit there, hands gripping the wheel, paying no attention to him, finally waving the attendant for gas? Irene never looked. She sat behind the wheel, sullen, watching Eddie move across the front of the car.

"I'm going with!" he yelled. He had a toothbrush in his shirt pocket.

"No," Walker said, wiping his eyes.

"Yes!" Eddie said. "Mom said I could go. Until school
starts."

"No."

"Yes! Go ask her if you don't believe me. What the hell, you think she drove me here to have a soda pop?"

Walker studied Eddie's mother, sitting, now smoking a cigarette while the attendant pumped gas. He did not wish to talk with Irene Pesto. She had never quite liked him, and now she probably felt he was taking her only son away. He looked back at Eddie who had plopped down on the up-ended pink suitcase. Walker never believed Eddie would come. He didn't know if he wanted Eddie along. All the planning for the journey had involved him alone; he had never thought about asking anyone. The invitation in the morning had not been serious, only a joke, only to get back at Sky.

"Just go ask," Eddie repeated, taking out his wallet. He counted money.

"I believe you," Walker said.

"You know how she's always wanted me to be tougher," Eddie said, sticking the wallet inside the green bag. "That's why she made me go out for football."

"Eddie, come on. She didn't make you go out."

"Yes, she did. I don't like football anymore. It's not fun anymore. So she made me, and I went out. Now, she's talking two years up the road, talking about the army. My old man was in the army and I guess he was tough."
She cuts out adds from magazines and hangs them on the refrigerator, GI bill shit, opportunity, travel, the whole nine yards."

Eddie took out a candy bar from the green bag and started eating. "To make a long story short, I got her to see how this trip would make me tough. Out on my own, facing the unknown, rolling stone, etc. etc. I also said if she let me go, I'd consider the army."

After the attendant left, Irene called Eddie to the car window, and they talked, then Eddie gave his mother a kiss on the cheek, a little chocolate smudge, and the Plymouth wheeled out through the pumps, past the small pile of luggage, Irene waving. It was not sentimental; it was not sad. Irene waved until she had to step on the gas to make it through the yellow light. "Ci vediamo!" Eddie called, throwing a kiss down the highway. He knew all Italian cuss words and he knew how to say goodbye.

Walker laughed to himself, imagining Eddie in the army, with his high pitched voice and his weight. They would eliminate candy from his diet. They might call him dumpy, the same as the football players did. Seniors thought Eddie was pathetic. He complained too much. But Eddie had come through a tougher life than football players knew. His father had left Irene when Eddie was nine; she had begun to drink too much, martinis after a day at the office; the fact that Eddie had been thinner
and had once ruled the neighborhoods with his golden arm. Through the years, Eddie had had to give up the idea of being a star, and he had done so without moping about it.

"I need to go change shirts," Walker said. "I must have walked three miles, with that pack."

"Go ahead, I'll guard the loot." Eddied crumpled the candy wrapper and stuck it in his shirt pocket. He was environmentally aware. He sank into the green bag, and took out long strings of red licorice, folded them up and ate them.

The restroom smelled like pine. There was a large mirror over the sink that Walker used, looking into his own eyes. He laughed. "What are you doing?" he said to the mirror. He examined the chain and cross that looked good on him. Bueno suerte, he heard Alicia's voice again. He saw her in blue jeans, bending in the fields.

He washed his face and arm pits with warm water and dried with the old shirt and put on the new one, feeling the chain underneath the shirt. Maybe it was good luck that Eddie had come, after all. It would be better. He was glad Eddie had left football. This would be good for both of them.
CHAPTER VI

There was still some light when the train pulled out of Marion, Ohio, going southward, first slowly, but gaining speed. A tall thin man with a small pack had hoisted himself inside the first boxcar just after the whistle had blown, before the train had moved. Walker had seen the man with two other men earlier, walking near the depot. Now he saw the man sitting inside the car as it passed.

"I see another one!" Walker called to Eddie. Six more cars passed, then the boxcar with the open door. The cars loomed next to the boys, swaying, as if they would topple at any moment. Walker felt the tremor of wheels on track. He and Eddie moved alongside the tracks, step for step with the huge cars. The train increased speed. Walker threw in his pack, then hoisted himself up. Eddie was jogging beside the car.

"I can't!" Eddie cried.

"Throw the bags!" Walker yelled over the sound of the wheels. He saw the outskirts of the town moving by, the piles of rail ties and briar hedge. He leaned and grabbed the army bag, then the suitcase, then he reached for Eddie's hand.

"No!" Eddie yelled. "I can't do it! I'm too. . . ."
"Hoist yourself up, Eddie! I'll get you!"

Eddie jogged faster, then he ran ahead of the car, stopped, and when the car arrived, he jumped. Walker grabbed his arms, dragged him to the middle of the car.

"Crissakes!" Eddie grunted, cleaning himself, brushing his pants. He rubbed his elbows that had scraped across the floor. "Are we doing this all the way to Montana?"

"That's how you get on," Walker said. "You ever see in the movies?"

"I can't do it," Eddie said.

"Next time, you go first. When the train's going slower." Walker sat back against the wall of the car, feeling the sway and the air blowing in. He had seen the outlaws in westerns, how they had hoisted themselves up, just the way he had done. His first jump and he had done it perfectly.

"I'm no good at this," Eddie said. "I'm too fat to jump trains."

"No, you aren't. Look at it this way. You'll lose weight doing this."

"Yeah. How much does a leg weigh?" Eddie took out a handkerchief, spit on it, and wiped his elbows. "Maybe I'll lose a leg and an arm. It'd be pretty easy to do." He ruffled through the green bag and pulled out a Milky Way bar, and ate it in four bites. "That helps," he said, relaxing. "Chocolate is most wonderful."
"Most wonderful?" Walker laughed.

"Of anything," Eddie answered. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths. He sat cross legged, in his Buddha pose. "I don't need women, long as I have chocolate."

"You're stupid, Eddie."

"I'm serious. Chocolate is better than sex even. I read it in a magazine."

"And you believe it."

"Well, I also have experience. With chocolate. It calms me, and it gives me a rush, and I can eat it while I'm studying geometry." Eddie laughed. "I kissed a girl once and it didn't taste as good. I don't think she liked to brush her teeth."

"Ok, Eddie," Walker said. "I get the point." Walker wanted to sit and look out on the land and feel the wind. He'd forgotten how Eddie liked to talk. He remembered how Eddie had talked his way into hard times at football.

"Can't believe my mother let me go," Eddie said, reaching into the green bag for a Hershey's bar. He slunk back into the bag, then propped the bag against the wall of the boxcar. "I caught her at the right moment, I think. She has Wednesday afternoons off, so when I got back from practice, there she was, at the table, sipping a martini. I told her I was through with football, and I wanted to go with you, the whole argument, how I'd consider the army if she let me go. She blinked, then said absolutely not."
Then I pulled a chair up and told her again. I said I'd had it with football. I think it was the fact that I'd sat down with her. Usually I'm pacing the living room when we argue. She gave me a slightly less emphatic, 'No, honey.' Then she had a second martini. That's when I surprised her. I got up from the chair and moved to the chair right next to her, and I put my hand on her knee, and my face so close I could smell the alcohol, then I said, 'Mother, remember all those stories you used to tell me, how you always walked to school even when the snow was four foot high, and you think I've got it easy? Well, I'm telling you now I'm going with Walker. I want the tough life.' Then I told her about people in her generation leaving when they were sixteen years old etc. and I was no different, etc. etc., I got her to give in."

"What'd she say?"

"Well, first she asked if I knew what I was doing. You know, the whole protective mother bit. Did I really think I could face the big bad world. I think I began to make a crack in her little baby, only child idea. It's so weird, Jimmy. The mother thing. She wants me to be tough, but she doesn't want anything to bump into me." Eddie tore the wrapper down, broke off a piece of the candy bar and gave it to Walker. "What about you?" he asked. "Your father must have put up a fight."

"Not really. He told me I'd end up like grandpa."
Said I was running from things."

"He try to make you stay?"

"He tried to talk me out of it. Said I should finish school. That's his big thing. He never finished high school. I told him I'd finish someplace out west."

"That's it? He just argued and let you go?"

"That's about it. Said I'd be back in two weeks, the same big bad world thing." Walker laughed. "I was going to bet him. I was ready to put all my money on the table and bet him I wouldn't be back for a year." Walker gazed out through the boxcar door, to the sun that had dropped below clouds on the horizon. He lavished in the vistas of red barns and silos, and the fact that he was moving. He liked the motion of the train, the sway, the idea of moving away, of going somewhere. "I'm going to try to forget about Fairport, Eddie," he said. "Let's do that, ok? Let's talk about what's up ahead. Let's talk about train rides and all the things we're going to see."

Walker dangled his legs over the side. "Come on, Eddie," he motioned. "Look at that sunset. You never sat in a boxcar like this, so let's do it. It's like being real hoboes."

"I don't know," Eddie said. "What if we come to a bridge or something? We'll get our legs cut off." Eddie sat next to Walker, keeping his legs in.

Walker leaned to look, and saw nothing but fields and
briar and the long chain of cars. He laughed. He didn't push it. It was fine having Eddie beside him, legs inside and all. He thought about what they would do when they got to Columbus. Maybe they would go to a fancy restaurant, or to one of the college bars. A fancy place would be best. He would take Eddie and everything would be on him, because he had the money. Seven months he had slaved bussing tables at the Fairport Cafe, and now he had two hundred dollars. He had a roll of tens and twenties, thick inside his pocket. He could splurge. They would buy champagne and make a toast to the journey. He would make a toast to his moving out.

"Nice sunset," he said to Eddie, who was already working on a spool of licorice, chewing like a cow.

"Real nice," Eddie answered.

Walker took out the packet of letters, gave one to Eddie, and took for himself the last letter, the October one, written two months before Abraham's death. There might have been other letters; this had been the latest date in the batch of six that Walker had rescued from the attic when he had gone up in the spring of '75. The letter was on yellow lined paper, dated October 23, 1937.

Dear Annie and the kids,

We have come by train and by truck into Wyoming, with two more men added to our group
of eight. We are camped on Bitter Creek and can see mountains in the distance. Deep blue and shadowy in the mornings, and by afternoon, they are red and purple. We have good food from hunting, and the women have herbs and teas. No money, yet we feel this wealth. It is as if there is no depression or soup lines or humiliation.

We hear about the gold in Montana and everybody wants to get up there fast and take a peek. Rumor has it a man took out a chunk as big as my toe, worth a thousand dollars at least. Maybe we'll be rich!

Tomorrow we head out and will be in Montana. Hope you and the kiddies are all right. Are the boys giving you a hand? Say hi to Mom and Dad, and relay this letter to them. You are always in my heart.

God's speed, love,

Abraham

"He's funny," Eddie said, handing the letter to Walker.

"You think?"

"Yeah. Somebody should publish the part about the river."

"Nobody'd like it. They thought he was weird."
I can't see the **Register** printing what Abraham wrote."

"Yeah, you're right." Eddie took out more licorice.

Walker re-read the letter. It was a report from somewhere in Missouri, before the group had gone north. Abraham had been reminiscent of life in Fairport, of the farm, of a small conservative town and the river that had also meant something to him. He had scribbled on the back side of the letter an essay he entitled "Naming the River," then went on to draw the Sandusky, the dam, the bridge, the hydro plant and the A & P grocery, all the way to the sugar factory. Walker skimmed the front page, then turned and read about the river:

In times before the Wyandot and Iroquois were pushed irretrievably northward, there was a spiritual man named Sitting Deer who rested every evening at the sandy banks of the river, contemplating life's beauty and serenity. This went on for years, then the pioneers came. One evening as the sun was setting, a pioneer crossed Sitting Deer's path, observing from behind one of the many trees the dark man's exercise. And when the pioneer greeted the spiritual man, Sitting Deer merely pointed to the land, then to the sunset, then waved across the flow of the river. The pioneer left. He carried with him his parchment and quill and
carefully recorded everything, including Sitting Deer's greeting. In the diary, he wrote - Indian, sand, river, dusk. He returned to his fortress, went to his desk, and as was his penchant for naming things, decided to name the river. He played with the notion of the Indian, the dusk, the sand, and called it the Sand dusk River. The name stuck for a hundred years.

Then a large family of Czeckoslovakian corn farmers gained control of the land from Tiffin to the lake, and they decided to add an "i" to the name, which was later changed to a "y". Hence, the name Sandusky River.

Walker tucked the letter inside the envelope, wishing that some of his grandfather would have rubbed off on his father. But it hadn't. His father's wilderness was the roaring inside of the Cleveland baseball stadium, beer and hotdogs.

Walker took out the map, tracing with his finger the route Abraham had travelled, going as far as Hays, Kansas, then up to the Platte River. The train had found rough track and was bouncing a wooden spool against the sides of the car. Eddie held his knees and cursed in Italian. The train swayed and rocked. Walker found it impossible to sit comfortably.

"How many more miles?" Eddie asked.
"I don't know. Maybe sixty or so?"

"Seems like we should have been there by now."

"Trains go slower than cars. Don't worry."

"This is for the birds," Eddie grunted, holding his knees.

The engine whistled through the sleepless night, winding past fields and farms and towns, toward the steel mills of eastern Ohio. Now there were only clusters of lights to mark the towns Walker might have guessed to be those on the way to Columbus; but instead, they were towns a hundred miles east. Coshocton, West Lafayette, Tuscarawas. The train smoked its way through Uhrichsville on smoother track, stopped five minutes, then moved on toward Steubenville and places east.
CHAPTER VII

The train pulled in under tall bright lights and clouds of gnats buzzing thick as the humidity. Switcher engines lugged up and down the rails, their little yellow lights blinking. Eddie swatted bugs, then picked up his suitcase and followed Walker along a path that veered away from the main track, along warehouses, through weeds, to the smoke of a campfire, where two hoboes made their place.

"Maybe they'll have coffee," Eddie said.

"I didn't know you drank it," Walker said.

"Just started."

The older man sat on a bucket and rolled cigarettes that he placed neatly in lines on a two-by-six next to him. He wore a Phillies baseball cap and had a grey beard as unattended as a row house. The younger man gazed into the fire, gripping a tin cup, intent on the flames.

"A jungle," Walker said, stepping confidently into the circle. He had seen jungles in books. In the stories about hoboes, there were always the descriptions of jungles. Shabby, Walker thought. Light from the fire refracted off broken wine bottles. He could see discarded oil drums that propped up sheet metal roofing. Behind the
older hobo, three two-by-fours acted as frontal pillars, with a mattress underneath and clothes left by other transients the way tourists leave books in hotels. The place was a slough of bottles and paper sacks and baggies and bicycle tires. Clothes hung on nails. Shoes without partners held the roof down.

The older hobo introduced himself as Pauper, tipped his cap, and introduced Willie, who glanced up from the fire momentarily. There were buckets and a log for seats.

"You boys is up early," Pauper said. "Early bird catches tobacco butts on the cathedral steps around here." He laughed and slapped his knee. "That's a real old one." He poured more grounds of coffee from one of the baggies, stirred the brown juice inside the pan. "Sunday after­noon, after Mass," he said, looking closely at the grounds floating atop the water. He laughed again. "I got cataracts. And I carry grinds and butts in these things. Sometimes I'll pour in tobacco instead. I think I got it right this time."

"It's coffee," Walker said.

Pauper offered tin cups, and Eddie accepted, even though he never drank coffee. He was getting into the experience. He offered to help roll cigarettes. Pauper sifted through his pockets for butts, took out a handful, pinched off the filters, like the old woman Isabella pinching crawfish tails, and pitched them into the flames.
"Some churches are good," he continued. "Bars on Sunday morning before they sweep." He studied Walker. "You don't smoke or nothin'," he said.

"Not this early," Walker answered, feeling left out. He wanted to move, to find the city. "We just stopped to say hi. We're going in for breakfast. Come on, Eddie," he urged, standing. But Eddie had settled in. He puffed, took another slug of coffee, and spit into the fire.

"Can't I finish my cigarette?" he asked.

"Bring it with you," Walker said. "We'll stop someplace on the way in and you can buy a whole pack if you want."

"Sounds like you fellas have some spare change," Willie spoke for the first time. He kept his eyes on the fire. He flashed a look to Walker quickly, then returned his gaze.

"I ain't eaten a good meal in ages," he said, slowly. "Couple, three bucks'll get me something to eat, if you don't mind."

Walker had most of the money, twice as much as Eddie, and felt obliged to donate. He took two bills from his wallet and handed them to Willie, who stuffed the money into his coat pocket.

"Appreciate it," Willie said. He sipped coffee, holding the cup tightly with both hands, like he was cold. "Now I can eat," he said.
"If you fellas is migrant workers, seems you're headin' a roundabout way goin', ain't ya? Ain't that much around here."

"We wanted to head south, first," Eddie said, taking one last puff on the cigarette before he twisted it into the dirt. "Then we're going west. We'll hire on as ranch hands."

"We're just passing through," Walker added.

"Passin' through? You comin' a long way east for that, ain't ya?" Pauper worked on another cigarette. "You know where you're at?"

"Columbus," Walker answered.

Pauper lighted a cigarette in the flame and laughed. "That's a good one," he said, his laughter becoming short, emphysemic coughs. He took a long drag from the cigarette. "This isn't Columbus," Wille said, fanning the fire with his gaze. "You must've got on the wrong train."

"This is Pittsburgh," Pauper said. Seeing the looks on the boys' faces, he slapped his knee and laughed. "This here's Pittsburgh, Pa."

"Shit," Eddie said.

"Wrong train," Willie said in a low, deliberate voice. He laughed to himself. "But that's all right, 'cause the sun'll be shining, and pretty soon it'll be November, so just enjoy it while it lasts." He looked up and smiled.
"We'll be going now," Eddie said. "Maybe we'll be back after we eat."

"Only place the trains come through," Willie said. He spit a wad of chew into the fire. "You gotta be back."

Eddie was already moving down the path, toward the street lights. Walker looked east and saw the light of dawn, felt the mixture of hunger and fatigue from the all-night ride. He felt relief leaving Willie. He and Eddie trudged through inner city early morning, the bread truck parked on the alley, a news boy lugging two sacks full of papers. Lights in apartments flicked on. A siren rang.

"We'll grab something quick, then get the hell back on the right train," Walker said. "I don't like this. We just lost the whole day."

"I'm bad luck," Eddie said. "Lately things aren't going right, and I think I know why. It was me and Sky about six years ago in old what's-her-name's garden. The old woman by the hospital."

"Vanelli?"

"Yeah. We went in to get some carrots or something and she came out and put a hex on us. Things have gone haywire ever since."

"Funny."

"I'm serious. Everything I touch is bad luck."

Eddie stopped on the sidewalk. "Maybe we shouldn't get on that next train. It's going to wreck."
"Eddie!"

"I can feel it, Jimmy. I feel the curse. Cross my heart and hope to die, if I lie, stick a pin in my eye." Eddie crossed his heart, then made the motion of sticking his eye.

"We're getting on the next train, Eddie. There's no curse. First we get something to eat, then we get out of Pittsburgh, ok?"

"Ever since," Eddie whined. "I got fat, and everything went downhill. Not to mention I might be gay."

"You're probably not," Walker said.

"I'm not into girls. I dream about guys, Jimmy. Once I dreamt about Moreno. He was naked, trying to swim across the river in high water. It was exciting. I woke up with a hard-on."

"Most guys wake up with hard-ons," Walker said, looking at the old buildings, worn down, hedging in on themselves. There were condemned buildings, with boards over the windows.

"Moreno swam out to this rock and sat there," Eddie continued, "naked, on the rock in the middle of the river."

"Probably where you wanted him to be," Walker said. "You just want to see him out where he couldn't get you. You were putting him out in the middle of the river."

"Why naked?"

"Who knows? I don't think you're gay, Eddie."
"I'm different. I'm not like other guys."

"You're Italian. You show your emotions. It's in your blood. Most of the others are hard-assed Germans. Moreno's superman. He'll grow up and run a bulldozer or something and drink too much and beat his wife." Walker saw a black cat perched on a wall overgrown with ivy. There was a liquor store and empty storefronts loaded with graffitti. Two women smoked cigarettes on steps behind an iron gate as the dawn broke. Walker thought about hot evenings when he and Sky and Eddie and sometimes Elizabeth would sit on steps. He remembered times they would sit and predict the future, ten years down the road, which football player would end up in which factory. They always put Moreno in the foundry, in the flames and soot, and he would come out on breaks covered with sweat and every bit of it he would have coming to him.

Eddie found a diner resting on the corner by a caution light. Rudy's Cafe and Grill. The place was purple and white. White square building with purple neon lights. Small white tables and purple walls. Along the west wall there were booths with purple vinyl seats.

"I don't know," Eddie said.

"Don't worry," Walker answered quickly, moving through the door. "Sometimes it's good to be emotional."

"I want to be tough," Eddie protested.

"Maybe you can be both. I don't know."
Walker watched Eddie slip the green bag and suitcase into the booth, against the wall. He sunk back into vinyl, wiped his eyes, peered out the porthole of a window, and sighed. "I don't know," he repeated. "Maybe I made the wrong decision. I'm tired of trains."

"We've only taken one."

"I'm tired of going the wrong direction. We'll keep fucking up, we won't get any sleep."

"We'll get sleep, Eddie. We'll get on the next train, get all the way to Columbus, then find us a good place to sleep. We can hang out in the city a couple days. It'll be fun."

"Something'll happen. I can feel it." Eddie began to twirl the strands of light brown hair just over his eyebrows. He twirled before every test, before report cards, inside the lockerroom after football practice. "This isn't any little camping trip to the Mohican Memorial Forest, you know. This is the big time. We're right in there with hoboes, Jimmy."

"We're doing fine."

"I don't feel fine."

The waitress, with a tired look, handed them menus and poured water. "Coffee?" she asked. They both said no together, then laughed. Walker closed his eyes, felt himself enfolded in cushion, and let his mind drift. Eddie's homesick, he thought. It brought to mind the
foliage and rivulets and rapids of the Sandusky. He saw Isabella with her lawn chair and Brenda by the big rock on a sunny day.

"Maybe it beats playing monopoly Saturday afternoons," Eddie said, sardonically.

Walker saw the agonized look on Eddie's face. Eddie was weighing possibilities, tugging with choices—the monopoly board or the trains. Walker did his own weighing, seeing the scales tip like the old banana bump on the teeter totters, soundly in favor of trains. He wanted to move. If we're lucky, he thought, we'll catch a hotshot all the way, get there in a day, see the town. He opened his eyes to the crackle of candy wrappers. Eddie was digging through the bag, his hand full of paper. He rolled it into a ball and put it on top of the ashtray.

"Pittsburg," Eddie said, laughing, wiping his eyes. He kept laughing. So did Walker. The waitress brought food, and they laughed and ate. "Goddamned Pittsburgh," Eddied repeated. "Will we ever get it right?" They laughed more, while the waitress kept her eye on them as if they were loonies. They giggled through their last bite, left the tip, grabbed their gear, and waved as they went out.

They trudged back through the avenues in a clouded overcast and city haze, back toward the tracks. From the hill, they could see the two hoboes, and two other men
with bedrolls, hiking down the cinders. Walker led the way in a direction away from the encampment, toward the train depot.

He kept his eyes on the men, who looked worn and ragged and rough. He thought of the adventure, the good feelings coming back as he left the path and descended toward the tracks. Images reeled through his brain, movies and stories of hoboes and boxcars and camaraderie. And, he was going to a good place. He and Eddie going, and he would show Eddie the places, the rugged land, the rivers, everything. He was ready for the ride.
CHAPTER VIII

The train took them back to Ohio, stopping at Cambridge where the boys found a park and slept through the afternoon. Eddie found a newspaper and covered his face, like he had seen people do in movies, on park benches. Walker let the sun fall on him, sunlight splintering through maple leaves. It moved across his body as he moved in and out of sleep like flotsam on the river, rising and falling. He smelled marigold. He heard voices of children at the swings and rocking horses. Then the sunlight moved into the trees, leaving him in shadow, and the voices were gone, and Eddie was sitting up next to the maple tree, reading a comic book.

"I'm famished," Eddie said, when he saw Walker open his eyes. "Let's go find something that'll ruin our health." Eddie rolled the comic book up and stuffed it inside the army bag. "Double cheeseburger," he said, "big fat juicy fries with vinegar, extra thick chocolate shake."

It was Eddie's way of moving out from under the paw of authority. Irene had tried to maintain his diet, but now Eddie felt the awesome power of his freedom.

Walker checked the roll of bills wound up in his pocket, extra money he could not fit in his wallet.
"We can check out the town," he said. "Let's get rid of our bags somewhere, see what makes this place tick, and by sundown, we'll be on our way to Columbus."

"Maybe we could just stay the night," Eddie suggested. "I don't know, Eddie. I want to get to Columbus. We'd get bored here in a couple hours, don't you think?"

"Maybe we would," Eddie conceded.

Eddie splurged. He stuffed himself. He sat ecstatically at the picnic table outside the Dairy Queen and pondered a second chocolate milkshake. He sighed, "Irene'll kill me." Then he laughed and got up with more money and went to the counter.

Walker had had his fill. He watched Eddie bring back the milkshake, all smiles, all restraint gone out the window.

"This is heaven," Eddie said, swilling chocolate.

"Like sex," Walker said, winking.

"Better," Eddie answered and winked back. He belched. When he finished the shake, he crumpled up the cup, and pitched it toward the open barrel, missing. He got up to get it.

Walker wanted to comment, to say something about old times when Eddie had the arm and never missed. But he kept quiet. He didn't like dredging up old glory, especially since he was leaving Fairport. On his way to
new glory, while Eddie was going back, where he would continue to face the curse. It wouldn't be fair to say anything.

Guys and girls hung out, Saturday night. They cruised. They sat on car hoods. They lounged in front of telephone booths. A group, everyone with a cigarette, hung out on the corner, flinging epithets at motorists. Eddie and Walker moved through the traffic, toward the tracks.

"Sky made the cut," Eddie said out of nowhere.

"I'll bet he did," Walker said sarcastically, kicking a big rock along the road.

"No, really. He did."

"It was only the first practice, Eddie. How could he?"

"He caught every pass. I'm not kidding. Everything they threw at him he caught. He's guaranteed second string. No more gauntlet."

"Good."

"All I did was trip over my feet. I couldn't take it, so I left. It was either that or it would have been me doing the goddamned piggy crawl and Sky sitting there watching."

"Everything's busting up, Eddie."

"It's a pain in the ass."
They came to the first viaduct, the word DARLING scrawled in big red letters across the entire face. There were stone scratched rhymes and coal scratched obscenities and one liners: This world get me +. MY President and MY country see to it I sleep in YOUR backyard tonight! Madison Wisc. For a good time, call 443-4121 after midnight. Underneath a triangle were the words in coal: IF YOU WANNA GET HIGH, BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION. Jesus Saves! Hendrix lives! Graffiti sucks!

The two boys stood in the hull of the arch with its protests and pleadings and rhymes that had lasted the wind and rain. Outward, they saw the western sky that had paled from orange to purple. A car rushed over the viaduct as they walked on, taking the path next to the tracks, through tall weeds and thistle, toward the distant swirl of smoke.

Walker saw the figures of men in the distance, at a second viaduct and he imagined settling in for the night. He and Eddie camping out with hoboes, drinking with them, taking that step in. He remembered when he was ten, when he had been afraid to walk out on the ledge where the water gushed at the base of the dam. All his friends had managed to push themselves out, into the rushing water, and Walker had held back, afraid to make the leap, afraid he would be washed down the river. He remembered the time he did jump. He had held, and finally he was out on the
edge with everybody. Now he felt the same sense of adventure, entering this world of hoboes, thinking he and Eddie might camp with them. They would sit down, and maybe one would be clever or witty or mean. They would hear stories, like Pauper's stories. Stories of the road, and all have coffee in the morning.

"Let's rest," Eddie said, putting down the bags. He rubbed his elbows. "Maybe I shouldn't have packed so much."

"Too many comic books," Walker said. He adjusted his pack, fixed the straps and checked his water. "I think we'll have to camp," he said. "Not much traffic on this line."

"Let's sit down and think about it, ok? I'm beat." Eddie plopped down on the green bag, resting his elbow on the pink suitcase. The sugar high was wearing off.

Walker sat on a rock and tied his shoes, then watched the sky and the first star. He smelled mint and camomile near the rock, and the continuous redolence of tar and cinder. Both boys rested, leaning on their packs, watching the stars come out. Both of them at about the same time heard behind them the rush of footsteps.

Underneath the viaduct, the fire flashed and became brighter as all trace of twilight faded. There were the three figures and Eddie by the fire, their shadows leaping
up the viaduct wall. Green bottles gleamed, empties, and the one the men passed around, laughing as they skipped their hostage. One man wore a heavy cap with one ear flap. He chewed on a cigar. Another wore a full beard and a hood. The third figure faced the tracks and the opposite wall, where their partner struggled with Walker.

The man wore a long dark coat and old pants and tennis shoes. He held Walker's wrists over his head, pinning them against the concrete. When Walker tried to free himself, the man shoved his knee into Walker's legs and scraped his hands hard against the wall. He leaned into Walker, trying to make him buckle.

"It's all I've got!" Walker said, regaining his balance. He gasped for breath, smelled urine and stale wine.

"Nice clothes," the man grunted. "Rich boy, carrying all that loot. You somebody's little rich boy." With one hand, the man kept Walker's wrists together against the wall, and with the other hand, he dug into Walker's back pockets.

Eddie tried to get up, but the man with the hood grabbed his leg and raised the wine bottle against him.

"I'm telling you," Walker gasped. "It's all I've got!"

"What's this?" The man grabbed the chain and lifted it over Walker's head, looked at it, then flung it against
the rails.

"Check 'is underwear!" one of the men yelled. The others burst into laughter. "Check 'is socks," the man yelled.

"I don't have anymore!" Walker tried to break the man's grip. The man bore down again, coughed, and rubbed his whiskers against Walker's face. He pressed Walker's face against the wall, then he let go.

"Now git yer ass outa here!" the man said. He held the money and the wallet.

"And don't get any funny ideas," the hooded man said in a raspy voice, "about comin' back with nobody either. You come back with somebody and you're in real trouble."

"Go on," the bearded man said to Eddie. "You, too. Git the hell outa here."

Eddie stood, stepped out of the circle of men. He joined Walker, who was searching for the cross and chain. Walker found the chain, but no cross. Then he went back to the fire, facing the man who held his wallet and the roll of bills. The man stuffed the bills into his pocket and pitched the wallet to the others. The man with the hood held the wallet to the light and peeled out three twenty dollar bills.

"What about us!" the bearded man said. "We all had a part in this. Give us some!"

But the hooded man clutched the money. He took the
three twenties, then a ten, and tossed the wallet to the other man. "They's enough for you." The bearded man picked up the wallet and counted two more tens, a five and three ones. He eyed the other man contemptuously and pocketed the money.

"It was mostly me and Bud," the hooded man said. "We earned it."

"What you waitin' on, rich boy," the man with the dark coat said. "Go on. Git down them tracks now. Town's just up a ways."

"Give it back," Walker said. Two of the men laughed. The hooded man got up from his log, holding the bottle. He stepped close to Walker.

"You want us to kill you?" he asked, grinding his teeth.

"I want my money back," Walker said.

The man pushed the wine bottle into Walker's face. "You can have this," he said. "Hundred dollar bottle of wine." The three men roared with laughter.

"Go on back to Mommy and Daddy," the bearded man said. "Git out of our camp."

"Come on," Eddie said, pulling at Walker's arm. "Let's just get the hell out of here."

"That's right," the fighter said. "Move it, now!"

Walker pocketed the chain. He and Eddie moved to the stone where the men had jumped them. They put clothes
back into their bags. Clothes were strewn over the weeds. Shirts, socks, underwear. The hooded man had riffled through the old letters and had left them to blow in the weeds. Walker was able to collect them all and put them back into the envelope. Once they had gathered everything, they made their way back toward Cambridge. They came to an arc of light where a man had set up camp by the first viaduct. The man sat with his bedroll beside him, boiling coffee over the fire. He said nothing. The boys moved past.

"There's the park," Walker said. "We can camp there."
"We can call the police," Eddie said.
"No, we can't. We look like hoboes ourselves. They'd lock us up. Maybe they'd send us back to Fairport."
"Good. Let them send me back."
"You want to go home?"
"I'm bad luck, Jimmy. It's that old woman. She caught us with one of her watermelons. In her garden. She threw a curse at us. Ever since, it's been down hill."

Walker rubbed his wrists and felt the scrape on his forehead where the man had pushed him into the wall. He kept moving, down the path, far enough from the town, and close enough for the security of the lights. Eddie stopped once to switch bags, then they moved on, around the city, to the place where they could see the high lights of the tennis courts. They set up camp behind the backstop of
the softball field and listened to the cushion sound of
tennis balls while they lay awake, looking up at the
stars.

"I still think we could get the police," Eddie said.
"They would get away, then they'd find us and kill
us. Maybe they'll be on the same train."

"Let's not take the train," Eddie said. "Screw the
trains. Let's hitch hike to Columbus. Then I have enough
money left I can catch the bus back to Toledo, give Mom a
call. She'll come and get me."

"You have money?"

"Thirty dollars. In my sock." Eddie smiled at his
cleverness. "We'll have breakfast in the morning. I'll
buy. I owe you one." Eddie pulled out a blanket from his
suitcase and covered himself. "How you going to make it
all the way out?" he asked. "With no money?"

"I'll get a job somewhere. I'll work for a week,
then I'll have enough." Walker stared up at the stars.
"I can't go back," he said. "I've got to do this, Eddie."

"Have to? Couldn't you come home, then make money?
They'd take you back at the cafe."

"I don't want to go back to the cafe. They treat me
like a kid. Bussboy. It sucks. I can find work in
Columbus, Eddie. It's a city. There's probably all kinds
of jobs."

"Suit yourself."
Walker got out of his bag and took off his jeans. He rolled them up with the other clothes he used for a pillow.

"What if somebody comes?" Eddie said.

"Let them look." Walker studied Eddie, who had not taken off anything, not even his socks. "It's better with no clothes, Eddie. You shouldn't wear so many clothes to bed."

"What if those hoboes show up?"

"They won't."

"I still think we should call the police. We can't let them get away with this. You gonna just let them rob us like that?" Eddie leaned toward Walker, bringing his bag up to Walker's face. "You gonna just let them take everything you worked for? All that work busting your ass at the cafe?"

"Eddie, Crissakes, they're probably in the next town."

"No. They're right down the goddamned tracks, Jimmy. They're laughing at us. They're sitting by their god-damned fire thinking how they've struck it rich."

"How much did they get from you?"

"Seventy or so. I don't know. I had a hundred with the thirty in my sock."

"It's not worth it, Eddie. I'll just find another job. Delay a week. I don't want to go bothering policemen. Even if we did, even if they were still there, they'd say we were crazy. There's no proof."
"They have your wallet. That's proof."

"They probably pitched it in the weeds. Eddie, I'm not going back there. Forget it, ok?"

"I don't like being robbed. I don't like taking shit. That's why I left. I leave and I get more shit. When will it stop?"

Eddie sighed and slunk back to where he had made his bed. Walker heard the short, frustrated breaths. Eddie had more guts than he did. Even in the halls at school, when Walker avoided trouble, Eddie faced it, got pushed up against lockers, was called names because of his weight, and he fought back. He didn't back off.

"We need sleep," Walker said. "Don't worry about it. I can always get more money. I'll find a job, ok?"

Eddie said nothing. Walker gathered more clothes to fatten his pillow, then rolled over, away from his friend. He imagined going back to the robbers with a policeman, catching the men by surprise, watching the officer order the hoboes to empty their pockets. Walker saw the bills falling out, tens and twenties, at their feet, and he bent, gathering them up. And as a final touché, he singled out the man with the coat who smelled like urine, and called him a useless drifter. He saw himself draw the man to the viaduct and scrape the man's knuckles across the concrete.

Walker clenched his fist, opened his eyes and looked up at the half moon. I could not, he thought. Eddie would
have, but I can't.

Later, he remembered his grandfather's words, about the mountains, about a lost wave he could not let go of. He thought of the man in the field, flannel shirt, strong arms. He wanted to be strong, not afraid of things.

Walker heard Eddie sleeping. His mind drifted back to the hoboes, and each time, he tried to bury the thoughts. He traced the deep blue ink mark, trail through Missouri, Kansas; at Hays, going north to the Platte River, to the mountains. He followed the map trail along the river, to Wyoming, into Montana to the place Abraham lived. Then, at the end of his mind's travel, he came back to the broken glass, the fire, the robbery, and his own fear.
CHAPTER IX

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Goodbyes. They were not his forte. First with his father, the fight a week before, then saying adios to the apartment and the parking lot, which was all Walker could do at such a disintegrative point in the relationship. The short and bitter goodbye with Elizabeth had left everything hanging, everything left unsaid. Now, with Eddie, who had broken off suddenly to catch the highway going north, through Mansfield, up to Sandusky, where he could either hitch back to Fairport, or have Irene pick him up. "She needs me. I'm not homesick," were his last words. Then, in his own Italian way, Eddie had given Walker a hug and a kiss, verged on a tear, and handed Walker ten dollars to tide him over until he found a job. Eddie had braved his way to the fringes of the city to pick up highway 13. Walker went the other way to find the rail yard, determined to keep to the trains.

He had spent the whole day in the big city, looking for work, finding nothing. He had walked nearly ten miles, between the two rivers, through the university, in and out of shops and businesses. Summers were slower in the U district. The companies were cutting back labor in
preparation for the slow season come Fall. It was de­pressing. Walker had stopped at a bagel shop and found relief in food. He thought about Eddie, embarrassed about the kiss. He could not say how, but the absence was deeper than he had figured it would be. It ran right down to the old glory days in sandlot, up in the trees bruising apples. It ran through the tumultuous erosion of their luck and talent. Funny that one or the other had not continued the road to glory. They had slipped together, Eddie with his overweight and Walker, slow and clumsy in his growth spurts. They were even, down to the common parental losses. Eddie's father had split in the late sixties, had turned hippy and left for California about the same time the accident took Walker's mother.

Now, Walker sat on a rock in the heat wave, with seven fifty in his pocket. He was amused by the big man, Schmetterling, who swatted like a bear at the butterfly over his head, then came back to the rocks, beads of sweat rolling down his cheek. He had a thick handlebar mustache that he twirled when he spoke. He was overdressed, in blue jeans covered to the calf with leather leggings and a denim shirt. Draped over his bags was a leather frayed jacket.

Schmetterling was most recent, in on the 12:31, although, he explained, the trains didn't run by time any­more, but by tonnage. The other three, the girl Sara and
the two men, had been there already, before Walker arrived. Schmetterling was going down to Memphis. The other three were heading east. They sat a few yards away, arguing.

"I know some gamblers," Schmetterling said, "lose ten times what you lost. They get over it. Two hundred you can make up in a couple weeks." He winked. "Or you can live off the land." He looked up into the blue sky. "Lucky it's harvest season," he said.

"I'll have to get a job," Walker said. A breeze picked up. It swirled dust and leaves and brought fumes of cinder and creosote. The breeze touched Schmetterling's long hair, the color of rusted rails, played with it on his shoulders.

"Could pick apples and squash and zucchini," Schmetterling said. "Zucchini's all over the place. Plenty of apples in Ohio." He laughed. Walker wanted to laugh, too, but he still felt horrible. He watched Schmetterling take out a Swiss army knife, then roll a tomato out of a paper bag, onto the dry grass by the rock. He cut into the tomato and offered half to Walker. Grapes inched out of the bag. He offered Walker a bunch.

"Speaking of Pittsburgh," Schmetterling said, biting into the tomato, "I was steered wrong one time. Matter of fact, it was up in Montana as I recall. I was heading east, to Michigan. This engineer tells me to get on his train. Train went north. Kept going north and never
broke, all the way up to Cutbank. So I sat three days looking at wheat fields." He brushed back his hair. "Sometimes you just get a bum steer." He handed Walker the grapes.

"Thanks," Walker said.

"You look starved. When's the last time you ate?"

"Yesterday," Walker answered. "I don't have much money." Walker removed the skins, sucking the juice all he could. He felt juice roll down his chin. When it dripped, the dirt drank it up. Walker dropped skins and watched them bleed and the dirt soaked it all up.

"Good, eh?" Schmetterling said. He rolled out a zucchini, sliced off the tips and offered it to Walker. He asked the other three if they wanted any, but they refused, still in the middle of their argument. The girl wore jeans and a tee shirt with Mickey Mouse on the front. She wore a tattoo, an eagle, with the name Gordy underneath. Her hair was short, the ends bleached yellow, and very short at her ears.

"Just let me go," she argued.

"You can't go alone," the big guy said. He was unshaven and wore a blue stocking cap. He took off the cap once, rubbed his boot with it, and put it back on. "You're with us," he said.

"You leave and somebody'll wind up raping you or something," the other man said. He was shorter, clean,
evidently more the brains of the two men. He carried a camera and a notebook.

"I think I can take care of myself," the girl said. "I don't need you."

"A guy's gotta eat," Schmetterling said, taking out an apple, peeling it. "You ride the rails, sometimes you forget to eat. Next thing, you're starving to death. Lots of guys out there starving. Live on alcohol and potato chips." Schmetterling rolled out a potato. "I keep up with my greens. Potatoes are good." He called to the other group, then pitched the potato to the girl. She caught it. He took out another and cut it in half, offering one half to Walker.

"No thanks," Walker said, still sucking grapes. Weeds along the path rattled in the breeze. A wasp at Walker's feet chewed brittle weed stalk.

"Pulled the potatoes and zukes from a garden in Johnstown, two days ago. The apples come from Waynesburgh, yesterday." Schmetterling laughed. "You'd better start," he said. "You sort of become a raccoon. Go in after the sun goes down. Gleaning, I call it. You have to eat right when you're mother's not there." Schmetterling put the food back inside the bag and stuffed the bag inside the leather jacket. He closed his eyes, leaning back against his pack, covering his face with a cowboy hat.

"Soon as that whistle toots, we get on," he said. "I got
us a nice boxcar."

The big guy's name was Bernie. He kept taking off the blue cap, doing something or the other with it. He stuck close to the girl, who resented it. "It's gonna break," he said, tucking the cap over the tip of his boot. His voice was low, whiskey parched. "You just wait, man, and this thing'll break. I'm telling you, things'll bust loose and we'll get about six months of good times. That's all, then it'll get real bad."

"Where'd you hear this?" said the shorter man, named Joe.

"Just heard it," Bernie said.

"You hear something doesn't mean it'll happen."

"I HEARD it," Bernie answered loudly, slapping the cap against his leg. "Everybody's sayin' it. Up in Wenatchee, in California, man. Fuck, if you don't believe me. . . ."

"I didn't say I didn't believe you. Calm down. I just wanted to know where you heard it."

"You're always interruptin', man."

"Let him finish," Sara said. She took out her watch, checked it, then slipped it back into her pack. It was only a day pack. She had nothing else. No sleeping bag.

"Six months, and I'm gonna bust ass," Bernie continued. "Gonna stay straight. No more booze, stayin' in
at night, just workin'. Then I'm gonna buy me some land." Bernie studied the two, mostly Sara, who leaned on her elbow. He directed everything to her. "Buy me some good land, in Tennessee. Up in the mountains."

"Land's not cheap," Joe said. "I think you're going to be working a lot longer than six months."

"Nine months," Bernie shot back. "I'll get on a boat and go shrimpin' and after that, haul ass back to Wenatchee for apples."


"You don't care," Joe answered. "You think I'm a third rate dreamer. Give me that good luck bit." He laughed.

"Fourth rate," Sara answered, sitting up. "If you don't really get into a hobo's life, if you don't spend time with them, it'll always be shallow. You don't know hoboes. Who wants to read a superficial history of nomads and harems?"

"You said you liked the part about the sixties, and Dylan."

"I said I liked the sixties, not what you wrote. That stuff's old hat. Everybody knows how Dylan tried to be Guthrie. Do you know how much has been written on the sixties?"
"It's not old hat."

"Ok. It's not. Believe what you want."

"It's not just the booze," Bernie said. "That stuff you wrote about everybody dyin' from booze."

"I didn't say they were all dying from booze. That wasn't my point." Joe picked up his notebook and read, "The hobo lives desperately, going job to job, earning just enough for his good supply of wine. What is it that pushes him?" Joe closed the notebook. "Then I said it was booze that kept them going. I didn't say it killed them."

"It's runnin', man. Sometimes it's booze, but it's all them guys on the run. It's like truckers, man. Wheels movin' in their blood." Bernie shook his head, and rubbed the cap down his leg, to his boots. "It was in my blood. But now I'm tired of it. I'm gonna settle down in Tennessee. I'm fuckin' thirty-two and got twenty former addresses." He laughed. "Hell with this shit. I'll get me some land."

Walker continued eavesdropping, lying back on his elbows, watching the switcher picking up cars, moving them up and down the rails, watching the brakies pulling levers. The girl held her own with the two men. She was like a kid with a long pole poking at a bee hive.

"I think it'll sell," Joe said, holding up his notes. "Photographs help articles sell. You should see the
"The tone's all wrong," Sara said. "It's like you're trying to impress somebody. Too many adjectives. Anyway, how do you know hoboes die anywhere? We ain't seen a dead one yet."

"Read the papers," Joe said, closing the notebook. "I think I have sufficient understanding of hobo life," he said, standing up, looking down at her.

"It needs more something," she replied. "More experience maybe. Something."

"You're really nasty," Joe said. "Maybe you should go on your own."

"She can't," Bernie said defensively. "She's just a girl."

"Thanks, Bernie, but no thanks," Sara said. "Let's all go for a beer," Bernie said. "Let's find a nice dark place, have a drink, get outta this fuckin' sun."

"We'll miss the train," Joe said. "No, we won't," Bernie said. "Train's not pulling out for an hour or so," Sara added. She fanned herself with a magazine.

"Who told you that?" Joe asked.

"Who do you think? The conductor. He told me it leaves at four."

"I suppose you just walked up and asked."
"You bet. That's all you have to do Joe. If you were such an expert on trains, you'd know. Stick it in your notebook. 1980 conductors aren't the king shits of the past. They don't care if we get on their trains."

"I'm going for a beer," Joe said.

"You buying?" Bernie said, rising eagerly.

"No."

"Come on, Joe. I bought last time." Bernie pulled out his wallet, paging through bills, then he stepped toward Sara, almost touching her. "I'll buy yours," he said.

"I'm not going. I'm beer'd out. I'll watch the gear." Sara stayed sitting.

"Get him to watch it," Bernie said, pointing to Walker.

"No. You guys go on," Sara said, glancing at Walker.

Joe was already walking. Bernie looked back, like a sheep dog, then he threw his cap high in the air and caught it and ran to catch up. They climbed the embankment, taking the street going north, out of sight.

After ten minutes, the whistle blew. Schmetterling rose quickly out of his nap. He gathered up his bedroll, told Walker to hurry, picked up apples that dropped out of the jacket, and scrambled to the tracks. Sara followed behind Walker, lagging behind Schmetterling, who took long, swift, six-foot-four strides.
"You're leaving your friends," Walker said when Sara caught up to him.

"Yes, Darling." She smiled, then sang, "Breaking up is hard to do." She caught up and walked beside him, humming an old Beatles' song. They moved into the shadows between the long lines of boxcars and piggy backs and flatbeds, halting in front of an open boxcar, where Schmetterling had already thrown in his gear. He hoisted himself up, then grabbed the other packs and helped Walker and Sara.

"Where's your buddies?" he asked her.

"We split," she said.

The train nudged forward, wheels creaking, slowly, then faster, then another whistle. The three of them moved to the back of the car, back among a dozen wooden pallettes and cardboard and binding straps.

"Four engines," Schmetterling said. "Take us all the way to Indy. That's where I get off and head down to Memphis. Schmetterling caught his breath, wiped his eyes from the swirling sawdust, and when the train had reached travelling speed, he moved back toward the door, leaning up against his bedroll. Sara and Walker moved up, against the opposite wall.

"That's strange company, those guys," Schmetterling said.

"I thought they were safe," Sara answered. "I made
a mistake."


"I was on a motorcycle," she said. "Coming back from Pensacola. Some idiot ran me off the road. The bike hit a tree and caught fire. Burned all my art and all my poetry, except for what I got in my pack."

"Whooeee!" Schmetterling exclaimed.

Sara shifted her pack and leaned into it, then took out a cigar from her purse and lighted it. She offered one to Walker, giving him a jump with hers. He puffed quickly to keep it going. He kept his eyes on her. He almost choked when she said she was going back, to Montana. Was this all a dream? Was it the Wizard of Oz or what? Would he wake up next to the tree in Tiffin after he had gone with this girl all the way out? He reached down and pinched himself. It hurt. Maybe you could do that in a dream, too.

"After all that money I'd made," she said, "all that art, then it's gone like that. Some asshole driver, must have been drugged out of his mind. He never even stopped. My bike's in flames, and he keeps going." She offered Schmetterling a cigar.

"Don't smoke 'em," he answered. He removed his cowboy hat when the breezes got going. He pulled out his paper bag and pitched grapes and apples across the boxcar.
Walker took more grapes. He arranged his gear behind him and felt the sway of the train, listened to the distant whistle as the train moved through a crossing, out past the suburbs, past a golf course jutting out at the river's bend. Walker felt the new turn, the next few hours, moving out of Ohio, the girl next to him, her shoe leaning into his ankle—he felt no loss. He secretly said his goodbyes to Eddie one more time. Bueno suerte. He was at that hour when he knew he would stay the trip, believing that she would want to take trains with him, all the way to Montana. No turning back.
CHAPTER X

Some smooth track, some rough. There were the whistles, the pattern Sara told Walker--first the long, then the two shorts, then the longer as the train moved over the crossing. She had not picked it up on her travels, but out behind her house growing up in Toronto, where the trains went by.

Early evening settled around them, breezes cooling, the constant beating of the pallettes against the side of the boxcar that had become a natural part of the whole thing. Smoke from Sara's cigar. It was like the river, down on the flat rock under the bridge with a lantern or a small fire, only then it was the river moving by and now it was them. Flowing like the longest rivulet, winding across the entire country.

Schmetterling balanced the cowboy hat on his knee and began talking, and he talked through a dozen towns about hotels, about the last adobe left in Santa Fe. "One out of three," he said. "I could have lived like my grandfather, a king in his own right, but I gave up money for love." He slapped his knee the same way Pauper had and laughed, like he was telling stories that could never be
true. Walker watched Sara, who leaned back, working slowly on her second cigar, taking everything in with a dreamy look on her face.

"Adolf was a king with those hotels. He had a few back in Germany. Had six in all when he moved to Reading, back in '40. Father would tell us how he loved to parade that wealth, down the main streets of Reading, dressed to fit a mansion, top hat, gold chained watch, every day going to the news stand where the shoe shine boys waited, quarrelled even, because grandpa left the biggest tips. Twice he was elected mayor, and afterward, he sold out and moved to Santa Fe and started up half a dozen hotels all over again. He died in '52. Father was already squarely in the business and took over. He wasn't so kingly as Adolf. He never paraded, except on the golf course, where he paraded talent more than wealth. But father carried Adolf's blazing preoccupation with the business. Holed up in his office 'til midnight the same way, and he couldn't go anywhere for vacation without taking the business with him. Consequently, when I was nineteen, he keeled over on a chip shot to the seventh green. The golf course has this little silver plaque memorial behind a little knoll approaching the green. Says 'Mica A. Schmetterling. April 11th, 1961, 9:37 a.m. R.I.P.'"

Schmetterling pulled out another sack and rolled out a tomato and pulled cheese that he sliced thinly and
draped over half the tomato.

"Goes to show you what work can do, eh?" He rolled a tomato across the floor to Sara. She had her own knife and sliced it and gave half to Walker. Schmetterling rolled on like the train. "My brother Meyer and I went to my mother, who said she was tired to the bone of hotels. She never wanted to see another strange face or another travelling salesman. Blamed the hotels for father's death and their strained marriage. You take the hotels, she told us. And she took the house, the cash flow, and the Mercedes. She goes down to Oaxaca every winter and up to Alberta in the summertime."

"You got the hotels?" Sara asked.

"Meyer and I did, only my underwear isn't made of Fruit of the Loom, but ant colony. I never could sit still. Father bequeathed three of the six to me and the first I sold to Meyer fifty percent off. Meyer thought I was crazy and he was caught in between greed and honor, and he chose greed, which is all right. Like I said, I wasn't into money. I took off and rode the west wind. Any long trip's worth five Magnovoxes is how I look at it."

"How much did you get?" Walker asked.

"I got enough to travel a couple years. To Europe, down the long spine of the Cordilleras and Sierras, down to Peru and back. Then I sold the second hotel, same deal."
Meyer didn't fight it. He got rich. Then, he was killed. His plane crashed in a hail storm, three years ago. One short happy life, eh?"

"And you got all the hotels?"

"God Almighty no! I've got that one final adobe I can call home, if I really want to. I check in every now and then, make sure nobody's stolen the lamp shades. Meyer's widow inherited his mess. There wasn't any will."

"Why don't you just fly, if you have the money?" Walker said. "Why are you riding trains?"

"I don't enjoy planes or plane people. It's boring. You can say what you want about bummy rides on freights, but you can't say it's boring." Schmetterling settled back, dusted off his cowboy hat, like he was finished, but he wasn't.

"Woman back in Parkersburg said the same thing." He laughed and stretched out his leg, then pulled out an apple, sliced it and threw the seeds out the door. The sun was going down, orange stretchmarks of cloud on the horizon. "'Let me see your checkbook,' she said. Pretty little thing. Irish. She had pitch black hair, a little too much eye shadow. But she was pretty, too pretty for that bar. She asked why I didn't have a car. She was really into cars. Not into trains. She was also into free drinks, and when I didn't offer to buy her one, she said I was like the rest of the men. Said I was all talk."
Schmetterling wrapped his long arms around his knees, stretched, then leaned back. "I told her if she wanted, she could escape that bar scene and come with me, with all its treachery and romance."

"And obviously she's still in Parkersburg," Sara said, nudging Walker's leg.

"Told me I was nuts. She chose that smoke filled cocoon. She could have had this, and she could have had the southwest sunset, and good wine on my patio."

Schmetterling removed his boot and fingered his toes.

"You ever see a desert sunset?" he asked.

"Couple times," Sara said.

"Never was out of Ohio," Walker said.

"She could have had a desert sunset off my veranda. Huge burning sky, and cactus and all those flowers. Milagro. That's what the people down there call it. They'll come in groups out to the edge of town or on a hill and they're taken into it. They taste it. I've tasted it. I wanted that girl to see it, but maybe it would have been too much, too lonely, too magnificent."

"You can't expect a woman to pick up with a total stranger," Sara said.

"If I'd been a stranger with a car and a house," Schmetterling answered. "If I'd bought her a few drinks and lived in the next town, she'd come along. The whole train thing was out of her ball park, so she's back there,
dying of boredom, and we're not."

"Three cheers for us," Sara said, holding up her cigar, nudging Walker again. She smoked down to the butt, then pitched it out the door and leaned back, trying to sleep. Smoother track. More whistles and headlights at the crossings, and lights for towns and clear sky. Walker put on a jacket and leaned into Sara and slept.