1992

When the music's over| Fiction

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The University of Montana

Recommended Citation

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University of Montana
When the Music's Over

Fiction

by

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B.A, California State University, Fullerton

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1992

Approved by:
Chair, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

Date
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Desperate Measures

Chapter One:
Pictures of Lily

The ceiling bulb flickered. What little light there was came from the open door at the end of the long hallway. Water dripped from the door frame and pooled on the floor.

"Got any bud?" Paradise asked.

Stoney lowered the book he was reading. He thought a moment. His cot squeaked when he shook his head, no.

Paradise sauntered to the next open door, the Loud Brothers' room. "Got any bud?" he asked.

"Fuck no," the larger and quieter of the two brothers, said. He'd been nicknamed Chico because he played tight end at Chico State. He acted like an All-
American even thought he was second string.

"Hey bench-warmer," Paradise asked, "Where in the hell is Chico State?"

"Fuck you," Chico said.

Paradise hammered the next door with the heel of his fist, got no answer, tried again. "Fuck," he yelled. He clamped the headphones on his ears, clicked on the Walkman. It was yellow and water proof. The Grateful Dead, the only music he'd listen to, trucked into his ears. He'd already replaced the batteries five times in the week since he'd arrived in Naknek. In his company-owned rubber boots, he clumped down the hall and out the door. It was raining. Actually, misting might be more accurate. The sky had been the same dull aluminum color 24 hours a day since he'd landed in this burg. He tugged on the drawstrings of his Tulane sweatshirt and drew the hood around his face.

Werewolf passed Paradise on the stairs. The newly painted steps smelled of turpentine. "Got any bud?" He said it loud. With the Walkman's volume maxed out, he couldn't hear himself talk. He squeezed a pinch of Copenhagen from a green tin and slid it into his mouth.

Werewolf heard the music leaking from the headphones. He smiled. He always smiled. "Wow, man. I haven't the faintest idea," he said. "Gimme some." He reached for the tin, pinched a healty portion.

Paradise talked his way down the stairs. "I need some kindness," he said. "I need to get stoned. I don't like being bored." He drummed his fingers on the wooden
railing in time to the music. "I need money." Tap. "I came up here to make money."
Tap. "See you at lunch."

Bopping to the music, he crossed the pot-holed driveway. He passed the mess
hall, an ugly green quonset. He stopped to say, "Hey, how ya doin'" to three Eskimos
caulking a wood-rotted boat. "You guys got any bud?" The raingear-clad Eskimos
glanced at each other. They chuckled. One aimed a caulking gun at Paradise.

"Fucking Athabascans," Paradise mumbled. He didn't care if they heard him
or not. The Eskimos shook their heads and returned to patching up the hull. Paradise
spit in the dirt.

The boat was dry-docked. Propped up on saw horses and cinder blocks, it
looked as if it'd never float again. The paint had peeled off and left the wood soft and
water-soaked. He wondered why they bothered working on it. All the fishermen on
Bristol Bay were on strike and most of the fishermen from other areas were holding
out in sympathy. Maybe it was a good sign, a sign that the strike would end soon.
Maybe the Eskimos knew something the white boys from the lower 48 didn't.

Werewolf stood on the second story landing, the hood of his yellow slicker
pulled over his head. He watched Paradise disappear down the ravine steps that led
to the cannery, a conglomeration of sheet-metal buildings sprawled on a pier that jutted
out into the Naknek River. The single-story buildings matched the color of the thick
boards slatting the pier—pearl gray. The entire complex looked jury-rigged—a main building where the salmon was processed was surrounded by several smaller shacks that had been added through the years, a warehouse here, a freezer there.

In his thick boots, Werewolf shuffled up the hall and peeked into Stoney's room. “Hey Stoney, how's the book,” he asked.

Stoney lay on the cot, his head on a doubled-up pillow propped against the white wall. He peered over the top of the book and arched his eyebrows.

“That good,” Werewolf said. It was “South of No North,” stories by Charles Bukowski. “I've heard a lot about that guy. Let me read it when you're done.” He walked into the room and eased onto the bottom bunk across from Stoney, boots and all. “You going to read all of them?”

Stoney looked at the books stacked on the edge of a big wooden spool with a rusty "no trespassing" sign on top that he used for a desk. He shrugged. There were five or six Bukowskis, a couple Hemingways, Fante, Barth, Steinbeck, Hugo and Dworkin.

“Still constipated?”

Stoney grimaced and nodded. He hadn't taken a shit since the day after he'd arrived. He blamed it on the food. It had been a long time since he'd eaten this much meat. Beef every day--steak, roast beef, something ground up and gristly swimming
in murky gravy. Potatoes and rice, too. At first it all tasted great.

He thought it might be the lack of shreddies. Every morning for as long as he could remember his breakfast had consisted of three crunched up Nabisco Shredded Wheats in a bowl of milk. But since his arrival last week he'd eaten watery eggs, hard bacon, greasy sausage, runny Cream of Wheat, and dry fried potatoes. Stoney had nothing against hot breakfasts; it was the routine he missed.

A couple of times the fried potatoes almost made up for the missing shreddies. He discovered if he added enough of salt and steak sauce the potatoes were pretty tasty. After eating a few helpings, he'd get thirsty and chase the food down with juice. There were all kinds of juices in metal gallon cans, usually five or six to a table--cranberry, orange, apple, apple-cranberry, pineapple, papaya, grapefruit, Twister Pink Grapefruit, orange-cranberry, orange-strawberry-banana, orange-raspberry, apricot nectar.

Although the food wasn't the best in the world, he could eat as much as he wanted. Stoney'd been amazed on the first morning at 7 o'clock. The mess hall was crammed with chattering, sweat-shirted, baseball-capped, burly and bedraggled zombies picking mucous from the corners of their eyes and jockeying for a good seat. Steam condensed on the windows.

Stoney'd straddled the picnic table bench. Zach, his roommate, was the only person in the room he knew. They'd met the night before.

The room grew quiet when the food arrived. Two waitresses scampered
between the rows of tables replacing the empty bowls with full ones. He grabbed the Black one's wrist.

"Could I have some shredded wheat?" he asked.

Her face was sheened in sweat, her hair wrapped tight in a bun like a ballerina. Her red short-skirted uniform clung to her body. She didn't try to pull away even though she balanced a three-foot tray loaded with plates and bowls of steaming food. She chuckled. "What you see on the table, honey, is what you get," she said. She laughed, showing off a wide mouth full of perfect teeth. Her eyes crinkled and something warm and scary came out of her.

The low-ceilinged room fell silent. Spoons dripping oatmeal hovered in mid-air. Fork-stabbed sausages paused before opened mouths. The cooks abandoned frying eggs and the kitchen help ceased their clatter.

"I'd think with this many varieties of juice," Stoney said, "you'd accommodate a meager request for cereal." He let go of her wrist. She balanced the tray. After a long silence, the waitress pointed a finger at him and huffed through her nose. She cocked a hip, thrust her boobs forward, and locked eyes with him.

"Hey, where's our food?" a guy with an acne-ravaged face yelled. "We're hungry. We're out of pancakes."

The waitress shook off the stare. She ambled toward a table of fat bearded fishermen. The room erupted with babble as everyone resumed eating. With his fork, Stoney nudged two fried potatoes into the yolk leaking from his eggs. Small boxes
of cornflakes, raisin bran, and Rice Krispies were offered the next morning, he never brought up the "shreddy" question again.

But he was still constipated. If it wasn't the missing shreddies then maybe the pancakes had something to do with it. They were an inch thick with a texture resembling styrofoam. He needed a chisel to cut them. Stoney figured they'd roamed through his stomach and set up a roadblock somewhere in his lower abdomen. His gut hurt. It felt rock hard.

"Yo, Stoney," Werewolf said. "Stoney? Earth to Stoney." Werewolf sprawled on the bed, arms folded behind his head. He stared at the criss-crossed springs that supported the top bunk, one coiled tighter than the other. "Earth to Stoney.

Stoney scissored the book over his stomach, glanced at Werewolf.

"Worked four hours this morning. I Pablo Picasso-ed the freezer walls," Werewolf said. "A nice dairy white. A pure virginal white. I swirled the brushstrokes." He swirled his hands in the air. "I imitated Van Gogh. Got a headache from the smell. That asshole supervisor didn't have anything else for me to do after that. He didn't appreciate my technique. Said I took too long. 'It's just a wall,' he said." Werewolf hacked at his ear with an imaginary knife. "You got any aspirin?"

"Whole bottle." Stoney rolled over. He reached under the bed inside his suitcase. He pulled out a small white bottle, reached between the two beds and jiggled a handful of extra strength Excedrins into Werewolf's outstretched hand. Werewolf popped them into his mouth and swallowed.
"Thanks," he said. He shivered from the pills' ugly taste. "I'm ready to unite the proletariat against the evil manifestations of capitalism. I came up here to make money. A lot of it. I expected to work 20 hours a day. I hate manual labor. Hate shitty jobs."

"I know what you mean. I won't do it anymore," Stoney said. "I'll work in the cannery. Pack salmon as many hours a day as I can stand." He sat up on the edge of the bed. "But I won't go down there every morning and kiss ass for grunt work."

"Yeah," Werewolf said. "The chicks get all the gravy jobs anyway."

"It's amazing what boobs can get you in this place," Stoney said.

"Heard a rumor this morning."

"Which one this time?" Stoney asked. They'd heard so many rumors that no one believed them anymore. First it was the hourly wage. No one seemed to know exactly how much an hour they would make. Some said six dollars, others claimed four. Next the union representative, a company man if there ever was one, said they'd all be working by Thursday. That was four days ago. Another rumor centered on Las Vegas hookers at the Naknek library but no one had checked that out yet.

"I heard they're fishing in Egigek," Stoney said. "How about the donut lady? I heard she screws Filipinos?"

Every morning, long before anyone was up, the donut lady delivered trays full of huge glazed donuts in a beat-up van. Where she made the donuts was a mystery. She was fat with witchy hair and wore leather. She hung out with the Filipinos.
“No, not that one,” Werewolf smiled, then asked: “Does she really?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “If the fishermen are still striking on the fourth of July, the company starts sending us home.”

According to some of the fishermen, the sockeye salmon, reds, they were called, had been running up-stream for about ten days. The run peaked seven days either side of the Fourth. Stoney and Werewolf imagined the fish that were getting away, swimming up-stream to do their spawning thing. After awhile they didn’t see fish; they saw dollar bills caught in the current just out of reach.

Stoney circled his foot on the sand-coated floor. Werewolf covered his eyes with the back of his wrist. Rain splattered against the window.

“I could down a mess of Daiquiris at Trader Vic’s,” Werewolf said.

“Pina Coladas,” Stoney said. “Daiquiri is a chick’s drink.”

“A what?”

“Werewolves of London drink pina coladas at Trader Vic’s.”

Werewolf’s real name was Warren. He and Paradise shared the room next door. Pudgy-faced Warren hailed from Longmont, Colorado. He wore a different wrinkled polo shirt every day. He wasn’t a guy who’d ever masquerade as a crazed wolf—his eyes had lit up and he turned crimson when he admitted that he didn’t have a girlfriend—but he had the same name as Warren Zevon. And he liked to drink. He consumed racks of Budweiser until the edge wore off, then he'd chug J&B. And he had a gut to
prove it. Stoney'd nicknamed him Werewolf.

"All right. So all we have is The Red Dog. And a pina colada will cost me ten bucks," Werewolf said. "I don't want to talk about it." He raised up on one elbow. "Let's get some dinner. At least that's free."

As if in answer to Werewolf's request, an amplified buzz startled both of them. A speaker cone mounted on the mess hall roof blared Ahhhhh-oooollllll-gahhhhhhh across the compound.

Stoney reached for his shoes. He refused to wear rubber boots. Werewolf rolled off the cot. His boots left small piles of sand on the blanket. It was Zach's bed.

They lingered outside until the line of people had filed through the narrow door. A wave of humid air met them as they scanned the tables for an open setting. Stoney checked the mailbox just inside the door. Nothing. A week and she hadn't written. He'd sent three letters already. He wished he'd taken his own advice: never get in a relationship when you're going out of town. He wanted to be a free-wheeler in Alaska, available for anything that might come up. And there he was flipping through the letters.

The waitresses rushed from the kitchen carrying turrens of food and pitchers brimming with ice water. Stoney found a seat across from Chico. Werewolf sat in the Filipino section at the other end of the hall. They gave him dirty looks but he spooned food onto his plate anyway.

"D'you get a letter?" Werewolf yelled. He shoveled spaghetti into his mouth.
Stoney shook his head.

Someone elbowed Stoney’s back.

“Hey,” Stoney said, irritated. He swivelled into the shoulder-length blonde hair of Paradise.

“Got any bud?” Paradise whispered. “Any kindness?”


“No bill? What’s bill?” Paradise figured it out and scowled. He stood up, scanned the room. “Hey Werewolf,” he yelled. “Hey man, you got any bud?” The 423 diners stopped eating and looked at Paradise. It was as if someone had yanked the plug on the volume control.

Werewolf stifled a laugh, leaned over his plate and sucked up spaghetti.

“No, man,” Stoney said. He said “man” real hard. Chico passed him a bowl of rice.

Paradise tugged his Tulane baseball hat low on his forehead. The cap was duct-taped where the adjustment strap had broken. “No work. No bud. Shitty food. My girlfriend’s cheating on me. I can’t take this,” he said. “I can’t take this.” He stalked out of the mess hall, waving his arms.

The banqueters resumed eating fried salmon, rice pilaf, over-steamed broccoli,
peaches, au gratin potatoes peppered with left-over sausage and bacon bits, and squares of carrot cake.

"What kind of juice we got this time?" someone yelled.

"Waitress. Oh waitress. Could we have white zinfandel with our gourmet dinner?" a tall guy with dreadlocks called from corner, his voice faintly disguised as a woman.


"Guess he doesn't like the choice of beverage," Stoney said.

"Not that bozo. I mean your hippie friend."

"Paradise?"

"Yeah." He pointed his fork. "The pothead. How'd he get a name like that?"

Jocks, Stoney thought, fucking asshole jocks. "He's not a hippie. Don't call him a fucking hippie. Hippies're from the '60s." He twirled up spaghetti on his fork, shoved it in his mouth.

"Have some all rotten potatoes," Chico said. He slid the bowl across the table.

"Au gratin," Stoney corrected. "With a 'g.'"

Chico's forehead furrowed. "Is that a spice? Is 'g' a spice?" He raised his hand, beckoned a waitress. "What's in these spuds?" he asked when she came over. The waitress gave him one of those I-have-better-things-to-do looks. The other six guys
at the table nudged each other, cackling with laughter. Stoney smirked, straining to keep a straight face.

"Just a minute," she said. "Stay here. I’ll be right back." She hurried into the kitchen. When she returned, a Woody Hayes-straight-up-the-middle hulk of a fullback followed. He brandished a meat cleaver.

"What seems to be the problem," he asked in a deep voice. He planted both feet in front of the table. He glared at Chico. "Is there a complaint about my food? An epicurean dissenter?"

Chico leveled a berserker’s stare at the hulking black man. He gripped the table, ready to spring. Stoney sat on his hands. Everyone else suddenly found the food engaging.

Chico sighed through clenched teeth. "Great potatoes," he said.

A smile cracked the big man’s face. "Name's Hector. Hector. Don't you forget it." He tickled the air with the meat cleaver. He held out his other hand. Chico hesitated, then shook it. Hector's hand, or more accurately, paw, enveloped Chico's large pass-receiver mitt. Hector turned toward the rest of the mess hall diners. "I run this kitchen. Anything goes wrong, I'll take care of it. Believe me, I'll handle it." He released Chico's hand, and strolled to the kitchen, majestically

Chico massaged his wrist, tried to shake circulation back into his hand. His face flushed.

"Guess I showed him," he mumbled. He picked up his fork, speared three
broccoli sprouts. They were cold and rubbery. "Think we'll work tomorrow?" he asked. No one answered.

Stoney finished his meal in silence. He wrapped three pieces of carrot cake in a napkin and stuck them under his sweatshirt. Sweets were hard to come by.

Heavy Metal bass notes crawled through the cracks in the floor. Mosquitoes, the size of quarters and sounding like tiny blimp propellers, mosied in through the open window. Stoney was trying to read. Zach had borrowed Fante's "1933 WAS A BAD YEAR" and climbed into his bed. Every so often he'd chuckle. He'd look at Stoney and say: "This guy is crazy." He read until he fell asleep, his breath pumping in comfortable snores.

Metallica, maybe Def Leppard, Stoney thought. He liked Metallica. The volume increased until the vibrations from the bass felt like ants crawling on his skin. A mosquito motored in and landed on Zach's arm. He woke with a start, piled out of bed and jumped up and down on the floor.

"First someone gets sand all over my bed and now this god damned music." A strange look crossed his face. He smiled wanly. "I should have taken the post office job," he said. He circled his finger around the area where the mosquito had bitten him. "I saw a horde of mosquitoes attack a moose once. They swarmed on his snout and bit him until he suffocated. Killed him. Just like that." He slashed his arm through the air.
Stoney slid the window closed.

“That fucking music's going to drive me crazy,” Zach said in a gravelly-whisper.

“I'm going for a walk.” He slipped into his raingear--yellow pants and jacket--pulled on his boots and left. Five minutes later, the music stopped and an awkward silence fell on the room.

Stoney slid open the door and peaked up and down the busy hall. He stepped out in his socks and coasted toward the next door.


“Fine,” Stoney said. He wondered who the hell he was. He'd never seen him before.

Five or six guys from the other end of the barracks crowded by, talking loudly and drinking beer. Stoney and the little guy got out of the way.

“Nice weather we're having,” the little guy said. “Did you work today?”

Why in the hell did this guy stop to ask me about the weather, Stoney wondered. More guys milled by. “Yo,” said a guy in a red bandana.

“Nope,” Stoney said.

“Thought I saw you working this afternoon.” More people cut by. Stoney stared at a pretty brunette. Women didn't venture into the men's barracks often.

“See you later,” the little guy said. He waved, smiled nervously and walked down the hall. Stoney knocked on Werewolf's door and went in.

The hall was empty a half-an-hour later when Stoney stepped out of Werewolf's
room. He saw the little guy leaning against the shower room door. Stoney ignored him.

"Hey man," he said. "I can solve your problem."

"What problem. I don't have a problem." Stoney wondered what was with this guy. He opened the door to his room intending to go in before the conversation went further.

"I can accommodate your request. The one at dinner."

Stoney looked puzzled.

"Bud. I've got bud, man," he whispered, glancing up and down the hall. "I heard you asking about it. I tried to talk to you earlier but there were too many people around."

Stoney motioned the guy, who was no taller than Stoney's shoulders, toward Werewolf's room. Inside, he bolted the door and explained the situation to Werewolf. Clothes were scattered all over the room. Werewolf laid on a cot, reading the sports section of The Anchorage Daily News.

"What are you saying?" Werewolf asked. He looked first at Stoney, then the little guy.

"I can accommodate you," the little guy said.

"How much?" Stoney asked. "Is it good stuff?"

"Hell yeah, it's good stuff. Oregon grown," he said.

"How much?"
“Seven joints. Twenty bucks. My room.”

“Can we roll ‘em?” Werewolf asked.

The little guy nodded.

“Let’s go,” Werewolf said.

Werewolf and Stoney followed the short guy down the hall. They looked into rooms full of guys pounding beers, playing cards on pieces of plywood and arguing over nothing. Other rooms were padlocked shut with big silver and blue Master locks.

Werewolf glanced into the shower room. A man with a stomach layered in fat stood in front of a row of porcelain sinks. He was looking into a mirror and shaving. He had a heart shrouded in thorns tattooed on his butt. Someone was taking a shower. Steam condensed on the closed window, ran down the glass and dripped onto the sill.

Paradise walked out of the shitters on the other side of the hall, tucking in his shirt. He pulled the headphones off. “Hey, what’s up?” he asked.


Werewolf signalled him to follow. "Got any more?” he asked. Paradise dug the Copenhagen out of his pocket, handed it over. They continued down the hall.

“Man, I just called Lily. She wasn’t there. I waited in line for 45 minutes before I got a phone. I got her answering machine. I don’t want to talk to her fucking machine. It’s two in the morning back there. What the hell’s she doing out that late?” Paradise
aimed and spit in the bottle.

The short guy glanced over his shoulder. Stoney nodded toward Paradise and shrugged. Stoney'd decided to call this little guy Bud Man.

They passed another open door. A guy and a chick were engaged in a little heavy breathing on a cot. The foursome stopped to watch.

Paradise couldn't stand it. He blurted out: "She's probably out with that big Korean guy. He's got a black belt. She told me it was over. She swore she wouldn't see him again. I bet that's where she is. She's with him." He swept his hair out of his eyes.

The couple on the cot jerked apart. The chick laid there, motionless, as if she was posing. She looked like a milkmaid, messed-up dirty dishwater blonde hair, big boobs and homely as a bulldog. It probably wasn't often she got this much attention. "You looking at my wife?" her lanky husband asked. He had a Norwegian accent.

Paradise was oblivious. "Shit's going down in Boston and I can't--" Werewolf jerked him down the hall into Bud Man's room and bolted the door. "She's screwing me up, man. Lily's--" Paradise grew quiet as Bud Man pulled a stash of marijuana from a faded green duffel bag.

"Mantanuska Thunderfuck?"

Werewolf shook his head.

"Then how do we know it's good stuff?"

"Try some," Bud Man said. He closed the purple curtains. The room darkened.
Paradise and Werewolf sat on an unmade cot. Stoney leaned against the wall. For some reason, he felt far from home. A dope deal, he thought. We don't even know this guy. A convenience store owner down in Seward had told him that grass was legal in Alaska. He decided not to worry about it.

Bud Man rolled a bomber. He knew what he was doing. He creased the paper between his fingers and sifted in the pot. Paradise lit a match. Bud Man licked the paper and then blew out the match.

"Hey man," Paradise said. Werewolf and Stoney tensed, ready to act.

Bud Man reached under the bed for a towel. He folded it and shoved it under the door. Then he slid the window open. "I don't want to take any chances," he said as a match sizzled into flame in Paradise's face.

Paradise inhaled. The red-tipped joint glowed and burned a good half-inch. He passed it to Werewolf and the joint made the rounds. They toked deeply, holding the smoke in their lungs as long as possible and then blowing out blue streams. The room filled with a pungent ditchweed odor. Stoney's eyes teared from the smoke. Werewolf choked, gulping chunks of air.

It was good stuff. The buzz came fast. Paradise arched his eyebrows at Stoney. Werewolf felt like he was melting into the cot, his head rested against a rubbery wall. He was a salmon, a King Salmon, finning out of Bristol Bay back to the stream of his birth.
Paradise would have bought the whole stash if he wasn't broke. "Do you take Master Card?" he asked.

He got silence for an answer.

After the third hit Stoney fetched his wallet from his back pocket and plucked out a $20 bill. He handed it to Paradise. He said: "You get the stuff. We'll settle later. I'm going down to the dock."

"Cool," Paradise said, glowing.

Stoney waited a few minutes for the air to clear, then unbolted the door and left. He cradled his ailing stomach with both hands. Bud Man bolted the door behind him and rolled up six joints of kindness.

It was midnight and still light although heavy clouds hid the sun. Paradise and Werewolf shuffled through the gravel to the telephone hut. Before leaving Bud Man's room they'd divvied up their windfall. Werewolf took two joints and Paradise said he'd give Stoney his share later.

The two phones were on either side of a narrow quonset where the boots and raingear were stored. The hut was newly painted a putrid green. The phones were open.

Werewolf took the charge phone. He punched in his calling card number, then dialed 1-900-L-O-V-E-T-O-F. He leaned against the wall. After several hollow rings, the line connected.
"Hello. Let me talk to Vicki," Werewolf said. There was a pause. "No. No way. I don't want to talk to Martha. I want Vicki. I always talk to Vicki." Another pause. Werewolf read the instructions on the pay phone. "I'll wait 'til she's done," he said. He peeled paint off the wall. "Hi, Vicki." A smile washed across his face. "It's me, Warren." He liked that she always remembered him, regardless of how long since his last call. He closed his eyes and listened, his smile growing larger.

Paradise wasn't as lucky. He dialed Lily's number, collect. When her answering machine clicked on and the operator suggested that he try again later, he started to slam the phone in its cradle but left it hanging instead. He lit up a joint as he stomped off to find Stoney.

All 127 steps down to the pier seemed like slow motion. Even though the generators were running, the dock and cannery were deserted. When Paradise failed to locate Stoney, he balanced on the edge of the dock, as close to the edge as he could get, and listened to the tide go out. He swore he heard the water being siphoned out to sea.

Raucous seagulls circled over the bay. As the receding water left the mud flats bare, the birds dove for madly flapping fish. The birds excited screeches grated on his ears. He put his headphones on and pressed the play button on the Walkman. The music pumped through his body. Furry caterpillars crawled through his veins, gave him goose bumps. In celebration he lit up another joint.

After a while he took the 127 steps two at a time up the ravine. He found and
animal path that wound through the tundra, miles of bushes, marshes and tall grass. He was careful to stay on ground and not sink into knee-deep water. He wandered to a high ledge overlooking the bay. He saw St. Petersburg Point where the Naknek River swirled into Bristol Bay. At low tide the river wasn’t much more than a mudpit with a few streams braiding through it. On the horizon he spotted the black specks of the Japanese cargo ships anchored in deep water and waiting for the caneries’ salmon deliveries. If it wasn’t so cloudy he might have seen the smoke-shrouded mountains in Katmai about 100 miles to the west. Or was it east? He couldn't tell.

A lone 32 ft. snub-nosed boat teetered on its side in the mud, a light flickering in the captain’s cabin. The mist changed to a deluge.

Fat raindrops plunked into the ground. Rooted to the edge of the cliff, Paradise leaned into the downfall. He pulled the hood over his head and wished for his raingear. Under a brooding sky, he began to air guitar. His right arm windmilled the imaginary strings while his left hand strangled the frets. He sang. Sang as loud as he could. He yodelled. He hoofed. Water dribbled off his hood onto his face. But he played on with all the poise and intensity of Pete Townsend at his best.
O.D.'s in the backyard shoveling topsoil into burlap sacks. He wants to start a garden even though spring's already shown its brighter side. He's been outside a lot since he got home.

It rained buckets when I picked him up at the bus station last week. The windshield wipers clipped back and forth as he scurried into my car. I tried to be nonchalant when I asked about his car. He said it was being repaired somewhere in Utah. He wouldn't tell me why.

His leave of absence ends tomorrow, and I'm wondering what he'll do. I can usually tell about these things. I just can't figure out what could make him change so much in two weeks. I'm trying to read between the lines. Find some logic. All I can
go on is what he told me when he came back. And that wasn't much. But what else is new.

I know my husband, though. He tries so hard not to let anyone see how he feels, but I see right through him.

This is what I know; this is what I imagine, no doubt distorted both by memory and wishful thinking.

YOU ARE ONE OF US cinemascoped across the computer screen, each letter flicked on, gobbling up space. O.D. bolted up, casting the bedcovers onto the floor, and almost knocked me out of bed. He'd been having these dreams for three months. He said that a monitor talked to him, one with a boomerang-shaped halo above it. At first, single letters clicked on the screen. Eventually the letters transformed into words and then into whispered gibberish. O.D. listened. He said that he didn't want to hear it, that he couldn't help it. He harkened to the siren's sound, like an alcoholic to drink, until the computer's promptings began to make sense.

Make sense to O.D., that is. I never could stretch the explanation quite as far as he did. He said: “Computers lack imagination. They do exactly what you tell them as long as it's logical. They aren't moody. They never deviate from procedures. They have no feelings.”

“So what,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

“That’s me,” he said. “That’s what I’m becoming.”

“But that’s why I married you,” I said. “I like knowing you that well. No
surprises."

"Well, evidently that's not working."

I didn't understand. I didn't want him to change. If he changed, I'd have to.

After this dream screen debut, I watched O.D. force himself to use his computer.

He'd slouch in the chair, fingers perched on the keys, and stare at the blue screen. I imagined it full of poltergeists.

He'd been designing computer systems for five years. Though he didn't know it, I'd often watch him work. Absorbed, his computer plugged into the modem, his fingers click, click, clicking over the keyboard, he'd concentrate for hours, days designing elaborate systems that I can't begin to understand.

"What are you doing?" I asked him, once.

His neck muscles tensed in answer.

"What is it you're doing? How can you work at it so long?"

He glanced at the screen, raked a hand through his shaggy hair. "It's a fail-safe device that determines the continuity of electrical wiring harnesses used in conjunction with arterio-robotic-malthusiasms."

"But what does it do?"

He tried to tell me. Something about a gizmo cross-indexing a conflagulator. I didn't understand. I knew he talked that way on purpose. He did his best to avoid explaining the details in plain language. I never asked about his work again.

Occasionally, I felt second best. But O.D. made good money with the programs
that filtered from his mind into the computer. I liked living comfortably. Having what I wanted. Granted with all the time O.D. spent working, I didn't have as much of him as I would have liked, but I couldn't complain.

At least, no complaints until he asked his boss for time off.

O.D. lost it at work. He told me that he switched off his terminal. He had never turned it off like that before. O.D.'s problem reminded me of my Dad. He used to have problems like that, too. He was a partner in machine shop that manufactured high-tensile-strength capscrews for the Aero-space industry. He hated his job. He'd come home late at night, irritated, snapping vicious words at my mother. He'd sit in his favorite chair, a chair no one else could use. After a few martinis, he'd mellow out, and call me over to sit with him. He'd let me have the olive.

One night he came home and knelt before my mother. He didn't even take off his coat, just cradled his head in her lap and cried. He mumbled things I couldn't hear. My mother sat there. She didn't move. Didn't hug him. "Don't be an ass," she told him.


Maybe my father had felt like O.D. did when he charged into his Ron's office and asked for a vacation.

Ron didn't glance up from his computer. "Just a second," he said, and continued
typing. He hated being interrupted, so this is how I saw him reacting.

Ron's an older guy. He taught O.D. everything. He's been into computers since the beginning. He worked for IBM back when computers filled whole rooms. He's the type of addict who turns on the computer before he brushes his teeth in the morning, and turns it off just before going to bed.

O.D. waited. He said that he got impatient, which was unusual, considering he treated Ron like a god. Eventually, the clicking stopped. Ron peered at O.D. through thick glass-magnified eyes, and said: "Not a good time to leave. We just received two new contracts from Taiwan. We've worked a long time to get our foot in the door. I was going to talk to you about them--"

O.D. probably stood there holding up the doorframe. He talked real straight when agitated, like a computer.

"I must go," he said.

"Who'll cover for you?"

"I am going. One more day of looking into a screen--" I don't know why, but when O.D. told me about this, I thought of the robot, Klaatu Niktu, in the movie, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. The part where the robot stands in front of the spaceship, and you know something ominous is about to happen.

Ron thought a moment, digesting the information. "I can swing the time off if you request a leave of absence, but you'll lose your bonus," he said. He examined his terminal. He glanced at O.D., pushed a key. "That's a hefty bite of money."
"I want to leave tomorrow," O.D. said.

He stared at a pattern on the rug. It looked like a circuit board. "No, I want to leave right now. An immediate leave of absence."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I have to go.

I must go. Maybe I can explain when I return."

Yeah, maybe he'll get around to telling me, too. He's still out back, digging.

I heard the screech of shovel scraping hard against rock.

The morning O.D. left, I followed him as far as the freeway ramp. He asked me to go with him. And I wanted to. I really did. But if I took that much time off, I'd lose my job at the florist's for sure. Besides, without that bonus money, we'd need my paycheck.

I assumed he'd zoom north--Canada, the Yukon. If he had to take off, he might as well go as far away as possible.

I kissed him. But I didn't say good-bye.

That first night after he'd gone, I drank a glass of chablis. It didn't help. I tried a beer, a Keystone. It tasted bitter, but I sipped more and read some poetry by Wordsworth. He makes me cry. After the fourth beer, I switched to Tequila. I put on a Tito Puente album. Turned up the volume and danced around the living room. I got dizzy and crashed on the floor. The tone arm skipped across the record and shut off.
O.D. ran out of gas seven miles short of the Nephi exit. The engine coughed and jerked. He was probably speeding. The dashboard went bananas splashing orange, green, red and white letters across the screen. When the engine died, it was all he could do to steer the car off the road. He said he missed the edge of a concrete bridge by a hair.

Out of gas on I-15 near Nephi, Utah, he scribbled on the back of a postcard of the Mormon Tabernacle, tall white pinnacles surrounded by highrises in downtown Salt Lake.

Somehow, O.D. had wandered through Yosemite National Park, and got on Rt. 95. I still can't ascertain what he was doing there. He could have driven straight north from San Jose. I-680 connects with I-5, and goes through the rest of California, Oregon, and Washington. I got out the road atlas and checked.

He ended up staying at a campground in Tonopah, Nevada. Don't ask me how he got there. I asked him, and all he'd say was, "I got lost."

He'd never camped in his life. I like camping. I used to go all the time with my Dad before I got married. O.D. said he slept in the car, and froze.

Apparently, this is where he encountered the old man for the first time.

It was dusk. O.D. was running the car heater to keep warm when the old guy drove up in a powder blue '63 Ford pickup, and backed into the next campsite. O.D. said that the truck caught his attention because a cloud of smoke trailed behind it. The truckbed wheelwells grated against the tires. He smelled burning rubber about the
same time he noticed that there wasn't a license plate on the bumper.

A pink-striped mattress covered several ripped and faded boxes, paint cans, car parts and wood chips stashed into the truckbed. A big dog lounged on the mattress. The man's fishing poles stuck out the side, and a yellow rowboat pockmarked with rust, angled from the cab toward the tailgate.

As soon as the truck stopped, the dog leapt down and roamed the campground. O.D. said the dog looked mean and ferocious as if it would have a name like Fang or Killer. The old man unfolded a canvas mat on the deep grass. He knelt and patted out the wrinkles. Next, he pulled the mattress from the truck, slid it onto the mat, then spread a sheet and two blankets over it. He smoothed out the wrinkles, and tucked the bedcovers under the mattress. When he'd finished, he rummaged through the truckbed until he found a plastic jug with the top sawed off. He set it down by the bed. The wind soon blew the empty jug over.

"Why didn't he sleep in a tent?" O.D. had asked me.

"He didn't need one," I'd said.

O.D. raised an eyebrow. I don't know how he does it, only raising one.

"He had the canopy of night for his tent," I said.

"Huh?" he'd said, and went back to work on his garden, chomping at the ground with a pick.

O.D. didn't take any chances.

He was afraid the old man might walk over and try to talk to him so he locked
the car doors. The wind sifted through red-budded tree branches.

The old man had bushy eyebrows like mini hedgerows. He slouched on a picnic bench and clipped his fingernails. When he'd finished, he swept the tabletop with his finger until he'd collected the clippings. Then he sprinkled them into a glasses case and buried it in his pocket. He slipped a dart from the flap of his hat and scratched behind his ear. According to O.D.'s description, the hat was Russian, the type with the furry earflaps that snap together on top, the kind political prisoners wear when exiled to Siberia.

The man sat through the night, occasionally nodding off. He talked to himself. O.D. flattened the car seat, and tried to sleep. His toes got cold. He doesn't sleep well when his toes get cold. I bet he wished he had that dog's thick fur, or the old man's hat. The nightsounds--birds, cars honking, wispy music, a mother calling her child back to the tent--caught on the wind. Each noise jolted the old man awake. He cussed up a blue streak. "Goddamn, goddamn son of a bitch," he'd say. Or, "Fucking shithead goddamn sum bitchin' radio." O.D. said he learned new variations on old words, which surprised me. I'd never heard him use any.

Just before the old man went to bed, O.D. heard him urinate in the plastic bottle. At first, he couldn't tell what it was. Then he wondered why the old man just didn't piss in the grass. Strange habits, I guess.

O.D. woke up as the sun swelled like a bruise across the horizon. A rectangle of crushed grass where the mattress had been was all that was left of the old man. In
the chilly camp bathroom, O.D. opened the spigot with one hand and splashed water on his face with the other. The towel dispenser was empty so he dried his face on his shirt. Wearing the same clothes, he zipped onto the freeway.

He ran out of gas in Nephi, Utah. According to the road atlas, he must have taken Rt. 6 up to Ely, and then cut across Rt. 50 through Delta where the road intersected with I-15.

There he sat and brooded as SERVICE ENGINE SOON blinked on the dashboard. Tiny bells accompanied each flash.

"I hate computers," O.D. mumbled. "They're never wrong. That makes them a lot like people, I guess." He did explain how he'd tried to push a hundred miles past the car's computer warning. The dashboard usually displayed everything from outside temperature to the amount of gas left in the tank. When the tank was low, a small amber light flashed, and the computer signalled the number of miles left before running dry. Sometimes the screen read "zero," but he'd drive an hour before stopping to fill up. He loved fooling the computer.

I figured this time, bored with driving, he thought that he'd once more pit himself against it. He'd create a little tension to pass the miles. Filmore is the last exit before Nephi. That's at least fifty miles. The gas gauge probably read zero, but he pushed on. I don't like it when he does that. If I was in the car, I'd threaten him with the long walk. I'd get nervous. Sometimes I'd demand that he take me home. We never ran out of gas, though.
I guess he got the tension, all right. Only this time the computer fooled him. I’m glad I wasn’t there. If he’d stayed home, I could have relieved his tension. Oh well, his loss.

I’ve always thought he lost anyway when he bought that car—a souped-up purple Beretta. It’s a coupe, he said. He got it because my Dad paraded around in a Buick Riviera with everything on it. He and my Dad argued incessantly about American-made cars. My Dad preached buying American. O.D. argued that it didn’t matter. He said that quality mattered. I liked my Dad’s Buick, but O.D. couldn’t stand it. The digital dashboard fascinated him, though. Funny thing is, my Dad, despite all his arguing, bought a Volvo shortly after O.D. bought the Beretta. Now they don’t talk at all.

His new set of wheels set us back a bundle. The “Z” he traded in wasn’t even a year old. And he didn’t ask me about it first.

Frowning, O.D. opened the door of his crippled car. Before his foot touched the pavement, he felt the diesel blast of a passing semi.

He slumped on the trunk, and watched cars whip by. He reconnoitered the situation. Although he didn’t tell me this, I know he sat there and sulked, impatient and angry. He gets that way when he’s done something dumb. Only he won’t admit it.

He was stuck in a valley surrounded by green mountains tipped with late spring snow. Lines of sprinklers stretched across fields of alfalfa sprouting from purple dirt.
The waning setting sun sprayed orange streaks across the sky. Patches of goldenrod muscled through cracks in the blacktop and shimmied in the wake of passing cars. As I listened to him, I thought the descriptions sounded almost poetic, not like him at all.

As the sky burned itself out, he opened the car's hood to attract help. He probably curled into the passenger's seat, stared at the blank dashboard, and contemplated the long walk. Just as he had psyched himself to hoof it, he saw a powder-blue pickup coast to a stop. The truck had a streaky hand-brushed paint job. A man wearing a fleece-collared jacket waved from the cab.

O.D.'s first reaction was to slip his wallet from his pocket. He was worried about being robbed. He opened the car door and stashed his money high up under the back seat springs, then ran to the passenger's side of the truck. The door swung open. He saw the Russian hat. "I'm out of gas," he yelled.

Although O.D. sketched a vague picture of his vacation escapades, he could recall the old man clearly.

"Need a lift?" the old man asked.

O.D. leaned into the cab and nodded.

A semi barreled by, swaying the pick-up and rattling its suspension. The dog stood on the mattress edge and nuzzled O.D.'s shoulder.

"Could tow ya I s'pose. 'Cept I don't have my chain. Hafta try the rope," he said. Wrinkles gouged his face.

"Well," O.D. said, hesitantly. "I'm out of gas." He looked at the dog, thought
about petting it. He changed his mind. "I'll try it."

The man clambered out of his truck. He drew in a deep breath, let it out, and surveyed the land. He hadn't shaved in days and his shoulders stooped forward.

"You stay put, Chuck." He pointed at the dog. The dog didn't move. He untangled a greasy rope from under a bald tire, then schoochied under the car. O.D. followed. The man had fastened the rope to the radiator hose. O.D. wasn't sure, but he, nevertheless, suggested that the chassis might be better. That word has a nice sound--chassis--something I could wear like a tiara.

O.D. brushed the dust off his jacket. The man got in his truck. The rope tethered the Beretta to a trailer hitch on the truck's bumper. O.D. eased into the driver's seat. He switched off the car's warning lights, turned the ignition key to "accessory," pushed the gearshift knob into neutral, and grasped the steering wheel. While he waited, he wondered if the old truck could tow his car.

Nothing happened. In the violet dusk the dashboard flashed as if it were laughing at him. Back home, he thought, there would still be another hour of light. He's always thinking like that.

The old man climbed out of his truck. He sauntered to the car, oblivious to the cars and trucks streaming by. "Goddamn sum bitchin' rat turd dead batt'ry," he yelled. The dog barked. The old man cussed and flailed the air with a tire wrench. O.D. flinched. He didn't open the door.

"Hafta' push-start the fucker," the man yelled at the window.
O.D. waited until the man unhitched the rope before he got out of the car.

I could picture him planting his feet in the gravel for leverage. I could see him slip but quickly regain his balance, and with his shoulder, strain against the tailgate. The truck slid forward, gathered momentum. The old man let the clutch out. The truck lurched ahead, the engine grinding. After three tries, O.D.'s legs screamed mutiny, and he thought about me, how I told him to exercise more. Fortunately, the engine caught and a wave of heavy blue smoke billowed out the exhaust pipe.

The old man raced the engine. He gave a thumbs-up, and backed the truck to the car. O.D. attached the rope and hopped behind the wheel. The rope tightened and the pickup crept onto the road, the Beretta close behind.

Poor O.D. puttered along in someone else's control, thoughts ranging through his head like: what type of person would stop to help someone on the freeway. What would he want? I'd never think twice about helping someone broke down on the freeway. I wouldn't do it. Too dangerous.

The old man towed the car to the Nephi off ramp. The tires jostled across a cattle guard. They parked the car next to a brightly-lit island of gas pumps.

I ran out of gas in Utah once. I was with my father shortly after I'd gotten my driver's license. I was surprised when he let me drive. I drove for hours while he napped. I was nervous. I forgot to watch the gas gauge. The first lurch of the engine woke my father up. The car barely made it to the next exit. I don't remember the name.

I ran out of gas right in front of the station. My father couldn't push the car up
the small incline. Every time I let off the brake, the car coasted backwards. He'd try to push. After a while four men with sweaty, dirt-smudged faces came out and helped push the car to the gas pump. They wore funny short-brimmed hats. I thought the dirt was from farming; that these men were people of the earth and smelled of fresh-cut alfalfa, and cow manure. I wondered if they were Mormons. I'd never seen a Mormon before. Dad told me to stay in the car. He mentioned later that the men worked for Bethlehem Steel over by the lake. They were steel workers on their way home.

He didn't say anything about running out of gas. He didn't even ask how it happened. But he didn't let me drive anymore, either. I'd screwed up my big chance. I uttered an apology. He mumbled something about Utah being a "dry" state and he couldn't buy any booze. The whine of wheels on grooved cement leaked into the car.

O.D. ambles into the kitchen. I offer to fix him a drink, a Bloody Mary, a Tequila Sunrise, anything. "Nope," he says. "Ice cream. I'll get it." His face gleams with sweat. He wipes his shirtsleeve across his forehead.

"What was Nephi like?" I ask.

"It's a town with more gas stations than people," he answers. He opens the freezer door and pulls out a frost-covered ice cream container, sets it on the counter.

Well if he doesn't want a drink, I'll fix another for myself, I think.

"What happened with the old man?" I ask.

O.D. has now collected a banana, a can of peanuts, Hershey's chocolate, whipped cream, and I think he's rummaging through the cupboard for a cherry.
“Nothing,” he says.

“Nothing?” I say. “Nothing? Something happened.” I sit at the table, rubbing my finger around the lip of my glass. “What did he say at the gas station?”

“Better check your transmission.” O.D. turns and stares at my shot glass.

“Huh?” “What?”

“Better check your transmission. That’s what he said.” O.D. turns back to his ice cream, talks over his shoulder. “He’d heard that towing new cars could foul up the transmission. He was concerned. He wanted to make sure I’d get where I was going. The guy stopped to help me. No one’s ever done that before.”

O.D. scoops ice cream into a large dish. He layers slices of banana on top, uniformly sprinkles peanuts over that.

“And then what?” I ask.

He criss-crosses the can of syrup over the whole thing. “We’ve been over this a thousand times,” he says as he dabs on the whipped cream and stuffs a cherry. “Nothing happened. My car broke down. There’s nothing else. Nothing.”

“You never tell it all. Only what you want me to hear. What about tomorrow? Your job, what will you do? I think I’m entitled to know.”

“How many have you had today?” His eyes nudge my glass, caress my face. He sits across from me. “You never used to drink like this. What’s it get you?” He purses his lips. “I tell you everything I can.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, shovels a spoon into the sundae.
I sip my drink. O.D. watches and I become self-conscious. I set down the glass, ice cubes clinking. I stare at the glass for a moment and look up. O.D. is focussed on the glass. "It's getting worse," he says. "I've put up with it for months. You start early in the morning and pass out during the five o'clock news."

O.D. shoves away from the table, hurries toward the door. "Why don't you come out and help me," he says as the screen door slams. The bowl of half-eaten ice cream sits on the table. The ice cream melts into the chocolate, the peanuts sink to the bottom.

I drink to get answers you don't provide. Go on, run back to your garden. Quit your job. I can guess what transpired at the gas station in Nephi on I-15.

The shocks creaked as the tank filled. O.D. smelled the gas vapors.


"Charlie," the old man said. He removed his gloves and shook hands. His hand was wrinkled and liver-spotted, but his grip felt strong. The fluorescent lights draped over the gas pumps, hummed. A Winnebago lumbered up to the next island and tripped the warning bell twice.

"Thanks for stopping," O.D. said. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help." He wasn't sure if he trusted the old man. But he wanted to. He said he felt like he owed him something. "Can I buy your gas? A beer? How about some dinner?"

"Nope. Don't want nothin'. Don't touch alcohol, haven't for years. Glad I could
help." Charlie nodded his head to the left. "I'll wait for you over there," he said. "Be sure to check that transmission."

The numbers on the pump stopped. The nozzle clicked off. After he fetched his wallet from under the backseat, he went into the station to buy something for Charlie.

Afterwards, O.D. sat down in the car, placed the key in the ignition, and twisted. The orange dashboard lights smiled on. He pressed the gas pedal and glared at the dash. The engine turned over, settled to a smooth idle. That's how he said it—a smooth idle. He drove the Beretta to an unlit parking lot where Charlie and his old Ford waited.

Chuck pounced on O.D. as he opened his car door. Both paws gripped his shoulders. The dog slurped across O.D.'s glasses. He hates getting his glasses dirty. Hates cleaning them. But he laughed and brushed the dog aside. He scratched between its ears.

Charlie smiled and nodded toward the dog. "Life's not all there if you don't have a friend. Don't know what I'd do without him," he said.

"Is your battery okay? Need a jump?" O.D. said. Chuck tagged behind O.D.

"Nope," he said. "Don't know why it wouldn't start before. Drove 300 miles today." O.D. opened the trunk. He lifted the new battery.

"I bought this for you." It was heavy. His muscles tensed with the weight. He held it for a long time. His arms began to quiver.

Finally, a smile cracked Charlie's face. O.D. said he loved the surprised look.
Charlie fitted the battery between all the boxes in the truckbed. "God damn, that'll come in handy," he said.

Quite frankly, I've never seen O.D. spend that much money on anyone, especially if he didn't have to.

"I need to check the oil," Charlie said. "How's that transmission?" He unlatched the truck's hood. It groaned open. He pulled out the dipstick, wiped it on his coveralls and slid it back in the engine. "Hmmm. Looks okay," he said. "Where ya from?"


"Sounds pretty slick." Charlie stuck his head under the hood. "Where ya goin'?"


Charlie lingered outside the range of headlights. O.D. saw his eyes. They sparkled like a cursor. He liked the look. Charlie slammed the hood and checked to make sure it had caught. "Montana's a ways," he said.

"Yeah, going to take some traveling," O.D. said. "You need anything else?" He glanced at the disheveled truck.

"Naw. I already told you I don't want nothin', damn it." Charlie smiled. "I just hope you'll help someone if you see them in trouble." He yanked a rag from his side pocket, wiped his hands. "You religious?"

O.D. shook his head, no. He braced for a sermon.

"Only fuckin' religion I know," Charlie continued, "is to help others. That's the
only Jesus you need in this world. People'd never go wrong that way.”

When O.D. told me this, I thought this guy was a Mormon looking for a convert. I thought he'd recruited O.D..

Charlie squeezed the door latch. The truck door yawned open. "Hop in, Chuck," he said. He shooed the dog over and slid behind the steering wheel. The wind bristled the dog's mane. The starter whined and cranked over the engine. Charlie leaned out the window. He inhaled deeply. "You smell it?" he said, exhaling. "Everything's growin' faster n' a rabbit fucks. Never tried it, myself. Plantin', that is. Maybe will, someday." He scanned the sky.

O.D. saw a sky clustered with stars. He looked until his neck hurt. When he gazed into the truck's dark cab, he noticed the blank dashboard, its vinyl material torn and peeling. The lights for the dials were off. "How can you drive without it?" he asked. He pointed at the dash.

"Just do." Charlie tapped the dashboard cover.

"Blew a fuse or something years ago and never bothered fixing the fucker. Just know when everything's all right. The wheels go and I guide 'em." I imagined O.D's mind turning somersaults at this kind of logic.

"Where you heading," O.D. mumbled.

The dog barked.

Charlie revved the engine. "Goin' to Minnesota. Cut seaweed. A lot of lakes up there with green stuff growing on the bottom." He eased off the clutch and the truck
scooted onto the road.

"So long," O.D. yelled. He watched the headlights spear the darkness. The tail lights faded to red dots reflected off the guardrail. The truck curved to the right and disappeared behind a hill. If only O.D. had gotten in his car and come home after that.

But he didn't. He plopped into his idling Beretta. Orange digits glowed. He clicked the gearshift knob into drive, but held his foot on the brake. After a minute or so, he shoved the knob back into park. He didn't, so he said, know where to go. He gazed out the window. It was dark and he couldn't see anything except his reflection in the glass. That scared him. It would scare me. I don't want to be alone like that.

O.D. stared at the dash. He concentrated on a large zero plastered in the center of the speedometer. He blurred the zero with his eyes, then brought it back into focus. He reached up to the right and hit a roller switch. The dashboard flickered. After a moment's thought, he opened the trunk and hauled out the tire wrench. Back in the car, he lowered the steering wheel, aimed carefully, and smashed the dashboard. Smashed it until the whole area was a black gash like the eye sockets of a skeleton. He doesn't know why he did it. I asked how it felt? Did he regret it? He wouldn't tell me. He trashed up his car, shattered our life and I can't to do anything about it.

He did say that he heard the loud whispers of cars and trucks cruising by on the freeway. He nudged the gearshift knob--

Click. Past reverse.
Click. Past neutral.

Click. Into drive. He pressed the accelerator and steered the car in the direction of the old man. He hollered, “Shit baby, I ain’t gonna’ program computers no more.” He probably did say that. And I really believe he drove after that old man in his dilapidated truck. I think he got lost on a pot-holed dirt road somewhere in the mountains. In the dark, his nose pressed to the steering wheel, he took a wrong turn and wandered around aimlessly. I think he never caught up with that old man. And after a while the car's transmission probably blew up on a steep pass in the Wasatch National Forest. If he’d had the dashboard on, a red light would have warned him.

So all I can go on is how I feel. This is what I know:

Some men don’t talk much. Most men who do, never have a lot to say. O.D’s not old enough for a mid-life crisis. I just don’t know what he’ll do with his job tomorrow. I don’t like not knowing. Whatever happens, I think it’s time we decided together.

I suppose I could join O.D. in the backyard, help him sack dirt. Maybe I could convince him to buy a wheelbarrow. Might make the work a little easier. I think I’ll fix myself another drink, first, then go out and plant something for myself.
O.D.'s wife stared at him.

"I mean, right now, I'm really feeling close to you," he said.

O.D.'s wife crouched, stretching her tight Gitanos. She opened the cupboard door, clattered through the Revere Ware and picked up an grease crusted iron skillet. She brandished it at him.

O.D. flinched half-heartedly and said: "I mean it's a feeling right now. Not one of those forever things."

His wife shook her head. Her long, newly-permed hair whipped across her shoulders. She banged the skillet on the stove, turned an ebony knob and flame flared through the grill.

"It won't be the same tomorrow."

"Shut up," she said.
“But--” O.D. held up his hands, palms out.

“Hemingway didn’t know shit. And what good is all this doing you? We’ve put our lives on hold for three years, and now you’re saying it’ll be another three. Three more years. That’s bullshit!”

“I’ve kept my job,” O.D. said. Barefoot, and wearing shorts, he stood in the center of the kitchen, arms at his side. “What more do you want?”

“What do I want?” His wife stabbed the air with a spatula. “I want a red Mercedes convertible like Denise has. I want to live on the beach. A Malibu beach house. I want to have a baby. I want--”

“You know,” O.D. said. He leaned against the white-and-cinnamon tiled counter as if he’d been hit. “Who the hell cares what you want if you can’t pay for it. You’ve got to be happy first.” He slipped off his glasses, blew a speck off the lens. He squinted his brown eyes and said: “I’ve got a wallet full of charge cards used up to their limits. Past their limits.”

O.D.’s wife plopped three pork chops into the smoking skillet. Missiles of grease splatted on the gray stove top as she mixed in a can of Campbell’s French Onion soup. She glanced over her shoulder. “Ever since you took that course on Hemingway you’ve been spouting all this deep stuff.” She mimicked: “What do you value more--a piece of shit surrounded by gold or a piece of gold surrounded by shit. What kind of declaration is that?”

“That’s not exactly what I said.”
"What difference does it make? You always want to be something else. You want to be Manufacturing Vice President. You want to teach. You want to write. You want to move to Siberia. You want me to go along and be your weekend wife. That's what I am." She punched a button, the can opener whined. O.D. collected lettuce, cauliflower, tomatoes, carrots, bell peppers, radishes, mushrooms, olives, broccoli and a cucumber from the crisper in the refrigerator. It's a huge beast, he thought of the refrigerator, like a white elephant, but the monthly payments are low. He split the head of lettuce, reached for a bag of fresh brussels sprouts.

"How about brussels sprouts?" He handed her the bag. She screwed up her face. She hated brussels sprouts, was about to decline, but poured them into the vegetable steamer never-the-less. O.D. loved them smothered in butter. He called them mini-cabbages.

"All you do is read and work. You come home exhausted and then hide your face in a book. There's no time for me. No quality time." She attacked an onion with a knife, short thrusts tapping a thick cutting board. "Didn't he shoot himself?"

"Who?" O.D. asked.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist. "He sure endured with dignity."

O.D. slumped against the laundry room door. The gray washer and dryer combination arrested his attention. Kenmores. Sears let you charge anything, but don't be late on your payment or there goes your credit rating. We live from paycheck to paycheck, he thought. We both work.
"O.D. are you listening?" his wife asked. Pilar, an ash-colored Persian cat, padded through the dining room, her tail erect. O.D. saw her reflection in the polished floor. His wife’s pet. He’d agreed to give it a home when his wife had allowed him to name it. She’d brought the spindly-legged cat home from the vet where she worked on the weekends. She’d rescued a lot of homeless animals. Sometimes as many as five or six cats roamed the house. It got bad when she mixed dogs and cats. Once O.D had found a mother cat giving birth to kittens in his closet. “I have two jobs,” his wife often said as if she were a martyr, as if, O.D. thought, they, the two of them with their combined incomes, didn’t make enough money.

The animal resembled a furball with toothpicks attached. It spent most of its time staring at the wall, its tail swaying across the carpet.

“C’mere Pilar,” his wife crooned. “Come here, baby.” The cat ignored both of them. “O.D., did you hear me, O.D.?”

“Yes, yeah, I heard you,” he said. “Rankle called Friday. Ordered me to fire Joe.”

“No way,” she said. Steam billowed out of a pan as she checked the brussels sprouts. “Just because he’s the chairman of the board---”

“Yep. Couldn’t argue. Couldn’t get a word in. Told me to fire his ass and hung up.”

“What’d Joe say this time?” she asked. She slid two sets of monogrammed silverware out of a drawer.
"Something about executives standing around beating their meat while the machines go to hell."

O.D.'s wife smiled. "That sounds like him. He probably said it after working twenty hours straight to fix one."

"Yep. He's always pissed off if a machine screws up. Especially if he works all night," O.D. said. He picked up the salad bowl and carried it to the dining room table. "If Joe wasn't there I'd have to be. The calls in the middle of the night are bad enough. You'd think no one knows how to make a decision or trouble shoot a machine. That's what they're paid for."

"You worry too much." His wife stirred the pork chops. She watched O.D. pour the salad dressing. "Is that bleu cheese?"

O.D. shook his head.

"I sort of wanted Italian."

He shrugged.

"They know it, you know."

"Know what?"

"At work. They know you'll fix it. That's why they call."

"But in the middle of the night? I cringe every time the phone rings anymore."

He screwed the cap on the bottle of salad dressing, slammed the bottle on the blond mahogany table.

"It's your job. Your plant," she said.
"Now you sound like my boss. I know my job." O.D. pulled out a chair and began to sit. "Maybe I'll quit. That's what I could do. "Quit."

O.D.'s wife ran from the kitchen. She slammed the bathroom door. After a few minutes, O.D. turned down the flame, covered the skillet. He eyed the brass handle on the bathroom door and wondered if it was locked.

"You're a dreamer," she called, her voice hollow, muffled. "All you want are dreams. Like that babe you never screwed in high school."

"Darilyn Astley," he said too quickly. "Dare. I called her Dare."

"You broke up with her so you could go to the Prom with Shirley. And you got her back to your bedroom and you were just about to get your rocks off for the very first time in your life--"

The toilet flushed. O.D. and his wife had been through this scene a million times. O.D. couldn't figure out why she continually brought it up. He told her his dreams, he thought. That's all it was, a dream. Was it his fault that he dreamed about Dare a lot?

O.D.'s wife opened the bathroom door. "When your mother walked in on you," she said. "She caught you bare-assed in the act."

Two drops of water dribbled off the doorknob, splashed on the floor. "Face it, I'm too real for you."

He didn't answer. He didn't move, didn't breathe.

"Okay, don't admit it. You're the one having the dream."
“So I dream about her,” he shrugged.

“But you wake up and tell me about it.”

“It’s a dream.”

“How can I compete with a dream?” She ran her hand over her breasts, lightly across her crotch. Her glance stabbed his eyes. O.D. looked away. She pressed her finger to his chest. “Are we going to eat?” She brushed past O.D. and grabbed two plates from the redwood cupboard next to the window. The low sun filtered through the white Levelor blinds, angling slivers of light across the kitchen.

After dinner, she sponged the dirty dishes. He arranged them in the dishwasher, the oldest appliance in the kitchen, two months short of paid off. O.D. liked how it hummed when he turned it on.

They retreated to the family room. O.D. fell onto the high wide couch they’d bought on sale, payments deferred for ninety days.

His wife closed the curtains, switched on a lamp, and snuggled into an over-stuffed beige rocking chair. Potted plants languished wherever space permitted--wandering jews, spider plants, and ferns from the ceiling, yucca plants on the carpet, aloe vera, pathos, peace lilies and venus fly traps on the coffee table and the ledge next to the skylight. A huge stovepipe cactus erupted from a clay pot on top of the big-screen television.

O.D. watched TV. He fell asleep during the second commercial. Two hours later his wife tried to wake him as the grandfather clock chimed.
First she kissed him. When he didn't respond, she shook him and then squeezed his shoulder.

"Wake up, O.D.," she said impatiently.

"I'm awake." He'd been awake since the kiss.

Ching.

"C'mon, let's go to bed."

Chong.

"I'm awake." O.D. snapped, his eyes closed tight.

"Let's go to bed and fool around." She jerked the pillow from under his head.

Chong.

"I love you, you asshole," she whispered. She tapped up the thermostat and went up the stairs. The television glared into the dark room.

Sometime in the center of the night Pilar leaped onto the arm of the couch. She clawed the coarse scotch-guarded material contently. Purring, she pounced on O.D.'s stomach. She licked his mustache. He swatted his nose. In retaliation, the cat dug her claws through his shirt into his skin. He scrambled up, pinning the cat against the couch. Pilar clawed free and darted into the dark kitchen.

"Damn that cat!" O.D.'s stomach stung. He rubbed his eyes. The clock chimed. He thought he counted twelve, maybe thirteen. The television danced gray shadows into the dim room.

It's the TV, he thought. She left the TV on. Went to bed without me. I feel
like a stale bread crumb, but I'm not tired. Wired. Sired. Desired. Fired. God, Joe, what am I going to do?

O.D. leafed through the TV Guide, found a movie. "Odysseus' Long Road Home." Twenty years away from his wife, he thought. Penelope. My faithful Penelope. Lucky Penny. A penny for your thoughts.

The TV crackled as he switched channels. He watched the movie. It was one of those low budget foreign films. After viewing a half-an-hour of Cal Worthington and his dog, Spot, car commercials interspersed with a movie where the lips never matched the dialogue, O.D. switched off the TV with the remote control.

In the dark, rubbing his stomach, he shuffled into the dining room to a long wall shelved with books. Hardbacks. A sign of his prosperity, he thought, buying first editions. He plucked a book from the third shelf--THE SHORT STORIES OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY.

Back in the family room, he switched on a porcelain lamp. The soft light caught the hanging plants, casting an audience of shadows on the walls. O.D. cracked the book to a marked page. The light barely illumined the print.

Sometime later, he snapped the book shut. He couldn't remember what he'd read. His glance circled the room. A clean place with good lighting, he thought sarcastically. Life's a tease. Why strive for anything. I can get a raise, a house, a million bucks. But how can I fire Joe. My friend. If I don't can him, no job. Would she stay if I didn't have a job? She wants kids. Won't wait much longer. Do I want all this?
How do I change it?

O.D. laid on the couch. He stared at the skylight and imagined stars, millions of them. I could kill myself, he thought. Put a shotgun to--ah, hell, that's easier read than done.

His head throbbed just above his left eye. He massaged his forehead and slipped the book back on the shelf. The floor creaked as he ambled past the bathroom to the stairs. Halfway up, he noticed the lamp.

He turned down the thermostat before switching off the lamp and shuffled toward the stairs.

The cat scurried under his feet. He stumbled. The cat screeched. O.D. grabbed the banister, his shoulder crashed into the wall. The impact knocked a baroque-framed mirror off the wall. The mirror softly punched the carpet and splintered. He pulled himself up, careful not to step in the glass. He thought he felt fur, lashed out, connected with something solid. The cat flew across the room.

The sprinkler system drummed water on the grass and cement outside. He opened the door and walked into the bedroom. After all the commotion, he figured his wife would be awake. He hoped she was.

She wasn't. "Ah, hell," he mumbled.

Through the open curtains, he noticed the moon framed by a pair of power lines stretched between two telephone poles. He sat on the edge of the king-size oak bed. He slipped off his clothes and left them in a pile on the floor. Naked, he curled into
bed next to his wife. A cool finger of air sifted through a crack in the window. O.D.
closed his eyes and listened to the thk-thk, thk-thk-thk of the sprinkler until it stopped.

He had a headache. He thought about aspirin. The bottle was downstairs. He
didn't feel like climbing out of bed.

When O.D. didn't immediately fall asleep, he squirmed under the covers until
he landed in a comfortable position docked against his wife's bare behind.

Her smooth skin radiated a warmth that drove away any thought of sleep.

Something else woke up. O.D. wondered if she'd be in the mood. He was, and it was
rubbing against her thigh.

The last time he woke her up like this, she'd had a shit fit.

"Why'd you wake me up," she'd asked, her voice raspy. O.D. 's arm was draped
across her breasts. His erection, an obvious answer to her question, pressed firmly
against her back.

"To fool around," he answered to the back of her head.

"Why," she asked. She didn't roll over to face him. Her breathing resumed the
deep rhythms of sleep.

Why, he thought. She asked me why. How do you figure that. She was so
warm and O.D. oh-so-ready. He was shot down again and didn't like it. Didn't care
for the helpless feeling. Oh well, maybe in the morning, he rationalized.

The alarm buzzed. It was a clock that Joe had given him in high school because
O.D. was always late for class. The dial light was burnt out. As he reached to turn
it off, a bolt of pain pierced the back of his head. He grimaced. His wife slipped out of bed. She closed the bedroom door, and padded into the attached bathroom. Water from the shower soon needled the tiled walls.

Steam drifted into the room. The sun brightened the purple-tinged sky. Daggers of light stabbed through O.D.’s eyelids.

“God, what a headache,” he moaned. He crawled out of bed. He felt like a snake that slithered down the stairs. He side-stepped the shattered mirror, found the economy size bottle of aspirin. He popped four extra-strength pills, drowned them with a tumbler of orange juice, ate two pickle slices then crept back up the stairs, each step sent painful tremors up his spine to the base of his skull.

When he got back to the bed, O.D. knelt on the floor and cradled his head on a pillow and slowly rolled his body onto the mattress. He pulled a blanket over his head.

“Boy, what’s wrong with you?” his wife asked. She emerged naked, shrouded in steam, from the shower stall. O.D. peeked through the tiny oblong holes in the blanket’s fabric. Beads of water trembled down her thighs. Her dark wet hair stuck to the slight rise at the top of her breasts. “You missed it last night,” she said. She toweled her legs. “I tried to wake you up three times.” She considered the lump under the blanket. “Are you hiding, or what?”

O.D. knew that she didn’t try three times, but he liked that she was teasing him. “Where’s the heating pad?” he asked. He hoped his voice didn’t sound as weak as he
felt. "That blue one in the linen closet."

"Maybe it's in the linen closet."

"Real funny."

"What do you want it for? Something kinky?" She sauntered to the bed, threw one leg onto the mattress and jumped. She bounced across the soft down comforter until her legs straddled his body. The sun peaked over the windowsill.

O.D.'s eyes coasted up two long brown legs. He liked her calves, enjoyed their aerobicized firmness. Any other time he'd revel at her tanned body--those oh-so-tiny white arrows on her crotch and ass, the small creamy arrowheads on each breast that the sun never saw. "Would you cut it out and get me the goddamned heating pad."

His wife put her hands on her hips. She didn't move. "O.D. stay up late reading?" she cooed.

He writhed his head side to side on the pillow.

"It's stifling in here. Open a window or something." His wife's ankles dug into his side.

"The window's open. The curtains're open. The sun is up, sky's blue, dear O.D.."

She vaulted off the bed and ambled toward the hall linen closet. Fresh air rushed into the room.

"Did you really try to wake me up, last night?" he called. After a few minutes, she returned with the heating pad and closed the door.
"I was feeling horny."

"Open it."

"What?"

"The fucking door."

"Why? What for? Who pissed in your Wheaties?" She was near tears. "The big head has too much control, O.D..." She tugged the door open. "You need more little head action. Know what I mean?" She popped her eyebrows and posed before the cheval glass, shoving the heating pad toward him.

"Is that some kind of philosophical declaration?" he sniped. "What the hell does it mean?"

"You better find out soon," she said.

As he peered from under the blanket, two wives leaned over the far end of the bed— one real, one reflected in the mirror. Two pairs of breasts fell forward, squeezed together by outstretched tan arms. The arrowheads touched. He reached from under the blanket, and took the heating pad.

O.D. peeked at his wife's reflection as he forced the plug into the wall socket next to the headboard. He slipped the heating pad under his head. She shimmied into black pantyhose, uniformed herself in a sunflowered jumper. She called it her "Century 21 look," even though she worked as a claims adjuster for the good hands people. She had a case in court today—a two million dollar settlement. She sauntered into the bathroom. The blowdryer's scream soon attacked his headache.
Hair dry, face powdered and made up, his wife peeled back the blanket and kissed him on the forehead. "You're awfully hot. You look moldy. You gonna' be all right?"

"Headache. I'll be okay. Little more sleep."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"No, I mean about Joe."

"What would you do?"

"You wouldn't quit would you?" She perched on the edge of the bed.

"What would you do?"

"I'm not you."

O.D.'s wife palmed his forehead. Her hand glided across the blanket, lingering over his crotch. "I'm accustomed to certain things," she said. "I want to keep them. We've had a good life, so far. I want it to get better." She closed the door as she left the room.

A few moments passed. The heating pad softened the hammer blows in his head.

He dozed off.

He balanced on a wooden raft bobbing in the center of a lake. The sun massaged his shoulders and neck. A girl swam toward him, her arms sliced through the water. She pulled herself up on the raft and said, "Hello."
"Dare," O.D. whispered. "I love you. I'm sorry for everything. I love you.

Dare's smile mirrored the sun. Her dark hair framed an oval, elfin face mined by a deep dimple in her chin. He fell into that dimple. It became a crater.

"What the hell happened to the mirror?" O.D.'s wife yelled up the stairs. "It's a mess. Can't even see myself in it." The closed door muffled her voice. He didn't answer.

"I just bought this," she said. "Is Pilar up there anywhere?" Eventually, the sliding glass door ground open and closed, and O.D.'s wife was gone.

O.D. drifted back to sleep. He dreamed about Dare. But Dare turned into his wife and they made love. He woke up just as he began to ejaculate. He scoured the room for Dare or his wife. He didn't want to be alone. Couldn't stand the loneliness. He wiped himself with the sheet, squinted at the cheval glass, but couldn't see his reflection. He threw off the blanket. He had to take a leak.

In the shower, the warm spray chased away the last of his headache. He pictured an old man lounging in a wicker chair asleep and dreaming. The image scared him. "That won't be me," he shouted. "I won't be that old man." The steady spray drowned out his plea.

O.D. armored himself in a midnight blue suit with a purple paisley tie, opened the bedroom door and descended the stairs. Pilar sat on the couch in the living room. No one ever entered the living room; it was a room for show. Muffled sunlight crept through the soft cotton curtains revealing furniture that hadn't felt a human touch in
years. As he scratched behind her ears, the cat relaxed and pressed her head into his fingers.

"You know, Pilar," he said. "The earth hasn't moved for me in years, but at least my headache's gone. And that seems like a good place to start the day."

O.D. collected the pieces of broken mirror. He dropped the shards in the trash, each piece shattered into the next. Then he slipped his wallet from his breast pocket. After slowly considering each credit card, he stacked all 17 in his hand and flipped them, one-by-one, like he'd flipped his baseball cards as a kid, into the trash.

O.D. strolled into the front office.

Two calls were on hold, a third line was ringing. Brenda rolled her eyes as a good morning salutation. He waved to her, passed through the hallway alcove, and poured two cups of coffee. He gave one to Brenda. "Nice dress," he said. She winked as she talked into the phone.

Before O.D. could sit down in his office, Kern, the third shift production supervisor, swaggered in.

"God damn it. Why can't I get a maintenance man in here at night?" Kern slouched in a chair in front of O.D.'s desk. "I called Joe seven times. The last time I let it ring for half-an-hour. Machine's been down all night."

"What's the problem?" O.D. asked. He sipped his coffee, leaned back in his chair.
"Seems like I can never get any help at night."

"Joe was in here all day yester--"

"How the hell does that help me at night? I'm supposed to supervise the shift. I'm a supervisor, not a maintenance man."

The phone intercom hummed. Brenda's voice squeaked through the tiny speaker. "You've got two calls waiting and three messages. Are we gonna' make Sparklett's shipment today?" Sparklett's was the largest bottled water outlet in California.

O.D. glanced at Kern. Kern shook his head, no. "That's the machine been down all night," he said.

"No," O.D. said into the speaker.

"If we miss it we'll lose the customer," she said. "They're out of bottles."

"Call them back. Explain our situation. Find out what they need to get them by," O.D. said. "Who's on the phone?"

"Rankle, for one."

"Put him through. Take messages on the rest."

"He's not in a good mood," she said.

O.D. turned to Kern. "Switch over two machines to run the order. I'll get a maintenance man on the other problem. Hold people over if you need help. We screw up this order, the customer's history."

"What about--"
“I’ll take care of Joe,” O.D. said. “Just get those bottles running. Now.” Kern left. O.D. picked up the phone, wedged it between his shoulder and ear. He leaned back in his chair, threw his feet up on the desk and said, “Yes, sir” into the mouthpiece.

Nothing. Dead silence. He’d forgotten to connect the line. He reached over and pushed a button on the phone.

“Yessir,” O.D. said. The whining throb of the machines emanated from the production room, a constant sound seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day.

“O.D.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Rankle.”

“Busy morning?”

“Mondays are always bad.

“Good production over the weekend?”

“Had a few problems, but we worked them out.”

“Did you do it?”

O.D. thought fast. “Do what?”

“Are you going to fire his ass?”

“I know he has a big mouth. Talks too much. But he’s good with machines. The best I’ve ever seen. There’s no one else with his qualifications. We’ll be hurting without him.”

Rankle breathed into the phone. “Do I have to fly out there and do it for you?”

“I can run my plant.”
"Do it today. I want that big-mouthed son of a bitch out of my company. Nobody ever calls me at home and tells me how to run it."

Click.

The intercom hummed. Brenda asked, "Are we gonna' have enough bottles for--"

"Get Joe."

"But he's working on---"

"I don't care. Get him."

O.D. stared out the window.

O.D. smiled. "Don't call me boss, Giuseppe."

"Okay--boss." A grease stain creased his forehead. His hands dripped from a fast scrubbing.

"How many hours you put in over the weekend?"

"About thirty," Joe said. "Had an electrical short. Number seven machine. It would come and go. Sat there with the meter on the relays." Joe wove his purple-veined hands through the air. His arms were covered with scars. "Six hours. Finally found it. Wire burned through. Barely making contact. And then there was--"

"Great," O.D. said. "Good job. Those intermittent shorts are tricky. Takes patience to find them." O.D.'d suffered through them many times. With Joe gone, he thought, he'd probably be suffering through them again. "Ah--did you by any chance
talk to anyone in the corporate office last week?"

"Yeah." Joe said slowly. He looked at the floor. "That jerk-off just doesn't understand."

O.D. was tempted to ask what he'd said, but said instead: "I had this funny dream this morning. Remember Dare?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "In high school, you dumped her."

"Well, I was standing in the center of the Coliseum in Rome. The place was packed with students. I was the teacher, and all I had on was my underwear. The students laughed and began to leave. Wait, I said, I just got here. This is a good class. Come back. Come back."

"Everyone deserted you?" Joe asked.

"Yeah," O.D. said, then hesitated. "Well, not everyone. Dare, in a wet bathing suit, leaned against a pillar, but she started to leave. Next thing I know, she fades away and my wife appears in the same bathing suit. She looked hot." O.D. smiled. Joe nodded. "Like the first time we made love. God, we made love sixty-three days in a row."

"You never told me that," Joe said.

"Then she pulls off the shoulder straps and slips the bathing suit down her legs."

"And then what?"

"Wet dream."

"A what--?" Joe smirked as he figured it out.
"Giuseppe."

"Yeah, O.D."

"We're in deep shit. We need that machine up and running ASAP."

"Keep that goddamn supervisor out of the way and you'll have the machine, chop-chop."

"Good. How about lunch later?"

"I can't go looking like this."

"Who cares?"

"Why do you think he smiles so much," O.D. asked. He nodded toward a white-clad man in a wheelchair bussing dishes a few tables over. He cleared the plates, glasses and silverware into a big tray that sat on his lap. When it was full, he'd wheel it into the kitchen.

"He's happy," Joe shrugged. He glanced around the Rusty Pelican. It was bustling with business men in suits, and here he was in his greasy maintenance uniform. "I don't know. He likes what he's doing. Maybe he got laid last night. Who knows?" He cut off a chunk of cajun chicken.

"How can he be happy as a busboy? He's crippled."

Joe didn't answer.

"How can he be happy making as little as he does?" O.D. bit into his medium-rare guacamole cheeseburger. With his mouth full, he said: "He'd have to work two
hours to pay for this burger."

"He likes what he does," Joe said. "Why worry about it?"

"He's happy. I want to know what it takes to be happy. I couldn't be happy as a busboy and I'm not a cripple." The waitress brought the check.

Joe nodded toward the waitress as she strolled away. "Chicken's pretty good today," he said.

"You want another drink, dessert?" O.D. asked. He flipped open his wallet, intending to pluck out a charge card. It took a moment to remember why his wallet was empty.

Joe picked up the tab and O.D. didn't fire him.

At five o'clock, just after shift change, O.D. shuffled out to the production room. All forty machines percolated. He found Joe proudly scrutinizing the humming machines. "You hear it?" Joe asked. "God, I love that sound. When I hear it, I know we're makin' money." O.D. smiled. He draped his arm over Joe's shoulder and led him toward his office.

They sat in front of O.D.'s desk, side by side.

"Giuseppe, sometimes you've got to do some things you don't like."

"Don't I know it, boss."

O.D. guided the steel-blue BMW to the curb, out of gas. He pounded the
steering wheel and snapped his neck against the headrest. He'd stopped at a pre-pay self-serve station, but the attendant, a college student from India, had refused to give him gas, not even enough so he could go home and retrieve his charge cards. He'd hoped he could make it home on fumes.

He slammed the door, locked it, walked around the back of the car to the sidewalk. Rush hour traffic streamed by on the four lane street.

When he reached his house, O.D. stared through the glass before opening the sliding door. He stepped through, pulled the latch, and slammed the door.

"Is that you?" his wife asked. "I didn't hear the garage-door-opener. Is the patio door next on your list of things to break?"

His charge cards--Visa, Mastercard, Shell, American Express-- were neatly lined up on the kitchen counter. How colorful, he thought.

"What the fuck are these doing here?" With one swipe of his hand, he scattered the plastic cards across the floor. He marched through the dining room into the family room. "I threw these fuckers away."

"I know. I found them in the trash. Cut myself getting them out." She held up her bandaged finger. "You'll need them."

"Goddamn it, I don't want them. I don't want anything. I quit. I wish I could quit. I've had it--"

O.D.'s wife sat in the rocker, both feet tucked into the cushions. She sipped a glass of red wine, and watched him. Soft rhythmic sounds drifted from the stereo.
The cat lounged on the back of the chair, staring at the wall, her tail curled around her paws.

"I—I—he told me I'd changed," O.D. stammered. "Ever since I became plant manager. I fired him and he forgave me. He fucking forgave me. He asked me why I put up with it. He's my friend, the best maintenance man I've ever seen. And I fired him."

O.D. walked to his wife, knelt down, and laid his head on her lap.

"Penny," he said. "I forgot who I am. I don't know anymore."

Penny, O.D.'s wife, set down her wine glass. She raked her hands through her husband's hair. She leaned over, hugged his shoulders and slipped her hands under his shirt. "Would you call this grace under pressure?"

Her husband raised his head. He quizzed her eyes.

Penny smiled. "Why don't you give yourself a little credit forgetting this far?" she said.

O.D. kissed Penny, then. It was a long wet one, the kind with a happy ending that lingered until the next morning. Together they slid toward the back of the chair. The chair rocked gently. O.D. thought about the busboy, how happy he'd looked. He knew he'd never make it as a busboy. And with that knowledge his passion for Penny increased.
Deer Crossing

I knew the morning two fat-bellied men in a yellow city maintenance truck cordoned off the top of Greenough Hill and erected the “deer crossing” signs that something bad would happen. The bib-overalled men tied up the road for three hours digging, measuring and pounding. They left five perfectly straight signs that warned against deer but also signalled the city’s incursion into my valley, the Rattlesnake.

It took less than a week before some dipshit driver whacked into a deer near one of these crossing signs and drove off.

I’d been watching a herd of deer ever since they’d wandered into the valley. I’d see six or seven of them darting from my headlights when I drove home late at night. During the day lone bucks stood next to the road like sentinels, staring at passing cars. Several times a deer bounded across the road in front of my car, white tail flashing,
and disappeared up a hillside covered with a heavy gold growth of winter wheat and knapweed.

I'd been seeing deer ever since I moved to Missoula from Southern California three years ago. I learned fast not to admit my California origins.

A bike shop attendant once refused to fix my bike. When I told him where I was from he told me to go fuck myself. Montanans are short tempered when it comes to Californians—especially the rich ones and the sport hunters. I'm neither. I quit my job. Came here because I'd dreamed of living in the mountains. And I wanted to go back to school. I'm a grad student. In anthropology.

I knew those deer crossing signs were bad omens. It always seems when something is left alone, nothing untoward happens. But as soon as you let everyone know about it, bam, you've got to deal with the adverse effects.

One afternoon bordering on the winter solstice, I drove home from the university. It was half past five and very dark. A few inches of snow had fallen earlier and the low sky promised more. My car labored up Greenough Hill, wheels spinning in the slick wet. At the top, several cars had pulled off on both sides of the road, headlights glaring. At first I thought there had been an accident. I slowed down as cars filed by. I stuck my head out the window. I'd been researching an overdue paper about the settlement, development and eventual rape of the Seeley Lake area. After poring through musty tomes all day, I wanted to get home.

The car in front of me inched forward. Just as I was about to honk, it swerved
to the right off the road and then left and picked up speed. I saw a deer lying on the white dividing line. It was a buck, a six-pointer. His neck trembled as he raised his head. After a moment it fell onto the slushy pavement. His amber eyes burned in the headlight’s glow.

I felt those eyes in a place inside me where I don’t very often go.

I’d seen animal eyes like these before.

Two years ago my girlfriend had flown up from Los Angeles to spend Christmas. After working full time while attending school for six years, she’d finally gotten her Master’s in Marriage and Family Counseling. She’d found a job with Orange County Children’s Services and hoped to start a private practice soon.

As a matter of fact, if she knew I was even talking about this, she’d probably throw a shitfit, so I won’t mention her name.

She’s afraid her parents’ll find out. Her parents are class conscious-aholics. They didn’t want her to date me because I wore an earring. Don’t get me wrong, her mom still sends me a Christmas present every year. They’re nice people once they get to know you. But they believe their kid’s behavior reflects on them. They believe their lives are an extension of their kids’ success.

I used to think my girlfriend looked like Mary Tyler Moore—skinny, dark bobbed hair, always bubbly, far from the goody-goody type, though—so for the sake of argument, I’ll call her Tyler.

Tyler, a social worker at heart, had a habit of picking up stray lambs in need
of help, mostly people with low self-esteem. I was one. I was a wreck after my divorce. I'm not sure if I found her or she found me. But she helped get my life back on track and I think I helped her, too.

I met her a year, maybe year and a half after my divorce. I'd been asking every woman I knew out on a date. I'd be nervous, scared that my date wouldn't like me. I wanted, needed to show these women that I was okay, that my wife had made a mistake when she left me for another man. Most of the time I was self-conscious. Once at a movie I thought that eating popcorn made too much noise. It was distracting. I was afraid of a dumb thing like that.

But Tyler was different. Dressed in a bright sunflower calf-length dress and barefoot, she ambled up to where I sat on a wooden bench watching the ducks skim across the pond. Willow trees leaned over and teased the water with their branches. She said hello. She thought I looked cute in my white t-shirt and suspenders. The top three buttons of her dress were undone and I could see the firm edges of her breasts.

We went to Two Guys Italian Restaurant that night. She had a two-for-one coupon. We talked for three hours before we ordered dinner. I loved talking to her. It was easy and fun. I took her home and on her parents doorstep under the bright porchlight, moths fluttering, I asked her kiss me, make me feel something that I'd never felt before. She started a wet open-mouthed dilly but broke it off suddenly.

"I don't know if I like that," she said. She smiled but it was a stern smile.

"Don't I kiss good?" I asked.
“I'm not responsible for how you feel. I don't have to make you feel anything. You make yourself feel. Not me.” She pointed at me. I stepped back, slipped off the porchstep and nearly fell. Tyler grabbed my shoulder, followed me to the car.

“It was just something I said, just a line. It didn't mean anything. I know you can't make me feel,” I lied. I'd say whatever she wanted to hear.

“Besides, I like the way you kiss,” she said. She bear-hugged me and laid on a killer, the kind where your feet levitate off the ground, your droopy socks straighten and your toes tingle.

We saw each other a lot after that.

We watched a lot of movies, too. Six months of movies and talk and movies and talk and one night she decided we'd make love. But first she had something to tell me.

Tyler'd had an abortion. Her high school honey was the culprit, a guy she'd dated for seven years. “I thought if I didn't have sex with him then something was wrong with me,” she said. “I did whatever he wanted, whether I liked it or not. I won't make that mistake again.”

“It was so easy to get pregnant and even easier to get an abortion,” she continued. “An abortion seems an easy answer, but I've got this hole right here and I don't think it'll ever fill in.” She put her hand over her stomach, fingers splayed. The place I imagined where her womb might be. I set my hand on hers. “It's been five years.”
The silence that followed ripped open a memory that I'd forgotten. My ex-wife had an abortion. At the time, I was young and didn't want kids and an abortion seemed an easy way to rectify a difficult situation. I couldn't recall how my wife had felt. I took her to the clinic, dropped her off and picked her up afterwards. We never talked about it. She'd cried but we never talked. I wished I could turn back the clock, undo what my wife had gone through, undo the guilt Tyler felt now.

Tyler had a hardness about her. But she knew more ways to make love than just fucking. Even though I was impatient, I liked that she didn't do it until she was ready. I can't explain why—it's up there with the same explanation as to why a deer gets hit by a car only after the deer warnings are put up.

When we finally climbed into bed, it took a couple more months before she was comfortable. "Couldn't we just hold each other?" she'd ask. The holding led to touching, body massages, extended foreplay, and the excruciating pleasure a feather can give. I got the impression that she was grooming me into a lover she could trust.

Tyler showed me how to feel, how to let myself go. I became less of a performer and more of a participant. I lost what she called the male goal-oriented bull shit—"find 'em, feel 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em."

Somewhere in all this cuddling, I learned to like myself, learned I had something of value to offer.

Most of all Tyler talked to me. She told me how she felt, what she liked and what she wanted. She didn't expect me to read her mind like my ex-wife had. I didn't
know, then, how hard honesty could be.

We lived together. Moved into a condo half-way up Mt. Baldy. We couldn’t afford it, but the place had ambience and high cathedral ceilings. It lasted a year.

One day Tyler said she “wasn’t getting what she needed from me.” I never asked her exactly what it was she needed because I don’t think she knew. I didn’t know. Besides, my ex-wife had said the same thing, only she wasn’t getting a house in Beverly Hills and a red Mercedes convertible. I didn’t want to hear that line again so I told Tyler I wasn’t getting what I needed, either.

We’d parted as friends, however, friends learning to deal with an awkward situation. There’d been no finger pointing, no gripes, we admitted that we’d drifted apart and neither one of us was to blame. “We’re better friends than lovers,” she said. That was good enough for me. I escaped without too much damage.

When I decided to move to Montana, scared to death whether I was making the right choice, Tyler volunteered to help. She soothed my jittery nerves, even drove my car with the huge U-Haul trailing behind. She gasped at the Berkeley Pit in Butte, gazed in wonderment as we cruised the freeway toward Missoula and five shooting stars scratched silver streaks across the two-in-the-morning sky. She lugged boxes into my new home.

That was three years ago. Although I hadn’t seen her since then, we’d remained close through letters and expensive long distance telephone calls. I missed her. A lot. I wanted to impress her with Missoula.
When she arrived we drove up to my landlord's cabin on Elbow Lake. We'd parked the car in a tree-lined niche just off Rt. 83 and walked. If you can call maneuvering through two feet of snow, walking. I pulled a sled packed with food and utensils-- a coffee maker, a thermos, real silverware, red plates and glazed cups, a canned ham, a canister of hot chocolate, three bags of marshmallows. We were only staying two nights and I knew we didn't need all the stuff we'd brought, but Tyler'd insisted.

"The sled is heavy," I said out of breath. "It's overloaded. We don't even need all this stuff." We trudged up a hill. The backpack straps bit into my shoulders.

Tyler groaned. She tightened her scarf and hugged herself. Her thin California blood was no help here. She didn't complain. Got to give her credit for that. "Are we lost?" she asked.

"No," I lied. I couldn't let Tyler know that. The entire area was grown thick with pine trees. Deep snow covered the trail. I shuffled toward where I thought the lake would be. Tyler followed.

"What's that?" she asked. She nodded toward something lying on top of the snow.

I knew what it was. I didn't want to tell her.

"What is it?" she asked. I held out my arm to hold her.

She brushed by and hurried ahead. "It's a deer." She tapped the ribcage with her boot. I felt the quiet forest tremble.
"Don't do that," I said.

She glanced at me. "It starved to death."

"Starved?"

"There's too many deer," she said. "They're overprotected. There's too many of them." She curled her tongue over her upper lip. "Could I borrow your Chapstick?"

"You sound like a hunter," I said. I didn't understand how someone who wouldn't squash a spider could say something like this. I took off my glove, dug the Chapstick out of my pocket and handed it to her.

"I read a magazine article on the plane," she said. The Chapstick made her lips shine. "Deer are dying from starvation. There's too many of them. Not enough forage. That's why you see so many hanging around your house. They're looking for food."

"I love these deer," I said

"I love 'em, too," she said. Tyler shoved the Chapstick in my pocket and hugged me. "I love that you love them."

"I suppose you'd legalize grizzly hunting, too," I whispered into her ear.

"Huh?" she said. She pulled away, scrutinized my face. "You're mad, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not." I plowed through the snow, the sled tugging on my arm.

I heard the lake long before I saw it.

"What's that?" Tyler asked. I detected a tad of fear in her voice. I liked knowing that. It made up for her know-it-all-starving-deer comments. After all, I am the
I explained how the ice layered the lake. As the layers expanded and contracted, they cracked. Sometimes the sound speared through the ice, while other times it just rolled across the frozen water.

She shivered. “It sounds weird,” she said, “like a jar lid turned at the bottom of a well.” I didn’t tell her that I agreed.

The lake was a white sheet, unwrinkled, marred only by animal tracks. We skirted the edge until I spotted the cabin. “There it is,” I said.

“We were lost, weren’t we?” she asked. She gave me one of those looks that I couldn’t lie to.

“Yeah,” I said as nonchalantly as possible.

Tall snow-canopied trees ringed the redwood two-story cabin. Dried out pine needles covered the green roof. A porch swept around the front door and windows. It was good for watching eagles swoop low over the lake on long summer nights when the sun didn’t set until 10:30.

I told Tyler how the cabin had once been part of the prison barracks at Fort Missoula. Italian and German POW’s who had been captured right after the United States entered WWII were interred at the fort. The government had felt safe banishing prisoners to the wilds of Montana. After the war ended, many of the prisoners stayed in the area, and the barracks were put up for auction.

“See what you can find out with a little research,” I said. “That information’s
in my paper. Maybe I'll get it published."

The cabin rested on a knoll where Elbow lake doglegged to the left. We struggled up the hill, used my landlord's key to unlock the ancient deadbolt in the back door. The cabin felt colder than outside. My breath froze. I snatched up kindling from a box next to the fireplace and started a fire. Tyler stayed close to the fireplace, checking out the cabin.

"The Wilson family of Missoula bought part of the barracks and had it disassembled piece-by-piece at the fort. They rebuilt it here where the Clearwater River curved and gouged a deep channel."

"Don't worry. There's a kerosene heater over in the corner," I said. A small fire flared in the open-mouthed stove. I took off my gloves, rubbed my hands together. I rubbed Tyler's hands. She looked out the window. The cabin had plenty of windows. More window space than walls. No curtains, though.

"It's so white," she said. "So alone. What animal made all those tracks?" She motioned her head toward the lake. She hugged herself against the cold.

I wrapped my arms around hers. "In the summer the lake is crystal clear. You can see murky green plants wave in the current. Armies of turtles sun themselves on rocks and bleached tree trunks. One night a beaver scared the hell out of me when he slapped his tail on the water."

She turned and kissed me. Her lips were brittle, coated with peeling skin. Some of the dry skin stuck to my lip. "This is wonderful," she said. "So quiet and isolated."
I like being here with you. Tell me more.”

I tried to spit the skin off my lip without Tyler seeing. I offered the Chapstick. She swept it around her lips like it was lipstick.

I told her how the Wilsons had dammed this section of the river. Cousins and aunts and uncles and friends had gathered one weekend and formed a human chain. They found rocks and boulders light enough to carry and deposited them across a skinny section of the river. The dam only raised the water level a few feet, but it was enough for the family to swim and water ski. That was over 40 years ago.

“People actually water ski here?” Tyler asked. That sounds ridiculous. A motor puttering up and down the lake would be a terrible irritation. It’s blasphemous.”

I shrugged my shoulders, thought “here we go again.”

“This hasn’t always been called Elbow Lake. The real Elbow Lake’s a little north toward Seeley. It was just after Lucky Lindy’s flight and the people in these parts wanted to pay homage to him.”

“Who’s Lucky Lindy?” she asked. “A local gangster?”

“Lucky Lindy. Colonel Lindbergh. The man who made the first transatlantic flight.”

“Didn’t he get kidnapped?”

Sometimes, I thought, the best part of research was the ability to impress others with authority. I loved impressing Tyler with what I knew, loved the way she listened to me. I had her with the Lindbergh thing.
“He toured across the country. Everyone loved him. When he came through Montana, the residents bestowed his name on Elbow Lake. So it became Lindbergh Lake.”

Tyler took off her coat. She sat in a tattered bamboo chair in front of the fire. I threw in two hefty chunks of wood. Sparks shot out, landed on the throw rug and burned a hole before I could stomp them out.

I continued: “Years later after the Wilson’s had dammed up the Clearwater, they called the lake they’d created Elbow not only because it looked like a giant elbow, but because Lindbergh had usurped the name from the other lake.”

“I like that,” Tyler said. “Seems fitting that the name survives. Elbow Lake. It has a Montana ethic to it. Like elbow grease.”

“Back then, there were hardly any deer or elk in this area,” I said. I stepped outside, scooped up snow in a boiler pan and set it on the butane hot plate. Then I opened a can of Chow Mein. Tyler screwed up her face when she saw what it was but ate it when I offered her a plate.

The sun dropped below the horizon and night rushed over the cabin dark as obsidian. Wrapped in each other’s arms, we snuggled in a fraying recliner and drank beer. We fit tightly in the chair. Our feet toasted in front of a snapping fire. After a while Tyler apologized for the beer going right through her. She asked if she could pee outside the door. It was very dark and cold and the outhouse was 200 feet away.

“Unh-huh,” I said.
"Why not?" she asked. She stopped in front of the door.

I didn't know why I'd told her not to. I improvised. "Because," I said, "you'll leave your scent outside the cabin and attract bears."

"Okay," she said. In her thick socks she slid across the wooden floor, pulled on her boots and zipped her coat. "I'm not going out there alone."

"I'll go with you," I said.

"No," she said. "I just need a flashlight."

I acted like I couldn't find it. She obviously didn't need me.

"It's right there," she pointed.

I handed her my favorite flashlight. It was a three-in-one jobby with a little fluorescent bulb for reading, a flasher for emergencies, and a big light I'd beam into the sky to see how far it would go. Tyler fumbled with the switches until she found the right one.

As she opened the door, I said: "Watch out for the brown spiders."

"Huh."

"The tiny spiders hiding underneath the toilet seat," I said. "They wait until you're sitting down and in the act and then--" I raised my hands and clenched them shut.

"Yeah, right."

The screen door slammed. Her footsteps trailed off through the snow. Alone with a good fire, I finished off my beer. The cabin windows gobbled up the light.
Outside, nothing existed. The world ended, swallowed up in darkness. We could die here and no one would find us til spring, I thought. It could be snowing and I'd never know until morning.

I wanted Tyler to like this cabin. Looking around, I noticed several clocks adorning the rough wood-panelled walls. They were all frozen at three o'clock. An ancient refrigerator stood in the corner. I didn't know what good it was considering there wasn't any electricity. Several blankets and sleeping bags dangled from stuffed cupboards. The wind creaked through the roof.

I hoped she'd like it here more than I liked where she lived. I'd gone out with her on some of her social work calls back in Orange County. They were depressing. I got frustrated with the futility of it—abused kids with screwed up parents. Drug addicts. Adults who would shoot you sooner than tell you how they felt.

Once Tyler recommended to the court that a four-year-old girl be taken away from an abusive, alcoholic mother. The little girl was black and blue and the mother couldn't remember doing it. The day after the judge acted on Tyler's recommendation, and the girl was placed in a foster home, the irate mother barged into Tyler's office with a gun. The mother cried for her baby back. Tyler'd screamed and the young mother dropped the gun. It was loaded. She still had it in her desk drawer.

Tyler came back in all cold and snugly. "I didn't sit down," she said. She kissed me fast before I could react. We drank frozen beer. It had been left outside too long. We touched each other, our hands tenderly roaming, lingering over buttons and
zippers, but never further.

Sometime later, I woke up in her arms. The fire sparked low and darkened the cabin. I needed to take a leak. I figured to step quickly outside next to a tree, but Tyler woke up and asked why I was going out without a coat.

“Oh,” I said. “It’s not that far. I don’t need it.” I snatched up the flashlight and plodded out the door.

The crusted snow glittered in the moonless night. I stopped halfway to the outhouse and shined the light into the sky. The sky was deep and dark and dusted with glittering gems that I might have touched with my hand. I lowered the light and scanned the surrounding trees. The beacon caught two glowing orbs suspended in the darkness about three feet above the snow. They were amber. They didn’t move.

I pictured myself as a feast for a mountain lion or bear. I wanted to be scared but sleep, inebriation, and curiosity overrode my fear. Flashlight in hand, I followed the beam toward the shiny-looking marbles.

After I’d shuffled 20 feet or so, the eyes levitated up to my height and moved left past several silvery-barked trees. I hesitated, figured I was history. The tiny shining eyes crept up the hill and gained a body. It slipped into a clearing. A doe paused, captured in the flashlight’s beam, and then ambled up the hill out of sight.

I rushed into the outhouse and latched the door. I began to shiver.

Afterwards, as I sauntered back to the cabin, I stopped and circled the flashlight beam through the trees. Several pairs of glowing eyes hovered in the darkness--some
lime-green, others amber. What are they? Where in the hell did they all come from? They surrounded the cabin. I was afraid, yet drawn to the macabre sight. It was exciting.

I scrambled into the cabin and double-latched the door. I figured Tyler wouldn't believe me, probably discount the seriousness of it, so I didn't tell her. But the thought of what else was out there scared me. I liked the feeling.

She was asleep, anyway, in one of the narrow bunk beds. After stoking the fire and adding two good-sized logs, I stripped down to my underwear and climbed in next to her. I hoped the three sleeping bags and four blankets would be warm enough. As I waited for sleep, I could still see those floating eyes reflected in the window.

A long, loud groan, like two pieces of coarse metal scraping together, pierced through the cabin and woke me at sunrise. I groggily realized two things: The sound was just the ice, layer grating against layer like plate tectonics. And I was freezing my ass off. With the fire out, frost had crystallized on my clothes. I pulled my pants on. They were stiff and cold and stung my legs. I rekindled the fire and stood in front of it.

Warmed by the snapping fire, I brewed a pot of coffee and watched Tyler sleep trundled up in the sleeping bags and blankets. She liked sleeping late. I liked waking up with her there. I remembered the morning I woke up alone after my wife had run off to Las Vegas with a guy from her office. I'd been crushed. I'd needed tranquilizers to calm down. Those pills felt real good and I was afraid I'd get used to them. My whole
world had grinded to a crashing halt. It took years to get it running again.

The coffee smelled good. I noticed a herd of white-tailed deer just outside the window. They pawed the snow, foraging for food. I watched them until Tyler woke.

“Come here and see this,” I whispered. She threw off the covers and clambered out of bed. Her long woolen nightgown, tightly gathered around her neck, dragged on the floor.

“What is it?” she asked. She reached into my pocket for the Chapstick.

“Shhh.” I nodded toward the window.

She knelt before the window and we watched the deer. I wanted to be part of that herd. “When I feel like this, I want to make love,” I said softly.

She felt it, too. “Why don’t we?” she whispered.

I unbuttoned her nightgown. She shivered. “Your hands are cold,” she said, her hands on mine.

“I haven’t made love in a mighty long time,” I said. “You looked great when you stepped off the plane. In your black tights and short skirt, you dazzled me.” I hesitated and asked: “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think so.”

I kissed her. It was a hard wet gooey kiss. I fumbled with the rest of her nightgown buttons. She drew away.

“A condom?” she asked.

“I didn’t bring any,” I said. She always worried about disease, about getting
pregnant. Sometimes when we used a rubber, she'd stop me right in the middle. Then she'd check to make sure the rubber hadn't ripped.

"Let me up," she said. She noticed the look on my face. "I'll get my diaphragm."

She got up and rummaged through her bag of clothes.

Several minutes passed. My ardor disappeared. "Did you find it?" I asked finally.

"Yeah, but I can't find the spermicide," she said.

Just then a whining buzz spooked the deer. Their heads jerked toward the noise. In threes and fours, the deer scrambled up the hill. Two guys on a snowmobile sped around the bend in the lake.

Both riders had rifles strapped across their shoulders. The guy in back waved. I shot him the finger.

"I found it," Tyler said. She held up the tube.

"I'm not in the mood, anymore," I said, and glanced out the window. "Oh well," she said. She leaned over and uncinched my belt. I didn't stop her. "I want to love you," she said. She handed me the diaphragm, asked if I'd put it in.

I watched her eyes. I remembered the deer eyes from the night before.

"Do it," she sighed. She pulled me toward her. Her eyes squinched closed, her body tensed. She began to cry.

"What's wrong," I asked. I was inside her.

"Nothing."
"Why are you crying?" I wanted to pull out, but she held me tight with her arms and legs. I didn't move.

For the first time in my life I realized what it was like to violate a woman. "Let me up," I said.

I rolled off. I felt dirty, as if I'd done something terribly wrong. But I didn't know what it was.

Tyler hid her face in her hands. She cried. I covered her with a sleeping bag.

"I wanted to make love to you," she sobbed. "I wanted to share the passion for the deer. I saw how you felt. That's how I feel for you."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "What'd I do?" I pulled her hands away from her face. I needed to see her eyes. "Did I hurt you?" Human eyes don't shine in the dark the way animal eyes do, I thought.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said. She wouldn't look at me.

I couldn't figure it out. I didn't know what to say. I hated myself for not knowing the right words. I hugged her. She laid her head on my shoulder. I felt like I was falling, so I held on tight. Her tears fooled me. Anyone who could cry like this, I thought, must be in love. I melted before those tears.

Lying on the cold floor, holding her in my arms, I felt guilty and sorry and inadequate and very much in love. I never came right out and said it, but I kind of asked her to marry me.

During the drive back to Missoula, Tyler asked about a song playing on the
I'd never heard it before. She said she liked a line from it. It went something like: "But I can't seem to rescue myself."

As we approached Bonner, she told me about a woman in her office. Her name was Beth and she'd just broken up with her lover.

"Another one of your stray lambs?" I asked. Tyler smiled.

"She's so paranoid. She's afraid someone in the office will find out," Tyler said. "When she worked up the courage to tell me she was scared to death I'd stop being her friend."

"She obviously doesn't know you," I said. The steering wheel vibrated as the car bounced over the railroad tracks by the mill.

"Beth's really stressing out. I've been over to her house a couple of times. She's so afraid someone will find out," Tyler said.

I figured Tyler would help Beth through her bad times. That's what she's good at.

Tyler left the next morning. We hugged and kissed. I suggested that she could work on her PhD. at the university in Missoula. She mumbled plans about coming back up in September. She borrowed my Chapstick and asked me to drop her off at the airport so she'd have time to fix herself before she boarded the plane.

I drove home in silence. I hated the silence, but I didn't want the radio on. I was alone. Fifty-cent-sized snowflakes fell and gathered on the road. I switched the windshield wipers to high, but they hardly kept up. I'd forgotten to get the Chapstick
In the following weeks I convinced myself that I wanted to be married. Once I surrendered to the idea, I was hooked. I wrote letters to Tyler every other day. And at first, she wrote back just as enthusiastically. I was excited to share my life and I couldn't wait for September. I must have been pretty lonely and hard up to have ignored the obvious.

After two months, Tyler's letters stopped. She didn't call. I figured she was busy, but I wondered about the silence. If she had doubts, I was afraid to ask, afraid she'd run away like my ex-wife had. Rather than worry, I used the pending marriage as motivation. I liked waking up every morning knowing that I'd soon share my life, again.

Then the letter came.

She loved me, she wrote. There was no other man she wanted in her life, she wrote. But I can't have you, right now. "I've moved in with Beth," she wrote. "We're lovers, and I need time to figure out what I want." She didn't want her parents to know. She'd told her sister. She'd blown up. Asked Tyler how she could be that way. Wouldn't talk to her now.

I wanted to be cool. I wanted to understand, wanted to be the shoulder she could cry on and maybe somehow get her back. I was fooling myself. I'd planned on sharing books, bicycles, camping, psychology, music, movies, our lives, our bodies. I'd tricked myself into thinking it was possible.
I was alone. I felt empty, my house a hollow frame. I couldn't stay at home, but I couldn't focus on my research at school either.

I wondered what was wrong with me? I drank and missed classes and eventually focused my anger on Beth. I couldn't blame Tyler. Intellectually, I knew her decision was for the best. I hated Beth. It was easier than hating myself, easier than admitting how much I needed Tyler.

Tyler sent several follow-up letters. She knew me. She was worried. I sent her a card at Christmas with a scribbled note.

Since then, something periodically pops up and prompts a memory of Tyler—a song, the snow, the cabin. Tonight it was the deer lying helpless in the road.

The car engine idled. I opened the door and climbed out. I didn't know how I could possibly help the deer. I fetched the flashlight from the trunk. Flicking the buttons for all three lights, I set it next to the deer. The yellow light flashed; the big light beamed into the sky; the fluorescent bulb illuminated the buck's matted fur. He panted and struggled to rise. I knelt beside him, my knees in the snow, and cradled his head in my lap. His eyes no longer glowed amber. They'd turned dull green.

A stronger man, a real Montanan, might have put the deer out of its misery. A bullet through the brain. A knife slit across the throat. Maybe a severe blow to the head with a tire iron. But I couldn't do that. I'd sooner kill myself than kill an animal in so much pain. Humans can recover from their injuries most of the time. Animals are so fragile, so easily destroyed.
A truck's headlights lanced the darkness. The driver slowed, pulled up to where I knelt, and rolled down the window. The light flashed on a face. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. The deer shivered. From the cab a hearty voice asked, "Do you need any help?"