

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1988

Glass Stomach stories

Hartley L. Pond

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Pond, Hartley L., "Glass Stomach stories" (1988). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2460.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2460>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

THIS IS AN UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT IN WHICH COPYRIGHT
SUBSISTS. ANY FURTHER REPRINTING OF ITS CONTENTS MUST BE
APPROVED BY THE AUTHOR.

MANSFIELD LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
DATE: 1988

Class Stomach Stories

by

Hartley L.H. Pond

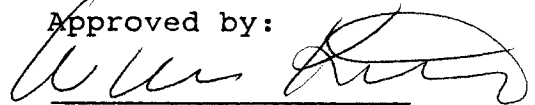
B.A., Connecticut College, 1980

Presented in Partial Fullfillment of the Requirments for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1988

Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

June 2, 1988

Date

UMI Number: EP36502

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP36502

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

7-1-88

Table of Contents

The Glass Stomach 3

Torpland 24

Tamarack Point 43

Near Home 57

The Warehouse 76

The Glass Stomach

A light wind out of the north kept the charter sloop Glass Stomach pointing toward shore, barely pulling on the mooring. On board, Rawson sat facing aft, watching the gulf and listening to the sounds of shore over his shoulder. Earlier, towering southern clouds had drifted east in rows, with the sun beating down hard between them. Now they were gone and the sun hung low behind him in the west. Out beyond Padre Island a squall dotted the soft gray and orange horizon. Rawson watched the etched veils of rain trailing the squall, and thought about leaving.

When he'd first come down to Texas there'd been the funeral to think about. All other thoughts Rawson had tried to force out of his mind in reverence to his brother. Now thinking the right thought at the right time posed a problem to Rawson. The appropriate words came easily at the funeral and in the days following,

but he felt things he didn't want to feel. There still seemed more to it than he could explain. He told himself this is why I haven't gone home yet.

He'd managed to alienate Ellen, his dead brother's companion and business partner. At first she welcomed him to stay on for a week after the funeral. Rawson told her he'd stay as long as he liked, and reminded her that it was his brother's boat. Things deteriorated from then on, although he'd tried to apologize. Ellen was now convinced Rawson had come to Corpus Christi to take the Glass Stomach from her. For his part, Rawson had done little to discourage her fears. He'd quit his job hooking up cable televisions in Connecticut and come south for the funeral, and really had no pressing reason to leave.

Ellen had crept off at dawn, barely making a sound as she rowed the inflatable Avon away. Rawson crawled out of his berth and up into the cockpit to see her going. In the grey dawn Ellen looked old and tired. He watched her chalky face tightening as she lengthened her stroke. When she was halfway across the glass harbor, he turned away and listened to the oars dip then suck back out of the water.

Ellen was sick of him, and he'd just let her go, leaving him stranded in the outer harbor. Afraid he'd come to Corpus Christi to take the Glass Stomach away

from her, she'd avoided conversation for a week. Ellen and his brother, Eric, had run charters out along Padre Island for the last seven years. The Glass Stomach was forty five feet along the water, with beautiful lines. The sloop was in good shape but for the stench left from his brother's body and minor damage incurred from floating aimlessly about the gulf for a week.

The Glass Stomach had become an attraction of sorts to the other yachtsmen moored in the harbor. Skiffs would pass close, coming and going from the Burr Brother's dock, the occupants casting curious glances, their exclamations in whispers coming clearly over the water. Last night he'd heard people a quarter mile away talking loud about the smell. While he'd stared across the water at the cruiser, that sat like a giant lighted clorox bottle, Ellen, from below, pumped off two shells from Eric's shotgun, spraying the cruiser with pellets.

He'd run below and Ellen flew at him wild and sobbing. He felt her shaking under her salty damp sweat shirt and jeans. When he began to speak Ellen stiffened and pulled away. She looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. At that point he'd felt like getting into Ellen's pants. Not for comfort or even lust, he thought, but something that made him feel bad.

"They thought I'd just sit here pretending nothing's going on, like I don't hear or see a thing," she'd said.

The Corpus Christi harbor was filled with winter yachtsmen, most full of well-meaning questions that people who went in boats expected to answer and ask of each other. They don't even think to care about not talking it up. It's nothing to them, Rawson thought. He'd been in Corpus Christi for a month and he'd learned that.

Not the shrimpers and those who lived their lives on the gulf. They were different. They aimed to mind their business. They barely talk, even when a charter sloop gets towed in smelling so bad that the Coast Guard moors it out by the breakwater for a week before bringing her in to the Customs dock and impounding her. His brother, Eric, was one of them, and he'd died of a heart attack out alone on the gulf, and that was it.

The Mexican lowriders and high school kids were jerking along the shore drive, honking in heavy Saturday night cruising traffic. A carnival was in town and Rawson could see the ferris wheel and bullet ride a couple miles up the coast. A cool breeze came up off the gulf. Out beyond Padre Island the squall hadn't moved much. He put on a gray windbreaker and went below.

Looking around the cluttered galley and berths he realized he had decided to forget his claim to the sloop. The Glass Stomach belonged to Ellen by right of her partnership with Eric. The Coast Guard saw no reason

to keep the sloop impounded, and she'd had possession two days after Eric was in the ground.

Rawson had a postcard, nearly five years old, in which Eric wrote that someday the Glass Stomach would be his. It was the last time he'd heard anything from Eric. He pulled the card from his wallet and examined the wild penmanship and blurred ink. The postcard was a black and white aerial shot of Corpus Christi a week after the hurricane of 1952. Rawson's vision of Eric's world had been constructed from dozens of postcards stacked neatly in his desk drawer at boarding school. The cards came from Singapore, Saigon, Nepal, Thailand, Morocco, then sometimes from as close as New Haven. They always contained a line or two about the need to work hard at school.

A faint yellow light streamed through the forward hatch. The stench and fading light gave the forward berths the feel of a sickroom. Rawson popped the hatch and felt a breeze begin to come through. All around the forward berths lay Ellen's clothes, pieces of teak she was in the process of sanding, a green down sleeping bag and a stained pillow without a case.

Crawling forward into the bulkhead, he dug through an assortment of sailbags. He pulled at one and heard a glass sound. He twisted on the bare bulb above Ellen's bunk and slid a large heavy glass stomach out of the

sailbag onto Ellen's clothes.

The inside was coated with pink streaks, with a hardened puddle of the pink on the bottom. Rawson thought of the photograph he'd once seen of his brother blowing a great glass gut over a blue flame. Pepto Bismol had paid Eric handsomely for dozens of glass stomachs over the years. There was a folded piece of blue paper stuffed in the stomach, as well as pictures of his family, and two rings. Rawson rolled the glass gut until the paper opened enough for him to read a few sentences. It was a newsletter Eric's former wife once sent him. She'd sent out two or three a year while they had been together. Usually the newsletter would quote a John Denver song and proudly proclaim some revitalization of their marriage through throwing out a television or having just completed a fast. Poor Gail. He wondered if she knew Eric had ballooned to three hundred pounds and died alone on the gulf. She probably won't know unless I tell her, he thought.

He remembered telling Eric that Gail was nice on Thanksgiving twenty years ago, and Eric grunting that she was an angel sent to tear him down. And then later that same day, playing in the fallen leaves at dusk and staring from behind a big maple at a glowing bay window, at the bobbing shapes, and those backwater pictures came back so strong and clear that he felt he'd known then

that this was who he was.

The throaty chug of the Burr's Yachthaven launch was coming closer. He took a deep breath. He crammed the postcard into the glass gut, then twirled it so the blue newsletter covered the card. He pushed the glass stomach back into the sailbag and stuffed it into the bulkhead. He heard the stomach clink as he climbed back to the cockpit. Cole Walsh was idling out toward him.

"Thought you were still out here, Rawson," Cole yelled.

"Ellen's gone to town and took the skiff," Rawson said, feeling stupid.

"I just saw her at the Mainliner Cafe and thought you might be stuck out here. I think she might be a little too drunk to remember to row back out, so I just came out to check on you," Cole said.

"Thanks, Cole."

"You need a lift in?"

"I'll be right with you." Rawson went below and looked around. Everything seemed back in place. So Ellen's too drunk to remember I'm sitting out here. She couldn't get that drunk, he knew. He went back above and stepped down into the launch.

"How can you stand that smell?" Cole stopped.

"It took a couple days," Rawson said.

They swung away from the Glass Stomach and headed

into the dock at an idle. Sitting against the transom he watched the bullet ride dive toward the ground and reappear. Cole was a good sort, Rawson thought, coming out here, checking to see I'm doing all right. Rawson watched him flick a cigarette ash into the water. He was in his late thirties, maybe. His hair was a thin white and his scalp was tan and worn. Cole was in good shape. Under his khaki pants and grease stained flannel shirt, he was still a young man. He moved quickly and surely about the launch, floats and dock. The yachtsmen and the shrimpers respected him. He's older than me, yet he's a lot younger, Rawson thought.

Rawson looked back at the Glass Stomach. It's a pretty sloop. The wind was still coming off the gulf. He listened to the halyards tapping the masts of a harbor full of yachts over the chug of the launch.

"Sorry, I have a bill to give you, Rawson. I've been carrying it around for a couple days. They need money up front for the teak before they'll order it. I know that's stupid, but Dave Burr told me specifically to hand it to you. Ellen ordered it for a new gunnel. You owe us for ripping up all that carpet too. Shit, sorry, Rawson," Cole said.

He looked genuinely disgusted handing over the bill, Rawson thought. But he knew Cole was uneasy about his staying around. They'd avoided talking about that since

the afternoon he arrived in Corpus Christi.

"Where you going now?" Cole asked.

"I'll get some dinner and then look for Ellen at the Mainliner."

"I'd watch her. I don't think she needs you around. I don't know who Eric would want the boat to go to. But the idea that you're trying to sell that sloop out from under her on top of Eric being gone has got her a little crazy," Cole said.

"What else do you think, Cole?"

"I wouldn't push her tonight, the way she is. She's talking bad about you, and plenty of guys, when drunk enough, will forget about your being Eric's brother and just think you're some asshole repossessing a boat. She was his mate for going on six years. That counts for something around here."

"Seven years."

"Fine, seven."

"I'll go easy. Maybe I won't even go over there."

"That's a good idea," Cole said.

Rawson opened the bill and then shoved it in his pocket. He could hear bits of the carnival music coming across the bay in waves with the wind. The moonless December night sky made him feel good.

"You don't need to order that teak, of course. She came in and just said you would take care of it," Cole

said slowly.

"It's all right, I'll pay for it," Rawson said.

"You can come into the office Monday morning and square up."

"Thanks, Cole."

"I'd go have a beer with you, Rawson, but I should be getting home. I just came to check on you."

Rawson stepped onto the float and cleated the bow line. He watched Cole cut the engine and pull a tarp over the dash. He climbed the short ladder to the dock. The wind was picking up. He waved at Cole and went on down the dock. Rawson felt good walking. His legs were stiff from sitting all day. He listened to Cole's boots slapping the planks and echoing off the water below. Rawson crossed the tracks, and headed north down the shore drive. He went along the harbor front, past the Vietnamese fishing fleet and their shanty markets and homes on stilts above the beach. The lowriders were still jerking along the shore drive to his left. Someone yelled unintelligible hatred at him. He watched the car move ahead slowly, and when traffic stopped and it appeared he would catch the car, he ran across the boulevard and headed into town.

He passed two restaurants where he'd assumed, while riding in to the dock with Cole, that he would eat. It was a strange thing about restaurants, the ones that

didn't even pretend to be good, wholesome, or anything special. Once he became recognized as a regular, and sometimes that took only two or three meals, he would stop going to avoid the tired welcoming smiles and talk. If he kept going, he would start ordering food he thought the waitress wanted him to eat.

As he went by the Mainliner Cafe, he listened to the voices, a cue ball breaking a rack, a juke box, and all the sounds coming to him as if out of a barrel. A wave of prickling sweat swept his back. And then Rawson was watching himself too closely, waiting to see what he would do next. He couldn't go in and face Ellen right now. He wanted to explain to her why he was still around but he didn't know. Rawson might have told Ellen he just wanted to know how his brother had lived, but he knew there was more to it than that. He went on past the Mainliner trying to nail things down.

The Half Keg was a small corrugated aluminum hanger set between a bank and a vacant lot. There were no windows but for a small slot high on the door. In the thought of a bar, a sports page with the hockey and basketball scores, beers and a burger, he began to calm down.

He bought a Houston paper from a box at the door. Inside the smoke was thick, making the light yellow. Rawson found a table and opened to the sports page. No

waitress came and he couldn't see anyone who was eating. It was an old man's bar. It smelled of cigars and farts. On the wall was a velvet painting of Elvis on the cross with a Kenworth driving out of his chest and the caption, "keep on trucking."

Rawson counted eight men sitting alone with draughts of beer in front of them. He caught the eye of one and stifled a smile. They had the look that said, I'm seventy fucking years old and I still don't know shit, and I feel bad about it. Rawson had seen it before. In an instant something would turn over in the red veined face. Some thought going belly up.

At the bar he ordered a draught and a cheeseburger that came bun, condiments and all in a steaming plastic bag. He ate, avoiding looking about the room. He tried to line up the legs of chairs and tables to the apexes of the dark green tiles. He thought about his brother having lived here for nearly a decade, and how it was only when Eric died that he'd come down. He never asked me down though, he thought. He wondered what Eric would say of his month long stay in Corpus Christi. I shouldn't have talked so much when I first got down here, after a while I wasn't even listening to my questions or their answers, Rawson thought.

Outside the wind was still blowing and he heard the carnival. Hollow rustling came down from the palms and

sand blew along the street. A sweet rot smell was coming out of the mangroves. Rawson flagged a cab. He hadn't seen a cab since arriving in Corpus Christi and really had no destination in mind other than he felt sick and afraid. It was as if the next person who spoke to him, before he was ready for it, would leave him unable to think or speak. He nodded when the driver asked if he was heading up to the carnival. Rawson tried to remember the other times he got in a cab and used the required immediacy of making a decision to direct what happened next in his life. He leaned back, feeling the heavy roll of the Marathon Cab and the wind blow through a broken front window.

"You should see the whale they got out at the carnival. Closest I ever got to one of those," the driver offered.

Rawson nodded and kept listening to the fat black man with the brightly woven knit hat. He said he was from Belize and that he drove very slowly, "So as to concentrate on keeping everybody alive." Rawson was glad the man was talking and that he only heard bits of it. The driver wasn't asking any questions as far as he could tell. When he got out and walked toward the carnival gate the driver yelled don't forget the baby whale. Rawson nodded and went in. He'd always hated carnivals, balloons, clowns and the circus but tonight

the crowds and neon lights seemed a welcome distraction.

There was a beer garden right down next to the bay and he bought enough tickets for seven beers, then sat at a picnic table and began drinking. Down the coast the Texaco sign above the Burr's Yachthaven office sent a red glowing reflection out across the water. The breeze carried the smell of oil off the water and deep fried food from the carnival stands. He wondered if Ellen was back on board the Glass Stomach, passed out. Ten years ago he might have drunk the beer and tried swimming the two miles to the sloop. He thought about that and decided he'd never been that brave or that drunk, and that he had always been a miserable swimmer, and that if had he wouldn't be around now thinking such shit.

A skinny woman with bad teeth asked him for one of the tickets. He'd been crumpling the tickets and then pressing them to the table to flatten them out again. She was drunk and her friend, who stood a little way away against a telephone pole, was laughing hysterically. Rawson gave her two tickets and watched them walk off toward the beer tent. He thought of the night he might have if he were truly drunk and chased after them.

Then thinking they might come back, he went off in search of the baby whale. He was surprised that such a cheap looking carnival would have a whale and he saw no

place that seemed likely to house one. As he headed off, the two women came running up after him, laughing and spilling beer on themselves. They both had blond hair and were very skinny. One wore a leopard print nylon top and the other wore a Harley Davidson t-shirt. They had dirty tight jeans over their rail thin legs.

"Where's you going? We's coming back to thank you for the beers," they giggled.

"I was told that I should want to see the baby whale," Rawson said. The two looked at each other and laughed.

"What do you want to see that thing for?"

"Is it real?" This sent them to doubling over and one, they were barely distinguishable, spit a mouthfull of beer at her shoes.

"I'll go see the whale," one said.

"Good, lead the way."

The two took Rawson by the arms and marched through the fair-grounds past Greta the Penguin Woman, hundreds of large sky blue teddy bears, and staggering people holding plastic beer cups. They yanked and pulled at him and told of how they knew where the whale was if it was in the same place as last year, and that they didn't understand why he wanted to see it so bad because it never did anything, and that they were Mandy and Debbie, and that they were getting thirsty because they'd

spilled too much of their beers trying to catch up.

Rawson slipped his arms around them, and one of them, probably Mandy, grabbed his kidney and called him a porker. They were skinny all right. They had the rib cages of large rodents. Rawson was amazed at how brittle they felt. He hoped they were alone and that he wouldn't meet the poor slob who rode the Harley and thought he loved Debbie.

"There's the whale truck, I knew we could find it. Last year it was right in this same spot," Mandy beamed at Rawson and playfully punched him in the chest.

"The whale's in that truck?" Rawson asked, stopping to look at the tractor trailer painted with blue seascape mural and a baby whale frolicking up a playful storm.

"You want to see Baby Betty?" Rawson asked, still staring at the trailer. A line of people waited to walk into the trailer, while others exited in nodding amazement that yes, there really was a whale in there. Some shook their heads in prideful admonishment to those loved ones who had skeptically sat outside.

"Give us three tickets and we'll get us all another beer while you're seeing the whale," Mandy said.

Rawson gave them three tickets and went to stand in line. It was loud next to the trailer. Hot air was pouring out of a droning compressor. It was a somber

line waiting to see the whale. Hardly anyone spoke. He wondered if Greenpeace had heard about Baby Betty.

Inside it smelled like a pet shop. A narrow walkway led the length of the trailer past a tank that took up the rest. Rawson was shocked at how big the whale was. Baby Betty was at least twenty five feet in length. Big enough so there was no hope of ever turning around in the tank. She slid along the side of the glass and bounced off the far end, and then, with what to Rawson looked like an acquired skill of some difficulty, sculled her way backwards until her fluke bumped the rear of the tank. Fluorescent light shined down through the murky water. The whale seemed to watch the stream of visitors as they shuffled slowly past, listening to a blaring tape about the intelligence of the species.

Outside, Rawson headed for the gate. He didn't see Mandy or Debbie and felt it was probably for the best that they got to split his beer. He was cold now. At times he might well have enjoyed the prospect of a two mile walk. Tonight though, a long walk by himself seemed dreadful. He couldn't get anywhere fast enough, and all the time knowing once he got there he wouldn't feel good about it. Rawson walked back the shore drive facing the oncoming traffic. He walked for a while along the guard rail, preparing to jump if a car came close. When he realized that he was no longer watching the approaching

headlights he stepped over the rail.

It was hard going beyond the rail. A narrow sloping median of grass separated the rail from a rockpile breakwater and the bay. He listened to the small waves slap at the rocks. Once he fell forward and came up covered with dry nettles. He started to mutter to himself and walk raggedly. There was something he heard in his voice, a veteran stain, a part of him that stalked the rest. He fell again and stayed down.

Out beyond Padre Island the running lights of a tanker and the shimmer of a rig far beyond, spread across the water. Ellen had told him that by the time you'd sailed halfway to the first rig you could see five more. He got up and threw a smooth stone side-armed, watching it disappear into the dark waves without a sound.

As he came to the dock he heard Ellen's cackling and other voices ringing over the water. He saw the faint red coal of a cigarette and three shapes in the glow of the Texaco sign. For a month he'd lain awake in the stench of his berth waiting for her to return from town, thinking tonight something is going to happen. Now she was out there at the end of the dock waiting for him and he told himself tonight something will change, something will turn me around.

When his feet hit the dock the conversation ahead

got quiet, and all he could hear was the sound he made. When he was close enough to know they knew it was him he heard, "Some asshole on parade" and Ellen groan and giggle. Rawson stopped and stared at Ellen and two men he'd seen before. They wore a collective smirk. Ellen looked a little scared, he thought. On the bench beside her were all of his things. Two suitcases and a model boat he'd bought and made the day before.

"There's a bus heading to Galveston in an hour, Rawson, buses going just about everywhere," Ellen said.

He heard her voice crack and was almost resigned to going when one of the guys grabbed his throat and started screaming ugly in his face. He saw the cigarette drop from the other hand and then he was released and nudged backwards about a foot. Rawson swayed, trying to get his legs under him. He knew it was coming but didn't move and caught all of it on the jaw. The sound came from the inside, and then came again as his skull struck the planks. It seemed a familiar sound. Rawson waited for more, but heard Ellen telling them to leave him alone. Then she was standing over him, looking down. Rawson slowly looked up the paint speckled jeans past the purple t-shirt to the round face and long black hair with streaks of grey. The blood was running down his throat and he coughed wildly.

"What do you want here, Rawson?" Ellen was peering

into his face.

"The Glass Stomach," he said faintly.

"Sure," she said, stepping back.

"I paid for the carpet and the teak. I mean, I'm going to pay for it," Rawson said.

"Shit, what do you do with a guy like this?" Ellen said.

They were picking him up. He struggled and the man holding him through the arm pits dropped him. He felt splinters rake into his back as he was dragged across the planks, and then he was falling. The water was warm and black, and he kept thinking about the familiar sound his head had made when struck. He came up knowing he was going to have a hard time making it to the float. He flailed toward the dock and took hold of a slime covered piling. Ellen was again above him, nervously asking if they saw him. A flashlight found his head and there was much rejoicing fifteen feet above on the dock. They're relieved, Rawson thought. One of the guys was trying to piss on him but couldn't get the trajectory. When he got to the float, moving piling to piling, they pulled him out. He lay on his back and didn't try to move.

"You still want what you're not going to get, Rawson?" Ellen sounded sad, he thought.

He might have nodded all of a centimeter but he didn't know if they had seen it.

"He wants a ride on the hound," one of the guys said.

They weren't laughing now. The cuts in his mouth were still bleeding and there was a hot feeling in his ears. When he looked up at the night they were gone. A heavy weight pressed down on his chest. When he tried to sit up it rolled off him. The glass stomach wobbled slowly away from him across the float, stopping against a cleat. I ought to feel something, he thought, something more than this month being gone. The carnival was closed down now, he couldn't make out the ferris wheel. Rawson picked up the glass stomach and his things and went down the dock.

Torpland

The wind crossed the mile of crackling fodder corn, roared in the palms above and vanished. Bob Payne watched the young man in the dark suit walking toward him.

"Got something for me to sign, no doubt," Payne said smiling.

"No, sir. I came to warn you," Rawson said.

"Warn me about what?" Payne asked skeptically.

"About tomorrow morning. Mr. Aoki's bringing an appraising crew out to catalogue everything. He'll have a contract stipulating that the property must remain exactly as it stands from the moment you sign until the sale goes through. The sale is contingent on your signing. I thought this might give you a chance to grab a few things."

"Damn if that isn't strange," Payne said.

"Sorry."

The two shook hands. Payne's pale blue eyes stared down at him. The wrinkled tan face squinting below a green baseball cap with a fertilizer logo. In all the years he'd known Payne, Rawson had never seen him wear anything other than a white t-shirt and khaki military pants and that hat. He was still a powerfully built man at sixty.

"I can't take anything out of my own house?"

"Not once you sign, except for your clothes," Rawson said.

"Well I'll be damned if that don't strike me as strange."

"Yes it is," Rawson offered.

"Christ, I've got a moving company coming in tomorrow afternoon."

"Well you'll save something there."

"I'll lose my deposit," Payne said.

"You're getting out of debt with enough money to start something else. It's a good price, more than I expected you'd get," Rawson said.

"That's strange too, Rawson. Who's the philanthropist buying my land? How is it that after refusing me a loan three years running, Aoki finds me such a good price that everyone tells me I'm crazy not to sell?"

"I couldn't tell you that, Mr. Payne," Rawson said.

"You've got to be Japanese to get a loan in this

valley," Payne spat.

Payne stared at Rawson doubtfully. Rawson had never known where they stood after the antics of Payne's daughter Lois. When she was twelve, four years older than Rawson, Payne had caught them playing a game Lois called Mr. Fish finger. As Rawson had sat on the ground listening to a bewildering set of instructions and commands Payne had crept up and caught them. He'd beaten them both and Lois hadn't been mentioned since. Rawson always felt Payne might in some way blame him for his daughter's ongoing life of corruption.

The first October rains had come, breaking the heat which had hung over the valley for ninety days. The air felt sharp and the sky seemed higher and a darker blue. The coastal mountains appeared purple against the sunset. Along the row of tall eucalyptus lining the drive out to the road, a blackened truck sat anchored among weeds.

"You'll remember these fields too, won't you son?"

"Sure, Mr. Payne," Rawson said, looking around thinking just what he remembered now and what might stick out later.

"That truck there hasn't moved since before you or Fergie was born, Rawson. I always meant to clean that mess up."

"I never noticed," Rawson said, feeling puzzled.

"Its been sitting like that for forty-seven years now. Someone shot out the windows twenty years ago, and bits and pieces of her are gone, but she hasn't moved a fucking inch."

"No sir," Rawson said, not knowing why.

Along the row of tall Eucalyptus lining the drive out to the road a blackened truck sat anchored among weeds.

"Funny your coming back to work for the bank after all these years, Rawson. I guess I never thought you'd come back to Torpland after your folks moved and you went east to college and all," Payne said.

Rawson shrugged, "I had to pick somewhere to live."

"Now Fergie, he'll never leave. You don't see much of my son though, do you Rawson?"

"I saw him drinking at the Sportsman a month ago."

"My son's worthless, but I wanted to leave him something. I don't even know if he's heard I'm selling out."

"I'll tell him," Rawson said. He felt uncomfortable now. He brushed his thin blond hair back off his forehead, then looked down at Payne's feet and the ground between them. He didn't want to look Payne in the face and he felt a wave of prickling sweat sweep his back. As much as he wanted to belong, he now felt he'd made a mistake in coming back. He reached into his jacket and gave Payne a business card with his room

number at the Torplander Motor Court.

"If I can be of any help, Mr. Payne, let me know," Rawson said.

"I'll see you, Rawson," Payne said, turning and staring back across the square of corn toward the clump of trees that shaded what once had been Rawson's family's place.

In the mirror, through a trail of dust, Rawson watched Payne still standing under the palms. The drive into Torpland took thirty minutes with a stop at Cody's Gun and Liquor store for a quart of beer and a pint of schnapps. He drove slowly, taking two shots of the schnapps and chasing it with the beer. He'd wanted to help Payne in some way and he felt good about warning him.

It was Friday evening, and although the bank stayed open until six, he'd missed his meeting with the bank president by nearly an hour. But when he passed the bank, Mr. Aoki was sitting in his Mercedes out front reading the paper. Rawson cruised around the block and came up behind Aoki.

Aoki smelled of talcum as Rawson leaned over the driver's window and listened to a string of complaints over his lack of punctuality and general aggressiveness.

"It makes no sense getting me angry with you, Rawson."

"Certainly not, sir," Rawson said.

"Good," Aoki said, looking slightly baffled. "I have a task for you then. I want you to take my car and pick up some friends of mine at the Sacramento airport this Saturday evening at nine. This is very important, Rawson. Pick up my car tomorrow morning, take it out for a nice drive if you want," Aoki said smiling up at Rawson. He handed Rawson an envelope, and while the window hummed closed he pointed at the envelope and said, "Everything you need, Rawson."

He didn't even ask where I'd been, Rawson thought. When Aoki had turned the corner and was gone, Rawson took another gulp of schnapps and beer. Main street was crowded with cruising cars, an occasional low rider, all with thumping stereos. Rawson drove the length of town twice, sipping his bagged bottles. He recognized a few faces on the street and in the passing cars but he'd been gone a long time and only back a year. On the way to his motel room he bought three lottery tickets and another quart of beer.

The Torplander Motor Court had been the Holiday Inn when he was a boy. Although slightly run down now, it still had a good coffee shop and a busy bar with country western music. He needed some company and felt excited about heading out to the bars on a Friday. He'd find Fergie and talk about the farm and old times, and get right about this thing.

In the shower Rawson used his foot as plunger to unplug the drain but he was too late and flooded the bathroom. The water poured through a heating duct and he heard people yelling below. He hurled a towel over the duct and flipped on the cable sports network. He lay out two long lines of cocaine and snorted one. It was the last of a stash which three weeks ago had convinced him to go to the hospital fearing a heart attack. When he'd dressed, and drunk the rest of the beer and schnapps, he did the other line and went out.

The cocaine made him feel reasonably confident on his feet. He spoke to several old friends, met their wives and girls, and seemed to be able to explain where he'd been and why he was back without betraying too much depression and confusion. When he spotted Fergie at the Stag playing shuffleboard and screaming back and forth with his opposition, he was happy but hung at the end of the bar to watch him finish the game.

Fergie had become a hulking slob. His curly yellow hair was receding over a red flaky scalp. He wore a dirty Harley Davidson t-shirt which pressed over his belt. In high school he'd been the type of person who must summon up so much psychic energy just to be polite and decent, that Rawson was afraid Fergie might simply give up in mid-sentence and murder him.

The Stag was filled with the sons of rich farmers,

field men, canners, college boys, and associated women. Stretching long and narrow back from Main street, the bar was choked with noise and smoke. On the pale green walls were the insignias of farms and tomato varieties long forgotten, interspersed with the mirrored beer advertisements given out by distributors. There were old Coca Cola and Squirt signs nailed up behind the bar with the pennants of the old Oakland Raiders and Forty-Niners dividing the bar in half. The back room had a game of lowball poker going most nights. Over the front entrance hung a giant velvet painting of a harvester rumbling out across a field, with the logo "keep on growing."

As Rawson took all this in, he felt his confidence ebb out. He wondered if Fergie knew about his father's selling out, and how he'd take it. They'd never been close friends after high school began. Rawson's father had taught at the university, and for ten years they'd rented a farmhouse across the fields from the Paynes, before moving back to Connecticut. A row of olive trees stretched the two miles between the homes along Cache Creek. Rawson and Fergie spent several summers riding bikes along the path and fishing in the creek. Rawson remembered the way it looked when the summer afternoon sun sprayed through the canopy of leaves, knowing a good feeling was associated with those rides that he'd forgotten.

He was about to leave when Fergie came up and slapped him on the back. This close Fergie loomed over him. Rawson felt transparent.

"What brings you around, Rawson man?" Fergie handed him a bottle of beer. He grabbed Rawson's hand and pumped it hard.

"Your father and old times, I guess," Rawson said.

"Oh, shit you're sentimental, Rawson, christ."

"He's selling you know. You hear about that?"

Fergie stared at him for a moment. "No, but I'm not surprised. I haven't been out to see him for months now, and he don't like coming by my place."

"I'm working at the bank and I've been involved with the sale."

"The bank. Which bank would that be?"

"Vaca Valley Savings," Rawson said.

"Good money?" Fergie asked doubtfully.

"No. It sucks really."

"You always had the brains, I thought you'd be rich by now."

Rawson shook his head. He'd underestimated Fergie in someway. He'd expected something else from him, maybe anger or abuse, but Ferg seemed perfectly placid and only vaguely interested. Rawson wondered what Fergie felt and remembered about the old days and decided that he would never know that.

"I'm fixing harvesters and going on unemployment for the rest of the year," Fergie said.

"Sounds good."

"I'm okay. I've got an old Harley Sportster."

Rawson fought for something new to say but felt stifled. It was okay to come back and work for the bank, and it was okay to help orchestrate a deal to get Bob Payne out of debt and home, but he didn't feel good about shooting the shit with Ferg.

"Come by my place sometime, I'll give you some lines. First house past Plainfield fire station," Fergie said.

Fergie turned and went back down the bar bellowing for a rematch. Rawson finished his beer and went back to the Torplander. Driving through the parking lot he caught a glimpse of Bob Payne carrying a box into a room.

Rawson rarely went into the Torpwood lounge. Living at the Torplander was bad enough, getting to be a regular at the house bar seemed dangerously depressing. Tonight though, he needed company and alcohol to combat this wired feeling. He wasn't worried about Fergie anymore, but rather embarrassed and confused over his own feelings. He told himself he shouldn't feel anything, it wasn't his land being sold, and it wasn't his fault. He realized now he meant little or nothing to the Paynes.

The Torpwood had two dozen high circular booths with shiny black plastic covers. Rawson sat at the dark bar, ordered a scotch and tried not to look at himself in the mirror. When a hand reached over his shoulder and stole the drink, he knew without looking it was Lois. He hadn't seen her since coming back, although he'd half expected she was a regular at the Torpwood. She kissed him and laughed. Despite hard living, Lois was still exceptionally beautiful, as if it was only the tight black dress, gaudy make-up, and wild hair that gave her the burned-out-hooker look.

"Well," she said, shifting back and forth.

"How have you been?" Rawson asked.

"Well, I tend bar at the bowling alley, and I lost my baby a couple months ago, and my boyfriend just carved slut all over my new car with a tire iron."

"Good grief," Rawson said, slightly miffed at her confession.

"I'm still wearing this, but it's from a couple years ago."

"Who gave you that?" Rawson asked, staring at the large sparkling engagement ring.

"You don't know him. He beat me up one day and told me to hock it for drugs."

"Christ Lois, I'm sorry."

"You're always sorry for someone, Rawson. I'm sorry

for you. Like, why are you here?"

"I don't really know."

"I'll tell you then." She paused and Rawson felt for a moment he was going to learn something. "You came back for me," Lois said cackling.

"That must be it."

"You want another round of old stinkster finger," she said.

"Mr. Fish finger," he corrected her.

"That's right."

"I'm working at Vaca Valley Savings in the real estate office," Rawson offered, trying to change the subject.

"I worked there as a teller a few years ago but I got fired."

"Aoki fired you, huh. He'll probably fire me too."

"The Aokis are devil worshippers."

"No, they're Buddhists."

"That's what I mean," Lois said, sounding exasperated.

He bought her a drink, and after shaking his head no to a couple prolonged stares, went back to his room alone.

At eleven o'clock sharp Rawson parked his Impala behind the silver Mercedes and knocked on Aoki's door. The bank president lived in a sprawling ranch home with

a circular driveway and landscaped grounds with a fountain filled with fat brightly colored carp. The house backed against the golf course in Torpland's most fashionable neighborhood.

Aoki's wife answered, invited him into the foyer, and went to get the keys. She was a tiny, squat woman whom he'd met as a boy at her daughter's and son's birthday parties, although she showed no memory of it. As she came back down the hall he felt an uncontrollable urge to say something polite.

"How are Esther and Bruce doing these days, Mrs. Aoki?"

The woman looked bewildered then flashed a cross expression. Rawson knew they'd both become doctors and long since left the valley but he'd put on his most polite voice and asked anyway. She handed him the keys and opened the door without a word. Still anxious to establish some sort of rapport with the woman, Rawson searched for something more to say.

"I've always admired your Buddha fountain and the carp pond," he offered backing out the door. He pointed at a ten foot high bronze Buddha that sat cross legged on a cement toadstool, lazily pissing into the carp pond, but her face barely changed expression as the door shut.

An hour later he was sipping a beer at the Stag and

reading the contents of the envelope Aoki had given him. His instructions were to wash and vacuum the car, then pick up the Shimura family from Western flight 904 and check them into the Torplander. And to be present at ten Sunday in the coffee shop to meet the Shimuras and the Aokis for brunch. Simple enough, he thought. Nearly sure that Aoki had obtained Bob Payne's four hundred for the Shimuras, Rawson felt worse than ever about his role. Aoki had put a crisp one hundred dollar bill in the envelope for him.

At dusk he was sitting across a mirror listening to Ferg's theory on why the quality of cocaine was going up and the price down, while repeatedly asserting that nothing so definite could be said about marijuana.

"The shit creeps up on you," Ferg said, drawing on a joint.

"Tastes okay."

"Expensive, though," Ferg added. "Someone is trying to fuck Torpland up."

Creeps up was Ferg's way of saying you better try and imagine it's powerful because it sucks. Rawson didn't want it to be too good anyway, he needed to keep a reasonably clear head for the drive to the airport.

"Its the Japs who are fucking Torpland up," Fergie said.

"How do you know that?"

"They own everything around here now, they even grow the best dope."

"Some Japanese are buying your dad's place, Fergie," Rawson told him.

"I knew it. Christ I felt it coming," Fergie screamed. He jumped up and grabbed a twelve gauge pump from the wall, checking the chamber. Then putting the gun back and saying slowly, "Fuck, what do I care about what happens."

"I've got Aoki's car out front, let's get a drink."

When the time had come and gone to pick up the Shimuras, Rawson began to feel a certain relief in the knowledge he was as good as fired. He had nothing against the Japanese, though he knew he'd have a hard time proving it to anyone now. He just didn't like what Aoki had done to Payne. But still none of it made sense to Rawson. Payne's four hundred was a very small farm, not worthy of a conspiracy to force a sale. If Aoki wanted to set his friends up with a farm, he could have found a much larger property for the same price.

The Mercedes banged along the dirt road between his old house and the Paynes', and Rawson watched the moonlight gleaming off the creek between the rushing trees. Ferg yanked the car off into the square of fodder corn, hurtling blindly through the tall stocks until an irrigation ditch ripped the back right wheel off. An

hour later they sat on the roof of the old truck under the Eucalyptus. Fergie heard the scuffling first, but within a minute they saw Bob Payne coming toward them down the drive. Rawson stared at the figure approaching through the dark.

"What are you boys doing out here," Payne asked, a flashlight now beaming on them.

"Just spending a last night on the land, Dad," Fergie roared.

"Fergie?"

"Yup, you bet ya pop. It's me."

Payne came up and looked them over. He seemed both curious and disgusted.

"This must be your idea, Rawson. Fergie never gave a shit about this place," Payne said.

"I've got to tell you something Bob, you too Fergie!"

"What is it, son?" Payne asked.

"Old man Aoki had you blackballed at every bank in town. He got you to where you'd be forced to sell."

"Why'd he do that, Rawson?"

"He wanted the land for his friends, the Shimuras. They flew into Sacramento from Japan tonight. I was supposed to pick them up at the airport. I didn't know why Aoki was doing it until today. He wanted this land for his Japanese friends."

"Fucking slanty eyed bastards, we ought to drop

another bomb on them and keep them squinting," Fergie grunted.

"Shut up you worthless pig," Payne said, looking incredulous for a moment. "Shimura?" he asked.

"John Shimura the third," Rawson said.

Payne broke into a wide smile and began laughing.

"You think it's funny? I'm fired for this. I was supposed to pick them up and take them to the Torplander."

Payne laughed harder and Rawson and Fergie exchanged glances.

"What's so fucking funny?" Fergie growled.

"All of it," Payne said coolly.

"What is it?" Rawson asked, feeling as though he was about to learn something terrible about himself.

"Well, well you're sitting on it. That truck is it, by golly."

"The truck?" Rawson asked warily.

"Old John Shimura died in that truck you're sitting on. His kin just wanted his land back, I guess," Payne's face wide-eyed and satisfied.

"What do you mean?" Fergie asked.

"I mean, forty seven years ago they came to take Shimura to one of the camps, but he wouldn't get out of that truck you're sitting on. He told those national guard boys to stand back and he waved a pistol around

saying he'd kill himself and maybe someone else if he wasn't left alone. Then he shot himself in the knee and screamed bloody murder about how much it hurt and that he'd done it so that he'd have the gumption to put one in his head. He sat in that truck for a couple hours while his family and friends begged him to put the gun down and go to the hospital. Finally he was willing to let them take him to the hospital, but he bled to death before the ambulance got out here."

"Why didn't they just drive him?" Fergie asked.

"I don't know, I was only a boy."

"You saw it?" Fergie asked quietly.

"I stood behind one of these trees," Payne said pointing at the row of Eucalyptus.

"Why haven't I ever heard this before?" Ferg asked his voice cloaked in a soft amazement that seemed odd to Rawson.

"Because I've never been too proud of buying this land, even though I got it from the bank, and years later. I guess no one was very proud about that day, and everyone knew it was wrong taking him off to a camp, but no one was going to do anything,"

Payne paused, "Christ almighty, Rawson, you better not have fucked up this sale tonight. That fucking truck you're sitting on has eaten at me for thirty-five years."

Rawson sat stunned, listening to the eucalyptus rustling above. He felt too fucked up to get straight on anything now. At dawn he rode with Ferg in the back of Payne's truck into Torpland. On the way they passed a black limousine and Rawson stared into the eyes of a Japanese girl standing on the back seat watching the road reeling out behind her.

Tamarack Point

Cal twisted with a jerk out of his bindings. A twinge of pain shot through the inside of his right knee. Something was still wrong in there. The hut was half buried in windblown drifts of snow. He pulled his skis from beneath a foot of new snow and leaned them against the hut. It would be clear soon. A squall hung over Pyramid Peak and the Bells, but most of the western sky was a thin gray. To the east, the departing storm hung low and dark.

"How does it feel to be back, Cal?" Ben stood in the doorway, grinning.

"I don't know yet. I haven't been back in a long time. You're a hell of a lot better skier than I am now. I had trouble following you."

"Yeah, that's what happens when you live to ski. I'm sure you'd be just as good if you'd stuck around." Ben looked almost sympathetic, as though he felt sorry for Cal having turned so soft.

Cal looked up through the steep glades, trying to follow the tracks he'd made coming down. Once under the

boundary rope he had become aware of how long he had been gone. He had made awkward jump turns in the new snow and had needed to stop often. A few years ago he would have loved that run, but now his legs shook.

"The hut is trashed. No one comes out here anymore, not since they made it a big fine for going out of bounds."

Cal watched Ben Zarkos talking and remembered how much he hated reunions. Even among the best of friends there was awkwardness, and Ben was really, or had been, his brother's friend more than Cal's. Cal had no real reason for being back in Aspen, not that he could feel good about.

Compressed, stratified layers of snowfall rose four feet on the hut's V-shaped roof. Ben leaned out the doorway against the waist deep snow. Ben has aged too, Cal thought. He had the early gray hair some Greeks get, and a sallow gauntness to his cheeks. He was still trim and powerful for a short man. Cal tried to remember how he had looked back when they were all growing up in the neighborhood.

"Someone must have lived out here last summer." Ben said.

Cal swung down into the hut. Smashed bottles and cans littered the floor. The ends of a burned bench hung out of the stove. Two cans of motorcycle oil, a burnt

plastic garbage bag and the remnants of meals were tossed about the plank floor. A thin frost covered the inside of the hut. On the wall, carved deeply into a smooth log, it read, "IN MEMORY OF RICK WEISS, WHO LOVED THESE MOUNTAINS".

I don't know who carved that. I didn't come out here again until last year, and it was already here."

Cal ran his glove along the log, clearing the frost.

"Whenever I try to picture Rick's last day, I'm standing out on Tamarack Point. I watch him ride the bus to the mountain, and on the lifts, and going under the rope, and the whole time I'm standing on those boulders. It's just a quirk, meaningless...it's just the way I've imagined it for five years."

"Tamarack is close to the chute Rick died in. It's a couple ridges over. You imagine it from there because we climbed up there that first summer, twelve years ago, and then we all went out there on the point to get stoned a few times each winter."

"Sure, I guess that's it."

Cal wondered about the garbage and how long the hut had been silent. Several months now. He would have liked living out here for a summer with a dirt bike to get him to town and work. He thought of the cool summer sunsets, of riding the jeep switchbacks up from Castle Creek

Road, then of some unknown friend of his brother who had carved the memorial, and of the summer he and Rick had lived in a tent to save rent.

The hut was probably forty years old. It stood on the edge of a gently sloped meadow two thirds of the way down a fabled out-of-bounds run on the backside of Ajax Mountain. Below the hut, funneled chutes plummeted eight hundred quick feet into Castle Creek. Tamarack Point was the rocky shoulder of one chute. It was a thin, craggy peninsula dotted with blighted pines. Cliffs fell away on three sides and one could only traverse out and traverse back.

"I want you to take me to where you found Rick. I want to know what it was like for you, Ben. I just want to know everything that happened."

Ben was staring back at him coldly, rocking on his boots and bouncing against the wall. Cal really did not know why he asked this of Ben. He felt bad doing it.

"You look a little wired, Cal. Maybe you should go get some sleep at my place." Ben's voice was a practiced calm.

"I've been up for thirty hours. Probably should have stopped somewhere. I wanted to snort and smoke the trip into something good. I had a case of beer on ice when I started out, but the idea went bad before I even

left. I've driven here from California so many times now. I always used to stop at this rest area in Nevada where they said you could see geysers in the distance, but I missed it this time. Let's go out there, Ben."

"You wanted to know what it was like for me, that's what you said. Christ, Cal, it was the worst day of my life, you know that. Why would you want to know all about it? You're lucky you weren't here."

"I wish I had been. I felt shut out by all of you. No one called me. I didn't even know he was dead until that summer. Christ, it's been five years now."

"No one knew where to find you, Cal, and your parents being dead, no one knew what to do. Dana took care of it. The burial, I mean."

"How is she bearing up? It's still hard to think of Rick married."

"Dana..." Ben paused. "She's doing better now. She manages the Paragonn. You should have written to her."

"Sure."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"I don't know what she thinks of you at this point. Back then she was certain you just avoided the funeral. She thought you were quite the shit."

"So...Does the Paragon still look like the inside of a New Orleans whorehouse? Maroon velvet on the floors

and walls and fancy fake antique furniture."

"You want a change of subject, huh? Yes, it's the same...maybe a few more fags."

"Let's go out to Tamarack Point, Ben."

"We're not skiing any of those chutes, Cal." Ben's voice was strained.

"Okay, I just want to see where it happened."

"It was a day a lot like this, with a foot of new snow. We're just going to look down, then traverse out to the jeep switchbacks."

"Sure."

He followed Ben through a couple hundred yards of gentle tree skiing. Even here he felt awkward. Each compression of his legs sent a roll of fat lurching about his waist. He wondered about pressing Ben for details. He knew Ben was angry and uneasy. He had never written or called Ben or Dana. Instead, for five years he had simply imagined the slide and Rick's last day. He thought of it when he was bored or scared, until it was like a child's daydream. Sometimes he even forced a curiosity when it was not there.

Ben was pointing down the chute with his pole when Cal caught up. The gully had slid. A fracture began just below them, ten yards wide and several feet deep. The snow was stripped away down to a crusty slab sheet with brush and dirt showing.

"Probably happened in the last two hours." Ben glared at him, then looked away.

Cal nodded. He stared at the fracture line and at the piles of boulder snow far below. Part of the boulder snow had piled into Castle Creek. The water was moving slow and was black under the gray sky. Cal felt transparent, as though his face betrayed his shadowy thoughts. He wondered if he and Ben had become the kind of friends who could no longer hold each other's eyes.

"Was it here?"

"Yes."

"Was it like this?"

"It was a lot like this."

"Where was he?" Cal waved his hand out at the creek.

"I'll tell you, and that will be the end of it as far as I'm concerned. I was right here, this exact spot. Rick went into the chute and did about six turns, and it fractured right behind him. He got swallowed right away. One of his skis popped up in the rubble down at the bottom. I side-slipped the slap and skied along the edge. Once I was down there, I started probing with his loose ski. I knew it would have taken at least forty-five minutes to get any help back here, maybe more, so I just looked around frantically. I could hear the creek behind me, and maybe the trees, but it was the same as

and maybe the trees, but it was the same as it always is out here. The I saw his arm, the blue sleeve of his jacket way up the chute. I climbed back up and found him bent backwards around a tree. A small aspen."

"When I think about it, I'm standing on that point over there...I picture his eyes pinned open like blue stones."

"I guess he kind of looked like that...shit, that's enough, Calvin."

Ben began climbing to his right. In a half hour they had climbed and traversed their way onto the jeep switchbacks. In another hour they had reached Castle Creek road and h[^]Ad hitched a ride back to Aspen and the base of Ajax. It was just past noon. Cal was tired. No, exhausted. His heart beat in hollow lurches high in his chest.

Cal watched Ben get on Lift A and then grow small and disappear over a ridge. IOn the past he never would have quit early on a powder day. He walked heavily down the hill to his station wagon, crawled into the back and zipped himself in his sleeping bag. He laid out the last of his cocaine and snorted it, feeling desperate and stupid. He tried to remember Aspen when he was fresh out of college and had plans, glimpses of paths leading straight into his future, and then wondering what more he could do to assault those ancient conceptions of

himself. He drank two beers from the blue aluminum cooler and fell asleep.

The wind was making the car quiver. He did not know how long he had been awake. It was dark now so he knew he had slept several hours. He lay in the cleared slot of the wagon watching beads of moisture run down the fogged windows catching the light of condominiums. He thought about calling Dana and looking up old friends. Well, it's not like I'm coming back in glory. Not some rich lawyer seeking a house to buy, but it is a chance to fill someone in on the last eight years. I don't know, it is as if I have forgotten the gist of my story and by tonight I might like what has happened, he thought.

Cal splashed his face with melted ice from the cooler and changed clothes. He felt remarkably good. His legs had that good ache and felt strong. He dug a roach out of the ash tray and drank a beer. The smoke stuck and he coughed wildly.

Heading into town the snow was coming down fast in big wet flakes. It muffled the whispers of two fir clad women and their swaggering husbands. He passed the familiar shops and restaurants with new names along Galena street, bought a paper and decided to eat at Cooper Street Pier. Walking fast to an empty table he

sat down and opened the paper. He did not glance about the room for a familiar face. A waitress descended upon him almost immediatly.

"How about some fat gnarled pork chops, gravy and white bread. Maybe some yellow wax beans." She began to turn away but he quickly spat out, "No a cold musty meat sandwich with that oily shimmer of all the spectrum." Cal looked up hopefully. "Sorry how about a burger, fries and a draft."

"You know this isn't Price or Parachute."

"I know."

She smiled and walked to the bar. It was not pork chop and white bread country. In Aspen one could eat just about anything, he thought, but there were a few drab gut wrenching meals that were not to be had. The same wall decorations, old mining equipment, shovels, and big photographs of sailing and surfing in Hawaii, were still hanging on the rough hewn pine walls. The bar was loud and crowded. He ate his food quickly keeping his eyes pinned to the sports page and the spring training preview.

Across the street in a phone booth he fumbled through a mangled phone book looking for names of old friends he was nearly certain he would not call. He could see his table and the waitress cleaning up his burger basket, through the glass front of the Pier. He called Ben and

told him he was going to call Dana.

In Pomeroy Ski Shop he halted an eager salesman with a "just looking" and studied the racks of boots, skis and clothes. The smells of wax, wool, leather and new carpet pulled at old pleasant memories. Then he was outside again moving through the wind and the big sweeping flakes.

The Paragon was a three story brick building built in the 1890's. He could hear the city music thumping a block away. Cal stood in the snow and peered through the painted window at the crowd and the fancy bar, plants and antique furniture. Big wooden fans hung far below the ceiling turning slowly. He'd always hated this place.

Dana was standing a few feet from the window staring out at him. He wasn't sure how long she'd been there. When he nodded and stepped back and straightened his pants and jacket he saw an anguished inner grin come over her face. She met him at the door with a kind smile and hugged him, thumping her hands on his back.

"Ben just called and told me you were in town, I'm glad."

"Yup," Cal tried to decide what was different about her. She was thinner and her hair was short and dyed black. She looked brittle in the face with a purple hue around the eyes.

"Well," she laughed. "Let's have a drink. I manage this place now. Did Ben tell you?"

"Yes." He was going to start telling her about his trip from California but caught himself.

"You and Rick always hated this place so much, more than anyone I think."

"There were a lot of things one could rightfully hate."

"Probably still are I'm sure," she laughed.

Cal followed Dana to the back of the bar to an empty table with an adding machine and stacks of rung up checks.

"I was taking a break from tallying up these and I saw you out there looking in. What brings you back to Aspen, Cal?"

"He stared blankly at her and could see that she was scared. He wondered whether it was bad to sleep with your brother's widow.

"I guess just for the drive," Cal offered.

She looked relieved and he told himself not to be an asshole.

"You and Rick used to enjoy those trips so much. Rick would tell me how you gave him historical and geological lectures while you drove."

"Sure."

"Ben said you were up on the Castle chutes today,"

her voice cracked and she looked surprised to have said it.

"Yup."

"How was it Cal?"

"I don't know why I dragged him out there. I'm just a groping pig."

She looked away. "I used to drive up Castle Creek road and hike up in there. Not for a couple years now though."

It wasn't until he started talking and telling her of the years of really doing nothing, of the few jobs, a few schools, of the daily bike ride, joint and six pack that he realized how bad it had been. Dana ordered him a scotch. He wanted feel like he used to on the night after a heavy snowfall but he only remembered that it was good.

"Why were you not here when I buried Rick?" Dana's voice changed and broke through their lost dreary conversation.

"I didn't know until it was too late," Cal spoke the lie aggressively. When he lied he was forever defending the point in memory until in his heart he knew it was as good as true. Dana looked doubtfully at his drink. A waiter came and asked Dana to approve someones credit. He waited a few minutes, then finished his drink and walked out.

Cal walked back to the wagon thinking how no one would know that he was driving back to Sacramento. The snow was coming down in big flakes with the wind.

Near Home

Lake Charles lay flat and sweltering below the wing in the dusk. He'd drunk enough old scotch that he no longer clung to the armrest, but glared out over the soft green city with confidence. Rawson had a lot of problems, of that one fact he was sure, but he felt a new resolve. He'd come south to start his first job in years, and also to attend a family reunion, which in itself amazed him. Somewhere below lay family never met, future business partners, and the opportunity to resurrect his life in the presence of people who hadn't been privy to its deterioration.

Connecticut was shot for him. Friends urged him to leave before he drank and snorted himself to death. For his part he'd lived in perpetual fear for years, at least that's the part he remembered most clearly. Rawson was nervous about working again anxious about dealing

with relatives, but he felt happy and tried not to think about the bottom falling out. He was glad to have moved from autumn back to summer. The trees below were still green although they had that dying look before the fall colors come.

Lake Charles was the home of the old southern wealth, or so his mother thought and told him at La Guardia. She read books about the secret aristocracy in America and knew these things. She'd grown up a hundred miles north of Lake Charles, and had once done a genealogy project on the city's oldest families. Rawson scorned her hobby, feeling that her intense interest in old money was sad.

It was not without kindness that his mother had sent him to Louisiana. She'd given him five hundred dollars and told him that his uncle had promised to take care of his hotel and food until he was settled and had his first paycheck. Rawson knew his mother was torn about encouraging him to go away, and if there had been an inkling of hope that he might break out of his rut she'd never have mentioned Louisiana.

Rawson had never met Lester, but his mother told him his uncle was an odd fellow much like himself. A man who'd been shunned by his relations for years, but now ran the family lumber business with tremendous success. Somehow Rawson felt, although he understood it to be

ridiculous, that by his wits he was destined to help the Gulf Pine Timber Company immensely. He was family after all, and his grandfather had founded the company that Lester now ran. Gulf Pine Timber had always sat like a prized trump card for Rawson to fall back on, although his mother had scorned the idea of his going to work for her brother.

Rawson loitered around the airport for an hour before calling Lester. The phone rang twice before Lester was on the other end drawling out a big welcome and apologizing for not meeting him at the airport, but saying that a great week, and maybe a great life, lay ahead for Rawson in Louisiana. Rawson nodded and occasionally said yes or thank you. Lester told him to sit in the bar and put a buzz on and he'd be down in a couple hours.

Rawson had never liked meeting family, but lately it was worse. Explaining his unemployment, lack of a degree, and how he managed to fill his days was an increasingly humiliating experience. It had been ten years since he left college and he'd never been comfortable with himself or what people thought of him. He'd listened in horror as his mother coldly informed her brother Lester over the phone that the family timber company was lucky to be getting Rawson and since she'd never asked the family for anything, her son better be

treated well. She'd be angry Lester didn't meet me, Rawson thought, but he was actually relieved as he headed for the airport bar.

Rawson leaned against a lightpole, watching thousands of moths and bugs swirl overhead until Lester pulled up in a brown Jaguar. He'd never met Lester; his mother kept no pictures of him as far as he knew, but he was stunned by the strong resemblance not only to his mother but to himself. He picked up his suitcase and walked toward Lester, who waited by the open trunk.

"Well, we finally meet, Rawson. I'm glad."

"Thanks. I'm glad to be here," Rawson said, shaking his uncle's hand.

"How was your flight? I'm sorry I wasn't able to get down to meet you on time."

"That's no problem," Rawson said.

"How's your mother doing, Rawson?"

"Oh, she's all right."

"Keeping busy?"

"She's got her friends and organizations. She's all right."

"That's good," Lester said slowly.

"Yes."

"Well let's get a move on. Might as well get home and get you settled. Your mother asked me to get you a hotel room so you could have your privacy, but I thought

maybe you'd like to get to know the family, so I made up your mom's old room for you. I hope that's okay."

"That's fine," Rawson said. He'd heard his mother telling Lester she didn't want Rawson pressured into living with the family. Although it had embarrassed him, he had wished to have a hotel room to himself.

They drove with the windows down and Rawson could hear the rhythmic racket of insects in the woods along the side of the road.

"I never understood why she left. She was my favorite sister," he paused, "I had to leave for a while too, though, soon after she did."

"She talks about old times and your parents sometimes."

"I haven't been a good brother to Martha. Christ, I haven't. I haven't seen her since Mom's funeral."

"Families can get strange that way," Rawson offered.

"Yes, they can. Maybe we're both at fault."

"Well, mom's fine, so don't worry," Rawson said.

"Well, we're just going to have to show you everything she left behind."

"Good. I like it already."

Rawson stared out the window while the moss-draped trees blurred past. He was tired and drunk. So far Lester didn't seem too obnoxious. He was a small man with a large balding head and blue eyes. He wore khaki

pants and a polo shirt, and Rawson could smell cologne.

"Your mother says you're drifting son. I can be straight with you now, can't I?"

"Drifting...I guess that's what I've been doing." Rawson said.

"Nothing wrong about that. I drifted myself. It takes longer these days to find yourself. To find a women, a job, just some place, and then resign yourself to it all."

"Sounds horrible," Rawson said.

Lester laughed. "You sound like I used to. I felt the same way."

Rawson wasn't sure about that, but he smiled and nodded out the window.

"Maybe you'll find your niche down here, Rawson."

"I hope so."

At Moss Bluff Lester pulled off the highway to buy a six pack. Rawson got out of the car and looked for at the woods, felt the warm wind, and it was like he'd always expected. He watched Lester buy the beer and talk to the clerk through a screen door. Rawson thought it was a good place to stop. He liked the log store with a stuffed bear next to the register and an old Squirt soda sign over the door. Lester came out the door smiling. Back in the car he said, "I always get myself a buzz from here on. I know the road from here up home

like the palm of my hand, I do. Every fucking turn the next eighty miles of forest and swamp."

"That's good," Rawson said.

"You bet it's good. I get a feeling," Lester thumped his chest hard twice. "I get a real feeling on this road."

"I wish it were day so I could see more."

Lester laughed. "It's pretty, but it's all the same."

They drank the beer and Lester drove faster as if to prove he really did know every turn to De Ridder. Rawson found it difficult to talk. Lester was twice his age but appeared quite young and fit. In the morning he'd start trying to lose weight and get in shape again. He'd told himself that for years, but in a new place it might work, he thought. He fell asleep drooling against the window, waking once to feel Lester's hand resting half on his shoulder and half on the back of the seat. He jerked and the hand went away.

The Battin family reunion traditionally took place on the banks of the Sabine river, where Rawson's grandfather cut the first square of timber for the mill. A few tall pines had grown since, but for the most part the land was barren but for high tan grass. Along the shore was a cinderblock barbecue pit, a paved boat ramp and a portable toilet Lester had brought in for the

occasion.

Rawson helped putting up an awning between four small trees. He'd met young Less and another cousin, Roger, who were probably in their early twenties. They'd scurried up the trees and Rawson had handed up the corners of the tarp. They seemed as friendly as he wanted them to be for now. When the tarp was up Lester told Rawson to go out and direct the parking of cars.

Keeping the cars in orderly lines proved difficult for Rawson and the hordes of relatives who drove up the dirt road. He had an idea of what he wanted them to do, but soon the open space had cars everywhere and at all angles. They got out of their cars carrying generators, coolers, sports equipment and called to one another as they walked down to the river. After a half hour he gave up and went to stand next to the kegs.

Rawson talked to a few people and introduced himself to several relatives who said they remembered his mother and how was she. He was into his fourth beer when he noticed that a group of old folks in wheelchairs had congregated under the tarp and that they seemed to be talking about him. He looked away and had almost forgotten them when one of them began to holler and moan. One of the elderly women was struggling to get out of her chair and was swatting at herself while some of the others screamed "ants, ants." He ran over when

others seemed slow to move in assistance.

She was red in the face and tears were pouring down over the wrinkled flesh. He could see red ants swarming on her legs. Rawson picked up her feet and brushed the ants from her legs. She was beginning to calm down when she stared hard at him, falling completely silent for a moment before gasping coldly, "Get him away from me." A hand fell on his shoulder and Lester walked him through a circle of mumbling relatives and back to the kegs.

"She's just a nasty woman," Lester said quietly.

"Christ, I heard her hollering, I thought I'd help."

"No matter, forget it."

"Who is she?"

"She's our aunt Meg. I doubt Martha ever mentioned her; she's never been very pleasant, Rawson. She's old, you probably won't see her again."

"I didn't say I wanted her dead, Christ. I just asked who she was."

"Forget it, I'll spray the ground and get rid of the ants."

Rawson watched Lester walk toward his Cadillac, which was now completely boxed in. He returned wearing a hooded gas mask and a yellow tank on his back. He blasted the ground under the tarp with a thick white cloud of pesticide while the barbecue went on. The old folks sat in a row of wheelchairs staring coldly at the

figure moving around in the white cloud. Rawson recognized the smell from somewhere and the metallic taste in his mouth. When Lester was finished the wheelchairs moved back under the tarp and out of the sun.

"I don't know if that kills ants or not," Lester said walking up to Rawson. "We sell it at the lumber yard for the roaches, but I suppose it should get to them ants, too?"

"Oh, yah," Rawson offered.

"Hey, Roger and little Less are taking the boat up the river for some skiing. You should go along."

"Great," Rawson said, feeling he'd seen enough of the reunion for now.

They rounded a bend and the river vanished into miles of thinly wooded swamp. Seventy feet behind the whining boat Rawson clung with cramped hands on the rope. The sun was setting and the towering clouds were rimmed with gold. He no longer drifted outside the wake for fear of getting into shallows or striking a stump. And then he knew he'd fall. His hands could no longer move to adjust his grip. He couldn't pull the tether close and he was beginning to bend over.

The water was warm and dark. He held his head as he tumbled, but the water was deep and he struck nothing.

When he came up the boat was still moving away at the same steady speed and in a moment they were gone from sight and all he could hear was the whine of the outboard. When the noise was gone too, he began to look around. For as far as he could see in all directions there was the grey calm water of the great swamp. Overhead, towering southern clouds moved east in rows. He saw no dock, cabin, or solid land anywhere. He hated the Battins for this prank, but he felt certain they'd be back quickly. He shouldn't have told them he hated snakes. That was a definite mistake, he thought. He heard the wake slapping at the dead trees, and then that was gone too.

Ten minutes passed before he heard the whine coming closer again. They idled toward him and Roger threw him the tether. Rawson hadn't really considered the possibility of more skiing, but anything was preferable to sitting in the warm still water. When he was up behind the speeding boat he noticed leeches on his legs and stomach. After a few minutes the Battin boys cut the throttle and came around and picked him up. They were smiling.

"Time for a beer, cousin?"

"Get these damn leeches off Me!" Rawson said as he pulled himself up the tiny ladder and over the transom.

"Sorry we weren't so alert back there. I turned

around and this asshole was just sunning himself and guzzling," Roger told him.

"I'm glad you came back," Rawson said.

"Shit, look at them leeches, fucking A."

Roger got up and blew the ash off his cigarette. "Hold still and I'll get them fuckers off you."

Rawson felt the leech move as the coal burned it, and the smell he remembered from unfortunate insects under his magnifying glass. When they detached he had four bright red welts. He thanked Roger, who shook his head.

"I hate fucking leeches," young Less said, handing Rawson a beer.

"So do I," Rawson said. "I'm glad I didn't meet up with any snakes."

"They're around, that's for sure," Jiff said.

Rawson sat back and watched the swamp peel past. He was tired. His forearms felt like clubs, the muscles hard and unresponsive. His legs bounced like sewing machine needles. The Battin boys seemed less hostile after his stint on the end of the rope. Occasionally one would point at an alligator or a heron. They passed a joint around, and when Rawson took a few heavy tokes they seemed to warm even more. They were younger than he was by at least five years. They were all still in good shape and Rawson felt self-conscious about his soft pale belly and hanging kidneys. But he felt confident for

having stayed up behind the boat for so long, and now he would impress them with his capacity for partying.

Roger killed the engine and the boat coasted to a stop. The stern wake slashed up behind the transom. Rawson watched Roger pull out a couple rods and a bait box. He twisted pork rinds over a large hook.

"Try your luck with that, Rawson. There's a deep hole right here and we get big gar sometimes."

"What's a gar?"

"Alligator gar, like a mean northern pike and a barracuda combined only they like swamps. They'll bite at anything, actually. They're junk fish, but they fight like hell."

"D'you eat them ever?" Rawson asked.

Roger looked at Less and laughed. "Niggers will eat them, but they stay out of the swamp."

"Fuck that, I saw one grinning all teeth, cruising around in a prime bass boat just last week," young Less said.

Roger turned on a variety of electronic gear and stared with a puzzled expression at various lumps of color but never got too excited.

"Coldest water in fifty miles right here in this spot," Roger said. He was pointing at the multi-colored temperature gauge and a thin patch of blue below wide layers of green, yellow and red. Rawson nodded. He could

see down thirty feet to a small sandy bottom area surrounded by shadows. He doubted the water was very cold but he could see that there was a current here.

Rawson let the bait down slowly so that it passed over the sandy spot and rode with the current into the shadows. He watched the filtered shafts of light below the water with particles of vegetation slowly moving through. He let the line out, feeling the light sinker bounce occasionally along the bottom, and then slowly reeled it back so that the rind again passed over the sand spot, then let it back out into the shadows.

He sipped his beer, feeling the muscles in his shoulders relax after the skiing. He felt friendlier towards his cousins despite their marooning him. There was thud on the end of his line, and he was listening to the reel as it whined out and the shouts of his cousins. The gar tore across the sand spot and Rawson saw his flank flash a silver green.

"Heavy sucker down there," Roger said.

"The rod's bent nearly double," Rawson gasped.

"Yup, but she'll never break."

Just then the fish slowed and turned and Rawson pulled back on the rod and reeled in ten cranks.

"It's not over, they're like eels, they fight forever and when they see the boat they go nuts," young Less said in Rawson's ear.

But the fish was weakened now and Rawson knew he'd given everything in the first minute and now he was finished. The fish came to the surface and wriggled and jumped about before Roger netted him. He held him before Rawson and pointed at the rows of large sharp teeth.

"Ugly," Rawson said. The gar was two feet long and probably weighed eight pounds. Roger cut the line rather than fool with the hook and chucked the fish over the side. Rawson watched him move sluggishly at first and begin to sink, but then he moved more efficiently and darted out of sight into the shadows. He thought of the gar carrying that hook around for ever.

Doctor Island was a small lump of dry ground with towering trees and an old red house. The windows were broken and junk lay strewn in the dead leaves below the trees. A dilapidated thin dock extended twenty yards from shore. They tied the ski boat to a rotten piling.

"This place gives me the creeps," Roger said.

"You're not going to believe some of the stuff still here, Rawson," little Less said.

"Who lives out here?" Rawson said.

"The doctor used to," Roger said.

Less laughed. "Old Doctor Stubbs, he died about ten years ago. He wasn't much of a doctor but he got an island named after him."

"He kept a lot of strange things in jars. Still some around last time I was out here. That was last summer, I guess," Roger said.

The sun streamed down in cones through the clouds. He followed Roger into the cottage. Rawson stayed near the windows and stood in the pools of sunlight. Little Less examined a row of large jars and picked one up gingerly. In the fading light the babies were a yellow green color. They had troubled little faces. The thick pickle jar was only three quarters full and Rawson tilted it so that the tiny head struck the glass with a gentle thud. Some of the formaldehyde leaked out on Rawson's hand and he felt the cool as it evaporated. He put the pickle jar down. He felt a wave of nausea. They were fairly far along in development, but he didn't comment on it to the Battin boys. Young Less said they were black babies but Rawson wasn't sure you could tell a white fetus from a black one after years in formaldehyde. In another jar two cottonmouths had been horribly fitted together, each with gleaming fangs buried deep in the back of the other, the tails half swallowed. Rawson walked back out of the cottage and waited for his cousins. He felt dirty for looking at the jars, as if he'd paid to see a freak show, and he wondered what young Less and Roger thought of the island.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Rawson yelled. He

was surprised at the annoyance in his voice. The others two came out shaking their heads in disgust.

"Let's get back to the barbecue," Roger said. He looked at the sky and laughed. "I bet it's raining on them back there right now."

Rawson looked toward the south and saw a thick black cloud trailing veils of rain. He thought of the extended family huddled together under the tarp with the rain boiling on the red dirt.

When they returned to the barbecue many of the guests were gone, but the noise was louder. The two portable generators droned, the big television boomed the summer Olympics, and the stereo played old Rolling Stones. As the boat idled out of the dark he saw that the wheelchairs were gone, along with all the little kids. When they got closer he saw that all the women were gone too. Lester came down the bank with a big stoogie hanging wet from his mouth. "You aren't sober enough to be out in the dark!" Lester yelled. "Get in here!"

"Get the in the water," Roger yelled back, then quietly, "and I'll run over your ugly head."

Rawson shook Lester's hand watching him smile drunkenly over his shoulder at the cousins tying up the boat.

"How far did you get?" Less asked Roger.

"We did some fishing at the sandhole."

"I thought I told you to give your cousin a real tour."

"He saw enough," Roger said.

"We went to Doctor's Island," Rawson said.

Lester's face softened. "That's pretty far. I gave Roger ten bucks for gas, so's he wouldn't be cheap with his cousin down here and all."

"It's too dark to see anything now, anyway," Rawson said.

He walked down the dock with Lester, telling him about the fish he'd caught. Rawson felt a good soreness from the exercise and he felt a new balance, and a quick strength in his legs that he'd forgotten. He stayed and drank with his cousins until everyone had left but Lester.

"I'm going to start you out in New Orleans working at one of the yards, Rawson."

"Not around here?"

"Sales is where you make a move, Rawson, and you need the big market to move fast."

"Okay." He hadn't thought of sales or New Orleans, but hoped Lester was doing him a favor.

"Good night, Rawson. I'm glad you're going to be taking your place in this family," Lester smiled.

"Good night, Lester."

The sky was turning a pale grey in the east. Rawson

sat on his mother's bed staring out over the garden. He listened to the last of the crickets and the first birds of dawn, and thought of how many times the sun rose on this empty room.

Warehouse Furlough

Mr. Ho flashed his craziest face, told the black man he hadn't killed anyone in fifteen years, then turned and went back into his plywood cubical office. Rawson looked worriedly at Jerome for a moment before following Ho into the office. The warehouse manager sat with his feet up on his desk, nervously rubbing the special forces tattoo on his forearm. He glanced crossly at Rawson as he passed behind him. Rawson sat down on a cinder block and began reading the sports page.

"You'll get nowhere befriending him," Ho said.

"He's not my friend," Rawson sighed, watching Ho spin a screwdriver on the desk.

"You think I'm too stupid to know how you think?"

"No, I'm just trying to get along."

"You don't understand, this warehouse isn't jail, it's not school. You don't have to get along with everyone to protect your ass."

"I know, but I ran over the nail, that's why the forklift has a flat."

"Jerome's supposed to have the yard swept. That's his only job. He's a sweeper, and nails are what he's supposed to find. I've had six flats and the year's not even over. Those tires run three hundred dollars now. Did you know that?"

"Jerome's a good worker, you didn't have to lay into him. We've got two forklifts anyway," Rawson said. The words were out before he considered whom he was addressing. The chair flew backwards across the office and Ho leapt up, throwing the screwdriver into a cardboard box outside the office. Rawson saw it go in, quiver, and fall back out onto the cement floor. Thirty years of army hung with Ho and he didn't take advice. He'd seen Ho throw the screwdriver almost every day for a month now.

"He's trouble for me and nothing more. I've tried with him, with all of them, and it's not worth it."

Rawson kept quiet. Ho was cooling down. Throwing the screwdriver always took something out of him, but Rawson knew it was time to choose words carefully. He kept reading the box scores, and after a minute of pacing about Ho sat back at his desk and said bitterly, "It's the heat."

"I can't believe it's October and still near a

hundred," Rawson said, offered sensing Ho was ready to forget.

"Tell your uncle I want an air conditioner in this office, and that the work furlough program is fucked."

"I'll tell him," Rawson said absently. Ho repeated this nearly every day.

"He won't listen to you."

"Probably not." Rawson had no intention of saying anything to his uncle anyway. His uncle Lester owned Gulf Pine Timber, and although Rawson had known him only six weeks, he already knew he wouldn't listen, particularly about the county work furlough program. Uncle Lester thought himself a progressive man, and wanted to change things. He drove a Jaguar with "Solidarity" and "Anti-Apartheid" stickers on the bumper. He sent memos to the furlough workers encouraging them to finish high school at night, so that they might be hired full-time once their ten week period at Gulf Pine was up. Lester split their wages with the employment development office, and took a big tax write-off for participating in the program.

"Your Uncle's a good man, but he doesn't understand how worthless these furloughs are."

"Maybe, but Jerome's all right. You're wrong about him."

"He's on drugs."

"Everyone is," Rawson blurted, knowing it was a mistake. He'd already had a few lectures about drugs from Ho. With a swirling motion of his short muscular arm and a great exhaled breath, Ho depicted the evaporating mind of the dope smoker disappearing into space.

They would take their afternoon nap now. Rawson took off his shirt and lay down on the smooth cement floor. The polished cement stayed cooler than anything else in the warehouse. The humidity still sapped his strength and he was glad Ho allowed for a rest in the afternoon. They'd take turns getting up to load customers' cars when the intercom cracked.

Rawson felt bad for Jerome. Ho was hard on everybody, but Rawson saw that Jerome took it poorly, and he worried. The look on Jerome's face while Ho screamed had been of utter incomprehension. He'd looked at Rawson the whole time, and when it was over, for a moment, there'd been no expression on his face at all.

Rawson was tired, but after ten minutes he got up and walked around the warehouse. The Metairie store was the flagship of Gulf Pine Timber. The warehouse by itself could house two football fields and the yard was bigger yet. He enjoyed walking amongst the pallets of neatly stacked bags of Portland cement, fertilizer, lumber and PVC pipe. He went behind the long row of stacked

paneling at the back of the warehouse and called Jerome's name. The long narrow cavern had become the resting area for the furloughs. He stumbled over a couple pints of brandy and heard an annoyed voice ahead in the dark say, "He's not back here."

Rawson retreated from behind the paneling and went out into the yard. The autumn sun sent shimmers of heat off the asphalt yard area. He examined the ripped forklift tire. Rawson hoped the new tire would arrive before Lester saw the forklift marooned and tilting.

Rawson had rounded the end of a long line of stacked lumber and run over a pile of scrap wood he'd been saving. Rawson remembered the nail ridden studs, but it'd been too late--the fork lift bounced once and the air left the tire with a bang that made his heart lurch. He'd driven the forklift far enough so that Ho couldn't see the collapsed pile of two by eight-fourteeners he'd swiped with the forks while trying to gain control of the forklift. Rawson reframed the stack of lumber quickly. Keeping the lumber framed was Rawson's daily project.

Back in the warehouse he heard a crackle, and Jill, her voice as seductive as one can sound through a distorted intercom, asked that a cabinet sink unit be brought to the service door. Usually Rawson and Ho fought jokingly over who got to bring merchandise out

for Jill. Ho seemed more impressed with Jill than Rawson thought reasonable. Ho would take what ever she asked for to the service door, tell her a nasty joke, then report back to Rawson on how she was looking. Ho talked pussy and Rawson tried to avoid his eyes.

Rawson drove the new forklift up to the edge of a thirty-foot-tall scaffolding of shelves stacked with tubs, shower units, range tops and other fixtures. He looked toward the office but Ho hadn't moved. His feet were just showing on the desk through the plexiglass office window.

Jerome shuffled up sullenly. Ho didn't allow any of the furloughs near the forklift or anything else he thought they could damage. Jerome wore army fatigues and a loose sweat shirt. He looked at Rawson, shook his head awkwardly and smiled at his feet.

"We need an American Standard cabinet sink, number 30A," Rawson said slowly. He waved Jerome to get on the pallet.

"Okay," Jerome said, his face taut. He stepped on gingerly, spreading his legs so that his feet were over the forks. Rawson lifted him up to the top level of the scaffolding shelves, then watched him disappear out of sight.

"You can't expect a sink to slide by itself onto the pallet," Ho yelled, limping toward Rawson. Ho had taken

shrapnel in the leg in Viet Nam. Rawson tried to imagine how it might have happened, when he saw the limp. Rawson lowered the forks, got off the forklift and climbed onto the pallet. Ho smiled oddly and made the swirling motion with his hand.

"Who's going to help you? How do you plan to get up there?"

Rawson, wanting to save Jerome from Ho's wrath, shrugged as Ho shifted and started lifting him. He found Jerome leaning against the sink shaking his head and smiling.

"I can't believe I'm hiding," Jerome said.

"Ho sucks," Rawson offered.

Rawson pushed the sink to the edge of the scaffolding and carefully lowered it onto the pallet then stepped back.

"Get on," Ho called up in annoyance.

"Not enough room," Rawson returned. He could have stood on the edge, but it was a long drop and he wasn't sure what to do about Jerome. Ho backed away from the scaffolding jerkily and let the pallet down fast. He started to take the sink away on a dolly, then looked up at Rawson and said, "Climb down."

"Come on," Rawson laughed.

"You're not a man yet," Ho said, and headed out to the service door.

Climbing down certainly was possible if one was willing to take some splinters shinning down thirty feet of studs. At the opposite end of the scaffolding Ho had pounded steps into the studs, but that route was blocked by a wall of bathtubs stacked almost to the front edge of the scaffolding. Rawson looked at the four-inch-wide ledge that stretched twelve feet and lost his nerve. It was farther than he could go in three steps and he'd have nothing to hold onto in the middle.

"I'll shinny down and get the lift up before Ho's back," Rawson said.

Jerome shook his head in disbelief. Rawson figured nearly everything was bullshit to Jerome, and he was sure this scenario fit into the bullshit category.

Halfway down Rawson looked up and saw Jerome moving gracefully along the four inches of ledge, his feet hanging far over the edge. His back arched and arms spread against the stacks of cardboard boxed tubs, he'd almost made it across when he seemed to sag. Rawson saw the fear grab Jerome's face and his eyes flash down for a moment as his hands fought to get a hold between boxes. He was still for a moment, a quick step, then another, and he stood on the other side bent over and panting.

"Jesus, Jerome," Rawson gasped when he was down.

Rawson watched Jerome climbing down and heard Ho

limping toward them. The three of them stood next to the forklift, while Ho complained about nails and the heat.

"She's wearing one of those shiny tight tops, a red and orange striped one," Ho said.

"She's ugly," Jerome said.

"Who's ugly?" Ho said in disbelief.

"That service bitch on the speaker."

"Why aren't you sleeping behind the paneling, with the other furloughs," Ho said, checking his twirling arm thing, and heading back to the office. Halfway across the warehouse he yelled back, "Go out and frame piles, Jerome."

Jerome headed out to the yard without a word. The grey metal door swung out into the sun and banged closed. Rawson went back into the office, pulled off his shirt and lay down. Ho sat hunched over his desk thumbing through Lenox's air conditioner catalogue. He glanced at Rawson on the floor and said in disgust, "You're fat."

"Gosh, thank you," Rawson laughed, rubbing his hand across his chest and stomach.

"You're too young to look like that," Ho said seriously.

"Go to hell."

"Don't talk that way to me. I'm the manager, and I don't give a damn about your uncle."

"Fine."

Rawson lay on the floor, feeling his lower back dip against the cool cement with each breath. He thought of what might of happened if Jerome had not made those quick steps. He tried to imagine the noise it might have made. That was crazy, he thought. He watched a bug crawl slowly across the ceiling toward a hundred watt bulb.

"Go help Jerome frame the stacks, he's never done it before, and you need exercise, Rawson."

Rawson got up slowly, letting out a moan. Ho stared back at him with a puzzled expression. Little beads of sweat formed the outline of his back on the cement where he'd been resting. He pulled on his shirt and started for the door.

"He'd make a good soldier," Ho said absently as if to himself.

"Who?"

"Jerome, once he knew where he stood."

Rawson went out of the office. He picked up Ho's screwdriver and shoved it in his pocket. Outside he noticed that the angle of the sun had changed quickly over the last few days. Overhead towering southern clouds drifted slowly east. I bet it rains tonight, he thought. Rawson walked to the edge of the yard and sat down against the fence beside Jerome.