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### Along the Focal Length

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ALONG THE FOCAL LENGTH

By

Marshall Gaddis

B.A., University of Iowa, 1967

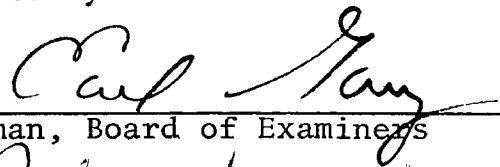
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LOVESONG

*"I'm sorry, sir, but the massage does come first, you know." -- Anon.*

*"Always the massage comes first." -- Anon.*

Up on the bandstand Dudley didn't notice how much the place was filling up until the music stopped echoing off the walls and coming back to him. Too many goddamn people with their shapeless peoplinoises, all interfering with his own good sound.

That bunch down front in particular: nastylooking around a dull aluminum beerkeg in a shiny brand new galvanized steel outdoor trashcan. Couldn't swill enough out of bottles like everybody else; had to have a keg to themselves. By closing he'd have to protect his amp and guitar from a bunch of drunken gasstation attendants and apprentice washingmachine repairmen.

Some sort of leader standing up on the table next to the keg: "Somebody go get me some more water. This here's a firehouse ain't it; find where they keep their water for puttin out fires with."

Five minutes later one of them came back across the dancefloor swinging two fivegallon red gascans in rhythm to the music. Polished red steel reflecting the toobright ceiling lights in regular flashes.

An air of ceremony in the way those around the table moved now, eyes fixed on the preparation of the tap.

Accurately blocking out the chords of one more over-simple song, Dudley watched the one on top pour the water into the trash-can. Eager hands from the crowd reaching up to help. Or maybe just reaching for the lone figure working busily by himself. Supplication perhaps. His garments. Or maybe exaltation without purpose. Or crap, pure crap. Just reaching up to take part in a oneman job where they weren't needed.

The first can was emptied and given to the highest hand. That was all it'd been. The other hands dropped. Just that one left holding the single red oblong at the height of the kegstraddler on the table and Dudley on the bandstand. Then the can went up: a high bright arc flashing red as it turned near the fluorescence of the ceiling. Firetrucks. Out of the way; hurry. But silence, no siren. The can hit the dancefloor, dented with the sound of suddenly indrawn metallic breath, flipped over. One couple sidestepped, danced a few more steps, left the floor.

Clumsy -- crude, clumsy bastards: denting wellfinished metal just because they didn't need it any longer for their sick little purposes. Puny. No need.

Yeah, and they were louder and happier now, working the second can. Water level higher now, floating the ice up near the top.

Greatest possible contact between cool and keg. All right, maybe they were one step above total stupidity. Not far enough away to make any difference to him.

The second gascan was handed down, still heavy. It was carried to the end of the table and left on its side with the open end pointing to the dancefloor. Water gouting out, fanning out, and people moving away, moving off the floor. A few angry voices sounding pretty tentative. Many others wild and joyous and sure. And stupid.

Cops? One way over there, another even farther out, two at the door -- all with folded arms. Everybody else was staring at the large idiot on top of the table too, even the band. Dudley kept his music coming steady, but the others were botching their respective parts. They would. Any excuse would do.

Black hair swinging now as the head bent over the keg to inspect the threading of the sleeve around the plunger. Now standing up, finished. A bit of a pause; everything ready now except something.

The song ended and the big figure straddled the keg. The long body bowed, tensed. Why? It was only a small job. Oh -- still not tapping it yet; something else to do first. Black hairs sprouting from the backs of the hands which worked the weight of the can toward the table's edge.

Another song, no more interesting than the ones they'd done so far or the ones they'd do later.

The keg was at the edge. The redfaced figure turned the spigot outward toward the wetness of the floor. No dancers now. The spigot branched from near the top of a threefoot plunger the length of the keg. Three feet of well-cooled beer. He raised both hands above his head, up toward the fluorescent ceiling. Supplication or exaltation. Everybody watching. Then he turned around, faced the stage. Palms inward, then forward -- reaching out to stifle the music.

The lead stopped playing right away. The piano saw a rare chance for a solo, picked it up, screwed it up, dwindled. Two beats later the drums stopped. The bass flourished through a little bit of triteness he practiced all the time but never got to use on the job.

Nobody left but him, and he wasn't about to stop no matter what the rest of them did. Why should he have to quit what he was doing just because of an ugly bunch of smalltown hoodlums? Complete silence now except for him. They could damn well wait till he was ready. And as long as he was the only one doing anything he'd drop the song and do something worthwhile. Right away quick without a break into the music the situation demanded: fast rich chords slowly descending -- a song made out of a run instead of a toolimiting progression or melody. He'd be done when he felt done.

A shout: "Hey you, shut that music off."

Not till he was done.

A roar: "Stop the mothergrabbin music. Right now. Apple."



Frozen pose with arms held high.

It was getting complicated, the rhythm as well as the chords. It was all he could do to keep up, and he almost hoped it would reach its finish soon.

The noise stopped him: too many people yelling at him. No way he could get the complex music coming to him all the way through himself and his guitar and amp accurately; just couldn't keep up. But even if they did ruin his song, he'd still be damned if he'd stop. They'd have to be silent for him, not the other way around.

The microphone. Strumming perfectly rhythmic cacophonous open-string chords he pulled the mike cord out of the p.a., jacked it into the vacant channel of his own amp, pulled the mike stand over and lay it on the floor in front of his amplifier. A chrome steel rod the length of two beer plungers at his feet, pointing from his powerful vacuumtubes toward the man and the keg. Still strumming, he reached lefthanded for the channel two volume control and said, "Keep those hands up." Strictly supplication. A simple twist of the wrist: all the way. The high shrilling squaling screaming tone of feedback took his words, took over. His own hands were above his head now, letting the guitar hang lownecked. Exaltation. He and his amp together could shut up anybody. His words picked up by the microphone, sent to the tubes, amplified, pushed out the speaker and

and into the microphone again . . . a cycle of "keep those hands up" uninterrupted until it reached the level of pure singletoned noise demanding attention, obedience, make them sorry they stopped his song.

Dudley turned the volume down, pulled the cord, replaced the microphone. Silence in the big cinderblocked hall except for traces of wallecho. Everybody watching him, naturally, watching the winner, king of the mountain, only one left standing.

Over on the table a slight movement -- a bow. "Thank you. And now that I have your attention . . ." The still uplifted arms came down slowly. A twitch of one hand and movement on the bench: a figure rose from the group. Small, dark hair, well put together, blank look: not bad. She moved to the end of the table and stood below the tall figure, her back to the dancefloor. Glistening with sweat, she faced the can glistening with water and melted ice. Still no expression. Still silence.

Both figures remained frozen. Finally the long arms went to the plunger, both hands somehow finding a way to fit on the blackball that topped the shaft. Some sort of signal maybe because it raised curious rhythmic phrases from the table.

"Stand right on up to it --"

"On home, man, get it on home --"

"Softspot on baby's head --"

"Yeah, just tighten on up --"

"Right now apple --"

"Fastest crab in the --"

A strong sudden motion. The man brought down his arms, sunk to his knees, put the full force of his body behind it. The plunger was driven its full length through the keg. The girl swung her head to the spigot. Snakestrike. Foam jumped, roiled out. Had she caught it all? Had she caught it all? No, some white flecks in her dark hair. Now she was directly under the spigot, jaw drapped, eyes staring, neck arched and long. Working to down it all. Fantastic gulps managing to keep up with the pressure of the activated foam. Gobbling so only traces bubbled out the corners of her mouth.

Shouts and cheers: encouragement, admiration. She was beautiful. Long taut neck with the strong rhythmic motion in her throat. Sightless eyes bulging slightly. Beautiful. Tranced face flushing from fastcirculating blood. Beautiful.

The backarched stance straightened in degrees as the foam slowed. Then she was still. A motionless dazed moment until she raised her arm, wiped it across her mouth, moved it up in front of her eyes to inspect the back of her hand for trace, then lifted it over her head in victorysign. The man on top of the table reached, grasped it, jumped to the floor. Cheering, shouting. Papercups held to the keg. Exaltation.

"Somebody crank the music back up. Get those sounds going again."

Dudley stepped back to his amplifier and readjusted the volume. A trial chord to see if the speakercone or voicecoil had suffered: nothing noticeable.

The band went into something ordinary. Wouldn't do; not after all that. Had to be a song for the lady. Had to be a song for the beautiful lady, and it was coming to him. With both hands on the guitar this time, he scuffed his amp along the floor with his foot, away from the rest of the band till he'd gone as far as the power-cord would allow. With a shoetip he tweaked the volume up a little bit so he wouldn't hear any music but his own. He sat on top of the amp so the sounds would come in not only through his ears but also through his ass; from there they'd be conducted by his skeletal system up through the jawbone and skull to the small articulated bones of the inner ear. Those primitives might have a rare flash from a revolving red can, they might have a bit of steel and some dull aluminum, they might have her, but he had so much more and he could do so much more with it, and by God before the night was over he'd have her too. For himself. The song was coming now from wherever music started. It was winding through his body and his instrument and his equipment and out to her; it was her song, and with her song he'd get her.

It was complex, really complex. He could see the way in, but not much farther. It wasn't going to be easy. A flashing red light was setting up a 4/4 beat for him nice and steady, but there was a strange asymmetric pulshing of the first and second notes of occasional measures. His ear and body fed back the news -- he was doing it all right -- but he still didn't understand why it came when it did, or when it was going to come again.

Chord progression was something else -- much harder to keep up with because where it went depended on the way the chord of the moment sounded. It all came in as something vaguely like sirenrise and sirenfall; it went out as subtle patterns of mostly augmented and diminished chords barely held before they were shifted.

The elements of the song started to steady a bit, giving him a chance to look more closely. There was something like trainapproach back there, a freight with one man to guide it and no passengers. A solitary head cocked to listen to the wheels for the rhythm. Only two legs strongstanced to feel the movement of the cars following each other around a curve, each rocking to the outside to give the whole train a slow writhing motion allowed for in the design of the couplers. And one hand reaching above the head for the whistlecord. The occasional pulshing of the first and second beats grew until it took over the song completely. With one string for each airhorn trumpet, heavy two and threenote chords were soon blasting out and hanging there

in front of all the people. Mostly in front of her. Beautiful.  
A song for the lady. Beautiful. Without having to look down  
from his guitar, Dudley knew that with each chord his tubes pulsed  
a brighter purple.

FALSEHOODS 1-4  
from THE CASE OF THE EIDETIC ENTOMOLOGIST

I like to tell people I was drafted, forced into the war against my will, victim of circumstances, all that -- but of course, I wasn't.

First I'll have to tell you about my short racing career, because that's a basic party of the story. It'll be an almost Herculean task to convince you why a man such as myself, eminent entomologist and at my youthful age already written up in Who's Who and Who's Who in Science both, would ever get involved in motorcycle racing in the first place. It is a long, complex story, so let's just do without it; it's not important really.

I specialized in T.T. scrambles -- fast dirt tracks with lots of twists and jumps and things. I guess the first thing to say is that I never won. The second thing, maybe, is that I almost never finished.

Of course I really didn't want to win.

I suppose that sounds like rationalization. In my case it's not, because I really was more interested in something else -- what you might call the fine art of taking spills with a flair. That's what I

got into the sport for, and that's why I stayed as long as I did.

Only problem is, never did manage to get hurt. Before my class was called I'd sit in the stands somewhere around the bad turns and watch the other riders look good falling off. Next thing you know I'd see them walking cool and slow in front of me with casts or crutches or anyway a limp. You know, an injury is something you can get hold of and enjoy any time you want; you've always got it right there with you. There'll always be a twinge of pain whenever you need something to think about, or maybe don't need something to think about.

It should've been easy, but I never could manage it. No matter how good the catapult from the bike would feel, no matter how convoluted my rotations or how fragile the position I assumed before landing, I'd just scuff my leathers a bit more and make another mark or so on my helmet, get up and walk away and plan for the next time.

But then I killed a man one Sunday, completely unintentionally of course, and that changed everything.

As usual I was pretty far back in the pack -- so I could watch the real action before taking another try in my own personal event. I'd already decided on the hairpin, my usual choice. Even the best riders go down there sometimes when they get too anxious and come into it too fast. I go into it slow and fall looking just like them.



Technique is important of course; halfway through the bend I turn it on way too much. The wheel breaks traction, the bike's already heeled way over so it springs around easily, and I go off the low side very gently. It's plenty close to the ground so there's no unpleasant bouncing and jolting. Just a nice smooth slide that looks real pretty to the grandstand eye.

Only trouble is it can't hurt you. I'd always think about intentionally highsidings, but there's too much risk with something like that. I wouldn't've minded the kind of spill that would give me my limp if it all happened quick like it does to everybody else, but when you're out there planning . . .

As usual I took a look over my shoulder starting into the turn. There's not much going on that far back, but I always try to make sure I'm down in plenty of time for the stragglers and latestarters to get around me without any trouble. Can't be too careful.

It was just one of those ironic things -- if I hadn't been so careful the whole thing might not have happened. That is if you think there's any way at all I could've avoided it, and to this day some few admit it was inevitable.

The way they told me later, up ahead two bikes were struggling hard for position coming out of this hairpin I was talking about. Somehow they bumped and both went down. One was out of the way by the time I saw them -- bike and rider both off the track outside the

turn. But the other -- man and machine both -- were right there in my path. There just wasn't any way by the time I saw them that I was going to miss by much. Some maybe, but not much. I already had a handful of throttle -- if you wait too long in the turn the spill looks phony -- and my cycle was laying way over in a slide. Not a fast slide I'll grant you, but fast enough to make it real hard to change direction.

Both of them were moving as I approached, of course, the rider sliding lengthwise -- a small narrow target -- and the bike bouncing as it went -- a big unpredictable solid target. Now if you were me which one would you take? Be honest -- a lot of people who answer that aren't, and I can always tell. Which one would you give lots of room and which would you try to just clear?

Or let me put it another way. Do you have any idea what would've happened if I'd hit that bike leaning the way I was? My front end would've tried to go up and over and I'd have been launched like a mortarshell.

If I had the whole situation to do over again, I'd do exactly the same thing -- stay right on the throttle, which took me around the turn and straight toward the rider. By this time his head had swung a bit toward the inside of the curve, closer to my intended path, and that threw off a little more the calculations I'd had to make in a split second. I didn't have any choice but to lean further and roll

it all the way on. All I remember is the way that white helmet kept getting bigger and bigger.

I almost made it, you know. They don't always point that out, but I did. It would've been quite a piece of riding. And actually all that did happen was my front wheel glanced off his helmet. He shouldn't've even needed an aspirin for what I did to him. And really, that's the only thing I thought did happen.

But the way I was sliding, my rear wheel was out farther than my front.

Right across his neck.

Right between his leathers and his helmet, maybe the only place where I could've left treadpattern right on the skin like that. They say when the freestanding arterial blood filled it in it was just like the plaster imprints police take from cartracks at the scene of things.

Didn't even throw me off my bike. That's how easy it was. I'd killed a man and I still finished the race. And one of my better races if you really want to know; I passed several guys before it was over.

Of course I didn't know he was dead then. They had him pulled off the track by the time I came back around and all there was out was a caution flag.

Far as that goes, he didn't die for several hours. One hour at least; I'm not exactly sure how long it was. I was a bit upset.

But back to the race: there I was, congratulating myself on how

I'd avoided a nasty spill and kept from hurting him, while really me and my machine bearing down on him had to be the last thing he ever saw. Might still be reflected in his eyeballs; they say that happens. He never gained consciousness.

Well once I found out about it, I wasn't ever going back to the track. You can imagine the way I felt. But then I started thinking. In a way this'd be a whole lot better than a limp. Understand, I wasn't calloused -- I'm not now, particularly, even after the war and all -- but if you race at all you can't keep dwelling on danger and accidents. What's done is done, always will be; you've got to accept that or you don't belong out there. So I started thinking about just walking in front of the stands. Never riding again, but just walking around without a limp. No trace of injury to myself, nothing that might make me seem less or imply a lack of skill. Instead, something that would get them whispering inconspicuously, just obvious enough that I'd see it if I were looking out of the corner of my eye. So that's what I did. I went to all the races, walked around after every heat, never talked to anybody unless they talked to me first. Not too many did that, but of course they never really had; I never really was the motorcycle sort as you can well imagine. But a few did talk: usually they'd ask where my leathers were, I'd tell them I'd hung them up after the unfortunate accident. Some of them had to get smart of course and ask what accident. Even now I maybe hate them

of all, pretending not to even know about it but really telling me they didn't think it was an accident at all.

Others came right out and asked me how come I hadn't avoided the guy. People I used to consider friends, they'd ask me that. What did they expect me to do -- kill myself instead of him?

But except for them, and they were only right after the accident, nobody accused me of anything to my face. Would've been okay if they did; I mean if I've done something that earns me a reputation and I come to live with it, I wouldn't be bothered by the notoriety. Instead though, lots of people who used to treat me okay suddenly started acting like I had an odor or something. Nobody crossed the street to avoid me like I'd sort of expected, nobody tried to beat me up because they were a friend of his; fact is, I didn't even catch anybody pointing from a distance. All that happened was there'd been a few times before all this that somebody'd invite me along for a beer with the guys after a race, and those times stopped. Really made me feel bad, too -- you'd be surprised how something small like that will when you're ready for the big stuff.

Then things got worse. I'd come up on people suddenly and they'd stop talking real quick and so I'd know they were talking about me and the guy I ran over. If they'd kept talking or said anything at all even if it was just to call me a killer and then walk away it would've been all right, but they just stopped and then talked about baseball or

something till I went away. Then they started again.

I started avoiding races and all the people that had anything to do with motorcycles, so I wouldn't have people talk about me when I wasn't around and stop when I was. But, you know, it got harder to do all the time. It got so no matter where I went people wouldn't let me forget I'd killed somebody who after all had gotten in my way through no fault of mine. Even people who didn't have any connection with racing did it too -- you can't imagine the way things like that grow and get spread around. And the things they did got more subtle: they made a big thing of ignoring the subject completely even when they knew I wasn't fooled. Then they'd toss in some real sneaky way of reminding me that they hadn't forgotten and that's what they'd been thinking about all the time they discussed these other things. I'd have to leave.

I don't know what might've happened if they hadn't been building up a war. I was about to lose my job and I couldn't concentrate on anything for more than a couple of minutes before it'd come up some way or other. So more and more I started thinking that over there people wouldn't give me such a hard time on account of killing one man. I mean I'd done it and there wasn't any way of undoing it no matter how much I wanted to. No matter how much I despised the idea, I was a killer. Somebody somewhere was going to have to take me for what I was, just as I'd learned to do.

So I enlisted. Wasn't drafted after all. And just like I'd hoped I found people right away that could make use of what I'd proven I could do. With lots of professional help and training I developed my accidental, more or less raw ability into a useful, polished skill. The rider was the first of quite a few, and I'm not bragging.

No more about the war; I don't want to talk about it. It was very bad of course, they say all wars are, but in other ways it was quite all right. I can't very well explain that; if you've served in one you'll understand, and if you haven't I don't guess you ever will.

Well anyway, it's over now. At least it is for me; I'll be the first to admit I've had enough. I lived through my part of it and now I'm out; I guess that's all you can really ever say. Only problem is, I went in because I was a killer and didn't belong where I was; now I'm back a hell of a more proficient killer. I'm happier with myself this way, but it's hard to figure how I'm any closer to belonging here. If I can't find some way to get by maybe I'll re-enlist, but the army's really no palce for an entomologist.

## THE CHANGELING

They turned west -- away from the lush Bitterroot Valley and the old lands, toward the land of the young and the beautiful. And it had to be more than coincidence, didn't it, that she was following right in the footsteps of her greatgreat grandfather? He'd left it all behind because he was sure he didn't belong there any more than she did and he'd crossed the mountains the same way Lorena said they were going.

Lorena had the heater up too high so Mim rolled her window halfway down. Without the dirty glass in the way the green was more brilliant, the water tumbling beside them clearer and livelier with whiter caps. Or maybe it was the wind in her face that made it that way. The road split a narrow grassy valley that wound with the creek. At the foot of the mountains on either side the trees started in a line so even they could've been planted that way. They grew thick there and they grew thick all the way up the sides, just like at home. It made such a beautiful picture; it was just the way valleys ought to look, just the kind of place roads ought to go. She tried to imagine even one old man anywhere in the scene and couldn't. They belonged in dirty bars and hospitalwards and coffins, not in this



live green world that was taking her where she wanted to go.

The ancient trapper -- wasn't old when he did what she was doing now, of course, not much more than her age probably -- had brought the only good blood to her family, the only fresh blood. Nothing before and nothing in the four generations since. Just his strength carried on and watered down more all the time. No point in denying the facts: nothing less than strong whiteblood could've done the job. Before him there'd been blood from other tribes, other places -- blood of chiefs, blood of captives, blood of warriors. Best indianblood there was around, but it wasn't good enough: generation after generation they grew and died in the same damn place. But along came one independent Frenchman from Canada and things changed, yes they did, and here she was on her way at last. Indian-blood wanted to sit, whiteblood wanted to move. You had to face it.

They were higher. Mim hadn't noticed them leaving the valley -- actually taking the valley with them because the creek still followed alongside -- but she could tell because now there were trees all around, right up to the water and the road. Never mind what kind of trees; only indians knew things like that -- this was an ash and that was a whitetailed pine, over there a bluebarked cherry and further on a sawtoothed alder. Sure. Only indians knew things like that because knowing things like that couldn't do you any good.

And she wasn't an indian. Her blood was that of her greatgreat

grandfather resurging, getting dominant again, even stronger than it had been in her mother. Blood was funny -- just like a clear creek flowing into a muddy river, the pure water wouldn't mix for a while and even when it did some would find an area for itself alone and would flow downstream just as clear as it came in. You could tell it with blood the same way -- just look at the stream. For some reason with her family it'd always been the women; the men weren't ever anything but muddy savages. And past her the mud had its way male and female; even her younger sisters that she'd raised by herself ever since she stole them away from the murderous old bastard, even they couldn't ever be anything but wellmeaning indians.

That's right, all you had to do was look. You could've seen right away that her mother was white just by the way she was the only one who acted civilized, who knew how to act civilized. If it hadn't been for her mother those first fifteen years what would she've grown up like herself? Alone with that brute of a man and his brutish sons and two young girls who were half and half and had to be watched and brought up just right or they'd fall. But her mother had been there, had been there to keep the house straight and pretty no matter what went on. She'd always been right there to keep undesirable influences under control, to keep the worst of the old fart's barbuddies out no matter what. She'd been there to remind

all of them that they were better than some of the people around and not as good as others, that you had to keep working to make yourself better or you'd right away get worse. She'd been there to make life clean and comfortable and respectable all by herself with nothing to work with. And then she'd been murdered by a man that never knew what he had by his side and in his bed. Never even knew. Wouldn't have let her die if he'd known -- even him. Yes he would -- he killed everybody that put their arms around him in love. Wouldn't even go to a doctor to see if was true that he carried TB -- indian disease -- and gave it to all the family without getting it himself. I ain't no typhoid mary he'd say, but I ain't no nervous nellie either. Just indian drunk stupid, that's all. All he'd ever been, all he'd ever be, and he'd survive in his own kind of death till he'd killed everybody better. It'd take somebody far more evil than he was to bring him to a stop, but by God it would happen; someday it would happen. Even if she had to come back when everybody'd forgotten her and do it herself, evil at last after so many years of resisting with all she had. But she'd wait till somebody got there first or till a time when even Cathy and Josie would be so steeped in indianlife and indiandyng that they wouldn't know her face or her californiabrown whiteskin.

The creekbed was narrower now that they were higher, the water more active. Almost violent. Must've had a real early spring runoff

down here or some strong rains. If it jumped much higher it would be over the banks and out on the road. If there was ever enough to really cover and you had to drive at night it would be terrifying, just like driving in the creek itself, waiting for a wheel to go off the road and sink in the shoulder or worse yet got right into the bed. Turn a car over just like that and leave you drowning upside down in three or four feet of water with no way out, no way at all.

If it'd only been weather like this when he'd come through. He'd planned to get across all the difficult mountains before the heavy snows set in, but he'd misjudged. Maybe the trip was harder than he'd expected. He'd gotten caught right in the middle -- high ranges with difficult passes east and west, no practical way of cutting north or south and then going across. So he did what he had to do -- he stayed. This was the part of the story she'd loved best to hear when she was young and hated most now. In those days in places like this getting stuck meant one thing -- you found the nearest peaceful tribe and wintered with them. And in his case hoped the people who were waiting in Oregon would keep waiting, that not too many people had gotten there before you, that none had taken your place, that nobody but your friends had come up with the same idea, that there'd still be seal and sea otter enough a year later so the trip would still be worthwhile. It wasn't like gold -- if there were too many people in the good places,

you couldn't just go off and find another lode somewhere else. You had to be in the right place when the time was right, and he'd made a mistake.

She'd always wondered how much that had worried him. It was a risky plan anyway; apparently ships had stopped making a profit on the trade twenty, maybe thirty years before he and his friends decided they could strike it rich. Didn't sound likely to her, but as the story went they'd heard of some breeding grounds off the beaten track someplace where it was very cold. Probably still not big enough to be profitable for ships, but they were all rugged mountainmen and if they packed up there with horses and mules and did all the trapping and skinning themselves instead of dealing with the greedy eskimos they could really clean up. Really could; chance of a lifetime. Come back down the coast to where it was all civilized because of all that gold everybody'd been mining till it was finally almost gone. Really could've lived it up if he hadn't misjudged and gotten caught by the winter. And worse. Sometimes she thought those friends had waited and everything did work out like he'd figured, but other times she wasn't so sure. No way to know.

Life couldn't've been too hard in the Bitterroot for a Canadian trapper, even in the winter. But no, he had to go and make it even softer by cosyng up to a woman. If only he'd gone on somehow in spite of the snow. He might've made it. Instead, by the time things had

thawed out enough for him to go on he'd married her in some turkey tribal ceremony. Now what the hell did he want with a wife? They'd've let a white man stay without marrying her. Could've bought her if he'd had to, didn't have to go through all that. The way it worked out he hung around and hung around after he should've left. Probably ready to give up his life of exploration and discovery to become a damn farmer and squawman and stay there forever. Must've spoken French and English and God knows what else and he was ready to give it all up for a bunch of indian grunts and squawks. And one of the first things he heard in those grunts and squawks he was getting used to was that his new squaw was pregnant. And that made him fool enough to hang around when he should've gone. All that good travelling and expeditionoutfitting weather gone: spring, summer, fall pointlessly wasted.

It looked like they were a lot higher now -- just road and trees and a little bit of creek and high walls and sudden drops to green and blue and rock. Lorena was working hard; she looked determined over there, stomping hard on the straight stretches and the short downhill, squealing tires around the corners, building up speed before laboring up the long steep grades.

The trees out there were getting strange. Some were blasted black from ragged top to bottom. Others were clean but snapped off near the top, sometimes stripped of bark from the break halfway down the tree; all the way around at first and then narrowing to a point. And some

were lying over the ground in crazy directions, uprooted intact. More all the time.

Lightning explained the black ones, but what about all those others? Almost looked like there was more timber destroyed than there was alive and standing. All she could think of was that they got real heavy loads of snow on the branches in the winter and high winds pushing the extra weight broke the limbs or even pulled the trees out of the ground. She'd seen a small tree or two like that at home sometimes after a heavy storm, but never anything like this. Never even heard of anything like that happening to so many, but what else could it be? Somebody big walking through, tearing out everything in his way? Somebody big and ancient and evil?

The sun went behind a cloud and made it all gloomy. Everything was ugly now. Almost scary. If she knew Lorena better she'd say something -- hearing her voice might break the mood she was getting into. But what could she say without sounding like a baby. . .?

Maybe they were right, what they said about all the bombs changing the weather. Unless it was just down here -- up here -- where she'd never been. She rolled her window back up.

Well, soon enough they'd be off this mountain and that would make it all right maybe. She could keep quiet that long; she wasn't that bad off. Other things to think about anyway. It must've been just about this time of year her greatgreat grandfather finally got away

a whole year later than he should've and a year and a half later than he was supposed to. A daughter'd been born in the fall and it was healthy enough and another spring had come. And that, she figured, had done it. You could keep the blood quiet for a while but you couldn't keep it quiet forever. He must've just had to leave, to keep on west, to get some seals and his fortune while they were still there to be gotten. You couldn't keep someone like him a squawman long. Some men maybe, but not one like him. So he told his wife, if that's what you wanted to call her, that when he got out to where he wanted to be and made his first big catch and brought back the skins and set up a permanent camp, he'd send back a messenger telling her where he was and how to get there. By the time she got word she'd have to wait till the following spring and by then the kid ought to be able to survive the trip if she was careful and took her time.

The damn old indian refused to go, of course. All they knew how to do was sit. Couldn't get that blood to move. No way. Her place was where it'd always been, with her people. If he wanted to go away well he was a man from somewhere else and he could, but the tribe that raised her would bury her and bury her daughter too. Crazy, stupid squaw -- only chance she'd ever get and she threw it away, Didn't even know what she had.

Mim was sure he'd done his best. He'd probably argued till he



was blue in the face that her place was with her husband. But she'd said no, her place was with the tribe. So okay, he said the only thing he could -- he'd send the messenger when the time was right; then she came or she didn't. Nothing more he could do. What else could you expect him to say? That was just as reasonable as any white man could be with an unthinking squaw. Hell, he was lucky to get away; sometimes Mim thought he knew it back then just as well as she did now.

That was the end of the story of course, because he did leave like he had to, and she stayed like she had to. The single message came as promised and that was all. The end. But Mim knew how the story went after that; over the years she'd figured out how it had to go. And now she was part of the story herself, just like her mother would've been if she'd lived. She was going where she had to go, where he'd had to go a hundred years before, right to where she'd find what she knew was waiting for her, right where she knew it would be.

The car had been lugging very slowly up a long, steep grade, but now it was going faster and smoother. Around a turn and suddenly out into the bright sun. The little niche of canyon they'd been following opened out; they had to be near the top. The road got broader just ahead: a parking area where you could stop and look at

the view. And a sign:

WELCOME TO IDAHO

Then one on the other side of the road facing away from them. Mim turned and looked behind as they passed:

BITTERROOT NATIONAL FOREST

Another one ahead:

CLEARWATER NATIONAL FOREST

Even the name sounded brighter. Everything was different now that she was finally out of Montana; everything was clear and shiny. She was on her way. Her body would carry the whiteblood to a destination decided long ago, leaving sluggish indianblood behind. What else was there to do? She was out of the state and out of that world completely and there was no turning back. She felt wonderful. Maybe she never would come back for Cathy and Josie; after all, their future was as clear to her as her own. They wouldn't come. Not ever. She was going to have to make it all by herself, just like the trapper. They'd hem and haw and keep on living with their so-called father till it killed them. They'd take the death they knew rather than the life they didn't -- an indian trait if she'd ever heard of one -- because it was in their blood to do that and nothing else. The blood was too mixed now, too far gone, and always would be; almost all the good that remained had gone to her. She had the last of the adventurous whiteblood that made life different and valuable. She

should've known that so long ago. She could've if she'd dared look. Reaching the top of the mountain and the end of the state was enough to make her sure of what she'd known somewhere all along: those day-dreams of coming back triumphant and carrying off the girls in another rescue had just been there to make what she had to do easier. All she'd ever be able to accomplish with the girls would be to write them and say when you're ready like I'm ready now, either you'll come or you won't. There wasn't any truth in anything else; either you had the blood pure enough or you didn't, you followed your blood or you fought, you followed your blood or you got caught. If you had it you'd know, and if you didn't you never would. She knew. Now, on top of the mountain, facing Clearwater and ready to flow west with it uninterrupted, for the first time maybe she really did know.

## DUDLEY IN NIGHTTOWN

"Now I don't belong to any of these private clubs," said the deskclerk. "Junior college instructors don't make enough money to be paying membership fees anywhere. Even," chuckling along, "to the human race. But there is one club, strictly private and strictly Negro. That's where you have to go for music. They won't allow any white folks to join, but I can get in -- I do all the time as a matter of fact -- and what's more, I can get you guys in. I know a musician, colored of course, who belongs to the club. And you boys picked the right day to come through town too, because he'll be playing there tonight. My relief's due any minute; would you like to go?"

"Sure man, that'd be great."

It was a short drive over. Dudley and Joshua left their motorcycles in an alley and joined the deskclerk as he locked his car. The place was around the corner, with nothing written on the door. The buildings around were somehow blank too; didn't show their function. Nobody on the street at the moment either.

The deskclerk pushed the door open and they stepped in. Dark,

quiet.

A slow voice from their left as the door closed behind them:  
"Good evening, Warren. You have guests with you also; good evening, gentlemen."

"That's right, Booger old man." The deskclerk's voice shifted over to them. "His real name's Booker of course, but I always call him Booger. He's used to it by now and it's all in fun, you know. We're old friends by this time. I suspect he even likes it, don't you Booger old man? This is Dudley, and hulking over here is Joshua. They're just passing through town; I ran into them almost accidentally and thought I might bring them by."

"Those who know me better than the parents who named me call me what they choose. You gentlemen are welcome."

Dudley's eyes were adjusting and he finally got a good look. Tall and thin, skin more swarthy than black, absolutely hairless except for a tremendous mustache. Everything below the nose disappeared in hair or in shadow. The ends must've been waxed; they spiralled up and back toward his nose, maybe 270 degrees in all.

"Don't let old Booger's scowl scare you. He never lets you know what's going on, even in the several years I've known him. His voice never changes and his face never changes and they say the only time he smiles is when he's eating a little bit of whitewoman. Isn't that right, Booger?"

"Hey man," from Joshua, "let's go sit down. Nice meeting you Booker." He was already several steps away when Dudley followed.

The layout of the place was strange. Long and narrow. To their left there was a row of tables, then another row on a terrace a foot or so above the first. Several sets of shallow steps leading from one to the next at wide intervals along the length of the room. A third tier above the second. Men in dark suits and ties, women in bright dresses at the tables. Tall waitresses in tightfitting leotards that varied in shade so they exactly matched skincolor ignored the stairs to bound from level to level without tilting trays or spilling drinks. Moving rapidly but not hurrying.

The bandstand was at the far end of the room on the righthand side. The long rows of tables pointed at it, the two lower rows reaching, the top one overhanging.

From the deskclerk, "let's get a table up on top; it's my favorite place. You can see everything that's going on."

They walked between tables, climbed rows. It was an unlikely enough way to set up a nightclub, but it seemed workable. The stage was visible from all points. A terrible place to play though; you couldn't ever find a suitable volume. People in the rear wouldn't be able to hear, those in front would be deafened. The musicians would just have to play for themselves and let the audience choose their seats accordingly. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

They took a small table and sat down. One chair left over. A waitress was already springing their way and the deskclerk was already talking. "You boys being from far away, you may never have tried tequila, am I right? Well, my treat, my choice. Three tequila sours please Suzy. It is Suzy, isn't it?"

"Yes Warren."

"I thought so. I don't know Suzy as well as I do some of the other girls you see, for one reason or another, but she's a good kid anyway."

"Is that all for now, Warren? Any cigarettes?"

"No, I don't need any. Any of you guys running short? That'll be all then."

She was a few steps away and Dudley couldn't tell where her outfit stopped and her legs began. Everything was working perfectly together, her slender body driving those long legs effortlessly.

"I don't know about old Booger. I used to think he didn't like me, resented me being here, but now I think that's just the way he is. I always give him a hard time just the same. He's got a twin brother; can you believe that? It makes a funny story. They own this place together; always have. The other one's always trying to look different from Booger but never could make it. He tried to dress differently at first but Booger wouldn't allow it. You'd see them change their clothes sometimes four times in a night here,

trying to get away and keep up respectively. Roger -- that's the other one -- finally shaved his head, thinking Booger would finally let it go because they'd always both been proud of their good hair -- long and smooth and wavy. But Booger's came off without hesitation, so Roger grew a huge mustache. Old Booger followed him day after day. Roger got mad and went out, bought some hairstraightener, let it grow as long as it could and then started waxing the ends and curling them with some contraption. Everybody was laughing at him by then, but he was determined. A question of identify, I guess you might say. But old Booger kept up and Roger panicked. There wasn't but one thing left to do and he did it: he left off with the straightener and the wax and just let it droop and bristle. Some say he even roughed it up intentionally somehow every night before he went to bed, but I wouldn't know. At any rate, the whole thing was finally too much for old Booger; he'd given up his good hair but he just couldn't let that mustache go to seed. Of course there was a rumor around that Roger had threatened if this didn't work to cut off one side and go around with only half a mustache, but I don't think he would've. So now for the first time you can tell them apart: one droops, the other curls more all the time. Word is, though, that Roger is turning green with envy, if that's possible for a colored man, and he's going to start waxing again."



Then the drinks were there. A curious ritual: the deskclerk handed over some bills, Suzy took change from an invisible brown pocket somewhere and put it on a small dullblack tray. The tray went on the table in front of the deskclerk while she stood back, regal with arms crossing her chest and eyes staring over their heads. Dudley followed her gaze: heavily textured stucco wall and nothing else. Back to her face until there was movement in the corner of his eye. The deskclerk took some of the change off the tray and pocketed it. At the sound Suzy flickered and then took the tray without moving her head or eyes. The same erect stance. The tray and money disappeared. "Thank you Warren."

"Thank you, Suzy. Thank you."

Then she was gone.

"To you boys having an exciting ride and to my enjoying an exciting time riding right here, if you know what I mean."

The drink was harsh, sour and sweet at the same time. There was something thick, almost syrupy, to it; Dudley held the glass up to the strongest light he could find and swirled it. Nothing thick in it; nothing but the taste.

Joshua and the deskclerk started talking about music, what they called music. Dudley looked back at the bandstand. A big Hammond, a set of drums and three horns -- two trumpets and a tenor. Unlikely instrumentation unless the hornmen alternated solos and spent most of

their time working as some sort of rhythm section. Topheavy. And over there in the shadowy corner a bass stretched out on the floor on its side, bow lying across it. Hell of a way to take care of equipment, even obsolete handcrafted unamplified equipment.

It was late, so the band had to be on a break, sitting scattered and anonymous somewhere below him.

Suzy appeared unsummoned with three more drinks. Dudley kept his eyes on her, intent, throughout the ritual this time. Absolutely no change of expression. Absolutely none. Perfect. Did she know he was watching her?

She disappeared.

A few minutes later the band moved up onto the stage. The desk-clerk waved as they picked up their instruments.

Nothing happened.

He half-stood and waved more vigorously. More obviously. A muttered "God damn" from Joshua. Half the people in the place were sitting behind them, normally looking past them to the stage, paying no attention to them sitting there. But then suddenly a white hand waving wildly in the air. God damn.

Up on the stage one of the trumpet players went widegrinned and waved back. Small, maybe thirty, very wellgroomed with a thintrimmed line above his upper lip, a neat olive suit with a bit of red plaid vest showing through.

"That's my friend. See, that's him with the trumpet, the one on the left. He's the best musician down there. The whole band depends on him. You'll see, it's built around him."

"Pretty good friends, are you?" from Joshua.

"Yes, very good. Why? Does that bother you, a Negro and a white being close friends?"

"No man, I was just asking. Just curious, you know? It's not like I really give much of a shit one way or the other what color your friends are. You just said something and I asked you about it."

"Okay, Joshua, okay. Don't fly off the handle or anything. You can understand how I might be a bit overconscious of people's reactions here in this part of the country."

"Yeah, but don't be worrying about my handle; I won't fly off it."

"Keep a good tight grip on it do you?" he chuckled. "Well, I'll answer your question for you, maybe more than you expected. I don't see any reason not to be honest with you guys because you're both all right: you ride motorcycles and you're on your way out west. I'd tell you things I wouldn't want many people around town to know. Am I right that neither of you have ever tried drugs? The whole scene is pretty common here; up till a few years ago you could get peyote through seedcompanies advertising cacti in the backs of mens' magazines. Harold down there and I have been getting high together pretty

frequently for years; it's not so good to do things like that alone, you know. And a funny thing happens to a friendship when you're always getting high together. I mean you guys may think of yourselves as being close friends just because you've hung around together for a long time doing the same things, but you just don't have any idea what a friendship can be, believe me. Drugs become a shared experience of a kind you can't get any other way, so you end up with a relationship that nobody else has and you can't have with anybody else. I don't know how to describe it to somebody that hasn't tried it; there's just no common ground for communication.

"You get to know the person in a way you aren't able to in the everyday world. There's too many defenses there -- walls and blocks and things like that. Everybody walks around behind masks. The world's phony you know. Drugs make it real and make the people you're high with real too. Even makes you real yourself after a while. And whenever you run into that guy, no matter where you are or what you're doing or how long it's been since you've been up, a little bit of being high comes back."

The deskclerk broke off when Suzy appeared with three more drinks. She moved in time to the music. She looked even better than before, more aloof and majestic.

This time the deskclerk left all the change on the tray.

The tequila wasn't harsh anymore.

For a long time, through two or three more drinks, they said little and listened to the music. Or pretended to listen; Dudley was watching Suzy's movements from table to bar to table to bar. It was all so strange and beautiful.

"What do you guys think of the band? Pretty smooth, aren't they? Yes sir, pretty damn smooth all right. You see how Harold is holding them all together, the way they all depend on him? And do you know what else? Not one of them earns his living at this, not even Harold. In a sense they're amateurs, not professional musicians, though they all belong to the union of course and they're the best in town. Most of them are teachers or professional men of some other sort. All educated, all intelligent. But they're closer to the roots of music, if you know what I mean, than us whites. An unprejudiced intelligent whiteman can learn a tremendous amount from the Negroes. Ues indeed they can. Sometimes I feel like I'm just barely started myself."

Dudley drained his glass to that, but another was in front of him. It had been slow going at first.

Soon the deskclerk had to piss and stumbled down the steps. As soon as he was gone Joshua said, "This band sure is a disappointment, apple. Sure is a letdown. I was all ready to hear some good sounds; instead all we get is this swingy shit. Nothing to it at all. Place itself is too refined: women even got heels on their feet. But there

ain't nothing wrong with the drinks, I will say that; nothing at all. I could do this all night, long as it stayed this free."

After a while Dudley could hear the deskclerk coming back. Sounded like he'd stopped at a table along the way, but too far away for Dudley to make out the conversation. But he could hear the backslap and solitary laughter when it ended, when the desk-clerk made his point and left.

He sat down, "While I was bleeding my lizard I thought of something. Either of you guys had a colored girl before? Much balls as you've got riding cycles crosscountry I'll be you have, haven't you? Because you know I might be able to fix you both up after the place closes. How'd you guys like that, huh? We'll see if I can't work something out."

More talk, more tequila, more confusion of sound from the band up front. Dudley watched Suzy.

When she disappeared for a few minutes Dudley decided he had to piss too. He walked carefully through the roomful of black people. Was anybody going to get in his way or say anything to him because he was white and didn't belong in their club? Because he was guest of some loudmouthed armwaver he didn't know?

By the time he reached the men's room he was relaxed. Nobody was paying a bit of attention to him. No angry looks, no indulgent looks. He checked the mirror for his own expression. Everybody

pissed. Just one pissed among many. Drinkers pissed. Pissers drank. Drinkers got drunk and nobody got pissed off; no reason to. The deskclerk would've been stopping at every table to exchange a few remarks before he pissed. Very complicated journey for a deskclerk. Smarter to stay uninvolved; easy journey.

Back to the table. No trouble telling which one.

More talk and tequila and Suzy and sound. And finally Suzy there asking if they'd like another before the bar closed. She was beautiful. Beautiful. The drinks they had would last. She went away, beautiful.

And then they were waiting outside the front door, him and Joshua. Closed out. Instead of leaving, people seemed to be standing around in little clumps.. Sereral groups down the length of the building. A group on each corner of the intersection like sentries. What was everybody waiting for? And the two of them, why were they waiting -- why didn't they get their bikes and leave?

The deskclerk came around the corner and hurried them over to a group. Quietly, "Introduce yourselves to these guys and wait right here. Be back in a few minutes, soon as I talk to some people."

"That's what you said before, apple."

"Did, didn't I. So I did." Around the building and out of sight. Nobody paid any attention to them standing there.

"I'm a stranger --

--talk about it --  
-- travellin the dark --  
-- but he's got the power --  
-- mojo hand, my man --  
-- and I'm so afraid of the dark at night --  
-- Lord yes, and when they get to talking like that all you can  
do --  
--why do I have to be a stranger, darkling --  
--make me stay when I really want to go --  
-- if you were me, would you take it --  
--all you can do is grab them about the ears and --  
--made me be a stranger, darkling --  
--tell me would you take it --  
-- took your love and ran in the dark --  
-- oh yes, got to do it --  
-- just about normal size he says; name is Big Ben Brown --  
-- so afraid --  
-- whoooo, I thought sure you said bend down --  
-- cause I'm used to it --  
-- travellin around this lonely world --  
-- tell me, would you just hang your head and cry --  
-- but just remember darkling, you're going to be begging me one  
day --



-- sometime my best friend comes to me on my job and he looks at me and says Richard, you don't know what's going on --

-- gonna fall down you know --

-- or would you stand up --

-- and I look up at my friend because I'm innocent --

-- or would you stand up --

-- you gonna cry and I'm gonna walk away --

-- would you stand up --

-- he says Richard, you don't know what's going on --

--leave you stranded oh yes I am --

-- would you stand up --

-- and just remember --

-- would you stand up --

-- oh yes I am --

-- would you stand up --"

The deskclerk was back again, saying, "Got it all set up for you. No other whitemen have seen as much of what's happening here in this short a time. You guys are really getting the full tour, whether you know it or not. There's about to be one wild party tonight just because I set it up for you. Not that these people aren't always ready to party, but I just mean there wasn't anything arranged until just now. By the way, this,"towed by the upper arm, "is Harold I was telling you about. You are able to

recognize him without the trumpet in front of his face, aren't you?"

All that laughing.

"You can follow him over and then go in with him. You might have trouble if you weren't with somebody, being white and all."

From Joshua, "You aren't going, deskclerk?"

"Well, I don't believe so. I'll see you guys in the morning when you check out. It's already been a lot of night for me; any more and I'd fall asleep at the motel tomorrow and that wouldn't be good for business."

"Yeah, maybe it wouldn't be good for business. What all's going on at this party?"

"Wine women and song, Joshua, wine women and song. Half the band and half the waitresses and lots of people who know how to have a good time. Lots of liquor. And maybe, just maybe, something better. What we spoke of earlier?"

Half the waitresses. "Will Suzy be there?"

A change in somebody's eyes. Harold quickly, "No man, Suzy's --"

"Yes she will," from the deskclerk. Yes she will. She just told me she would, not five minutes ago. I must've talked to her after you did, Harold; she must've changed her mind."

"Well then, she says she's going to be there, she's going to be there. Going to have ourselves a time, yes indeed."

"That's right, brother; got to do it cause I'm used to it."

"Come on, what all we waiting for?"

Joshua again, "Just one more thing. Is Booker going to be there?"

From Harold, "No man, Booker don't swing, you know? Too old. Too old to muss the custard."

"Think we'll let it go then. Lots of miles left. Thanks for showing us around, deskclerk. See the rest of you later too -- next time through."

Suzy. "Wait a minute, Joshua; I'm not so sure I wouldn't --"

"Doesn't make any difference what you're sure about. I'm sure enough for two."

Back at the motel, Joshua said, "Let's pack up and leave now instead of in the morning, just ride till we get tired or the tequila gets us. Too nice a night not to be out in it. Too nice to stay around here."

When they were done they carried the packs and ropes out to the parkinglot. "Pull them up here in front of this old Dodge and I'll get us some lighg to tie by." He opened the cardoor and turned on the headlights.

When the packs were lashed and tested he turned the lights off. They started their machines, listened to the sound coming off the walls and the empty street, let the motors warm. Then out of the lot and

onto the highway.

They hand't shifted out of first when Joshua's hand chopped the air. Dudley hit his killbutton. Earlymorning silence.

"Deskclerk's car just pulled up around the corner there, less I'm wrong. Let's just wait a bit and see what's goin on."

A figure slid out the cardoor and walked through the lot. Under a streetlight for a second; one hand in a pocket, the other holding a paperbag. Then he was up to their door, never hesitating, never looking around the lot, never seeing them. The hand came out of the pocket and muddled at the knob. A change in the shadows and then back. No more deskclerk.

They waited several minutes without saying anything. Nothing happened. The room windows stayed dark.

Finally Joshua's silhouette swung up toward the streetlight, came down again, kicked his motor over. It caught and fired smoothly, and again the sound reached Dudley from all sides.

## FIRE SEASON

Two headlights moved steadily through the west Texas night. The overlapping beams created a road in front of the middleaged pickup. The dull red taillights soaked it up again.

Four eyes looked out into the darkness. Those of the woman driving were small and narrow, made for squinting into the shimmering dusty heat. But this time they had chosen darkness.

The road changes from white to black. Concrete to asphalt. Must mean a town but don't look to the sides. Drive at the same speed. One of these towns doesn't mean a thing. Just small and ranchy. Not rangy. Straight and short and narrow. White again. Black stripes across making little squares. Squares and squares stretching out on and on. Steady thumping feel each one through the tires and the springs and mechanical things to the seat and through the meat back to the wheel and out again. Back to the road.

The seat beside her was empty.

Beside her shoulder, on the same level, were two more eyes: large and round, always staring. The eyes were set into a dull rust-red background. The bone structure was so well defined that the hollows of the eyes were almost tunnels. The beak and talons were

the color of unpolished antique gold and had the same crusty look.

Around the leg of the bird was a leather band connected to a thin finely worked silver chain. The chain lay on the seat in several loops; ran up the back of the seat and disappeared behind it.

The hawk was motionless most of the time, staring out the windshield at the lighted area in front of the truck. Now and then it exploded into a fury of motion, beating the air with blurring wings. Then it preened itself, cleaning its feathers and talons of blood that wasn't there.

U. S. 80. About time. Relax now. A little bit anyway. The first step is the hardest. Truck stop ahead. Fill it and oil it and start it again.

The sun started to rise, yellow and swollen behind her. It kept striking her eyes, reflecting out of her rear view mirror. She twisted the mirror so she saw only the roof of the truck, but she couldn't stop the reflection off the large flat windshields of the big trucks carrying cattle to Dallas and Fort Worth.

Sunrise. Stop the truck. See the sunrise one more time. Going west. Sun rises in the east. Watch it one more time before it's too far away. A mountaintop is higher. Closer to the sun. But the sun rises on the horizon. At the edge of land. Beneath the mountain. Farther away. Stop the truck. Out.

The woman laughed, a rasping giggle, at the shrill cry of the

bird. "Do you think I'm going to leave you behind? Don't worry, it'll never happen. Alma couldn't leave you behind."

Unclip the chain from the spring behind the seat. Arm out. Ah, the strength behind that grip. Strong but gentle. Keep the arm steady. Strong but very very delicate. Get out of the truck. Hold the loose end of the chain. Put down the tailgate. Attach the chain. Shake the arm. The same cry. It never changes. Fierce but impersonal. Indifferent. Don't know. Flies to the top of the cab. Chain almost tight. Always the highest perch. Same urge that makes it fly higher than other birds. Above everything. To take the plunge. Domination. Maybe.

Alma pushed aside some of her few possessions and lay in the bed of the truck, her legs dangling over the edge. The rich southwestern colors were already fading into insignificance.

It's a big sky. Like a huge canvas. Texas is the drab color of a cheap frame. Sets it off well. On my back like the first time with Romero. On my back quite a bit in those days. But not outside like that. Thought it was the answer. It filled the nights. Big city girl. Had to try it. Daywork. Nightsex. Commercial art not art. Plenty commercial. Houses from blueprints. Artist's conception. No conception. Why. No artist. Not enough either way. Not the way I expected. Not enough to fill the emptiness. Tired of hunting when Romero came along. First man that wanted me in a long time. First

time outside. One blanket between me and the ground. One separating us from the sky. First man to say anything. Had been nearing the office boy class. Designs on the milkman. Won't you come in. More trouble than it's worth. Note in the milkbottle. Pickup bed is cold. Should have a blanket. Late spring but still cold. It was chilly then too. Even when the sun came up. Blanket still on top of us. Cast a strange lumpy shadow on the grass. A strange animal grazing in the pasture. How does it eat. How does it move. How does it live. Any birds. Pastoral scene. Should have been birds. Wouldn't be complete without. Some sort of birds. No grass here. Shouldn't be any birds here. Out of place. Soon too hot for them. Too dry. Summer soon. Fire season.

The woman folded her long body into a sitting position. She pulled herself to the edge of the tailgate and stepped to the ground. She walked around to the cab and extended her arm at the level of her eyes. "Come to Alma, honey. It's time to go. It's still a long way to California. You're in a hurry to see the mountains, aren't you?"

Within an hour they reached El Paso. Alma parked in front of a cafe in a Mexican section. Her entrance generated slow silence, then rapid Spanish.

A tall gaunt woman, unkempt, wearing levis and boots and a heavy red wool shirt with the sleeves rolled up, carrying a huge bird on her arm. A long silver chain hanging down from the bird almost to her



knee before coming back and running around her waist, jingling with each step. Early in the morning.

Take the farthest booth. In the corner. Put the bird on the far edge of the booth. Damn bird has to have that high perch. No way to keep it down. Thank God there's no chandeliers. Keep the chain tight so the waitress can see it won't get loose.

One finally approached, stopping ten feet away. Alma ordered a heavy meal and a bottle of Mexican beer. The woman brought the beer immediately. By the time the food came it was finished. She ordered another while the waitress put the plate down on the next table. Alma reached the food with a long outstretched arm and moved it to her table. The hawk shrieked. The waitress set the second bottle down quickly. Foam ran off the rim. She almost tripped on the hem of her skirt as she backed away.

After leaving the cafe, Alma drove slowly until she found a market. As she got out of the truck she again heard the bird's cry. She looked around; nobody had noticed. When she came out of the store she took a deep metal bowl from the back and put it on the seat beside her. Into it she put a half-pound of raw hamburger.

Beautiful. The bird on the lip of the bowl. Whole body pivots with the stroke of the beak. The whip of that neck as the head is thrown back. Bits of meat flung against the windows. The seat. The metal. Sticking everywhere. Too bad I couldn't rig up sheets to

catch it. Catch the mute too. Later. Mighty mute. Sheets block my vision. Can't drive now. Not while it eats. Can't disturb it. Very delicate. Can eat feathers and fur and small bones and fat. Not delicate. But once it stops eating the whole system goes to hell. Cab is splattered everywhere. My hair too. Probably. What would Romero say. Delicate bird in captivity. Not when wild. Balance care and no care. Must keep it wild but must keep it. Keep it alive. Travelling touchy. Very difficult. Can't disturb it. Brown meat. White mute. Meat brown or red. Not a pure color. White is pure. Impure meat and pure mute. Bird dropping down into the bowl. Talons flexing in the meat. Getting all of it. Getting down to it. Hereditary. Wild. Food sign. Beautiful sign. Love to see the heritage showing through. Now finished. Returning to the back of the seat. Taking to the air. Must be above. Where it belongs. Up high. High perch.

Alma put the empty bowl on the floor and drove out of El Paso. The highway was new and divided, running up into the foothills overlooking the city.

Blur of the bird's wings behind. Hops around. Flash of white. Mute sticking to the dashboard. Close. Pretty white splotch. Most of the meal. Uses up all the rest. Fast and efficient. Wish mine were as good.

Much greener up here. Like miles away from Texas. There's the

sign. Finally out of Texas. Green like the field. Romero talking about art. So confident. So sure. New ideas and new forms. So sure he could do it. Made me see my own fear. Afraid to give up my job and take the chance. Might not be worth the effort. Biggest nightmare. Everything I'd paint would look like an artist's conception. Buildings with blueprinted trees. Couldn't risk it. He wasn't afraid. New forms. Sure he could do it. Believed him. Had to. Maybe. Nothing to lose. Still afraid to take the chance. Decided to with the sun casting a lumpy shadow. Gave notice. Traded the car. His car too. My money out of the bank. New pickup. Red. Headed for Mexico. Taking the plunge at last. Plunge into water. Water fire earth air. One at a time. One blanket between earth and me. One between him and air. Now fire. Fire. Fiery color of hawk's tail. Not rust like rest of feathers. Tailfeathers absorb light. Others don't. Too close to the eyes. Eyes always open. Always staring. Using up all the light nearby. Close feathers don't get any. Tailfeathers far enough away to get light of their own. Chestnut and amber. Cinnamon and honey glowing softly. More active now. Green outside. Fiery feathers instead of hair fiery feathers through the air. Back to air again. Other back to earth. No place for water. Not a damn fish. Fire in violent paint on Mexican dark night velvet. Sell them in Mexico City. Both painting then. Not rivals. Experiments. Not serious. Deep black velvet. Green background outside. Trees and

shrubs. Food for living things I can't see. Better eyes could.

The faded red pickup nosed along the course of the Rio Grande. almost directly north to Las Cruces, where the highway turned west and crossed the river.

Highway 70 coming in. 90 at Van Horn and 70 at Las Cruces. Like tributaries of a river. River. Water. Last of the four. The truck is a canoe. Up the creek. A crocodile. Carried downstream in a swelling river. 90 and 70 angling in pointing west. That's the way the current flows west of the divide. Toward the mountains. Not away. Land getting drab again. Bird is calm. Good interest there for a while. Go through Phoenix instead of Tucson. Wanted the Spanish Trail where the explorers had gone but more mountains on 70. Get the bird used to it. See how it reacts. Natural hunting territory. Living here and there. Painting less. Help Romero. Same thing. Worth the effort. Good results. Both of us proud. Romero happy. First time he could paint without interruption. Grateful. Shaping him into better artist. My job. My art. Living sculpture. Completing him. Grateful. Happy. Love now and then. Making love shaping too. Making. Making good. No. Good for him. Good enough for me. No loss. Artist's conception. Make the architect happy. All that matters. Not supposed to be a masterpiece for Christ's sake. Master-piece masturbate. Its own reward. Please the architect is more important. Higher end. Closer to the air. Other end on the ground.

Like a tall building. Domination. Must have the high perch. Fly above all others. Farther from the ground. For the plunge. Mountain higher. Still earth. The air comes all the way down to the ground. Mexico boring. Painting getting worse. Romero's getting better. Domination. Had to stop mine. Master piece. Who thinks of these words. Maybe they know something. Not even good. Ever. Good enough for the architect. Master's piece. More like it. Everything in its proper place. A place in the sun. Finally. A place in the air. One blanket away. Strange lumpy shadow. Were there birds there. Happy. Never been happier. The dream made up. Romero as new force in Pan-American art. New forms. New concepts. Success. Critical and promising. Fiery red and promising. Promise her anything. Power behind the throne. Where's the throne. The dream and happy. Glad when he wanted to leave Mexico. Boring. He kept getting better. Both confident. Back to the states. Texas. He wanted southwestern landscape. Good frame for his work. Settle down. Permanence. The dream must be right. Must be a place for me. Inside the frame. Where it counts.

The faded red truck pressed on.

Damn thing sure does ride rough. Getting old. Paint getting flat. Used to have some depth. No more. Still runs at least. Got good service out of it. Romero's trips. Fill himself with the landscape he called it. Maybe that would do it. Fill myself with rocks and sand.

Water and Joshua trees. Maybe that would do it. Good times out there. Hiking and camping. Sharing something. He was the only one who painted the scenes. Never on the scene. Equal there. Riding back to the house head on his shoulder. Peaceful. Equal building the house. Hell I did more than he did. Carry cin erblocks well as any man. Get the Mexicans to work too. He didn't know enough Spanish. Funny house for artists. Rectangular flat. Two windows. One door. Didn't even try to reach the sky. Dust too dry for you and I. Don't know why the bird won't fly. A house in Texas. Homemaker's dream. At the end of town. By the highway. How does it go. Got a brand new house by the roadside made out of rattlesnake hide. Got a brand new chimney way on top made out of human skulls. So come on take a little walk with me somebody and tell me who do you love. Wierd song. Who was the artist. Who conceived it. The house and the song. Lived there how long. Seven years. Something like that. Stable. Romero better and better. Capturing the spirit of the southwest. Powerful technique. But no more talk of concepts. No more about futures. Less ambitious. Usually had enough money. I could always do freelance work for architects. By mail. By male. When we were low. Free lance and master's piece. Could have gone back. Offers. Turned them down. Still could go I guess. Contacts from my earlier life. Usually Romero made enough. Took the truck to New York a couple of times. Selling

paintings. Built a kiln one time he was gone. Alone. Makes me a kilner. An architect. Who makes the kilner. Who kills the maker. Who fires the kiln. Fire and earth. Made the bricks too. Fire and earth and water. Romero came back. On his back. Sometimes. I got closer to the air. Where the birds are. Just a blanket. Bird's all right. Calm. The first few feet are the hardest. Back with the truck. I used to use it too. New Mexico reservations. Learned about pots. Painting pots. Squaws do all the work. Drab colors. Fire burns them. In the kiln. In on the kiln. Sun burned out the truck's red. Dull and flat. Getting old. Traditional behind the designs. Makes them meaningful. Tell Romero what does he do. Not interested. Fight. Not him. I fought. Looking down at my pottery. Inferior art form. Scorn. Over and over. Despise. Sneer. He wouldn't say it. Just said he wasn't interested. Over and over. It's as good as his painting. Painting dirt and sand. Landscapes. He painted it on. I painted on it.

In the middle of the long afternoon the truck ran past the Arizona border. The land was still lifeless.

The last trip. Alma I'm going to New York and sell this last batch. Fine. When do you want to leave. I don't know. Going along again I suppose. Yes. I won't be coming back. Just like that. I won't be coming back. No apology. No explanation. It's time he said. That's all. It's time to go. Cosmic destiny or something.

Learn the secret of the mystics. Send one thin dime find out it's time. He'd leave a good bit of money. How much. How much has it been worth. Do they tell you that too when you answer the ad. A table to see how much you owe. Different grades of service maybe. Previous experience. Best years of my life. Don't have to say that. More trouble than it's worth. Didn't say nothing. Sat and waited for him to finish. Finish talking and finish leaving. The pickup too of course. Any paintings I want. As if I would keep them around. The house if I want. Anything else. Fair. Fair share. Didn't say anything. Wait and wait and wait. One day he wasn't there. Wait and wait and wait. Still wasn't there. Nobody was there. Painting binge. Alone. Nobody to judge. Nothing to compare to. Rusty at first. Rust red. Then got the swing. Eat sometimes. Sleep sometimes. How long. Who knows. Stopped one time to look around. Depressed. How's the bird. Okay. Got to be careful. All I have left. Living sculpture. Taking the trip well. I was afraid. Little more excitement. Land getting rougher. Climbing. Won't be long till we get some mountains. Then we'll see. Paintings weren't good. Stopped. Sat around looking at them a couple of days. Put everything in a corner. Should have had a closet. Not built with that in mind. Should have had an architect. Everything would have been different. Couldn't look at pots. Too many of them around. Too much earth. Drab colors. Need fire. Fiery colors. Fiery tail. But soft fiery.



Charcoal. Blow on it and it gets brighter. A new concept. Variable pigment. Blow on it and it gets brighter. Everybody's an artist. Part of the process. Where he blows changes the whole painting. Emphasis. Texture. Even composition. Orbits of decreasing brightness around a point. Like the sun. Blow too hard and it ignites. Keep the artists in business. Satisfy everybody. Who needs Romero. Who needs anybody. I can develop new concepts too. I see art forms they don't even imagine. Shaping things. Takes a woman to see that. Shaping children. Or men. Artists. Architects. Birds. Kilns. Kills. It's getting more active. Rocks and hills. Must be more sensation of movement. What does it see. How does it think. What does it think of me. Grateful. At least not ungrateful. It should be grateful. Later. Training and opportunity. Shaping. Got to get it there first. Vital. Still young. Unformed. Uncorrupted. Only instincts. No habits. Get it out of Texas. Nothing to Texas. Have I been too easy. Got to keep it alive. Can't domesticate it though. Can't make it a pet. Killer instinct. How does it live. How does it eat. Nothing to do. Just sit around. Throw pots at other pots. See which broke first. Hard to tell which ones would be strongest. Would survive. Survive by breaking their fellow pots. A couple of the strongs didn't look it. Looked delicate. Like a bird. A woman. Even me. Almost. Carry as many cinderblocks as any man. More than a weak one like Romero. Make my own bricks. Make my own bird. My

own hunter. Eat as much. Can't drink as much. Tried that too. Tequila. Looking at broken pots. Always got sick. Can't make a good drunk. Never tried. Note in the bottle. Not worth the effort. Threw the square tequila bottle at a pot. The pot broke. Broke all my strong pots with that damn bottle. A wall finally did the trick. Jose Cuervo bit the dust. The earth. Smell filled the air. Silent odorous wings. Nothing left. No king of that mountain. Visit people next. Even Romero and I met people. A few. Seven years after all. Drink with ranchers' wives. Pickup looked at home. I didn't. A different world. Whoever's satisfied is right. But their strong men getting old and tired. Adolescent children getting married. Teenage children getting divorced. Everybody pregnant before after or even in between. Stupid animals chewing the yard. Rifle racks in the pickups. Shoot deer from the truck while they're caught in the headlights. Spotlights if that won't work. No excitement. Something to do. Satisfied. Who knows.

As evening approached, between Safford and Globe, the land grew more rugged. The faded red truck rushed up and down the steep hills, hurried around the sharp turns. The hawk flapped its wings slowly, experimentally. It halfhopped, half-flew to the dashboard. Then it returned to its usual perch. It moved up and down the seat, looking out the side and back windows and through the windshield.

How long was it after he left. Three weeks. Maybe. Another

rancher's wife. Had a friend who raised falcons up toward the mountains. Found a fledgling red-tailed hawk in a nest. Didn't know what to do with it. Didn't think it was worth training. Not worth the effort. Rancher's wife said I could use it for a watchdog now that Romero was gone. Snide bitch. Rub it in with a little laugh. I laughed too. Driving back in empty pickup to empty house. Visualized. Young powerful bird leaving my wrist. Climbing into the air. Away from the ground. Slow strong strokes. Above everything. The plunge. Pigeon or small ground animal. Talons. Blood. Torn. Back to me. Shape it. Raw materials. Artist at work. Danger do not disturb. Up to the ranch by the mountains the next day. Say the puny little thing in a cardboard box. Didn't look like it could ever do anything. Does now. Moving around quite a bit. Alert. Ready. Impatient. Like me. It won't be long. Fire season. The man talked about falconry. Traditions. Like pottery. Gave it more meaning. All art has traditions. New concepts. Watched him feed it. Gentle but not too. Not good for anything as pets. Lose their hunting ability. So delicate in captivity. Looking for an excuse to die. Get upset once and they stop eating. Fast metabolism. Hungry for very long and they never recover fully. Die if they can. Challenge to the artist. The shaper. Took the top off the kiln. Cleaned it out. Made it higher. Another roof. Raised the door. Bar between the walls for a perch. Holes in the walls for air. To let the air in. Small holes.

Dark. Small. No room to move around. The man didn't like it. Not right. Wouldn't give me a falcon at any price. Only a red-tailed hawk. Finally old enough. An artist chooses his own materials. Chooses his purpose. How can you be cruel to a material. Took it home in a box. At night, In the dark. Put it in the dungeon. In the dark. Took it out only to feed it. At first, Then to take my arm. Power behind that grip. Leather armband first. Then control. Threw away the leather. Firm controlled grip. Small deep dents in my arm. Doesn't break the skin. Considerate. They come out slowly. Yellow-white dots. Then tan again. Grew quickly. Almost full size. Almost full strength. Take a chance on spoiling it. Let it out an hour a day. Chained to the stump. Silver chain from Mexico. Had to have exercise. Maybe eyes need daylight. Carry it on my arm. Get used to it. Used to other people. For the trip. Can't upset it. All I've got. Delicate. But so strong. Let other people use their arm. Not very often. Not artists. Don't do anything. Sometimes hope the hawk will turn on them. Not hurt them just scare them. They can't handle my bird. Won't allow it. My creation. Not till it's finished. Then they can try. Yes. Masterpiece. Flying close to the sun. Above the other birds. Dominating. No wax. Sun won't melt. Good materials. Soaring up there. Then driving to the earth. Air reaches all the way to the ground. Sudden splotch of red. Some stays. The rest moves across the canvas. Action painting. Toward the artist. In the air.

Another plunge. To me. On the grass. Mountains are grassy. Meadows. A blanket to keep off the cold. Even in the summer on a mountain. Between earth and air. Water always nearby. To wash off the pigment. Maybe even a pig. A small one. Big enough. Big enough to leave. Lock up the house. Load up the truck. Camping equipment. Old clothes. Wait till dark. Feeling of motion before it sees the motion. Delicate. Think it's flying. Can't confuse it. Might not eat. One thing at a time. Finally start. Like starting a fresh canvas. Paints mixed. Stage set. Get out of Texas. West.

It was dark when the truck reached Phoenix. It found a gas station and then a drive-in taco stand. Alma parked in a spot several spaces away from any cars. She rolled up her window and left the bird in the truck. She persuaded the puzzled girl at the counter to sell her raw meat as well as tacos. When she walked back she saw cars parked on both sides of her truck. A group of teenagers surrounded it and the bird filled the windshield with beating wings.

If they're tormenting my bird. Run. Open door. Get in. Calm it down. Delicate. Vital. Calm it down. Better. Hopping around. Those damn kids. Still out there. Tall one waving his arms. Shake loose chain. Open far door. Get them. Get them. No. They're running away. Scared. Ought to be. Before they upset you. What did I do with the food. Save the meat. Eat quickly. That cry again.

Can't ever tell what it means. Unemotional. Not the word. Abrupt. Opens its beak and it comes out. No effort. Sharp beak shuts it off. Taco spilling over. Orange paper. Why. Grease makes it gold. Light comes through. Diffused. Like tailfeathers. Beauty where you don't expect it. Calming down now. Get out of here. Out on the calm road. Nothing to disturb it. Feed it later. Unexpected red tailfeathers. Greasegold. Like the southwestern sun going down earlier. Catching hundreds of empty ugly roadside beerbottles just right. Shining gold. Coins in a chest. One after the other. All the way west. Until the sun ahead gets too low. Too close to the ground. Ruins refraction. Still hopping around. Smell of the food. Or the excitement. Delicate. Can't lose it. Vital.

The faded red truck worked its way through the endless traffic lights of Phoenix and its western suburbs , scurrying from one to the next. The stop and go motion kept the hawk off balance. Several miles past the last of them Alma pulled off the road. She filled the bowl with meat and put it on the seat in front of the bird. The large eyes followed her motion but the hawk didn't descend.

After a few minutes of waiting, Alma got out and walked to the back. She found the familiar shape of her sleeping bag in the bed of the truck. She walked back silently and looked through the window. The hawk wasn't eating, but it stood on the lip of the bowl. Alma waited in the cool Arizona night until the bird started.

Won't interrupt it now. Once it starts it doesn't stop. First few feet are the hardest. Get off the ground. Slide onto the seat. Don't shake the bowl. Danger. That might disturb it. Artist at work. Don't disturb. Getting down to it. A ritual of the meal. Once it starts it doesn't stop. Every ritual has a tradition. Gives it meaning. So glad it's eating. What would I do. Middle of nowhere. Destroy my plans. Destruction isn't artistic. Creation is. Destroying something creates something else. A carcass. Furry red. Limp getting stiff. Across the canvas. Action painting. Running. Flying. Dripping. Destruction is artistic. Creative. Replacing. Artistic choice. Which is more appropriate to the scene. Which pigment to use. Architect chooses artist. Artist chooses materials. Materials choose prey. Finished now. Back to perch. Put bowl on floor. Empty. Completely empty. Roll out bag. Into it. So glad bird ate. Vital. So glad bird ate vitals. Will. Fire season.

When she awoke, it was still dark. She rolled up her sleeping bag and put it in the bed of the truck. The bird was as alert as ever, but calm and content. Alma took a rag from the floor and tried to get a lumpy white splotch off the windshield. She got most of it but the rest smeared.

Driving and driving and driving. It's different at night. Just road ahead. Dim shapes rushing past on both sides. Nothing out in front of the lights. Nothing around the next curve. Nothing at all

behind. Like a gallery. One painting at a time. Down the hallway. Around a curve. A scene. Over the hill. Another scene. Another painting. Where's the exit sign. At the end of the hall. Can't you see the red glow. No. Is there a glow. False dawn. One scene after another. Not like a gallery. Too fast. A cartoon. Too fast. Who's running the projector. Any other cars in the cartoon. Don't remember. Funny you don't notice. How long have I been awake. Getting lighter.

As they topped the next rise, a black shape dotted the middle of the road. When the lights struck it fully it moved, grew wings, lifted off the ground. With surprising slowness it flew up and away. The onrushing red pickup got there too soon. But the flow of air lifted the bird and it passed over the top, showing frightened underbelly only inches from the windshield.

Get away. Hurry around the turn. Escape. What is it. Another one. The same. Brakes. Hard. It goes so slow. Get away. Almost stop. Shift. Grind gears. Gas.

The truck hungrily picked up speed into the next turn. When the lights straightened out another black shape fled. The truck braked reluctantly and the bird escaped. The hawk was unable to keep its perch and the cab was filled with the beating of powerful wings.



Stop. Calm the hawk. No. They're out there. Get away. Don't dare. Get away. Delicate. Vital. The first few feet are the hardest. Red movement across the canvas. Truck. Red. Faded. Dripping. Out there. Trying to stop me. Violent. Get away. Can't stop. The hawk. Delicate. Upset. Violent. Calm it. Now. Before it's too late. Everything would be ruined. Violent later. Can't. No. Drive a steady speed. Calm. Stop. No. Drive steadily. Less danger. Give them a chance. Get away. Before the hawk gets too upset. Gets. Goes out of control. Steady thirty. Watch the speedometer not the road. In here. Don't look at them. Get away. Hit them if necessary. Black on red.

The old truck doggedly went around the next turn. It flushed two from the road. One pulled over to let it pass. The other fled up the road. It tried to accelerate, match speed, move away. The horn of the truck yelped: a jubilant hunting cry, not a warning. The baying red truck gave the black shape no chance to change lines. It crashed through the underbrush at a steady thirty. Because of the slow speed of the truck, the airflow had no effect. The heavy black shape hit the windshield and disappeared. A brilliant red smear pointed upward.

Faster. Can't stop seeing it. Over and over. Small and black in the lights. Spreading out. Up and out. Up. Larger. Flapping large wings. Flying backward. Larger. Into the glass. Faster. Can't let them get in. Inside with the hawk. Breaking the windshield.

Letting in the air. Their air. No. Faster. Before they learn how. Before they're taught. Shaped. Red blur across the road. Across the seat. Across the canvas.

The hawk had gone into a frenzy when the form hit the truck. Reddened wings violently beat the air inside the cab. Their rattling blur filled the closed space with the sound of unlubricated gears, punctuated by shrill impersonal cries. The bird flung itself at the windows and the doors. Alma held her right hand to her cheek to keep the wings away. Her wrist and forearm were buffeted by the maddened hawk. Feathers floated with a gently rocking motion.

They're everywhere out there. Faster. Keep that hand up. Keep the wings away. Out of the eyes. Couldn't see then. Run off the road then. Hit a tree. All over. Feathers all over. They probably sleep there too. In the trees. Knock them loose. Fall and hit the broken car before they wake. Crash through the broken red egg before the wings open. Heavy and black. Plunging down from the high perch. Keep the elbow on the horn. Feathers. Faster. Get out. Out of here. Outside. More of them. Faster. Faster. Can't stop. Can't slow down. Get away. Get away and calm the hawk. Feathers. Feathers in my lap. Soothe the hawk. Not too late. Can't be too late. Feathers in my hair. Faster. Delicate. All the plans. Shaping. Creating. Training. Not too late. Faster. Get away and shape with soothing hands. Faster. Flying backward. Larger. Before the impact. Before it shatters like a faded red egg. Before I'm out there with

them.

Hot on the scent, the faded red truck ran away from the dawn, toward the night's carcass. It growled hungrily from engine to exhaust. The baying was constant now, and a shuffling sound came from somewhere in front. It eagerly burst out of each corner, over each hill, attacking any shapes it found on the road. With impersonal violence it bore down on them as they struggled for the safety of the air. The headlights found the point where paths would coincide and the truck followed. But the flow of air over the tall truck lifted the birds. As they went over, they brushed the top with wings, claws, beaks, tailfeathers. The air grew lighter and the road emptied. The truck pulled over to the side and gave up the chase.

Stopped. All stopped. Home to roost. Must have a high perch. Above everything. Has to have. Flying above every other bird out there in the air above them all. Looking down scornfully at all the other birds. By my knee. My low knee. Looking up mournfully. Sad eyes. Accusing. Flying alert up there ready to swoop down to the green meadow. Down there on the seat. Dazed. Not alert. Down there. Has to have a high perch. Above everything. Watching everything from above. From the fire tower. Fire season. Almost ready. Little things running around the meadow below the tower. Little wild mountain things. Domination. Swoop. High up in the air close to the sun. The wax not even starting to melt. Sun shining through the

tailfeathers diffusing the sun back to the green grass so far below so far beneath so far beneath the air.

The truck didn't cross the Colorado into California until late the following afternoon. Again the hot desert sun was shining through the windshield into Alma's eyes. Just west of Brawley she flipped down the sunvisor to cut the glare, knocking loose a tailfeather that had been resting on top. When it fell in front of her it caught the sunlight. She grabbed for it several times while she braked with both feet. She kept her eye on it as the truck stalled. She picked it up off the floor, held it to the light, moved it about, watched the different shades of red. Finally she waved it around in vague flying motions and her eyes followed.

TWO WAYS OF THEMATICALLY APPERCEIVING AN ESTABLISHMENT,  
THE OSTENSIBLE FUNCTION OF WHICH IS THE SALE AND  
FACILITATED CONSUMPTION, BY ITS PATHONS, OF  
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE

At first it seemed dark. Not small dark. Not unlit dark.  
Big dusty brown vacant dark.

All those old men. Lined up against all the walls, sitting  
at all the counters. All those ugly old men. No young ones. No  
women. Just those wretched pale things keeping away from the sun.  
Color of pulpsmoke, bit of sulphur yellow behind the white.

Lorena led her back. Between the beer and drink counter on  
one side -- ole men lined up quiet and orderly like sitting corpses --  
and the cigarcouter and pintcounter on the other. Past the large  
blackboard with baseball scores and people's names. Past the was  
that a tickertape or teletype or whatever you called them?

Some of them had noticed now. They were stirring and turning  
and staring and shrugging and turning back and talking about them.

Lorena was taking her to empty side by side seats at the grill  
opposite the closedin cashier's cage with real metal bars. Were they  
going to have to sit there and eat, actually eat, with evil greedy old  
men on either side?

Had to be tables somewehre; what kind of place didn't have tables?

She took a few steps -- no, those were only cardtables back there. She did take a seat beside Lorena and then it was too late -- an old soiled shoulder on the other side shrugged away from her, flickering light off the steakknife -- just enough to make sure she noticed.

On the wall in front of them a sign:

LADIES NOT NEEDED HERE

O God, what was that old man eating that he had to slurp it like that. She couldn't look at him to find out -- what was on the blackboard menu? Couldn't be any of those. Wait. Calves' brains and scrambled eggs? Eating an animal's brains? Eating the brains of a little baby cow? Had to be it; that's the kind of thing an old man like that would eat. Real meat would be too much for the soft dark gums she knew he had. Brains he could sort of suck into his slack pink hole and through to whatever was beyond. Slithery smogsmoke-colored brains. She could hear him; yes, she could hear that. The slick rhythmic drawnout sound of it and something else, something irregular. What? She couldn't look, but she knew. Hanging filaments and dangling coils of tube slapping against the vaguely whiskered chin, leaving snailslime tracks as they were steadily, slowly drawn up and in.

Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe he was having some kind of spasms over there. Maybe he hated her being next to him and the rage was shortcircuiting his body. Any maybe he wanted it to happen.

All he wanted anymore. More than anything else in the world he wanted to blow all the bloodvessels in his brain and fall over against her, on top of her, all over her with his brainblood mixing with that calfbrainblood and all those puttogether brains pouring out his mouth and all over her, all over her, covering her, getting in her long hair, into her ears and mouth and up her nose where all she'd smell would be old man, where all she'd ever be able to smell would be old man because it'd be on her, in her, sick slurpy old man she'd carry the rest of her life. If he let her live.

"Something?"

"What?"

"Something," from another one. Another one behind the counter, greasy bloodspattered apron weekold over yellow armpitted teeshirt hanging limp from a skinny chest. At least this one had some teeth though, a couple over on one side.

"Something."

She just stared.

"Something, lady."

Lorena at her side, "Of course. Two burgers d, two Great Falls. In the bottle."

The apron turned. On the back there weren't any stains from the juices of animals -- just a belt with a "Wait" tooled into it and, a few inches below and barely right of center, a huge ragged hole in

the dirty denim. No underwear. Pale braincolored wrinkled flesh.

"Never beat this place for atmosphere," Lorena said, "let me tell you that. Enjoy it while you can."

After they were finished Lorena took her down the street and into another dirty brown place. At least here there were some tables. And old women too. They weren't as bad, not nearly as bad.

But Lorena was leading her to the bar anyway. She was going to be hemmed in again and have to .... "Lorena, can't we take a table this time?"

Eyes on her for a second. "I suppose. If you think you have to, but for the atmosphere I'd --"

"I'd really much rather sit at the table."

"All right, go ahead then. I'll join you with the beer."

She sat facing the street so she could at least look outside if things got too bad. But she turned her head when she noticed what was on the wall. Pictures. Just covered with photographs, all identically framed, all the same size. The whole wall: fifty of them at least. And all old men, all sick ugly deformed repellent old men. Who took pictures like that? Why? Bad enough having them in here coughing huge gobs of their lungs on the floor, but putting them all over the wall . . . .

They all had the same noses. Puffy, shapeless . . . undigested. And the mouths: too many of them smiling for no reason except happy



scaring people like her. No teeth of course, just pursed puckered old mouths caving in at the edges. Whirlpools. Sick. But wait, over there some had teeth. The teeth section of the wall. Not real ones; didn't fit or anything. Pawnshop probably. People's hocked them and lost the ticket. Somebody else buy them for a quarter. Oddsized ones in a little dish with a sign:

IF THESE'LL FIT YOU, TAKE THEM HOME

Try them on. Bring a friend with you to tell you how they look. Or maybe the little man behind the counter would have a mirror he'd hold up with a smile -- if he wasn't too busy. And if they didn't feel good just put them back in the dish and the next one along might have better luck.

A couple on the bottom two rows had teeth as rotten as the faces. So they'd have to be real, wouldn't they? Nobody'd make false teeth to look like that. But then who took the pictures?

What about the eyes: were they false too? Put in by a peculiar taxidermist? Almost glaring and staring because they were too weak to even see the camera. Glaring and staring at her because she was looking at them. All hanging side by side, making her look somewhere else. Out the window. But they stayed in the corner of her eye anyway; wouldn't let go of her attention now that they knew how vulnerable she was.

She turned further and faced the bar. Better, but still she knew they were there, calculating the strength of her thin back, trying to size her up without sliding across the wall and giving it all away, trying to see what sort of chance they'd have . . . .

It wasn't so bad at the bar, and not only because of the women. It was mostly that the horror wasn't as concentrated up there. Baggy pants and everything were like a uniform, all the same so you wouldn't pay any attention. Baggy pants couldn't hurt you, and looking at them was sort of a relief. Faces were what hurt you.

Up at the bar they moved though; that made things worse again. Or did it? Maybe not. It was still better to look there.

Jesus, that one old guy up there -- no, he didn't look like anyone. Nobody at all. Nobody in particular. They all looked the same and he looked like all the rest. Resemblances could fool you but really they all get to look that way. He was just somebody old and sick and evil, looking around for somebody fool enough to get near enough so he could contaminate them. Looking everywhere except out the big front window at the people rushing past to do the things he used to do.

He was up now and coming toward her. No -- a different one; he was still in his seat. See, they did all look the same, not like anybody or anybody else but just all the same. Same baggy pants. The one that was up was uglier because he moved more. Toward their table.

Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he didn't want anything. Maybe he was just going by -- bathrooms had to be in backsomewhere. Moving so slow you couldn't tell: One step going one direction, the next another. Couldn't tell from his eyes either because behind the thick magnifying glasses they weren't looking at anything at all. Nothing outside the glasses anyway.

So slow. Would he be forever?

Getting closer. Face too big for the skinny body, blownyp eyes too big for the face. Staring, staring, staring at her. Greedy. Evil. So slow, so very very slow. Staring at her as he step by step scraped along the floor.

It was all right. He was going on by. Hadn't wanted her at all. Hadn't seen it in her, whatever it was they saw. Didn't even know she was there probably; just looking for the place to --

O God no he was falling. Lurching sideways toward her chair as he collapsed. Arm coming out toward her trying to grab her before he hit the floor. Trying to pull himself toward her, fall on top if he could. It was all a trick. All a dirty rotten trick, making her think he was going by when really he just wanted to get her with her guard down so he would take her along. Slower than her so he had to be sly. That's the way they were.

She jumped up, pushed her chair back. It fell and smashed on the floor. Broke apart at her moving feet like brittle limbs. Her

beerglass hit the floor, beer still spreadout in the air. She was out of the way of all of it -- not that slow yet. Not yet. Too many years knowing what was going on. Up against the wall, table between her and the dying man, wallphone pressing into her back. He'd seen it, he knew. They all saw it in her just like she saw it in them. Recognized her as fast as she recognized them. Both knew their roles. That's why they were forever and always after her, trying to die on top of her, trying to take her and then die and leave her filled with their sickness and with just them so she'd have to follow as soon as she could.

But she'd escaped again. He saw that too so he stopped dying.

Nobody said anything in the whole place. They just stared at her except for the ones who were busy picking him up and putting him back on a barstool, pressing his teeth back in his head, laying the skull on its side in a beerpool on the bar. His glasses lay broken on the floor. O God. What if his eyes were just as big without them. O God. Or maybe pieces of broken glass had been driven into them, right into their big wet centers.

And there was more. In the air she would smell it plainly, though all she'd been able to see as they picked him up was that other stain growing in his pants.

## II

Idling their machines down the latenight Mexico street. No cars at the moment so they took the center: duststreaked sweaty strangers hitting town after a long ride, cantering slowly toward the saloon.

Yes, and the doors fit too -- the old swinging double doors under a sign:

## THE WEB

Dudley followed Joshua's lead and remained astride. Right up to the door: quick twists of the throttle, whinnying exhaustroar.

Someone came out, and as soon as he did he fit too: short, dark, apron over levis, white shirt with rolled sleeves held up by purple armbands, matching purple scarf. Big limp. Dudley followed the leg down till the reason appeared: one highly ornamented cowboy boot worn outside the levis, the other leg the same but ending just below the ankle in a fat bulb. A leather blister. Under the sign-light it had the same rich toolwork.

They killed their engines. From Joshua, "You Mr. Joe?"

"Sure am, Mr. Joe. Bring them in." Holding the doors.

A cheer as they rode in between bar and tables. A small wheelstand from Joshua in response. More. Beer thrust at them as they

went by; with his frontbrake hand Dudley took one without spilling.

The bartender had somehow already bobbed his way behind the bar. "Right on through to the back room. Who'll buy them a beer?"

"Sounds good, Mr. Joe --"

"I'll take next -- "

The rest a blur as they rode through. Maniacs, all of them. Swarming over the car and tables. Talking. Jukebox. Screaming and singing. Beersplash.

A large backroom: several uninteresting motorcycles and two strangelooking cars without fenders or hoods, bodies and frames cut, sectioned and rewelded. A roll bar on each, but they didn't look to be anything that races, not with those stock mediumsized engines. Had to be a back entrance somewhere.

Room was made for them at the bar. Mr. Joe came up. "From where did you hear about my place? We rarely get new people. Most if they hear about it don't come. Visitors are good, make us a good night."

From Joshua again, "We came across the border with a big cycle-club of some sort -- all on matching 74's, uniforms, all that sort of thing."

"And they told you about Mr. Joe's place, the web? They must have felt you more our kind than theirs, for they would never come in here themselves. Bowlers."

"What?"

"Oh yes, bowlers. On Wednesdays they bowl in El Paso, on Saturdays they drink here. Different clothes for each, and they never ever get them mixed up. If there's anything you want just yell for Mr. Joe." Bobbing down the bar, "If I don't hear you they will. That's right, Mr. Joe," to himself.

The noise around them never let up, never took shape. A quick glance was enough: soldiers on leave in pressed pants, young ranch-hands in Saturday night shirts or still in workclothes swilling beer to clear the dust, milling around to erase the boredom of the day's work mending fences, tending wenchies. But the only two girls there looked like they belonged to the place, not to the men. Unattended. And one was coming toward them.

She approached like a diver, hands together and pointing forward to clear the way. She opened them as she came between the two stools, moving them apart, and thrust her chest forward. The cowhand on Dudley's far side rose, offered his stool. Dudley moved onto it, leaving the middle one for the girl.

Her chest again as she reached around both of them, grabbed their shoulders, pulled them in to her. God she was strong. God she was big.

"I am Rosa."

A sweater so coarse it looked more like a sweatshirt, long loose skirt, no shoes. Little makeup, long black hair loose and uncombed. Not pretty at all really, but impressive as hell.

An immediate hand on his leg. A quick startled look around: he saw the other one on Joshua. He looked away. Now it was quickly sliding up toward his crotch. There. Round and round. Joshua asking a quick question to someone. Dudley couldn't make it out and he wasn't about to look over there again. Didn't hear any answer. And then Joshua's voice with an unusual exaggerated inflection, "Sorry but no dinero? No pesos."

Oh no, not at all. Joshua couldn't be right. Not at all. The steady circular stroke continued without faltering. Not at all. She couldn't be trying to excite or arouse, not like she was doing. Just comfortable and soothing after all their hours on motorcycles. Just doing something nice for them.

Mr. Joe was back, putting more beer in front of them. "I hear that. You think she's working Mr. Joe, looking like that? She's not trying to hustle you, just to make you feel at home here. A welcome for new people; we get so few we like. Believe me or ask anybody here: Rosa is no amateur; if she was hustling you no way you would say no."

Funnyvoiced Joshua, "Okay buddy, I'm sorry --"

"Call me Mr. Joe."

"Okay Mr. Joe. Tell her I'm sorry, would you? I didn't mean to



make her feel bad. She can do it if she wants."

"She understands English some little, but I don't think she's interested. She seems to like the manners of your friend better. He seems to not mind as you do."

"But I don't --"

"As you did then."

Not so loud. The whole bar must be looking over at him now. From both sides. Now he couldn't look to the right either; it'd look like he was turning away from Rosa too. Thank God there wasn't a mirror behind the bar or he couldn't be able to avoid seeing everybody staring. He couldn't hear any change in the surrounding noise, but they had to be watching.

Two more beers lined up in front of him from somewhere. He reached for the glass slowly so he wouldn't upset anything, interfere with anything . . . .

A strange slow voice broke through the noise. "Well what have you got?"

Was he talking to Rosa? Suppose she answered.

But he didn't hear anybody answer, and Rosa kept on.

"I mean you've got to have something there that --"

She'd better keep on.

". . . something to put up."

Joshua finally answering, not Rosa, but Dudley couldn't make out

what he said. And then the other, "Yeah, now what about a place to do it?"

"I expect my friend down here'll move for a few minutes, take whatever he needs with him. Jesus, still going on too. Just sittin there. Hey Dudley man, can I bother you for a minute or so?"

Afe slow voice accelerating, shifting into Spanish. Rosa's reply quick and happysounding with a laugh at the end. No more hand.

After a minute Dudley stood up, looked around. Joshua with a hairy yellow giant. No kind of cowboy. Six and a half feet tall at least. Hard to tell how thick or thin because of the height and all the hair. Bush for a head, face in the middle fighting for space. Beard down to the chest, hair on the shoulders and up toward the ceiling: all an incredible shade of grapefruit. Rosa's hand in back of all that waving goodbye, moving toward a table.

"You mind moving those glasses, Dudley? We got ourselves a bit of an armwrestling match here."

Out of the beard, "Mr. Joe, you don't mind if I come over on your side of the bar for a minute do you? We're using it for a gaming table.

"You come on then, Mr. Joe. Just remember the house gets ten percent of the pot. Rules of the gaming."

"That's high, Mr. Joe -- ten percent of the pot is definitely high. You take too much."

"Too high? You don't want the house high as well?"

Big yellow shaking, "Don't know, Mr. Joe. Don't know anything about that."

Joshua's forearm looking short and plump next to the other. A bicep on either side of the elbow; very strange. Dudley slipped off his boot and put it on the bar. The heel under Joshua's elbow equalized height and leverage.

"Very unsanitary. Very very unsanitary, you see. Fifteen percent perhaps so I can pay off the health inspectors. They may have undercover men here now. Always careful, that's Mr. Joe.

It was over quickly: a minute of balance and then Joshua's slow steady victory. Things popping and twitching in his arm all the time. "Good try, apple; fight it to the end even when you know. How about while you're over there reaching thirteen feet up for that tequila bottle. Mr. Joe might give everybody at the bar a shot. Rosa too; can't forget her. Rest of the people at tables'll have to take care of their own selves."

Big yellow put town the tequila on the bar, went over to a table and brought back a guitar. Joshua took it and handed it over without looking. "Here you go, apple. I wouldn't know what to do with one of these things, but I figured it might come in handy if we get around a campfire one of these nights with nothing else to do. Might happen; we still got some miles to go."

All that hair talking, "If you can play at all that ain't much. I keep it -- kept it, I guess -- for carrying around and plunking on. Ain't good for much else, but you never know when you'll want music and anything at all will do."

"Like now, apple. Put that thing in gear and give it a test-drive, see how well you and it get along."

The slow yellow voice loud, "I'll drink to that. I believe we'll all drink to that long as the night's first tequila is sitting right here in front of us."

Shouts and glasses clinking up and down the bar. Mr. Joe quietly readying another bottle.

Dudley turned the guitar over. Cheap, but not as bad as some. Back caved in -- a foot, a head, something like that. He tried the tone: better than he's expected. Same with the neck. Roundwound steel strings, but that would be all right. He quicktuned it, tried a few chords. Behind the bar Mr. Joe twisted something and the jukebox cut off. Nobody seemed to mind.

At first he only chorded while Joshua sang, but people were slow joining in and he couldn't very well let Joshua's drunken voice crack and shudder around the melody by itself.

It wasn't hard to play at all and sing at the same time. First time he'd tried, but they were so different, so separate -- no confusion. And somebody was holding a shot of tequila to his lips every time he

paused between verses. That might get confusing after a while.

It was great to hear, though, when all the other drunks came in on each chorus: in the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines . . . .

Only trouble was, the song was going on forever. Nobody cared about the rest of the song because they didn't know the words; they just kept waiting for the pines part, and pretty soon they were hurrying it so it messed up his guitar. But then Joshua lifted both hands and Dudley stopped playing. The singing stopped after a while. Joshua the showman held the silence, held it, then started: "I left my home in Norfolk Virginia . . . ."

They started yelling; it was all right. Dudley hunted around the neck, found the approximate key. Then hunted longer with his voice and joined in, "Straddled that greyhound and rode it into Raleigh...." Try to do the song right. No chorus to this one and again nobody knew the song but him and Joshua. Everybody tried to help by handclapping on the second and fourth beats, and that was all right. The two of them would make up for their lack by singing louder. But then the crowd got some idea of the song and started climbing all over it. They were just singing whatever was in their heads, jamming it into the melody and the rythm as best they could. Well what the hell, it didn't really hurt, didn't do the song any good and it went well with tequila. He sang louder anyway. As long as he and Joshua

did it right the rest could do what they wanted. They didn't interfere.

Out of the confusion of sounds somebody's voice loud and clear -- big slow yellow? -- "it's nice enough I guess, but is it the real Mexico?" Yeah, over there talking to laughing Rosa. Everybody laughing over there. Dudley stopped singing, just played and listened. Somebody took advantage, poured two tequilas into him, one right after the other. Burning. The song wasn't much more than a loud humming blur now, but he kept playing the progression correctly anyway.

Lots more tequila.

The noise eventually subsided. Joshua looked over at him; those were the only two songs they'd worked out. Time for something new?

The flameyellow bush came over. "You seem to play it well. Could I borrow it for a bit?"

"Yeah okay, try not to hurt it; been in the family for years."

"I'll try to remember," handing Dudley a folded envelope. "You've been a long time on the road, I hear; might want a few of these to keep up."

Dudley unrolled it: white pills, maybe a dozen. One more glass of tequila to wash a couple down. Two to Joshua. He refolded the paper, pocketed it. The guitar was going now in strange hands: a strange song. Rosa seemed to be leading the singing. Evidently a

a house favorite -- everybody sung it like they knew how. Probably did it every week; probably what the bush had brought the guitar for in the first place. Well he and Joshua had still been the ones to get it started. It was their idea even if somebody else had it too.

He listened to them sing. Fast slipping back into the role of spectator, sitting in a bar watching the entertainment. Another glass might help.

It didn't. "Hey Joshua, why don't we get the hell out of here."

"Might just as well, I guess. Looks like that might be sunlight or something coming through the slats of that window. Birds might be tweeting. You got any idea how we're going to carry that guitar along?"

Hadn't thought of that.

"Maybe while I'm in the head it'll come to me. See what you can think of while I'm gone."

Two drinks later Joshua was back. "I figured it out, man. Know just what we need. Just. But I can't make either of the girls understand and I don't know where in hell Mr. Joe got to. Looked all over. Maybe you can get it across to your girl Rosa what we want; it shouldn't be all that hard. I think she's just not listening to me cause it's me. Come on, I'll tell you what I had in mind."

She was at the table with four cowboys. How should he go about it? With Joshua behind him he stood close, spoke confidentially, "Rosa, we

need a bra."

Reaching for him she said, "No comprendo."

He backed up, bumped into Joshua, almost fell. "Please?"

She settled back in her chair, yawned and stretched.

"Rosa, would you please sell us one of your brassieres?"

She looked puzzled.

"We need one real bad."

She looked troubled. Maybe she really didn't understand. He cupped his hands, brought them down on his own chest three times.

With each stroke, "Bra ... bra ... bra. "

Rosa was giggling.

He shook his head. "No, Rosa, your bra. Please," and gestured with cupped hands toward her.

She smiled, opened her arms with that gesture of hers, arched her back.

People were standing around now, watching, laughing, Dudley turned. "Wouldn't one of you tell her we're just trying to buy a bra? That's all, buy a bra. Somebody help."

But they just grinned. "Buy a bra," big yellow snorted. Rosa smiled at everybody, almost gleaming.

"Okay, damn it," turning back to Rosa. "Now then, watch what I'm doing." He reached behind his back, fumbled around, then started to unbutton his shirt. Reaching inside he again cupped left and right.



"Bra . . . bra."

She reached underneath her own sweater. Violent activity against the cloth. "Me too," she said clearly. More laughter behind him.

"I give up," he said. Turned away. But motion caught his eye and he turned back. She was lifting the sweater over her head. Her face was hidden, but a magnificent stretch of skin wasn't. The question came out muffled: "These you mean?"

"Oh Christ."

"Here comes Mr. Joe, apple. He'll help you out."

Glad to turn around -- almost. "Hey Mr. Joe, would you tell Rosa -- ask Rosa -- to sell us a bra for a guitarstrap? That's all we want; I didn't mean this. All this is a mistake, believe me. I can't make her understand."

A flood of Spanish. The sweater came down slowly. Rosa beamed, got up, said a few words.

"She says she'll have to go upstairs to get one, or maybe you already knew that. She also says to tell you it'll be a few minutes for she has to iron it."

From Joshua, "Iron it? Iron a bra? Hey look Mr. Joe, tell her the scruffiest one she's got. All it has to hold up is a guitar; not much considering . . . ."

Mr. Joe told her, she answered, he translated. "She says to tell you that when people see Rosa's bra they see her best. It must look good. When people ask whose it is you must answer that it is

Rosa's from Juarez with pride in your voice."

"Beats the hell out of a sandwich board; I'll wear it proudly."

Rosa said something more. More laughter. Much more laughter. From Mr. Joe, "That's what she thought at first, that you wanted to try one on yourself, when you first asked. She says to tell you that you may go up with her and pick out the one you want. She will model them for you. Or as she says, if you'd like, you can do the modelling . . . ."

She wasn't gone long -- just two more drinks at the bar -- came in swinging brilliant deep purple. Dudley took it carefully -- still warm. "Jesus Christ. All this?"

Background barcomment, "Cut it in half and use it for helmets."

"How much does Rosa want for this?"

Mr. Joe pouring one more shot, "I buy her things for her. I will buy her another one of course. It is on the house. Just tell anybody who asks where you got it and it will perhaps bring in business. Little while it will pay for itself don't you think?"

"I don't know . . . that much material might be expensive, apple," attaching the guitar somehow, slipping the strap over Dudley's shoulder.

Cheering. Strange weighty feel of the guitar against his back and the purple satin bra bandoliered across his chest. Pancho Villa.

Joshua stood back, examined the job. "Thank you Mr. Joe. And Rosa; mostly Rosa. And the rest of you."

"Same thing. Thank you Rosa."

"It's good you came. You have the rest of the tablets? They're on the house too and you may need the rest on your journey."

Dudley patted his pocket, feeling the unusual tug at his underarm. All there. "We'll be back this way sometime. We'll be here again, sooner or later. See you then."

"Okay. Goodbye Mr. Joe. Good trip."

"Goodbye Mr. Joe."

Chorus from the web, "Goodbye Mr. Joe."