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SUGAR PIE AND HONEY AND OTHER STORIES

by

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B.A., University of Washington, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Sugar Pie and Honey

Nobody could drive yet, and Seattle's busses didn't come out that far. So our moms would take turns car pooling us into Christ the King's parish rec hall and Mr. Leon's dance class Tuesday nights that summer-- against my will at first. Our house had a big yard with an orchard up behind it with apple, plum and prune trees, a grape vine, rose bushes, and down in front, a big clump of cedar, a tall cottonwood, hedges along the drive, and a snowball tree way down in front, along Ballinger, where I'd stand waiting for my ride so they wouldn't have to drive all the way up.

All the guys from St. Marks out from the northend, Lee Hottinger, Steve Caley, Ray Maddox, Jimmy Parfit, Roger Wright packed into Steve's mom's station wagon and into town where the houses were all tight, right against each other, to learn to fox trot, waltz, cha-cha, general social etiquette and the swing. We would all be starting Blanchet, the co-ed

Catholic high school that coming fall and this was something our moms maintained we'd just have to know. I wanted no part of it, but couldn't talk my mom out of making me go.

Tall and skinny with a shiny bald spot, Mr. Leon wore plaid slacks and a jacket, called us ladies and gentlemen and snapped his fingers. Hokey, but he looked to have rhythm. He talked about a bunch of things like how to hold your partner, line of direction, different timings like slow, slow, quick, quick, the chassé, count 1-and-2, or the twinkle, slow, quick, quick, the wrap step, the hesitation. All of us, maybe eighty couples, watched his lanky arms and legs as he whisked his petti-coated partner around the stage. He could move. He switched the record and showed us the underarm tuck, the wrap release, the throw out and sugar foot walk of the swing with "Can't Help Myself" by the Four Tops blaring out of the tinny speakers.

Mr. Leon had four pretty assistants all tall with turned-under permed hair, full dresses and sharp nose-cone bras, (C-cups Lee Hottinger called them afterwards as we waited for his mom to pick us up) and though these assistants were maybe twenty, at fourteen they looked to me to be awesome. And they always smiled--teethy. Mr. Leon always talked, loud, but when he didn't he smiled too. With his glasses, pale glossy face and bald spot, everything shined beaming on top of the plaid, and they'd stop, with his assistant smiling, holding a position for all of us to see like mannequins.

And then we had to try. The girl I was with at first, my partner, wasn't bad to look at. Good bod. We made the most of it. She had pale skin like my sister and smiled when we got close. "Warm in here, isn't it," I said, Lavioris beaming off my breath. And she said, "Yes, partic-

ularly for June," like it was a coded password we'd worked out. I liked that. I was into spy stuff then, read Ian Fleming, and thought maybe when I got over being shy I might just get into the CIA.

Ruth, that was this partner's name, (I had to ask twice) was too tall to be any real consideration for me. Besides, as we plodded through the first fox trot steps I was already looking over her shoulder, pretending to watch what the others were dancing like, but watching this cute short girl three couples ahead of us. She had distant Scandinavian features. Trying not to stare, she wasn't giving me back any looks.

"This's my favorite kind of music," Ruth said. "Yes," I said, not knowing the name of the piece that sounded something like the marching music my dad used to play to wake us up for school, wishing I was somewhere else. I couldn't think, so I said, "It reminds me of the ocean."

Pretty much the same stuff through the next three partners: the fox trot, slowly, slowly, quick, quick, the basic box step, forwards and backwards. I kept watching ahead but she didn't notice me. She didn't seem to notice anyone. Her partner hung on her though, I saw that. Mr. Leon's voice screamed out, "That's too close. You're holding her too close there," and that's what I was thinking. But when the music stopped and we all looked towards the couple in question, they were on the other side of the room.

I heard Lee Hottinger smirk behind me.

Cathy. That was her name. I watched the way her small mouth formed her words and only had to ask once. I'd wiped off my hands on my pants between partners, but was sweating pizza. Hadn't thought of anything clever to say since I first saw her, and now here she was.

Mr. Leon showed us the open conversation step in slow motion without

music from the small stage in the middle of all of us. Same slow, slow, quick, quick rhythm. Maybe Swedish, I thought looking at Cathy. She had smooth skin and short straight blond hair. She did look foreign. I asked and she told me her name was Schmidtz. We walked through the step in slow motion as I looked down at my wingtips, and then to her tight tan ankles under her stockings.

"Compliment your partners, now gentlemen," Mr. Leon ordered.

Right away I said, "That's a nice dress."

She gave only a blank stare back. Said nothing.

Lee Hottinger laughed behind us. I could hear him. "That's a skirt not a dress," he said, in the long gap before the music started.

Lee Hottinger was not my best friend. Lee was one of two thugs in St. Marks School. He had thin, white-blond hair, a jugged forehead and high hairline like he would soon be bald, olive skin, and I remember sweat built up easily along his temples. In the fourth grade I used to go over to his house. He lived on the creek. We'd catch bullheads, gut them without breaking their necks, timing how long their hearts could beat outside their bodies, connected to nothing.

Lee's dad had a red Chevy pickup like my dad's but with a V-8, chrome and a canopy shell. And a four speed stick shift. Their house sat down in a hole at the end of a dead end, and as we got older Lee would start up his dad's truck when his parents were gone and back it out into the cul-de-sac, driving it in circles, waving.

Lee's sister looked like a rat. She was four grades younger than us, had rope straight, dirty blond hair, and that rodent face, thinner than Lee's. She never fit right into the uniforms the girls in St. Marks had

to wear. She'd come into Lee's room when I was over sometimes and they would scream at each other and Lee's mom would yell from upstairs, "Lee!"

Lee's father made Saki and kept gallons of it in the basement. He also kept stag magazines. Lee would show me these and read parts he liked especially. Like where the guy comes in naked, totally naked, (Lee liked to say naked, putting extra emphasis on the first syllable) and this guy begins kissing the girl who tells the story in the magazine, kissing pretty much everywhere.

One magazine specialized in nudist camps. This might have been Lee's favorite. Everyone lounged around, as Lee would say, naked. Lee read details out loud for me: naked and nude. And pictures. One page showed penises, side-by-side comparisons, like Charley Atlas's ninety-six pound weakling next to the He-man. Before and afters. "Look how much heathier this dick looks," Lee said pointing to the photo of the one that had been out in the sun. The other one looked shriveled like it'd been left in a bucket of cold water for weeks. No debate about it. About which one a person would want.

Lee's mom liked to wear pedal pushers. She drove us home after that first dance lesson. Lee's mom drove us a lot. When we talked about it, the dance lessons, I guess we rambled, and probably made it sound like it hadn't been all that bad. Lee brought up that business about the dress that was a skirt. Lee's mom turned around and looked at me funny from behind the wheel. It was just a matter of phone calls before all our moms would know about that skirt and about what we thought about these dance lessons.

Lee's mom liked to talk. About everything. She'd ask us questions

when we rode in her station wagon and if we didn't have much to say she'd talk about Lee, school, now this dance business, politics, sewer bonds and sidewalks, church stuff. She called herself outspoken. This was my first encounter with understatement. I remembered whenever I was over at Lee's and inside she was usually on the phone. She ironed on the phone, cooked on the phone, looked outside on the phone. She talked the same way on the phone as she did in the car: fast and busy. And she had opinions. About everything.

It's funny, Lee didn't have all that much to say. And his sister never talked from what I saw of her. His dad was quiet too and not around much. But Lee's mom made up for them.

Like I said, Lee'd never been my best friend. We lived far enough out that you had school friends and summer friends. Lee was a school friend. Saturdays in the fall, Lee and I would go down the hill behind his house to the creek. Summers, you could catch trout behind the alder log jams. Small rainbow. But in the fall, salmon longer than your arms would come up, through the Sound, the locks, and the lake, and up these creeks to spawn in low water. Red and black with white fungus blotches, they'd hang along the cutbanks in deeper water until spooked, slither up the shallow ankle-deep runs with their black backs, tail and fins half out of the creek.

Lee wanted to use nets. He got his dad's kneeboots, broke clubs off rotten stumps for both of us, and waded the creek clubbing after the paired-up fish.

We got one one day. It was Lee's fish. He chased it up a sand bar. It was ugly. But it was big. Grey and big. Not the clean silver, salt water color--but big. A few eggs drooled out of its vent and I remembered

its eye watched us as we stood above it--the fish on the sand, and even after the first club hit, the eye moved, watching us as we hit it.

Of course we thought we really had something. We crawled up the bank back to his house with Lee holding it by its gills, me holding the tail. There was sand all over it. We ran into Lee's dad first. We showed it to him. Lee's dad usually didn't talk much. Like I said, he usually was quiet. He looked at us, at the clubs and at the fish. "Why'd you want to do something like that," he said.

It was one of those questions parents ask you you could never answer.

I had to go home. Lee's mom wouldn't let him bring it in the house. Later Lee told me his dad made him bury the fish in their back yard.

It was that summer of Mr. Leon's dancing lessons that I found a tin of rubbers. I was waiting for my ride and they were down at the end of the driveway, on our property, next to the snowball tree like somebody had stored them there. FOR PREVENTION OF DISEASE I remember the label on the tin said. What disease I wasn't sure. Lee Hottinger would know though. I had the rubbers in my pocket to bring to dance class and figured I show them to Lee. But I thought better of it. He'd tell his mom maybe, and if he did, that would be that. Every mom would know.

Lee's mom didn't keep quiet about much. I wondered whether Lee's mom henpecked Lee's dad, nagged at him like that. Like she did to Lee. Maybe. She didn't keep secrets, I knew that. At first I thought maybe Lee's dad was gone on a job somewhere. She'd say stuff in the car like, "Don't act like that, Lee. You know I'm alone now. Remember that."

And she started showing up early when it was her turn to drive us home, coming into the hall watching us progress around the dance floor.

I was glad she wasn't my mom. She looked a little sad. She'd wait by the door in her pedal pushers and I could see she watched all of us, probably thinking we looked cute, especially Lee.

I hadn't danced with Cathy Schmitz much the last few weeks. Just the way things worked out in the lines. But I remember Mrs. Hottinger was there, towards the end one night I did.

I'd just danced with one of the tall assistants. We were right next to the stage. I'd forgot her name as soon as I heard it but she didn't talk much anyway. She just smiled. Cathy was next in line. I looked over at her, smiled, and she smiled back.

Partner change, and we were back at it. Swing dancing, "Can't Help Myself" playing, wrap releasing, underarm tucks. The underarm tuck--really the underhand tuck, Mr. Leon had told us--was easy with Cathy. The assistant had been too tall.

Mr. Leon turned the music down like he was going to show us something. "Now gentlemen," he said, and we stopped, looking up, right underneath him. "What's your partner's name?" He said it to everyone, but we were right next to him. Right there next to the stage. I looked at Cathy. I started to form her name with my mouth but nothing came out. I couldn't remember. I knew her name, of course, but came up blank. Nothing. She looked at me and the eye I looked at was like that salmon's looking back at me. Mr. Leon right on top of us: "What's her name?"

"Cathy," I finally said, after she'd already said it.

That was Seattle, what fourteen years ago, those dance lessons and Mr. Leon. "Sugar pie and honey, Can't help myself." I hear it every once in a while.

Missed my ten year high school reunion this summer. On purpose. Two days after college I moved away. Sure, they're all married with a couple kids. Happy enough, probably.

I was thinking about that summer before high school though. This morning. About Lee Hottinger, the dance lessons. We never talked about it then, but Lee was the first kid I knew whose parents got divorced.

We're into fall here but it's still warm. Last year and a half I've been living with my girlfriend and last night along the river I asked her if she wanted to get married. It's low water and we waded through it easily. Yes. That was all she said. Really. And I was thinking about it this morning. About all of it. About what's next. About all that can go right, all that goes wrong.

Yes, Your Husband's Here

Valarie told me something like this might happen. But tonight when the phone rings, I answer it and no one's there on the other end, it still irks me. After all, it's late--late for the phone, I mean. I've got other things to worry about. Like the river for instance.

And Curt's out here with me.

It's not that there really isn't anyone there on the other end, just that they won't say anything. What can you do?

I say hello two more times and hang up.

You'd have to see the river. There's standing water in the yard, and the river's running just the other side of the berms, just right there. And on the radio they said it's still coming up.

I've been house-sitting Valarie's place for about a week. This's only my second time so far, watching Val's. We're old friends from work when we both used to waitress at The Crazy Horse. Hadn't seen Val much for almost five years, I guess, until the last couple months. No one had. She'd been out of circulation.

Usually I don't watch television. But she's got two of them with remote controls. The cable besides. She says she doesn't watch it either but who knows. Last night, for instance, Gallagher was on. He told a great one about hemorrhoids and Preparation H. He was kind of cute until he took his cap off. Anyway, he moved his hands showing one of them, a hemorrhoid, shrinking from there to here, ending up with something about hot dog size. What's so good about that, he'd said.

I was just telling Curt about it, but maybe you had to see it.

Curt doesn't like it now when I make them flutter through. The channels. Flipping them like a kid at a push button transistor in a car. He says, Jesus Margie.

I don't do it for him.

Val'd been head waitress when I first started. Cocktailing. Everyone starts out cocktailing first. Val'd come out of the dining room my first night to train me. Usually she'd get the tips. That was the policy. The trainer got the trainee's tips. She didn't go for that, so we drank our tips: shooters of tequila, margaritas to sip on. It was a Monday but it seemed busy to me.

That was my first night. Nobody ever said anything.

I guess about then Val started working two jobs. Waitressing four nights a week, selling real estate days. She used to say, A couple more years like this and I'll be set for the next ten.

She's got a lot of nice things. It's a great house. I feel like a queen out here. And you should see the hot tub. Val calls it the spa. There's a kit for it and I check the pH, chlorine, watch the temperature-- things like that.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not into that much. Val doesn't use it

either I don't think. The tub. But you can't let something like that just go to pot though. She told me she hopes the river gets high enough she can get some flood damage insurance on it.

Who knows the way it's coming up.

It sounds weird, I know, I tell Curt, but she pays me to watch this place. Seven dollars a day.

Curt says, Really.

I'd do it for free, I say. But it's a lot of responsibility, I guess. And that's what she wants.

I wouldn't argue, Curt says.

I tell him she doesn't want a lot of people out here, parties, people dropping by, things like that. So it works out fine, I say.

Curt doesn't say anything. He's new in town. He doesn't know Val from Eve.

Besides, she's got two dogs and the cats--going back about the pay, I mean. Luwanda, that's the three-legged one, the Gordon, she stays around. But Swainyo, the big one, splits every once in a while. At least he doesn't shed.

But it's the cats Val's attached to. How's Gladys? That's the first thing she says when she calls. Gladys is her favorite. Val's got cat stationary, cat pillow covers, sheets, cat figurines, cat this and that. Last thing she told me the first time I'm sitting her place, Margie, I don't care if the house burns down but don't let anything happen to Gladys.

Have you ever noticed the way Johnny Carson plays with his nose all the time?

Now that you mention it... Curt says.

I don't know how she does it. Val, not working for so long, I mean. I'm back at it. Waitressing. Su Casa now. That's how I met Curt. He met me. It's a lot smaller than The Crazy House--that's what we called it--Su Casa is, but the tips are good and the crew's okay. Just didn't feel like going back there. The Crazy Horse. Once you leave, you know, that's it. Some girls go back, I know, but you've got to start on the bottom again: cocktailing. I couldn't go back to that. It'd be like moving back in with your parents. Breaking up's bad enough. Divorce, things like that. I can't go backwards. Work wise, that is.

Look at Val. She's smart. When she quit she quit everything. It must have been nice. You hardly saw either of them around much. She or David. I wasn't part of that crowd then anyway. I was married then. To Scott.

Curt says, What's Valarie do anyway?

He's got the remote control. He made me put it down. Entrepreneur, I tell him.

The phone again. I look at it, ask Curt to turn down the set, let it ring three times, and say a clear hello. Maybe I hear some breathing this time but nothing else.

People, I say towards the phone when it's on its way back down.

Curt says, I'll answer it next time.

No you don't, I say.

Curt's getting some wine open. There's a commercial for farm imple-ments on, so I hold the channel button down again, just in case. The black host with the mustache on the religious station's interviewing

someone with a beard who must have done something, but I can't place him. It's called 700 Club but I don't know what 700 stands for. Usually they want money at an 800 number.

Luwanda wants in. But she's shedding. She was hit on the county road a couple years back. Val tried to save the leg but finally it had to come off, right at the hip. She gets along all right it seems, chases the ball, gets up the stairs, no problem.

Curt says, Why don't you let her in?

Luwanda smears her nose against the glass.

Could you put some ice in mine, I say.

Valarie's gone again, on another short trip. That's the problem. The problem with the phone. She was secretive about where they were going, just giving me numbers. Phil, the guy she's on this trip with is married, and he's been seeing her off and on all through the spring, I think. She tried to tell me his wife might be calling out here, as strange things had been going on with the phone before she'd left. Rude calls, she'd said.

Just write down the day and hour, she'd told me. I didn't think much about it then, even though Val made kind of a deal out of telling me. What good would it do to write anything down? No words were exchanged.

I'm trying to remember what Valarie's voice sounds like, wondering whether our voices might sound the same over the phone. I don't think so.

I thought about taking the phone off the hook, but I'm a hint curious about all of this anyway. I don't mind answering someone else's phone, really. It doesn't bother me. After all, I'm only house-sitting. It's

not like I'm involved in it.

Have you ever sunburned your part? I ask Curt.

He looks at me. Hair part, I say, touching on top my head.

He laughs.

Don't laugh, I tell him. It hurts.

I run the glass over the top of my scalp. I thought I'd been burned everywhere but I guess not. This was a first for me.

My scalp's going crazy... itching, I say. Like my skull's split down the middle.

Ever try vinegar? he says.

I don't think so, I say.

People are talking about the river and what it might do if this weather keeps up. Everyone knew it was going to be a big run-off year. This afternoon I was talking about it with someone over coffee. I always have coffee before going to work. There's a crowd then, sitting out in the afternoon sun talking about this and that, watching cars go by.

And with this weather. The hills getting green, that look they get in the spring, and the sage and the lupine.

Now watch the way he plays with his nose, I tell Curt. See that.

So? he says.

Mac Davis is on now. He's fiddling with his too. He's cute, in a rough way, but what can he do?

Scott had hair on his chest too, like that.

Look at that, I say to Curt.

Curt says, Maybe it's just an idiosyncrasy, something like that.

Julie has a theory. I tell Curt, Julie says everyone's tooted-up on the show. That's how he gets people to talk. Look at him fingering that thing. They can't have colds down there this time of year.

Maybe it's the pollen, Curt says.

You're dull, I tell him.

Julie's theory is that there's somebody backstage drawing out lines in the dressing rooms, and they're all coked-up. Nasal blasters, things like that. Julie's in to it. I work with her. She's probably one of my best friends.

See what else's on, I tell Curt. So he holds the channel button down, going through them all. Then he holds it too long and it just keeps going, flopping through all the empty channels with nothing but salt and pepper static.

Salt and pepper. Salt and pecker, we call it at work.

I start flipping through Adventure Travel off the coffee table. The ice cubes rattle when I drink. I'm not keeping up with Curt. He drinks fast. Maybe he's unsure about all of this.

Valarie told me Phil has two teenage daughters and that one, the one named Kirsten, had come out here one night to check and see if her dad's van was in the garage. Val'd been upset with the dogs. Neither of them had barked.

Thumbing through I see an article on the River of No Return.

I've floated the day section, I tell Curt. Below Salmon. That was with Scott on the Fourth some years back. I'm holding up the article for him, showing the pictures with some rafters, the looks on their faces, the green tint of the river, and the rocks and white water.

From Val's bedroom you can hear the Wood. With the TV off you could

hear it now. I keep track of it on the trees back of the house, wading out, notching this aspen. It keeps coming up--another three inches today. Silty, with a glacial feel.

Someone having coffee today told me it always peaks early in the morning, the river, sometime after midnight. Then it stays, or goes down a little maybe, and builds up again during the heat of the day to midnight again, when it all drains to a new peak.

I like just listening to it. You can almost feel it by listening.

Julie has another theory, about running water, and what it does with negative ions, electrolytes, things like that. Ways it can change your chemistry--body chemistry. She's in to that too.

She had her palms read too. I tell Curt, Julie at the restaurant had her palms read.

And? Curt says. He's watching intently.

And she's supposed to meet a tall man who doesn't live here who's involved in medicine--but not a doctor. Dark and handsome, of course, I say.

Beats me, he says.

Here's another article towards the front about survival books. I'd read Survive the Savage Sea when I was with Scott. He always talked about getting a sailboat. In California he sailed a lot, I think. Maybe he is again.

Gladys is up on my lap. I look over towards Curt. He's staring into the set, colored light shining back, turning his face colors as they change. He looks distant.

* * *

The phone rings.

I mean really, I say. This is getting a bit much. What time is it anyway?

Tell them, he says. Do you want me to get it?

I shake him off, pointing to the television, swallowing some icy wine.

Tell them you're in bed, Curt says. Tell them you're the answering service.

I shake my head, smile, say hello--professional and happy. They say nothing. There's someone there but they just don't know what to say. It must be that daughter, Kirsten. The wife wouldn't be fooling like this--calling this late. But maybe. Maybe she's desperate.

I wonder how many times she'd let it ring. When she'd cut it off. No, your husband's not here. That's what I feel like telling her.

Val's put on weight since David went back to California. She was always a rail anyway, so maybe she's relaxing more now. She's getting away from the coke. She's trying to change that image. She's getting into aerobics. She says she's starting to feel good about herself.

That's her theory, I guess--aerobics. And Julie's got her negative ions. Think I'll call mine the big bang theory. Just one quick bang, it'll be big and all spelled out: This Way--He's the One--He's Not the One.

I was married almost a year. Eleven months, plus a few odd days, I liked to say afterwards. There was an ease to it. Then the big bang. Like you're in your car, your new car, waiting at a crosswalk, and bang, you're rear-ended. Whiplashed.

Yes, your husband's here. That's what Caroline told me when I went

over to see if it was true.

It still gets me.

It's getting late. Gladys is purring. I feel like asking Curt to hold me. To just hold me.

The phone rings again.

I get up and go to the kitchen window, opening it.

Are you going to get that? Curt asks. He's filling his glass.

Not now, I say. It's getting late.

That's five rings. I hear the river, but it just keeps ringing over all other sounds.

Curt looks over at me. I run my fingers up near my hair, feeling the cool come in from outside.

How's the old noggin? he says.

She's still ringing. I'm remembering what it was like.

That hurts too, I say. It just burns.

Roadhunters

It was quiet. Jim rolled his eyes open, squinting out into the unfamiliar cramped surroundings. His head hurt. With the top of his bag unzipped, he sat up peering out through the frosted window. It was cold. He scratched off a clear spot but could see only white before his breath recoated the spot. Best get going, he thought, if we're going to salvage any of the morning. This's the last weekend. Then, pulling the zipper down the length of the bag, exposed to the chill inside the truck, he remembered: they were stuck.

Jim scraped off the glass again. His brother snored. Jim nudged him with his boot-socked foot until the hard snoring stopped. Bart coughed. Even in thermals Jim thought it felt cold. Looking out through the frosting spot of glass he saw only dull white.

"Let's get up," Jim said, clearing the phlegm out on the last syllable.

"Huh?" Bart rasped from the corner of the truck.

"Let's get moving." Jim's breath shot out towards the frost-lined

glass. "Light out," he said, crouched, pulling his pants on slowly, trying to stay as much as possible in the sleeping bag. His clothes were chilled but not frozen. Somehow he had kept his boots under his bag. They were unfrozen.

Bart stirred while Jim climbed over the seat, grabbed his jacket and cranked the Vice-grip door handle open. "Shit," he said, as dry snow sucked into the cab. "Dumped last night."

"Much?" Bart asked hoarse.

"Enough. Foot, foot-and-a-half maybe. Coming right down."

The door hung up on some snow-drifted sage and Jim pushed it hard, open, and climbed out squinting. Snow cut at his eyes. White--all he could see--dull, blinding white, without any clear line between ground and sky.

"Close the door," Bart said. "Be out in a second."

They were somewhere in Copper Basin, Unit 50, one of the last rifle hunt areas to close in southcentral Idaho, and this was the last weekend it was open. Spur on the moment they'd headed from Hailey Friday night after work, drove the two hour drive to Mackay in three, and headed in late over the Burma Road. It looked different in this white-grey light.

His breath mixing with the falling snow, Jim kicked open a path around the side of the truck and bent down to look underneath again. He couldn't see if it was high-centered. The axle, brake line, brake drum packed with snow--the whole front end of the frame packed solid, tapering out along the transmission case to single crystals of frost--the truck creaked as his brother moved. Jim stood back up. He didn't want to have to think.

He looked down at the tire. It was dry snow and the tire looked dark and dry next to it. Hairline cracks spread out over the sidewall, Jim kicked the tire clean of snow.

"Christ," Bart yelled as he poked out through the door. "Jesus Christ. Where the hell are we?"

"Yeah," Jim said slowly. "How the hell are we going to get out?"

"Christ Jesus."

Jim looked up at the ruts in the snow behind the truck. Not that much last night, six inches maybe, hard crusted pack. No real trouble driving, the ruts glaring in the headlights, but no real trouble until this curve. He figured the truck sat maybe twenty-five yards off the road.

"We'll get out," Jim said making conversation as he passed his brother.

"Should hope to shit." Bart squinted through the snow. "Spread some of this and I'll start it up."

The dry blew in, drifting off the flat, and they scraped away what they could around the tires.

"Sounds a little weak," Jim said.

"Come on Betsy," Bart said under his breath as the pedal again audibly pumped the linkage to the carburetor. "Got down there last night." The starter whined, and the engine turned over.

"More than I can say for us."

Bart waited for the battery to recover. When the starter kicked in again the engine coughed once, and took, spitting out black carbon onto the snow off the tailgate. The lifters rattled and the cold engine began to pump thick oil, and ran.

Bart shifted the stick linkage into reverse with two movements, straightened the front tires as he ducked his head out the open door

into the falling snow, and slipped out the clutch. The tire he watched just spun, freely, as if it were in a trough of water.

Jim came around the driver's side. "No good," he said again. Snow clung to his eyebrows and mustache. The engine idled down. Jim's face looked purple. "It's dug in," he said. "High-centered maybe."

Bart nodded as his gloves fumbled for the key.

"Handyman jack under the rear seat?"

"Yeah," Bart said. "I'll shovel if you want to get it out."

"Maybe we can build a corduroy road," Jim said, working his way into the back, sliding the sleeping bags and gear back out of the way. He lifted up the seat. "Jesus H. Christ," he said, his feet crunching into the cans, empty glass pints. "No wonder I'm hurting so bad."

After they jacked the Travelall, stuffed hunks of sage in both wheel divots, spread the cloth game bags out behind the wheel paths, they stomped and shoveled out a long path back towards the road.

"You try this time," Bart said.

It started easier. Jim engaged the gears, turning the wheel, and dropped his head out the open door. The smooth tread-lug spurt around as he slipped the clutch, caught on the sage, slipped, rocked--the truck easing out of the hole it'd been stuck in. Bart pushed. It was rolling. The tire caught some more sage debris, lurched, crunching over it, turning on the snow and sage wheel path, slowly, and rolled onto the cloth game bag, building momentum, sunk, digging into the bag and slipped sideways. The tire swirled, grabbed the cloth, spitting it with the sage stalks, spattering snow out. And the tire spun to no use.

"Hold it, hold it," he heard Bart yell up from the front as it idled down.

Snow pelted the hood. Jim forgot about his head. He sat fumbling with the steering wheel. A quick flash, he remembered the spinning wheel of a bumper car as a kid at a carnival down in Twin, for some reason, and his father's face swung round and round at him behind the wheel.

Bart kicked the side of the truck. It sat cattywampus in the white field. Jim turned the idling engine off, climbing out. "God damnit," he said, as his older brother surveyed. "What do you want to do?" Jim looked at his watch. Snow fell on his wrist.

"Can't hunt in this weather, that's for sure."

"Hungry?"

"Hungry, hungover and cold."

"Makes two of us."

The strong sun off the snow blinded him at first. Slow going, Jim kicked, floundered, postholing in the hip-deep drifts. Bart cut trail. Late Monday afternoon, their third day, December 1, the storm quit. It was only blowing. They plowed on through the dry snow without speaking. Wind cut his face--the air dead cold.

Jim forked off to the side, packed out a small clearing, unbuttoned, then squated. He heard Bart's one-piece suit brush its crisp sounds out. Thin clouds hung above on the ridge line like smoke.

Jim caught up as Bart cut through the drift onto the vicinity of the road. "We got what, two hours of light maybe." Bart pointed. "Boxes in behind us." He glanced at the map. "Think there's only one way."

"There's that ridge," Jim said slowly. "Could get a better view from it."

"Don't need scenery."

"Overview. Give us a look around. An option or two."

"Too deep."

Jim pointed. "Looks like the wind's blown the ridge clear above that draw."

"We're not going to walk out a here today anyway, I guess," Bart said.

"Okay, let's go. I've got the pistol."

"See that. Let's get a rifle just in case."

By now rescue parties were out looking for them, Jim hoped. Bart's wife knew roughly where they were. Overdue a day now, she'd be making phone calls. Stomp SOS's, keep snow off the roof, off the windshield. There would be planes, he thought, helicopters, snowmobilers maybe. Maybe somebody else was lost--the storm hit so quick--maybe out here. Maybe they'd run into them. With supplies maybe. There had to be struggling game. It was just a matter of time, Jim thought. They would have great stories.

The sun dropped below the far ridge as they made their way up. The south exposure was blown clear of deep snow, but still it was slow.

"Barely can make it out from here," Bart said pausing, looking back towards the buried truck. "And we know where to look. Better keep some sage handy for a signal fire. Take a mirror off to signal with."

"Wish we had some carpenter's chalk," Jim said. "Something to dye snow with. Some paint for the roof."

Bart pointed to the drifted line of the roadbed. Steam vapor hung above a patch of bare sandbar willows.

"What do you think happened to that antelope?"

"Caught itself on the barbwire, I'd guess," Bart said. "Between strands."

"Yeah. What about its head?"

"Coyote," Bart said quickly. "Probably got it while it was still alive."

"Fun huh. Was it a buck or doe?"

"Couldn't tell." Bart stomped his feet circling in place. "Should've asked the magpie."

Jim knocked his boots together, looking out. He tried not to think much, staring into nothing but glazed drifting snow. The blued barrel and fat 3X9 scope of the bolt action rifle slung over Bart's shoulder paled in the chill on the ridge. He could see a long way and see nothing.

"We've still got those biscuits and cheese," Bart said, turning to re-break trail.

"That we do. And one frozen beer."

"We'll do some hunting tomorrow."

"We better," Jim said, his breath trailing out behind him.

Jim woke, back against the tailgate, in a half fetal, comma hunch, like he was being spooned only she wasn't there against him. The tailgate felt cold. His gut ached. His head on top the wrapped pile of outer clothes, he smelled the foul socks, the boots, the musky-must smell out of his bag, and the permeated smoke layering the innards of the truck.

Dull morning light, opaque grey, glint through the frost-coated glass. His stomach growled as he rolled onto his back. The last couple days they'd killed the storm in their bags, all day, except to urinate, eat some saltines, sleep maybe, play cards, sleep more. Not today. Jim thought of those long Sundays in bed, Lynn, smells of breakfast at the cabin, the trout she'd caught that morning, the grassy hollows where the river ran in spring. They were there with the lupine, the grass with

color.

He was stiff. There was wind.

The report of the .270 echoed out through the open, snow-piled flat and back off the rimrock, down the ridge. Jim refocused through the scope, found the doe, still unaware of them, kicking, stumbling the direction she'd been headed. The deer fell over on its side in a drift.

"Nice shot."

By the time they'd made it to the kill, out a good hundred and seventy-five yards, a magpie was the only moving thing out in the white flat.

The doe stumbled maybe a dozen yards before falling. The eyes looked peacefully glazed. The bullet entered low, and had shattered both front shoulders.

Jim began venting the carcass.

"Figure we both did each other a favor," he said. The warm pouch and entrails spilled out steaming onto the snow.

"How's that?"

"She's starving and we're about to, and this keeps all three of us from dying that way."

"I don't know," Bart said, taking the liver into the bag. "Little early for deer to be starving. She's got an inch of fat on her."

Thursday night he decided: They had to try and get out. The box apiece of ammunition they'd fired that afternoon hadn't caught the attention of any of the snowmobilers fiddling with their machines, two and a half, maybe three miles away. He'd heard the racket of those machines, heard it so well. Distinct. Saw blue puffs of smoke, the outlined men all so

well. What was wrong with them anyway? Why hadn't they heard the shots? They must have been rescuers.

Clear and cold again that night, with an eighth of moon. They talked it out. Six days so far. And all they'd done was wait. Tomorrow they'd head out. Out over the long open field, up the bank and, they hoped, out the path left by those four snow machines.

It would be a long walk in the snow, past "The Potholes" marked on the map by stained blood and greasy fingermarks. A lot of standing water, Jim remembered fishing near there. It couldn't be far to those tracks. They could take a rifle and Bart's pistol.

Jim turned off the stove.

First light they were off. It was clear. It had to get warmer. When the sun did come up over the ridge-top it got only colder. Sharp against his face, ears, the temperature dropped as the sun sucked cold air down onto the pocket of the flat.

Jim walked with his head down, tucked into his chin. Smoky vapor from the creek hung ahead, above the clumped willows. It had to get warmer, he thought, as they both walked on.

Just one snap and he'd broken through, knee-deep into ice-slushed water. Only his right foot hit creek bottom and he was out, but both layers of jeans were wet. Water sloshed out of the tops of Jim's boots. He was cold and it would take time.

It could have happen to either of them, he thought. They would have to stop now, build a fire while he dried off. It was around noon. They had matches, paper, and even a small bottle of white gas, he was sure.

But it would take time--down time.

Bart was off breaking willow sticks. He hadn't said anything. He had to be cold too. Jim heard him yell for him to come over.

"Worse things have happened," Bart told him as they crossed on the path. Bart slipped the fish egg bottle of gas into his jacket.

"Yeah, yeah," Jim nodded, walking on. "Better too. Why doesn't a helicopter just come down and pluck us out a here. Not worth it. I admit it," he said, plodding on towards the clearing, not caring that no one heard him. "We made a mistake. Made a mistake just coming out here. Okay? Just bring on the copter. I'll never do it again. Get me the horn. One copter, a bag of donuts and some coffee. Yes sir. Parachute them down. Fine. Don't really care, over--"

He walked into the clearing Bart's tracks lead to. Lots of deer sign. And he saw the round sunk patches where they'd bedded, clear of snow and solid, like small ice rinks. Jim found the piled, criss-crossed heap of sticks on a brown sack. He dumped half the white gas on.

"Don't really care," he said, flicking the match. The pile went up in the humph of gasoline explosion.

Jim unslung the rifle and set it alongside the pack, folding the leather sling underneath so the barrel was up out of the snow. "Brandy," he said, trying not to slur the words when he spoke.

His feet felt numb. He stamped and kicked off the iced snow, jumping in place, then sat down on his pack clearing out more snow. The pant cuffs were frozen around the top of his boots. "Brandy," he said again aloud. "Just drop it. You don't have to pick us up today. Just a thermos now. Come back tomorrow with more coffee, more brandy, maybe a rope ladder. How about a burger while you're at it. Cheeseburger thank you.

For that matter, hold the burger, hold the rope ladder, just radio a stand and tell them four apiece with everything, fries, onion rings, gallons of coffee and brandy. Yes, any brand. Imported be fine. Reporters don't have to know about the brandy. I'm sure they'll be there. They'll want a story. I'll give them one," he said, holding his feet out over the fire. "Better warn the stand to rope off a landing area. They'll get a story. Don't forget the brandy."

The wet wool of his boot sock singed and stunk, dripping into the flames as he sat holding both feet above the smoldering ashes, reaching for more sticks.

Bart was out after more wood. He had to be cold himself. It would be okay. He was calm now. He would dry out his socks, boots, thermal underwear and they would get on and get out. They could both use the rest. "Brandy," he said again out loud.

He took a hunk of venison from the daypack, stuck it on a stick and held it out past his feet. It singed into the flames. He chuckled to himself about a barbecue, trying to laugh out loud but couldn't.

He wanted to laugh the day he realized Lynn had really left. He couldn't tell anyone about it at first. Not even Bart after work having a beer. By the end of the week it was sure and he let it out, joking about it during lunch. He wanted to laugh. Laugh with Bart. She would be back, he'd said. They always do. Wanted to have a beer at the B&B and laugh out loud and mean it. Laugh at it all but his insides were rolling like they had been then, and he felt now that there was little difference between laughing or crying. Some hell of a barbecue. Where was the copter anyway. He had a story.

"How goes it?" Bart dumped an armload of willows next to the fire,

spreading some individual sticks onto it.

Staring still into the flames, listening to his socks, smelling them, the sizzle of the short flames, the drip off his pantlegs. "Warm," Jim said quickly, alert now. "Not bad at all."

"Look mostly dry. What about the pants?"

"Won't be long. What time you got?" asked Jim. "My watch stopped."

"Twelve-thirty, quarter to one. Got some time yet."

"Meat'll be done soon."

"Yeah, see that. Have to give it a try." Bart reached down for the stick and held it out over the hottest part of the fire. The venison singed, dripping into the greasy flames.

"You hit anything with that?"

"Sometimes," Bart said putting his hand on the grip of the holstered handgun. "You've shot it haven't you?"

"Yeah, guess I have. Jumps around too much."

"Got some hot loads for it now. Spear hollow points, 158 grains."

"Don't think I could hit a garbage can at a dump with it."

"Takes practice. Just have to get close with these loads though."

"Steak smells good," Jim said. "Just like downtown."

"Oh hell of a lot better than the B&B. Screw old Frank."

"You mean screw old Mary don't you."

"Screw her too."

"And Jenny?"

"Put the boots to her while we're at it."

"You're at it," Jim said.

Bart smiled. "Now Debbie, I'll have to be nicer to. Yes."

"I bet."

"Desert, you know." Bart put some more sticks on the fire. It went up, the meat flaring with it. "Creamy at that."

"Thought you might have a liking for her."

"Damnit," Bart said, taking the meat out of the flames. "Why do all the pretty ones go and get married so young?"

"Never stopped you before."

"A little conscience never hurt anybody," Bart said, resting the meat down on a pile of sticks. He cut into it. "Here, try some of this. It'll take your mind off the B&B."

"Not coffee."

"Not bad though," Bart said chewing. "Could use some gravy."

"Yeah, along with some cheese, a bun, hot mashed potatoes and some brandy for the coffee."

"While you're at it, I'd like some rhubarb pie, ala mode. Deb serving it."

"Wouldn't mind seeing you get some of that."

"Oh, I'd share."

"Just bet you would."

"You know your older brother better than that," Bart said, stirring up the remnants of the fire with the greasy stick, chewing down a piece.

"Hell, you're a married man," he continued. "Part of the time anyway. You know'd I'd share."

Jim fumbled with his boots, holding them out over the small smoldering fire. The steam and smoke mixed together.

"What are the women like over there?"

"Nice," Jim answered quickly, "real nice. Best women in the world in Bangkok."

"Oh yeah."

"Yeah. They just sort of come with a room. They're beautiful, just beautiful, all of them. Speak English. Show you the city."

"Oh yeah. Tell more."

"Use your imagination old boy," Jim said smiling. "Rest and relaxation."

"Come on."

"You're still thinking about that desert. Well, I wouldn't share either."

"Under the circumstances, might just share anything to get out of here."

"Yeah," Jim said lacing up a boot.

The sun had been down behind the two peaks in the ridge to the southwest a good hour by the time they'd dropped down into the flat. They walked quickly. The cuffs of his pants glazed stiff with ice, the clear air stung his face. The big cone-shaped mountain flared a long time, it seemed, in the hanging evening alpenglow. It looked larger than it did in daylight.

It took a long time coming back across the flat. Hair outside his hat froze with white frost. Vapor rose from the creek and potholes behind him like it was coming from large mouths.

It didn't look like much in the field from a distance. They'd left the domelight on. He'd hoped this morning never to see the truck again, at least not till spring. It had an eerie glow of its own below the low, almost quarter moon in twilight. Anything looked good now.

The note was still on the steering wheel. Bart kicked his boots clean first, on the edge of the cab floor, and climbed in. In back Bart started pumping the Primus stove, lit the one burner and put on the slushy pot of

of venison broth. His face had a blue tint in the short flame of the stove and weak dome light.

Jim was still in front fumbling with his boots.

"Can't get my sock off," he said with his head pointing down to the floorboard at his feet. "It's frozen. They're completely numb."

"Can you move you toes?"

"No. The sock's ice."

"Your toes?" asked Bart, looking over the seat at them.

"No!"

"Get back here and thaw them near the stove. Get the other boot off, now be careful with them."

Jim swung slowly up over the seat and crawled back into the rear towards the stove, sat down on his sleeping bag rubbing his icy socks.

"Are they both numb?"

"Can't feel a thing."

"Can you move your toes?"

"No. Can't even feel them."

"Keep rubbing them. Water'll be hot in a minute."

"How're yours?"

"Fine, but I didn't get them wet. My boots are still greased pretty well."

"Those boots of mine aren't worth a shit."

"Breaking through didn't do them any good, I'd say. Were they dry when we left the fire?"

"Could have swore they were."

"Here, wrap this jacket round them. We'll get some broth in you in a second."

* * *

That night Jim got the frozen socks off but his feet remained numb, ice cold, and were unchanged by morning. Still cold, still clear, sounds of brief wind hit against the truck. The feet looked grey, lifeless, ice-cube cold--they looked like clear balsa wood. The skin would not roll over the knuckles of his toes. Droplets of water formed on the flat bony tops of both his feet like they were glasses of iced water sweating in summer. But they were dead cold. He couldn't look at them any more.

Bart was out after more wood. He wanted to scout around just in case someone might be looking for them. They'd both heard stories about serious frostbite before but neither of them had dealt with it.

The small one-burner gas stove had been boiling snow most of the night and all of the morning. Jim put on his boots now, unlaced, and swung over the seat to head out after more snow to boil. He opened the door, looking out into the bright openness, grabbing at the door handle and lifting, raising himself slowly up, out away from the truck. He started one unassisted step and fell flat on the snow.

Lying out in the cold dry snow, he knew he would not be leaving the truck far on his own.

Next morning, Sunday, his feet had thawed partially but were dead grey, numb. He could feel nothing of them. Streaked black up the ankles, the feet had no sensation at all for him.

The day before Jim thought he'd heard engines, a plane, a truck, all day. Not the whining rasp of a snow machine's two-cycle, but the drone of a four cycle drumming in the distance. He was sure. The sound carried in wind. Maybe a helicopter, he thought. His mind raced. How were they

going to get out. He just couldn't keep Bart here, waiting on him, hoping they'd be found. Bart had to try.

Jim stretched out rearranging the wrapping on his feet, resting his hands on the cold metal of the wheel well, then rubbed his eyes with the chilled hands.

He thought about Bart. He wasn't around. He must be after wood or game. There was only one rifle on the dash. Jim's mind raced, concentrating on nothing long. He was back working one minute bent over with a hammer, then fishing, having a beer and lunch in the B&B laughing, smashing his thumb, Lynn's face. He always kept coming back to her face. He remembered dreaming her face last night and then someone else's, it was hard to tell, maybe Bart's. Mostly he remembered dreaming loose teeth, dropping out of an open mouth--the molars falling out.

Lynn's face looked distinct now, glowing with tan. He was already stiff. The big yellow quilt of hers at her family's cabin up past Swan Valley on the Teton, the blue lupine showed above the grass along the bank. There was Bart's face again, stranded in the truck looking out.

His mind raced as he swung slowly out of the wrappings of the bag, looked down again at his feet somehow not a part of him anymore. How long would it take before it would begin? Maybe a week. It would spread, he knew that. What could he do? He remembered stories about people losing their toes, knew if untreated gangrene could be fatal.

He remembered the story his father had told him about a carpenter whose leg was crushed, amputated just above the knee by a crushing swing of an out-of-control concrete bucket. He remembered he had told him how the man asked for a cigarette, opened his jack-knife while they waited for the ambulance, and calmly cut off an annoying piece of dangling flesh.

He could crawl, he told himself, maybe not far in this stuff, but he could crawl. He knew no matter what he told himself, when it came time to he could never cut off his own feet.

He stretched and grabbed the small stove, shaking it to be sure it had gas, pumped it, opened and lit it. Putting on the stained aluminum pot he eased back down and rested, waiting for the water to come to a boil.

The grey sky lowered and slow thin snow began to fall.

They both woke on the morning of December 12, the fifteenth day they'd been stranded, to the sound of wind strong against the truck. Bart dressed, deciding to go out anyway. They needed the meat. He didn't say anything but the stench in the truck made him glad to leave even into weather. Jim stayed in his bag.

"There's some broth on and I cut some strips of rib meat for you," Bart said, climbing over the seat again, looking back into the rear of the truck to see if Jim stirred or had heard him. He reached up and grabbed his rifle, running through the bolt action.

"Okay," Jim muttered, not turning his head pointing still to the tail-gate.

"Need anything?"

"Naw, I should be okay. How long'll you be gone?"

"Most of the day probably," Bart said. "If they haven't moved on." He worked a cartridge back into the chamber. "The meat's stripped out, next to the stove. Grabbed some myself."

"Blowing pretty hard isn't it?" Jim said. He turned over, looking to the front of the truck.

"Yeah it is. Some venison left but I don't want to miss the chance."

"How many shells left?"

"Enough. Six or seven. About as many as matches left."

"Well, I won't waste any if you don't."

"Be back this afternoon," Bart said. He turned, opening the door out into the cavern of snow, following his rifle out.

Jim turned back towards the tailgate and went through the calendar he'd scratched on it, took out his knife scratching on another day and date. It was their mother's birthday, he remembered. He wondered how she liked Phoenix and what kind of winters they really had.

He remembered Christmas dinner, was it three, he thought, Christmasses back. It seemed longer than three. There had been no snow yet that winter, he remembered. He listened to the little stove hiss behind him and didn't think much about more broth. He remembered flying back to Seattle. It rained only one of the three--the day before the funeral. He remembered his mother on the phone.

He couldn't help but hear wind.

It would be slow walking, he thought. Maybe his mother was taking tennis lessons this morning. They would have a good dinner. She might be tanned.

He drank down the broth anyway after it had cooled a bit. It was bland and thin. The backstrap of venison dunked into the broth softened, and it had some flavor, he was sure, but by now he'd lost any sensation for it. "Brandy," he said aloud. "Californian would be fine. Maybe something sweat--apricot brandy."

Jim laid down again and tried to sleep, listening to the wind against the truck. He didn't hear another jet, this particular one on the Salt

Lake-Seattle route, streak through high above him. Didn't hear the magpie scavenging through the pile outside the truck, picking through the piling garbage, pecking fat off the doe's hide. He didn't hear the two shots echo from Bart's 30-06 through the flat.

Jim dreamed back deep about fishing. A kid back in some summer, it seemed he fished every day. He pictured himself every day down in the back yard under the cottonwoods along the hedge digging, raking in the compost pile for worms. Dozens every day. He pictured the coffee can, and the worms squirming in it on the shiny bottom before he'd put in any clippings or dirt.

The bamboo rod his father'd given him worked well, he remembered. Plenty of reach to get out over the grassy overgrowth spots trout hid-out under during hot afternoons. He remembered catching an eel once. He remembered mostly he fished by himself. He remembered the firm creek trout.

Mostly he remembered the worms and dreamed that time he's really gotten into a bonanza. Piles of them just after a rain. They were clumped and intertwined on the surface, just under the first layer of leaves. He filled two coffee cans, he remembered, pounded plenty of nail holes through the metal lids for air and put in plenty of dirt. Half worms, half dirt.

He remembered the smell from those cans a couple of days after not using many fishing. He remembered his father had been mad at him. And he remembered the green putrid gooh, finally looking into the can a week or so later, and the green coiled gooh underneath the dead leaves. He remembered the dead smell.

Jim stirred awake from the cramped position he'd been sleeping in,

dreaming at the end he heard thunder and a warm tropic rain pelting down on the roof. He turned over, then raised himself up to look out through the blurry window. Somehow he wasn't surprized to see hard snow falling, driven into the glass of the truck with wind.

He scooted forward, flopping his bag open to look down and see what condition his feet were in. He remembered again that dead smell of the worms.

The snow stopped falling two evenings later. They'd spent that time in the truck in their bags again, eating, sleeping, talking some, waiting. Some other late falls there might only be a skiff of snow in this flat by now. The Pioneers to the south and west might be snow covered, but they were another 4,000 feet off the flat. In this range Hyndman Peak, at 12,078 feet their map said, was visible in clear or broken weather with its sharp, Alp-like top. So was The Devil's Bedstead, 11,100 feet, well named, dominating the sky to the south and west of them.

Unnamed on the map and closest, the Big Black Dome, was the most dominant feature in their close foreground. It was the first thing to get sun, the last to lose it. Late summer it'd look like its name: a dark round shale slide going up and on. But this was an unusual year of heavy early snow. Treeless at the top, it looked clean and bright.

Bart looked up towards it late Monday evening as his piss steamed into the snow. The waning, seven-eighths moon broke over a disintegrating cloud and for a brief moment the flat was bright.

He hadn't been able to say anything to Jim just then about his own feet. He had been out in it a lot. Must be the steel toes, he thought looking down at the bleached leather of the toes of his unlaced boots.

He buttoned up his coveralls. It was just the toes, he thought. They'd have to get going soon. He hoped his feet wouldn't swell too much. So far only his big toe looked dead.

Friday, the eighteenth of December, the weather broke again and Bart made the preparations. He'd first thought about it dragging the deer back by himself.

Stay where you are was the rule when lost, especially in winter if you have shelter of some kind like they did. They would just have to find some other out there, Bart thought. He thought he remembered a ranch house last time fishing, somewhere near here.

It was warmer at least, he thought, as he scraped snow off the hood of the truck. Maybe the weather would break and hold.

There were only four bolts holding the hood itself to the spring hinges but it took longer than he would have thought to get them loose. The hood had a perfect curve. The upturned snout skimmed through the snow well when he pushed it front first. It would work. And the hood's underframing ribs were slotted towards the front and would hold the loops of rope. He knew it would work. Bart limped back to the truck to get the rope.

"Think it'll be fine," he said, climbing over the seat, scrounging through the milk box where all their loose tools and hunting gear were kept. "Slides real well on the snow. Work your way out in a minute and we'll give it a try."

"Okay," Jim said. "I'll be behind you."

Saturday, the nineteenth of December broke clear, still cold. It was

the twenty-second day after being stranded and they were going to try and get out again. Bart tied on their sleeping bags, a game bag of meat, the stove and pot. Jim worked his way out into the bright sunlit snow and crawled towards the hood sled. They were ready. The note was left on the steering wheel, dates changed.

The weather looked good.

Bart pulled on the rope around his waist. The sled moved behind him. The rifle slung over his shoulder would be a nuisance, but they were moving.

Jim tried to laugh. "Mush, sled dog, mush."

Jim dug his gloved hands into the snow to help drag the hood sled forward with Bart's pull.

Bart looked only ahead, pulled again and said nothing. He knew Jim would notice the limp. Going would be slow. His own foot was not good.

Jim thought he heard engines again, clearly now, but said nothing as Bart apparently hadn't. He looked around. The sled jerked forward. Jim sat back on the cold metal hood. It would be Christmas, he thought, in less than a week--six days from now. It's just three days short of winter. He couldn't help but think three Christmasses back to the last time he'd seen his father.

The sled jerked forward again, and as he rolled back with it the grip of the handgun strapped to his belt clanked against the cold hood. Jim looked back towards the truck, squinting his right eye. A magpie silently pecked at the doe's hide.

Red In The Morning

The thick brine smell hit him as he walked down the gangplank onto the floating dock, and went on down towards the bait tender's float. The light was on. Marc heard a radio. A gull on top a creosoted piling stood, cocking its head, watching him as he walked closer. The shiny water lapped the wood floats and the chain connecting the section of dock clanged as he stepped over the gap and walked onto the next rolling section. Stars were out, but dim.

"Two dozen," Marc said when the baitman came out of the shack. He looked young. Marc didn't recognize him. He wore a faded green, half-zippered sweatshirt.

Marc burped up the taste of onion and cheese scrambled eggs, and his stomach settled again. There was no one else on the float. The window in the shack looked bright and Marc saw the antenna and a black transistor radio.

It smelled good out, Marc thought: salt, fish and creosote.

The baitman dipped the net into the closest screened-in pen and pulled it up, alive with flipping herring, edged the net over, down to the propped-

open plastic bag held on the scale-coated metal rim. Two fish escaped flipping back into the water.

The baitman dipped again scooping at more herring.

"How's fishing?"

"Good," Marc said. "Good yesterday anyway. Good enough. A couple nice ones. How's everyone else doing?"

"All right. Some limits," the baitman said. He held the dip net with both hands, guiding the frantic fish into the bag. He didn't look up when he spoke. "Good size to the fish."

He scooped again. "Windy today though."

"Yeah it is," Marc said. He listened to the sound of waves breaking against the breakwater. It hadn't registered before.

He put his hands into the rear pockets of his jeans.

Three gulls hovered just out past the pen, low under the flattening sky. Some croaned laughter came over the transistor. The baitman wrapped a tie around the bag and handed it to him, herring flipping, beating inside, most of them upside down against the plastic, scale-covered bag.

The baitman stretched another bag open on the frame, and dipped again.

Marc looked down into the water at the black backs of darting fish, schooled, flitting in curves, four or five caught, dipped out with every slow drag of the net. Two upside down fish floated in opposite corners of the pen.

The radio blared again, a drawled male voice: "...and you can guess what happened to the ice cream..." It was Marti Allen, Marc thought. Everyone on the radio screamed and howled. He breathed in another long breath of brine air. He thought he knew the joke.

He heard the footsteps behind him and turned to look. She didn't say

anything but smiled.

The baitman looked at her, wrapping the tie on the second bag. He handed the bag to Marc and the fish slapped against the plastic against the side of his knee.

"Where you headed this morning?"

"Possession," Marc said. "Maybe Double Bluff."

"Possession should be good. Good yesterday. Here you go and good luck to you."

"Thanks," Marc said turning, heading down the planks with the change in one hand, the fish in the other. Holly walked next to him and he handed her one of the bags of fish. It was not quite light. Two gulls yapped as they walked down the dock. Marc heard more belly laughs on the radio and the waves against the breakwater.

"Not too cold," Marc said. He held the boat steady as Holly swung over the gunwale. It rocked when she got in.

"Not at all," she said. She'd known Marc for a short while and this was their first time out fishing.

Marc went back to the stern and took out the broken-down rods, the tackle box, opened it and the cantilevered shelves opened out. He took out the reels, and locked them on the rods, screwing the reel seats up tight. He gave one to Holly and she watched, and began threading the line through the guides.

Marc looked back towards the stern, remembered, got up and dipped the pail over the side, pulling it up half full of water. He opened the bags of herring and dumped them in.

He sat back down. His father thought that was silly. But he wasn't here today, Marc was on his own and all there was to think about was

fishing. Marc liked to think herring kept fresher that way in water. He stood back up, took a stainless steel snap swivel from the box and slipped the loop at the end of the line through it. He did the same for Holly's rod. He remembered his father thought those snap swivels were expensive and silly.

Out past the breakwater it was a sloppy grey, two foot chop. The whole Sound looked grey. Marc bumped the throttle so the tach read 3400. "Watch for deadheads," he said to Holly. He looked at her and said, "Logs. Waterlogged logs," and she shook her head and stood up, braced for the motion of the waves against the windshield.

There were no other boats out. A thirty minute run, Marc let the engine idle and the boat drift in the waves after they got close to where he wanted to fish.

He got out the cutting board, putting it on the engine box. He took two slick six inch herring out of the bucket. Holly watched as he drew the knife across, through the fish just behind the gills, cutting off the head at a beveled angle. He threw the entrails over the side. He cut the other the same.

"Called a cut plug," he told her. He stripped some line off the reel. From nowhere a gull came, hovered just behind the boat, and dove for the fish guts.

Rubber kneed with the motion of the boat, Marc stuck the trailing hook of the leader into the cut herring's open cavity, stuck the barbed point through the meaty portion of the fish's back and out, letting the hook dangle on the leader through the hook-diameter hole. He took the first hook through the same hole, letting it dangle, and stuck the trailing

hook in again, back, just above the anal fin parallel to the backbone, burying the hook so that just half with the barbed point stuck out. He drew the first hook back into the original hole, eye first, so the leader between the two hooks was taut, this hook wrapped around the backbone inside the herring.

The bait hung from the leader and these two, half-buried hooks.

"Supposed to imitate a wounded herring," Marc said. He handed the baited rod to Holly, and baited the other the same way.

Idling at a slow troll, Marc swung the boat around north and with his other hand held the rod out, watching the bait working in the water: roll, flash and roll next to the boat. He let the boat steer itself, stripped out the line and put the rod in the holder.

"Any special fish charms or chants I should be saying?"

"No," Marc said. "Wouldn't hurt to think like a fish maybe. A hungry fish."

"Famished," she said.

Rolling with the water, the exhaust gurgled-in with each passing wave. The engine idled and Marc saw the dim red generator light flicker on. He wanted to fix that. He would, he thought, if this was his own boat. He'd rig up two batteries in series just to be safe, and maybe get a larger generator so it didn't discharge when trolled. But it was his father's boat.

"So were you busy yesterday?"

"Enough," Holly said. She was watching the twitching action the bait sent back to the tip of her rod. Marc watched both of them, and the line slanting back into the water. Watched the waves curl through the line then drop off into the air of a trough, and the line snap back slack.

"Double-decker must have stopped out front for awhile. Around five it was just jammed." Holly spoke without looking at Marc, concentrating on the rod. She worked in the photo-jewelry department of a local discount store. Marc had bought film there for a while. Holly had curly blond hair to her shoulder, a quick smile and liked working with the public. She was saving money for her first year of college that so far had been postponed two years now. She planned to work part-time once she enrolled.

The engine idled steady and waves chopped against the lapstrake hull. Marc thought the wind might be picking up, but it was clear with only a few whitecaps on the rough, deep blue water. He looked north to the clay-white cliffs of Possession Point, cut through the madronas and maples, Useless Bay where he used to dig clams, and lined the boat up on the point.

"You know--I forgot about it till now--someone tried to shortchange me last night."

Marc looked at her.

"Yeah. It was busy and pretty late. This guy comes up to me with something small, a pack of batteries, gives me a twenty. I ring it up, hand him his change, and he goes, 'Wait, I think I've got something a little smaller,' hands me a five and some change. I make him change for that and he hands me back the twenty saying, 'I'm really sorry about this.' He tried to get me confused, but I closed the till and told him I was too busy."

"Were you alone?"

"Yeah. But I called Duane on the intercom and this guy's gone up to the main checkstands by now. He tried the same thing there."

"So he tried to get change back twice?"

"Yeah. Make a quick twenty."

"Small potatoes."

"The way he looked at me though, saying how he was sorry about it, like he almost meant it."

"Like I said, small potatoes. He was wishing for something big and on--"

A reel sung out, Holly's, line playing off it and the rod bouncing.

"Well grab it," Marc said, going to the controls. He killed the engine accidentally, left it and went back to reel in the other rod. "Just let it run," he said. "Hold it up, high like that. That's it."

He had the other line in, and the rod out of the way. The silver jumped just off the boat, and Holly gave a quick "Aghh."

"Okay, reel in now," Marc said. He put his arms around her, lifting the rod up then dropping it down as she reeled. He thought it looked like a good fish. "Now reel again," he said.

As Holly got the fish in Marc readied the net. "Keep the rod high," he said. He watched the fish right next to the boat with the excitement he always felt watching one, the dark back, a quick flash of silver from its side. "Now reel. Just a little more. Okay, now hold it up." Marc dipped the net in.

"What now?" Holly said. She sounded like she was shivering.

"That's good. Good. Okay," Marc said as he scooped the silver salmon head first into the big net.

"All right," Marc said. "Nice fish, nice fish." He lifted the net out of the water and held it high, in front of Holly, the fat silver throwing its head and tail from inside the mesh of netting.

"Oh my" was all she said, still holding onto the rod like the fish might yet get away.

The fish was tangled in the net, and Marc put it down on the floorboards, turned it upright and hit it three quick blows on the head just back of the snout with the short club. He unhooked the fish and untangled it.

"That breaks the ice. Nice fish," he said again, slower this time. He held the fish up out of the net for Holly to see.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"And big," Marc said. "Maybe fifteen-sixteen pounds. Real nice fish. You can put the rod down now."

"Okay."

"These sea lice here," Marc said pointing.

"Yeah."

"It's just in from the ocean. Good job," he said, smiling, holding the fish up by the gills in front of both of them. "It's bigger than the ones we caught yesterday." Marc put the fish into the cooler, doused the scales, slime and fishblood off the deck, rinsed the net in the salt-water and went up to the controls. He thought of the funny way his father pronounced yesterday. "Let's get another one," he said.

Up front he saw he'd left the key in the on position, turned it back to start it and got nothing. He heard the water slapping against the sides, turned the key again, jiggling it but still got nothing.

There were still no other boats out. Marc rigged another herring for Holly, as the boat drifted, stern to the on-coming waves. He showed her how to mooch, working the bait up and down, working with the tide and wave action, and went back to looking.

Everything looked connected. He turned the key over again but got nothing.

* * *

Except for the wind it was quiet. The wind coming straight on from the west, they would drift straight in, Marc figured, probably near Haines Wharf. Looking west it was all blue water and whitecaps. They'd been adrift more than an hour now and there were no other boats. One more time Marc tried the ignition. Nothing.

Holly was still fishing, running her line in and out, checking her bait, and letting it back out again. It didn't seem to matter to her at all. She seemed beyond it all, Marc thought, the way she kept fishing. Just like nothing had happened and nothing worse would, watching her line come in and out on her reel, watching the rod tip.

"Any strikes?" Marc said, going back to the stern.

"Not in a while."

"Check your bait, why don't you," Marc said. He got out the cutting board and two fresh herring.

The belly had been eaten away from Holly's herring. Marc rigged a new one, watched it work with only the action of the tide and waves next to the boat: the slow roll, flash of silver in the bright water. He rigged another for his rod and let out a short bit of line, working off the opposite side of the boat.

He thought again of the possibilities, hoped that another boat soon would pass them. It had to be the battery. He'd eliminated everything else.

"Hey," Holly said. Her rod was bent double with another fish. The line played out in short jerks, headed almost straight down. "Okay," Marc said, reeling his line in.

Holly kept the rod high. "Heavy thing," she said. She started pumping the rod, working the line back in. It was coming back in steady. Almost

straight up and down, the swivel and sinker were clear of the water now, and Marc looked down over the side, saw the ugly grey streamlined body, the fin and tail, and put down the net. "Mudshark," he said. "Big one though. Let me take hold of the line."

He pulled it up past the sinker by hand. The dogfish held quiet alongside. He took out the knife. He hated the leathery skin, the bulged shark eyes. Carefull of the spine, he pulled the line up more, flicked the knife quickly, close to the snout, stood up handing the hookless leader to Holly.

The dogfish flipped its tail and sunk back out of sight.

"It was a big one," he said.

"Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Probably should have killed it. They're scavengers," Marc said, getting out the leader wallet. "When I was a kid I used to kill them. Always. Kill one, it'd sink down dead, other ones coming up to eat it, hitting it right then, as it's sinking under you, eating their brother as far down as you could see it."

"Cannibals," Holly said.

"Yeah, cannibals." Marc cut another cut plug for her. "Used to break their noses when I was a kid."

"Break their noses?"

"If you break their snout with a club and let it go, they won't submerge." Marc looked over at her. He threw the innards and head over the side, rinsed off the board. "They'd drown if they did. So they swim right up on the surface, fin out and everything. It's something when you're a kid."

"Must be," Holly said.

"Finally they beach themselves."

"Why'd they do that?"

"To keep from drowning, I guess," Marc said. "Of course they die anyway."

Holly watched the action of the herring over the side and let out line. "Well it was a fish," she said. "More than you can say." She smiled when she looked at him.

"Today anyway." Marc watched her. Watched the intent way she worked the line, her firm grip, the tight fist she made on the handle, wind in her hair.

She looked over at him. "So when does school start for you again?"

"The twenty-second, I think." The wind blew steady, whitecapped on blue, and the close waves swished as the water curled off the wave-tops and slapped against the boat.

"Will you be glad to go back?"

"School's all right."

"I can't wait," she said. She had reeled in and was checking the looks of her herring. "What would you be doing if you weren't going to school?"

Marc looked around. "Working. I don't know." There were no boats. It was starting to get to him. There was nothing he could do. He went up front. "School's a good way to stay out of the draft." He tried the ignition once more but nothing.

"What about the lottery? What's your number?"

"Haven't got it yet." Marc scooted up on the dash, sitting back against the windshield and watched Holly fish.

"So, are you worried about it?" She looked up at him.

"Maybe. Maybe I'm not. I'm not sure about what I'd do, but there's

still school, deferments, and I do know what I'm not going to do."

Holly went back to fishing, leaned against the gunwale braced for the motion of waves.

"This is what I'd do if I had any say about it," Marc said.

"Sit in the sun?"

"No. Fish. I'd fix up this boat and fish. Did you ever fish with your dad when you were a kid?"

"Sometimes," Holly said. "We used to go to the ocean maybe twice every summer. I'd get to go out some."

"We lived on Whidbey Island in summer when I was in grade school, and when it wasn't windy I used to row everyday, trolling a big coho fly off my trout rod."

"Catch anything?" Holly looked at him as Marc walked back.

"A lot of dogfish. Damn things. That's where I learned the trick about breaking their noses. Only did it twice, now that I think about it. They'd really smell on the beach after a while. Did you get a look at the one you had on?"

"A quick one. You let it go, remember."

"You don't want one. I caught a small salmon once, on the fly rod with just a fly reel. It was something. When my dad'd come home we'd always go out again with the real salmon gear. I remember the fish jumping behind the boat, just like yours did. I was a kid and was sure I was going to lose it."

"But you didn't."

"No. I remember showing the fish to my dad when he got home from work. It was something."

"How big was it?" Holly said.

"Well, it might have grown, now that I think about it. It was nothing like yours. Maybe six or seven pounds. But it was something for me then. That was the first salmon I'd caught by myself, and I remember waiting to show it to my dad." Marc reeled his line in to check the bait, and took the thread of kelp off the sinker and reeled the rest in.

"It was my dad I guess, who first told me about breaking those mudshark's noses. I guess he used to do it himself too, when he was a kid." Marc flipped the herring back over the side and watched it drift down in the water.

"You want to have another look at yours?" he said to Holly, after he'd put the rod back in the holder.

"Sure," she said. And he already had the fat silver salmon out of the cooler, held up high for both of them to see.

"Might grab the other oar Holly, and give it a wave." But the troller had seen them, and its twin masts of outriggers bobbed in the waves as it pulled alongside.

"Dead battery," Marc yelled as it got closer. The skipper shook his head and waved. Wind-kicked waves splashed against the sides of both boats. The troller swung around, its steady diesel puffing, and on the stern braced against the gurdy, a thin woman stood with a line ready.

Once tied off to the bow eye, the troller turned and the line snugged, and they were moving again, towed at a good clip. The woman watched them from the troller's stern. The loud diesel pumped, and Holly and Marc looked ahead, riding smooth in the wake of the troller, watching the tow line.

When they got closer to Haines the troller slowed then swung, idling

its engine. The runabout drifted alongside and the woman yelled it was too shallow for them to get closer. Marc looked, nodded, and saw people watching them from above on the tall pier. The boat elevator wasn't coming down.

The troller back in reverse, then forward with them taut against the tow line behind it. Holly went forward to the bow eye and Marc readied the anchor and line. Once free of the troller, Marc threw the twelve pound Danforth out. The line played through his hands, slacked and Marc threw some more out, wrapped it around the cleat and made two quick half-hitches.

The skipper and the woman who looked to be his wife waved, Holly and Marc waving back. A puff of diesel throbbing through its rusted stack, the troller headed north in beam seas. Marc looked back up and saw the faces looking down at them from the pier.

The ladder was almost in reach, and Marc worked more line out so the boat drifted closer to it. The bow pounded against the incoming waves, tight on the anchor line, just out from the row of barnacled pilings. He could reach the ladder.

"Okay," he said to Holly. "I'll go see if they can lift us out. You keep us off the pilings. Just sit here and use both feet. Fend it off like this." Braced on the wide transom, Marc pushed the boat off when the wave lifted them towards the piling. Holly got in position. "I'll be right back," Marc said. He smiled to her as he went up the ladder.

Marc spoke to two people who'd been watching from the pier and then found the person in charge. Then he made the phone call. He came back to the edge of the pier and looked down at the boat. It rode high with the waves, tight against the anchor line. Holly waved. She had both

feet out past the gunwale, sitting on top the transom, wedged next to the engine box. Marc worked down the ladder and Holly reached out and grabbed his foot and held it down as he let go and jumped back in.

"Too windy for them to pick us up." Holly looked at him. "I called my dad and we'll think of something. Here, let me spell you for a while."

"I'm fine," she said.

"Okay." He looked back up at the pier. "Wind's supposed to keep up for a few days like this." Marc reached down and took the bucket of herring, dumping them over the side. He opened the latches on the engine box and looked inside again. He looked back up and saw the two gulls hovering above the waves behind the boat diving for the herring.

He heard a yell and looked up to see his father's face looking down at them. He started to climb down.

He tried the ignition, checked the battery terminals and tried again. "Go ahead and disconnect this one, I brought another battery." His dad looked at him. "Let me have a line and I'll lower it down."

Marc nodded. His father was up the ladder. Marc was surprized he'd brought a battery. He'd sounded busy on the phone. Marc hadn't asked for one. And he hadn't seemed upset.

Marc had the cables disconnected and the battery out of the way. He heard his father yell and Holly say okay. He stood up to bring in the battery being lowered. Marc grabbed it as the battery and boat swung together, untied it and put it down in place. He just barely tightened the connections. Holly fought to keep the boat off the close piling.

Marc went forward and turned it over. "All right," he said under his breath when he saw the flywheel spin on the open engine. He hit it again and it started. He went back and tightened down the terminals.

Marc looked up at his dad. "Do you want to take it in?" he yelled up. His father just nodded no, lifting his hand gesturing to him.

Marc latched the box over the running engine, went forward engaging the outdrive, and the boat idled forward into the waves. Holly got the anchor line in, and Marc went over and helped with the anchor.

Marc looked back. They were still clear of the pier and pilings. His father watched them from above. Marc bumped the throttle forward and the boat surged, hitting the first wave hard. Marc knew he'd hit it too fast and the boat hung in the air, hit the next wave and a big curl of water plowed off the bow and back into their faces, and the boat plowed on, through to the next hanging wave.

Something About Water

She calls me this morning. So I drive out there. She knows I'm coming out. She lives seven miles north of town, and it looks like it's rained even harder at her place, with puddles at the low spots in the driveway. The garage door's open. All the grass and leaves have a damp look. So does the dirt. Her car sits out back. I park in the turnaround.

Her dog isn't there to greet me when I get out.

Come up, she yells after I open the door. It's stuck against the jam, and she yells, I'm upstairs. I get it closed. Upstairs, she yells again. A Dutch door with a glass upper half, the wood must've swollen with all the rain.

I take off my boots on the rug and leave them in the corner. I'm coming up, I yell.

In the tub, she yells back. And I start to hear water, light slow splashes, as I go up the stairs.

If you want anything, she says loud, get it out of the frig. There's water on, she says. It'd still be hot.

Thanks. Could I bring you something? I say as I get to the top just outside the open door. Upstairs looks bright.

She says, In a second maybe. She's in the tub, hair slicked back close to her skull like a wet otter. I've seen her like that before.

Great morning, isn't it, she half-smiles saying.

Yes, I say.

She asks, Did you smell the cottonwoods on the walk in?

I say, Yes. Yes, I did.

And I look out past her, out the glass windows at the white flax floating down off the trees, up, all around the cottonwoods, out the glass past the tub. She dunks underwater blowing out bubbles. A large square tub of dark green Spanish tile, gangly plants hang all around, behind and above it. A bottle of Bertolli olive oil sits on the far end of the tub, cap off. She comes back up, holding her nose and slicks her blond brown hair straight back. Her dog, sprawled at the edge of the tub waiting for something to do, wags its stubby tail when it first sees me.

Would you like to take a bath? she asks.

No, I say. Thanks though. I smile. Things to do, I say.

Out the ceiling-high glass beyond the tub past the cottonwoods, I can see the grade the highway cuts diagonally across the landscape, through the foothills and quaking aspen. Everything looks so green with the new leaves. Warm for this time of year, hot actually the last half of the week through the weekend, without a cloud. Now it's overcast, mist bunched up the draws, and it's raining.

She says, Come on, smiles, looking towards me and dunks under again holding her nose. Her knees come up out of the water. The thin tanned thighs.

I've always like her looks. Don't see any scar. She comes back up out of the water, squirting some back out of her mouth, looking sort of at me. Smiles. Droplets hang on her chin.

I look back out the window. Behind the garage there's a row of firewood rough stacked, half under some torn, bleached-out visqueen, and a cat crouching on the stack, cottonwood tufts coming down all around it.

A pick-up goes by headed north. Two-tone, mostly red.

So what's new? I ask, looking back at her.

What day is it today? Her chin and tips of her hair drip back into the tub.

I catch myself staring. She blinks both eyes looking dead through me. I feel like doing pushups.

Wednesday, I tell her, going to add all day, but don't.

Busy these days?

Enough, I say. When it's not raining. Can't work in the rain. The roof drips. I hear it hitting the deck like small hollow slapping feet. I look back at her. She looks straight into my eyes. Too long. She knows she can do that.

I take a couple steps closer to the tub. Her dog shows interest, lifting its ears, and I squat down, kneeling on one knee to pet its neck.

I guess I just don't know anymore, she says. I look across at her. She leans forward, turning the water on: loud hollow splashes as it dumps in. I give the back and roots of both ears some attention. Her dog looks up at me with its smudged brown eyes.

I'm having some trouble, she says, looking still at me like I might turn into something... I don't know.

I start to say something, but don't, waiting for her to turn off the water.

Is this a nice man, Molly Brown? she says towards me and the dog, above the water. What do you think Moll? What does Molly think? She has her wrist cupped under her chin, resting, slouched down against the edge of the tub, peering at both of us with the water pouring in. Molly glances at her twice. I work a clump of her loose fur between three fingers.

She turns off the water with her foot. She looks up at me. Remember the time you drug me up to Galena? she says.

I remember, I say. I laugh. Drug?

Before the mountain opened...

I remember.

Hiking and hiking and hiking in those clunky boots with all that snow. Come on, that's all you said. She cups her hands like a megaphone. Come on, come on.

That was a great winter. Everything opened up Thanksgiving, I say.

And we drank all that brandy on the way back. Steam's coming up around her. Go ahead and open the door, she says, it's not too cold out. If you want to.

Maybe just the top half, I say.

Yes. Keep Molly in. She's got a touch of cold I think.

She looks good.

She does, she says. I had her clipped this spring. She's such a pretty liver color when she's clipped.

Molly gets up when I open the door. She knows what we're talking about. She knows we're talking about her.

The air feels good in my face. So where's Greg? I say. I look over at her. Stretched out, she grabs her ankles. Water beads down her back and her lower vertebrae stand out under the tight skin.

Greg's gone, she says. She looks at me. Do you ever feel like singing?

I don't sing, I say.

Sometimes that's just how I wake up. Sometimes I feel like I don't want to see anyone, you know. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I feel like singing. That's all. Sometimes I don't. She's still looking at me. But you don't sing, she says.

I don't sing, I say. Sister Superior said I was flat in the fifth grade. She made me just mouth the words.

Nuns, she says. So. Are you seeing anyone these days?

Not a soul, I say.

Come on, she says. Her hair falls down in the water. Would you hand me those, she says. She points to some pills.

I read the label: Flagyl 500 mg.

Sure you don't want some tea or coffee or something? she says when I hand them to her.

Sure, I say. I'd have some joe. I look back over and see her sit back into the water, steam coming up around her. Her dog rolls over on its back with its legs up and her white belly. How about you? I say.

Maybe some tea. She says, Greg and I broke up. You knew that? She looks at me. I start petting the dog. You were always so different, she says.

That was a long time ago, I say. I start to count the winters back

in my head. What was it, five years?

Thin steam comes up out of the water. You were a touch hyper, first, she says. She's looking at me. She turns the water on again.

I hear a hawk screech somewhere near. I can't see it. Molly's eating it up--the attention.

I'm starting a fast, she says. Skipped breakfast yeasterday. Today too.

I'm listening to the water. The way it still gets to me. Like rain on a tin roof. Want me to close the door? I say.

She shakes her head. Wouldn't you know it, she says. Here I was trying to break up with him, and find out I was pregnant. She runs her toes under the pouring water. It's all finished now, she says.

For the first time I see how thin she looks. Plenty of color, but thin. I want to say something.

She says, Therapeutic termination, I think they might call it. Her voice echoes against the water. She cocks her head sideways and looks at me. Maybe some tea.

With the water on Molly and I walk out to the back deck. A thin steady rain. And the river, full and swollen this time of year with run-off, just right there, past a clump of willows. There's something about it.

Molly has her nose buried to the grass, working like a hunter. I look back towards the house. The blond logs stand out with the white chinking like fleshy smiles. And the new leaves. Colors always look so deep in overcast. This time of year, this kind of weather makes me always want to go somewhere.

I hear a car or truck pull off the road and into the driveway. Molly

pays no attention. Maybe they see my truck or maybe they just needed a spot to turn around. It wasn't Greg. It's another truck. I hear it going through the gears headed back south.

Looking up I think how much the cottonwood tufts look like big first flakes of a wet snow.

But it's raining. I feel like leaving. Anyway, I take my time going back in.