

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1969

Five stories

John Phillip Bauernfiend
The University of Montana

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

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bauernfiend, John Phillip, "Five stories" (1969). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2368.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2368>

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

FIVE STORIES

By

John Bauernfiend

B.A. Carroll College, 1967

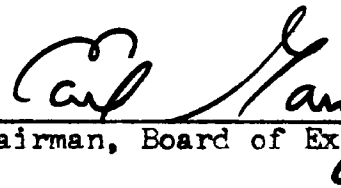
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

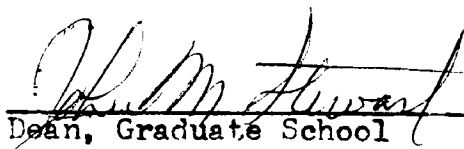
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1969

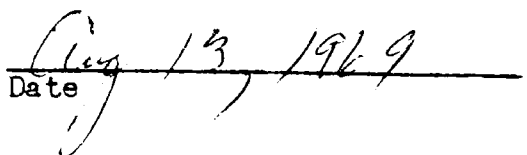
Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School



Date

UMI Number: EP34952

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

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

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



UMI EP34952

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

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

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



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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE	PAGE
THE SWARMING	1
DELIA	22
JASON	35
ON THE DARK SIDE	40
THE DESERTER	56

THE SWARMING

The summer my mother got sick with cancer was the same summer Eddie got married, and the summer she died was the summer Eddie got drafted and went to war. He used to write me letters about how crummy it was and how he hoped I'd never have to go away and fight. That I could never understand. Especially when he 'prayed to God it would soon be over'. I wanted more than anything for it to last long enough so I could go too.

Once he sent me a Christmas card printed in Korean. The Virgin Mary and Joseph both looked like they were Chinese and the shepherds had short black pigtailed. Even Jesus was yellowish and had slant eyes. It seemed strange to me at the time because those were the people we were fighting. The Chinese and the Koreans, I mean.

I wanted to go really bad but I was only twelve years old so instead I tried to give my dog to the K-9 corps. When I went to see the postmaster about it he asked me if I didn't like my dog or something, and if that was why I was doing it. It made me feel bad because I loved that dog more than anything. I didn't try to tell him though, grownups are like that. It didn't make any difference, they rejected him anyway. He was one-eighth collie.

When I wrote to Eddie I never knew what to say so I just asked him about the weather over there, if it was cold, and about how many Koreans he'd shot. He wrote back sometimes and said the weather was bitter cold and that they did nothing but climb mountains - the 'terrible brown mountains

of Korea'. He never said how many Koreans he'd shot and this always aggravated me.

Writing to him for some reason I never wanted to capitalize my "I's". Doing that seemed like it would have been making myself equal to him. Then one time he wrote back and said I should stop it and that I shouldn't be ashamed of anything, that he'd box my ears when he got home if I didn't start using the capital. After that I did, but I never felt comfortable about it. I remember one thing that he did that always seemed strange, too. Words like "chow" and "ammo" he always put in quotation marks, as though there were something a little ridiculous about them. Maybe that should have warned me.

Eddie left and Mom died on the same day, a Saturday. I remember because all that last week hydroplanes were racing up and down the river, getting ready for the Marathon race the following Sunday, sounding like bees swarming or having a war.

I really liked him. Maybe it was because he treated me the way I would have treated me if I'd have been him, or better still, the way I would have treated him if I'd have been the grown man. We used to talk a lot and he always listened to what I had to say - not the way grownups usually do, amused, indulging you, but maybe as though the things I said reminded him of things he already knew were true, but had forgotten. He never acted as though he wasn't as good as other people - but as though they weren't one bit better. There was something in his attitude that aggravated people, especially my Pa - maybe he was just too smart to be a hired hand.

We both worked pretty hard that June, raking hay and bailing, bitching about the heat somewhat, because it really was hot; and every evening on

the way home we'd stop at the abandoned stone quarry to take a swim before we came in, though Pa never knew about it or he would have whipped me for sure, having made me promise I'd never swim there. It was three hundred feet deep and ice cold spring water and there were schools of runty fish in it only an inch or two long, because there wasn't anything for them to eat.

Eddie could really swim. He was about an inch under six feet, not as tall as my Pa, but probably weighing half again more. Sometimes after undressing on the rock ledge I'd watch his knotty muscles twitching like thick snakes under his dark skin as he stepped to the edge and dove off, always first because the water was so cold. He'd stretch himself through the air like a drop of water finally loosed from a faucet, then hardly make a splash, disappearing for a minute and a half at least. I'd follow in a cannon ball, hoping I wouldn't have a heart attack. More than one person had had a heart attack jumping into the icy water and I used to think that I was going to too, the first few seconds after I'd jumped in - my heart would stop beating and I could hardly breathe, but then in a second I could again, and when I looked around for Eddie he'd be swimming way off toward the middle, cutting the water like a torpedo, a little mound of foam at his toes and where his hands sliced the water.

Once Eddie told me he thought I'd be a big man someday which made me feel good because I always felt a little ashamed about being so skinny. My pa was skinny too and so was my ma, so I guess I come by it honest, but I would rather have been about Eddie's size. In fact I used to pray to God every night to make me weigh about 180 pounds. I always thought that sounded like a good weight - heavy enough, but not so heavy you

couldn't be lightening fast.

We'd swim around for awhile until pretty soon the cold water would make my balls start to ache and my toes go numb so I'd climb out and let the wind and sun dry me. When I pulled on my levi's they always felt crusty. By the time Eddie got out the hot sun beating down on the ledge was making me sweat, and I was ready to go back in, though I never did.

In the summer after baling was finished usually I'd drive the tractor and pull the wagon while Eddie walked behind loading bales. He could load two at a time all day long if he wanted to, letting himself forget everything except the sound of the machine. When he got like that I knew it was useless to try to talk to him. He wouldn't have heard me. I never saw a man who thrived so on hard work. He had a rhythm the way a blacksmith does when he's working a piece of heavy steel, or an old gandy dancer stroking down steel rails. For long hours he'd work in swinging time to the slow-paced chugs of our ancient John Deere, walking like something bad in a dream that follows you, breathing powerfully as though the diesel fumes tasted good and churned him with strength. Sometimes he'd let out a holler at the sky he felt so goddamn good. Once when the baler broke down he really cussed it, not because the hay was his, but because he just hated to stop once he got going.

Machines never scared him like they do some farm hands. It wouldn't be true to say he loved them the way a man might love a horse or a mule, but he understood them and never fought with them. He'd sooner take a hammer to a friend than to a machine. Every bolt had a right size wrench and God help the man who offered him a knucklebuster. He'd use baling wire if he had to, but the loose ends were always twisted tight and snipped off clean.

Sometimes during that last week when we were taking a break and the only sound was the wind and the striking of a match, the half-drowned whine of the boats on the river would suddenly needle clear and sharp down into the field, piercing back into the earth. It always made me think of a swarm of invisible vipers or maybe locusts devouring, destroying something down by the river. No matter how hot it was the thought always made me shiver.

On the last Thursday afternoon before Eddie left it was so hot sitting on the tractor I almost passed out. We were about through baling when I asked Eddie if he wanted to go up and watch the boats for a little while.

Walking up there I could smell the fishy green river and see the orange setting sun sparkle hot on the water so that I was blinded and closed my eyes, little red spots jumping like fireworks. One corner of our north forty overlooked a ravine that gouged down the eroded bluff, passing between a clump of new birch trees and some white boulders with just their noses sticking out of the veined earth, emptying its dryness in scattered brush at its mouth, like huge brown molars. There the river began its big bend to the east, a three mile half moon jutting out, a rattlesnake's tooth called Morasmus Point.

Once in a while deer tracks were in the ravine but I never saw the deer. They were so old and smart they were more like ghosts. Every fall caravans of hunters came up from Chicago driving big cars and pushing their big bellies through the local taverns hunting for a card game and someone who would kill a deer for them. Sometimes they organized drives through the bushy country up north killing rabbits, squirrels, cows, a few deer, and once in a while, themselves. When they were in the woods the local hunters were afraid to go out, though they themselves weren't much better.

It was an ugly sport, to drive a deer through the belly-deep snow until he was so exhausted he'd stand trembling while a man on snow shoes walked up to him and shot him. But at least we ate the meat. Some of the guys who worked at the paper mills in Rhineland used to drive around for two weeks with a buck tied to the car and then throw it away, only keeping the head to mount.

From the fence at the top of the ravine Eddie and I could see the boats slapping up and down, tiny against the wide rough river as a swarm of beetles, sliding sideways as they made their practice turns around the black and red buoys, sputtering, screaming, trailing blue-black smoke that hung like frost bitten fingers over the river for a long time afterwards.

"I betcha sometimes you wish you could race again, Don't ya Eddie," I said.

"Sometimes."

"How come you don't then?"

"Well - because when a guy gets married things ain't just always the way they used to be. Things change." Eddie scratched his chin. "He can't just go on an' do whatever he pleases."

"Yer wife won't let ya?"

"No, she don't want me to, but its more this way - when yer married, yer ass is spoken for. Its like a business deal. You do something yer partner wants and she does somethin' you want an' that way ya stick together."

"Maybe so Eddie, but it seems like the woman partner gets everything."

"She makes out pretty good," he smiled in spite of himself.

"Yeh, so I think I'd race anyway."

"Maybe so, but when a guy stops puttin' into this marriage thing it's

dead."

"I'm never gettin' married," I said.

"Don't blame you," Eddie laughed. We had a smoke on that.

I knew Eddie was leaving for the Army and couldn't race anyway, but he hadn't the year before either. It was hard to understand because he'd won two years in a row and then quit just because he'd gotten married. He still messed around a little, helping some friends build their boats, but he wouldn't even get into one, though somebody said they heard a boat out on the river once at two o'clock in the morning and out of curiosity got out of bed to go down and see who it was. This guy, Schwartz was his name, swears it was Eddie, though he'd never seen the boat before. Anyway, nobody else heard it so everybody decided old Schwartz was drunk and having hallucinations.

As the sun sank lower the river turned slushy gray, and at the edge the dock lights of the town gleamed between houses dabbed lightly with rose. The evening was breathing as though it were a living thing, and the crickets became a chorus. We said goodby at the ravine, Eddie saying he had some business to take care of down by the river, though not saying what it was, and I started home alone. Our fence line ran at an angle to the river and walking along I noticed a car coming out from town, driving slowly along the water. I watched it for a minute, wondering what anybody would be doing down there at this time of day. It was too dark to tell, but the car looked familiar. Headlights stabbed across the river as it followed a bend in the road, then swept back across the sky like a lone searchlight, reappeared a narrow myopic shaft feeling its way carefully along the road like the antenna of some insect. I decided it must be a fisherman.

Thursday nights Milly's husband Jack always worked late so usually she came over for supper, but that night she didn't make it. At the supper table I remembered how, the week before, my Pa had laughed when he told us Eddie had been drafted. He didn't like Eddie because Eddie was a Polack. Pa hated Jews, Russians, Irishmen, People from Chicago, Northern niggers (the others knew their place), but especially, Polacks. I guess the trouble with Eddie really started when he was taking out my sister Milly. Then when Eddie killed Pa's Jersey bull it seemed to unhinge him in everything having to do with Eddie. He acted as though Eddie had tried to ruin him, not save his life. Pa could change things in his mind that happened to him until he really believed that somebody had tried to cheat him or double his taxes. He scowled at every stranger that came to the door, believing him to be a tax assessor or working for the health department, come to inspect the milking equipment and the barn, just waiting for a chance to shut him down.

Pa thought Eddie was a bad influence on me. Mostly, I think he was afraid Eddie would complain to me about the pay he was getting or about how hard Pa was to work for. He never did though. He didn't seem to care. That's how well my Pa knew Eddie. I remember more than once when Pa sent me over to Eddie's with his check 'cause Eddie had forgotten to ask for it.

Eddie's wedding night my two sisters, my folks and me all went to the wedding dance and I got drunk on beer. There were sixteen big barrels and I did my share when the folks weren't looking, though it wouldn't have mattered much if they'd have seen me because we could always drink beer at a wedding dance anyhow. I guess it was more fun to be ducking around mobs of people, holding a mug of beer, looking out for the folks, than to

be standing in front of an old piano or something trying to force the stuff down in front of everybody who were always watching for your eyes to water anyway.

Eddie got married on a Saturday and the celebration lasted until Monday morning, when he went back to work. That's how it used to be in Tomahawk. Nobody could afford to take off work for a honeymoon so they had their honeymoon dancing polkas and drinking beer. Of course, every once in a while the married couple would disappear and then be greeted by cheers and well meant laughter when they returned.

A wedding dance in Tomahawk was like a carnival with rivers of beer, piles of sausage, twenty different kinds of cheese from two year old limburger to the mildest cheddar, raven-haired beauties and some hay-haired with powerful breasts and souls of music, dancing old people who could hardly walk anymore and little kids playing tag.

Hundreds of people packed themselves into the towns only dance hall, eating and chug-a-lugging beer with one another, singing, dancing, playing accordians, making the music of the old country throb and swell, skirts swing and happiness grow through everybody until even the Poles and Germans were brothers. There really wasn't much for them to fight about any more except something like a German guy making time with a Polish girl, but that was enough to interrupt the music.

At Eddie's dance a big German named Ruben who weighed two hundred sixty five pounds and had to duck to get through the doorway kissed a little Koski girl who had been smiling at him all night, and the fight that followed with her brother and then his brothers and then everybody will be remembered until their own kids are grown (they got married the August after Eddie) and Hahago county slides back into the river. After that fight there was considerable more mixing of the races. Within two weeks

two more wedding banns were announced, though some of the old time Polacks who couldn't speak English weren't being told.

Eddie's wedding dance was also the night my mother got drunk. At least I thought she did because she never acted that way before or since. She came up to me in front of everybody and put her arms around me, wanting me to dance with her. I got the sickest feeling in my stomach and I pulled away, damn near knocking her down. Father Glendowski was standing next to us and saw it all. He looked as though somebody had just punched him in the guts when he caught my mother. I guess he was the only one who wasn't completely drunk - and that was because he had a heart condition. I cried walking all the way home because I knew she wasn't drunk at all and that I had really hurt her. The next morning Pa gave me a lecture about respecting your elders and all that crap. He made me apologize to her for the way I'd acted at Eddie's wedding dance. It wasn't an easy thing to do - him watching - one thumb hooked in his suspenders as though he thought he were Napoleon - chin stuck out, accusing. When you feel the way I did about my mother and then for him to make me apologize - it was filthy. It made me sick. Afterwards I really did go outside and puke, but it was probably because of all that beer I drank the night before.

Eddie's wife conked out about daybreak on Sunday and went home, but Eddie stayed with his friends, drinking and dancing until the next morning, and when he stumbled home from work Monday afternoon it was into the best honeymoon fight his neighbors had ever heard. He finally gave up out of sheer exhaustion and slept on the couch in the living room.

"I'll be goddamned," his wife told her neighbors the next day. "I know what he wants and just how bad he wants it." When I heard that I knew things didn't look good for Eddie.

He hadn't been married very long before his wife really started making things rough for him. During the winter he worked as a mechanic at the John Deere shop in town and during the summer he worked for my pa or some other farmer who needed temporary help but he never made much money. That was bad enough, but what really made his wife mad was that he didn't care. She came from an uppity Irish family, the only one in town. Her dad was an invalid from the First World War and she fought with her mother all the time. That's why she married Eddie - to get out of the house. She had plans for him. He was going to 'better himself' and 'make his mark'. For a long time (for her) she couldn't decide whether he should become a doctor or a lawyer. Finally she settled on law school. She thought that wouldn't take as many brains. When she told Eddie of her decision she said she knew it would take a long time, but that she was willing to wait. Eddie was not exactly enthusiastic. In fact he laughed at her, which was a real mistake. Eddie didn't come home until noon the following day, and from that time on she never let up. "What is your gumption? What kind of a man are you?" Every time Eddie came home from work she was waiting. He began to lose weight. He drank regular before, but heavier now, and wasn't seen to smile much. When a pretty girl smiled at him he looked after her with a mixture of contempt and interest. He used to wander around town late at night looking like he hadn't slept for weeks. When the taverns closed at 2 a.m. he was the last one out and he wasn't in any hurry. Sometimes he went fishing down by the river but he'd sit for hours and never feel a bite. It wasn't from him that I heard about his troubles, but from his neighbors. They could hear his wife better than he could since they were two walls and some distance away. There weren't

many men in town who could laugh easily about Eddie though some made a show of laughing loudly. My pa sniggered whenever he mentioned it. "Worthless gets as worthless does" he used to say.

I didn't like Eddie's wife before and even less after seeing the way she was pushing at him. As far as I was concerned, he was already about as smart as anybody could get. I decided she had lowered herself a long ways in my eyes, though I never said anything to Eddie about it. For some reason, I guess he still thought she was o.k., and I didn't want to stick my nose in where I wasn't wanted. I used to try, but I could never see Eddie waving his arms around in a courtroom, making some jury cry so he could collect a big fee and buy his wife a new fur coat.

On the Friday before he left for the Army she came out in the field where we were working as mad as I hope to God I never see another woman get. We both saw her coming, way across the field, stepping high, really laying 'em down, but we didn't say anything to each other, trying to ignore her the way you ignore a coming thunder storm when you're workin' to get in a last load of hay. In a minute she confronted the tractor, knuckles on her hips, so I had to stop. Before the motor had died she was screaming at Eddie. I turned around on the seat, wishing I'd had the nerve to run her over, and I'll swear to God I saw Eddie shiver a little. Thinking of it later I didn't blame him though, I was scared too. She looked as though she'd gone clean out of her mind.

"I hate you, Edward Karawski, you dirty son of a bitch!" She had learned how to cuss from her pa. "God damn I'd like to smash your thick bastard skull." She shook her little fist at him. "You're nothing but a slimy bastard of a sneak thief! You hear? Nothing but a slimy bastard

of a sneak thief!" She marched toward him while Eddie stood his ground. I almost kicked her in the head as she went by.

"You'll not forget this," she screeched, aiming a kick at Eddie's groin. He was expecting it though because he side-stepped easily.

"Steal the last penny in the house," she yelled, leaning towards him, her arms stiff behind her. The wind was blowing her hair all down over her eyes, and she shook her head so she could see him better.

"The boy," said Eddie.

"Dammmn the boy. I'll have everyone know what a drunken worthless bastard you are. You're the lowest animal that crawls the face of the earth. You steal food from the mouths of babes. You let your wife go hungry - you steal the last - miserable - cent in the house - and buy whiskey!" She snarled "whiskey", her eyes bulging as though she had just seen the devil himself.

"I didn't buy whiskey," he said.

"Liar! Bastard!" she sputtered. "Your mother's a whore and your father's a pimp!" She stomped her foot. "I hate you!"

She turned and ran back the way she had come and we both stood open mouthed, watching. In a minute she stopped in the middle of the field and screamed something inaudible at Eddie, making some jerky obscene gestures but we couldn't understand what she said. Then she held up her skirt and stumbled away, tripping every few seconds. Eddie let out his breath real slow looking at the sky. Then he started to laugh. For a minute I thought he was crazy, but then I started to laugh too. It really was funny. If she had tripped and fallen down maybe it wouldn't have been so funny, but now it was funny. In a minute I stopped because I hadn't really learned how to

laugh yet at something that was horrible and funny at the same time.

"Well I'll be a son of a bitch," said Eddie.

I thought about that for a minute, then I started up the tractor. It didn't seem to make nearly as much noise as before and it didn't seem to run right either, so I shut it down again. I felt kind of nervous all of a sudden.

"Eddie?"

When he looked up, dust masking his heavy dark face, his eyes were glittering oddly.

"Start it up."

My hands trembled when I jabbed the starter button. We finished the haying and got it stacked in the barn by three o'clock. Working up there reminded me of the time two years ago when Eddie and I had finished stacking and he was having a smoke before we came down.

We were watching a bunch of chickens squabbling below the loft door and showing each other the measles on our arms from the hay. The sweat in the armpits of my shirt had gotten cold already so I sat leaning against my knees, my elbows wide, my arms locked in front. Directly above the loft the sky was dark blue and clear, but a storm was rolling in from the north east. I could see little puffs of dust being whipped up along the county road south of town. In the loft, the air was grieving still. Across the river in the swamp a stab of lightening changed the grey curtain of clouds to muddy orange.

"I guess I'll take Milly to the Park Dance Saturday," said Eddie, dangling his long legs out of the loft.

"She'd go, Eddie, but Pa won't let her."

"What?"

"Sure, Milly knows you're gonna ask her. She's been workin' on Pa all week, but he won't budge an inch."

"How come?"

I shrugged my shoulders and put my chin on my knees. "I don't know. He says you're corrupting her."

"Goddamn. That'd be the day."

"Maud might go, Eddie. She never listens to Pa anyhow."

"No, I don't wanna take Maud."

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't wanna take Maud either."

In a few minutes the wind hit us full force, driving dust and bits of paper toward us from town. We were about to close the loft door and go down when we saw Pa walking backwards toward the barn, leading our Jersey bull who was reluctant to come in a deceptively gentle sort of way. Dust was flying and the barn was creaking in the wind. Pa was pulling hard, the bull not actually holding his forelegs stiff, but bending each one slowly, carefully, as though walking on something sticky. For a minute the dust billowed up and we couldn't see them.

"What's he gonna do?" said Eddie, standing up.

"I don't know," I said. "Doctor him I guess."

"He should get a vet."

I didn't say anything because I thought Eddie was right. Pa never did have a way with the stock, and this bull was an onery one and hard to handle. He had an infection in his penis which caused it to drop yellow liquid so Pa was going to get him into a stall in the barn where he'd be easier to handle and give him a shot with a hypodermic needle.

"Hey!" I jerked my head around and saw Eddie spread-eagle in midair,

falling from the loft. He landed on his feet in the middle of the huddled chickens, squashing one flat as a snowball against a wall. Then I saw, Pa had tripped and fallen and the bull was on him like a freight car on stilts. He didn't have any horns, but not realizing it he was rolling his head low, trying his best to get ahold of something and toss it, all the while his hooves stomping over and around Pa's head and body. The bull saw Eddie running toward him, waving his arms, but he didn't leave Pa. Like a mad-man Eddie looked around for something, and then he saw an axe standing against the potato cooker. Running over, he picked it up, started back toward the bull. The bull stopped, and it looked like Eddie was walking slowly, but then he was there, facing the bull. Snorting, the bull lowered his head and Eddie swung the axe. He leaned over backwards like a tree in the wind, the axe behind him like a trailing branch, then rolled forward and down like a sprung steel.

"Sa thunk". The bull's front legs clove wide and he fell solid to the ground, the axe buried to the wood. Eddie stood perfectly still, looking down, the back of his neck white as a mushroom stalk in the dust that billowed around them both wildly.

By the time I got down the ladder and outside he was halfway to the house, carrying Pa in his arms like a bride. I could hear Pa moaning and trying to kick loose. It didn't seem like he was hurt very bad. He was saying, "Oh--oh--twenty-five hund'ed dollars, oh--no, oh no!"

Eddie had trouble getting him through the kitchen door, he was kicking so hard.

We came out of the barn looking for Pa, to see what he wanted us to do. The kitchen door slammed and he came around the back of the house,

walking hunched over like an old man, a long red handkerchief hanging out of his side pocket like a torn string of guts.

"Go up an' men' do fence by da ravine," he said. Blowing his nose he continued on toward the barn. "An' today I want it done."

In the toolshed we got a small roll of wire and wire-cutters which Eddie carried, while I took a hammer and a pocket full of staples that pricked my leg every step I took. There wasn't anything wrong with the fence but Pa was always afraid he'd lose a calf up there. It was about a half a mile so I thought we'd take the pickup, but Eddie started walking so I did too.

On the way neither of us said anything. I felt close to him in a way that I never had before, but something was bothering me too - it was almost as though I were afraid of him. When we got to the ravine we nailed up a couple loose strands and ran an extra one near the bottom of the fence for about a hundred feet. We weren't in any hurry, both of us wanting to drag out the minutes and make them last, so when we finished the sun was low in the West, making the stubble in the field glow reddish, and the curly hair on Eddie's arms and hands too. I guess I'm allergic to something growing in the ravine because I began to sneeze. I'd been pressing underneath my nose for several minutes. Like somebody lost, the echo of a sneeze stole back across the river from the swamp on the other side. Eddie lit a cigarette and said, "I guess we're through."

"A-choo," floated back, hollow, lonesome.

I took a drag on his cigarette. Handing it back I heard a hum coming from way down the river.

"The boats."

He nodded and we listened quietly. The swamp had picked up the sound too and was humming independently, as though someone had spun a top and then left it.

The sound of the massed boats approaching strummed the still air like a single hovering insect. Across the river in the swamp a screech echoed as a great horned owl rose out of the shadows, pumping huge wings in ponderous grace through the lean black trees, fleeing toward the far side of the swamp.

"My last day workin' for your pa."

I didn't say anything.

"Let's go," he said.

Reluctantly I turned from the river. "Yeh Eddie. Hey, the boats are really moving, ain't they." He didn't answer. We walked back across the field, the hammer and small wire-cutters heavy in my pocket. Stopping to take a leak I tried to think of ways to tell Eddie how lucky I thought he was, going into the Army. Shaking off the pee I still hadn't come up with anything. By now he was growing smaller in the distance, a dark figure pushing back the red sky. He walked with almost a shuffle across the rose colored earth.

"Ed-d-ie." My voice sounded puny in my ears, seeming to lose itself in the hugeness of the field.

"Ed-d-ie!" He turned around to wait. I ran toward him hoping that maybe now I could talk to him. All during the week whenever I'd started on the war he'd gotten real gruff and short with me so I'd decided to just shut up about it. I plowed to a stop like a boat in front of him. "Eddie?"

"What?"

"When you comin' back?"

"Come on, let's go." He started walking so fast I had to run to keep up. Pretty soon he settled back down to his old shuffle and we walked together for awhile. From the sound of the boats they were passing the swamp. Soon they were just the lingering ring of a boxed ear. We reached the turnoff to the quarry.

"Feel like a swim Billy?"

"Sure." He hadn't answered me, but sometimes he did that then days later he would, as though I'd only just then asked the question. It bothered me though because pretty soon he'd be gone. We didn't swim for very long. A set sun was fighting back the strangling inky darkness with blood stained fingers while high in the east, long raggy clouds streaked fire and gold scratches over the cold empty sky. Dressing on the ledge I felt clean the way no bath in a tub can ever make you feel. Crickets were chirping in the dust all around us, just out of sight. A mighty bird swooped by, looking for prey. The quarry water was a cold, glazed eyeball, broken only when a tiny fish jumped, leaving a rain drop pupil. The smell of hay reached me, and the sound of the wind in the branches above us, brushing them clean and stiff against the sky.

We dried ourselves with our T-shirts and started up the bank sending down a shower of pebbles into the still water. A half mile away was the highway, cars passing, their lights already on, moving slowly. I thought Eddie was going to say something pretty soon; he kept looking at me oddly, then down to the ground, so I just waited. In the rushing darkness the boats on the river whined, skimming across the smooth water. A star was out, pale in the bruised sky, solitary as blood on a pin-pricked finger. At a clump of hickory trees that marked one corner of pa's land we stopped,

and Eddie put one foot on the bottom strand and leaned an elbow on a post.

"Goddamn boats," he said, taking out his cigarettes. I nodded, taking one from the pack. He leaned back and forth on the fence post making it squeak. I lit mine, then his, and we sat down on the ground by the fence. I'd killed a pheasant once in this very spot.

"It's a hell of a thing, Billy, about yer ma."

I didn't feel like looking him in the eyes so I looked away toward the highway. All the while I'd been expecting him to talk about the war, about what he would do when he got to Korea, or how maybe he wished I could go too. He didn't though.

"A hell of a goddamn thing." He rubbed his nose, slapped the back of his neck where a mosquito bit him. "Things happen--all the time, that don't make a goddamn bit of sense." He studied the blood on his palm.

"Doesn't everything make sense, Eddie? I mean, to somebody?"

He wrapped some grass around his finger next to his wedding ring, rolling it off, keeping the grass together, and looked at it closely as though the answer might be there.

"Whoever knows about it ain't sayin', Billy."

More stars were out now, still barely visible. When he spoke I could barely hear. "You know, Billy, sometimes a guy knows when things are going to be a certain way - for a long time before - he knows just how certain things are going to be. There's no use fighting them. You follow me?"

"No."

"Hmm. Let me put it this way. When I'm gone - no - I'm goin' away - o.k.?"

"O.k."

"And I figure I should try an' leave you with something - something you'll remember because when you do get older - ah, son of a bitch!" Suddenly he jumped up and dug into his pants pocket.

"Here's something maybe you can use." He handed me a brand new jackknife.

"You can maybe learn to whittle and make things. Whatever you want." He looked around at the trees, then back at me. "You'd better be gettin' home. Your pa will be wondering what I'm doin' with you." Raising his hand he turned away. "See you Billy. Take care the knife."

I watched him walk along the fence toward the highway, not knowing what to say. Finally I yelled, "Hey thanks, Eddie," but he was pretty far away by then and if he heard me he didn't answer. It was kind of a son of a bitch because I never saw him again.

DELIA

She was a B girl, "No whore, no whore," she said the first time I met her in the Torro. Pee Wee was dancing in her G string on the elevated stage in the middle of the smoke filled bar, and the sailors were crowding around, some of them on their knees, waiting for her to dance up close. The music was brassy and loud.

I bought her a drink and had a zombie myself because I'd decided to get drunk. The letters from my fiancée had been getting more and more sisterly, and since my involvement was anything but brotherly, I was in a drinking mood.

We sat at a little table just big enough for two in the semi-darkened rear of the bar, and I asked her the usual questions you ask a girl your own age when she happens to be working in a bar in T-town, like what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? I got pretty much the usual answers. Her family was poor and she had come to Tijuana in order to make a lot of money. She said that in one year she could make enough money to go home and support her family in style for ten years. Her father was dead.

She was small and quiet, with coconut colored skin, black shiny hair which she wore short, and beautifully graceful hands. She used them as she talked, reminding me of the flutterings of small birds.

"Marine?" she inquired, after I bought her the second drink. The stuff she got was colored water, and the girls got a cut, keeping the little tabs the waiter left on the table each time, then turning them in every night after work.

"You're right," I said. It was pretty obvious, and small talk wasn't

my line. She gracefully overlooked my rudeness and picked up the conversation.

"Short time, Marine?" she inquired, showing her knowledge of Marine Corps jargon. It had a double meaning, a quick trip upstairs, or time left in the service.

"Long time, yet," I said. "One year."

"Not so very long. Then you go home?"

"No," I said. "There's nothing there. Maybe I'll come down here and stay for awhile. Not Tijuana - maybe further down."

"Maybe you like it, Mexico maybe. Tijuana cruddy." She wrinkled up her nose, then said, "What are you called?"

"Mike," I said.

"I like," she said. "Mike strong."

"Thanks," I said.

"Si," she said, feeling my arm quickly. "Like stone." She giggled and looked away.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Delia," she said, sighing as though it implied more than just a name.

"Delia - that's a beautiful name." It seemed oddly reassuring to be starting the preliminaries of love in the Torro. California girls in their convertibles were all named Sandra and didn't speak to jarhead peons.

"What town you from, Mike?"

"Chicago."

"Chicago?" She broke into a credulous smile. "I have a lover in Chicago." I must have looked skeptical because she sat up primly and said,

"You don't believe me? Here's the letter." She rummaged around in her purse and pulled out a wrinkled blue envelope, handing it to me. It was postmarked Chicago, Illinois two weeks before.

"Somebody already read it three times. Read it to me?"

There were ten or twelve cramped, hand written pages covered with splotches of ink from a leaky ball point pen, and hearts with arrows through them drawn in the margins. Delia's lips were firm but her eyes were shiny as I unfolded it and began reading:

My Dearest Sweet Delia,

It is cold here now and I wish you were here with me. I love you and miss you so I don't know what to do. I don't take any girls out because I am always thinking of you. Girls want me to go out but I always say no. Every day I love you more and more. I will come back and marry you whenever I can.

Ever since the first time I saw you I was in love with you. You are the girl of my dreams.

The letter got more and more ridiculous and I looked up to see if Delia really believed all this stuff, but the dreamy expression never left her eyes. Maybe it was the only letter she'd ever gotten. The closing lines were:

Your eyes are like the stars, Your ruby lips haunt me in my dreams at night. Your skin is like the skin of a goddess. Delia you are the only girl I will ever love. Someday I will come back for you. Don't be ashamed of your work. You are not a whore, you are a B girl. Always remember that.

Your heartbroken lover,

Sam

"He sounds - different," I said. How did I know? Maybe that was just the way he expressed himself. It was hard to tell about things like that unless you knew the guy. Besides I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Sam wants to marry me. I'm a B girl, no whore," she said, her smile full of wistfulness.

After my third zombie I told Delia I'd write a letter for her any time she wanted. She thanked me and said she'd have to think for awhile about what to say. Maybe the next time I saw her.

I got completely wiped out that night, thinking about my own problems, and when I finally wandered out of the bar and across the long, evil smelling bridge toward the border I had a feeling I'd never see Delia again. T-town would swallow her up whole. I got sick off the bridge because of all the zombies I'd drunk, and after I sobered up a little I made it the rest of the way to the border, showed my liberty card that said I was me and legally out of my cage, and caught a bus back to Camp Pendleton, sleeping all the way.

It was two weeks before I got back because it was two weeks until payday. I'd written Ellen to drop the phony sisterly crap or stop writing, and she'd stopped writing. It was all over and when you're twenty and the first real one is over you feel like you've lost something permanently, and maybe you have.

I started smelling T-town from five miles away but it didn't turn me off like it usually did because I was thinking about Delia. After I got off the bus that turned around at the border I crossed the bridge and walked up and down, but the sailors were all peaceful that early in the day, so finally I went down the steps into the Torro. It was only about four

o'clock and I didn't think she'd be there, but there wasn't anyplace else I wanted to go.

The bar smelled rank, like a pile of wet cigarette butts laced with a smattering of vomit. There weren't many customers, and not seeing Delia I asked one of the girls where she was.

"Delia phhhtt," she said. "You buy me drink?"

"No," I said. "I'm looking for Delia." The girl was wearing a black dress with sequins, and a necklace made of some kind of long teeth.

"Delia whore like everybody else. You buy me drink?"

"Scram," I said. She followed me down the bar.

"Delia fuckie nigger, pimp, swabbie. You want nice girl? I nice girl."

"Get lost," I said, getting up on a stool, ordering one beer.

"Cheap skate jarhead," she said with a toss of her head, starting after another customer who'd just come in.

From the bartender who was now washing glasses I found out that Delia was due any minute. Pee Wee was dancing for her own amusement on the small stage, and I turned around to watch. She was small, about the same size as Delia, but where Delia was quiet and almost shy, Pee Wee was all fire and fingernails. I'd seen her take a chair and break it over a sailor's head once when he'd tried to jump up on the stage with her, and laugh when she saw the blood, but she was a dancer. She danced as though she wanted to stop the world and step all over every living creature on it.

The Torro was filling up slowly and I was beginning to wonder if maybe Delia wasn't going to come, when I saw her coming through the doorway, purse over her shoulder, alone.

"Hi Doll," I said.

"Hi-lo, Mike." She stopped, locking her hands in front of her, as though to crack her knuckles.

"How 'bout a drink?"

"Sure. Let's go to the table." I got off the stool and followed her over to the same table we'd sat at before.

"No zombies Mike, o.k.?"

"I like zombies," I said.

"But you get so drunk."

"Drink Tequila," she said. "Joe like tequila."

When the waiter came she ordered two tequilas in Spanish, making sure he understood that she wanted two. He brought the drink and left no tab for Delia. I guess they only got a cut on the colored water.

"Will you come with me tonight?" I asked her.

"No whore," she said, shrugging flippantly.

"I know that."

"Then why you ask? Get another girl." She waved her hand and bunched up her shoulders. "Lots of girls."

"But not like you."

"Girls all the same," she said. "Why you want me?"

"Because you're beautiful, and besides, you remind me of somebody." She did, and it was uncanny because she didn't look at all like Ellen.

"You too?" she said. "When you talk it sounds like Sam." Then she laughed, as though something no longer bothered her. "I'm not me and you not you." A big sailor came up to our table and asked Delia if he could buy her a drink.

"No. I'm drinking with Marine."

The sailor left and joined four or five buddies sitting around a table next to the stage, and they all looked over. I looked back at them, hoping something would happen. I would have gotten murdered, but I wanted to smash something or get smashed. I wanted to take my hurt out on somebody. Delia said, "No trouble Mike. You go to jail - phhht," she snapped her fingers. "Disappear."

"Good," I said.

"No good," she said. "Why you say that?"

I noticed she was wearing a shade of lipstick I'd never seen before - kind of a rose petal pink, and I noticed that her lower lip was full, like a tiny pillow. She was biting it, making herself look more philosophical than sexy.

"No reason," I said. "I didn't mean it."

There was a P.A. system in the place that played Mexican music when the band wasn't playing and Pee Wee wasn't dancing. It was playing now, something about a dead bull fighter. Outside I supposed it was getting dark, and the pimps would be getting thick.

"What you think about Sam?" she asked, curiously.

"Nothing," I said. "I don't know him."

"What you think about the letter?"

"Ah Delia," I said. It came out sounding sad, but I guess that's the way I meant it.

"Ah you," she said, jumping up. "Ah you gyrene shithead." She stomped across the bar and sidled up to some sailor so I got up and left. She ignored me as I went by, and I heard the table full of sailors laugh.

Outside, the sidewalk was thick with passing sailors, marines, and a few army guys, everybody in civies except the army guys. You could tell the Marines by their spit shined shoes and the way they walked, and the sailors were what was left.

The pimps were busy all around. Somebody was dealing for pot with a big armed taxi driver in a Hawaiian shirt. They usually didn't come through, selling you some worthless crap, knowing that to the gringos they all looked alike. I walked up the street, stopping to buy two tacos from a vendor with a pushcart. Thirty cents. Tomorrow, when they were old, two for fifteen. They told us on the base never to eat Mexican food but I always did because I liked it. I never got the bug, even from the old stuff I bought when I was broke.

I made the rounds back down the other side of the street and proceeded to get plowed. Finally I landed back in the Torro but I was so drunk they wouldn't serve me. I'd never heard of anybody being refused a drink in T-town before so I knew I'd scored a first. Then I saw Delia and yelled, "Delia, Delia, com'er." She came over, both Delias, merging and unmerging, until one with fuzzy edges stood in front of me, my insult, whatever it had been, lying between us like a broken hurdle.

"I'm sorry, Delia," I blurted. "Din' mean - oney meant - sorry for love. Sorry for love."

I turned around and stumbled out the door, afraid maybe I'd get down on my knees or do something stupid, and stumbled up the steps. I was halfway up, making slow time, when I felt someone pulling at my arm. It was Delia with her purse over her shoulder.

"You got your purse," I said. The purse bothere me because I knew it

wasn't right.

"I help you. Come on."

"No. You lose your job."

"You come with me."

I wasn't in any shape to argue with her, and together we made it up the steps, me being careful not to step on her beautiful tiny feet. On Reforma I gained my footing a little and remembered to stagger on the outside. Delia was like an angel at my side; a little pressure here, a slight tug there, and we were making it through the crowd. Then I fell down and she tried to help me up but it was like a child pulling at a sack of cement. Nobody stopped to help. Finally I made it to my feet by not worrying about up, but just pushing off the sidewalk and Delia pointed me in the right direction. I fell down twice more, and disgusted, I looked up and saw the bull ring looming squat, the street, the huge entrance archway, the jumble of garbled red letters defying any reason for being there, so I got up and started toward it, Delia yelling in a small voice I didn't know. I broke into a lurching trot and lowered my head like a bull, the blank yellow mass of the bull ring wall coming, rocking like a ship, and we met.

When I came to I didn't even have a headache, and that seemed funny so I started laughing. That hurt like hell and I stopped. Delia was sitting on the bumper of a parked car, and when she heard me laughing she got up.

"Dumb jarhead! Why you do that? You kill yourself. Get up."

She didn't feel sorry for me and that pissed me off a little, so I started moaning. "You not hurt. Get up, hard head."

I got up slowly, leaning against the wall. It towered over me and looking up I almost fell over backwards. Then I felt sorry for Delia, that

she should have to put up with me, and I tried to hug her but she started down the street. I followed, remembering a couple guys I knew who'd gotten rolled lately, then sick ashamed of myself because Delia would probably lose her job for doing this stupid thing. Delia stayed in front of me, never turning around, and I followed like a homing pigeon with a broken wing, my wobbly legs loose and tangled. She turned down a narrow alley and I made the corner, knocking over some stuff piled up outside a door, untangled myself, and kept going. Some of the doorways were lighted and I heard loud voices, then Delia's voice saying something in Spanish. Finally Delia waited for me, and we turned and crossed an open place, another alley, and stopped in front of a door in a long row of doors. She opened it, light falling over me, and pushed me inside. I landed on a purple bed spread and was asleep almost before I heard the jangle of light bulb chain and the door closing.

The first thing I heard the next morning were the birds. I had a terrible hangover and a big lump on my head. The sunlight was fierce and bright through the open door, spreading in a wedge on the rough wooden floor. I was undressed down to my shorts, my clothes folded neatly over the back of a chair standing next to the big sagging double bed. The room was small. Besides the bed there was a table, three chairs, a stove and some wooden boxes being used for drawers. Some women were talking and laughing in the alley outside, and afraid they might come in I started dressing as quickly as I could - I would have been embarrassed to have them find me in bed. I'd gotten my trousers and shoes and was fumbling around with my shirt when Delia came in, looking surprised to see me up. She was even more beautiful in the sunlight, but I was so hung over I couldn't stand the light. I covered my eyes and groaned.

"Buenos dias," she said, sounding superior. Maybe she thought I'd been groaning at her. I rubbed my eyes for awhile, sitting on the edge of the bed, then I said, "Maybe I'll go out and buy some tacos. Are you hungry?"

"No," she said, and started banging around, straightening things up. Every little noise hurt. Then she came over and stood in front of me, hands on her hips, looking down. I was tenderly feeling the lump on my head, trying to remember what had happened.

"Would you marry B girl?"

I didn't know what to say until I looked up and saw her face. She was partly angry, partly accusing, partly hurt. I said, "Sure, somebody like you." She stood there for a few seconds to see if I was telling the truth, then spun around and went out the door. I was just sitting there on the edge of the bed, holding my aching head, wondering what that had been all about when she returned with a handful of tortillas and started heating them on the stove.

I watched her moving around, setting the table with plates and two forks she'd gotten out of an orange crate standing on the floor next to the stove, and in a few minutes she gestured for me to take a chair. The beans were like pudding, hot with dried peppers and good though it hurt my head to chew. The tortillas were crisp and I made tacos out of mine. Delia had two bottles of Mexican beer which we drank, and even though they were warm they were good. It was Sunday morning, and every once in a while I'd see somebody go down the alley, all dressed up, the passing children looking like little bunches of flowers. When we finished I licked my fingers and smoked a couple cigarettes while Delia heated a pan of water on the stove

for dishes. She moved with the conviction of a woman who was trying to make up her mind about something, and the green dress she wore crinkled smoothly over her fine small hips. I wanted to close the door and go up to her but I couldn't do it without having it look cheap and ungrateful. When she finished she didn't seem to want to sit down again at the table which made me nervous, so finally I said I thought I'd better go, and stood up. It never crossed my mind to offer her anything.

"You come back next week?" she asked. The intense look she gave me surprised me.

"Sure."

"I sore now. I had op-eration two days ago."

"Operation?"

"Operation," she said, touching her belly.

On my way back across the bridge I thought about what she'd said. Goddamn it though, she seemed inconsiderate. It was going to be inconvenient, but I guessed I could wait.

JASON

From October or November, depending how soon the winter set in, until March or April, he was totally alone with the whiteness, the coyotes, the elk, and occasionally, the wolves. These were the long months.

He was a well educated man who had read much in his time, but books had long ago lost their appeal - most of what he'd read involved people in society, or civilization, or whatever one wished to call it. He wondered how much of his civilized capacity for enjoying civilized things he was losing.

The only book he still read with any regularity was the Bible, which he read for the beauty of the language. He read it for entertainment, too (he felt himself to be an "old testament" man) though by now he knew most of the stories by heart. . . occasionally, when he had time, he would copy short passages into a tattered notebook which he kept in his shirt pocket, and then reread them later, when the mood struck him.

During the winter he lived in a sod hut he'd built into the side of a mountain. The hut was about 12 x 14 with dirt floor and walls, and the roof was built of Lodge Pole logs covered with slabs and two feet of dirt. It was snug and warm and had a small cast iron stove Jason had found in the Elkhorn city dump the first year he'd started mining. There was only one window in the upper part of the door which left the inside dark most of the day and sometimes, when he had gas, he used a small lantern which burned with a hot white flame.

When Jason rose in the morning, he would open the door to clear the

night air, then start breakfast - usually pancakes, deer meat, and several cups of boiled over coffee. Often, if the snow was deep, he would see elk feeding in the meadow that bordered the creek, and sometimes he would kill a cow or a calf. He seldom killed a bull because the meat was tougher and he would have been sick of it before he'd gotten half way through it, and besides, with the spring thaw he would have had to salt it or dry it.

Flour, coffee, sugar, salt, tobacco and cartridges for his rifle were just about his only expenses, besides the two bit shirts and trousers he bought at the Salvation Army Store whenever he came to town - three or four times a year in an old Studebaker pickup loaded with a ton or so of low grade ore. The first trip in the spring was the toughest because talking to people was hard after the long, silent winter months. Words long unused fought with his tongue, and when he started to stutter and mumble, his pale blue eyes would grow fierce and people would turn away from him, thinking he was crazy. This only made him angry.

His greatest joy was to find a mineral-laden fault and to let his imagination play upon it like sunlight, before he began to pick and pry and worry it for its secret. People in town knew him as "Crazy Jason", and they knew he'd been looking for the mother lode for eight years. They thought he was either a fool or a mad man. What he didn't know about mining wasn't worth knowing, a thing he told himself often enough, but eight years was a long time. Since it was more desirable, at least more palatable, for Jason to have people consider him crazy rather than a fool, he'd begun to play along on his trips to town. He realized that he was doing it, and the thought was repugnant to him, but he was so far out of contact with people, he didn't know quite how to remedy it. And then, the

thought kept recurring to him - maybe he was a little crazy. Who but a mad man would spend his life alone in the mountains, grubbing in the dirt?

It was sundown on a cool, late summer day, probably September, but Jason didn't know for sure. He was sitting by his camp fire, in front of the tent he pitched in the summer time, smoking a cigarette and feeling the good feeling one large grouse cooked in wild rice makes, flavored with juniper, and waiting for the appearance of a friend - an old buck. He wasn't waiting to kill it - his rifle was in the tent and he hadn't loaded it, so he knew for sure that he wasn't waiting to kill it - maybe he'd never be ready to kill it - the old one, anyway. There was another one, a little two-point, big for his age, but dumb - and that one he might kill. He could use the meat. The night before, the little one had walked up to within fifty feet of Jason and then looked around foolishly, trying to hide behind a small roseapple bush. After crouching behind the little bush for awhile, the young buck had walked down toward the creek, trying with difficulty to maintain his young buck dignity. He crossed the creek, climbed the bank on the other side, and disappeared over the top. At the edge of the timber a hundred yards away the old buck had been watching and, when it was almost dark, he'd stepped out, his rack silhouetted for an instant against the gray sky, then circled noiselessly around behind Jason and come down to the creek, moving like fog itself.

Jason stirred the embers of the fire and looked around. The sun was almost down, the shadow of the mountain behind him falling across the meadow almost to the creek. He picked up his empty water jug and started down to fill it. The grass in the meadow was waist high - "wasted grass" people in town would say - and maybe they were right. He could have raised

hay, had a few cows, a good horse - even built a house. He knew he could have built a pretty good house. Maybe all the ifs and maybe not. But he was old now - too old to start over. His mouth was pulled down into the perplexed frown it always assumed whenever he thought too long about his age. He'd never married, and he felt the emptiness of the childless man. He had many things to teach, but no sons to teach them to. The jug, which hung by a rope, slipped off his shoulder, and he swung it through the grass. It made a light, tinging sound. He passed the choke cherry trees which gave him fifty gallons of wine the good years, and then the gooseberry bushes, from which he could have made a thousand gallons the good years. Once he'd thought about starting a winery - he liked to tend things of the soil and he liked to make wine - and Beta grapes would grow where he was, but the idea of having federal agents coming onto his place, inspecting the way he did things, and taxing him besides, was too much.

At the creek he filled the bottle and drank, then crossed it, went up through the brush, and climbed to the top of the low ridge that ran parallel to it. The wind was cool, light on his face. He passed old test holes he'd made years before, remembering the assayer's report from each of them. It was all low grade ore and it all could have been mined - he could have made a living, torn up the country with dozers, blasted the rock, mucked it out - he could have, but he hadn't. He was looking for the mother lode.

He reached the edge of the timber and stopped. Among the tall gnarled Ponderosa were the mushrooms he picked every spring and fall. They were good, fried with deer steak. There were thousands of them. He sat down under a Ponderosa, took a long drink of cold water, rolled a cigarette, lit

up, and searched the meadows and the edges of the timber for the buck. Once, the year before, he'd decided to kill it, and had hunted it for two days, but he hadn't gotten a shot. He'd trailed it through the snow like a wolf, knowing its habits, its favorite places; but each time a little effort was needed that would put him in a position for a shot, he'd slacked off. He wondered if he really wanted to kill it. At the end of the second day, he'd gone back to the hut, killing two jackrabbits along the way - ashamed about killing two jackrabbits after trailing the big buck for two days, but out of meat. A week later, he'd killed a dry doe, which lasted him until spring.

Jason looked across the meadow and the creek to his camp. It was a solitary locking camp. He took another drink of water, replaced the cork with a single slap of the heel of his hand, and wiped his lips, so as not to wet the end of his cigarette. He felt the rough bark of the Ponderosa against his back, and looked up. Its branches were thick as a man's thighs. Not far from here was a Ponderosa that measured twelve feet around but stood only thirty feet high, a storm having toppled most of it sometime in the remote past - maybe a hundred years before. But what was left had continued to grow. When Jason first saw it, he'd walked 'round and 'round it muttering, "Gawd damn, you was a tree," in a minute changing it to "Gawd damn, you are a tree," and laughing. Jason backed off and could see the path of it through the nearby trees - a hundred feet had fallen.

The sun was gone now; purple darkness was gathering across the meadows like the folds of a cloak. Jason got up, slung the water jug over his shoulder, and started toward camp. He could see his fire, barely smoking. He followed his path through the grass. His boots were wet - at the low

ridge above the creek he stopped, hearing a crashing below him. It was the old buck, moving out of the brush. His jumps were high and short - he almost seemed to remain in the same spot. When he reached the open ground of the meadow he whirled around and faced Jason, shaking his rack from side to side and pawing the earth. Jason hadn't moved. The buck was in velvet, and he was looking for trouble. They stared at one another for perhaps thirty seconds; then Jason carefully backed up and made a detour around the buck, back to camp. He picked up his rifle, loaded it, and started down toward the creek. Jason didn't often back up for anything.

There was fog in the creek bottom, Jason noticed, as he came down from the warmer air of the camp into the cooler air of the lower meadow. The buck was still there, standing stiff as a statue, looking at Jason. Jason raised the rifle and sighted in. He sighted in so long that his arms began to tremble, and he lowered the rifle. Suddenly the buck whirled away and crossed the meadow, the sound of him heavy on the stillness of the evening. Jason stood looking after him.

Back at camp, he stirred the ashes of the fire, then took off his boots and washed his feet in the wet grass. He could hear the buck rattling his horns against the limbs of trees and crashing around, getting rid of the itchy velvet. Again and again the buck tore into limbs and branches, and to Jason, lying in his sleeping bag later that night and looking out at the moonlight, it sounded like the clash of swords in ancient combat.

ON THE DARK SIDE

His poems decreased in inverse proportion to the miles he wandered.

All of his life he'd been afraid of succeeding - more afraid of succeeding than of failing. Succeeding would have raised him in the eyes of a world whose opinion he thought he detested. Failure could always be made tragic, if not comfortable. There was much more to it than that, he knew, and someday he would write a poem about the failure of his failure and it would be a great success. Wouldn't that be a son of a bitch.

He was getting sleepy watching peons coming from the town, and it was a town - no village. Some of them smiled shyly, but others looked tough or frowned, not approving of his spending Sunday leaning against a tree, the steeples of the church so close he could have roped them both with the loop of a rosary. He'd heard the bells that morning and again that evening.

The churches of Mexico were always narrow because the trees never grew tall, and so the roof beams were short. Eons of time accumulated between their walls the way water accumulates over the low spots of a floor. Torn paintings by obscure artists, peeling frescoes, stone arches - gold altars in spite of Hidalgo.

Over the warm dusty earth night was coming on, first in the east, silent, a tide. The peons on the road shuffled past the now sleeping Leo in a peregrination of serapes, sombreros and rubber tread sandals. He was dreaming of sharks and dolphins. Someone was calling him. A big shouldered man with a thick black moustache. Next to him a woman, very beautiful, not looking at Leo. Brown hair tied up behind her head. A black sweater open at her brown throat.

"You want a ride?" The man switched to English. The truck was an ancient two ton binder, bed covered with canvas.

"Si Senor." Leo rubbed his eyes and took a delicado out of his shirt pocket and lit up before he gathered his gear and shouldered it - bedroll and knapsack tied together. The engine was idling roughly.

"Preciate it," he said, throwing the gear in the cab. He climbed up inside and the woman moved over.

"Welcome," said the Mexican, grinning. He grabbed first and they chugged off. Under a load the miss disappeared. "You are Norteamericano, si?"

"Right."

He grabbed second. "How are you called?"

"Leo."

"Leo the Lion, eh?"

Leo looked at him, not answering. The woman between them was distracting. It had been a long time since Leo had had a woman. When the engine hit about three thousand rpm the Mexican grabbed third.

"I am called Pancho." Slowly the needle moved toward thirty. "I steal from the rich, give it all to the poor. I am one bad hombre." He grabbed fourth and they roared past the peons on the road, narrowly missing them. "If I told you of the men I have killed, you would not believe it. They deserved what they got." He took fifth gear reluctantly, the rpm dropped, then began gaining slowly.

"The old son of a bitch runs pretty good," he said, reaching for the wine skin on the seat next to him. "Drink Amigo?" He handed it to Leo.

"Gracias. Pancho you said."

... After the famous

"Si. After the famous bandido. Perhaps you have heard of him."

"Pancho Villa, huh?"

"Si. And I have lived up to my namesake."

Leo's hand was steady as he raised the wine skin, but he ended with a squirt in the face.

"You have come to the right country, Amigo." He chuckled and took the wine skin. "Have you tried the women, yet?"

"The women I have not yet sampled."

"Ah - a shame." He drank until the wine ran down the sides of his mouth. "Our women are not like your Yankee women." "They are warm, senior, warm."

The woman looked over at him - he was unshaven, smelling of wine, cigars and sweat. "She does not approve," said Pancho.

"They have their prejudices," said Leo.

"Si, si. And she wants so bad to get pregnant. Such a shame - ten months and still she is not pregnant." Pancho rubbed his nose and sniffed.

"Maybe she should see a doctor."

"Doctor - bah. What could the doctor do except what I am doing, and that I would not like. She is strung too high, that's what is the matter. She must learn to relax."

"High strung, you mean."

"Si."

"You have a good knowledge of English," said Leo. "Where did you learn it?"

"In L.A. during the war. I made handgrenades."

"Hand grenades."

"Si. And no duds, not one."

"How do you know?"

"Couple short fuses, but no duds."

"I see what you mean. What did you do then - after the war?"

"I came home and stayed drunk for three weeks. I was glad to be out of L.A."

"L.A. is a son of a bitch."

"Si. L.A. is horrido."

"Mucho terrible."

"Ugh, so bad I am loosing my appetite for the wine." He looked morosely at the wine skin.

"What did you do then, after the drunk was over?"

Pancho filled his mouth and gargled, spit it out. "I bought a boat."

"What kind of a boat?"

"A fast boat."

"Did you fish?"

"Sometimes."

"What kind of fish did you catch?"

"All kinds, Senor."

"And you made money - "

"Si."

"What happened then?"

"The Coast Guard."

"You were doing something - illegal?" Leo sounded surprised.

Pancho shrugged innocently. "Si."

"What did the Coast Guard do?"

"Such a boat to. And the hold filled with goodies. I hid under a

piece of floating wreckage until they left. Four miles I had to swim."

"Well," said Leo, "at least they didn't catch you."

"Ah, si, and one must include that in the profits. The evils of prison life are well known."

"So you were out of business."

"For a little while."

"What did you do then?"

"It was no time to quit, Amigo."

"Right. So you went back into business for yourself."

"Si, good honest labor. The money is less but there are other things. Money is not everything, Senor."

"Right."

"And now - I'm hauling to Guatemala. I am what you would call a 'wildcat trucker'".

"That's o.k."

"Si. To Guatemala City."

"There's some kind of a revolution going on there, isn't there?"

"Si. A small one." He rubbed his cheek. "I forgot to shave today." He gestured toward his woman. "She usually let's me know when I forget to shave." He laughed good naturedly. "How long since you have eaten, arigo?"

"A few hours. Yesterday."

"I will give you something to eat. In a few miles there is a place."

"What place?" asked the woman.

"El Pajaro Mosca," said Pancho. "What other place?" They were speaking in Spanish.

"I do not like that place."

"Why?" said Pancho.

"Because she who runs it is a whore, that's why."

"You know nothing of such things. You are a child."

"Is there hot sauce at this place?" asked Leo, sensing that his meal was in jeopardy.

"Garcias woman told Concha that Garcia got the clap at that place. What does that mean?"

"Never mind," said Pancho. "It means that he was applauded."

"Hot sauce?" repeated Leo.

"Si, si, and hot peppers, too."

"I do not like it," said the woman, folding her arms.

"Who asked you to like it?"

She sucked in her breath, almost seeming to snarl. The truck continued down the bumpy road, its headlights joggling and cross eyed. The road branched and they took the left fork. Soon the road became two ruts. In the west the last trace of a blood red sunset was fading over the mountains.

"This is a short cut," said Pancho. He finished the wine and threw the bag on the floor. Exhaust was filling the cab so he opened the hood vent. It was stuck and he had to kick it. Both side windows were already open. The engine sputtered, caught, sputtered again. Pancho caught first, double clutching smoothly. If he'd missed the shift they'd have been half way back down the mountain - the brakes must have been down to postage stamps. The engine clattered loosely, then the top was in sight - lean gnarled trees standing fierce against the sky, and boulders and rocky outcroppings. They were crossing a sidehill, one rut low, and Pancho fought the wheel, keeping his hands on top and his fingers out from the spokes, sometimes whistling when the truck tipped toward the edge. Leo's hand was never far from the door handle.

In the saddle of two volcanic mountains the ruts joined a road, and two more miles of steady decent brought them into a mountain valley. Ahead they saw the lights of a village and heard dogs barking.

El Pajaro Mosca was an adobe building at the edge of town, light spilling yellow across the road from its open front door. As they roared in, Pancho gunning the engine and sending out clouds of oil smoke, several people came to the doorway and looked out. Two burros were tied in front, flopping their ears as though signaling their masters to quit drinking and start for home. Pancho and Leo got out and went inside, leaving the woman.

Noise met them with a blast at the door, nearly sending them back into the street. They plowed through it as though it were a tangible, hostile thing, toward an empty table. Most of it was coming from a juke box in the corner, which was turned up as high as it would go. There was laughter and much drunken shouting. A young girl was moving among the tables, serving pulque and tequila. They sat down and Pancho ordered a bottle of tequila and two pitchers of pulque. The noise made it almost impossible to talk. When they were served, Pancho convinced the owner, a blue eyed thin mouthed woman about forty that she should serve them some beans and enchillidas. Twenty minutes later the waitress brought the food. Leo had been sniffing the air for some time. Pancho, too, was hungry. They stopped drinking long enough to dig in.

"Eat, my friend," said Pancho. "Who knows when your next meal might be, eh?" Leo really didn't need any encouragement.

"Si, si," he said, avoiding Pancho's eyes. There was a five dollar bill tucked away in his sock and he felt guilty about it. Pancho took the last enchillida, gave Leo the beans. After they'd finished, Pancho called

for a rag, and they wiped their hands. The burn of the hot peppers made them waste no time in reaching for the Pulque. Pancho's face had assumed an ironic expression, as though he were keeping a private joke.

"Did you get enough to eat, my friend?"

"Gracias. Plenty."

"Private enterprise is something, is it not?"

"Yes. I sup'ose it is."

"Look around you Amigo. All this would not be here if it were not for private enterprise."

Leo poured a shot of tequila and chased it down with pulque. "I sup'ose," he said, coughing.

"If the state owned this cantina, what would the food be like do you think?"

"Bad."

"Bad - very bad. Private enterprise is the cornerstone of North American civilization. Too bad it is dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Monopolies. Trusts. Things like that. In the Estados Unidos a few hundred corporations own ninety percent of the wealth. In Guatemala a few hundred families. What is the difference?"

"You have a point."

Leo appeared thoughtful.

"How are things in Guatemala City?" yelled one of the men sitting at the next table. Leo recognized "Ciudad Guatemala".

"Not bad," answered Pancho.

"Business is good?" asked another.

"Si, I make no money, but, then, I am an idealist."

"You make no money - ha! Is that really so?"

"Si. My business is a pastime with me. A way of amusing myself."

"A what?"

"A pastime."

"I see."

Leo followed the conversation as best he could. He could read Spanish but speaking it was another matter. Finally he got up and found the door marked "Hombres". Behind the door was another, a wooden one, and after Leo relieved himself he decided to see where it led. He opened it and stepped outside, into the cool night air. Around the corner of the building he could see the truck. Pancho's woman was probably asleep in the cab. He decided to walk over and see. It would do no harm. There would be no harm in it. He walked over but she was not there. He sat down on the running board and tried to think. Maybe someone had run off with her. Jesus christ, maybe somebody really had. Some son of a bitch had her slung over his shoulders like a shot deer, and the warmth of her belly on the back of his neck was weakening his knees. He was looking for a place in the grass, the bastard. Leo jumped up and went around behind the cantina.

"Pancho's woman!" he called. Maybe she didn't understand English. No, she must understand English because she knew what me an' Pancho were talking about when she started bitchin' - Leo walked further into the desert and called again. No answer. The moon had risen and he could see his breath faintly against its light. It was a full moon. He howled like a wolf.

"Aarrroooooowooo."

A dog started barking in the village. Leo sat down against a rock and

thought about camping here for the night. He would go and get his gear out of the truck and spread his bedroll right here. Only thing was - then he'd be stranded. Wonder what Pancho's hauling that he's going this way? There was a blacktop road a hundred miles to the east - why hadn't he taken it? The more Leo thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Pancho was up to something. The old binder had hardly made it up the mountain. Whatever he was carrying it was heavier than hell. Leo smoked his delicado and wished he could write a poem. Sometimes he felt guilty about not writing poems anymore, but he'd be goddamn if he'd write one just because he felt guilty. He was always outfoxing himself. It aggravated him that he could do it so easily. What the hell was he doing with his life he asked himself. What the hell had he been doing that he was here, now, nowhere and yet at some strange threshold. Tomorrow he would start his great poem. Lines had been running through his head for months. It would be a narrative poem like The Odyssey. He began reciting the beginning.

I have straddled and cracks of the earth
 ducked the crumbling of its walls, and
 seen the ant end of great dreams
 crash, my own and others,
 trying to find whatever it is that
 matters, because if nothing does
 I goddamn well better be told.

He remembered a poem he'd written just before his marriage called "Al-
 rededor".

Malvado es el corredor
 y rojo.
 Hace viento.
 Allí tambien esta el hombre.
 Y cerca el centro,
 La conmovedor puerta
 Al traves cuel
 Todo necesitor pasar.
 Vivir es menos
 Menos el viento.

He would do a critical study about the opposing philosophical and moral attitudes expressed in the poems and then sell it to some magazine for a hundred bucks. The poems themselves he would probably give away.

When he looked around Pancho's woman was sitting against a boulder, not a hundred feet away.

"Pancho's woman," he said. He felt ridiculous about reciting his poetry to the stars while a woman was sitting only a hundred feet away. He stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered over.

"I was looking for you," he said. "I thought maybe you were lost."

"Ha!"

"No. I thought you were lost."

"The cantina is over there," she said, pointing.

"No, not me, you. Ah, forget it." He started to sit down.

"Over there," she said. "I do not mind, but Pancho has a very suspicious mind."

"The hell."

"Si."

Leo straightened up. "You speak good English."

"Gracias. Pancho taught me."

"It's cold out. Aren't you cold?"

"My sweater is warm," she said, "and the boulder is still warm too."

She was smiling.

"Bueno noche Senora."

"Bueno noche."

Leo was dreaming again. He was in the shower with his wife, though he was legally dead seven years this month. They were moving together in a slow dance under the hot spray, languid as two cells out of the first sea splitting.

He squeezed the full cheeks of her ass and felt her wet thighs against his, her apple firm breasts against his chest, the wetness of their bellies sealing. She like a surfer feeling the great swell rising under her, thrashing and wild to the bottom of the tub pulling him down, arms locked around his neck, down, then the tub too small, so over, him on the bottom, then up, higher, wild, hard, high driving, screaming while the water beat against the wall behind them and the telephone rang on and on.

Pancho was hanging onto the steering wheel with both hands. The ruts were yanking the front end this way and that.

"I should set the hand throttle and let the ruts have it," said Pancho. "Sleep, like the gringo - "

"Or make love - " she said.

"Si. Or make love. The hell with driving." He was quiet for a minute, looking through the upper part of the windshield at the stars. "So many stars," he said. "Like the eyes of the gringos of L.A."

"No."

"Si. The gringo stars are the burnt out ones. They are so dense you would not believe it. Money is their gravity, and they are dead to all that matters."

"If they are so bad, why did you go there?"

"To make money. But two thousand years ago I would have gone to Rome so that was not all. I wanted to study the workings of a democracy. I knew the stories of Abraham Lincoln and I wanted to see these things at first hand. You will not believe it, but I wanted to become president. I would have made a great president.

"Si. I believe you."

"At my command much would have been done. But, as you see, I have failed."

"Do not say that."

"It is true. But I have been El Presidente to some. The power of life and death - that is the power of El Presidente. And now it is time."

"Time for what?"

"Take the flashlight out of the glovebox and look at the boots of the gringo."

She did as he directed, then switched off the light. "Good boots."

"Si, very good boots," he said, laughing.

"But what of it. If you are thinking of stealing them, they would not fit you. He is tall, skinny, you are short, fat."

"Fat! I am hard as a rock. I have the strength of six men."

She clicked her tongue and said, "And still they would not fit you."

"Ah - but the boots are not all." He produced a long narrow blade.

"I wish you would not chew now Fancho."

"Gringos do not travel without money," he said, tracing his thumb on the blade.

"He is a baby. How could you harm him? Look at him."

"He is asking me to cut his throat."

"Don't do it. For me."

"For you?"

"Si. A favor."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Just because."

"What is there between you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, eh?"

"Nothing. I merely ask for mercy. It is my right."

"Si. That is so."

"And I am thinking of you."

"How is that so?"

"The Policia."

"Fools."

"Si. But occasionally lucky. Pancho, listen. What you have in mind is madness."

"So?"

"But what if the gringo has no money? You cannot be sure - "

"To hell with the money. I will have gringo blood on my knife and it will be a good thing."

"Is he not a man - like you?"

"He is a gringo."

"And not a man?"

"Enough of this talk."

"If you kill him God will punish you."

"Sure," said Pancho.

"He is testing you."

"Jesus christ, woman."

"Think of the Bible. Remember the stories of the stranger in disguise? Remember who the stranger turns out to be?"

"A rich merchant?"

"No, Christ. Christ in disguise."

"Woman, your brain is permanently twisted."

"There is more to a man than bones and flesh - you yourself have said that."

"Si, I have said that. His wallet, his boots - "

"That is not what you meant."

Pancho scraped his cheek with the blade, but lightly, laughing.

"And how do you know that this gringo has not come to help the poor, like a saint."

"A saint. Woman, you are a poor judge of men."

"If I am you are also insulting yourself."

"I had not considered that." He was quiet for a minute. "I suppose that God is capable of playing such a joke. But there is a difference between a man and a donkey. You know that woman? A man can grab the stick and beat the joker over the head with it. He can break the stick over his head, and break the head too. The laws of the head. But that is all."

"Si. A man can do that, and what will it get him?"

"Himself."

"How can you love anyone with such an attitude?"

"Who loves? What do you know of love anyway?"

"Well then - what are you going to do?"

"I have not yet made up my mind." He rubbed his moustache with the back of his right forefinger.

The road had been climbing steadily, and now there was fog far below them, solid as an ocean floor. The lights of the truck swept weakly around a curve, caught the eyes of something standing in the brush.

"Well, there are many things that I need," said the woman. She looked over at Pancho.

"There are many things that I need also," he said.

The road was snaking precariously along a narrow rock ledge.

"There is a gold tooth. I saw it."

"Jesus christ, woman. A gold tooth," Pancho caught second gear. The road was leveling.

"Cut his throat and pull the tooth," she said.

"I'm thinking."

"Throw him over the edge and no one will ever find him."

The moon eased its way out from behind a cloud, lighting the great, fog shrouded valley a mile below them.

"I have to piss," he said, stopping the truck. "Perhaps he would rather die in Guatemala."

THE DESERTER

I.

The train I had been riding pulled into a little town in Saskatchewan and since it looked like a division head I figured I had time enough to scrounge up something to eat. There were cars to pick up - I could see a half dozen gondolas loaded with sulphur at the edge of the yards, and ten or twelve flat cars all chained up holding logs, so I knew if I hurried I could make it.

Before I climbed down out of the gon I looked all around for bulls. The yards were quiet in the falling night, except for a switch engine crashing cars down at the other end. It gave me a cold feeling the way the rails held the faint gray light from the sky, looking almost electric in the dim way they gleamed. Part of it too was because the yards were so big and the town was so small - like a parasite on a steel back. From a distance the town looked false, as though it had been drawn in the dust by a skady hand with a crooked stock. It was all weather beaten and unpainted wood.

Since it was eight thirty or so I had trouble finding a grocery store open. There weren't any people on the dirt street that I could bum, and going up to a house in the twilight wasn't such a good idea. People got kind of scared when they saw a big, raggity ass old bum standing outside the door, night coming on. At least that's what I've always found. But I had seventy cents in my pocket so I wasn't worried. All I needed was a grocery store.

Three blocks further on I found one, the roofs of rain stained empty shacks all around pitching down toward the ground like the lowered heads of a crowd of mourners. Some of them were about ready to fall, their windows plucked eyes in the hollow shadow of false night. The shades behind the windows of the grocery store were pulled but there was a light on, and through the torn front shade I could see a little old china-man sweeping up.

After I rattled the door and knocked a couple times he raised the shade and peeked out. Funny thing, then, because he opened the door.

"I need a quart of milk an' a loaf of bread. I got ulcers."

"Come in," he said, jerking the door the rest of the way open, nodding a small head and a wrinkled forehead - a forehead so wrinkled it looked like a washboard.

"Bread on milk, you say?"

"Yes sir, that's what I need." It gave me pleasure, calling people like him "sir". He closed the door behind me and started toward the back of the store, shuffling along as though he were walking on railroad ties - probably an old gandy who had taken six strokes to drive a spike all of his life, but would probably outlive all the three strokers who ever lived.

While he was getting the stuff I looked around the store. It was small but the shelves were loaded with canned goods, the floor was covered with pyramids and small stacks of cardboard boxes, and the counter by the cash register had hardly enough space to pass money back and forth, so loaded was it with candy, cartons of cigarettes, and an old fashioned scale that used a sliding counterweight. I could see a closed door at the back, looking like the half hidden opening to a cave, and I figured it led to his living quarters. Above it was a whole shelf of wine bottles, but since I hadn't

taken a drink in three years, I hardly looked up.

When the Chinaman came back I thought about bumming him for a pack of cigarettes and I probably would have if he hadn't been a Chinaman. It's hard enough having whites look down on you, but when everybody does you haven't got a place to stand. I gave the Chinaman the right amount, down to the last penny, and his small dark eyes hopped to mine and away again like shiny marbles. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd have had three or four cents change coming, but now he knew.

"Thank you, sir," I said, trying to let him know his opinion of me didn't make a goddamn.

"Very welcome, sir," he said, smiling. The sneaky little bastard was giving me back the same. As soon as I hit his rickety front porch and started down the rotten wooden steps and looked around I realized what a match would do around here in about fifteen minutes. I had to laugh at the thought of a couple thousand bowed out vegetable cans with their labels all burned off, the Chinaman picking through them like a city dump bum. How quick somebody could change his life, if he had a mind too.

Darkness was drawing close to the earth and the sun was clear out of sight, brushing yellow over the hills in the west. I walked back toward the yards, carrying my paper bag in one hand and my bundle over my shoulder, and whistling, but with only half a heart. The town was a regular ghost town. Hardly a light anywhere. When I got closer to the street I started toward it, through a patch of tall grass. When I hit the cinders I saw somebody coming around the corner of a lone box car. He'd probably been waiting for me.

"Where the hell you think you're going?" he yelled, coming toward me

as though there were a big wind behind him, pushing. He was a big guy with a bit gut and wore the uniform of the Canadian Pacific police with its red strips down the trouser leg. He even had a little badge.

"The train," I said, acting kinda stupid. I guess I should have said I was just out for a stroll because he got mad.

"You goddamn bums think you own the goddamn railroad. Get the hell moving before I lock you up."

"O.k." I said, trying to sound just the right amount disappointed.

To^o much would make him suspicious, and not enough might make him madder. I walked through the grass and along the edge of the street for a ways. The bull was standing with his hands on his hips, scratching his crotch every once in a while, watching me. Pretty soon I passed an old water tank and a couple of railroad shacks with broken windows, and I knew I was out of sight so I lay down in the grass and waited. It was almost full dark. The yellow in the West had faded to green and pink. Then I heard the "toot-toot" that meant the train was getting set to pull out so I crawled through the grass pushing my bundle and the paper bag ahead of me, until I was at the edge of the cinders again. The bull was nowhere in sight. I strained my eyes looking for movement. It was always movement that gave away a man. The evening lay restless and uncertain in the yards - dark under the cars, lighter in the open spaces, the grimy reddish color of the cars somewhere in between. The train was like a narrow river that had stopped somewhere in an underground cave, but might suddenly move again, no one knowing when. The grass under me was wet with dew, and the good smell lingered when I rubbed my nose. The wind moved lightly, carrying the smell of old diesel smoke and cinder dust. In a minute I heard the hiss of air, and then

faintly, toward the head of the train, the rising whining pitch of the units. The cars jerked foreward, each crash separate but close on the one before, and the whole train was moving. Steel screeched against steel. Cars rocked slowly, lazily through the darkness.

I jumped up running, crossing the rails a set at a time. An empty gondola was coming. I threw my bundle in, and grabbed the ladder, climbed up and dropped inside. I made a thump on the steel floor when I landed. Then I huddled down out of sight. The car was rocking back and forth, keeping time with the rough railbed. I could see no lights. I had the feeling that I was rumbling right out into nothing, leaving everything behind, even myself. The darkness parted smoothly for the train. I almost hollered I felt so good. I wanted to yell goodby to the fading town. I wanted to jump up and down and tell the distant cold stars to get fucked. I felt like running up and down the length of the train defying its lurches, riding it like a spinning log.

When I heard something. A grunt - as though I had company. That angered me. It angered me so much I picked up a piece of 4 x 4. It made a pretty goddamn heavy club. Then a bundle landed at my feet and a face popped up over the wall like a jack in a box and he was in, landing without a sound, a long lean faced kid about twenty years old with stringy blond hair hanging down to his eyes. He could have jumped right out of a comic strip. I hesitated. When I'd heard the grunt I'd thought it was the bull. This kid was a hell of a ways from a bull. But I was still mad so I just stood there.

"Blimy mite, that bloody cop almost made me miss my trine." Then he

saw the piece of 4 x 4 in my hand. "Cuch," he said, peeling through his fingers. I had to laugh then. He really would have been saying "ouch" if he'd been the bull.

"I'm Michael," he said, sticking out a bony hand, a crooked grin splitting his grimy, dirt streaked face.

"Dan," I said, sticking out mine. The train was really moving and I wondered how he'd caught it. "That bull give you a bad time, eh?"

"Just a bit," he said, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand.

I threw away the 4 x 4 and sat down against the front wall of the car. The kid sat down next to me.

"I figured you were the bull," I said.

"Could 'ave been," he said, sounding overly agreeable. "Ah, what a beautiful night."

"Ain't it though?" I said, taking care to sound overly agreeable myself.

"I doubt if the bulls enjoying it, though. I led him a merry chase, shouting obscenities about his canine ancestors. I think he wanted to shoot me."

"You take a chance, messin' with them guys," His precise English made me want to drawl mine even more than usual.

"Bloody right. I was bored."

"Guy down in - I forgot where - on the S. P. I think, got shot right off the top of a car. Never made a single paper."

The kid shrugged. "I shouldn't 'ave been standing there."

I didn't like the answer, but I didn't say anything. I guess in a way the kid was right, but I was a little pissed that he took my advice so lightly.

"You're from the stites, aren't you?"

Since he was a kid I let it pass. "Yeah."

"I thought so. You don't speak like a bloody Canook."

"You from England?" Since he'd started asking the questions I decided it wouldn't hurt to go on with them. With a kid its a more natural thing to do anyway that sit around talking sideways, which is what you do with most of the bums you meet. Kids don't have any best to be touchy about.

"New Zealand," he said. "Auckland."

"Jesus christ, yer a long ways from home."

"I'm finishing up a trip around the world."

I guess it never crossed his mind that some guys might not welcome a kid riding the rods for the fun of it. It pleased a guy off seeing somebody make a hobby out of what he makes his living at.

"Travel while yer young," I said.

"I've been gone two years, mite, doing just that."

"Long time," I said.

"When I left I told my mother I was going to Australia for three months." He started talking about his experiences in Australia, about how he'd worked here and there to support himself. I got tired of hearing him talk about work so pretty soon I wasn't listening much to what he said, but mostly to the way he spoke. His accent sounded odd coming from such a raggedy looking character. Finally he quit talking and broke out a can of spam. He offered me some so we made spam sandwiches. It was worth it, the spam for the bread. He didn't have anything to drink so I gave him some of my milk. I really didn't want to, mostly because he'd have to drink out of the same bottle, but he was coughing and goddamn near choking to death so I passed it over. Giving anybody anything was something I just never did anymore.

If you gave people anything instead of thinking you were o.k. they stole the socks off yer goddamn feet. I satisfied myself that I wasn't getting soft in the head though - the chunk of spam I took was worth four slices of bread and a half a pint of milk. After we finished eating, the kid rolled us a couple cigarettes and we sat and smoked, feeling so good we didn't even want to talk. The bouncing of the car as we rattled and jerked through the darkness was the only thing bothersome, but I was so used to it I hardly noticed. The kid kept shifting his ass around though, trying to get comfortable.

"Ahhh," he said. There was a long silence. "Ever been aboard an ocean liner, mite?"

"Nope."

"Ummm."

I let him sit for awhile, then I said, "What's it like?"

"Mite, it's really something." He was all enthusiastic. "You get up about eleven o'clock - or maybe noon - " He stretched lazily, "and go down to the dining room, and there stands a waiter all dressed in formal attire - " The kid jumped up and assumed the solicitious, hovering air of a high class waiter. "Good morning sir - sleep well I trust? Good. And what would you like this morning? We 'ave T-bone stike, fried chicken, fifteen different kinds of sea food, including shrimp, oysters, clams, lobster, crab, fresh water trout - you say you'll 'ave the lobster? Excellent choice sir. And we 'ave fifteen different kinds of white wine, sir. Which would you prefer? Ah, the Riesling. Excellent choice, sir." The kid sat down against the front wall of the gon. "What a life, mite." He sighed and took out his papers and Prince Albert. "But not for the likes of me." When he finished

rolling one he handed me the makin's. We were pretty much out of the wind where we were sitting. When I lit up this time there wasn't the hoarding fear that the cigarette would soon be gone so in a way I enjoyed it less. Lately it had gotten so that I couldn't enjoy anything unless there wasn't enough of it. Whatever pleasure I might be taking couldn't stand all by itself. It had to be propped up by some goddamn law of diminishing returns. I don't know what I'd have done if I'd been rich.

The kid started unrolling his blanket and while he was unlacing his boots his mood seemed to change. He pulled off one and started cleaning between his toes, absently. "It was a good life, mite, but you know, those waiters 'ad us pegged from the start. All they wanted was a big tip." I could smell his feet way the hell over where I was sitting.

While he was getting himself unraveled under his blanket I started unrolling my piece of canvas. When I got the wrinkles flattened out of it I lay down with all my clothes on, pulled half of it over me, and looked up at the stars. No new ones ever slid over the top of the wall unless the train rounded a curve. I mean, it wasn't like passing trees. They were so far away we might as well have been standing still.

"'ow far are you going, mite?" said the kid, pulling the blanket up around his ears.

"Ain't you heard the song?" I said.

"What song's that, mite?"

"Forget it." I threw out my cigarette. I hadn't buddied up with anybody in years, and I wasn't going to start now.

"Good night," he said.

"Ah jesu christ," I said. Before long he was asleep. In spite of

of myself I wondered what it would be like to be a kid again, not knowing anything, loving everybody. Here was this kid, wanting to be friends - at least he acted like he wanted to be friends. I decided he could do that because he didn't know anything. Even in ten years he'd be a hell of a lot more choosy about who he made friends with. In fact, a kid like him who probably thought he loved everybody might go the opposite way after he got his nose rubbed in the shit a few times, because he'd never really known anybody. A good meal and a couple of cigarettes always put me in the mood for thinking. It wasn't such a bad life, bumming. It had its good points - going where you pleased, when you pleased, nobody to bother you. The thing was, it just seemed like there wasn't any place to go anymore. Lately, everything had started looking familiar. Two months ago I'd been in Chicago - the tenth or maybe the twentieth time, I don't know, and a guy came up to me and asked me where was I headed, and I couldn't tell him. That wasn't so unusual, it had happened before that I didn't know where I was going, but this time there wasn't anyplace I wanted to go. I couldn't even think of any place I thought I wanted to go. Before it had been the going part of it, never the getting any place. Now even that was gone. So I flipped a nickle north or south, and north it was. Me and that guy stayed together as far as Milwaukee where he got off in the middle of the night with a can of my beans. It was funny because I knew he was going to steal my can of beans the minute I laid eyes on him, and I let him.

Finally I dozed, dreamed of a red headed woman I'd seen working in an employment office one time. I saw myself coming up to her, she young and green eyed beautiful, me old, bald headed, asking if she knew of any jobs. No, she said flatly - looking so goddamn confident that I wasn't going to

jump over the desk and grab her I goddamn near did - I hadn't eaten in a while. I guess she was mad because when our eyes had met she'd gotten a little flustered. I wasn't a man, I was a bum. I told her that I could run a combine, but she wasn't impressed. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, she kept saying, her eyes pulling away from mine. She would have screwed me, but she wouldn't give me a job.

I don't know how long it was before I woke up shivering, seeing my breath against the clear whiteness of the moon, and decided to get up and walk around the car. As soon as I shed my canvas and rose I saw hundreds of small fires, like the camp fires of some army, sleeping. Beautiful wasn't the word for it, it was wierd, something more - like fading back in time and seeing Lincoln's army sleeping the night before Gettysburg. As I watched I got the feeling that the fires were singing. I listened but the music was drowned in the hard steel clatter of the train. The fires diminished in the distance until all a sudden they were snuffed out, and I heard the high pitched mournful shriek of the train whistle, calling them back. The pale stars took up the chant now, millions of frosty white voices. The world was full of music. I know it, but I was deaf. The gon jerked and pulled me along, and it occurred to me that it was something like a coffin - open to the sky, but still a coffin. When I lay down again on the vicious floor I slept like the dead until the sun was almost up.

2.

Gray dust spread in the East and grew like a bowl on a potters wheel and as I watched the sky became pearl dust. The gathered dress of night were swirling away.

I stood up in the cold wind, hardly able to straighten up, my bones ached so much. The kid was still sleeping. He was smiling a little. I rubbed my face and looked around, shivering. We were in the mountains. Scrawny Douglas fir were passing slowly, floating by like something only half seen in a fog. I couldn't stop shivering so I blew in my hands and walked around the car, swinging my arms. Low timbered hills appeared, darker underneath. The kid began to stir.

"E-b-b-bloody c-c-cold," he said, pulling the blanket tighter around him, burrowing deeper. "Mornin' Mite," he said, opening one eye.

"Mornin'".

He rubbed his feet together under the blanket and closed his eyes, "Ahhh," he said, "ummm," giving a shake like a puppy. In a minute he was back asleep.

I climbed up on the rear wall of the gon and balanced myself, looking down at the blur of passing railbed and the rusty, fist-like couplings jerking up and down, giving and gaining slack until half the string of cars might suddenly jerk forward playing snap the whip. I stood there for awhile, poised. I did it every morning. It got my blood running. In a minute I jumped to the ladder of the next car, climbed up and started along the top. I always liked to know if there was anybody else around. There weren't any more gondolas or flats so I couldn't be sure but I didn't think so. It felt like an empty train. When I got to the caboose I walked around on the roof lightly, 'cause I didn't want to wake up the guys inside, and stopped near the edge, looking down at the tracks. Then I got down on my hands and knees and looked down through the slanted windows of the little dome. At first I couldn't see anything. Then I saw two guys with all their clothes on sleeping in bunks. There was a narrow aisle running up the

middle, a couple of tables, a coal stove, and junk of all kinds hanging from the walls - lanterns and stuff. I could see one of the sleeping guys better than the other. His mouth was open a little ways, and I knew he was snoring, though I couldn't hear him. His double chin spread wide under a knobby, red chin and I could see the dirty neck of a yellow T-shirt under a checked wool shirt and bib overalls. One of his boots was unlaced and pulled half off his foot. He looked as though he were sleeping off a drunk. One of the tables was covered with scattered cards, and there were two empty bottles standing on it. A crucifix moved a little on wall above the table, looking down on all the junk. On top of the coal stove there was a coffee pot that had slid to the edge and was about to fall. I watched for awhile. With each jerk of the car I expected it to fall. The pot sidled a little closer. The unlaced boot bobbed up and down. Everything was just too goddamn inevitable. I jumped up and started down the ladder. On the rear platform I shaded my eyes and looked through the glassed upper part of the door. Everything looked quiet. I opened it and went in. It smelled like an old R.R. shack - kerosene, grime and old clothes. The light was dim, and I kept stepping on stuff, goddamn near tripping. Everything on the walls was swaying. "Clickety-clack, jerk, clickety-clack, jerk." I set the coffee pot on the table and looked around. Through the dirty windows I could see trees slipping past. I took the crucifix off the wall and studied it. It hadn't been off in years. It was cheap, made of wood and brass. Christ was just a blob without features. I looked at the two empty whiskey bottles on the table, and decided to put the crucifix in the coffee pot. I pulled back the lid and dropped it in. Christ under coffee. Let 'em figger that one out. The coffee smelled boiled to death. One of the

guys grunted and slobbered in his sleep so I started down the aisle. If they found me in there they'd think I'd come to steal. At the rear I opened the door, stepped out, and closed it quietly behind me. Then I climbed the ladder in a hurry, tip-toed across the roof, jumped to the next car, and started running. I laughed all the way back to the gondola.

"'Bout time you got up," I yelled, climbing down into the car. The kid was testing the cold steel floor with one bare foot. He didn't answer me, but started pulling on his trousers, jumping around on one foot. Then he sat down on the blanket and pulled on his stiff boots. He didn't have any socks. When he finished he jumped up and beat on his chest, trying to get warm. By now the cold air felt good to me.

We ate a spam sandwich apiece and smoked a cigarette, sitting against the front wall of the gon, waiting for the sun. Then it rose, just an eyelid at first, not warming me until I looked at the kid's bonny face and saw it impaled on the needle points of his beard. In a minute the blood red orb popped clear of the horizon, losing mass as it rose. The train was moving slowly up a grade. Passing a rosy tipped tree I saw a chipmunk keeping a secret, hiding on a branch. I was thirsty, so I kept my eyes open for water - a guy could fill a bottle and get back on the train before it was past, if he moved fast enough. The sun climbed higher, the fog hanging among the trees, retreating a little before shafts of probing redish light. We were leaning on the side of the gon, looking out.

"Certainly wild looking. Are there many bears around 'ere?"

"Oh hell yes," I said. "Lots of 'em."

"Really?"

"Sure. But they ain't nothin' to be afraid of."

"Na," said the kid.

"Naa. You can walk right up to 'em. Only if you turn yer back they might jump on you, an' if you back away they might git the idea yer scared, an' jump on ya, too."

"Very interesting delimma," said the kid.

"Ain't it though," I said.

He was quiet a minute. Finally his curiosity got the best of him.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"Well what can you do?"

"Ch - well, you growl at 'em."

He broke into a grin. "Aw come on, mite. You're 'aving me on."

"No," I said. "There's something about a human growl that scares the hell out of 'em."

"Come on - " he was grinning uncertainly.

"No - you just try it. Many an old trapper's been saved by growlin' at just the right time. "Course - you can't sound scared or they'll know it."

"You Americans 'ave a strange sense of 'umer," he said.

"Suit yourself - but they're more scared of you than you are of them."

"I've 'eared that before - what worries me is what if they suddenly get brave?"

I had to laugh. It was a pretty good question.

"What do you do then? Climb a tree."

"You can," I said. But I've had 'em follow me right up a tree snappin' at my toes."

"Ah ha," he said, shaking a finger at me. "They're afraid of you, remember?"

"This one had cubs. Growling don't work with a she bear if she's got cubs."

"What are you supposed to do then? Sing?"

"Well, you go right ahead. Me, I do run up a tree. Only you gotta watch what yer doin' because if you pick one too small she'll knock it down an' if you pick one too big she'll run right up after you. You hafta sorta measure each one while yer runnin' along an' git one that's just the right size."

"And just what size is the right size?"

"Well now, that depends a whole lot on the size of the bear."

"Exactly," he said.

The sun was higher now, warming my nose, a sure sign the day was going to be hot. I didn't pay much attention at first when the train started slowing down, because we were going up a grade, but then another track appeared alongside and I figgered we must be going into the hole to wait for a faster train behind us or one coming from the other direction.

"Hey did," I said, pointing ahead through the trees, "there's a lake." It was a pretty good sized one, too. "Let's go wash up an' fill the jug."

"You go ahead, mite. I'll wait right 'ere."

"There's no bears in there," I said. "Come on."

"I'd rather not," he said, about half ways embarrassed, but determined, too.

"O.k." The train shuddered to a stop and I threw my bundle down on the tracks. The kid wouldn't think anything about me taking the bundle. A

guy hates to get separated from his bundle. I was thinking that maybe this would be a good time to split. The kids company was getting old. A couple hours of anybody was about all I could stand, anymore. I picked up my bundle and started down the bank into the brush. He'd think I was coming back, because I'd left half a loaf of bread.

The brush was tangled and thick, but in a minute the ground rose and the undergrowth thinned into ferns and tall lodgepole pine. The needles on the ground were thick and soft, the trees naked fifty feet, fingers reaching toward the sky. When I reached the edge of the lake the air felt cold again. The water was placid, dark gray. Fog lay across it like a shredded woolly blanket. Through the upper part of it I could see the sun glowing red, the fog swirling to meet it and shut it out. I filled the big milk bottle carefully, not wanting to break the still surface of the lake. Then I rinsed it out, dumping the water on the sandy beach, filled it again, and drank. The water was cold and tasted like pebbles. I heard the whistle of a train coming in the distance. Through the trees I could see the kid waving for me to hurry up. Now that I didn't have to put up with him I felt benevolent toward him. He was yelling something I couldn't hear, his voice deadened by the surrounding fog, when a streamliner rushed past doing about ninety, windows flipping by like shuffled cards. Then it was gone. The freight creaked and groaned, the units sounding powerful through the trees, winding mightily, and the train began to move. The kid looked forlorn, leaning on the wall of the gon. He started to wave, then he changed his mind. I almost waved, too. We stood there watching each other, then he passed out of sight behind some trees. I watched the train for a little while longer; it wasn't picking up much speed; then I started fishing

around in my bundle for some hooks and line. I don't know why the hell I was looking for hooks and line, I didn't feel much like fishing. Pretty soon the train was gone and I sat down on a log and looked out across the lake. Then I heard the cry of a loon. It cried again and again. Oh oh ooo, oh oh ooo, oh oh ooo. I looked out through the mist, but I couldn't see it. I was just sitting there on the log when I heard something crashing through the brush. Whatever it was it sure made a lot of noise. I hoped it wasn't a bull moose looking for trouble. Then I heard a voice, "Bloody weeds - ouch!" and a minute later the crashing and cussing stopped and I saw the kid coming through the trees, looking all around, as though he half-expected to see six big grizzly bears any minute.

"Hello mite," he said. "You forgot your bread."

"By God I did," I said.

He dropped his gear on the ground, stuck his hands in his pockets, and looked all around.

"Drink?" I said, holding up the water jug.

"Well. Maybe I will." He took it with the air of doing me a favor. Then he set it down and started looking around again. "Just couldn't see taking your bread," he said.

"Don't blame you," I said. "Stealin's wrong."

"Wouldn't 'ave been. You left it."

"Spose you're right," I said.

"Wouldn't 'ave been stealing at all."

"You did the right thing," I said.

"Absolutely."

"Every mouthful a that bread would a stuck in yer craw."

"Not at all," he said.

"No?"

"I could 'ave eaten the whole thing - just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"How come you didn't?"

The kid shrugged. "Matter of principle."

"Ch."

Silence had settled down around us in a tiddly wink barrage of small sounds - frogs, crickets, the creek of a limb somewhere.

"What was that?" said the kid.

"Prob'ly a bear," I said.

"Listen."

I felt goose bumps rising on the back of my neck. I lifted my leg and farted loudly, sounding like something under water that had come up for air. The kid was offended. He walked down to the edge of the water. He stood there for a minute, then he said, "Imagine exploring this primeval wilderness. I'll wager a good number of them never came back."

"Some of 'em got the clap," I ventured.

He didn't pay any attention. "Forbidding - brooding."

"Ah Jesus christ," I said.

"He looked at me with a sort of pained look. "You Americans."

"I need some worms," I said. "You pretty good at diggin' worms?"

"Why?" he said.

"Fish."

When he went to look for worms I walked along the shore looking for frogs. I could see his blond head and dark turtle neck sweater moving through the trees, bending over logs. Pretty soon he came back with a

handful of worms, so I went back and baited a hook and threw it out. I hadn't found any frogs. We'd hardly sat down on the log when we had a bite. I pulled it in carefully in case it was a trout, not wanting to tear the hook out of its mouth. The hook was a little bit big for trout. He jumped once and I saw the rainbow flash of red and silver. Then he ran toward a snag, but I held him off - if he'd been a little bigger he'd have broken the line. I let him tire himself out for a little while longer, then I started hauling in again. Pretty soon I could see him coming along the sandy bottom, and I reached for him. He gave a little jerk, but I got him by the jaw, unhooked him and threw him up on the grass. He weighed about a pound. The kid had watched the whole operation closely. In a little while we had four more, all big ones.

"I'm gonna throw him back," I said, pulling in the last one.

"Do we 'ave enough?"

It was a stupid question so I didn't answer. I unhooked him, being careful not to tear his mouth, but he stayed where he was, his gills hardly moving. I reached in and moved him forward a little ways, forcing water through his gills. When I let go he swam away slowly.

"If your hands are wet you won't hurt 'em," I said.

The kid got a fire going while I filleted the fish with my pocket knife, shoving a pointed stick through the gills into the ground to hold them steady. Then I flattened the spam can and made a grate out of it, using green willow sticks for supports. We lost a lot of good juice because the spam can was too small, but it worked well enough. When the first piece was done I put it between two pieces of bread and gave it to the kid. The sounds he made eating it made me hurry the next one a little so it didn't

turn out as crisp, but it was good. The juice that had dropped into the fire sizzled and smelled good.

"They called that trout we 'ad on the snip," said the kid, licking his fingers. After I finished my piece I fried the rest and we used up the last of the bread. Then the kid rolled a couple of smokes and we sat and smoked against the log. I would have rolled my own, but he never asked. The sun was warm. I leaned back, closing my eyes. Pretty soon I was asleep.

3.

When I woke up it was because of the sun. My eyes felt scratchy and I held my breath for a second - a manure pile wouldn't have smelled half as bad. The kid was rubbing the sweat out of his eyes.

"'Cw about a swim, Nite?"

"I'm too goddamn old for that stuff."

"Well I'm going in."

I felt so hot and cruddy I decided to try it. We undressed right there by the log and waded in. The beach was sandy, but a little further out it turned to muck, so I dove in and splashed around. It was so cold that for a minute I couldn't say a word. We swam around for awhile, then the kid went in and got the log on the beach and rolled it into the water and kept on spinning. The kid caught it and pushed it out to where I was floating on my back, spitting water straight up like some old whale. Then he tried to climb up onto it, and finally he did, but I started it rolling again and he fell off. We played around that log for a long time, sometimes being surprised by the echo of our own laughter coming from somewhere across the lake.

"Look," said the kid, and I followed his pointing finger. Out toward the middle of the lake there was a cow moose and a calf, swimming. He hung onto the log and watched them, following the big V with the little V inside it. The cows noisy breathing came to us over the water, sounding labored and heavy. Every once in awhile she snorted.

"Are they all right?"

"They're o.k." But the cow was an old one. The calf was pulling ahead, then turning part way around to wait. The cow was lower in the water, swimming slower. She snorted more often. Then suddenly she grew taller, and in a minute the calf did too, and they waded out, water falling off them like a small cloudburst, and disappeared in the trees, never looking back.

The kid was grinning happily.

"You should see 'em in a fire," I said. "Everything in the woods can swim." He quit smiling when I said that. We left the log and swam back to shore, paddling along like a couple turtles, taking out time. When we walked up on the beach I saw a leech on the kid's back, so I dried my hands on my shirt and took a match out of my trouser pocket. The kid was rubbing his face dry with his sweater.

"Turn around," I said.

"Why?" he said, half turning and looking over his shoulder. I finished turning him around, struck the match on a rock, and applied it to the leech. It backed out in a hurry.

"Leech," I said, and he jumped about two feet.

"Where?"

I pointed down in the sand. It was lying there slippery and fat. He picked up a stick and started chopping away like an amateur woodchopper.

"I think its dead."

"Ugg," he said.

"Check my back, will you?"

He was pretty careful about looking me over.

"You're all right," he said, throwing away the stick.

"Come on," I said. "Let's do some laundry."

I had a couple of T-shirts, a sweat shirt, and an extra pair of socks, and the kid had about the same besides his turtle neck sweater which he called a "roll up pull down" or some such a goddamn thing. At the edge of the water he stopped, naked as a jay bird, his arms full of clothes and said, "a bit of soap would be awfully nice". Then he shoved the whole bundle under water and stood on top. "'ope my sweater doesn't shrink." For awhile we scrubbed away, not saying anything. After I'd wash something I'd wring it out and throw it up on the grass, stopping every once in awhile to straighten my back and work the kinks out. Birds were singing in the trees, and I could hear the hollow hammer of a woodpecker busy somewhere deep in the woods. There was a light breeze blowing, moving the tops of the trees. Big fleecy clouds were coasting slowly across a sky so blue it looked solid and heavy. The kid straightened up and wrung about a half a gallon of water out of his trousers.

"I suppose you think I'm a little crazy," he said, not looking at me.

"Why?"

"getting so excited over a leech."

"I don't know anybody who likes 'em." I walked up onto the grass and started pulling on my wet levis, getting sand all down the inside of the legs. "They're like bankers," I said.

"Ah ha," he said, laughing. "A bloody capitalist." He walked over to a stump with his trousers, jumped up, and began pulling them on. "You don't really think bankers are leeches, do you?"

"Nope," I said.

"I didn't think so."

"They're worse. They got dollars for brains and ice in their veins."

"I thought all you Americans were bloody capitalists. Everybody in the world wants to be a bloody capitalist. What's wrong with you?"

"I lost six million in the stock market."

"Come on, Mite. Seriously - "

"Kid - there ain't a system in the world that don't make a rangatang out of a guy if you give it half a chance."

I heard the whistle of a train coming, so we gathered up our clothes and started tying our boots and bundles. Then we started through the woods. A west bound freight was pulling slowly up the grade. The units rumbled past, shaking the earth. It was hard to see how long it was or what cars were coming because the tracks curved away. We climbed the bank, crossed the main line, and started down the line of slowly moving cars. They were all sealed. Finally the train squealed to a stop, sounding like a pen of disturbed pigs, and from behind us I heard the whistle of another train.

"We better find a gon," I said, and we started trotting. Sealed, sealed, everything sealed. The next whistle was much closer. I stepped across the main line to get a better look ahead. Nothing - all sealed.

"We'd better get on top," I said, crossing back. We could have waited at the edge of the bank, but then we took a chance on loosing the train we had. Sometimes they pulled out before all of the train on the main line was

passed. The kid was fumbling around with his bundle, trying to get started up the ladder when it came undone and his clothes fell to the cinders. I helped him pick them up and stuff them inside his blanket when we heard the whistle bearing down on us and saw the train founding the curve, eating up daylight and track. The whistle blared long above the growing throb of the engines. Then it thundered past in a rush of wind and cinder dust, and we hung onto the bottom of the ladder but not seeing anything. The hot wind sucked at our legs and the roar was deafening. It went on and on. Then the ladder we held jerked soundlessly and began to move. For a dozen steps we moved with it, hoping it would stop. Then it began picking up speed. We were caught between sliding walls going separate ways.

"Get on!" I yelled, but he couldn't hear me. His eyes seemed about ready to jump out of his head, so I put a knee where it would do some good, and he started climbing. Rather than wait for him I let go and grabbed another ladder, damn near pulling my arms out of their sockets - something like grabbing a doorhandle on a busy highway. My legs were dragging in the cinders but I hung on like the devil and pulled myself up. I hung there for a minute, my bundle in my teeth, then light appeared all around and the noise died away. The other train had passed. I felt like something pregnant, hobbling up the ladder with sore arms and that goddamn bundle hanging out of my mouth. I heard the clatter of more steel as the train stumbled over a switch and onto the main line, the whole train making a slight "S" to accommodate the tracks. When I got to the top I saw the kid sitting in the middle of the catwalk, the next car up.

"Hey," I yelled, but he didn't hear me. He had his head down between his knees, and I thought he was sick. Then the train gave a jerk and I

goddamn near fell off, so I started cussing.

"You're alive," he said, looking up.

"Nope."

"I thought, I thought - "

"Jesus christ," I said.

4.

We found a gondola toward the rear of the train and jumped in. I didn't like riding the top when there might be tunnels around. Exhaust from the units gathered toward the ceiling and made it hard to breathe. In fact, if the tunnel was long enough, a guy could suffocate.

The passing woods were green from emerald to olive, and brown between patches of shade that lay under trees like pools of water. We were climbing higher. Looking ahead, up the long wobbly length of cars I saw clouds of blue gray cinder dust boiling away from the units, spreading over the cars following, fanning through the trees like insect spray. The kid was standing behind me. He wanted to thank me for giving him a boot in the ass. The thought of him wanting to thank me made me so disgusted I wouldn't turn around. He'd find a way though, the little bastard. I should have just left him hanging on the ladder. Now, by God, there was a tie between us, and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about it.

"Should we dry our clothes?" he asked.

"Never dry wet clothes," I said, turning around. "You put them on wet an' they stay clean, an' they're warmer that way too. In fact, pretty soon the whole world's gonna find out about how nice it is to wear wet clothes. Me, I always wear wet clothes. Folks that don't always struck me as being

a little bit stupid but you can't tell people nothing."

While I'd been talking he'd gone over to the other side of the car and started rolling himself a cigarette, squatting down out of the wind. When I finished he said, "Thanks, Mite. I'm deeply grateful for everything you've done. You're a real buddy."

"Your ass," I said. This was more like it. He sat there for awhile giving me hard looks, then he started gathering pieces of wire and tying them together to make a clothesline. After he strung the wire across the car from four by fours sticking up out of the sides and tied up his clothes he walked to the other end of the car, ignoring me. I strung up another wire and pretty soon everything was flapping in the wind except out trousers. I walked to the opposite end from the kid and watched the crazy way the clothes flopped around in the wind.

There was a highway running alongside the tracks and before long people started waving to us. The kid was waving back like a candidate for president. In a minute he climbed up on the back corner of the gon closest to the highway and started looking pretty cool about the whole thing. The train was coming into a town and I knew we should start taking the stuff down, but I figured that if the kid thought he was a candidate for president then by God he shouldn't have to hide on the floorboards. He jumped off the corner and started toward the laundry.

"I suppose we'd better take the stuff down," he said.

"Nope," I said.

"Why not?"

"There's a town coming, kid. Start wavin' yer hat."

He didn't like it, but he didn't say anything. We passed the outskirts

tar paper shacks and log cabins with bleached out loas and cement caulking, junked cars sitting around the yards like neglected flower beds, crossed the highway where already a long string of cars waited, people pointing us out to the kids, rattled down the edge of what looked like the main part of town, toward a passenger depot with a train loading passengers patiently as a sow ending a new litter of pigs. The cars were old fashioned, some purple and some green, with high roofs and narrow windows - some kind of a cut rate tourist train. We were going slower now, feeling our way through the maze of tracks, the scene on the platform all of a sudden becoming sad and final - as though I was the only one who knew that in a few minutes all these people would be gone. It was like looking around a crowded baseball stadium and thinking about how different everything would be after all the people had gone home - the sound of the wind and the bits of paper blowing around. Crowds are immortal.

"Feel a bit conspicuous, do you?" said the kid.

"Just like a dog in church," I said. There was something embarrassing about it though - but I could feel sorry for them too. What they had they were. What I had didn't amount to much so I looked someplace else. I might have traded places with one who had enough money to do what he pleased, though. What a satisfaction it would be to turn your back on a million dollars. But then if I had a million dollars I probably wouldn't turn my back on a penny.

The people on the platform had been watching us, until their view was cut off. We were on the tracks next to the passenger train and as we passed the people inside could look right down into our car. They were curious as hell. We stopped with a screech and people started fiddling with their cameras. The kid was smiling at them. I turned my back on the whole

goddamn train load. Then a window went up.

"Look mommy, bums."

"Hush baby, they're hobos."

"Who's a hobo?" I said, turning around. "I'm a bum."

"See mommy?"

Other windows went up. He says he's a bum.

"They're doing laundry," said a blue-haired woman with a pair of glasses hanging by a chain around her neck. "How quaint. I'll have to tell everyone in Burlington."

I should have jumped off and walked away but there was no place to go that wasn't in plain sight.

"Let's pass the hat," somebody said, laughing.

"Pass the hat. Pass the hat."

A cigar landed in the bottom of the car. Then a dime. In a minute there was a steady patter of coins hitting the floor. Hands pitching pennys. We were jerked and began moving. The people waved. The kid waved back. We picked up speed. All I could see were arms, waving.

The kid had already started picking up the money and counting it. There was nine dollars and sixty-five cents Canadian and fifty cents American. Over ten dollars. Money from heaven. The kid danced around the car like a crazy man. We split it right there on the floor of the gon.

"There's a big rodeo in one of these towns coming up," said the kid.

"Zat so," I said.

"It's supposed to be quite a rodeo."

"I'm not so hot for rodeos," I said.

"Oh." He really sounded disappointed. He was quiet, for a minute,

then he said, "Well, if you don't go then I won't either."

That surprised the hell out of me. "Why?" I said.

"Well - because that's the way I feel about it. If it hadn't been for you I'd 'ave taken the laundry down."

The rodeo really wasn't such a bad idea, though, even if it was strictly sport. It had been so many years since I'd mended a fence that I didn't worry much about it. Most rodeo riders wouldn't hold a regular cowhands job. Not enough glory. Before long the kid had me talked into it. We talked it to death all the rest of the afternoon, and when it started getting dark it seemed like a different kind of dark from the evening before. Even after the stars were out we could see for a long ways. It was full dark when I noticed the lights of another town approaching. We passed the yard limit sign and started taking down laundry in a hurry. With us going to the rodeo we sure the hell didn't want to get picked up. The train slowed some more and we figured we'd jump off and walk around the edge of the yards and catch it again when it pulled out, when all of a sudden somebody was standing on top of the car in front of us, holding a flashlight on us.

"You two stay right where you are."

Big chance. Our bundles weren't even tied. The bull climbed down in a hurry.

"You got any identification?" he said, sticking his goddamn flashlight in my face. I reached around in my pocket and pulled out my battered social security card. Maybe he'd check us out and let us go. It had happened. He shined his light on the card and said, "Hmmm". I noticed his fingers were long and skinny and the back of his neck had a crook in it like a buzzards. The train passed under a row of lights gleaming down on us as we went back to town, and all

us from a steel tower, and all the shadows in the gon slid around like a weathervane.

"How about you?" he said to the kid. The kid gave him his passport.

"Hmmm," again. He paged slowly through the stamped visas. You're from - " he turned back to me, "the states and you're - " he suddenly faced the kid, as though trying to catch him at something, "from New Zealand." I could see the kid was scared. The bull knew it too. "Quite a world traveler, aren't you?" The kid didn't say anything. The way the bull said it, it sounded as though there were something wrong with being a world traveler. "China, Russia, East Germany - " He looked at me. "Quite a pair. What are you two doing in Canada?" We were approaching another tower of lights, and I could see his face clearly. He had a slopping forehead and a long nose with a sharp point - a cross between a buzzard and a mole. It was dripping.

"Robbing banks," I said.

"Turn around."

"We're tourists," said the kid.

I turned around and he frisked me. "What have you got in your pockets?"

"Loot," I said. "From the Brinks job."

"You'd better come along," he said, putting my social security card and the kid's passport in his shirt pocket. In a minute the train stopped.

"Come on. Let's go."

"You mind if we finish tying our bundles?" I said.

"Pick them up," he said. So we climbed down out of the car holding them loose, the bull following with his trusty flashlight. I thought about

running, but the bastard had my social security card.

We walked across the yards, two mangy dogs followed by a long legged brass-button barber pole, across the street, waiting in the middle for some traffic, down toward the depot, right up a narrow street, past old, faceless brick buildings with boarded up windows, and stopped a half a block above the yards under "Police" which hung on a little wrought iron arm.

"In," said the bull, opening the screen door. I went in first, passing down a long narrow hallway with a creaking floor into a small room with wooden benches sitting against the opposite wall, and to my left, a little old cop behind a brand new metal desk. He looked up when we entered, over the top of little steel rim glasses, then down with a jerk. He was working a crossword puzzle.

"Transients," said the bull. When the sargeant didn't look up a frown settled on the bull's face. "The old one has a pocket full of money."

"Hmmm," said the sargeant, sucking on a stubby little pencil.

"The other one just came from China."

"Don't say," said the sargeant, writing down a word.

"Yes I do say," said the bull. "And it looks a bit strange, if I do say so."

"Strange, you say." He was sucking his pencil again.

"Yes I do say. Blast it sargeant, you're not listening."

"Calm yourself, Mr. Travis. A Chinaman you say?" He looked up curiously.

"No, no. A Yank and a - "

"Yank my ass," I said. "I'm a Texan."

The sargeant smiled in kindly curicosity. "Texas you say? I've got a nephew in Texas. Murphy."

"Sargeant," said the bull.

"Don't know him," I said.

The sargeant sighed and folded his newspaper. "Would you gentlemen sign the register, please?" He pushed an open book across his desk.

"Now," said the sargeant. "Are you wanted anywhere by the law?"

"No sir," said the kid.

"And you sir?" He looked at me, his inquisitive little blue eyes narrowing a bit.

"Nope."

"Are you travelin' together?" he said.

"Only since yesterday," said the kid quickly.

"Look at his passport," said the bull, throwing it on the sargeants desk.

"We're spies," I said.

"You be quiet," said the bull.

"Well then," said the sargeant. "Empty your pockets." While the kid was emptying his pockets the sargeant reached into his desk and took out a long cigar. He bit off the end, spit in the wastebasket, and lit up. "Now you," he said, "separate pile."

In a minute it was all there. Two piles of silver.

"Well now," said the sargeant, leaning foreward. "And where did it come from?"

"Stolen, I'll wager," said the bull.

"No it's not," said the kid. "People gave it to us."

"What do you take us for, idiots?" said the bull.

The sargeant began to count, slowly.

"There's ten dollars and ten cents here," said the sargeant. He started counting the second pile. The bull stepped forward and began counting the first pile. "Five dollars and five cents," he announced in a minute. The sargeant looked up. "No - five dollars and ten cents." He was covering two dimes with two fingers.

"You're wrong, sargeant. I just counted it."

"Well count it again, for God's sake."

"Maybe you outta get an adding machine," I said. The bull started over, ignoring me.

"Five dollars and five cents," announced the sargeant in a minute.

"That's what I said," said the bull, looking up.

"This pile," said the sargeant.

"They'd be the same," said the bull. "It looks pretty obvious to me they'd be the same."

"O.k., o.k.," said the sargeant. "Ten dollars and ten cents. Now - where did you gentlemen get such a sum?"

"I told you - people gave it to us." The kid sounded nervous.

"Ha!" said the bull.

"I'll conduct the investigation, Mr. Travis, if you don't mind. Now - what people?"

"The people on the train in the last town. They opened their windows and threw it out to us. Besides - see - we 'ad our laundry 'ancing up on wires and they started taking our pictures and they - " he stopped. The bull

was smiling. "It's the truth - "

"I'm sure 'tis," said the sargeant. "Is that your story too?"

"Sure is," I said.

"Well then - I suppose I'll have to lock you up until I find out where the money came from. Come along." He rose and took a ring of keys off the wall behind him. "This way gentlemen." He led us through a heavy steel door into a small concrete cell block. The cellblock door was open. "In you go," he said with a bow and a sweep of his arm. He was so nice about it we went right in. Then the kid said in a shaky voice, "'ow long are you going to keep us in 'ere?"

"You just tell me where the money came from" said the sargeant, slam-
mint the cellblock door.

"But I did!"

"Tsk, tsk," said the sargeant, shaking his head. The steel door closed behind him with a dull thud.

"Bloody stupid cop," said the kid.

I flopped down on one of the racks in the first cell. "When you get a few more years on you you'll expect it."

"When I get older, huh? What's it done for you, except make you disagreeable?"

I laughed it off, but I didn't like it.

"We wouldn't even be 'ere if it weren't for you."

"Aw horseshit," I said. "They'd a locked us up anyway."

"No they wouldn't 'ave. Your mouth did the trick."

"Your ass. If you don't like it, shove it. Goddamn punk kid."

"Who's a punk kid?" He was standing in the middle of the cell, glaring at me. I felt like an old bear being prodded out of a long sleep.

Then my anger passed. It was too ridiculous - him standing there like a school-boy with his chin stuck out.

"Go away," I said. "Get lost."

"If you're going to insult me, stand up and do it like a man, jail-bird."

"Relax."

He sat down on a rack across from me. "Just admit that you're to blame."

"What's the use?" I said. "Nobody's to blame."

I lay there for a couple of minutes with my eyes closed, then I heard him crying. I was so surprised that I didn't even look at him for a minute. Then I remembered the first time I'd been locked up. I'd felt like a wild bird being stuffed in a matchbox.

"Easy does it, kid. We'll be out pretty quick."

He didn't answer, but he stopped crying. Then he jumped up and grabbed the bars of the cell. "Elcody stupid bastards!" The gesture looked a little ridiculous because the cell door was open, giving us the run of the cellblock. You'd think he'd gotten life.

"Let's have a cigarette," I said.

He took out his makings and threw them over on my rack. I took my time and rolled us a couple.

"There goes the rodeo," he said, sniffing.

"There ain't a goddamn thing we can do about it. Here -" He took the cigarette and we lit up. Flopping back on the rack I could hear the wind blowing outside, sounding as though a storm were coming.

"I'd never get used to it," he said, "being locked up."

"Give it a chance," I said, half serious, half laughing.

He sat down on his rack, dropping his chin on his hands. "I'm sorry for what I called you. I didn't mean it."

"Forget it," I said. "We're all jail birds."

The kid was looking around at the bare brick walls, the concrete floor, the filthy blankets on the racks. There was only one toilet for the whole cellblock and it didn't have any seat. The single hanging lightbulb left most of the room in shadows and darkness.

"Sometimes in the states you get a toilet in every cell," I said.

"But they don't know the difference between a toilet and a man. This little old Canook jail is a nursery school, kid."

I took my boots off and crawled under the cruddy army blanket, listening to the sounds drifting in through the open, barred windows. A couple of guys were drunk and arguing somewhere out on the street. Then I heard a bottle smash. After that I heard only a car horn once in a while, and the soft wind in the trees. You can get the feel of a town even from inside a jail sometimes.

II.

1.

Early the next morning they let us out. The little Irishman had gone home, so it was somebody else who stood at the cellblock door, rattling his keys.

"You're stories have been verified. Come on out." He was short and built like a pumpkin. Most of his hair was gone except for a curl that rose out of the top of his head like a stem. His teeth had wide gaps between them too, and he was grinning.

I was just in the process of lacing up my boots. In the states they took away your belt and shoe laces, afraid maybe you'd hang yourself. If you wore glasses they took those, too, whether you could see without them or not.

The kid pranced all the way to the open door, he was so happy. I followed him out, making the sargeant wait a little while. I never ran much for anything anymore. He slammed the cellblock door behind me and turned the key half a turn. "Thunk." We followed him into the front part of the building where he gave us our bundles and proceeded to unlock the top drawer on the left side of his desk. "Here you are, chaps," he said, pulling out a small canvas bag and dumping the contents carefully on top of the desk. The kid started scraping the money off into his hand and shoving it into his pockets.

"You mind if we count it?" I said. Getting out of jail with everything you went in with was harder than getting out without a key. When they let a guy out he was usually so happy about it he didn't notice anything missing, and if he did he'd better act like he didn't.

He didn't like it but he said, "Go ahead."

The kid started counting and before long I could see it was going to be pretty close. About that time the kid stopped counting and said, as though he'd been trying to tell me all along only I wouldn't listen, "It's all here."

"Good," I said, but I'd been looking forward to raising some hell.

"Now," said the sargeant, "if you'll just sign this receipt - "

He handed a little white slip of paper across the desk and the kid signed it while the sargeant rummaged around through the drawer looking for our

identification papers. Finding them he layed them on the desk next to the crumpled little canvas bag. Then I signed the slip and gave it back, my eyes returning to the little canvas bag. It looked a little like a used rubber.

"Don't take a freight out of town or you'll be right back in here." We were just two more bums that needed scaring.

At the door I turned around, because I was still feeling bad about the counting and said, "I didn't mean that I thought you guys took anything - " Then I stopped and got a little red.

"Go ahead, now," he said. "Forget it."

"Thanks," said the kid, as we went out. I thought that was going a little far.

It was an eight o'clock sun we met with a squint outside, and I was hungry enough to eat a brick.

"They should 'ave given us something to eat," said the kid.

"It would have been garbage," I said. We started down the street, looking for a grocery store. Nothing was open. There was something aggravating about having a pocket full of money, the sun well up, and nobody open. It made me think the shopkeepers were all a bunch of lazy bastards. Finally we gave up and sat down outside one on a curb. We rolled us a couple of smokes and we sat there watching a few early morning shoppers and guys getting off graveyard. Some of the guys getting off graveyard looked at me for a long time as they passed, and it was hard to tell whether they were jealous or disgusted. If they hadn't been so afraid of what people would say some of them would probably have joined me right then. Some would anyway - graveyard shift puts a man in a wandering mood. You're out of kilter anyway, coming home scratchy eyed with the sun fresh up and everybody else just going to work. Graveyard shift has

made many a bum. Some natural born bums work the graveyard shift all the time if they're stuck and can't pull out. They fell close to the night. I see it in their eyes all the time. I hear it in their footsteps on the cruddy sidewalk. I can tell when a natural born bum thinks he's stuck and I can tell when he thinks he's ready to pull out, too.

The kid was saying good morning to everybody who gave him half a chance - a regular Dale Carnegie. Pretty soon I saw somebody coming down the street, walking briskly. His face was pale as a winter moon and I figured it was him - the prop. Just the way he walked - confident. It would have taken an A-bomb to disturb one lousy bean in his bean can brain. He stopped and unlocked the door, kind of looking over our way as though somebody had dumped a whole load of garbage sometime during the night, and went in.

We followed him in, and out of pure cussedness I said good morning. He didn't answer so I took a step closer and said it again. "Good morning, good morning," he answered, smiling like a man who's been kicked in the shins from under a table, but not knowing by whom. Satisfied, I went to the back of the store and got a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, and some lunchmeat, unplugging the meat freezer with my foot as I went by and kicking the plug underneath. The kid bought a bag of potato chips and a jar of mustard, besides the same stuff I bought.

Pale face did a double take when he saw the big handfuls of change we fished out of our pockets to pay him. He was so goddamn sure we'd stolen the money I knew unplugging his meat freezer wasn't half enough, and that somebody ought to turn him upside down and play jackhammer with his head, but I let it go. I hardly ever started trouble any more. Outside we sat down on the curb. I figured it would be good for his business. He came

to the door a couple of times and looked out, but he didn't see anything.

When we finished we put the rest of the stuff in one sack and started toward the yards, passing brick buildings with small windows and stone ledges, rows of tarnished copper heads huddling under overhanging roofs. None were over four stories. In the lower floor of some of them there were big arched windows running all the way around that looked like the open mouths of a yelling mob. The street was narrow, dropping down to the passenger depot standing solid as an old church with its red roof and steeple with a clock. At the cobblestone street that was black top now, only showing its bones in scattered pot-hole sores, we turned right and walked along opposite the yards until we reached the west edge of town. Then we crossed the road and walked along the tracks for a ways. A train was pulling in but it was east bound so we didn't pay much attention until I saw a guy standing in the open door of one of the cars and I waved him off because of the bulls. In a second he was off with his bundle, waiting for the rest of the train to pass. Then he crossed the tracks and disappeared into the tall grass on the other side, never looking back. He looked familiar.

We crossed the rails in a minute and started back on the other side, staying in the tall grass. There was a good chance a west bound would leave off the south side of the yards. The main line ran down the middle though, and I decided it probably wouldn't make any difference - except that the tall grass was as good a place as any to hide. We reached a pile of old ties and sat down to wait. This kind of waiting never bothered me because sooner or later a train would be along and the rides were all free.

The day was warm and the grass smelled good and we hadn't seen a single bull. Even the creosote smell of the old ties rotting in the hot sun smelled kind of good - as though the railroad had been around for a million years and would go on forever - as long as I wanted to ride. I was sticking my legs out in front of me using my bundle for a pillow and the kid was lying on his side, head propped on his hand, chewing a piece of grass. I felt so good I didn't give a damn about anything. One single horse fly was buzzing around my head, and before it had a chance to leave I clapped my hands and got it.

"I've got a girl in New Zealand," said the kid. "She said she'd wait no matter how long I was gone."

I didn't answer. Let him dream. Then, after a minute I felt my old malicious streak getting warm. "When's the last time you heard from her?"

"About a year, I guess. But I 'aven't stayed in one place long enough for 'er to write."

"Ohh."

"What do you mean 'ohh'? You don't even know 'er."

"Yeah yeah - they got some things in common."

"A philosopher," he said, holding out his hand.

"I've been around the horn more times than you've been around the piss pot kid."

"You're equating age and wisdom."

"What? The hell you say. I'm telling you what I think." I was aggravated because I'd never quite been able to figure out where the man and what he'd done were joined. How much of a man existed if he hadn't done anything, hadn't really lived?

"Some of the dumbest people I know 'ave been around the world 'alf a dozen times."

"Maybe I'm not so thick as some of your friends," I decided I wasn't going to get mad.

"I didn't say you were. What I said was that she said she'd wait, and she will."

"Maybe so, - good luck," I said.

"Nite - I don't even need that."

I had to laugh at his good opinion of himself.

"Would you like to see 'er picture?"

"Sure. why not?"

He pulled out his passport and handed me a small photo. As soon as I saw she was good looking I handed it back. "Nope." He looked at it for a minute, then he put the picture back in the book and put the book back in his pocket.

"What do you mean, 'nope?'"

"She's too good lookin' to wait for anybody."

"I'll send you a wedding announcement," he said.

"You do that."

He was quiet for a minute, then he said, "Anyway, we're out of that bloody jail."

"Ummm," I said.

"It's only right - we didn't do anything."

"Good thing we weren't in the states," I said.

"Why?"

"We'd a got thirty days, anyway."

"Oh, come on."

"No - we'd a got thirty days. Anybody knows a sheriff has got to make a livin'". He'd stopped chewing on his quack grass. "They got a little different system a lot of places in the States. The county pays two-three bucks a head for every prisoner he's got locked up, and the sheriff feeds 'em on half a buck."

"But that's graft," he said.

I had to laugh at that. He was so right.

"Everybody's got to make a living - cop don't, so he takes a bribe. Guard don't, so he smuggles in junk. Judge needs a favor for some politician so he suspends a sentence. That's the way it is kid, everybody just making a living."

"Those are exceptions," said the kid.

"You tell me that in thirty years."

"Not in the United States," he said. "I don't believe it."

I just laughed. Why argue with him?

"You're bitter," he said.

"No I'm not bitter. That's life."

"You've been in prison, haven't you, and you're bitter about that."

"Horseshit," I said.

"You're sure full of questions, ain't you?" I was mad, but at the same time I didn't care. I didn't mind telling the story every once in awhile, just to keep it alive in my mind. It was a good trick to use when I was feeling grouchy but at nothing in particular. It focused everything just right.

"I was a deserter," I said, "in Nicaragua." It sounded so simple I had to laugh - there wasn't anything simple about it. I'd had a long time

to think about it. I watched his face to see the reaction. There it was - the disbelief, the curiosity, the contempt. I don't know what it is but to some people its worse than being a murderer.

"Well," the kid laughed a little, "no one wants to die."

"A philosopher," I said. That shut him up. "It's a funny thing kid," I said after a minute. "It's somethin' else. Like when you're doin' somethin' that's tough - you think its worth it you can do it, but let it become worthless - "

The kid was quiet.

"But that ain't why I'm a bum. I like being a bum."

"You went to prison?"

"Two years. Then - I went back in the corps. I wanted to clean up the D.D."

"Didn't you?"

"You don't know the corps, kid. They put me under a sinner captain. A real son of a bitch. One day we got into it. They kicked me out again." The kid sat there for a long time, thinking. Then he said, "Would you do it again - 'get into it', as you put it?"

"I don't know, kid. It was a tough way to prove I weren't a Yankee."

All the while we'd been talking I'd been hearing a train whistle, and now it was pulling in the yards - a west bound hotshot, as hot a shot as the C.P. ever runs, it being a railroad that would rather work the hell out of two units than put on one more and make some time.

We sat and watched it pulling through the yards, coming to a stop not far from where we were sitting. There sere fifty or sixty boxcars all sealed, a string of flat cars loaded with farm machinery, and a few more

boxcars down by the caboose. I looked all up and down the train but I couldn't see any opens, though there might be one on the other side. When a train first pulls in its hot and the bulls watch it close for anybody getting on or off, so if we waited a few more minutes things would be a lot safer. The kid didn't act very interested so I said, "You wanna split?" He shook his head no, but that didn't mean anything. The first chance he got he'd split. They all did.

The units uncoupled, pulled away, switched back, and clunked heavily past us, toward the other end of the yards. Units moving without a train always looked strange to me - six or eight thousand horsepower loafing along at ten miles an hour - like God mending underwear. We watched for awhile longer, then I said, "Wanna go look?" I was being real nice.

"Whatever you say, fite." He said it in such a half hearted way I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Cheer up, kid. C.F. bulls all got wooden legs." I was going to enjoy this - being the happy wanderer. I used to play the game all the time.

I looked all around the yards but I didn't see any bulls so I said "Come on," and started across the tracks, not giving a goddamn if he followed or not. Without its units the train looked like some kind of reptile with its head cut off, the end air hose hanging down like a steel nobbed prick. I walked around the front and looked down the other side, but there wasn't an open car in the bunch. I couldn't see way down by the caboose but I didn't want to risk walking any further out into the yards.

"Anything?" said the kid, coming up behind me.

"Nope."

"What do you think?" He was taking care to sound perfectly neutral.

"Up there." I nodded toward a bunch of cars sitting on the track next to the flat cars. "Best place in the yards."

It wasn't, but I didn't care. Without the bundles it'd be o.k. though, so when we got to the first flat car we stuck them up under the axel of a brand new international combine, out of sight.

"Suppose we get stranded?" The kid was looking up at the long canyon wall of reddish cars. They seemed to lean over our heads.

"Not a chance," I said.

He followed me up the ladder. We might as well have been chained together, for christ sake. In a way it was kind of funny. I didn't want him and he didn't want me, but there we were. The metal roof of the car was hot on the ass so we ended up sitting on the cat walk. I figured that when the train got set to pull out we'd just climb down and jump aboard - maybe. The yards looked quiet, the tracks shining in the morning sun, seeming to move a little in the heat the way a long rope does when you give it a jerk. I could see that all the jumble of tracks in the yards ended in a single main line crossing the brown flat land to the west, a million shiny pins laid end to end.

After a while I decided to take a look down between the cars to see if anybody was coming, so I crawled back away from the edge and looked over. Somebody was. I crawled back away from the edge and sat down on the cat-walk again. I was pretty sure it was a bull - just the way he walked. Pretty soon I heard footsteps crunching along the cinders, sounding like somebody important.

"What's that?" said the kid, stooping in the middle of rolling a cigarette.

"Bull," I said.

"What?" he whispered.

"Bull."

"Bull?" He goddamn near dropped his can of tobacco.

"Shhh," I said.

The steps drew closer, then stopped directly under us. We sat there listening, but we couldn't hear a thing. The kid finished rolling his cigarette quickly; then he stuck a wooden match in his mouth and broke the cigarette in half. I heard something that sounded like a bottle tipping over. I wondered what the hell was going on. I was edging over to the edge to have a look when the kid grabbed my arm. I yanked it away and peeked over, half expecting to see the bull looking up at me. He was poking around our bundles with a long stick. I could see a puddle of milk by the wheel of the combine. The son of a bitch. He sure was having fun. All he had to do now was grab the bundles and we'd be in a bad way. He stopped poking with his stick and started looking around, as though he felt somebody watching him - up and down the train, under it, then across the yards. He looked across the yards for a long time, then finally he turned and walked on toward the head of the train.

I noticed he had great big feet. He waddled around the front of the first box car and started toward the pile of ties, stopping to wait for two units that rumbled by, little bell ringing, looking sure as hell like they were going to couple up. By now we were flat down behind the catwalk. We should have climbed down, but I was about ready to part company with the kid and I'd figured out a pretty shrewd way.

The bull had walked on a little ways and stopped about halfway between the train and the pile of ties, hands on his hips. He had a belly on his

like a water tank. The bastard must have thought we were still over by the ties. If it ever came to running I knew I could run him to death, then turn around and stomp all over him, but it wouldn't come to running - at least not on the ground.

The units couples up with a crash that kicked the whole stirne back a foot or so. Then I heard air hissing and in a minute two short toots on the whistle.

"Hey," said the kid. "We'd better get down there."

The train jerked and began to move slowly. I could hear the units working.

"Wait a minute."

"Why? Let's go."

"The bull. Look at 'em."

The kid was looking over me, trying to see. "What? What about him?"

"He's got his pistol out."

"What can we do?" The kid ducked back down again. The cars were moving by faster now. Somewhere a wheel squealed for a long time.

"Our bundles," said the kid, scrambling toward the ladder. I grabbed his shoulder.

"You think yer gonna grab a flat car going that fast? Yer nuts."

"We 'ave to do something."

"I'm gonna," I said, smiling at him.

One by one the cars rocked by while I kept a good hold of the kid's shoulder. The last short string of box cars was coming, the caboosa tugging along like a gummed on wagon. I jumped up. The way I felt, I could have jumped clear over six sets of tracks.

"So long, kid," I said, and started running. I'd done it before. It wasn't as hard as it looked. The thing was to do it and think about it later. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the first of the last string coming. Half a car length ahead of me was a fifteen foot drop to the rails and ties. The car started by, and I gave a burst of speed from the cat walk to the edge and over. It was like jumping conveyor belts going opposite ways. My feet jerked sideways, but I kept my balance. When I turned around there was kid. He was so close behind me I almost bumped into him. I grabbed his shoulder and kept him from losing his balance and we were safe. The noise of the train changed from a loud clatter to a rhythmic clickety-clack as we passed out into the open. The bull had given up watching the pile of ties and had turned around. He was still standing in the same spot with his hands on his hips and his mouth open when we passed out of sight, waving.

2.

The cars were jerking sideways, the whole length of train looking like a thousand legged worm with willful feet. We climbed down off the top and walked the string of flat cars, stepping over stray rusty wire and wooden boxes trussed up tight in steel bands, and scattered blocks of wood, some nailed down like doorstops and some loose, and jumped the blurred, oblong box of space waiting between the cars, shivering a little each time because it wouldn't be hard to trip. Finally we reached the bundles, the puddle of milk looking like a horse wad of shot sperm, and we sat down against the combine. The sun felt old as a grandmothers kiss, and the wind rippled against my ear drums like snatches of conversation only partly

heard.

"I thought we'd 'ad it," said the kid, picking up the wet paper bag and taking out the chow.

"Pretty close," I said.

"But we made it," he said, grinning, throwing the paper bag over the side.

"I figured we would," I said, looking off somewhere.

"It was kind of fun," he said. "We'll 'ave to do it again sometime."

"Sure," I said.

"Very unique way of catching a train. 'ad you done it before?"

"The idea came to me up there."

"And a good thing too," said the kid, smiling innocently.

All around us the flat grass land rose slowly to meet the sky. We passed a herd of twitchy eared antelope, the little bucks with their top heavy racks looking up curiously, the does all quivering nose. Then they turned and ran, moving as though running were a way of making love to the earth.

We dozed for awhile, and when the sun was directly overhead we started out of the flat land into a range of low hills. I woke up when we started slowing down. At first I thought we were going into the hole, but then I could see blue black diesel smoke jabbing straight into the sky in two solid fingers and I knew the units were chugging full throttle. Before long we were barely moving. Finally we shuddered and stopped. The train shook like a wet dog and made another couple of feet, but this time it stayed where it was. Pretty soon somebody climbed down out of the first unit and started back toward us. When he got closer I could hear him whistling.

It was the brakee. He was chunky with red spots on his cheeks and a red spots on his cheeks and a red bandanna tied around a big, creased, sun-burned neck.

"Hi boys," he said. "Pretty good jump you made. Sure fooled that goddamn bull." He laughed loudly.

"Why 'ave we stopped?" said the kid.

"Won't pull it," said the brakee. "We'll go half at a time." He uncoupled us, and holding the lever, signaled the engineer. The air hoses popped apart like little girls kissing, the brakee jumped aboard, and the first half creaked up the tracks.

"Don't go away," he yelled.

"Well," said the kid, standing with his hands on his hips, watching the disappearing cars. There wasn't much we could do about it so we climbed down off the car and looked around - not a house in sight, nothing but miles of brushy, gouged, dry locking foothills. Below us a few hundred feet was a slump of ash trees, and I figured there might be a spring there. I listened and I thought I could hear water running.

"I 'ope our 'alf stays where 'tis," said the kid.

"Prceb'ly will."

The kid wandered over the bank and started down toward the brush. In a minute he yelled, "Hey Mite, berries. Look at 'em," and he slid the rest of the way down, grabbing bushes all the way. By the time I got down there he was working like a Mexican bean picker. We ate raspberries as fast as we could for awhile, working further into the brush; then the ground got black and wet, and by a little creek I found some juicy blueberries as big as grapes. I gobbled away for awhile, then I noticed it was quiet. The

kid was nowhere in sight. I started getting a funny feeling when I remembered how bears love blueberries. I looked all around, but I couldn't see anything. I didn't want to call the kid, I mean I hadn't seen anything - only blueberries, but I had this odd feeling. Maybe it was the rusty smell I thought I smelled. Then all of a sudden I heard a god awful "Garrowlll," a bunch of yelling, brush snapping, and I stopped dead. I waited a half a minute, listening, but everything was quiet. Then sweet blueberry juice started trickling down my throat and making me cough. I straightened up a little. Nothing happened. I straightened up a little more, swallowing the rest of my blueberries.

"Hey kid," I said, but not very loud. No answer. I took a step forward. "Squish." I was about half stuck in the mud. I took another step "sluurrk!" The bushes all around watched.

"Hey kid. You o.k.?" I started trying to adjust my mind to the idea of how his body was going to look. But there weren't any brown bears around here - just a few blacks. I heard something and I stopped, the back of my neck crawling. It sounded like a moan.

"Mite," came feebly through the brush. "Mite."

I started crashing through the brush in a hurry. Pretty soon I stopped. "Kid, kid, where are you?"

"Ooooooo," came from behind me, and then I saw him - he was lying on his back. I ran over to him.

"You o.k., kid? You o.k.?" Jesus christ, you're lucky you're even - " He opened his eyes and burst out laughing.

"You bastard! You goddamn no good bastard!" He was rolling around on the ground, holding his sides. For a second I felt like kicking him in

the head. Then I couldn't help myself and I started laughing too. I stumbled around and goddamn near fell down it was so funny. When we both finally stopped I said, "What the hell happened?"

"A bear, Mite. Just a bear." He was looking up at the sky. "She 'ad a cub with 'er. I didn't think it would work, but it did."

"Oh no," I said.

"She didn't run very fast when I growled, but when I chased 'er she broke into a regular gallop. "ave some raspberries, Mite?"

"Let's go back," I said.

"I'm still 'ungry."

"Come on," I said.

"But look at all the raspberries, Mite." He was grinning at me, his blue eyes narrow little slits.

What could I do? Leave a friend? "Well o.k. But keep your eyes open," I said.

"Right Mite," he said. He didn't though. He walked around picking raspberries as though that had been the only bear in the world. I was glad when I heard the units coming back. The kid was so gorged he could hardly navigate the brush and climb the steep bank.

"I was a pig," he said, resting on top of the bank. "I should be ashamed of myself." He groaned as he climbed aboard the flat car. We picked up our bundles and the chow, and walked back a dozen cars or so because we didn't want to be right under the units. Pretty soon the units coupled up and the brakee came by, looking under all the cars. The kid nodded to him in a selfsatisfied, sleepy way.

"Watch out for bears, Mite. The brush is crawling with them."

"Don't say," said the brakee, smiling.

"If you don't panic you're safe," said the kid, folding his hands over his belly.

"That right? I'll remember that."

"You 'ave to be forceful, that's all. Establish the proper relationship."

Walking on toward the caboose, his head cocked to one side, the brakee answered with a wave of his hand. The kid took out his makings, rolled himself a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, lit up and held the match until he almost burned himself. We got under way with a jerk which made the kid shrug his shoulders in a gesture of weariness. He dragged on his cigarette and blew out the smoke with a sigh. It was tough business, scaring bears. All the while we were crossing the hills he never said another word, but just sat there and smoked. Watching him smoke all those cigarettes made me wish I'd gotten a sack of Bull Durham. When we topped the grade and started down the other side he still didn't say anything and when we finally stopped at the bottom of the hill with much screeching and buning of brakes he watched the units pick up the first half, couple up, toot a couple times and start off again without so much as even looking curious.

The miles rolled by looking the same as before, only the clouds seeming to change - climbing higher in the sky.

"What color did you say that bear was?" I finally asked him.

"Brown," he said. "She was quite large. About a ton, I should judge."

"A ton, huh?"

"More or less. You know, Mite - " He dragged deeply on his cigarette, blew out the smoke, and stared off in the distance so long I

thought he wasn't going to finish - "I've always been afraid of bears. But I wasn't afraid then - I knew what to do. It was marvelous. I growled, and it ran." He looked at me with such triumph in his eyes I got a sick feeling in my stomach.

"You were lucky," I said.

"No, no. It was a matter of cold, physical courage." He was getting persnickety.

"Well I wouldn't try it again, if I was you."

He smiled at me in such a dreamy, silly way I knew it was hopeless. The one good thing I could think of was that he was going back to New Zealand pretty soon, and he'd never see another bear. Or were there bears in New Zealand? There probably were or else why would he be afraid of them? I thought about the whole thing some more and decided that probably in a day or two he'd forget about what he'd done and be just as scared as before. I hoped so - I could just see him growling at some Panda bear or Cinnamon bear or whatever they had while it nonchalantly gobbled him up like a peppermint stick.

3.

Three more hours of monotonous yellow flat land and low hills and we saw a town coming, a river gleaming in the sunlight at its edge, its three tall buildings standing independent as fat men in a swimming pool full of children. We jumped off plenty early in case horsefoot had called ahead, and walked into town on the shoulder of a narrow winding blacktop road. There was a lot of traffic - whole families with boxes and suitcases tied to their cars, pickup trucks pulling double horsetrailer, motorcycles with

straight pipes - but most of it leaving. A car load of people waved at us, three young girls in the back seat looking the kid over as though he were up for stud. "Rodeo" bowed out like a sail over our heads in red letters.

"Looks like its over," I said. The kid was really stepping out, and he didn't answer. Before long we were passing men sleeping everywhere - the warm late afternoon sun tpuching them gently, rolling them over when it found their eyes. There was mumbling here and there but mostly deep sleep. We passed empty bars, locked pawn shops, two by four cafes mostly empty, a mission - a dozen sober voices singing a gospel song. A little further on we passed a small hill of broken beer bottles gleaming brown in the gutter - sun caught crystals of ice sparkling for the garbage crew. Broken glass crunched underfoot. Passing cars slowed to get around the worst of it.

A skinny guy wearing black cowboy boots, a brown and yellow checked sport coat and a new cowboy hat was coming toward us carrying something by the neck in a brown paper sack.

"Which way is the rodeo,Mite?"

The man stopped, swaying. It was taking a second for the question to find the switch that would take it to the right answer. He looked like an old horse with his buck teeth and hair hanging over his forehead, and the skin under his red rimmed eyes was dark as a wet prunes'.

"The rodeo -where is it?" repeated the kid.

"Ha, ha - you need a drink, young feller." The man started unscrewing the cap off his bottle.

"No thanks, Mite. Just the rodeo."

"No? How 'bout you, pardner?"

"Never touch the stuff, friend."

"Never trust a man who don't drink, I always say. No offense, pardner." He took a healthy pull at the bottle. The smell of sweet wine filled the air.

"Where can we find the rodeo?"

"Ain't! What's the matter with you, bloody drunk!" The kid was damn near jumping up and down.

"Say pardner - where you all from, anyhow? You talk kinda funny - "

"Come on Mite," said the kid, starting to walk away.

"W'asamatter?" said the man. "Hold on a minute."

"Nothin's the matter," said the kid, turning around.

"How come yer gettin' huffy?"

"I'm not getting huffy," said the kid.

"Yeah? Well there ain't no rodeo, that's what. 's gone. Ain't. You don' like my english - 's tough."

"Well why didn't you say so," said the kid.

"There you go again," said the man. "I's tryin'. Ya won' listen. Ya missed 'er. She's a real pisseroo. Girls an' horses." He made a muddled shape with his hands. It was hard to tell whether it was a girl or a horse. "Ride 'em cowboy." He lurched down the street, holding the paper bag in front of him.

"Bloody fool," said the kid, looking after him. "Let's go 'ave a beer."

"Never touch it," I said. "But you go ahead."

Three ranch hands were standing in front of a bar a few doors down. They watched us coming through bleary, slitted eyes. The shortest of the

three was looking at the kid as though he didn't like him much. He was a rough looking old buzzard with a big, silver belt buckle. The kid ignored him.

"I suppose one place is as good as another," he said. The door was open. The place smelled like stale beer.

"Well, you go ahead. Gimmy yer bundle - "

"Why don't you come in Mite - "

The stale beer smelled pretty good. I looked inside. It was hard to see, but the place looked empty. I could hear the hollow sound of box cars smashing around in the yards across the street and almost gave in - but I knew it was the sound talking to me, not the kid.

"No kid. Drinkin's caused me nothin' but grief, an' I don't wanna start that again."

"Well, I'll 'ave just one, then," he said, handing me his bundle. After he'd gone inside I sat down on the curb against a light pole. My rheumatism was bothering me again. I was getting too old for this kind of life. Maybe I should settle down somewhere in a cabin and raise a big garden and kill all the wild meat I could eat. Every once in awhile I thought about doing that. Staying in one place wasn't so bad, if you didn't have to work. Maybe I'd find me a woman. They'd always gone for my bald head. Pretty soon I got up and went down the street to a cafe and bought a pack of tailor-mades. Then I came back and sat down again. Why shouldn't some nice woman want to tie up with me? Maybe a widow who'd already raised her kids, so we wouldn't have that hanging over us. I formed a picture of the woman I wanted. She'd be a little fat with nice big kazabas - I never did like 'em skinny, and I'd buy her a blue and white dress with small

checks that would go good with her blue eyes. And I'd never hit her, though she'd know who was boss. That was one place I went wrong with my first wife. A couple times I lost my temper and I hit her, and if you hit a woman you have to be mean enough to not let it bother you or she'll use it on you like a hat pin. The guy with the silver belt buckle came over and bummed me for a cigarette. A cop car went by looking everybody over, but he didn't stop. I goddamn near gave him a hard look until I remembered the last time I'd done that I'd gotten thirty days.

"Tomorrow they start pickin' 'em up," said one of the guys behind me.

"Spend yer money, sailor, but when yer broke you better clear out," agreed a second, a tall man with a droopy moustache.

"What you guys bitchin' about?" said the one who'd bummed the cigarette, an Indian with a pockmarked face. "You had yer fun. Now you got to pay. Is that simple."

I had a tacit right to speak because of the cigarette, but I'd heard the story so many times before I wasn't interested. All these rodeo towns were alike - the story was always the same. They lured a poor defenseless guy in and made him spend all his money and then when he was broke they ran him out or locked him up. It was the same for the pipe liners, the wheat harvest crews, the extra firefighters on the big west coast fires. It was the same for the Mexicans who picked everything the whites wouldn't stoop to pick and for the whites who would. Anybody who didn't have a white picket fence around his bedroll, had better keep moving. It kinda got a person down, after awhile.

The kid came back out and sat down on the curb. I could tell he'd already had a few.

"Gimmy a cigarette, Mite," he said when he saw me smoking. I took out the pack and gave him a handful. We sat there for a little while, then when he saw he wasn't going to have to make any excuses he said, "I believe I'll 'ave one more. Then we'll 'it the road."

"Go ahead," I said. "I'm not goin' any place."

When he went back in this time I knew he wouldn't quit until he got himself a snoot full, so I relaxed against the light pole, figuring on a long wait. He didn't know he wanted to get drunk yet, so he'd piddle around sipping his beer, telling himself he sure was thirsty and it sure tasted good, all the while ignoring the big thirst nagging at him - the thirst to laugh harder that he could, to be something bigger than he was. With me drinking always worked just the opposite. I always felt like I wasn't worth a good goddamn whenever I got drunk, and I started fighting and raising hell. That's why I swore off it - because it showed me in a light I couldn't stand. The next time he came out he was eating a bag of potato chips.

"Lately, I've been craving salt," he said, sitting down next to me.

"You want to get loaded you shouldn't eat anything," I said. "Four bucks ain't goana go very far."

"Who wants to get loaded? I'm 'aving a social drink."

"O.k.," I said.

"My potato chips, please," he said, rising. I gave them to him. "One more short beer. Then - the road. You look - after my bundle. Don't let anyone - you won't, of course. You're only dif-culty is - " He stopped, stepped up on the curb, and pointed down at me, "you are absolutely, definitely, beyond shadow of the least lil' doubt,- unsociable." He stepped back, turned stiffly, and walked through the door.

So I was unsociable. I made a couple of meat sandwiches, then went down to the little park next to the depot and washed them down with cold water from a fountain. The fountain was stone and stood exactly in the center, a little stone step at its base for kids. Water was shooting up in a little arc, and it looked like an awful waste, but there didn't seem to be any way to shut it off. I fiddled with the nob on the side but I couldn't stop it.

The day was cooling off. Shadows were spreading, silent as webs. It was the time of day that made you know that being a bum was a lonesome occupation. I remembered passing through a little town in Indiana once years ago, coming upon a piano recital being given on a front lawn, all the kin sitting on folding chairs and watching, listening to the young girl who was homely in a way that didn't matter. I don't remember what she was playing but it doesn't matter either. Nobody turned around and saw me, so I sat down on the curb and listened too, the setting sun golden on her brown hair, golden on the people in suspenders and big brimmed hats, golden on the lawn, golden on the windows of the house next door. After awhile I got up and walked on, even though she was still playing, because I didn't want her to ever stop. I walked right down the middle of the street under moving branches, like a slow motion shadow or a child tarrying home. The day was dying. I wanted to stop it. I wanted to squeeze the dusty, golden sunlight in my fist and stop the dying of the day.

I wandered back up the street, a bundle under each arm, and sat down on the curb, smelling the good smell from inside the bar. In a minute I got up and went inside.

4.

It took a minute for my eyes to get used to the dim light. There was a fat man in a red, short sleeved shirt and battered cowboy hat strumming a guitar lazily at a table, and two drunks sitting at the bar, one snoring with his head on his arms, the other mumbling to himself. There was saw dust on the floor and pictures of old time fighters hanging on the walls. Behind the heavy oak bar with its brass rail and wooden stools was a thirty foot mirror that rose to a peak in the middle, behind rows of bottles and fishing gear - plugs, flies, line, reels and pickled bait. The bartender was asleep, leaning back on a stool, his feet propped up on the till. Posted on the mirror behind his head was the sign "Credit makes enemies, let's be friends." I didn't see the kid anywhere.

"Hey," I said. "Gimmy a beer." The bartender opened his eyes and yawned, squinting at me. He had a wide mouth, long black hair, and wore a dirty white shirt.

"You got any money?"

"What do you think? I'm gonna drink on my looks?"

He brought me a bottle of Canadian beer and stuck his face up real close. I guess he was nearsighted. He took the money and threw it on the till without ringing it up. Then he sat down on his stool, hoisted his feet again, and closed his eyes. The fat man stood up, stretched slowly, and ambled out carrying the guitar over his shoulder as though it were a shovel. Nobody was in a hurry to wake up and start talking about the rodeo. The bottle stood in front of me on the bar, sweating. I would have ordered tap beer but they didn't have it. I was waiting for the kid. Three years without a drink is a long time, and I sure the hell wasn't going to drink

alone. All of a sudden I heard a voice yelling, "Anybody else? Anybody else want to put 'em up?" And there was the kid standing in the open back door with dirt all over his face, looking around as though he saw about six hundred people. The drunk who was still awake didn't pay any attention, but just kept on mumbling. The other one kept on snoring, and the bartender smacked his lips a couple times, not opening his eyes. The kid hadn't seen me yet. I was kinda surprised. He seemed like such a nice quiet kid. Then somebody stumbled up behind him and grabbed him around the neck, dragging him back out of sight. I didn't know how many guys there were or what the hell was going on so I grabbed my bottle and went out to see.

It was a pretty good fight. It was the guy who'd bummed a cigarette off me. He was heavier than the kid, but the kid had the reach on him and though he only weighed a hundred sixty or so he knew how to punch, so I just watched. The kid was up and down a couple times, and while the guy was standing still I had chances to bean him but I didn't because he didn't try to kick the kid when he was down. Then the kid let go with a lucky haymaker the guy stepped right into and he went down like a sack of spuds, hitting his head on something sticking out of the ground. He was out.

"Called me - bloody limey." The kid's sweater was torn and he looked pretty messed up - his clothes, anyway. His face looked alright. For a minute he swayed a little, then he said, "Let's go 'ave 'nother beer."

The guy on the ground wasn't moving, and I didn't like the way he was laying there, so I said, "What about him?"

"Fuggem. 'e start it."

I knew I should have taken a look at the guy, but I didn't. I told myself it had been the kid's fight, and it wasn't any of my business. So we went back inside. At the bar we hoisted our bottles, but I didn't feel

so good about it as I had before. Something spoiled it. Maybe the fight - maybe the kid being so drunk - I don't know. I hadn't changed my mind - but I didn't care much one way or the other. The bottle was getting warm in my hand. I set it down in my hand.

"Afn't cha gon! drink?" said the kid.

"Yeah, sure," I said. For the first time I noticed my knuckles were all skined up. I didn't know how I'd done it. I couldn't remember. I took an empty glass sitting on the bar and filled it, watching the golden, grainy liquid rise slowly, foamy, strings of pinhead bubbles coming from the bottom. The kid filled his and we touched glasses, me finding him because it was all he could do to hold his steady. Then I drank. It burned my throat in a harsh, cold way that made me shiver. Three drinks and the glass was empty. I filled it again and drained it. The kid was drinking slowly. I guess by now he was full of beer. The third glass finished off the bottle and I ordered two more. The bartender didn't seem to mind. He did everything dreamily without really waking up. The next one tasted less harsh and I was on my way. Every time I ordered another one I thought about the guy out back, wondering if he'd gotten up yet and when I went to take a leak I looked out the back door. He was still there. The first thing I thought was that I should tell somebody. Then I figured that if anybody really gave a damn they would have done what I did - took a look. He must be hurt awful bad, to be still lying there. Looking at him I remembered the way he'd asked me for a cigarette - knowing that I wasn't going to look down on him just because he was out of smoke, he'd been almost shy. I figured he was my friend too - maybe as much as the kid was. He could have been sleeping off a drunk except that his arms were sticking

straight out from his sides. Just coming back here to see about him was a big move - once I stopped ignoring something it was pretty hard to start again. Finally I went out to see if I couldn't help him. I started to shake him, and then I saw the blood on the ground under his head - a regular pool, and that stopped me. I knew right then. I jumped up, drawing back from him. The first hundred feet or so I ran sideways trying to get my legs working right. I didn't know what I was doing. All I could think about was getting out of there. Then I tripped and fell over something, and when I got back up I stopped. I knew I should have kept on running but I got ahold of myself and turned around and looked at him. He wasn't anything to be afraid of. The alley was dark. Nobody had seen me. I started walking back, kind of half circling. Just a body, just a man kept running through my head. Finally I stood looking down, feeling something welling up inside of me. It was hate! He was ugly - a goddamn filthy, rotten piece of buzzard meat. A dirty lousy dead body that would stink to hell and back and turn green. Garbage. A nothing. A worse than nothing because now - now I had to do something. I grabbed his legs and gave a pull, but his head was stuck on something so I grabbed him by the hair and pulled up. Then I dragged him around to the side of the building and dropped him. His wallet was hanging half out of his pocket and I pulled it out and opened it up. Eighty five cents in change. One folded dollar bill. Then I had an ugly curiosity - I wanted to see if he had a family. There were a couple of pictures, one of a dark woman, fat and smiling, standing by an old Ford. I shoved the wallet back in his pocket, nervous about what I'd done. Then I pulled it out again and wiped off the fingerprints, throwing

it down next to him. I was getting jumpy. The guy had a hole in the side of his head just like he'd been shot. They'd be after somebody. I stood up and started covering the guy with old boxes and paper. In a minute it was done. On the way back inside I stumbled on something sticking out of the ground - the stake. The kid was in the can so I had to sit down and wait. Pretty soon he came out, stumbling around. He sure looked helpless. I picked up our bundles and said, "Come on, lets go."

"Go where. Still early."

"Come on."

"Don' wanna go." He found his stool and sat down. Jesus christ, I said to myself.

"Come on," I said. "We're broke. No more money. Come on."

The bartender had picked a hell of a time to start waking up. He was blinking and looking down our way. The kid could hardly walk so I helped him out the door.

"Don' wanna go?" he said. "Early yet." We crossed the street, me half carrying him, half dragging him. With both bundles it was a job. I was getting tired so at the edge of the tracks I stopped. I could hear a train coming, but it was still a long ways off.

"Where we goin'?" said the kid, standing with his eyes closed. He was grinning.

"Home," I said. We started across the tracks, taking each one as though it were three feet high. Finally we reached the other side, and I dropped him on the grass and sat down to wait.

An idea was working away in my mind, and by not looking at it directly I sort of considered it. Put the kid on the train. If we both ran, they'd

catch us both - probably. But what if I stayed behind?

I heard the train pulling in and saw it coming, black and silent through the night, except for the screech of the wheels, and when it got closer, the slow throbbing of the units. It passed by throbbing, and I felt the ground beneath me tremble. Then it stopped with a jerk and a hiss.

I picked up the kid and put him over my shoulder, stooping to pick up his bundle. He was lighter than I thought. At the doorway of the first open car I dropped his bundle on the cinders and stuffed him inside. Then I threw his bundle in and jumped in after it, dragging him to the back and for a second I had the feeling that I'd gone through all this once before.

Jumping off the train I heard two short whistles. They'd changed crews and were getting set to pull out. In a minute the train began moving and soon the caboose went by, lanterns high, narrow and red, and I went back to get my bundle; a guy hates to get separated from his bundle. At the edge of the yards I lit a fire and sat down to wait. Before long I heard a commotion coming across from the yards, and I took a stick and poked at the fire, sending up a shower of sparks.