

TERMINATION

FULLMER H. LATTER III

TERMINATION

by

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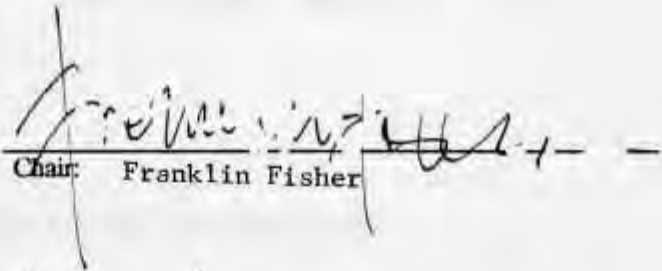
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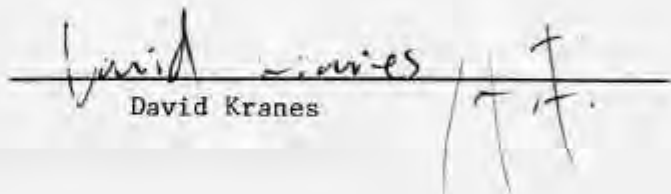
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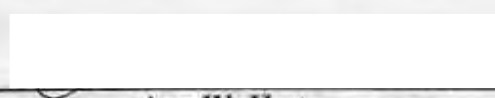
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ABSTRACT

The following stories were written from 1991 through 1996. My primary objective is to captivate each reader, to gain a complete trust, for the walk across a canyon on a fundamental, yet carefully constructed bridge.

The limitation of using the short form requires the most precise selection of details that creates the story where something memorable takes shape, materializes.

One advantage of the short story is a limited relief from the responsibility to relate every thing, each detail. This proportionally increases my responsibility as writer, to be honest with each reader. Every detail of scene, character, setting and plot must be interwoven with each segment that both precedes and follows. Every word is required to be essential.

Revision is something that does not end. Each time I read one of these pieces, I can see a clearer path over the trail. I know that I err in requiring my reader to assume the same pace as myself. When I revise, I find more color, a clearer view of the landscape or what year a certain pickup truck was made. I know I am successful when my work is read by a friend and I am told, I remember when that happened, as

if it were part of their memory. Yet, they have questions, they observe and think.

This collection was written as nonfiction, pushed over the edge. Each detail must be considered as a truth in itself and together with every other story that is each of us. Whether as the writer or the reader, there is a complete journey when each is allowed to seek their own way. It is not being led by the hand to the end of the trail.

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It is... I get up out of bed and go downstairs. I get the keys out of the cupboard and with the keys, pull a paper and toilet are up.

The lights, looking across, behind the edge of... it's cold and the street from the... state briefly. A... The P-10's... up and down... field.

TERMINATION

There are... statements to... I have... that I was found, a... in the August... had.

This view of... The... it... my family, school... rationalize, I... It is the best place I've spent my nights and days.

I have done it. I left everything and everybody. I left home for the first time when I was twelve. I didn't get far. I... It was 1967.

It is three-thirty in the morning. Full moon tonight and I can't sleep. I get up out of bed and go downstairs. I get the tray out of the cupboard and sift the herb, pull a paper and twist one up.

The lights, looking north, indicate the curve of Farmington Bay. It's cold and the steam from the refineries rises briefly. A slow freight passes Woods Cross. The F-16's complete an exercise, four fighters line up and touch down at Hill Field.

There are school assignments to complete, bank statements to assess and child support to pay and...I can buy the Airstream and live in the desert. I have dreams that I was found, a dehydrated corpse, smiling in the August heat.

This time of night generates unreasonable solutions. The 'I would do it, but' answer to everything. The standard excuses, my family, school or the occasional job help me rationalize. I want to stay here: she wants me to stay. It is the best place I've spent my nights and days.

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I have done it. I left everything and everybody. I left home for the first time when I was twelve. I didn't get far. I made it when I was seventeen. Flower power, man. It was 1967.

I came to Salt Lake City. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. It was crazy there; the mountains and the Salt Lake Valley where I was born, they fascinated me. I explored the Wasatch, Uintahs, Wind Rivers, Tetons, Sawtooths, and the deserts, west and south.

The last twenty-five years have passed rapidly. The number of trips, for recreation and re-creation I cannot remember. I do not mark time by what year it was, rather by events and the trips that led to or resulted from these events. I understand what it takes to heal myself. The insignificance I realize when my existence is challenged is the purest medication.

When my first marriage ended, I had anxiety attacks. I would simply pass out when I considered the loss of my daughter. I loaded up the beetle, put a brick on the gas pedal and steered south. When I stopped for the night I was deep in the red-rock canyons.

Turn off state Hiway 24 about thirty miles south of Green River and head east into the red rock. The old time name is the Flint Trail. I tracked the dirt roads, making my own map as I went. Purifying waterpocket water, I stayed two weeks. I drove into Hanksville, bought supplies and went back for two more weeks. The desert dried up my problems. I would return to camp after hiking the side canyons, dehydrated and hallucinating.

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I was in love. She wanted to see the Arches. It had changed status from National Monument to National Park, an event, she explained. More of an excuse to charge entrance fees, install flush toilets and pave the roads, I told her. I had traded the V.W. for a Jeep.

Five miles south of Crescent Junction we turned, crossed the D.R.G.& W. Railroad tracks and entered the Arches through Salt Valley. (This old road is still open: Ask me and I'll tell you how to find it.) We saw the Klondike Bluffs outlined as the sun fell, the Redtails settling. Camp was made and under the full moon the coyotes serenaded young lovers. The sage rolled flat under us, we slept and the fire died.

It was the fall my father and his parents passed away. I was appointed executor, finished probate and left. I ended the day up Fourth of July Creek in the Boulder Mountains, too drunk from the stop in Ketchum to continue. The next morning I shouldered my pack and left for a month.

The first few days I could only tolerate the starkness of travel above timberline. I couldn't be surprised by something from below. I knew it was time to come down when the sun rose that day. As I stood naked on a ridgetop, absorbing the first rays, I heard my father tell me I couldn't fly.

-4-

I learned that I would be terminated. Not through official channels at the company, but an old friend, "I thought you would like to know." I would be classified as permanently disabled. Disabled, I'm only forty years old. I loved my work. A good year could bring in six figures, with ten or twelve weeks off to roam.

I told the company I needed some time to consider their offer. I would never have to work again. They presented this as something attractive, to be desired. This time the Jeep and I ended up on the Toroweap Plateau.

I was dousing the fire to break camp and packing to head for the falls. The dust from the only road led to my camp. I made sure the .44 was loaded and holstered it under my canvas coat. I saw the green of a government truck and relaxed. The ranger explained he saw my fire last night. Not many visitors in August and he wanted to make sure I wasn't stranded. We drank the last of the coffee with some whiskey. It was frosty that morning, by noon it would be well over one hundred-ten degrees.

I cleaned out my ice box, wrapping in a towel the fresh milk and vegetables and gave them to him, for his wife and little girl. The round trip to Fredonia is three hundred miles. I told him of my plan to hike down to Lava Falls. He told me not to go.

Millions of years ago, a lava flow dammed the Colorado. The river prevailed, creating the most impressive rapids on the river. In the hiking guidebooks, the Lava Falls trail is listed as an escape route from the river. The black canyon walls hold the heat.

I descended into the canyon, reached the river and stretched out on a rock. The heat of the stone against bare skin calmed my tension. Absorbing the energy I felt renewed, uninjured. A jump in the river to contract the muscles and back to the lava lounge. The therapy distracted me.

The sun to the south had warmed my escape route. I carried three liters of water filtered from the river. The ascent was labored. My thermometer/altimeter told me it was 126 degrees. Then, I was out of water. I remembered looking back at my camp that morning and saying good-bye to no one.

The delirium came. I wondered why the Skipper, Gilligan and Maryann, the Howells and the Professor were so well prepared on a three hour cruise. Ginger was ahead of me on the trail. Did the Three Stooges ever reject a script?

Why was Wiley Coyote so resilient? Then, I was humming clips of songs that made me cry. *Git Along Little Dogie*, *When I Was Seventeen It Was a Very Good Year*, *Imagine*, *The Long Road Home*, *Desperado*.

When I came to, the ranger was shaking me. He told me he wanted to see if I had made it. The water from his canteen soothed my throat. My stomach would not cooperate

and I retched. Then I drained his canteen slowly and we talked. He described the remote existence with his wife and young daughter. I explained the circumstances that brought me to his jurisdiction.

"I ran a check on you. I saw you were carrying, under your coat, last night. You know I found a guy dead last season that tried the same stunt you pulled today. I figured I was coming down here to pick up the pieces," he wanted me to know.

"You wouldn't find them all here," I said.

You have to tolerate the slightly low, hiss as you hear the
pounding of the engine. When you can hear the rattle of
hundreds of wheels, when the wheels have you constantly
couple in together.

The train I started last year has a four-axle engine,
a six-axle passenger coach, and under the engine are four
railroad engines. I can hear the engine pulling the
coaches, the coaches, the coaches, the coaches, the coaches,
the coaches and no coaches, just a red light on the left side
I know most of the way. STEEL DREAMS. The way
the coaches are together that with the red light.

STEEL DREAMS

I have all day every day with my family now. In the
early seventies I captured seven acres in my back yard on
the railroad. In 1987, the doctors told me to quit. I worked
seven more years and the company paid me out of service,
paid me for my home and my job.

My new neighbor walks across the lawn and says
himself. He tells me he works at his father's auto
business. When he asks me what I do, I walk and talk like
"Whatever I want to do."

"No, really, I see you at work all the time, how do you
have no work?"

It begins with the endless questions about the train,
he wants to know about the locomotives, about the coaches
and the way the train works.

You have to know what to listen for. First you hear the pounding of the engines. Then you can hear the rumble of hundreds of wheels. When the whistle blows you instantly couple it together.

The woman I married last year has a house in Bountiful. I sit on her porch, smoke, and watch the trains run. I was a railroad engineer. I can count the engines pulling the boxcars, flatcars, gondolas, hoppers, piggybacks, tank cars, auto racks and no caboose, just a red light on the last car. I know each of the men, eastbound and westbound. We have spent more time together than with our own families.

I have all day every day with my family now. In the early seventies I ruptured seven discs in my back working on the railroad. In 1983, the doctors told me to quit. I worked seven more years and the company pulled me out of service, paid me for my back and my job.

My new neighbor walks across the lawn and introduces himself. He tells me he works at his father's auto dealership. When he asks me what I do, I smile and tell him,

"Whatever I want to do."

"No, really, I see you at home all the time. Don't you have to work?"

It begins with the endless questions about the trains, He wants to know about the locomotives, about speed and

weight, he wants to know about the dark side of my memories, the things I can never forget.

Listen, I tell him. Here comes another one. By the time the trains that left L.A. reach Salt Lake, they are bunched up together. They leave town eastbound, one after another. Hotshots first, drags last. It's a pull up the hill to Woods Cross, where we see the next outfit.

The engines are wide open, turbochargers screaming. Four big jacks on that train, 4500 horsepower each. Then the engineer backs off the throttle. It's downhill to Farmington.

The fastest I've ever gone? I had a power transfer of ten engines going to Pocatello, six or eight of them on line. New rail was laid, north from Cache Junction. I cut out the overspeed and tested the new track. We went over one hundred miles per hour, with plenty of throttle left. We ran out of straight track and had to slow for a curve.

Control of speed is what it is all about. A single engine weighs 200 tons. I've run trains weighing as much as 17,000 tons. Control of this weight uphill and down is critical. A few miles per hour overspeed on a long downgrade with a heavy tonnage train can turn into a runaway.

Pull the hill as fast as you can. Downhill, depending on several factors you either set the brakes and keep pulling or reverse the current through the traction motors, to retard the speed. That's dynamic braking. I had a heavy

soda ash train that had no dynamic brakes. Both sides of the train were on fire as we came down the steep grades west of Evanston. I used emergency brakes to stop at Ogden. The train had burned off each brake shoe. An engineer has to know how many pounds of air to set in the brake system and how to modulate the throttle to control the speed and keep the train in one piece.

That is a source of pride with engineers. Not to break the train in half is the ultimate display of skill. The drawbars that connect the cars together have a breaking point of 250,000 pounds. If you are going to move a train that weighs thousands of tons, it must be done with the right touch. There are men that have poor reputations as engineers because they are always breaking the train. They have nicknames like "Crash" or "Knuckles" after the part of the train that breaks.

Things will break, it is all mechanical. I was running at sixty miles an hour on a train one night. A wheel broke and derailed thirty cars. I remember my buddy in the caboose. The last car to go into the ditch was right in front of the caboose. He sat in the cupola and watched each of the cars, as they spilled off the tracks in front of him.

What was the worst part? My neighbor had to know. I complained about the hours. Dispatch would give me an hour and a half call. I wouldn't know if I was called for a shift switching in the yards or going out on a work train for a

week when I was called. We worked twelve hour shifts. I always hated getting called in the middle of the night. The sun would come up in my face halfway up Weber Canyon on a heavy freight doing 12 m.p.h., Green River still seven hours away.

He was insistent. He wanted to know about train wrecks. Had I ever hit anybody? He ultimately wanted to know if I ever killed anybody. He didn't know about the eyes.

I remember the eyes. I remember seeing them as if they had their own special illumination. It's not how tall that person was or what color the hair was or what they were wearing. I remember the eyes, the look of terror as they looked up into my eyes. It is the ultimate transfer between two people. They knew it was too late and I could do nothing but accept the last look and blow the whistle, ring the bell.

Should I tell him about the taxi driver in the rain on that Sunday night at 9:33 p.m., Mountain Standard Time? I remember the radio, still playing the hockey game, as blood, oil and antifreeze collected in pools under my feet. Or the two guys on dope that didn't see the train? They died quick, still smiling. Every bone was shattered in their bodies. How about the guy in the semi-truck? The driver was thrown from his truck, his body misshapen from the impact. He looked so puzzled as he lay in that pasture. The engine hit the truck

in the fuel tanks with the drawbar. The locomotive was engulfed in flames.

When I sleep, I wake up sweating sometimes, even after all these years. I still feel the flames coming in the window and see the surprised eyes as we met that morning. Or the woman at Layton that lost her race with the train. She was thrown into the fence from her car. As I tried to release her from the coils of barbed wire that entangled her, she went rigid and stopped breathing. I remember that last look.

I don't talk about the crossing incidents. A storm is blowing across the lake; it's a cold wind. I tell him of the terror, running at 79 m.p.h. on the passenger train, Amtrak in the fog, about the weather and how it affects the handling of the train. I tell him I'm glad I don't have to work there any longer. The red light on the rear end of the eastbound goes by and we go back into our homes and to sleep.

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BOTTLES

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The fall of 1969 he went back to Salt Lake City, where he was born. Following the second great war, his parents had migrated to California. After the summer of love in San Francisco, the Golden Gate state was tarnished for him. Everyone had come from somewhere else. He felt no connections and needed to work.

The car was loaded and so was he the day he decided to return to the land where he saw his first light. Friends pressed fat joints and hits of acid into his hand as he tried to leave. His plan was to head for Utah. He stopped at his sister's house and said good-bye to his mother. Since his father passed away, she had lived with her only daughter. His mother was seventy-one. He was her surprise baby. She would still rub her stomach and say to him, "He was brought to me by a little genie." She talked to him as if he were in the third person. He had always felt he was watching his life from the other side of the glass, hearing about it, as if it had happened to someone else.

She remembered clearer what occurred thirty years ago than the day before. She handed him the urn that held his father's ashes. "He always wanted to go back to Utah. I'll be buried next to my first husband. I'll not leave California now."

Twelve hours later, the lights of Salt Lake glimmered against the Wasatch Mountains. He stopped next to the

highway and got out of the car and caught the smell from the bottom of the Great Salt Lake. The wind was blowing, strong waves exposed the bottom of the lowest place in the Great Basin. The lake was where all water ran to, from the cities and the mountains above. The smell was of decay, not the fresh odor of the Pacific coastal flats when the tide was out. In the moonlight he held up his father's ashes and shook some into the air and said, "Welcome home."

He had no idea what to do with the jar. He set the urn down on the salt and looked up at the ashes drifting to the north. A round cloud moved across the face of the three-quarter moon. He was stiff from the drive and as he looked back down he lost his balance and kicked the urn across the salt flats. It stopped with the sound a bottle makes when it is thrown against a rock. He stood there stunned. His father was blowing north. He ran to the car and all he could find was the *Creamora* bottle he bought in the store/gas station in Wells. He ran to the shattered urn and poured out the artificial creamer and scooped up the ashes that remained. He placed the rest of his father in the passenger seat of the car for the ride into the city.

There was enough money to cover rent at the Se Rancho Motel for three weeks and he paid for a week in advance. With thirty-five dollars in his pocket, he went to fill his tank. That is where he met Karl.

On the other side of the island at the service station he admired a 1954 Chevrolet pickup with a handbuilt camper in the bed. He knew it was a 1954, it had the extra windows that wrapped around the corners of the cab. The color was a blue that moved like still, deep water as one walked around it. The layers of clearcoat had been rubbed by hand, he could see no burn marks that an electric buffer leaves. Just the movement of the blue came through. The camper was made of mahogany and brass screws fastened the wooden pieces. The window frames were brass and the shape matched the curves of the truck. There were no sharp edges. There were no streaks of rust.

"So you like my outfit," said the owner. "I'll show you the inside."

He thought it wonderful that a stranger asked him if he wanted to look inside. From his accent, it was hard to tell where he was from. No relaxed western drawl, he spoke rapidly.

"Oh, no that's O.K. I saw the workmanship and wish I could do something like that." He felt the other man needed to know.

"Name's Karl. I'm a carpenter, starting a new job tomorrow. I see from your plates you're from California. Need a job?"

Karl had noticed the toolboxes in the back of Steve's Volkswagen. He bought it for \$350 from a friend who had joined the Peace Corps and was liquidating his material life. It was the standard German army, desert green. A 1962, six volt model. The framing square sticking up out of his toolbox was touching the back window. It had etched the glass in small circles during the ride across Nevada. The dust hung on the back of the car. He had brought California and Nevada into Utah. All he could remember was smooth, black pavement from the trip.

Karl handed him his business card. It said, "Karl Smith. Licensed Contractor. Basements A Speciality". The telephone number was handwritten. He wrote down an address.

"And you are?"

"Steve, Steven Carver. I will be there."

They paid for their gas and Karl waved as he drove away.

Steve went to the address Karl gave him, at seven the next morning. It was an older house, near the university. Karl was there and, "I haven't had an office, came here from Rhode Island last year," he told Steve. "But if you ever need me call that number. I can pay you eighteen dollars a day, cash."

In the sunrise, Steve could see random grey hair in Karl's hair, evident in the muted light. No lines on his face, Steve guessed he wasn't much older than himself. He

could smell the elm and olive trees in the yard and walked over to listen to bees in the rosebushes.

"I see you appreciate the nature of things," said Karl. "You let the bee do his work rather than try to kill him." Steve would remember Karl was one that watched. He was aware of what moved around him.

They began the remodeling of the basement. There are always considerations when reconstructing. The people who held new title to the property had designs. Open space where we can recreate, they said. The foundation of the house would allow the prescribed area.

Sandstone blocks supported that house. Each stone was cut exact, to conform with the next. From that house Steve could see the city below. He thought about the pattern of the streets in Salt Lake. Each block was square with the next. There was a deliberate pattern here, from the foundations of the houses that extended into these people that lived on the edge of the Great Basin.

As Karl and Steve dug to expand the basement, they tasted the dust. It was dry and demanded deliberate excavation. Steve wet handkerchiefs, covered his mouth and nose and washed them when they filled with the powdered soil. Karl did not speak as he shoveled and kept the buckets full, for Steve to empty. As the space took shape, they encountered an obstacle. The coal bin was framed and walled

in, intruding into the square of the new family room. Karl suggested a break. They entered the fresh air and daylight. Karl went to his truck and opened the door to the camper.

"I've got some coffee left in my thermos," and Steve went to his car to get it. He returned to Karl's truck and entered at the half-crouch required. Steve was tall, over six feet and he helped Karl lower the table from the ceiling and settled on the pad over the wheelwell. Steve took a comb out of his back pocket and combed his long hair back and re-tied his ponytail. He poured coffee from the old thermos into two cups.

He inspected the construction of the interior, it was exquisite. The wood was formed and conformed to curves that occupied the inside of Karl's camper. If it was not mahogany, it was brass. Steve said this was the work of a master boatbuilder.

Karl smiled. "My old man owns a boat yard, builds forty to ninety footers for people with too much money."

He then lit a cigarette and stopped the thought. They stepped out of the truck and Steve looked beyond the green of the city, to the west, at the salty lake.

They returned to the basement once again and opened the coal bin under the house. When the boards were pried from the bottom, bottles spilled out, as coins from a slot machine. There were whiskey bottles, Fisher beer bottles and Gallo wines, all well represented. The new owners were

excited. They knew of someone that dealt in antiques. The bottles were history to be vendored. The owners indicated the collector wanted them to wrap each bottle in tissue paper and he would assign a value.

Karl told Steve that bottles were not an uncommon feature of Salt Lake City basements. Steve remembered California, where garbage was left on the curb each week. Whiskey bottles were placed on top. It indicated what was consumed and how much was paid. He did not remember being in a basement, in California.

At Thanksgiving Steve talked with his mother on the telephone. His father was still riding in the passenger seat of the V.W. in the bottle that once held powdered coffee lightener.

"Yes, I'm fine. Yes, I went to visit Aunt Gwen and Uncle Ernie when I got to Salt Lake. I have job. You know, we found all these bottles under a house I am working on."

Mother told him about his cousin Ralph. Gwen and Ernie could not communicate with Ralph when he returned from Korea. He was blinded in the war. He banished himself to his boyhood bedroom. Aunt Gwen would take him a bottle of whisky each day. Ralph pried up a floor board and deposited the Old Crow containers under the house.

"You know he left every bottle under the house for his mother to find when he was gone. Ralph died from syphilis in

1957. There is a picture of you placing a white carnation on his casket." Steve did not remember.

Karl contracted another house to work under. This house was located up on 11th Avenue. A young lawyer had purchased it for his sorority bride. The photograph of the beaming couple hung above the fireplace. Steve had never experienced a wedding picture that large. They held hands as Karl formulated the estimate.

When Karl shook hands with the attorney, Steve noticed the view, Salt Lake City laid out below in proper squares. The same view he saw from the east, from the last house, Salt Lake City with straight streets and tidy homes. Looking south, the sun was amber over Kennecott. He could see the inside of the mountain spilling over the side, washing finally into the lake.

This basement was an old dugout. From the north side of the house, the original grade demanded half of the basement. Karl was apprehensive about digging too much from under this house. The old stone construction needed support. Karl began coughing in that basement.

"What's the matter, man?"

"I'm sick. God sick damn. Shit damn sick. I wish..." and Karl would not say. He would always begin a statement and trail off. Like he was thinking about what he was going to say, and that a listener might not understand. They worked entire days without more than a few scattered words.

Steve was always amused at the way Karl split his swear words. He could create combinations of cursing that left Steve without sympathy for the situation. "God, sick, damn," and Karl would see him laughing.

"You never take anything serious. Hell and damn it, I want to tell you." He coughed until he choked. "Damn the dust."

The dirt colored all their clothes. Steve's white tee shirts soon carried the color of the dirt from under that house. The drain to his shower at the motel filled with the fine, red soil.

The shelf of earth under the 11th Avenue house was yielding. Karl struck with the pick and the point rose out of the dust with fragments of an old woolen blanket and white bones. Karl's exclamation was native to him, Steve didn't understand what he said. Steve turned from filling the buckets with dirt and watched finger bones rain down. Ribs clattered in the dust and rocked to a stop. Vertebrae rolled to his feet. Karl sat down in the dirt and put his head in his hands. Steve went to him and helped him stand. Karl was sobbing, "I didn't know. What should we do?"

Steve sat Karl down on the lawn and went to the front door of the house and knocked. The young bride answered.

"Is your husband here?"

"No, is there some problem?"

"I think you had better call the police. We found something in the basement."

The police arrived after the young attorney. Six patrol cars parked in the street and a crowd of neighbors milled in the street. Cars slowed, occupants craning their necks. Then the black body bag was loaded into an ambulance. It drove away slowly, no need for lights or sirens. The detective in charge said the bones were old and he had no questions for Karl or Steve. The attorney gave him a business card and they shook hands.

When the police and coroners retreated, Karl and Steve dug some more. Near the north wall of the foundation they uncovered bottles.

They were dated 1897 and still smelled of whiskey. Some still had corks in the bottles. The attorney put two of them in his study, upstairs. In the sunlight the clear glass turned to violet within a couple of weeks.

Karl had to go outside, for a cup of coffee. Steve continued the excavation. Karl's coffee lacked something and he knew where to find it. He went to Steve's car and returned to his coffee with the powdered cream. Ten minutes later Steve emerged from the basement to see Karl and his coffee and the jar.

"How's the coffee?"

"It's cold and a little bitter. Here, have some. How long have you had this?" Karl held up the bottle.

As he drove down the Avenues, on the east side of Capitol Hill, the sun cast a gold plating on the water of the lake that held the runoff from all the basements in Salt Lake City. The wind was starting to blow, steady. What was left of his father rolled to the edge of the seat and back as he stopped in front of his room at the motel.

Karl coughed deep. December seventh he was admitted to the L.D.S. Hospital with pneumonia. Steve was out of work for at least the next two months. He called the phone number on the business card. A woman answered and asked him to come to her house.

"He lived in his truck in my driveway for the last few months. That was the only way for me to repay him after he re-did my kitchen," said the woman. "When I didn't see him around last week, I didn't know what might have happened to him."

It soon would be winter and Steve needed some work. He wanted to move out of the motel.

He never worked with houses after Karl. Karl recovered and made kitchen cabinets for the houses that hired his hand. Steve found work driving a truck and went on the road.

Late at night on the highway, Steve would sometimes remember Karl, his serious view of life, too slow to smile.

It had been a couple of months since their last conversation. He had found a little house in Salt Lake City. It faced west, to keep the snow melted off the porch when he

was on the road. The next time he is in Salt Lake he will look at it again. This house is everything he wants. There are enough shelves for his books, and a place for the bottle of his father above the fireplace. The kitchen will feed him and any friends who may come to eat and talk. And there is a basement.

The woman I love will help me to love. I will be glad
to give you my love and my strength and my life, if you
will give me your love and your strength and your life.

Yes, right. The very first time I met you, I
knew I was in love. I was so happy and so content
with you. I was so glad to be with you. I was so
glad to be with you. I was so glad to be with you.
I was so glad to be with you. I was so glad to be
with you. I was so glad to be with you. I was so
glad to be with you. I was so glad to be with you.

BLACK VELVET

The first time I met you, I was so happy and so
content with you. I was so glad to be with you.
I was so glad to be with you. I was so glad to be
with you. I was so glad to be with you. I was so
glad to be with you. I was so glad to be with you.

I learned to love you. I learned to love you.
I learned to love you. I learned to love you. I
learned to love you. I learned to love you. I
learned to love you. I learned to love you. I
learned to love you. I learned to love you. I
learned to love you. I learned to love you. I
learned to love you. I learned to love you.

That's why I love you. That's why I love you.
That's why I love you. That's why I love you. That's
why I love you. That's why I love you. That's why
I love you. That's why I love you. That's why I
love you. That's why I love you. That's why I
love you. That's why I love you. That's why I
love you. That's why I love you. That's why I
love you. That's why I love you.

The woman I live with told me to find a job. "I'm tired of your thin ass just sitting around this place every day. I want some support around here."

"Oh, right. You want some bucks, O.K. I'll find a job. I'm sure I can score an assistant manager position at the local Burger Lane. Then you would bitch about me coming home smelling like french fries. I have printed 200 resumes and I there are six left in my bag. What the hell kind of a job do you recommend for today's English major?"

On the porch was the Sunday paper. She subscribed to it when I was enrolled in a journalism class last quarter. I am proud. I would like to accept a position that I have prepared myself for. I want to rely on my university experience.

I scanned the Help Wanted ads. Many I had answered.

"No, I think you're overqualified," or "I have people with Ph.D's coming in for this position." The most humiliating answer of all, "Oh, all we will pay is five dollars an hour."

That won't cover my child support. Last month the judge upheld the five-hundred dollar per month judgement against me. I haven't worked for three years, retired from the railroad as permanently disabled. I don't collect a pension.

I need a job. My cash is running out, I need money for rent. Love is expensive.

It was ten o'clock Sunday morning and I decided to dial the only new ad I might have a chance with. It said:

WRITER Creative writing assistant
needed. Must have excellent
grammar, computer skills and
natural creative writing ability.
Part time/full time. 484-4391

The phone was answered by a woman, "Black Velvet Entertainment Enterprises." We made an appointment after my last class on Monday.

"You will fit nicely into my schedule. I have a five o'clock that should be finished by then."

The rest of the day and all day Monday I wondered, what kind of business is open on Sunday morning? Entertainment Enterprises? The address she gave me was in a new industrial park. I aligned my south and west coordinates and arrived at 2381 South 2700 West, Unit A. There was a black "A" on the front door, no other sign or lettering. The lights were on but no one was in the small reception office. I sat down in a chair by one of the front windows that angled back from the doorway, giving the space a triangular shape.

There was a desk pushed up against the wall with a purse, a can of Diet Coke and a bottle of Windex on it. Another chair was on the other side of the door, back to the window. Under the chair I saw a dime, two nickels and a penny and a gold ring. A set of keys were left in the front

door. It smelled like used air freshener. I set my bag down and faked a cough.

The door to the adjacent room opened and she came in. She was tall, short blonde hair. She was wearing a white jump suit with an elastic neck. It was made of cotton and the fabric was worn, like an old tee shirt. It was obvious she was wearing nothing else. Goya used this body shape clothed and unclothed. She moved and kept her breasts constantly waving at me. She put her hands on her hips and reminded me why I came.

"I am here for the job. I have an appointment for six."

"I'm Velvet. You must be Mr. Latter. Just a minute."

She went back into the next room and returned wearing a black sweater over the white jumpsuit. Her eyes betrayed her; they were far older than her face.

When I was seventeen I left home and moved in with a topless dancer. During the last twenty-five years I have known other dancers, entertainers and the call girls that worked the railroad towns. They all had the same expended eyes.

"The job I advertised is for a writer to help me write my novel. I love romance novels. I think only a woman can write honestly about love."

I remember Webster's definition of irony. There is a choice between the dramatic or the tragic. At that moment, I decided there was too much tragedy in West Valley City that

night. I handed her my resume and a couple of stories I had written for magazine publication. One was about several trips I made down into the desert and the other was a profile of contemporary railroaders.

She leafed nervously through the pages and kept sniffing. She did not read an entire paragraph. Her hands were shaking.

"Oh, this is wonderful. I like the part about the sunset. It said you even went to the university? Wow, that's impressive. You know I had over a hundred calls for this job? I finally just started to tell people that the position is filled. I want to write my story. I want this to be nice. I mean, you know, nothing pornographic or anything. I just don't know where to begin. Have you ever worked for a woman? I own my own business and I'm only twenty-three. Would that be a problem?"

"No, no problem." I have a daughter who is about her age. When I mentioned this, she folded her arms and crossed her legs.

"You know, I never liked my father. We never had a relationship. He was never around and when he was, he used to beat me. I'm from Idaho. I left for California. I learned this business and came to Salt Lake last month. Business has been very good. I just know my book would be made into a movie."

I was hearing more than I wanted to know.

"I'd bet you didn't know this is an escort service. I have seven girls working for me. One is an eighteen-year-old transsexual. He has the most beautiful face. Tomorrow there is a six-foot model starting to work for me."

The door opened from the next room and an old man with a belly that hung over his pants stood in the doorway. He did not acknowledge me and finished zipping up and fastening his belt. He walked past me and out the front door and climbed into a four wheel drive Dodge pickup, with mud flaps, a gun rack and Idaho plates.

"Ga'night Ray. Ray's a good guy. One of my oldest regulars." Some one in the other room shut the door. "Why did you come here? You know, I think it would be just wonderful to be able to write."

She stood up and went into the next room. I heard her talking with another woman. She returned, sniffing and rubbing her nose. I don't like this. I look around to see if this could be a setup. I feel the hair rise on my neck and remember confrontations over money, women and drugs. I don't add these components; they are meant to be multiplied one with the other. The answer is always the same. I am uneasy. I get up to go.

"Wait, sit down." I don't. "Here's my name and a number where you can reach me anytime."

She wrote, "Black Velvet 973-8518," on a pink post-it note and handed it to me. I said thank you, smiled to not

betray my thoughts and went to my car. I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. I could not afford to be charitable. I pulled the film can out of my pocket and rolled a joint, while the oil pressure built as the engine warmed.

"Take the Long Way Home," Supertramp sang to me over the radio. I decided they were right. I got on I-215 and drove south, away from home. I smoked and circled the valley in the right lane. Then, I was back where I entered the freeway. I kept moving and headed north for Bountiful.

When I walked in the door, she wanted to know how the job interview went. I told her that I didn't have a job interview, I went to see a facilitator of dreams.

The scene was a simple, modest one. A small, unassuming building with a plain facade. The entrance was a simple doorway, and a few people were seen entering and exiting. The atmosphere was quiet and unremarkable. The building appeared to be a place of business or a public service, but nothing more. The people around it were dressed in simple, everyday clothing, and their movements were unremarkable. The overall impression was one of a quiet, unassuming place.

JOLENE

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We were a couple. Jolene and I lived together for eight years. Marriage was not discussed. That would complicate our relationship, I thought. I was married twice before I met Jolene, and I did not want to marry again. I was required to pay \$750 a month to support my three daughters. My past had determined my life. Jolene felt that drained our life together, but she said she loved me.

Then, just before Christmas of 1990 she told me it was over. I didn't ask why. I packed the truck and left after she went to work that morning. I did not settle into a solitary life. I was attending the university since my retirement and was enjoying my social life. A friend lined me up with Debra. Three weeks later, we were pregnant.

Debra and I discussed the options. Neither of us wanted a relationship when we met. I told her I had no interest in marriage. I had just left a relationship because I wouldn't marry. Debra and I had spent evenings in her kitchen, talking and crying together. She had a three-year old daughter. The father would have nothing to do with Debra or the child. Debra had insisted she would carry our baby and was terrified of the prospect of solitary motherhood. We agreed to marry and it was done in a month.

The day of the wedding I dressed and got in my truck and drove north on the interstate. I was shaking and I had to make a conscious effort to breathe. I turned around at Brigham City and came back to Bountiful for the wedding. I

arrived with a few minutes to spare. My friend and best man asked me if I was alright. He had never seen me so shaken in the twenty-two years of our acquaintance. I then said to Debra, I do.

Debra was in her own little world. I never did find out how to get inside. She was taking several medications for depression and ate pills to wake up, to go to sleep, to keep her regular and to tranquilize her. The mood swings became unbearable to me. I was staying at home with the children, going to school while she worked. Her resentment grew. We did not have conversations. Debra belittled my work at the university and on the evening of my first public reading she went out of town to work, despite earlier plans and promises. I wanted her to be included in my life and she refused. We didn't make love anymore. There was no currency in the relationship.

She disliked all of my friends. She constantly referred to my relationship with Jolene. I found myself fantasizing about Jolene at night, when Debra was out of town and I was sleeping alone. When a close friend's mother died, I saw Jolene at the funeral. She was bitter about what I had done. She saw me there, married with a new baby. It should have been hers. I stayed for another five months with Debra. We split at the end of April 1993. I left everything behind except my books, camp outfit and clothes. Once again, the

truck and I headed south. I had everything I needed with me. I camped south of Hanksville.

I was a mental mess. I couldn't read or concentrate. I could not even think of writing. I simply sat and looked into space, for hours at a time. After two weeks I returned to Salt Lake City to finish my undergraduate work. There were two classes I could not simply forsake.

I had just spent the last two years working on my degrees in English and Communication. I contacted my professors and explained my situation. My English professor, a poet, looked at me for a moment and said, "Marriage, I did that once."

Debra was my third wife. That did not make my heartbreak any easier.

I barely passed the English final and graduated. I did not attend the graduation ceremony. I was in Castle Valley. I drank a quart of mescal that day, when I should have been in my cap and gown. I had been accepted into the graduate writing program and I did not want to acknowledge my admission.

My depression ended after I had cleaned my pistol and sat looking at the end of the barrel all of one day. I was not afraid of the pain. I simply had work to do. There was still something I had to say. My decision was to return to Salt Lake City. I thought of Jolene as I broke camp and

packed the truck. I smoked a reefer, watched the sun set and drove north, back home.

Driving in the dark is my form of sensory deprivation. The limited illumination from the headlights is temporary in the enveloping darkness. I like to drive at night. The truck becomes my space capsule, the ground flying by at 70 miles an hour. Driving in the dark I have made wonderful decisions. I have also nearly killed myself.

It has been six months since the divorce. Jolene contacted a friend of mine. He told me that she wanted me to call her. After three days, I dialed her number. We talked for a few minutes. We agreed to meet.

We met for coffee during her lunch hour. Jolene and I had polite conversation. I wanted to know why she wanted me to leave almost three years ago. She wanted to know why I married. At least my child carries my name, was my feeble excuse. I did not know what to say. We agreed to meet again.

As I was leaving she stopped me, put her arms around my neck and kissed me. Not the kiss your mother leaves on your cheek and not the kiss of a lover. It was an inquisitive move. The kiss was long enough to make my drive home confusing. Driving in the dark, I forgot where I was going and ended up in the parking lot of the downtown post office. It was closed.

We met again last night. She called when I had just finished a consultation with one of my students. It was

Friday night, she had the Cuervo in the freezer and *The Unforgiven* had been placed in the VCR. Three years have passed since I walked into her living room. I stopped before I sat down and looked at her. Jolene asked me if there was something wrong. My eyes welled up and through the lens of tears I smiled and said, no.

The movie played. We moved from the couch and lay on the floor recounting the friends, family and events of the last three years. The movie was over, suddenly, and we went to the kitchen. The icy shots of Cuervo, chased by the fresh squeezed grapefruit juice stimulated our conversation.

Jolene expressed the desolation and bitterness she felt when we split, after we had been together. Then she told me the morning when she asked me to leave, she had received a call that her father was dead.

I was stunned that she didn't tell me until then. She didn't think I would really leave. She wanted the marriage commitment from me, after eight years of being together. And then I married someone else, almost a few days later. The conversation was not accusing. It should have happened before, we agreed. There was no malice in our tone. We were talking softly. The words moved closer to emotions. She lit a candle, turned off the overhead light and sat on the other side of the bar. Across the counter top our hands touched and we talked of the dreams we had shared, so many years

ago. We remembered the trips we took together, the personal successes and laughed at our failures. It was better than the therapy I for which I had paid for at \$80 per hour. She ground some beans and made coffee.

Then, it was three in the morning. The talk stopped and she moved the glasses and cups to the sink. I saw myself as I had never before. I felt outside myself, hovering somewhere above, examining emotions and observing my recent actions. I hoped I was sensing some objective enlightenment.

Jolene took my hand and led me down the hall and pulled her shirt off. I turned out the light. I realized I was not enlightened. I was just driving in the dark.

ABOUT LEONARD

"Hello, Marie. I've been down to the Idaho Highway Patrol office to see just what happened. They said it was one of those stupid accidents, nobody could do nothing. Oh yeah, I got your note, I'll be glad to help, you know be a pall bearer on Saturday. Leonard was my best friend, you knew that. Anything I can do, you just let me know. I'm just next door. They said he had just pulled off the road to take a, you know, relieve himself, and someone driving over the overpass threw out their empty whiskey bottle. It hit him in the head and he was gone when he hit the ground. He was still holding onto himself. You know I think his last thoughts were about you, Marie. Damn, me and Leonard used to do everything. You know he never was a drinking man. We would have our fun just because Leonard was the last great sportsman. His best invention was golf casting. I remember those surf casting rods he bought when you were on vacation in California. He brought them back here to Arco and I wondered what he was up to. He rigged the golf balls with a little eye bolt and a snap swivel. Then we'd tie on and cast down the green. Never did lose a ball. Never did make par, either. Then there was the rock fishing. He bought that old boat from that guy over in Mackay. It didn't even look like it would float. He never did unhitch it even when he was driving down to Salt Lake that morning it happened, he was pulling that damn boat. You know, Marie, he was driving down to Salt Lake to that R.C.Willey Furniture Warehouse to buy a

new dinette set. But that boat did float. We drove up to Mackay dam when he was looking for stones to build that bar-b-que out back. Well, he would stop to find a rock and throw it in the boat. We got on the lake and because of all the rocks, we were riding pretty low in the water. Leonard started choosing rocks and dropping them over the side. Well, pretty soon, a fish comes floating up to the top of the water. Leonard was just sure that it got hit by one of his rocks. We spent the rest of that afternoon loading that boat with rocks and going out on the lake trying to hit a fish. Never happened. That's when we got that ticket for the harassment of wildlife. The game warden said he wouldn't turn in a report for fishing without a license, when we were just throwing rocks. Everybody over at the Boise office would never let him live it down. You know, Marie we've been neighbors for three years now, since I moved here to Arco. In all that time there is really only one thing I can think of that Leonard might not be too proud of. Remember when the bowling alley got all shot up? And they thought it was some high school kids from over at Mackay that did it? Well, that was Leonard and me. He had that old Harrington and Richardson single shot goose gun, ten gauge. One night we were driving back from the cafe and coffee and Leonard stops at the bowling alley. He told me his old man owned it and never would give him a job. When the old man died his second

wife leased it out and moved to Florida. Now Leonard never had a decent word for his stepmother and I never understood why until then. We got out of the truck and in the boat was that old gun his old man gave him. Leonard had a couple of boxes of shells and we busted a window in the back door. He knew how to set up the pins and pretty soon we were setting them up and shooting them down. Strikes were hard to manage until we switched to the box of buckshot. Didn't he ever mention shotgun bowling? He never talked down his old man after that. When we were driving away all Leonard said was, never did want to work there anyway. But God knows he was an honest man. You know I'll never forget golf casting, rock fishing or shotgun bowling. Leonard was the last great sportsman. That fall after I moved up here I asked him if he was going to go deer hunting. He said no, not until I have antlers and deer carry guns. Then it would be sport. Well, Marie I'd better let you go. Them boys down at the Highway Patrol office said somebody will drive Leonard's truck and the boat up from Malad later today. Their investigation is over. Just one of those damn stupid things. Well I'd better shove off. You've probably got a lot to do. You just let me know, Marie."

I was at the end of a street and the people were in
agony. The train was not moving and it was very
hot. I was sitting on the ground and I was
waiting for the train to come. I was very
tired and I was very hot.

The old man was sitting on the ground and
he was very tired. He was waiting for the
train to come. He was very hot and he was
very tired.

LEAVING LA PAZ

The train was very slow and it was very
hot. I was sitting on the ground and I was
waiting for the train to come. I was very
tired and I was very hot.

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hot. I was sitting on the ground and I was
waiting for the train to come. I was very
tired and I was very hot. The train was
very slow and it was very hot. I was
sitting on the ground and I was waiting
for the train to come. I was very tired
and I was very hot.

The train was very slow and it was very
hot. I was sitting on the ground and I was
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very slow and it was very hot. I was
sitting on the ground and I was waiting
for the train to come. I was very tired
and I was very hot.

I was at the end of a mission for the Mormon Church, to proselytize. The train moving me north, closer to home from Bolivia stopped abruptly, waking me. It was nearly dark and riding on the train for two days forced my need for outside air at any opportunity.

The old steam engine was blowing off pressure. Clouds of steam turned golden in the thin air of the Altiplano as the sun was dropping. Then, the engine pulled away from the train, leaving the passengers to wonder about the story behind another delay. We were to be in La Paz that morning. Without the train noises, another sound quieted the passengers on the platform: gunfire from the city.

The engineer, walking back from the railroad office, informed us that the tracks were torn up ahead, dynamited by *los mineros*. Trainbound for two days, no news and the latest coup in La Paz had escalated. When I listened to this, I decided to walk into town. I had lived in Bolivia for a year and a half, by then. In the cities, the traffic moved less rapidly than one could cross town on foot. And outside the cities, walking is the only way to maintain awareness.

Hermana Sara lived on Calle Buenos Aires, eight, maybe ten kilometers down from the train station. I walked from the altiplano into La Paz, watching airplanes strafe the city below as the sun dropped. Behind was Mount Illimani, rising icy white above the entire scene. It was strange to

be above the planes, while the pilots machine-gunned the streets in the valley where they lived.

Dark, quiet streets now. Small arms echo from the streets below, down in center of town. Finally, Calle Buenos Aires and Hermana Sara's house, shuttered. Around back, I saw Remedios, Sara's cook, through the kitchen window. Tapping on the window made her drop the china: plates and cups clattered. Then I could see Remedio's full, white-toothed smile of recognition.

Between bites of Remedio's *bifstek y papas fritas*, Sara explained. I needed nourishment, I ate and listened. Army General Torres wanted control, but the Air Force and Navy opposed him. The Navy, in a country that was landlocked, had been denied access to the sea a hundred years earlier. This was Bolivia's two hundredth revolution in one hundred and fifty years. Pride reigned.

I had seen three of these habitual civil wars, part of my short history and inaccurate accounts of the latest revolution were in *Los Periodicos*, the newspapers. Sara and I toured her house. In front, every window was shot out. Thick adobe brick walls were pockmarked, lead becoming part of the mud. The kitchen on the lower floor was protected by meter thick adobe walls and faced away from the city. We sat there, drinking steaming *Mate*.

We talked until late, I told Sara and Remedios I was finally leaving Bolivia. The last attack of dysentery had

stripped twenty-five pounds from my frame. The telephone still worked and there was one airplane leaving at nineteen hundred hours, sunset on the *Altiplano*, the high plains. Then *Hermana Sara* reminded me about my need for departure papers.

I couldn't leave without departure papers issued by *El Departamento de Extranjeros*. I asked *Sara* if she needed anything from the government offices. She crossed herself religiously and begged me not to go, I would never return. There were *los desaparecidos*, those who had disappeared.

The city of *La Paz* is built down into a canyon cutting through the *altiplano*, elevation ten thousand feet. Streets circle around the perimeter and all meet in the center of the city, intersecting at plazas. A few blocks from *Sara's* house, the plazas were filled with people. Some carried sticks of dynamite and others had guns, old shotguns and carbines made in China. Gunfire from the city made people jump with a collective nerve reflex.

Fifty caliber, - BOOM, BOOM, BOOM - answered by the tat-tat-tat of countless thirty calibers. Powder would follow bullet, as darkness increased, tracing each bullet's path. Passing the crosstreets, I could see trucks with armed men and personnel carriers, uniformed, helmets buckled tight under chins.

Next crosstreet, a man trots one step behind me. Stays with me matching my pace, I hear his soft footfall. Block after block toward El Centro, he is there. Crosstreet next, full of fire up from downtown. Bullets bounce from stone, the high whine of ricochet thumps and buries in adobe. From the corner of my eye, man at my step has half of his head blown away. His body forces a puppet with no strings gait and he drops to the cobblestones. I will not miss a stride.

Then, I was running by bodies flung around the streets. Dogs sniffed corpses and retreated at my approach and ran at my passing, barking at my heels. One more block to the Post Office Plaza.

Altitude pulled at my lungs and legs turned numb. Pickup trucks flashed by and machine gun fire echoed in the narrow streets. Granite chips from the Post Office building rained into my hair, bullets hammered head-high. Doors were open, bodies sprawled, frozen in undignified poses. I lay on the floor gasping, adrenaline would not allow normal respiration.

Running again, I went upstairs to the immigration office. Doors were open and papers, forms littered floor. I found a blank exit visa, folded it carefully and tucked it into my inside pocket.

I stood in the Post Office doorway as airplane engines continued to drone above. Five hundred pounders landed on

university property, to the south. The planes circled back and the fifty calibers ripped the floors out of buildings. A running battle passed a few blocks to the south, the flash and thump of dynamite. My run back to Sara's was uneventful. I was only looking down, at one foot after the other, simply one step closer to leaving La Paz.

The phone service was out that afternoon, but I had to achieve the airport. *Hermana Sara* was begging now. Do not leave, *hermano*, my brother. You will surely be killed. But, in *La Calle de Buenos Aires*, she contracted un *taxista*, the ride to the airport would be one hundred American dollars. Hugs and *abrasos* for *Hermana Sara* and *Remedios*. *Que les vayan con Dios*.

The taxi driver raced to up to the altiplano airport, collected six twenties and sped away, back down into La Paz. The airport was surrounded by men in uniforms, *Guardia Nacional*. All carried Argentine made thirty caliber machine guns, with extra clips taped end to end. Inside, men in suits, with brief cases handcuffed to their wrists, nervously smoked cigarettes. Their jackets bulged with personal protection, nine millimeter. The plane stood on the tarmac, engines idled, propellers reflecting the terminal lights. The customs man does not look at the signatures I forged on the visa. He just stamped me out of Bolivia. Light gunfire now, close.

A murmur in the terminal speculated, rumor said General Torres may be on this last plane. We were loudly ordered to board the plane, each passenger was escorted by a guard on each arm. We ran across the tarmac, and climbed aboard, simple. A jeep sped by and we all dropped flat as machine gun fire was returned. The men in the jeep, hit several times, dropped out by the side of runway. They fired at us, as we ran out to the plane. While I was running, my escorts returned fire, pushed me up the steps of the plane and inside. We could see flashes of gunfire in the terminal, as the plane left the ground. Hour and a half flight to Lima.

Leaving the plane and entering the terminal at Lima, there was a crush of reporters and bright lights, cameras, and mini-recorders. I was thrown several questions, once again running through an airport terminal. Was General Torres on the plane, was I C.I.A., was I with the American embassy?

I was a *viajero*, a traveler, my answer. And I moved away, out of the crowd. They focused on men wearing dark glasses.

But, this is a story about leaving. I could not stop running from them, to tell them the arrival tale.

I wanted the ship to have...
 with the last...
 the ship in the...
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TAKE ROPE

I...
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I wanted the trip to begin something. Louise had fought with Jim last week and said yes to my invitation to spend a few days in the desert. Jim was married and would not leave his wife. Louise had said enough after four years. After four years of me dating her friends and her no answers to my why she should be with me argument, we were going away, together.

I planned a trip to a small canyon that I had seen from the air, flying back from a river trip down the Colorado. We had spotted this place, a slash of green surrounded by miles of sandstone. It didn't reveal itself on any maps, but the evidence was there. I drove south, fast. We pulled off Hiway 12 on the unmarked dirt road north of Boulder and parked it only five hours after leaving Salt Lake.

"Why are you taking that rope?" Louise shouldered her pack and watched me fasten the coil over my pack and secure the Jeep.

"Oh, you never know..."

"O.K. Tell me about being prepared and all that. We're going hiking in the desert looking for God knows what isn't on any map."

So far she was right.

"This better not be a demonstration of some male ego thing. You know, Jim said you had spent too much time in the desert. That it might have affected you, somehow," and I cut her off.

"I really don't want to hear about Jim. You said that was all over. Let's do something new." I started walking.

The desert was new. I was on spring break from graduate school at the University of Utah and the recent rains had opened the desert.

Walking down canyon and around the mesa, the cactus flowers changed from white to red from delicate pink to yellow, like the wildrose. A pair of ravens watched our progress from successive sandstone perches, always pre-announcing us as intruders.

It was labor. The sun did what it does and we sweated. I unfolded maps and checked locations. Sand mites ran for the sweat that runs off your face and falls in the sand. Louise was magnificent. I could not maintain her pace. She was always ahead of me. I would find her sprawled on a rock waiting. The long legs that I had admired were suited to desert travel. She placed each foot with purpose and little dust rose from her steps.

The sun was low and there it was. The green of the cottonwood and laurel and oak, blue of water, mixed. We could hear the water. The water smelled cool. The canyon appeared to be about two hundred yards long. We dropped our packs and walked all around the opening. It was from ten to thirty feet wide and the sandstone was undercut, leaving no way to climb down to the creek that flowed some fifteen or

twenty feet below us. It simply appeared at one end and disappeared at the other, running back underground.

"This is incredible. A river in the middle of no place, that goes nowhere. And we can't get to it. Well, this must be the beach," She said.

Louise sat down, took off her boots, shirt and pants and stretched out on the sandstone. I was inspired to set up camp. I returned to the packs we had dropped and moved them under a twisted laurel growing out of a crack in the sandstone. Louise, still carrying her clothes, dropped them near her pack and picked up a water bottle, the rope and walked south along the creek. I pitched the tent and shook out the bedrolls. The sky was the color that only we could see, then and there.

I walked toward the creek and called her name. There were her boots. I screamed her name. Then I saw the rope tied around the base of a cottonwood.

"I was just trying to get a drink. I thought my boot laces would reach." Then, I slipped. "This sure is a nice rope."

"Who taught you to rappel? From your technique, you should know better than climbing unassisted."

"Jim worked as a climbing instructor while he went to college." I did not want to compete with him and said nothing.

I learned to climb rock many years ago. I do not care for climbing as an activity. It is moving too slow. I would rather walk and observe.

I do not like a dependency on equipment. Anchors will slip, a rope can fray and break. This was a good rope. A purple climbing rope, 60 meters. Pre-stress tested to two thousand pounds. It was warm as the sun was setting and coyotes called to raise the moon.

Louise slipped her boots on, got up, coiled the rope and said "I've got to go get my clothes," and she turned to walk back to camp. I sat on the edge of the canyon, and watched the sun disappear. I walked back to camp. Louise had started a small fire and had placed her sleeping bag, away from the tent.

"Are airing your bedroll?"

"No, I'm sleeping out here tonight. I think we'd better get something together for dinner. It will be a while before the moon is up. And we need to talk."

I made myself busy, found a pot and put some water on the fire to boil. I set out the noodles, the tin of tuna and tossed some dried peas in the water. Nothing was said between us until dinner was over. She spoke first.

"Harold, you and I have been friends for a long time, three or four years, isn't it? But, do you really know me?"

"I thought that's what we are doing here." I like conversation, but I hate to talk, to reach deeper inside.

"Since I split with Jim, I've been looking at my life.

I'm not interested in another relationship. You are just a friend and I resent your acting like you are here to pick up the pieces. I know more about you from my friends you dated. All you would talk about was me, when you were with them. I don't need to be tied to anybody."

I felt so transparent. Any attempt to redeem myself would fail. Louise was too far ahead of me once again.

"Maybe we should head back in the morning, Louise." I got up, doused the fire and went to my tent, alone.

The next morning I found a note under a stone on my pack. All it said was, "Meet you at the Jeep."

She didn't talk, riding back to Salt Lake. She kept the tape player loaded and loud. She did say thanks when I dropped her at her apartment. After that I called her a few times and talked to her answering machine. I wanted something from her, to talk about our trip to the desert. Our time between the Henry Mountains and the Dirty Devil River.

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We had driven all morning, from Pocatello to Great Falls. My grandmother was in a rest home there. Mother and my twin sister had argued the entire drive. Once again they were dividing grandma's furniture and photographs. She was ninety-three, remembered no one and all she would ever say was, "Get the hell away from me."

I stayed outside on the wide porch that circled the outside of the rest home in Great Falls. It was after lunch and there was one old man north of the back door, in the shade of the house, away from the street.

"Give an old man a smoke?" I shook out another for myself and lit his, then my cigarette. I leaned up against the railing of the porch. He sat up straight in his chair.

After a long drag on the cigarette he said, "I'll be ninety years old in three months. Name's Jack, Jack Burns."

"Yep, I was born on Christmas eve, 1887, year of the big blizzards. My daddy had a place east of here, near Square Buttes. He had three sections and lost nearly all of them cows that winter. He said, he lost all of his cows, but gained a ranchand. And he used to really work my skinny little ass right off my legs. I remember going to sleep at night listening to the coyotes call out and answer each other. Three years after my daddy was killed, off Santiago, Cuba, I left my Ma and my brothers and sisters. I was fourteen, the oldest out of seven and figured nobody would miss me. Just another mouth to feed. Not much happening in

nineteen hundred-ought one. We sure beat them Spaniards, but I never could figure why my daddy just up and went to fight and die. Ma never did marry again. I found work in a feed store in Great Falls here. I lived in back. Fifty cents a day. I gotta get out of here."

I shifted my feet, crossing my legs the other way. I had been a listener all morning, but he had a story, something to be heard and remembered. A winged hat with a nurse under it poked out of the back screened door.

"You shouldn't be smoking, Mr. Burns."

The hat disappeared, the screen door slammed and under his breath he muttered something about what he'd do.

I could tell he was once a big man. The corduroy slippers were enormous. His hands were large and the three fingers on the outside of his left hand were bent away, pointing their own direction.

"My kids put me in here. Said I was incompetent. Goddam nurses order you around like you was a little kid. Let's have another smoke." He tore the filter off this one.

"When I was seventeen I went to work for the railroad, down in Pocatello. My daddy would have rolled over in his grave. He hated the thieving railroad companies. They made me a boilermaker and I went down to McCammon, where I serviced the old Oregon Short Line engines. I lived in a railroad company shack until I filed homestead papers on a section up on the south slope of Scout Mountain. Moved up

there in a wagon. Never had no car or truck till nineteen hundred and twenty-three. Bought me a Ford truck. I used to steal railroad ties and sell them. Those were tough times. By then I had four young kids. You ain't gonna see nothin' like the great depression, sonny. But we made it. I had my place and my job. After the depression I bought up another section, for taxes. Now them bastard kids just fight over it."

It was dry, another windblown, Montana summer afternoon. It came from the west, low humidity, drying all. He flicked the cigarette butt on the hood of a faded green 1967 Dodge Dart, the tail light revealing the year. I figured it must be a nurse's car, from the expired hospital parking stickers. He watched the smoke rise up as it burned and he smiled.

"But, boy I had me some times. The wife died in thirty-six. Just left me with them kids. I had to work and I had that place to keep runnin'. What was your name? Them kids was almost old enough to take care of themselves. I was still young enough to enjoy life, I figger'd. I do remember a woman. She was a nurse at the hospital in Soda Springs. I got throwed off a horse and she got my new Buick from me. It was all I had to pay her for nursing me back. Thought I was a goner that time. Don't trust horses or women. Them three boys and that girl of mine, you can't trust them, neither. Look what they done to me. Run me off of my place and sent

me up here to Montana, just 'cause they think it's where I'm from."

The screened door opened and the nurse promptly wheeled him around and inside, "Time for you to rest, Mr. Burns."

I walked around the front of the house. My mother was sitting on the north side of the wraparound porch, weeping to herself, unremembered by her own mother. My sister stood up from the chair on the porch and shook her fist at me.

"You just don't care do you, Willie?"

I hated it when she called me Willie. I took my handkerchief out of my pocket and handed my mother a dry one.

"What did I do now, Chrissie? Are you two ready to go?"

Mother wiped her nose and went back inside the rest home.

"Don't call me Chrissie. You heard mother and me talking on the drive up here. Mother is not going to leave until she gets the key to the furniture in storage. She wants to settle this while we're here. She already called and made reservations to stay for the weekend."

Great. A day trip had turned into an expedition. My sister did not wait for me to respond. She went back inside. She wanted that oak desk and the cherry-wood dining room set. The door opened again and I turned to say something before my sister finished me off. But it was Jack. He had his hat on and carried a small cardboard suitcase with the

tail of a white shirt sticking out. I could see where a button was missing.

"Come on let's get out of here," he said.

He grabbed my arm and steered me toward a dark blue Chrysler. "Come on, before that damn nurse finds out I'm gone."

I didn't even stop to think. "My car is over there, the Chevy." I opened the door for him and tossed his bag into the back seat. When I was backing out of the driveway, my mother and my sister ran out of the door behind the nurse with the hat. I could see their mouths working and Jack was laughing as we drove away.

Jack and I drove out of Montana, south out of Idaho and stopped in Jackpot, Nevada, the gambling capitol of Idaho.

Jack and I became friends. We drank good whiskey and ate baked potatoes with large steaks. Jack won three hundred and forty-five dollars playing Blackjack, and slept all the way home, back to Great Falls.

It was lunchtime when we arrived and he said he was happy to be home.

THE PRO LEISURE TOUR

Chapter 1

Members of the Tour

I walked through the door and Snow White had the worm between her teeth. She slammed the empty bottle of Mescal down on the table. Roy Rogers was telling her to swallow it and an entire cast of characters was assembled for All Witches Eve. I had just spent twelve hours on a slow freight, southbound.

It was Allen's birthday and he greeted me with a "Howdy Partner, whad'ya drinkin'? How was the train ride?" Then he stumbled.

There was no way I could catch up with the party, it was almost one, it was tomorrow. I remember telling the dispatcher I needed to get home and he then put us in every passing track between Pocatello and Salt Lake. I told him a kid on a bicycle could move one hundred and seventy miles faster than we did.

I stopped the train at midnight and the yard driver picked me up. We had left Pocatello twelve hours earlier and could legally work no more. It was Halloween and I had missed the little ghosts and goblins. I signed out and walked to my truck. A light rain was beginning to fall.

The truck started in the cold. I bought it new in 1972. Most everything had been rebuilt once or twice. Two-hundred and seventy six thousand, five hundred and twenty-two miles.

Drove it down Third West, past Pioneer Park. Three men, down the block past the Rescue Mission, ran out into the street and waved little plastic bags of illicit consolation. Downshifted and turned up Eighth South, over to Eight East. I stopped in front of Grandma's old house and shouldered my grip, my bag.

"Make it a tall glass of cold Cuervo. Thought I'd be here sooner. I left town this morning. Happy Birthday, Roy,"

We hugged and I knocked his hat off. "Thirty-five and there's so much more. Walk around and meet some people. I don't have a clue who Snow White and Raggedy Ann are. Over there is Tom, the flasher, and of course Cindy, his old lady is the Snow Queen." She went into the bathroom.

Allen gave me a glass full of ice and cactus whiskey. I said thanks and went to the kitchen. Gumby was there with a couple in matching Disneyworld sweatshirts, all drinking light beer. They were passing a joint around and I smiled and said no thanks.

"Well, you know the whole effect is that of detachment. He's just not a team player." They were talking about hockey. I went back to the front of the house.

Allen had the wide brim and the chaps and spurs to complete the look. On the tape deck Roy and Dale were singing "Back in the Saddle Again." Tom stood up, and revealed he was indeed nude under his overcoat. The rest of the people in the room laughed and Tom was told it was a

small joke, and worse than a late night rerun. He sat down and mumbled, "No preshy ashun" and passed out on the couch.

Allen was cleaning up paper plates, piled with trout bones. The plan was for me to be home earlier to help grill the freezer full of trout we caught a couple of weeks before. We had fished the small lakes on Boulder Mountain, camped out after the Labor Day weekend. The freezer was empty again and the fish fry appeared to be a success. He made several trips to the sink. Marguerita glasses were on the tables and the floor. The ashtrays were full. I had missed another good time.

Snow White and Raggedy Ann were sitting at the dining table between the kitchen and the living room. I sat down and introduced myself.

"I'm Dodge. I live here, and you are?"

They looked at me and Snow White said, "Oh yeah, we heard about you. You're the other guy." And they both laughed. "I'm Sara," said Snow White, "and this is Laura. We thought we had the right address. We don't even know where we are. We're nurses."

Laura got up and said she was going to wash off her white face and freckles. She took off the red yarn braids and it was evident to me the party was over. People were leaving. Tom sat on the couch, still asleep. Someone had opened his coat and his stomach rose and fell as he snored. The fun couple in the matching shirts squealed when they saw

this and she went back to the kitchen. She returned with a can of whipped cream and topped off Tom's crotch in white swirls. Tom would have loved the cherry placed on top.

Sara put her head on the tables and her shoulders shook. She raised her head and told me it was the craziest party she'd ever been to.

"Oh, come on. It's Halloween and everybody's had plenty to drink."

"Not me."

"Well, almost everybody. Anyway what brings you here tonight?"

"Well, Laura and I just moved here from Colorado and we both work at the University Hospital. We lost our directions to another nurse's house and this looked like the house that was described to us. I think it's on Twentieth East and Eighth South, not Eighth East and Twentieth South. Salt Lake is weird. I still can't find my way around."

Laurie returned, the raggedy face scrubbed clean. Allen came out of the kitchen and sat at the table. The Snow Queen opened the door from the bathroom, wiping white powder from her upper lip. She screamed, "Who did that to Tom?"

She gathered him up and pulled his coat around him and they left. The couple in the matching shirts smiled on their way out and it was Allen, Laurie, Sara and myself. Allen got up from the table and pulled his hat down and went to the kitchen. It looked as if Allen and Raggedy Ann had hit it

off. She stirred his drink and moved her chair closer to his and he walked back in, spurs jingling. "No fish left, asshole." He passed Laura a beer and one to me.

"Everybody is gone now, man. I thought you left this morning, you were supposed to be here. Oh well, fuck it." He turned to Laurie and Sara. "All he has is this house and that damn job. Oh and don't forget the truck. I think he was born in that damn thing."

"Sorry I missed the gig, man. Got a job to do. I thought I'd be back. To hell with it. I can't catch up with a taste of Mescal and one beer." I fished for a roach and lit a smile.

Sara and Laura were uneasy. Laura moved closer to Allen and took off the ten gallon brim and fanned his face. "Take it easy, buckeroo," she said. "You claim you two were partners since high school. This isn't the way you should act. You, with enough candles on his cake to set off a smoke alarm."

We all laughed and Sara asked if we had a deck of cards. I found two decks in the kitchen junk drawer. Allen shuffled and we decided on five card draw. We played for beans, a bag from the kitchen.

"You were supposed to do the fish," he said to me. "Dodge doesn't like to wash dishes but he can sure pile them up. He'll tell you he doesn't like to cook, he likes to eat. He can cook the pans off the stove." Allen laid down two

queens and three sevens. He had a lot of beans left and I was down to three.

"Do you still want to go to Zion's in a couple of weeks?" I asked it as a general question. Allen looked at me like I'd exposed our little secret.

"Of course I do," he said. "We've been planning this trip for weeks. You're not going to back out now, are you?"

"We've heard about Southern Utah," said Laura.

Allen took off his hat. "No, what I'm saying is, let's make this game worth something. Let's lay out some more beans and the loser will have to cook and clean up."

Sara and Laura looked at each other and they nodded. Sara spoke for them. "We're in on this action. Laura we don't even know these guys. Oh, what the hell. Deal us in."

We played a few hands and the men's team lost to the women's skill. We had to agree to our responsibility and we piled our hands, one on top of each other's and sealed the pact.

Then, it was agreed that we would all meet on the bridge over the Virgin River, at the campground in the Park. It was then three o'clock in the morning and the time that motivates boys to find comfortable places to lie down. Sara and Laura went home.

When they came over the next Thursday, we ate spaghetti and garlic bread washed down with a couple of bottles of Burgundy. We planned menus and checked gear. We had stoves,

tents, sleeping bags and lawn chairs. Sara and Laura said they would bring the food we needed. Allen and I would be there the next Wednesday. We would have camp set up. Sara and Laura would meet us on Friday.

Chapter 2

Zion

Allen and I left at four in the morning. In the back of the truck, it was all packed in. Tents, bedrolls and coolers of beer and food. Lawn chairs, the throne of the desert. The sunshower: fill it up, warm it in the sun, hang it from a tree and soap down while your fellow campers assess how bad they smell. Or how much they care if someone sees them naked.

We drove south on I-15. My old Chevy made it to Springdale for an early lunch. Extra gas tanks can take it to California without stopping. Allen slept until we passed Fillmore. The sun was in his face and he bounced his head off the window one last time.

"You know I was just having a dream about this trip."

"Are you talking about this one or is another one of your flashbacks?"

"Come on Dodge. You know how I am about dreams. This is serious." I thought about how serious he is. He regularly has his chart done and is on the phone once a week with Loretta, his astrologer. Allen came to live with me again, after his divorce three years ago. We were roommates when we were in college. I still lived in the same place, the house where my grandfather had died.

I didn't read Allen's science fiction books, Arthur C. Clarke was one of his heroes. I couldn't stand to watch Star Trek. And he didn't like to watch the old westerns I loved. He would tell me, each time I watched another horse opera, that I lived in a fantasy world. I would tell him that's O.K., they know me there.

"You plan on driving without stopping, I guess. Running those trains sure seems to give you some weird kind of endurance. Or maybe it's just brain lag and you don't know how to stop."

I passed him the quart thermos of coffee and told him to pour. Allen continued, "See, this is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. We don't even have to stop for coffee. We have everything we need right here."

"Give me a break, Allen. The less you have, the less you have to worry about. Travel light. Hell, we're only going for a few days. Sara and Laura will be down day after tomorrow with more food, and I didn't invite them. That's what this is all about. You know I think they're very nice. But don't go setting me up."

I didn't need to be lined up with Sara because he and Laura were hot for each other.

Allen finished his coffee, slid down in the seat and closed his eyes. "Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of. Let me know when we get there."

The Chevy small block V-8 moved us south at seventy-five. It didn't burn any oil. No power steering or air conditioning. Just more stuff to go wrong, I figured. Allen worked for his father's construction company as vice president of caulking and nails or something like that. The company built rows of homes at a time. He showed up to work when he wanted and the company bought him a new four-wheel drive Ford every year. His old man paid him under the table so Allen wouldn't have to pay much for his child support. He spent more on a single party than he sent his kids for one month. He knew I thought he was an asshole for that. He enjoyed singleness. I knew I was saving more than money, because I'd never married.

Allen woke up as we were coming into Springdale.

"See if you can arrange to pull over, driver with the unlimited bladder. Man, we made good time. Stop here at this motel."

We stopped at the Best Western motel and cafe in Springdale. Allen came out of the bathroom smiling.

"This is great man. Here we are, just like old times. Cruisin'. You know Dodge, We ought to do this all the time. Like once a month, just take off. Go to Vegas. Winter's almost here. We could drive over to Telluride for skiing and seeing. Man there's too much and too little time. You need to enjoy life a little more."

"Don't start on that again. I don't need you telling me anything. It's the same it's always been. You sleep and I drive."

But I couldn't agree with him more. In the last seventeen years since we graduated from high school, there have been four different women. Four I would consider long term relationships, say a year or more. None lasted, two had approached marriage, since I was thirty. Sue, the first to break my heart when I was twenty-six, told me I would never grow up. My life was the Professional Leisure Tour, she said. I liked that.

We ate our coffee shop white bread lunch and drove into the park, up to the narrows. We locked the truck and walked up the river. There were a few people strolling under the golden cottonwoods that lined the riverbanks. They keep the tamarisk trimmed out of here. It's not a native plant. Like the paved pathway, with the simulated homesteader fences to keep the people in line up the canyon, could be native in some way.

The air is different in the fall. The freezing night distills the air and the skies are a deeper blue during the day. I stretched my legs and Allen behind me on the trail dropped back. I loved to be away from the drone of the locomotives and realized then Allen was right. I would work for weeks on end riding the freights twelve hours every night. Up to Idaho and back to Salt Lake. One hundred and

seventy miles and I know every inch of that track, every milepost and which way the cars will roll, if left to stand. The only thing I'd done all year was go fishing with Allen for two days. We built campfires and drank whiskey out of the bottle. I want to go back to Boulder Mountain.

I sat down to rest and Allen came up the trail. He sat down on the chainsawed log for a bench. "This is great, man. You know we should go back into town, to that Bit and Spur place. The waitress at the cafe said it's the only place in town after dark. We should have something to remember from this trip."

"Allen, I thought we came down here to get away and I'm not going into town for bad food and to rub elbows with the tourists. You can take the truck if you want to go."

We walked back to the truck and down the canyon and found a nice place to live next to the river. Late fall and the campground was almost empty, just a couple of Winnebagos and three tents. I set up my old Springbar tent. It was my grandfather's and at least as old as me. I remember sleeping in it with him and my father, on cold nights. I think we were deer hunting. They are both gone now and there is no one to ask.

Allen came back from his walk around the campground and announced he had just invited two ladies in the white Subaru with the Colorado plates, over for cocktails around "supperish." I remember thinking I was glad Allen was there.

He would keep things on the right track. I would never have to worry about amusing myself. He was the social director for our trips. He once drove one hundred and twenty miles from our camp in the desert to Hanksville to buy olives for the martinis. As I walked around the back of the truck, I could see he had written *The Pro Leisure Tour* in the dust on the tailgate.

Chapter 3

Mating Games

The women strolled into camp. They both wore shorts and tee shirts, heavy ragg socks and hiking boots. Their faces were red from sun and wind. One was shorter, her brunette hair was cut to match the jawbone line, short and it bounced when she walked. "Allen said to come on over. I'm Linda and this is Cindy. You must be Dodge, isn't it?"

I smiled, Cindy was tall, like Allen and had long blonde hair. Her knees were dirty. She was slender and said, "We've been camping for three weeks. Linda is a photographer and asked me to come along. We are days behind schedule. Utah is so amazing."

Allen fixed martinis on my tailgate and I unfolded the lawn chairs.

She continued, "We stopped at Bryce and tomorrow we are going to hike up to Angel's Landing. You guys should come with us."

Allen passed out the gin and smiled at me as he made the toast, here's to us. He moved his chair next to Linda and asked her if she'd like to dance. She laughed and Allen said, "Really we should go into town and have some dinner. I hear there's a band at this little place."

Cindy took a sip of her drink and winced. She opened her mouth to speak but all that came out was a wheeze.

Then she said, "We're both so dirty. Haven't had a shower for days. And we are planning on leaving, to go home tomorrow. Linda, we can't be gone another day. We have to be back in Boulder by Saturday.

Allen spoke, before I could.

"We have a shower with hot water right here. You are welcome to use all you need."

The sunshower was full and had lain in the sun, as we drove south all day. The women looked at each other and Cindy said, "What is a sunshower?"

Allen went to the truck and held up a plastic bag, one side clear to allow the rays to pass and the other black for absorption and full, with five gallons of hot water.

"Yeah, just hang it up in a tree and soap down. Anybody else ready for another martini?"

Linda said yes and Cindy still had most of her first one left. Allen didn't have to ask me. I went to the truck behind him as Linda and Cindy sat over by the park service cement picnic table.

"What are you doin', man?" I demanded. "These girls are ten years younger than us and you volunteer to take us all to dinner. Are you buying? Besides, have you forgot Laura and Sara will be here sometime the day after tomorrow?"

Allen poured out the next round and smiled at me for a minute before he said, "I want that little Linda. Look at

the way she fills that tee shirt. I want to take it off and wash her body. This could be fun. And don't tell me that blonde hair and those long legs don't do something for you. Relax, man. Just go with it."

"Well, yeah, sure." I couldn't disagree with what he said. Allen held up the shower bag and asked, "Who's first?"

Cindy sat down her glass and asked how to work the thing. Allen handed it to me and said, "Here Dodge, help the young lady with her bath."

There were some cottonwoods that grew near the Virgin River and Cindy followed me, with her towel and a bottle of Dr. Bronner's Peppermint Soap. I found a branch and tossed the line over. I tied the rope around the trunk and when I turned around, Cindy was just slipping her shorts off and stood there completely naked.

"I'll see you back in camp," I said.

"No way, I need someone to help me wash my hair and scrub my back." She came over to me and started to pull my shirt over my head.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll probably never see you again after tonight. Get those levi's off."

There was no way to hide my erection when I pulled down my pants. I faced the setting sun. Cindy said it would be a shame to waste my excitement. I washed her hair and rinsed it clean. She took the nozzle and sprayed the warm water down the front of me and pushed me against the tree. She

poured the peppermint soap in her hands and it only took a few strokes. She said, you owe me one. We rinsed off and dressed. We went back to camp and I told Allen where the shower was.

He had his arm around Linda and said the shaker is full. I poured another one and Cindy and I held hands and the sun went down. We could hear Allen and Linda, moving away, laughing in the trees. Cindy wanted to go watch, and I said no way.

We never made dinner that night. Allen and Linda went to the other camp to find a clean shirt for Linda. Cindy and I walked over after a sliver of a moon came up. There was glow from the tent. I could see the backlit outline of Allen, furiously pumping away. Linda was moaning higher, octaves rising. Allen groaned and stopped. Cindy held my hand tighter and Linda asked if that was all. Cindy and I went back to our camp and she said, I guess I'm sleeping here tonight. In the tent she kissed me and I was ready. She said, no not inside me. I'm married. She moved my hand between her legs and her hips rose and fell. I remembered our shower.

The next morning we made orange juice and pancakes at our camp. We took the Yes 90125 tape and Linda drove us into the park and we hiked to Angel's Landing. Cindy and Linda didn't seem to feel the effects of the night before and were soon far ahead of Allen and me on the trail.

We stopped to rest and Allen said, "I told you. Just let your old buddy take care of you. I hope you had some fun last night." I told him she was married and he laughed.

"Let's get this hike over with. Laura and Sara will be here tomorrow, we might as well have a good time again tonight."

"I don't think so, Allen. Cindy said something about leaving today."

From the top of Angel's Landing it is possible to see for miles. The deep cuts that are the canyons reveal the layers that run under the entire southern portion of Utah state. It is possible to see the same layers of sandstone and shale exposed in the canyons of Bryce and on the edge of the Kaporowitz Plateau. We considered the implication of water and stone.

As we climbed into the white Subaru, Linda said, "We have to go. Cindy and I are way overdue at home and we would both like to thank you guys for breakfast and the hike."

They dropped Allen and me at our camp and they returned in half an hour and we said good-bye. Linda was crying and we all exchanged addresses. After they left, Allen and I walked to the bridge near the campground and watched the water go by. Then the white Subaru drove back in and stopped on the bridge. Linda rolled down her window and handed me the Yes tape.

"We forgot your tape. It was nice." And they turned around and drove away, nearly missing a dark green Subaru that looked too familiar. It was Laura and Sara. They stopped on the bridge and Allen and I were laughing so hard tears rolled down our cheeks.

"We thought we'd surprise you. We took an extra day of leave from the hospital and what's so funny?"

Laura parked the car past the end of the bridge and they both walked back to where Allen and I were sitting in the road. He was holding his belly and I wiped my eyes again.

"We were just telling some old stories," I said. "Yeah, you must have left early to be here now?"

"At five this morning. Laura had us all packed Monday. She really has been acting like a little kid at Christmas."

Allen said Ho, Ho, Ho and put his arms around Laura and held her. "Good to see you. Camp is just down over there. Dodge, you bring the car and we'll walk down."

I got in the car and drove to camp. In the rear view mirror, Allen had his left arm around Sara and the other around Laura. He was doing the talking.

Chapter 4

Sara

The four of us used the weekend hiking the side canyons of the Virgin River. Allen and Laura spent more time walking by the river and Sara and I cooked and cleaned up. It will be a while before I bet on anything again. Sunday night, the last night we were there, Allen waited until the fire died down and darkness settled. There would be no moon for a while and we walked around the campground loop and Allen pointed out the stars. He did know the Latin names and their magnitudes. I can find a few, the dippers, Orion and Scorpio. Just enough to find direction and tell what time it is. We went back to camp and Allen said he and Laura were going to walk around again. Sara and I pulled a couple of chairs to the fire.

"You know Laura really likes Allen. That is why she was so excited to come down here. We've only known you two for a couple of weeks and she is in love."

Allen and Laura had seen each other five times since we all met on Halloween.

"Well, don't you have boyfriend or something? An ex-something somewhere?"

I had never really talked to Sara.

I liked the way she looked. Blue eyes that looked right into yours when she talked. Her hair was dark brown, the color of mine and her hands were always moving. Not in a

nervous way, but always explanatory, adjusting and caressing. She was browned by the sun. She bent over to put another log on the fire and when the sparks rose I could see down the front of her shirt and her eyes caught mine.

"No boyfriend, only one ex. I was married for a couple of years until I was twenty-eight, now I've been single again for three years. He still lives in New Mexico where I was born. Then I moved to Denver and met Laura. We met in nursing school there. When I got married, she came to Salt Lake. She got me a job at the same hospital. Nothing was happening in Denver. All we did was go to bars and to work. Life was just too boring. I came to Salt Lake to ski a couple of years ago. One night a couple of months ago Laura and I were talking on the phone, feeling sorry for ourselves and maybe the wine that night told me I should move to Utah."

I said, I'm sorry for my bad manners and offered to fix her a drink, offered her a beer. She said no and told me Allen had been to their condo on Foothill Drive. Allen told her I would be single forever.

"Allen said you work a lot. He said you take life too serious. That must be fun to drive a train. Could you take me on a train ride sometime? I'll give you a tour of the University Hospital." I agreed, and she said, "Maybe I'll have a beer. You know we should go out sometime, we don't have to go with them, you know a double date or anything

like that. What do you like to do besides go to work? It'll be snowing soon and I love to ski. I like to go to the movies, too. We just saw *Out of Africa* and it was wonderful. Have you seen it? I'd go see it again. How about you, serious about anyone?" The last time I went to a movie was three years earlier.

"No, I do work all the time. I have a girlfriend once in awhile but they can't stand my schedule. I come and go all hours on those trains. I read a lot of books to get by. I majored in English, never graduated. Then I went to work for the railroad. Needed a job that pays."

Sara zipped up her jacket. The moon was coming up over the canyon wall. "I have a degree in English, too. That's why I went back to nursing school. I didn't want to teach high school brats."

We talked about our favorite authors and we agreed on Swift, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Stevens and Abbey. She hated Hemingway and I didn't care much for Elizabeth Bishop.

Then she said, "You have wonderful eyes."

I looked down at the fire. She moved her chair next to mine. There was no way I wanted to get involved with Sara. She was very nice to look at. Small lines appeared around her eyes. These were the memories of laughter. She was a person who enjoyed life and I would only disappoint her, like I had so many others. Why couldn't I be like Allen and just grab whatever there was to hold onto? I looked up

and she was still looking into my eyes. She then took my hand. "We've got nothing to lose. I'd like to get to know you," she said.

"There's not much to know. I was born in Salt Lake."

"Are you a Mormon?"

"No, Episcopal. My folks used to say the rest of had to pray harder to make up for all the Mormons. Ours was the only house on the block with a liquor cabinet. All the kids in the neighborhood were always at our house. We had a pool in back and my Mom is still the champion cookie maker. She'll make dozens at a time. My father died about six years ago. Your folks still around?"

"Yes," she said. "They live in Orlando since my Dad retired. He was the vice president of a bank in Santa Fe. They love it there. Listen, it's Laura and Allen."

We were quiet and we could hear their voices but couldn't make out what they were saying. They came back into the glow of the campfire and Allen said, "Looks like you two are getting along fine," and he winked at Sara.

Chapter 5

Springtime

Sara and I began to see each other. I would call the crew dispatcher and take off one trip every other week. It usually gave us the weekend together. Allen and Laura had been sleeping together since the trip to Zion last November. It was now March, Sara and I had yet to even mention a physical relationship to each other. A couple of times after we went to a movie or out to dinner we would go back to my house or her place and sit on the couch and watch the T.V. We would put our arms around each other and she would lay with her head resting on my arm.

The Saturday before St. Patrick's Day there is a parade through downtown Salt Lake. I said I would be off work and wear something green.

"I'm Irish, I'll have you know," said Sara. "Allen and Laura are supposed to be there and we'll all have a great time." She gave me an Irish bowler to wear and we went downtown. I tried to remember where my family was from. I don't remember discussing it with my parents. I assumed I was English, mostly. When I was young I do remember my father rustling my hair and telling me I was an American.

At the parade Sara was jumping up and down and saying hello to everyone. She seemed unusually happy that day. After the parade we went to the Green Street Pub for a glass

of green beer and a sandwich. I noticed she hardly touched her food.

"Oh, I don't know what is wrong with me. At least it isn't the same thing Laura has. Don't tell Allen but she's two weeks late. She is afraid if she tells Allen he'll leave. They've been fighting lately."

This was all news to me. I would see Allen between trips and usually he stayed at Laura's or I would come home and Laura was at our house. Everything seemed like it was okay. Allen would never say anything about it other than, "Oh it's going great."

Sara said, "I haven't been feeling too well the last few days. At least I know it's not the same thing Laura has. I feel tired all the time. Today I feel better than I have for a while. Let's go to your place."

We drove to the old house on Eight East. My grandparents had built and paid for the place. I was an only son and my parents didn't want the house after Grandpa died. My father signed it over to me and said don't ever ask me for anything else, you've got more than anyone deserves to have handed to them.

Allen and Laura weren't there. Sara turned on the radio and Kenny G played some soft rock. Sara's station, not mine. I liked rock and roll, *Doors*, *Zeppelin*. She started moving around the room twirling, dancing. Her green skirt raised up high and I could see the green underpants. She went around

the table one more time and landed in my lap. She then kissed me.

Not like our kisses of the past three months. She took my hand and put it on her breast and stopped the kiss and said it's time. We went into my bedroom and she stood there ready while I fumbled with my pants. I stood there facing her and we stood there just looking at each other for what seemed several minutes. I smiled first. "I like what I see," and I pulled her to me and for the first time, I knew what I had been denying myself.

Her skin was warm and she put her hands around my waist and rolled her hips, pulling me into her and touching lips. We lay on the bed and I began to kiss her, moving down her body. Her nipples were hard and as I kissed her belly, she pushed my head down and I tasted Sara. She rocked, rhythm to the music and gasped and shook. We held each other. Then she was calm and said now you.

I called the railroad and took another trip off. Sara and I had dinner when she finished work the next day, Monday.

It was time to ask her how serious she wanted us to be. I felt like I needed somebody for the first time in my life.

Chapter 6

Mercy Denied

Sara arrived with a nice bottle of French wine for our dinner and a bunch of daisies for the table.

"You're looking good," I said as she took off her jacket and went to the kitchen for a vase and some water. She came in and set the flowers in the middle of the table.

"I have something to tell you. Would you open the wine? We need glasses," she told me.

After I poured, she took two long swallows and began to cry. I went to her and knelt on the floor and put my arms around her.

"I went to the doctor today," she said. "They found a lump and did some preliminary tests. I was told I have cancer."

I wiped her tears with the sleeve of my shirt. She kissed my forehead and stood up. "I'm going to wash my face."

She had combed her hair back. When she came back into the room, it shined in the simple light of the dining room. She couldn't have cancer. Even after crying her eyes were very blue. She always counseled me about the right way to eat and told me I should exercise more. It's not that I felt like I was still seventeen, I didn't feel like I was twice that, anyway. Somehow she didn't deserve it, I thought.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell you like that. I haven't even told Laura yet. I have to call my mother."

"You pick up the phone, right now."

But she didn't, she picked up her glass of wine, walked to living room and stood looking out the front window to the east. I went to her.

"I wanted to say something to you tonight. There's something I want you to know more than ever, now you've told me this."

Now I fumbled to say what I had rehearsed in the middle of the night while my brakeman slept. My speech had been rehearsed over the miles to Pocatello and back.

"Dodge, I don't need sympathy or worse anybody's pity. Everything will be okay. You'll see."

"I wasn't offering my pity. I'm trying to say I love you. I'm trying to say I want to spend more time with you. I feel these things more than I have ever before, with anyone else. Give me a chance, Jesus."

"I didn't know," she said. She walked over to me and looked into my eyes. "I still like those eyes. But we can't think about anything serious until I find out what is going on. The doctors briefed me about chemotherapy. I don't need this shit. I know what it can be like. I already live with it every day at the hospital."

"Move in with me. You want love, not pity. I was going to ask you this before your news. Tell Laura you're going move out. I'll tell Allen to crash someplace else. It's not like he pays rent or anything. I'm fucking serious, Sara. Make me happy."

"I don't know, I'll have to think about it. You know Sara is a month pregnant. Has Allen said anything about it? They had a big fight again last night. He doesn't want her to have it. He said he has enough kids. Laura doesn't need that. She needs me, too. I don't know what to do. Until today I thought I did know. I do know I want you."

We moved into the bedroom.

Chapter 7

Why, According To Me

Every time I tell this story or hear parts of it, I have to be careful to remember I was there. It's true they are all old stories, I've heard them all one way or another.

I think it is too easy to be cynical and blame the government. Pollution and radiation testing are now killing more of the population than any single cause. Maybe that is why Allen says I'm so passive. I try to fool myself and say that's what we learned from the nineteen hundred and-sixties. Forty years later I say, to hell with that.

Everybody just lost interest. This country is now too fragmented to work like the Jeffersonian dream. People want to do their own thing. Own a little bit of the land and drive down the street and spit out the window of their car without having it all blow back in their face.

In my lifetime, I grew up between World War II and the Vietnam War. It seems apparent to me why idealism is not very popular among my friends. Why is it so hard to accept the bad decisions we made in our past? I thought we were all in this together.

All the years I have spent reading history have not enlightened me. I read what is accepted as the great literature and the only constant is the repetitive condition of human behavior. There is a theme of killing what we love.

Blame should be universally accepted. Many argue, easily that the world is our creation and has never been better. The next obvious question is, at what cost?

It is nice to turn a switch to light the night or to twist a dial to stay warm. Sometimes, I wonder about what it is that I do. Driving trains fits the whole industrial game. I can't completely convince myself that I am in the least way any better than anybody else. Now, when I think about Sara, I'm still not sure where my responsibility should stand or what I should do about it. I have to admit I like easy decisions. The greater the risk, the more confused I seem to become.

Chapter 8

Tested

Sara received the results of the tests by Friday afternoon. I gave her a ride to the doctor's office and she asked me to wait in the car. I waited for an hour, reading the April *Outside* magazine. When she came out, we drove up Big Cottonwood Canyon east of the city. She didn't speak a word until we stopped at the Brighton Store.

"They have to do more tests. It appears to have spread into my lymph glands. Doctor Simpson told me to quit my job. He gave me six months."

We walked around the Brighton loop back to the store. Inside, we found two seats at the end of the counter. She sat under the menu and stared straight ahead at the covered carrot cake.

"You want something to eat?"

"Yes. I can beat this, Dodge. I have seen the numbers of women who recover. I'm supposed to start chemo next week. Will you be there for me?" She turned and looked directly into my eyes.

"Of course. Just say when. I'll lay off from work when we get back to town. I haven't talked to Allen for a few days. Have you told Laura about the tests and everything?"

"No," she said and looked down at the table. "I really should tell her before somebody from the hospital does. That place is such a soap opera. Just like life, I guess."

Who could disagree with the change in perspective Sara had received that afternoon? To be told when you will die is too much information to process, yet it is the answer to the big question. I remember thinking what would I want to do first, if I was told six more months. One hundred and eighty days. Four thousand, three hundred and twenty hours.

It was time then, to talk to Allen. I asked Sara if I could tell him and she agreed. I felt there was no need for her to face it all alone. She told me that she had called her parents and that they would come to Salt Lake City from Orlando in a couple of weeks.

"I want you to take care of me Dodge. Laura is going to have the baby, with or without Allen. She just doesn't need to worry about me, too. I want to move in with you."

I didn't know what to think. I had made the offer. But I remembered how my grandfather had disappeared. Cancer had wasted him in only seven months. He told the doctors to stick it. He mowed his own lawn the week before he died from pancreatic failure. Could I handle that, watching Sara waste away? Or would she be, as she said, alright?

Driving down the canyon we stopped by the creek. She took off her shoes and dangled her feet, in Big Cottonwood Creek, from a boulder, the same granite from which the Mormon Temple was hewn. Spring runoff was at a peak and the snowmelt was liquid ice. She laughed when I couldn't even

hold my hand in the freezing water. She told me I didn't know how to live.

Allen was watching the local news when Sara and I walked in.

"Long time no see, Dodge. How ya' doing, Sara."

She said, "Hi" and went to the kitchen. I couldn't wait anymore to ask him about Laura.

"That's none of your fucking business. That's all I need is for everybody to start asking me what I'm going to do."

"Maybe I should call your old man, Allen. He still believes in all that old bullshit like honor and what it is to be human. For hell's sake, man, do something right in your life. You just take it all as handout. It's going to stop here, tonight."

"What do mean?"

"What I mean is, it's time to pack up your shit and crash somewhere else for a while. Sara's going to move in here."

Oh, just because you found somebody, I'm out of here." He called to the kitchen. "It's happened before sweetie. You'll get tired of him and his 'sit in the corner' cynicism. He would rather watch than dance. Fuck, you're pitiful Dodge. Hey Sara, did I ever tell you how he got that name? He was the first draft dodger in Utah, back in sixty-nine. He hid out in South America for two years. Can't face

reality. His old man disowned him and hardly ever spoke to him until the day he died. Now there was a ornery old man."

"Back it off, Allen." Then, I completely surprised myself. I watched my hand going through the air and connect with his jaw. He went back over the table and down on the couch. He sat there and rubbed his jaw and spit blood on the carpet.

"You asshole, Dodge." And he spit out a tooth. "I'll be out of here, before you kill somebody. Now you can see him like he really is Sara." She was standing in the doorway from the kitchen, tears rolling down her face.

"Allen I'm almost sorry," I said. "We have to talk, man. What the hell, now is as good a time as any." I pushed him back down into the couch.

"Sara has cancer. Today the doctors told her she has six months to live. I am sorry man, I lost it. But it's time to move on. Sara will be living here and I don't care what you do, really. How about you sit down with Laura and sort it out with her?"

"She is crazy about you, Allen, you horse's ass," said Sara. "You do owe her something. She didn't get pregnant all by herself, get a clue. Go to her and do something you evidently haven't had the balls to do. Solve your own problem, be a man if that's what you want to call it."

There was nothing for him to say. I had never hit him before and my hand hurt for two weeks. A hairline fracture, said the doctor at the railroad dispensary.

Chapter 9

Calf Creek

Allen moved out during the next trip I made to Pocatello. I didn't expect him to leave a note.

Dear Dodge,

Laura and I are planning to be married this summer. I hope I'm doing the right thing. Sorry about the other night. Nobody ever hit me that hard. All should be forgiven.

Call me,

Allen

P.S. Take care of Sara, I'm truly sorry. Let me know if there is anything we can do.

I decided it was time for the Pro Leisure Tour to make a run south. Calf Creek would be running at peak and the sun would heat the rocks. The evening's frost would evaporate. That country has healing powers.

Sara's hair had begun to fall out in clumps, she wore scarves to hide her head. Her skin aged quickly and turned scaly. I would spend hours rubbing her body with lotion, as if trying wipe away the cancer. Nights were filled with terrifying dreams, both hers and mine. She had to smoke a joint for her meals to stay down. She was rapidly losing weight.

We drove over Boulder Mountain, slowly. Sara wanted to stop and take pictures to send to her parents. When they came and stayed two days, they stayed in a motel, near the airport. It was clear they didn't approve of me. Her father asked me why I was living with his daughter. It was as if I possessed more than his knowledge of his own flesh. Did I expect something, he wanted to know? He wouldn't have understood even if I had told him. I knew then I believed in love. Sara loved me. It was in her eyes and in her hands.

The view from Boulder Mountain extends to the east and it is easy to see the reefs of sandstone unfold below. The canyons begin from here. The reds and oranges of the sandstone replace the dingy green sage and the heat rises in waves each morning. Stone absorbing energy produces distorted images. Sara acted as if there was nothing wrong. Sometimes on that drive to the Escalante River and the falls, I could not bring myself to look at her. Would she really be leaving with the change in seasons? I didn't want to think as far in advance as winter. I wanted it to stay springtime forever, that day.

There were no campsites at the B.L.M. campground. I had not been there for a couple of years. Calf Creek was written up in the travel magazines and in the *Salt Lake Tribune* as an out of the way place. Publicity had ruined another of what I had always considered one of my little escapes.

We drove back up the road and found the old, abandoned airstrip and set up camp on the edge of the canyon, three miles above the official government campground. No excuse to charge an entrance fee there.

We could only stay a couple of days. Sara had to be back at the hospital for the next series of tests. We set up camp and waited for the moon to come up. I pulled the bottle of Mescal from the cooler. It had sat there before we had left Salt Lake. Good cactus whiskey needs to be chilled.

I put some limes in my pocket and we walked out to Highway 12. There were no cars or motor-homes rushing past. Darkness anchors tourists. Sara took the bottle from me and sat on the white line and sliced a lime open. I joined her. We sat cross legged in the middle of the road. We could see in both directions. Any passing traffic could be heard two miles in advance, working the canyon for a couple of miles in either direction. The bats came out. Sara and I were the only ones to hear their high pitched calls, their feeding time and our conversation was mixed and musical.

"I never thought we'd be doing this again, Dodge. I'm glad we made this trip."

The nighthawks were riding the air, hunting.

Sara smiled and said, "I wanted it to be a surprise. I couldn't tell you, I had to promise. Allen and Laura are going be married in July."

"You bet, I'll be there. Here's to the Pro Leisure Tour."

We passed the bottle back and forth, again. Our heads turned and we shivered, as we swallowed. The moon began to rise from behind the canyon walls. It was large, over sized, in the clear desert air. The white light created shadows and her eyes became luminescent. Sara said, it was like sitting under a black light, where the white is really emphasized. Her teeth glowed, like they were backlit.

"I need some mixer," said Sara and she tried to stand up. For some reason this became the funniest thing we had ever heard. We began that laughter that is part of drinking; I couldn't stop laughing because she was laughing because I was laughing.

A car was coming up the canyon. We crawled over to the shoulder of the road and I threw the empty bottle as far as I could. It landed a few yards from the middle of the road.

"Good shot, deadeye," said Sara and we both started laughing again.

The headlights caught us as the car came around the corner. In the moonlight we could see the blue and red lights on the bar over the car. The authority had come to join the party. The sheriff's car was nearly by us and he slammed on the brakes and squealed the tires in reverse. The window rolled down and the deputy asked us if we were okay.

"Just watching the moon come up, officer. And looking for that lost shaker of salt. You a Jimmy Buffet fan, sir?" Sara was pressing our luck.

"We're camped near here and we are alright." I said.

Then we were both standing. The Garfield County laws might not have wanted us to sit, I remember thinking.

"Have a good night, folks." Thank you, Utah Travel Council.

We were already following his instructions. We both fell down again, laughing when we heard his tires crunch the shattered bottle. We saw the small shards that were thrown into the air and then they rained down, as dust in the moonlight.

The next morning after breakfast, Sara was in the cedars losing hers. She spent the day in our tent. I read Emily Dickinson while Sara slept. I fixed something to eat for both of us and kept a fire to be admired. I held Sara as she shivered through following the night.

We left at five in next morning. She said she would tear down the camp, but all she could manage was her jacket. I drove as fast as I could for the hospital, two hundred and fifty miles to the north, into Salt Lake City.

Chapter 10

Driving Situation

A map was not needed. I knew the road. Highway Twelve to Seventy-Two, over I-70, to Salina and Highway Fifty into Interstate I-15.

Sara moaned as I sped over the two lane blacktop. No traffic in the dark morning. I kept the R.P.M.'s high, sliding the tail of the truck out around the corners. I had wrapped her in a sleeping bag and positioned pillows to support her and strapped her in. When we went through Loa, when she asked how much longer, until we are there?

She stated her whole body hurt, like her nerve endings were drowning, seeking an atmosphere. The noise of traction, the tires losing pavement, hurt her head and pained her bones.

I just drove. No reason to stop. I passed cars and no one passed us. I thought about Sara and it was that morning I realized she might not recover. Her short cropped hair was still golden in the first rays that came through the windshield. I hoped she would sleep, but every imperfection in the road brought another sigh and her face winced with the pain of being jostled. We made it to I-15 and I let the truck fly.

I had just re-packed the wheel bearings and installed a new electric fuel pump that never missed a beat. I drove by

the tachometer. The tach obscured the speedometer, I had installed it just above the steering column. I considered the truck part by part, northbound at over one-hundred miles per hour. Other drivers flipped their finger or flashed their lights, as I flew by, after crowding them from behind in the left lane. I wondered about the valve spring on the number six cylinder. As I accelerated past another semi-truck, I saw the red flashing lights.

I stepped on the accelerator. When he stopped me, he ordered me out of the truck and I said no way. With his gun drawn, he approached the truck. He looked at Sara, wrapped in the blanket and so very pale.

"Is she okay?" An innocent southern Utah cop, thank you God.

"No, she's dying. You think I would drive like I have been, if something wasn't wrong?" He took my license and registration and called it in. Seconds turned to hours. When he returned to the truck he said he would escort us to the Utah County line, where an ambulance would be waiting.

I pushed that man over the interstate. When he would accelerate, I was on his bumper. My driving lights lit up his neck, even in the daylight.

He pulled over at the Payson exit and I could see the red lights of the ambulance. They loaded Sara in their vehicle and I my tears would not stop.

"Just go. University of Utah Hospital. Dr. Jack Simpson."

I jumped back into my truck and the Highway Patrol man informed me that he had chased me for over seven miles.

Someone had reported me, moving overspeed, using their cellular phone. I thanked him and moved out of the onramp lane. I caught the ambulance before it reached Provo. The driver saw my lights as I came up behind him, fast. He didn't say a word when we arrived at the University Hospital in Salt Lake City, less than forty minutes later.

Chapter 11

Sara Lives

I have never met anyone who enjoyed the smell of a hospital. There is no one clear odor. Disinfectant is applied in a thin layer over every surface. Enter the building and what is at first overpowering, becomes preferred over another unidentifiable smell. Walking past each open doorway adds to the layers that confuse the olfactory sense.

She looked so small in the room. The best feature was the window that faced west, Salt Lake City was laid out below. Sara did not care about a view. The steady beep of the body monitor, the tubes that were rehydrating and feeding her wasting body, denied any association with comfort, with nature.

There is no memory that I have where time was gone and each sunrise blended with the next. I did not want the sun to set. The railroad granted me a leave of absence for sixty days. Sara was too far gone to attend Laura and Allen's wedding in the middle of July.

I brought her wedding pictures and a piece of cake that she could not eat. She smiled, her eyes could produce no tears. She hadn't been able to speak for several days. Dr. Simpson said, any time now. I didn't know what gave her the will.

Then, she was gone. I received the phone call on July eighteenth, at precisely 5:32 a.m. It was over for her and only the beginning for me. I would have expired long before, with my low tolerance for pain.

Her parents insisted that she be flown to Orlando, to rest in a warm Florida soil. I do not remember flying back to Salt Lake.

My leave from the company was not up, but I persuaded them to allow me to return. I was learning about the most exquisite form of pain, the pain that no medication could relieve.

It did not take many train rides to realize that when souls touch, as Sara and I had, that there is a positive influence that would never be lost.

Grief slowly transformed itself to the gratitude that we had possessed during our time together. Nights were the time when I knew she would always be there, waiting for me.

By the end of August I could once again sleep more than an hour or two at a time. My accepted calmness replaced my anxiety. Only when another tomorrow came, did I realize how precious my yesterdays would always be remembered.

Chapter 12

The Tour Continues

He came out of the store, smiling and when he climbed into my truck he unveiled a fifth of Cuervo.

"You know I love that stuff," I said. "Remember that night?"

"Which night?" demanded Allen. "Which fucking night? Man, we've spent too much time together to be vague. I'll tell you which night. That night at the Halloween party, or when you were waiting for the moon to rise. You told me. How about that night on the San Juan, up all night patching boats? Turn here."

I swung the truck right, entered the on-ramp to the interstates. I grabbed the bottle from him and pulled hard on the distilled cactus juice. Sixth South and Salt Lake was behind us.

"Which way, navigator, north, west or south? We got two full tanks of gas."

Allen smiled and said follow the sun. I lit a cigarette and we drove west. Past the smokestack and smelter and out toward the desert of salt. The semi-trucks went by us, their tailwind unsettling our truck. Allen opened the glove box and rummaged around. I smiled.

"What are you looking for, Skippy. The registration under my seat?"

I passed him the bank deposit bag and when he unzipped it, he pulled out the baggie and the papers. He rolled a joint, lit it and inhaled, slow and deep. Then, I toked it until he hit my elbow.

"Leave some for me. Where are we headed? The next stop is Wendover. They want me at work in the morning. I haven't been this messed up for a long time. Keep going, man."

We finished the roach and there were a few swallows left in the bottle on the seat between us. We rode in silence mile between mile. There were no cars around us after we passed Knolls and the highway straightened out to cross the salt flats. Allen reached for the radio and he dialed in the Rolling Stones, *Under My Thumb*. The Doobie Brothers took us back to the streets and then John Lennon sang of the long road home. Allen picked up the bottle and took another slow swallow.

I waved it away and asked him, "Have you ever wondered how things might be different, you know, if we were all together, the four of us?" He shook his head and laughed.

"Get off it man, it's over. Move on. God, nothing is going to bring her back. I need to pee."

We drove by a green highway sign that said, "Utah Tree, comma, next exit."

Allen said, "Yeah, that's a good place."

There is a turnout, off the interstate to view the steel and concrete impression of a tree. Since it is the only thing rising out of the mud, I could stretch the definition of an evergreen.

In the moonlight it seemed ethereal, until I heard the splash on the pavement. Allen stamped the salt mud from his boots. There was no way to pee on the tree unless you wanted to be in over your ankles. Recent rains had turned the salt flat to mud. Relief, and back in the truck and westbound.

The lights of Wendover broke the darkness and I turned off the interstate toward Ely.

"Where the hell are we going?" demanded Allen. "I have to be at work in the morning."

"It is morning," I reminded him. It was just past midnight and no one else was on the road. An occasional jackrabbit disturbed the flow of asphalt as we moved south.

"I should probably call home. You know, she will be worried about me."

"There's no phone around here, Allen."

He fiddled with the dial again and all that was discernable was a country station out of Elko.

"Remember the time we went to see Willy Nelson? Man, that was a good show. Sara and Laurie made us buy those tickets. You know, we used to do some of the craziest things with those two. How about the time we found the side door open to the Salt palace and got into the Jazz game, free?"

"The best thing I've ever done was to marry Laura. We were having too much fun and then Sara was gone."

"Yeah, right."

I didn't see my face reflected in the windshield. The glow of the dashlights illuminated the face of another, she was there.

I pulled the truck onto the shoulder of the road. We both stood there looking up at Orion and the Little Dipper and the Milky Way until a semi-truck went by us, blowing my door shut.

"How many times have we watched the galaxies, Dodge?"

"Let's get back in this heap and be someplace." Allen climbed in the driver's side and told me to fasten my seatbelt. He accelerated the truck and when he saw the lights of the semi that passed us, he eased off the throttle. The buzz of the tequila and the smoke and the hum of the engine closed my eyes and my head fell back against the corner of the cab.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was warming the hood of the truck, wisps of steam rose from dew that had settled and Allen was snoring over the steering wheel. Out of the window, I could see we were pulled off the side of a dirt road and the sun fostered wisps of steam, rising from the sage. I rolled down my window and listened to the meadowlarks answer each other from the fenceposts. I

searched through my jacket pockets for the pack of cigarettes and opened my door quietly. Allen didn't move.

A cottontail scurried away from the remainder from the heat of the truck, as I stepped out and I felt the sun warm my back. The taste of the stale cactus was in my mouth and nothing could frame a cold drink of water. I went back to the truck and Allen opened the door and fell out and lay on the road.

"Oh shit. Did I tell you we are out of gas? I don't even know where we are. You were sound asleep when we went through Ely. Oh, God. My head is killing me. Pass me that canteen."

I gave him the water and grabbed the bottle from the night before and swallowed the whiskey that remained. I poured the few drops that were left on Allen's face and he jumped up and went to throw up on the other side of the truck.

He came back around and wiping his chin he said, "You clown, you know how I am. We are out in the middle of God knows where, with no gas and I haven't been home all night. You don't know how jealous she is. I'm supposed to be at the office at eight."

"Well, you aren't going to make it. It's quarter to nine and you said you remember driving through Ely?"

I rolled back the tarp over the bed of the truck and found the stove and the cooler and began to make breakfast. I didn't tell Allen about the five gallon can of gas.

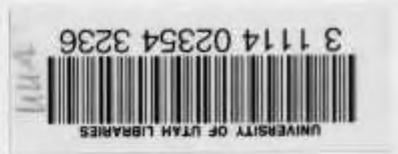
He smelled the coffee and got up off the ground where he had lain.

"You remember the *Pro Leisure Tour*? It never died."

We drank the coffee and ate the oatmeal with raisins in it and decided to take a walk.

"Let's wander down this road and find out where we came from," he said.

We followed our tire tracks, back down the mountain, into the rising sun.



NON-CIRCULATING

