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MACLEOD, ROBERT MILES. Two Stories About a War. (1974)
Directed by: Fred D. Chappell. Pp. 71

There are moments, hours and often days in our lives when time appears to be suspended. For men in time of war, this illusion may last for years. In reality, our course of time continues toward a single destiny, but while men live with war there are three real fates: to go to war and return, to go and not return, or not to go at all. Though which fate may befall a man in the reality of time is not controlled by reality alone. Time's illusions overlap, and what is real, and what is not, often cannot be distinguished in our lives.

Some men may only appear to have returned from war, others seem to have a way of returning when in reality they have not, and some may live war in reality when it appears that they have not gone at all. The two stories of this thesis involve these three fates of war for three individuals, and how illusion and reality effected their lives during the time of the Viet Nam War.

Illusion and reality in memories and dreams of past, present and what will be are tricks of time played on us all. The magician's secrets are well kept, but in stories we can read and wonder, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of how they work.

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis, **TWO STORIES ABOUT A WAR**, following
" the
approval of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

by

Robert M. MacLeod
"

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1974

April 18, 1974
Date of Acceptance by Council

Approved by

Fred Chappell
Thesis Adviser

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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April 18, 1974
Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Thinks maybe they can tell that he is frightened, but he is certain that they don't know why. He isn't sure himself, except that it began the very first day that he got home and asked where Brandy was.

Brandy is the lang's dog, part collie and part golden, but she had always been Jeff's dog, really. The whole family had to help each other to tell him how she got killed by a truck nearly two years ago. Mrs. Lang explained that everyone had agreed it would be for the best if he didn't know. Jeff knew, right away, that it had been her own decision.

It isn't her death that bothers Jeff so much; death is a very different kind of thing for him now than it was three years ago, before he was drafted and went to war. It was sound strange, but the hard part for Jeff is trying to understand how Brandy has been alive with him almost two years, when all that time she had actually been dead.

The first few days at home everyone smiled a lot, even Jeff. They were funny smiles, and he couldn't help wondering what else about his family had been concealed from him. The smiling didn't last too long. One day last week, his elder sister, Kathy, came right out

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THE WOODEN WHALE

Jeffrey knows they are all worried about him. He thinks maybe they can tell that he is frightened, but he is certain that they don't know why. He isn't sure himself, except that it began the very first day that he got home and asked where Brandy was.

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It isn't her death that bothers Jeff so much; death is a very different kind of thing for him now than it was three years ago, before he was drafted and went to war. It may sound strange, but the hard part for Jeff is trying to understand how Brandy has been alive with him almost two years, when all that time, she had actually been dead.

The first few days at home everyone smiled a lot, even Jeff. They were funny smiles, kind of shy, and he couldn't help wondering what else about his family had been censored from his mail. The smiling didn't last too long. One day last week, his older sister, Kathy, came right out

and told him how terribly concerned she felt, and then Jeff started teasing her the way he always used to do. Chris and Scott, his younger brothers, had a lot of grownup things they wanted him to hear. He wanted them to talk, and tried to listen, but the world they spoke about was nothing he remembered. Still, he tried, only they never seemed to have much time. There would be a telephone call, or another car pulling in the driveway, and they would have to go.

Jeff hasn't gone out much at all, except with his family. He isn't interested in seeing old friends. There aren't many around, and they all have jobs. He talks to Paul quite a bit, when he and Kathy come over to the house. Somehow, the fact that they had never met seems to make it easier for conversation, even though Jeff doesn't like him much. He and Kathy have been married fourteen months. His mother did write about that, although the letter was four months late in reaching him.

He can hardly talk at all with his parents, especially his dad. They appear confused to Jeff, uncertain in a way that makes them seem so fragile that the sound of his voice might upset them. For two weeks he has put up with his mother's sudden impulses to hug him every time he gets close enough, and he is always waiting for the unexpected slap on the back whenever Father is around. It's as if they think he doesn't notice all the cautious angled glances. He has watched the way they act so proud to have their soldier-hero home again.

They told all their friends, they told everyone in Bannerfield, how the Lang family is all back together, safe and sound. Jeff knows better than anyone else how much they wish it so, but he can tell they don't believe it.

That's why he started talking about coming here to Cape Cod for a weekend. He wanted it for them as much as for himself. Almost every summer since Jeff can remember, they have had the same cottage for the same two weeks in July. Whenever he thinks about his family all together, it is always in this place. He was afraid that it might sound like a crazy idea since the summer season is well over, the nights are cold now, and it's a long trip for such short notice. He wouldn't have dared to suggest it, but everyone else has been acting rather impulsive, and he would be excused because (as his mother has said at least 150 times since he got home) Jeff's not really himself, yet. It's true that he lost a lot of weight when he was sick. The doctors said it wasn't serious, but they were never sure exactly what he had. That's why he suddenly found himself on a plane going home, and out of the army two months early.

All the cottages are here just as Jeff remembers along the narrow road down to the beach. From the back seat, one by one, he sees them all again like old friends, but something is wrong. The cottage which they always rented has

been locked up for the winter. This time they will be staying at the lodge. All the cottages are empty, silently remote with their windows boarded up, ignoring him.

Through the scrub pine Jeffrey sees a flicker of a deeper blue than sky. Any moment they should see the beach, but he can't help thinking about Brandy, and it frightens him. The car keeps curling slowly downward, and there is a lightness in his head, almost like the dizzy spells he had when he was sick.

He is sure they ought to have seen it by now, and wonders how it can be possible for a section of the earth to be removed. Paul drives so slowly, and the back of Kathy's head sits calmly next to his in the front seat. Christopher sits across from Jeff, head down, picking at a callus on his palm. Chris already knows it isn't there, he thinks, but how can it be possible?

Rising up a little knoll, Jeff has a feeling in his stomach like being on a roller coaster just before it reaches the top.

The beach is there, and he can see it all in rainbow streaks of water, sand and sky. How many summers ago, then how many, each upon another... Calendars of memories all fuse within a single image instantly in focus. And it feels like he knew it would, like they have always been here, like he has never been away. Even Chris is looking now.

The shadow of a cloud is hurrying up the beach, leaving mica-silver sand that seems to shiver in the sunlight. The sand is spread out wide before him, scooped and heaped in mounds and twisting dunes flecked with sword grass. Running north, it narrows to a strip and disappears beyond the crest of a gradually rising bluff, dark with stubble and bayberry shrubs. To the south it forms a fishhook, curving beneath the distant cliffs of Headstone Point that rise like a turret at the corner of the land with the slender spire of Headstone Lighthouse standing at the top.

As children, they were taken up to visit the lighthouse once, but it's the mad sea captain his father used to tell about that Jeff remembers. Even now, he can picture him as if he really existed; up in the lighthouse watching, and waiting for the chance to kidnap one of them.

As far as Jeff can see across Monomoy Sound, the ocean is alive with whitecaps. Horses tails are what they always used to call them. From this spot along the road, on countless summer mornings, Kathy, Christopher and he, then later Scott when he was old enough to walk with them, would stop to look down on the beach. They would judge what kind of mood the sea was in, and decide on what was best to do that day. Their separate private lives were back in Bannerfield, locked inside the old white house on Maple Street. Each day here was a new adventure to share together. Bannerfield was in some other world, and not even

Kathy with all her postcards could ever give it any meaning here.

The ocean looks playful today, good for swimming if it were summer. In this place he has seen it in so many moods; angry, or just restless, and times when it was gray and sad. Sometimes it seemed to laugh so hard all morning that by lunch time it was tired, and would stretch out flat in the heat of afternoon. It made him sleepy just to watch it drowsy in the sun and barely moving. It looked flat enough to walk on, and it teased him with the secrets of mysterious lands that he could barely see along the edge of the horizon. The ocean is too choppy today, and he was never sure that what he saw was really land. But he can see the beach, and in this summer world he can still believe that they are out there, just beyond the veil of sea and sky.

In crisp October sunlight the car doors open, and Jeff feels released. The road ends here in the small parking lot by the old boat shack. Paul's is the only car. The asphalt, gray and badly cracked, is losing hold against the siege of sand and beach grass. He thought there were white lines painted here to mark the spaces. He remembers how they used to walk them tiptoed to keep their bare feet from burning on the blacktop. There is an inland breeze against his back with the faint spice of scrub pine that seems like a trespasser here on the beach.

"So here we are at the scene of all those summer romances," Paul begins to tease. "How many brokenhearted old boy friends are out there waiting in the sand dunes? Huh, Kath?"

"You may be surprised," Scott interrupts, and the three of them laugh.

There is a tone of graceful amusement in Paul's voice that irritates Jeff. He remembers them, those older boys, and how he watched over her. He has hoped for a kind of understanding between himself and Paul, like a ceremony for surrender of a brother's trusts, but they are no longer his to give away. This intruder, who settled in Jeff's world while he was gone, took them on his own over a year ago. Yet, he is aware of a peculiar need for Paul to be here.

"Aren't you coming, Jeff?" Paul asks. He has a moustache, trimmed very close, that fits with his nose and small mouth like intricate refinements to his tall thin frame. Beneath the moustache, the encouraging kindness in his smile makes Jeff feel like a little boy. But at least, he thinks, Paul knows that he is really here.

"No... No. I'll wait for the others."

Kathy looks so small beside him with both hands tucked up inside the sleeves of her sweater. He is dressed so warm in a long corduroy coat, and she huddles close beneath his arm. Together, Jeff can see a similarity about their faces that makes her look quite different.

He turns to look back up the road and sees the small building at the edge of the parking lot. He can still remember, way back, when it was just an empty boathouse. Then one summer they discovered it restored to life with one whole side made into a menu. The menu has changed, the old ones can still be seen beneath several coats of faded paint. The metal sign is rusting, but Jeff can still read the name, Oasis, written over the two crossed tin palm trees. The windows are all shuttered up, but he knows exactly what's inside. He can feel the cool linoleum floor against his bare feet, the noisy lunch counter with the squeaky swivel stools, and the good smell of people rubbed with sun tan oil. The change gets all sandy in the pocket of his bathing suit. He has to keep repeating the flavors over and over while he waits. The bottles are open and icy wet, but he carries all six of them back to the towels without spilling a drop.

"Somebody ought to make them tear down that cheap pile of boards," Christopher says, earnestly. "It makes the beach look like shit."

The Lang's station wagon pulls up loudly beside Paul's car, and ends the silence between Jeff and his brother. Jeff has been watching the car's approach across the flat stretch of road between the cranberry bogs. Scott gets out first. He looks immediately to Chris, and stretches his back.

"Jesus, that's a long ride."

There are moments when he can hardly recognize his brothers. It isn't only the long hair that confuses him. Chris's hangs straight to his shoulder like an entrance way to his face. With his long dark lashes and pale complexion, it makes him look even more like a girl. He had a scar on his jaw. It's still there, but now it seems as passive as a beauty mark.

Scott still has his curls, but the hair that once was nearly white is now the same as Christopher's; dusty, somewhere between gray and blond. Jeff's hair has always been dark like Kathy's.

The baby of the family is now a good three inches taller than Jeff, and even taller than Mr. Lang. He can still see freckles on Scott's narrow face, but his features seemed to have emerged defiant in Jeff's absence. Since the first day home, he has wondered when his little brother could have found such a magnificent grin.

He watches Chris brighten to Scott's smile, and now Jeff is smiling with them. All the things they have done here, he remembers, and thinks that they must be remembering too. He was the leader then, for he had spent more summers here than they. But the pride inside Scott's smile isn't meant for Jeff at all, and he recalls the child he always teased, the boy whose growing up he had embarrassed, and persuaded Chris to do the same. He sees Scott's smile of

victory, telling him that he has captured Chris along the way. Jeff can only think how foolish his smile must seem to them.

Mr. Lang is snapping up his windbreaker, collar up against his throat. With his broad shoulders and neck, he looks more like a football coach than a lawyer. A little over six feet tall, he appears heavy even for his height. Jeff watches him standing there like a statue of the strongest thing that he has ever known. A fringe of clouds, like a school of lazy fish, are gliding far above the breeze that rustles the cloud-like whiteness of his father's hair. The sudden image of some object, some half-remembered form, passes quickly through his mind like the turning of a page. There is an odd sense of connection that remains distinct, but the form itself does not. The pages turn too rapidly.

Jeff is left startled in the presence of his father's eyes studying him like a man stepping back to inspect the product of his labor. Jeff quickly turns away to hide from the fear of what it means to be completed.

Mrs. Lang is a small woman. She looks even smaller in her long tweed skirt, and one of Scott's old jackets. She moves quickly, as vibrant and brittle as the autumn day. With Chris's arm locked within her own, she gathers in Jeff's and turns them toward the beach. She walks between them, shivers intentionally, and squeezes their arms against her. Jeff knows that it is her way of pointing out how foolish they were not to wear their jackets.

"I wonder if the beach is changed?" she asks with a smile.

Paul and Kathy have stopped at the end of the boardwalk. Kathy turns suddenly with her hands cupped to her mouth.

"Hey. I wonder if the beach has changed?"

"Too late," Chris shouts back, "Mother beat you."

Kathy laughs, and Jeff smiles to see a look of confusion on Paul's face. It has been an old family game to see who would remember every year to voice the pointless question. Once it had been asked, years ago, when one of them had not yet learned that over the year the beach would always change.

Kathy's laughter encourages Jeff. Memories appear like photographs, pictures of the beach in other years when a sand bar emerged to make an outer beach, and the very next summer it was gone, but the creek had carved a new channel deep enough for diving. Looking at Paul, Jeff has a feeling of revenge to have his turn to offer kindness for never having known a beach like theirs.

Measuring his pace to his mother's quick steps, they march along the boardwalk. Curls of rich brown hair set in a style that she has never changed, brush against his shoulders. He can almost feel her small bones dance with vigorous energy. But there once had been a certain softness that is gone now. Gentle curves and cozy hollows have been

worn smooth, cutting sharper angles where soft shadows would no longer form. Jeff has noticed where Katherine has those ripples of shadow now.

Scott runs by them, his bare feet splashing sand. Chris untangles from his mother's arm, and starts after him across the beach. Jeff has an almost urgent pulse of energy to follow, but Mrs. Lang stops him where Paul and Kathy are waiting.

"Aren't you chilly?" she finally asks.

"No," Jeff answers. "Well, I guess a little."

"Since you insist on catching pneumonia, at least you'll be at home where I can see you get the proper rest."

Paul's laugh sounds like a short sneeze, and Jeff tries to be amused.

"Now, Mother. You wouldn't be implying that the army doesn't look after valuable government property like me?"

"Look at you!" she answers, her voice indignant, but she smiles for Jeffrey's sake. "There's no color in your face. You're like a ghost. Imagine, letting you leave the hospital like that. That's a fine way to look after their valuable property."

Jeff sees her smile with her head cocked like a nervous puppy, and he shrugs.

"I think they forgot he was there," Paul jokes.

"Didn't you tell me that they had you in there nearly five months, and didn't do anything? They must have done something."

Mrs. Lang's head darts from Jeff to Paul, and back to Jeff again. He sees the look, but Paul already knows things that the rest of the family doesn't. There has been very little talk about the war, or his illness. Even his brothers seem very careful about asking questions. It was another of his mother's decisions, Jeff was sure.

"Actually, it was more like in and out," he answers.

"Phillip! Come down from there before you break your neck," Mrs. Lang interrupts, calling to her husband.

Mr. Lang has joined Chris and Scott throwing a football from the top of a sand dune. As he turns to answer her, Jeff sees him begin to slip. He can hear the others laughing, but that puzzling, half-remembered object is passing once more through his mind. His father is up, brushing sand from his clothes, while Jeff is left confused with the nagging image still unclear.

"What do you mean: in and out?" Paul persists, and Mrs. Lang glares at him sharply. For a moment Jeff wonders if there is something in particular about his illness that she doesn't want to hear him say. He wishes he had told them everything, right away. Their caution makes it seem as if it really matters.

"It was really more like a vacation," Jeff goes on quickly. "I was lucky. You better believe it beat the hell out of being in the field, dragging my tail through some rice paddy, just waiting to buy one from Charlie."

He stops. None of this is true. He knows it isn't true. The words, even the voice isn't his voice. It must belong to someone else, someone only Paul knows, but the voice has surroundings.

He can see the long narrow ward, all the silly flimsy walls that squeaked about on little wheels, small screened openings too high to look outside, and people white and people green, faces masked in rigid purpose, going to or coming from, never stopping.

"Didn't they even know what you had?"

Paul's voice won't let him stop.

"They thought I had malaria, or beriberi, or some damn thing." It's the stranger's voice again, Jeff thinks, yet, it is his voice. It insists that he is someone else, someone who has never been here, an intruder like Paul. He can even smell the horrible odor they tried to hide with antiseptics and insecticides.

There are water stains on the ceiling, and the never silent hum of flies. He learned to pick a spot and stare at it until he could shut out everything. It became a habit, and he could lie in bed for several hours at a time, never thinking, just feeling the dampness of the sheets souring his skin, and the sickness moving to another place inside him. The rest of the day he had his album of summer memories to put together in his mind. But there was nothing for the nights except to stay awake, and hope to get back to the

company where sleep was too tired, or too drunk, or sometimes too scared to dream.

Jeff is talking louder, and his voice sounds bewildered. He looks to his mother. He is amazed how she could have possibly known that this would happen.

"But I had to go back in again," he goes on. "Then I was out again, then in again, out again, in again."

"Jeff, let's walk."

Mrs. Lang takes Jeff's arm and leads him out onto the sand. He can hear Scott yelling to his father, and the slurred rumble of the surf. Kathy and Paul are walking behind them.

They reach the down slope of the beach, and there is a sudden rush of noise as waves break on top of one another, and sizzle back through the sand. The breeze is stronger here. It seems to have changed directions, coming down the beach from Headstone Point. Spray blows off the tops of the waves like salty raindrops. With his face to the wind, sand stings against his cheeks, and he remembers a day when he was alone on the beach, and the wind blew so hard that the sand made a whining sound as if it were crying.

It was the day after a hurricane, and he walked a long way that morning into a gray wind beneath a low packed sky, feeling very small in a world that was so full of sorrow. The beach was a mess with kelp and seaweed, lumber and dead fish — a sand shark and part of a fish that must

have been much larger, and wooden crates and rubber tires all thrown up by the swollen ocean. While he walked, he thought he heard the ocean groaning. Waves heaved like tremendous sighs upon the sand, and he imagined that King Neptune was dying that day, and he was the only one who would be told, and he must keep the secret.

The image that was puzzling Jeff returns, its form composed now, and poised sedately in his mind.

"I saw a whale here once," he shouts over the noise at Paul. As he speaks, the words sound strange to him, for the image of the whale is made of wood. It floats in darkness, a smooth deep varnished body flowing down into a sweeping tail that arches high above its back. Solid and distinctly clear, it's not a real whale at all, but beautiful, like a vision from some past enchanted daydream. In a mysterious confusion of comfort and pain, it seems to promise that his summer world exists, and will be safe forever; from Paul, from everyone, including himself.

The autumn afternoon is short. It turns to bronze and then to silver that will quickly tarnish into darkness. The Langs have had the beach all to themselves. Now, almost simultaneously, they begin to realize that the sun never really took the chill out of the day, but just disguised it for awhile. Performing one last illusion, they watch it get

bigger as it goes away, stealing back their shadows and leaving them to shiver by the sea.

Mrs. Lang calls to her husband. Paul and Kathy are returning from their walk, and she is holding up the shells she found. Jeff and his brothers are idly tossing the football. Mrs. Lang herds them all together and starts them back, back to the cars, back to the lodge and dinner.

Riding in his father's car up the narrow road, Jeff begins to slip back into that habit of the hospital. He can feel the weakness of the muscles in his arms and legs, and the unfamiliar softness of his old civilian clothes. Then he stops to gather up the pictures of this place, the way he did when he was sick. Only now he does it very cautiously, half expecting them to shatter into senseless fragments.

At the smaller of the two dining tables, the Lang's meal is dwarfed into a corner of the lodge. Constructed like a square tent on stilts, old fishing boats are stored beneath the single enormous room. There is a balcony on three sides above the floor with tiny bunk rooms off of it, but most of the space is open, all the way to the peak of the roof some fifty feet above the center of the room. From the large gas range, the smell of the roast and Kathy's pie disappear in all that space. Paul and Scott are playing ping-pong. Mr. Lang has challenged Chris to another game of cribbage. Jeff sits across from them on one of the sofas in the center of the room, turning the pages of last spring's

Yachting magazine. No one but Jeff seems to notice how their voices echo faintly inside this skeleton of a building. He can't explain the feeling, but there is something very sad about seeing all the studs and braces in the walls, and the beams and steel rod supports to the roof so exposed, without partitions or any ceiling.

There are Kathy's shells beneath the lamp on the table, and Jeff knows that she won't take them with her. She will throw them out, leaving nothing but a little sand to be brushed away before they go.

He looks around the room as if he hopes to see Brandy asleep under a table, and that somehow she would make him less afraid to tell the others that he is really here. Then he remembers this afternoon with Paul, and the wooden whale comes back like a warning not to tamper with what little there is left. But the fear itself is too much, and he can't sit and listen to the echoes any longer.

"Hey, Chris. Remember that time we sneaked out of the cottage? Me and you and Scott — we got out the bedroom window and made that fire down on the beach."

"Are you kidding? I was never as scared in my life," Chris answers, picking up his cards.

"That's right," Jeff continues. "Dad got around behind us. He sneaked right around us, and came up from the water like some kind of sea monster. Scared the hell out of us."

"Scott must have jumped ten feet," Chris smiles toward the ping-pong table.

"I never saw him run so fast," Jeff laughs, bobbing his head up and down.

"At least I wasn't so scared I couldn't move," Scott answers.

"He's got you there," Chris laughs.

"I didn't think it was so funny," Mrs. Lang interjects from across the room, "running around in the middle of the night, building fires. Come and sit down — dinner's ready."

Seated close around the table, Jeff forgets his fear in the excitement of the conversation. The silverware is plain and tarnished. The plates and glasses, dull with age, appear a little dusty. But Jeff sees the lights inside the lodge bouncing off the black windows, and they seem to sparkle through the glassware and dance along the silver.

Christopher is with him now. Chris knows that his big brother is here, and Jeff begins with reckless confidence to get them all to see that they are here together, just like always.

Mr. Lang is saying grace, a ritual saved for special occasions. Jeff is happy, and everyone is quiet. With his eyes closed, he listens to the voice, and beneath the weight of his father's hand, his own feels smooth and very small.

Jeff breaks the silence before anyone has a chance to pass their plates. He goes back to Christopher, then quickly

calls on Scott, and one by one, to Kathy and his parents. While they eat he keeps them talking, adding details and circulating among them all the memories he collected for the past three years. His eyes follow them from one to another, seeing nothing but their faces, watching how they look as they remember, the way they smile or laugh at something someone else is saying. Jeff smiles because it seems so easy to have, for the first time, what he has never dared to think about; the feeling of finally coming home.

"Oh, Dad," Scott breaks in with his plate out for another helping of roast beef. "Okay if Chris and I use your car later?"

"I think it would be nice if we all stayed in and take it easy this evening," Mrs. Lang settles the question with a patient emphasis.

Chris stops eating, and looks up at her.

"Why?" he asks, and no one answers.

In the impact of the silence Jeff is shaken and confused. He looks surprised to find Paul's face at the table with the others.

"It's been a long day," Mrs. Lang explains.

"Aw, come on," Scott stops her. "Why not?"

"Because your mother asked you. That's why not."

The sudden sharp and open anger of his father's voice makes Jeff feel easier.

"Aw, for chrissakes," Scott says, his voice muffled by a roll he has just bitten in half.

Jeff braces in his chair as he waits for the explosion from his father; the final warning. He would put a stop to this foolish talk.

"Scotty!"

It's Kathy's voice, not his father's, and it sounds more like an appeal than a warning. Still waiting, Jeff looks up at his father. Mr. Lang is silent with his elbows on the table, palms together covering his nose and mouth. But his eyes are watching Jeff, searching him, and Jeff can see them asking for his voice, waiting for his assistance. All Jeff can find are the remains of a child's helpless faith that cling stupidly like crumbs on his chin to embarrass and confuse him.

"All right," Scott nods to Kathy, and begins in a patronizing tone. "Now, you see, Mom. All we want to do is, you know — go for a ride, get a little fresh air. We aren't going..."

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" Mr. Lang's open hand comes down hard on the table, his thick neck twisted toward Scott. The explosion had come, and automatically Jeff begins to relax.

"Please. Just listen," Chris says softly.

Jeff looks at him with disbelief as if his face and voice have just appeared in the empty doorway of his hair.

"If you want us to stay, all right, no big thing," he says with a voice of tired apology.

No one interrupts, and Jeff listens as the walls and rafters capture Chris's voice and send it back. It has no place to go, and he begins to understand what it is about this enormous room without partitions or a ceiling that is so sad. His mind travels desperately as far as it can go. It jumps across the world, but there is nothing there except a small bed in a darkened ward to lie in, and hear private human noises in the thick Asian night.

"I mean, it's not really that important," Chris repeats. "We just thought we might go out for a while, that's all."

He is finished. Mr. Lang moves. Jeff hears his chair scrape against the floor. He sees his father standing up, and then walking away from the table. Beside his plate, on his crumpled napkin, are the keys to his car.

Jeff can still hear Chris's echo, and there is nothing in the sound that frightens him. There is nothing at all but a hollow sadness. There are no partitions in the world any more that will ever make him wonder or afraid. He can see the very limits of the roof itself.

It's late now. The sand is damp and cold, but the fog that stretched almost across the cranberry bog has slipped back out to sea while Jeff has been walking. A few stars have appeared, but the horn at Headstone Light keeps

insisting that the fog has not gone far. There is still a salty wetness in the air. He has walked the beach, heading for the steady rise and fall of the distant horn, and stopping only once to turn around. It's behind him now, like an unanswered cry, and in the silence he can tell exactly when it will come again. He didn't see the beacon, or even the cliffs of Headstone Point, but he knows what it must be like to live inside a lighthouse.

He has no idea how long he has been out here. He was the last one to leave the lodge. Chris and Scott went off with the car. His mother left with his father to visit the friend who owns the lodge, and Paul and Kathy decided to go to a movie.

He watched them all leave, and they seemed like ghosts now twice departed. He said he was tired and was going to bed. It's funny, but it didn't even seem like his own idea to walk down to the beach another time.

He had seen the wooden whale again. He saw it very plainly. A piece of driftwood; that was all it ever was. The stump of some tree, worn smooth and water-logged, that he had discovered on the beach one day, years and years ago. He made his father come and see it, because it was too big for him to carry, and he wanted his father to bring it home. His father had explained how it belonged to the beach, and he had promised Jeff that it would always be here when they came back again. Next summer he couldn't find it, nor the

summer after that, but he was sure that it was only hiding somewhere nearby.

The ocean hardly makes a sound tonight. There are no waves, just a quiet ground swell. The night is so dark, that it's hard to tell if the ocean is really there at all. He can feel the sand under his bare feet, but he might be in a desert somewhere, he thinks, or any other pile of sand. The boardwalk should be right ahead. He is almost there when he stops.

He thinks he hears something; a sound, voices. He isn't sure, but he hears it again, and then a short familiar laugh. He watches as their forms appear, light shadows in the darkness, of his father, Chris and Scott in bathing suits with towels on their arms. They move like ghosts across the sand. They don't see him. They have no idea that he is here. He stares at them as if they are the pictures of all his summer memories turned to living negatives.

Pale, naked spectres running, and then disappearing where the beach slopes down sharply to the ocean. Quickly, Jeff follows after them. He sees them run and hurdle, splashing foam like silver in the black water. He can see the ocean now as he takes off his clothes. It looks so calm and flat, as if it is dreaming of hot summer afternoons.

The figures dive together, vanish, and then reappear. Chris and Scott are laughing as they wrestle with their father, like timid young swimmers clinging to his arms.

They push at each other, struggling to see who will be first to dive from father's shoulders. He is smiling at their contest, proud of his sons' kicking legs, his white hair slick like icicles on his forehead with a chain of seaweed draped over his shoulders.

Jeff runs naked, leaping, and then diving. He breaks the surface, and feels his body, smooth as varnished wood, sliding through the blackness. The ocean surrounds him and suspends him. With his eyes open he glides ahead, sounding to the bottom, then rising up to break the surface again. But he hasn't reached the others yet. He can't see them anywhere. It is so dark.

Looking back toward the shore, Jeff has the strangest feeling that he is just arriving, having traveled by the sea. Already he is too late. He forgot, and now can only listen to the echo of some other voice shouting out the question. It is too late for him to wonder if the beach has changed.

IN A TIME OF STORMS

Inside the cab above the engine, Charlie watched for ice and frost heaves along the empty road, and tried to make this morning like any of the several thousand other mornings he had left the warehouse. The cab of the new truck warmed quickly, and he smelled the plastic covered upholstery and new rubber floor mats. The truck was like a stranger, but Charlie never had trouble talking to strangers before. There had been other trucks, over the years, only this time Charlie had no desire to get acquainted.

Pulling off his gloves, he yanked at the zipper of his driver's jacket that had become a little snug around his chest and bulging middle. He felt the thickness of the stack of purchase orders before hanging his clipboard on the piece of a coat hanger he had fastened to the dash. His foot pressed the accelerator. Beyond the next curve was a flat stretch across a swampy pond with a small bridge in the middle. There was a familiar change of pitch in the engine. All of it was familiar, and yet nothing would ever be the same.

The weather had kept him off the road since last week. The storm was over according to the Wednesday morning paper, and the snow had stopped last night. But the sky and earth were fused together in the early morning gray. Without

distance or perspective, without promise or warning, the world lay flat and still with frigid indifference. It was a lousy cold day, but the weather suited Charlie just fine.

David Heath walked the frozen road through the woods of an unfamiliar countryside. In the darkness he had followed it for several hours, just a small black line on a map heading north. The sky had begun to whiten, washing out the gray. The night was over, but it wasn't going to get much warmer, he decided. A small clearing appeared through the trees ahead, and he could see the hills beyond. Something about its isolation with the woods all around, made him stop to rest beside it. He slipped off his knapsack, and brushed the snow from a rock along the ruins of a stone wall. It was like finding someone to share the cold with. After hitching rides since yesterday morning, he found someone he could trust. He wondered if this field had a farm to look after it, for he had not passed any, or whether it had any brother or sister fields nearby.

Nobody was at home to say goodbye when David left. It was the first snowstorm that had hit the southern Connecticut coast all winter, and he had promised to help his younger brother, Tommy, shovel the back walk. He felt bad about that, and about not saying goodbye. Of course, none of them knew that he was going, but at least he could

have thought goodbye to each of them at breakfast yesterday. Then everything might seem as final as it had to be.

David felt as if he had already traveled farther than he had ever gone in all his nineteen years. It seemed a very foreign countryside. Snow had muffled the earth, folding down the pines, burying the brook and filling in the hollows of the field. It seemed to have bundled up the world in a pillow full of smothered whispers. The snow whispered as it fell from branches and telephone wires on this morning that didn't look like morning, or any other time of day, but as if time itself had been knocked senseless by the three day storm.

The green knapsack was badly packed, over-stuffed with clothes and cans and jars. He smiled to look at it, and the faded Boy Scout insignia on the flap. Then it made him think of a Memorial Day at a cemetery a long time ago, and suddenly he felt as far away as the bugler hidden in the woods, answering, between each measure, the trumpets sounding taps.

Waving back at the face in the steamy window light behind the door of Hansen's Grocery, Charlie shut the side gate on the truck, and climbed into the cab. Hansen's was an early stop on what was usually his Monday route, but the storm had fouled everything up. It was going to be a long

day. Extra stops always annoyed him, but people like the Hansens were kind of old friends now, and they depended on him.

Charlie was a talker. He would always have some news about business in the city or one of the other towns. Each stop was like a visit with a friend, but the old customers, they were special. He had a gift, everyone said; the gift of gab.

It's been nearly eighteen years since Charlie Marrotte started driving a beer truck for New Hampshire Beverage & Distributing. He could name every village store and tavern in this part of the state, and exactly how to get there. He knew every back road along the narrow hill-wound country routes that strung together all the worn-out mill towns and isolated villages clear up to the Canadian border. Charlie's roads turned a crooked circle back to the warehouse in the city, back to his home, then back around again. He had settled into the crooked pattern that traced continually upon itself, and found a comfortable permanence as faithful and secure as time.

It was just a living, Charlie often said, and he had never planned to do it for so long. He came down from Canada to play hockey, to make a lot of money and go back. He was in semi-pro when he married Lorraine, and then there wasn't enough money. Then came the family, and that was the end of it. It was just a kid's dream anyway. There were others.

He didn't stop having dreams, but as his boy grew up, he sort of took them over. Charlie never really thought about it much, but all the dreams he had were for his son. Now his son was dead, and the dreams were useless.

It was nearly a month ago when Lorraine called him to the door that Saturday morning, and the officer saluted. He had seen Ed Johnson's boy across the street, shoveling the driveway, and somehow he knew, even before he answered: yes, they were the parents of Lance Corporal William Roland Marrotte, United States Marine Corps. It had been one week short of eighteen months since he, Lorraine and their two daughters had watched Billy board the plane. The officer left a letter and a flag, and Charlie held them all day while he sat in the livingroom, trying to remember that other morning at the airport; the way he looked in his uniform, and what they had said to each other.

Monsignor Brollin tried to help Lorraine, but Charlie refused to believe it, for he couldn't find the name of the place where the letter said he died on any map of Southeast Asia. He wouldn't listen to anyone until the day his boy finally came home.

He was deeply moved by the size of the funeral. As he listened to the Legion band and saw the marines in the honor guard, he was proud. It was no longer the death of his child, but an act of heroism, for his own son had given his life for his country. Gradually, he began to feel his

loss as if it were a bruise that he couldn't keep his fingers from, but only dared to prod it gently, and no one else could touch. Like his backaches, or the bills each month, it would always be there, but he could live with it. It was his pride.

The town of Pierce was just going to work when Charlie and his truck passed the diner. The usual crowd was there eating Gilly's hash browns, but Charlie didn't feel much like going in. He had already made his stop at Stanton's Market, and he kept going.

Old man Stanton, the Hansens; it was people like them that made his job okay. But still, it was just a living, and lately he felt that it was all he had, and it didn't seem like much. Even his famous gift of gab had disappeared. The ones that knew about his son thought they understood, but it wasn't his son that was bothering Charlie. It was everything else.

He tried to think about Lorraine, and their twentieth wedding anniversary, only it didn't seem to matter. If the storm started up again, he wouldn't make it back tonight anyway. His eyes began to wander from the road, looking at the passing fields and wondering; what was the sense of snow.

From his spot on the stone wall, David tried to imagine how the field had looked before the storm. A completely

different place, he thought, and it didn't seem fair that he should feel no different from the David Heath he had always known. The day before yesterday he was just another college sophomore. Today he was a hero, a fugitive from injustice, standing alone for what he knew was right, but he didn't feel any different. It was a disappointment.

He had expected to be drafted, and he said he wouldn't go, but in the end it happened so quickly that it was almost impossible to believe. The envelope, already opened, was addressed to him by hand in some secretary's mindless flourish with Local Board No. 43, Rock Beach, Conn. stamped in the corner. It had been there nearly a week. His family was prepared, they had everything arranged. Even the neighbors had time to talk it over.

David waved the letter around the house all afternoon, but no one would discuss it. After dinner, his father had a speech. "I know how you feel about this, David, and you can beat it," he had said. "Just get your tail down to the Navy recruiter first thing in the morning." His voice was so serious and so concerned that David had laughed; right there in front of his father, right in his face.

That startled everyone, but not half as much as David. Instantly, he was ready to be ashamed, to be sorry. Instead, he felt strong enough to tear the house down: rustic aluminum siding, piece by piece; imitation pine paneling, sheet by sheet; indirect lighting, wire by wire and central air, vent

by stupid vent, right before his father's eyes. He was so angry that it scared him, until he saw that it had shaken out all his father's suspicions. He warned David against attempting anything foolish, and that he would not be disgraced by his own son.

In the silence of this strange morning David felt a soft buzzing in his ears for some time before he really heard it. It was the sound of an engine, and he wished that he could walk all the way to the border, or at least begin to feel not so much like David Heath, the Rock Beach Heath's eldest boy. There had been a moment the other night, after everyone had gone to bed, when he did feel something different, something even stronger than his anger at his father. He had started a letter to his brother, Tommy, trying to explain, but just as he wrote that he was going to leave the country, he stopped.

In that moment it took to write the words, he had felt so damn beautiful that all the reasons, all the arguments became meaningless. It was madness, and yet he had never felt so sane, and right then he knew that he was going. It came so easy that he couldn't imagine how he was ever worried by any other choice.

The growing sound of the engine made him nervous, and he was cold from resting too long. He hiked the knapsack onto his back, and slapped and squeezed his fingers. He never liked cold weather, and he couldn't help thinking of

his last ride during the night. The big snow plow truck had seemed like some wild beast in the darkness with its madly spinning orange light, and its big metal mouth scraping sparks off the road. The driver had been an older man with a hatchet-like face he kept pointing at David. Ugly old eyes, squinting with suspicion, and so pleased that David didn't want a drink from the bottle in his pocket. And how much David had wanted him to know, to scream as loud as the snow plow with defiance, but that only made him feel more helpless. He was at the mercy of a land full of blind machines with mindless drivers. He hated them all. Let them destroy everything, David thought, at least he would have no part in it.

Charlie saw the arm-raised figure on the side of the road. It was odd, way out here so early, and thinking accident, he began nudging gently on the brakes. Then he saw the knapsack, but kept down-shifting, and the new truck eased to a stop beside the boy. He knew company rules, but he had picked up hitch-hikers before, although mostly on the highway, and never a kid with long hair and a pack on his back. It was just that Charlie was getting kind of worried about his mind. The way it kept drifting off, it could be dangerous. He thought maybe if he could just get to talking with somebody, no matter who it was.

He strained across the seat, and snapped the handle of the passenger door.

"Come on, climb in."

David grabbed the top of the door with one hand, and swung up easily into the cab. He placed the knapsack on the floor boards between his legs.

"How far you headed?" Charlie asked, already busy with his feet and arms shifting back up through the gears.

"North — a ways."

"Where to?"

"Berlin," David said quickly, then added, "I'm going to Berlin to see my uncle."

"Berlin! You're on the wrong road, sonny."

"I know where I'm going."

There was an edge to the voice that made Charlie aware that the kid had been watching him steadily since the moment he stopped the truck.

"Hey, I don't mean nothing. People always telling me: 'Charlie, mind your own business.' I never learn."

Charlie cocked his head and smiled with a shrug. David nodded, stretched out in the seat, and began to watch the road.

Charlie didn't say anything for a while. It was a good ten miles to Benson, and he wanted to get a look at the kid.

His hair was more shaggy than long. It looked clean, but he needed a shave. It was kind of a brown color that reminded Charlie of the soft brown stripe that marks the back of a full grown deer. His beard was darker, dark like his eyebrows. There was a leanness about the face that Charlie admired. It left nothing wasted; no soft extra skin or fat to hide the outline of his skull. One look at his face, and Charlie could tell that he wasn't any farm kid, but it was the kind of face that didn't show much age. He guessed maybe early twenties.

"Well," Charlie began again, pulling a cigar from his shirt pocket, "just so happens, I'm headed for Berlin myself. I got to go by way of Sunbrook and Temple, which surely ain't the straightest way I know to Berlin. But then again, that all depends on how big a hurry a person might be in."

"Is that all beer you got back there?" David asked suddenly. He was beginning to realize how cold it was outside. His nose and ears were stinging, but the shivering had begun to subside in the heat of the cab. He watched the short fat man working his jaws on an unlit cigar that rolled from corner to corner in his mouth as he talked. His gray hair was shaved close beneath a leather baseball cap with earflaps. His face was round like the rest of him. He had a long large drip of a nose, and his heavy jowls sagged with a weight that seemed to put a strain on his eyelids.

"Every drop," Charlie answered. "Over nine-hundred cases and fourteen kegs of it. They'll piss it all away by the end of next week. Just you wait and see. Kind of funny."

Charlie shook his head and grinned at David. He liked that face. He liked the tightness that made his eyes seem larger and very clear. The eyes had the same brown as his hair, and again Charlie thought of the deer. It might have been the way the kid had been watching him; openly, intently, as a deer will do for that long second before it disappears. Charlie had been close to deer, close enough to watch the eyes until he believed he understood what the deer was thinking. He believed he saw something in the eyes of this boy.

"That's a lot of beer," David said.

"That's a lot of stops. That's what it is."

Charlie clamped down hard on his cigar, and David almost laughed out loud. It was the ears. The useless earflaps stuck out at an angle like little wings over his huge drooping ears. He looked like a sad old basset hound smoking a cigar. It made him seem gentle, and all his wrinkles were like smiles whenever he spoke. It was a friendly face, and the voice was friendly too. He spoke very fast, but the words had a pleasant rolling accent.

"You been walking long?" he asked. "You look half froze."

"A while."

"You don't live around here, do you?"

"No. New York."

"New York Rangers — good team. Tried out with them once. You like hockey? I used to play a lot of hockey, but you look more like a track man; hurdles maybe."

"Yuh, a little."

"Thought so. You look in pretty good shape. You're lucky it stopped snowing. But I got to tell you. You should have took the turnpike. Take it from me. You ain't going to see many cars on these roads, for sure not today. I tell you what though. I can get you there. That is, if you ain't in no hurry, like I said."

"No big hurry," David answered.

Charlie cocked his head at David, and maneuvered his cigar into a smile. David grinned, cautiously at first, which made him feel silly, as if he had forgotten how to smile.

"Besides, nine-hundred cases is a lot of beer, and I ain't getting any younger. I figure a helper is worth about ten bucks."

"Deal," David said.

"Settled. Name's Charlie."

"Mine's Dave. Say, what the hell time is it anyway, Charlie?"

Hartland was a mill town. It was a gray street of tall houses. David noticed several plain four-storey wooden buildings that seemed to be apartments. Between them were tall narrow homes that looked like gothic churches made of wood. Painted gray or white and wrapped with ornate porches, they stood in a row on the right side of the street. On the left was a steep embankment down to the river.

Jammed with piles of broken ice, it churned thick and slow below the dam. On the far side of the river was a towering wall of brick with rows of dark, vacant looking, windows that seemed endless. From above the dam, it stretched a good half mile downstream; one continuous brick building.

It was almost one, but the morning had gone by quickly for David, working in the box, setting up cases of beer on the tailgate and sliding and jerking the dolly up the steps of taverns and grocery stores. He never knew there were so many towns up in this part of the country, or so many different sizes for bottles and cans of beer. While they worked, they talked. After a few hours, David felt as if he had known Charlie for years. He seemed to like to talk about the past when he was David's age, about his father's farm in Val Des Bois, Quebec, and how the old man still expected Charlie back some day to run the place. They even started arguments about sports and different kinds of jobs. Charlie liked to argue. It was hard to imagine anything that Charlie would not like to do, and yet David couldn't

help feeling that something wasn't right. Maybe he just had been working too hard, but sometimes Charlie acted like he didn't want to do anything.

The truck turned off the street by a small Coca-Cola sign that was nearly buried by the piles of snow cleared from the parking lot. The small restaurant seemed out of place among the street of tall houses. Across the river David saw that they had not yet reached the end of the massive brick wall.

"Looks kind of strange for a saw mill. Is that what you're thinking? Well, Dave, that's probably because it never was, at least not when they built it. Biggest furniture factory in the North, might be the oldest too. Some German fellas started it, way back. Started the town too.

"A whole bunch of them came over here, families and all, and started it from scratch. Damn near the whole town worked there once. They were still bringing people from the old country until the last war. It got sold then, and went broke about twenty years ago. They call it a turning mill now. They make parts for kids' toys, things like that. They're good folks; a lot of pride, but there ain't too many jobs around here now. I don't think they use but one end of that building anymore.

"Why don't you go ahead in and get us a table? Let me get these orders together, and I'll be right with you."

David climbed down and slammed the door just as Charlie was unhooking the clipboard from the dash. The wire slipped out, and clipboard and purchase orders landed all over the floor of the cab.

"Damnit," Charlie grunted as he tried to squeeze himself around the steering wheel and bend over. He moved David's pack, and a can of wax beans fell out. Putting it back, he noticed several other cans, a metal pot and frying pan, and a bag of brown rice tucked among the clothes.

Most of the tables in the restaurant were empty. Each was draped with a piece of freshly wiped oilcloth. The shiny wet red on all the tables seemed like the only color in the place. The rest of the room was so bare and stark that it made David think of hospitals. Even the scratched plastic water glasses seemed to have been sterilized clean. David thought he could smell frying oil, but he didn't see any food.

"You ordered yet?" Charlie asked, pulling out the chair across from David.

"No, not yet."

"Better make up your mind. The mill splits the lunch hour. The rest of them will be here in a minute."

A tall, sturdy, but sort of colorless woman with gray-black hair stretched tight in a bun was standing by the cash register at the counter. She raised her arm at Charlie.

"You go ahead and order," Charlie said. "The specials are on that blackboard there. See, what did I tell you; roast beef on Wednesdays. I'll be right back."

David was thinking of hamburgers, but he ordered the roast beef. After the waitress left, he turned and watched Charlie and the woman talking. They stood at the end of the counter where David had noticed a painting, an oil portrait, on the wall above the cash register. They talked quietly, not smiling. Charlie kept nodding his head as both of them looked down at the floor, and now and then up toward the portrait on the wall. It was a young face dressed in army khakis, and enclosed in a wide black frame. Several yellowed newspaper clippings and a couple of snapshots were tacked to the wall around it, and a small lavender piece of ribbon hung from the bottom of the frame.

When Charlie got back to the table, a parade of men and boys were filling up the restaurant. David watched them with a sudden feeling of discomfort. He studied each one with increasing uneasiness as they took their places around the bright red oilcloths. They were all different ages and different sizes, and dressed in all sorts of clothes, but he was struck by an oppressive sense of similarity about them.

Most were covered with sawdust; tiny chips clinging to the tangled hair along their forearms, sprinkled on their heads and down the back of their necks, and fine as powder on their cheeks and in their eyebrows. Something about their

faces made the old man look so much like the boy sitting with him, young enough to be his grandson. They all appeared so sternly carved in simple basic lines, and colorless like the woman behind the counter. They had the look of wooden toy faces that had not been painted yet.

David began to look at them as if they were all dressed alike. It wasn't the clothes, but the way they wore them. They were dressed for work, and each man's clothes were a part of the same uniform. They didn't talk much; a few words, a nod of the head, a shrug of the shoulders. The waitress took their orders, and they waited for their food.

"Hey, Dave, pass the salt. Thanks." Charlie ate steadily; chewing, cutting, chewing.

"Damn good meal," David said between swallows. "Really great." He felt grateful to Charlie for changing his mind about the hamburgers. "I bet it's the only thing these poor bastards got to look forward to."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Charlie had stopped chewing. David heard the question in his voice. It was the same pleasant voice, but it was a different kind of question than Charlie had used with him before.

"I don't know," David hesitated. He looked up from his plate and saw that all the wrinkles in Charlie's face had stopped moving.

"Nothing. It's just that," David lowered his voice, "it's such a damn pitiful way to live, Charlie." David

looked around at the bare white walls, and the red oilcloth on the tables seemed painfully bright.

"Look at them, Charlie. Can't you see? They were craftsmen, you said so yourself. Well, what can that old man there teach that boy now: how to put a wheel on a toy cart? They're nothing but machinery, and they don't even care. How can they let it happen? They just sit there and accept it. The poor dumb bastards."

"You don't know too much, do you?" Charlie spoke very slow and soft, but he wasn't sure. This college boy, this long haired kid, was making him feel embarrassed. What was he so mad about? What was he trying to do, Charlie wondered, start a fight?

"What do you want them to do?" Charlie continued in a whisper. "They didn't close the factory down, but it got closed down all the same. They're poor. You're right, some of them are damn poor now. But this is their town, you got to think of that. All their people are here, their families. They're good folks, Dave. They got a lot of pride. Hell, they get along all right."

"Pride?" David spit the word out with a harsh whisper, and Charlie suddenly felt as if someone had just cocked a gun behind his ear.

"What the hell good is pride?"

He looked hard at David. He heard the anger in his voice, but he could see his eyes, like a deer's eyes, and

tell that he was frightened. He was saying things and asking questions at the same time.

"Come on, Charlie," David continued. "It's stupid. Can you eat it? Will it keep you warm in the winter? What have they got to be proud about anyway? They're no better off than that kid up there in the picture. A lot of good pride did him."

"You watch how you're talking," Charlie snapped. His embarrassment was gone. "That boy died in Viet Nam, very first year of the war. One of the first ones over there. That's his mother I was talking to. She runs this place, and she's got every goddamn right to be proud."

"Another wasted life," David said, half to himself, just as he wondered how it was odd that he presumed, from watching Charlie and the woman talking, that the soldier in the portrait had been killed just recently.

"What the hell do you know about it?" Charlie spoke aloud with a sudden intensity that startled David.

"Where do you get off, sitting in your college school?"

The voice David heard seemed to come from someone else.

"How come you're not over there?"

"Hey, Charlie, I didn't mean anything," but as David spoke he felt as if he were making a confession. "It's just a terrible thing," he offered. "It all seems so wrong, that's all."

"Yuh, sure."

The men from the mill were watching like little toy soldiers with their unfinished wooden heads.

"Come on, let's go," Charlie said in his new voice. "I got work to do."

Outside, the snow had started up again. It was falling straight and quiet along the gray street with the tall houses. Charlie turned the ignition, and the blower began to swirl heat into the cab. Snowflakes crowded out the daylight, and made it seem like evening in the early afternoon. As if time were still unsteady and confused, it suddenly lost its place again. The storm had returned. It quickly bullied in, and afternoon was gone.

"Goddamn snow," Charlie muttered to himself. He wasn't surprised. All day, even before he left the warehouse, he had the feeling, he knew, that the storm wasn't over. He would have to telephone Lorraine, and spend the night in some motel. It had happened before, and there was nothing he could do about the weather.

"Twenty years. That seem like a long time to you?"

David didn't answer.

"Maybe so. I don't know. I guess it is for being married anyway. My wife, that's all she can talk about. She's even got this big party planned for tonight. If this gets any worse, I won't be making Berlin before tomorrow. You sure picked a hell of a time to visit your uncle."

The large truck rattled over the trestle bridge by the factory, leaving Hartland on the road over the mountain to Berlin. David held the knapsack between his legs and stared out the side window. He couldn't be sure what Charlie might say next, but he didn't want to know anymore about him.

Charlie reached inside his jacket for a cigar. He fumbled with the cellophane. The quiet way the snow had started, and now David's silence, was getting on his nerves. He turned on the wipers and the headlights.

"This old road, she has some bad hills. Anything can happen in weather like this. I never had a big wreck, but I seen plenty." Charlie glanced across the seat. David didn't move. "I should have stayed in Hartland. I would have too, if it hadn't been for you. What the hell got into you back there? You looking for a fight or something?"

"I don't know," David turned toward Charlie without looking up at him. "I'm really sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean..."

"Yuh, well, just forget it."

Charlie wanted to forget it. The storm and all was enough to worry about without being bothered by the crazy talk of some young kid that didn't know any better.

"It might be just a flurry," Charlie said, but he wouldn't let himself believe it. "They have them all the time up here. Anyway, New Washington is the next stop, right

up top of this mountain. After that, it's straight on down to Berlin. Just a little place, New Washington. You ever hear of it?"

"I don't think so."

"Lots of stories about it though," Charlie said, taking the cigar from his mouth. "It's kind of famous in its own way. It was in all the papers a few years back. Some scientists or something did a study up there. Somebody told me that one of them even wrote a book about the place. Not many other towns like it, I guess. The whole damn town is all related. Can you imagine that? You sure you never heard of it?"

"No, I never heard of it."

"Seems this guy, Washington, decided to go into the logging business back about, oh hell, 1800-something. He was a pretty sharp operator, I guess. He ended up buying out damn near every small logging outfit in this neck of the woods. That's how the town got started. But he had some kind of strange ideas about keeping it a family business." Charlie laughed, and wagged his head. "He's what you might call the town's founding father in more ways than one. There's other folks living there now, of course, but the Washingtons still run the business, just the way they always did.

"You know what happened to all them kings and queens that kept marrying their brothers and sisters. Well, they

needed them scientists up there just to get them sorted out. They say there's a lot of them that ain't quite all there, you know, kind of retarded, but they take good care of their own. They're a pretty good bunch, considering, but every now and then you hear stories." Charlie stopped, and looked over at David.

"It seems kind of strange," he went on, "with you having an uncle in Berlin, that you never heard about New Washington."

The cigar was back in Charlie's mouth, moving from one corner to the other.

"By the way, I forgot to tell you. I found a can of beans on the floor when we stopped for lunch. It didn't belong to me, so I stuck it in your bag, there. It was yours, wasn't it?"

David nodded. Charlie saw his eyes, and felt a tingle down his back as he recalled the deer. After tracking blood spoor all morning, he had come upon it suddenly, lying in a thicket of laurel. He would never forget the deer watching him as he raised his rifle. There was no room for escape, and the eyes looked straight at him without any sign of surprise or pleading.

"You know," Charlie continued slowly, as if he were thinking over each word, "I still can't understand what you were doing on the old post road. It doesn't make sense not to take the turnpike. How come you got way out there?"

David didn't answer, but he was watching Charlie closely.

"Looks to me that you're headed a lot farther than Berlin."

"It's none of your business where I'm going. You understand?" David's voice hurried. "And I don't give a damn what you think."

Charlie didn't need to think any longer. There was nothing more to say. It was all clear; back at the restaurant, everything, all that crazy talk. The kid, Charlie thought, he knows it too. David sat with his hands folded in his lap, watching Charlie as if he were waiting for him to raise the rifle.

Charlie could get mad; quick mad, yelling mad, but this was a very different kind of anger that ached through his shoulders, and seemed to burn its way down into his hands and fingers squeezing the steering wheel. He tried to concentrate on the road, beginning to turn white, but his eyes kept refocusing on the driving stream of tiny snowflakes as they crashed and exploded into water against the windshield of the truck.

David could see the anger in Charlie's face. His bassett hound jowls had risen fiercely. The earflaps of his baseball cap looked all set to take off. His whole appearance seemed strained with furious concentration against the steering wheel. He could hear the anger in the high-pitched

grinding whine of the truck, climbing steadily upward through the hills. He could almost feel the anger, like a pressure inside the cab, and he felt his own anger struggling against it, but he was surrounded. He thought about yelling at Charlie to stop his fucking truck and let him out, or maybe opening the door and jumping, but like the same old David Heath, he just sat there, wondering what was going to happen next. Through the lightly falling snow, he saw the sign — WELCOME TO NEW WASHINGTON — and fear quickly pinched at his scalp.

As they drove through the center of New Washington, around the oval with the tiny park in the middle, David saw two police cars parked beside the steps of the Town Hall. It was an old brick building, and appeared to be the largest one in town. Above the third storey was a big clock face. The sight of the hands impossibly set at nine-o-clock startled David. He quickly looked across the seat, half-expecting to see his father instead of Charlie behind the wheel. It had been precisely nine by the kitchen clock when he left home.

It was Charlie. David felt better, but not exactly comfortable. He wished that he could ask Charlie what time it really was, but he didn't dare.

Charlie backed the truck down a narrow driveway next to a small frame house just beyond the center of town.

"Get ten cases of twelve ounce bottles and them two half-kegs," he ordered as he climbed out of the truck.

David didn't move. He couldn't make up his mind. He hoped maybe Charlie would give him the ten bucks and tell him to get lost, or just tell him to get lost, and he wouldn't even ask for the ten bucks.

"Let's go. I haven't got all day."

Charlie stacked the dolly by himself, and yanked it up the granite steps to the back door. David had the rest of the order ready when Charlie returned. He quickly made a second trip without saying a word. David jumped down from the truck and waited. Charlie came back out.

"Here. Grab this and get that other keg," Charlie said with a kick at the dolly. "The boys inside want to buy us a beer."

"Sorry," David shook his head. "I'm not old enough."

"They didn't ask how old you was," Charlie snapped.

"They just want to buy us a beer. Come on."

The first floor of the small house was just one room with a staircase in the far corner, and a bar that ran the length of the back wall. The only light came from the windows facing the street. As David's eyes began to adjust to the dimness, he noticed several long collapsible tables, and a variety of wooden folding chairs that took up most of the

room. Three old men had the tables all to themselves. Two were playing checkers while the other watched. A group of eight or ten men were sitting around on the sofas and chairs arranged in a semi-circle by the front window. A musky odor of cigar butts and stale beer gave David the funny feeling that the place was filled with the ghosts of old men. Among an arrangement of plaques and photographs over the fireplace, was a large bear head wearing a necktie and a sailor hat with a cigar wedged in its snarling mouth.

"That all of it, Charlie? It's about time you got here, goddamnit."

"Bad weather," Charlie grunted.

"Bad weather? Jesus Christ! It don't seem to bother the mailman any, and we don't give a shit about him."

The loud voice came from a large body with stubby carrot-colored hair, standing behind the bar drying his hands, finger by finger. His flat broad face and thick forearms were a mass of freckles. David looked at the face, and it seemed to glare with a peculiar quality, like a lighted Halloween pumpkin.

"You old cannuck, have a refill," the thick vegetable voice spoke, grinning. "How you been, anyway?"

"About the same," Charlie said, pulling off his gloves. He had his back to David, and stood looking at the wall behind the bar. The head of a buck deer was mounted above the empty liquor shelves with a string of Christmas lights wound through its antlers.

Some of the men by the window waved to Charlie. David noticed a large American flag tacked on the far wall over a podium and an electric bowling machine.

"I don't know," the wide face said, still grinning. "I figure it must be finally catching up with you when old Charlie has to take himself on a helper." He raised his carrot-colored eyebrows at David. "Huh, Charlie, what about it? Who's your friend there?"

Charlie turned around suddenly. David felt a funny rhythm; like music, a faint tune, the measured notes of a bugle from very far away, but very clear inside his head.

Charlie's eyes stared into his, and the basset hound jowls were flushed and swollen out like rubber balls. David was frozen with the ridiculous sensation of music playing in his mind — Day is done/Da-da-da — Day is done/Da-da-da — the tune wouldn't go away, and he couldn't think of the words.

The purple veins near Charlie's temples were pushing out against his skin. David saw them twitch.

"Friend, my ass." The words sizzled out of Charlie in one hissing breath. Then he was shouting. "This no-good, long-hair, coward sonofabitch."

David felt like someone had just turned the lights on in the room, and the music went on and on.

"He's a lousy-stinking-draft-dodger, a goddamn deserter. That's who he is."

Charlie, shouting wildly, was moving toward David.

"You yellow little coward bastard. You don't know nothing about pride, don't know nothing. My son, he died on your account. You hear me? My boy shot dead for weak little cowards like you? And you want to take his pride."

David's back was pressed against the wall, paralyzed, numb.

Day is done/Gone the sun — Day is done/Gone the sun
— From the hills/From the earth/From the sky.

Charlie was close enough to grab him. David blinked as a mist of warm saliva sprayed his face.

"You let my son be killed. What do you care? You don't give a damn if they all killed. You goddamn coward. You killed my boy."

It seemed as if Charlie's entire head was twitching now. David tried to back farther away from his breathing, but the wall wouldn't let him. The room had shrunk, and was filled with faces, staring.

A sudden snapping pain shot up his arm. The faces disappeared, and the room moved too quickly for him to keep his balance. There was a dull hot thud in the back of his head, and the room stopped moving. He was on the floor with his back against the base of the bar. There was a face way up above him, wide, and grinning like a jack-o'-lantern.

"Get up, punk," The face drove the words down at David. "You got any idea where you are, punk?"

The bartender reached down toward him, but David suddenly felt his legs pushing his body up against the bar before the arm could grab him again.

"You don't got no idea, do you?"

David saw the swarm of freckles come alive on his face.

"Well, I'm going to tell you a little something, punk. You're in a V.F.-fucking-W. Hall. That's where you are."

As David stood up, other faces seemed to have him surrounded. Red hair, red hair; it seemed as if they all had red hair and freckles.

"You got a lot of balls, kid, coming in here," a voice demanded.

"Hell, these hippie-coward-bastards ain't got any balls. Don't you know that, Jerry?"

"Maybe we ought to find out, huh?" The freckles on the pumpkin face were dancing, and the carrot-colored eyebrows jumped up and down.

"If he does, he won't have them for long."

David's body sprang forward before he had actually thought to move. Hands and voices both seemed to claw at him as he burst through the faces. Charlie was standing at the door. David drove his whole body into the short round frame, and Charlie toppled backward with a crash against the wall. David had to stop to open the door, and before he could get down the granite steps, Charlie had grabbed him.

It was David's face now that screamed with rage until tears ran down his cheeks. Charlie looked pale and stunned. Their faces touched as David actually carried him down the steps before flinging himself free, sending Charlie sprawling into a snowbank.

"Hey, Charlie. Charlie, this is Eddy. You all right? Come on inside and have a drink."

It seemed to Charlie as if he had been lying in the snow for a long time before he heard the bartender's voice, and the big freckled hand reached down to help him up. He had listened to his own heavy breathing, felt the cold snow on the back of his neck, and snowflakes turning to water on his lips and eyelids. He had seen, in his mind, the frightened, bitter, tear-stained face, but it wasn't David. It was his own son's face, but then it looked like his face too, scared and lined with tears. He didn't know. He couldn't see it clear enough through the snow, but he was sure the face was dead.

"Come on now, Charlie boy, let's get up. You going to freeze to death out here."

Charlie saw the huge splotchy hand as it grabbed his wrist, and he felt himself being pulled up to his feet. He followed Eddy back inside. As he climbed the steps, Charlie recalled how surprised he had been when the boy had picked him up; surprised that such a skinny kid could be that strong.

David ran on anger, long after he had lost all feeling in his legs. Bitter hating anger bounced inside his head, sharp against his skull with each foot that struck the pavement. The wind came out of nowhere, but all of a sudden the tops of the pines along the road on the side of the mountain had begun rocking wildly back and forth, and knocking into one another. Sheets of snow, driven at angles, shifted one way then another, but each new assault seemed directed right at him. It whipped against his face and stung his eyes, but he forced himself to keep his head up unprotected. A forest of pine trees stood over him on either side of the road. He heard the sound of the wind blowing through them as if their tops were bent in fits of breathless laughter.

Day is done/Day is done/Day is done/Day is done —
kept rhythm with the pain inside his head.

He never looked behind him. The men were gone, but he could still hear them yelling and laughing, throwing snowballs as they chased him down the street. He just ran, and kept running until his anger lost the strength to carry him any farther.

The road seemed like a corridor between the walls of pine, shrouded in a dark whiteness. He had to walk now, but the rhythm went on inside his head, keeping time to a

thousand needles jabbing at his lungs with every beat of frozen air that kept rushing in and out. There was no one following him. No cars passed. There were no more houses. He had gotten away. He had beaten them; his father, all of them. He was free. He stopped walking.

He looked at his hands, and discovered that he didn't have his gloves. They were gone. Then he realized that he didn't have his knapsack anymore. No food, and the money that was hidden inside was gone now too. He was completely free, and he heard the wind gusting through the pine trees even louder than before. He had no idea where he was, where he was going, how far, or what direction. He couldn't even tell if it was day or night.

All is well/Safely rest/God is nigh — that was how it ended. That stupid tune he couldn't get rid of, the sound of the bugler in the woods; he had always known the words. It made him want to laugh. That day in the cemetery; oh, it was beautiful all right, just like the way he felt the other night. It was so damn beautiful. A kind of invincible freedom; that's what he wrote to Tommy. It was nothing but pride. The rest of it never existed. Little David Heath, saluting in the cemetery; same hero, just a different dream.

The corridor along the road was beginning to grow darker. The snow seemed to keep falling faster, and he couldn't see the tops of the pine trees anymore. This was freedom. He had felt it, and was certain. Now it was time to turn around.

He remembered the two police cars back at the Town Hall. They would have a telephone. They would have to let him make a call. He wished that he was home already, but he knew that he would have to do that on his own. He had gotten away by himself, he thought. He could get back by himself.

David was walking up the road when he saw the headlights casting tunnels through the snow. He climbed the snowbank on the downhill side of the road, and fell, sliding, into the trees. He waited and listened, but there was nothing but the sound of the wind. Then he heard a door slam.

"Hey, you... I know you're down there. I seen you."

It was Charlie's voice, and it sounded very tired.

"You want to freeze to death? Come on up here and get in the truck."

David didn't move. He had his elbows dug in the snow to keep his wet stiff fingers close to his mouth. The snow melted underneath him, and began to soak through his clothes.

"Hey, you all right? Come on up here, goddamnit."

"You go to hell." David's voice seemed to force its way out with an awful screeching noise that made his throat hurt.

Charlie followed the voice to the edge of the road. The kid wasn't going to get away from him; not this time. He stood on the snowbank and waited.

"If that's the way you want it. I sure as hell ain't coming down after you. Just thought you might be needing

that pack of yours. I got it in the truck. If you want it, you better get the hell up here in a hurry."

Charlie knew he wouldn't leave, not until he had the boy, but there was no stopping the storm. He could feel it gaining on him, and he might already have no chance left to make it back up that hill. He saw the pine boughs shake, and David stood up. Charlie watched as he crawled up the bank, struggling in the deep snow. He jumped down to the road and stood there, not even bothering to brush the snow off himself, just staring and breathing hard.

"Keep it," he said finally. "I don't need it, and I don't need you. I'm walking back."

"Walking-hell," Charlie shouted, and he grabbed the front of David's parka with both hands as if he were going to try and throw him in the truck. "You ain't going nowhere, and you know it. Ain't nobody could last out here in this."

Charlie was shaking him, and then suddenly let go. There was a look on the boy — the face in the snow. Charlie stepped back so quickly he slipped and nearly fell down. It was over. The kid was beaten, and Charlie didn't have to fight him any longer. There was no more need to worry that he was somehow going to make it. He wasn't going any farther. Charlie could see that for certain. He had come after him. It was what he knew he had to do from the moment the other men got back, and said that he was gone. That was all they wanted, but Charlie couldn't let him get

away. He had to do it. Only now that he had him, Charlie wasn't sure at all just what he really had done. The look on David's face had scared him bad.

The kid got in the cab without saying a word. Charlie had to take the truck on down the hill until he found a place to turn around. The headlights were almost useless. The snow was falling so heavily that he couldn't see more than a few feet beyond the truck. He drove very slowly, leaning over the steering wheel. His short legs kept jerking up toward the clutch and brake, but he couldn't concentrate, not with the boy sitting there across the seat. David had pulled a shirt out of his knapsack to dry his hands and face. The acorn brown eyes still looked like deer eyes, but lifeless, like the glass eyes of a stuffed animal.

Charlie couldn't help but remember how it was after the gun went off, and he had seen the hole he made in the white neck just below the shoulder.

He would have missed the dirt road if it hadn't been for the reflectors on the mail boxes. It seemed to take forever to back the truck around. He could barely see the brake lights in the mirrors as he tried to line it up, struggling with the steering wheel, and moving back and forth, a few feet at a time. He saw the left side of the box begin to tilt, and his right arm swung around and slammed the shift ahead before the rest of him had time to turn and grab the wheel. The cab bucked, and he felt the truck slipping

sideways before he pulled it out. And the whole time, the kid just sat there with his head down.

"Goddamn, you better hope we make it up this hill."

Charlie's voice sounded more like a cry of anguish than a warning.

"If I lose this rig on your account, it'll be my job. You got to be crazy. You just asking for it. I got no right being out here in this. It's company rules."

"I didn't ask you for nothing," David spoke, looking at Charlie for the first time. "And I didn't kill anybody either."

Charlie looked at him and saw the face again. It was David's face, his son's face, his own face, and the snow was everywhere.

"What do you care?" Charlie looked around wildly. "You don't care who's dead. You just got to kill yourself."

He said it just as he saw it, all of a sudden in the face, in all the faces. At the same time he realized that he was the only one left; the last face in the snow. He wasn't surprised. The storm had been wearing on the back of his mind for too long.

They were heading up the hill, and Charlie had gone through the lower gears as fast as he dared. He was going too fast, but he felt as if the new truck was climbing all by itself. He tried to hold on, but all the time he was waiting; waiting to feel the tires begin to slip, then the

box would snake around, and the front end would start to drift and slide.

In the warm darkness of the cab, surrounded by the sound of the engine, Charlie tried to watch the road, but the snow kept darting through the glow of the headlights like an endless stream of tiny shooting stars, and he couldn't keep his eyes from following their flight. He began to feel as if it all made sense. He was so very tired. For weeks he had felt the same strange weakness everywhere he went, and the world was just an empty hole; the sum of everything suddenly subtracted leaving nothing, nothing lost, nothing gained, and no way of knowing whether anything had ever been.

"Hey, you got to let me off in town. I got to make a phone call."

The voice made Charlie jump. In a startled blind instant his arms went rigid on the steering wheel, and every muscle in his face seemed frozen. Fallen asleep; his eyes had closed. Dreams; he shook his head. Impossible dreams; he shook them all out. All of it was impossible; the crazy faces, all of it. It was all because of the kid. Until he could get rid of him, the faces wouldn't go away.

He had to stop the truck. He was starting to pull it over when he saw more mail boxes and lights in the snow, and then houses. The truck seemed to be finding its own way up the hill.

The road had leveled. They were on a street. Before Charlie had a chance to think, to see exactly where he was in all the snow, he was turning the truck onto the oval that circled the small park in the center of New Washington. There were no people, not even any cars parked along the street. The place was empty. The store front windows were bright with light that fell out on the sidewalk and the street, but it seemed as if the whole town had gone someplace to hide from the storm. The snow looked brighter, and as large as scraps of paper, swirling in swift currents, crashing into the lighted store windows, and streaking in sudden shifting waves through the trees in the park.

Then it happened: a green spectre, out of nowhere, as if it had been waiting all the time just for Charlie and this very moment. He watched as if his eyes had seen it all before, and the green station wagon with a full ski rack on the roof sailed past the stop sign, floated across the oval right in front of the truck.

He jumped the brake, and the wheels locked. Charlie felt himself suddenly stop; breathing stop, heart stop, but the truck kept right on going. He was weightless, falling slowly, getting closer. He saw snowflakes, and then an image of a funny shocked expression behind a window in the station wagon. They were gliding together, and the silly look on the driver's face was gone as they collided, and Charlie shut his eyes.

Skis exploded, catapulted colored sticks went spinning off in crazy flights to all directions. There was an angry sound of metal banging, then yielding, grinding, shifting slowly together, and motion stopped.

Charlie awoke, and he felt like he had been asleep for a long time. No pain, he was stretching; first his arms, then his legs. Nothing felt odd or disconnected. His whole body was alive with an exciting fresh energy. He was awake, and he felt good.

David was awake too, but he still looked sleepy. He was sitting on top of his pack, rubbing his forehead. Charlie felt wide awake. It must have been that noise. He had been dreaming, he thought, but then he saw the snow blowing into the cab. His door was open, and the truck was stopped crossways in the middle of the street.

"Hey, you hurt, you okay?" Charlie looked surprised as he spoke to David.

"I'm all right, I think."

Charlie didn't hear him. He was already out of the cab. The driver of the station wagon was rushing around, inspecting each one of his passengers as they came out of the car. There were four boys and another man. Everyone appeared to be all right, except maybe the driver. He kept pacing from one end of the car to the other, and looking around as if he couldn't figure out what had happened.

Charlie stood in the street. Except for the bumper and a parking light, there was nothing wrong with the truck, but the driver's side of the station wagon was pretty well smashed up.

"You're bleeding. You're bleeding," the driver of the car began shouting, and Charlie was surprised to see him running over toward him. The boys stopped hunting for their skis, and came over to look at Charlie.

He slipped off a glove, and felt his face. He saw the blood smeared on his fingers. The others moved around, edging closer, watching him intently, as if they were afraid to get too close. Charlie touched his cheek again.

"Oh, my god, I'm sorry," the driver pleaded frantically. "It's all my fault. We've got to help you."

"It ain't nothing, " Charlie said, and he could hardly keep himself from laughing at them. "Nothing but a scratch."

Charlie felt the wind, harsh and cold, beating snow against his face and bare head. A painless cut; it was almost too funny. They kept staring, and Charlie began to get annoyed at their silly frightened faces.

"You're the one needs help," he said, pointing at the station wagon, "not me."

It was his wound, his own blood, and they would never know, no one would believe, how good it made him feel.

David looked on from the other side of the truck. His head throbbed, and he leaned against the fender, waiting

for the dizziness to go away. It was nothing but a bump on the head. When it happened, he had hoped, he really wanted to be hurt. He even thought about lying down in the street, but when he saw the blood on Charlie's face, he knew that it wouldn't do any good. He was all done pretending, and it was foolish to be afraid of what was going to happen, just as foolish as the lighted clock face on the Town Hall that had not moved even a minute past the hour of nine.

He didn't try to hide when the policeman came. He saw him walking over from the Town Hall. He looked over the station wagon for some time, shaking his head, and putting his flashlight up against the windows. Then he started going around the group, one by one, with a yellow pencil and a note pad. David thought about his wallet. It was somewhere in the knapsack, but it didn't matter.

"Hey, you, over there. What are you doing?"

The policeman pointed his flashlight at David. He was a scrawny little man with a thin scratch of a red mustache, and he looked lost inside the thick blue police jacket. "You another one of these skiers, here?"

David shook his head. He saw Charlie turn and look at him. He had another cigar in his mouth, but he hadn't done anything about the blood on his face. He looked different without his baseball cap. He had never taken it off, and David was surprised to see that he was nearly bald.

"You must have been in the truck then, huh?"

The policeman was standing next to David, studying him with his flashlight.

"You look a little shook up. Just give me your wallet. I need some I.D."

"Don't have it," David said, and the flashlight was in his eyes.

"Hey, this one says he's with you." The little man spun his flashlight back on the others. "Where the hell did that truck driver go?"

"What's that?" Charlie shouted as he came from behind the truck, carrying a case of beer.

"I said," the policeman shouted, then waited for Charlie to get closer. "This kid claims he's with you. Now I'm going to have to call the doctor to check him out. He don't seem too steady to me. You better come along too, and let the doc look at that cut. What's that you got there?"

"I can't hang around here all night."

Charlie sounded annoyed. He kept looking straight at the officer, but David couldn't tell whether he was smiling, or just biting hard on his cigar.

"I got to make deliveries in Berlin before the stores close. Now, I figure you, and maybe some of the fellas, after you're off duty of course, might could use a little something on a night like this. You know what I mean?"

"Hey, now," the thin red mustache wriggled, and the flashlight went out, "that's pretty damn decent. All that?"

"King size too," Charlie added. "If you'll just let us get going. This storm has got me way behind already."

For a moment, David felt himself wanting to yell at Charlie, but he didn't know what to say, and then he didn't dare say a thing. No one spoke as the wind gusted with a sudden roar through the trees in the small park. He was certain what Charlie had said, but he had no idea what he meant. He began to have the feeling that it wasn't over yet. He couldn't stop it. He had no choice. He had nothing, not even an identity. There was nothing in his wallet but a name.

"Well, I don't guess," the officer rubbed a gloved hand against his chin, and hesitated. "No, I can't think of nothing more I need from you."

Charlie held out the case of beer.

"But I can't do anything about him," the officer added, jerking his thumb at David. "I mean, he's got no identification. Just routine, but I got to have proof of I. D. So, ah, why don't you just bring that along with you? It won't take but a couple of minutes to have him checked out."

"Hell, that's just a waste of time," Charlie said quickly.

"How's that?" the little mustache curled.

"All you had to do was just ask me."

Charlie faced him, and David saw all the wrinkles moving as he worked his mouth around the unlit cigar. He felt that Charlie's eyes appeared very sure of what they were looking at. He spoke loud enough for the policeman to hear over the frantic blowing snow, but he was talking straight at David.

"I think maybe I should know," he said with his funny rapid accent. "He's my kid."