

# **THE HARDROCK TRILOGY**

## **Book II Mobile Zoo Ghetto**

Dialogs From the Mobile Zoo Ghetto's  
Osmotic Contribution to the Millennial Orgasm  
at The Edge of the World

A Novel By  
**Frank Patrick Stehno**

Copyright © 2002 by Frank P. Stehno  
All Rights Reserved

To Anne ...

for always listening to my stories, over and over,  
as we hiked through the canyons of Utah and Arizona;  
for rubbing my aching knee afterwards;  
and for supporting and understanding my word habit.

To Nick ...

for taking a chance  
and providing the opportunity.

The commonest off-road vehicle in Nevada  
is the D-8 caterpillar tractor.  
—Local Conservationist

He looked deep into the mirror, past the stains behind the glass, beyond the fading silver, to where reflection becomes more than reverse image. He contemplated the narrow tunnel of the trailer, diminishing over his right shoulder into the smooth curves of the Airstream. He noticed the shoulder itself, slightly tanned, with a few dark hairs interrupting its own smooth curves, healthy flesh flexing as the arm moved his hand to his blade. He studied his face, or the face of the man who used his name, the face that spoke to the world, felt the sun and the wind, and an occasional desert shower.

He wondered if the lines and creases were forty-one years, or the dry desert climate. He heard the seasons demanding submission, wanting out. He searched deep into the faded blue eyes, saw his escape; the cool liquid of a northern lake or the sky at sunset over the Sierras. Yet he knew he could not go back, not really. The desert marked him, cut him, buried the Man behind the face.

He contemplated one last shave, one more attempt at holding on, belonging to something other. He dropped the razor into the sink and turned away.

He packed a few cans; a package of this, a container of that. Selected three sets of clothing, one pair of boots. His pack would contain no more. He left field maps, colored pencils, Brunton and lens. He took his wallet; left house keys and photos of his family. He let the aluminum door hang open.

The pack went into the back of the government vehicle. He lifted two full canteens from the ground near the door, climbed into the International, turned the key, shoved into gear, and drove.

^^^

The year 1980 was eventful. Iran held America hostage. Eight American servicemen were killed in an aborted rescue attempt. Ronald Reagan was elected president. Mount St. Helens erupted, spewing ash across the northwest. There was the man-made ecological disaster at Love Canal. The Russians made their fateful entry into Afghanistan. The United States sold arms to China. El Salvador was under siege. Gandhi dissolved India's state assemblies because they were led by her opposition. A Polish jet crashed, killing 87, including 22 American amateur boxers. An oil field platform, with more than 200 workers, collapsed in the North Sea during a severe storm. Sartre died. Alfred Hitchcock died. The Winter Olympics became an exceptionally patriotic event when the U.S. hockey team overcame the stronger Soviets and then went on to defeat Finland for the gold. And speaking of gold, the price of that precious metal soared to over \$800 per ounce, setting off a modern gold rush. And that's where we were, in the middle of

Nevada, participating in the last major rush of this century.

• • •

We worked for NORMMEX, one of the worlds top producers of molybdenum. In spite of the current pandemonium for gold, our job, initially, was to sample old mining dumps in central Nevada for indications of moly. The old miners had concentrated on gold and silver, ignoring most of the base metals. NORMMEX hoped that our unique approach would yield overlooked deposits and maybe some new discoveries.

Because of the nature of mining in Nevada we needed to cover widely scattered districts in remote areas. We employed four travel trailers for accommodations and an array of four wheel drive vehicles, in addition to four Kawasaki KD-125 dirt bikes. As far as we knew, no other mining company had ever attempted this type of mobile exploration within the continental United States. With the bikes we could get to more difficult localities more quickly than anyone had before. It was to be more-or-less a hit and run operation. To accomplish our set goals we needed to collect as many samples as possible before winter snow forced us out and before our competition could beat us to the prime locations.

NORMMEX provided everything we needed. We brought ourselves, our knowledge, and our experience. Originally there were eight of us. Every one a geologist. I was hired as the Expediter for the crew. My job was to catalog and ship samples, keep the crew supplied, and maintain the vehicles and other equipment. In other words, I was in charge of logistics in support of the geological activities.

We left Tucson in late May, pulling two trailers and hauling the four bikes and other equipment. Our first field location would be Gabbs, Nevada.

^^^

At first Burt spoke only when my questions needed a vocal response. I didn't know if he was shy, or if he was afraid to contradict my opinions. Either way, I thought for sure he would loosen up on the drive to Vegas.

Near the outskirts of Tucson we passed a church bus. "Off to brain-wash another batch," I commented, for the sake of hearing my own voice.

Burt's face turned white. He immediately moved closer to the passenger side door. And that's where he stayed. He couldn't get far enough away. Perhaps my heretical opinions, my beard, and my long hair scared him. Maybe he thought I was some wild-eyed demented hippie who would force him to do drugs.

There was something about his demeanor, the way he carried himself so straight and righteous, the way he spoke in complete grammatical sentences, that tempted the devil in me. Burt wanted to please, to do things right. He didn't want to rock the boat. I wanted to crack his

naivete and let a little sunshine into his life.

After miles of silence I couldn't restrain myself. "So, uhm ... Burt, uh ... am I right in assuming you're a good Christian?"

Startled by the sudden breach of silence he looked at me for the first time in perhaps an hour. "Yes."

"You're also a geologist. Right?"

"I haven't graduated yet. I don't have my degree."

"When you gonna graduate?" I kept my eyes on the road.

"I have one semester to complete."

"Okay. Very good." I smiled at him. "So you've completed most of your requirements?"

"Yes."

"Okay ... then I'd like your opinion on something."

He sat silently watching the horizon.

"I've heard conflicting views. Seems it'd be hard being a geologist and a good Christian."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well ... there are so many discrepancies between the views."

"I don't see it that way. Give me an example." He took the bait.

"Well ... okay. In your opinion, how old's the Earth?" I took a quick peek to see his reaction. His expression didn't change.

"No one knows for sure."

"Aw, come on, that's the easy way." I wasn't going to let him off the hook. "What do *you* think?"

Burt hesitated a moment. "Geologically ... theoretically ... the Earth may be two billion years old."

"That what *you* believe?"

"When I'm dealing with geology, yes."

"Hmmm." I acted like I was pondering his statement. "Then how long has Man been hanging around?"

Without hesitation he responded, "According to the Bible, God created Adam and Eve just over six-thousand years ago."

Ah-ha! "Wait a minute. Doesn't the Bible claim God created Adam and Eve on the sixth day, right after he made everything else? If the Earth's two billion years old, Man should've been around just a few days shy of that."

"The Earth isn't two billion years old."

"Huh?" I acted confused. "You've lost me. Thought you just said the Earth was two billion years old."

"I said that was the geological theory. The Bible says the Earth and all of its creatures, including Adam and Eve, was created just over six thousand years ago." He seemed very sure of himself.

"Okay, if Adam and Eve were born six-thousand years ago, how do you explain the evidence of human remains dating back over a million years?"

Calmly he explained, "The fossil evidence is inaccurate."

“What? How can you say that, with carbon-fourteen ... superposition ... tree rings ... and all the other methods of dating?”

“Very simply.” He shifted in his seat. “God created the Earth before he created Man. The Creator controls change. Climate and other conditions have not remained constant. They were accelerated in those first days.” He brought his left leg up onto the seat. Facing me he leaned back against his door. “In spite of preaching evolutionary theory, science assumes ... it requires ... a constant state for its proof.”

“What about evolution? Are you telling me you don’t believe in evolution?”

“Evolution is a myth.” He retained his smug countenance. “The biblical record states that Man was created perfect. Because Adam rebelled against his Maker he was thrown out of Paradise. Since then mankind has been in a long process of degeneration. The Evolution Theory implies progress. Mankind is going the other way.” He seemed so self-assured, so confident in his beliefs.

“And this decline started six-thousand years ago?” I was laughing to myself because I’d been in this discussion before.

“Adam’s sin has caused a six-thousand-year-long moral and physical decline.”

“See, I don’t understand that. How can you say Man has declined? We’ve experienced more history in the past fifty/sixty years than all the time before. Look at all the changes, the new technologies, the information and knowledge we’ve gained. How can you call that ‘decline’?”

“That’s simple,” Burt smiled pleasantly in his confident Christian way. “We’ve reached the Time of the End, the Millennial Age.”

“You mean the end of the world?” I had to laugh a bit at that.

“As we know it, yes.”

“How do you know?”

He was slow to answer. “Let me see if I can recite this correctly.” His hands were lying palms up in his lap. He studied them as if reading a book. “It’s from Daniel. He said, ‘In the time of the end many shall run to and fro’, uh ... and, uh ... ‘knowledge shall be increased’ ... ‘the wise shall understand, but none of the wicked shall understand.’”

“Ah, so ... ‘cause I don’t understand I must be one of the wicked ones.”

He watched the road without comment.

“So, help me become un-wicked and wise. I don’t understand this running ‘to and fro’ business.”

“The prophecy is being fulfilled before our eyes. Today. It’s a more satisfactory explanation of our enlightenment and technical progress than the Evolution Theory. Everyone travels. Everyone is mobile. Everything is confused. Everyone seems a little crazy. The whole world is ‘running to and fro’. In spite of all our so called progress there has been an increase in world-wide poverty and hunger.” Burt’s voice filled with ardor. He was like some traveling preacher doing the “fire and brimstone” thing.

A whole array of thoughts sizzled through my mind. Burt went on.

“Here we are, ‘running’ at sixty miles an hour.” He indicated the steering wheel.

I didn’t have time to respond.

“Most people in this century have traveled more miles than all our ancestors combined, all

the way back to Adam.”

Again he didn’t give me a chance to respond.

“The Lord’s revelation to Daniel proclaimed that ‘knowledge shall be increased’. The present information explosion is not the result of Evolution, but the result of Divine interposition. Just one of the features proclaimed for this ‘Day of Preparation’ ... making ready for the Millennial Kingdom.”

“The End of the World again,” I blurted, attempting to stop his flow.

“No. It is not the end of the world. Only for those not selected. Those who have chosen the narrow path will be welcomed into the new Paradise on Earth.” He took a deep breath, almost a sigh of exasperation.

“What’ll happen to those who don’t choose this narrow path?”

“They ... or, I should say, their souls ... will die.” Unemotional. Factual. He said flatly, “They will not see the Millennial Kingdom.”

“So the wicked will just ... fall off the Edge of the World?”

“I don’t understand.” I could tell he was looking at me as I kept my eyes on the road.

“Well ... look, it only makes sense.” I was getting nasty now. “If you still believe in Adam and Eve, and a new Paradise on Earth, you probably still believe the Earth is flat. Makes sense. There’s only one place for the wicked to go. Over the edge.”

He turned to face the front of the truck, huddled up against his door. While the miles clicked by, his walnut brown eyes looked forward, scanning the horizon, watching for The Edge of the World.

...

We ran out of gas a mile from nothing.

“Sure know how to pick my spots.”

“Yup” was all Burt could muster.

My eyes traced the tight curve of highway as it climbed toward its cut through weathered granite at the pass. “Glad it’s not a flat.”

Burt looked at me, eyes narrowed. “Do we have extra gas?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Do we have a spare tire?”

“Sure. Of course.”

“Then it would be better if we had a flat.” He crossed his arms. We watched a station wagon cruise by, indifferent to our plight.

“I dunno,” I argued, “at this steep grade it’d be hard to jack this baby. Especially pulling a trailer.” I opened my door and climbed out.

“What’s up?” Dave inquired, as he and Stu approached from their truck, parked close behind.

“Outta gas,” I shrugged.

“Damn, man! You should have filled when we did.” Dave shook his head.

“Hey, the gauge read a quarter full.” I pointed toward the cab. “Damn thing’s screwed up.”



I heard Burt's door slam as Walt arrived. "It's obvious the tank's dry ... the stupid gauge still reads a quarter."

"Yeah. But if you got gas back there we wouldn't be standing here." Dave kicked loose gravel to emphasize his point.

We all stepped back as a fast moving van zipped past.

"Not used to pulling trailers." I glared at the twenty foot Empire hitched to my truck. "Didn't wanna back this rig across the highway." I gestured as another car swooshed by. "Wasn't sure I could maneuver without creaming that pump."

"Trailer rookie," Walt smirked. "We would've backed it for yuh."

I felt my face redden. "Didn't consider that."

"Well, hell. What's done's done," Stu spoke in his earthy Tennessee twang. "If that gauge's shot, this here truck's gonna keep you guessin' the rest uh the summer."

I shook my head. "What a pain." Staring off down the highway, "Did we bring extra gas?"

"Got those Jerry cans," Walt volunteered, "but they're empty."

"Yeah ... we were gonna fill'em once we got to Gabbs." Stu looked at Dave.

"Uh ... yeah ... well ... anybody drive this road before," Dave questioned sheepishly.

No positive response.

"Wonder what's on the other side of this pass?" He looked along the road.

"Nothing," Burt volunteered. "I just checked the map. There's nothing between here and Wickieup."

"How far's Wickieup," I asked.

"I don't know," Burt apologized. "It looked like a ways."

"Is it big enough to have a gas station?" Stu wondered. "With our luck, probably not." He answered himself and started toward his truck. "There's gotta be somethin' to siphon with."

"Hey," Dave's eyes flashed, "we've got that pump gizmo from SaveMart. This is exactly what it's for." He jogged to the Airstream behind Stu's pick-up and dug around in an outside storage compartment. He came back tearing at a plastic bag. "This might do the trick. Get one of those Jerry cans."

Burt pulled a red five-gallon gas can from among the equipment. Walt took it from him and screwed off the cap. "Shit! There's no spout. I thought all these cans had spouts."

"I'll see if the other's got one." Stu examined it, shook his head. "Nope. This fella ain't got one neither."

We stood there for a moment looking at the gaping mouths of the red containers.

"No way. That openin'll spill gas from here to Tucson." Stu rummaged some more. "Gotta be a funnel somewhere." He looked at Walt. "See if you can find somethin' back with the bikes." There were two Kawasaki dirt bikes strapped to the bed of Stu's truck.

Walt walked off. The rest of us scattered and began searching through storage compartments and equipment boxes. Nothing.

"Damnit to hell!" Stu shoved his hands into his pockets. "There's gotta be some way."

Again we stood helplessly watching as a string of cars moved by, up the highway, and over the pass. One by one their road noise was muffled by the weathered stone.

"You guys could drive on to Wickieup, or find the next station," I suggested. "Fill up those

cans ... buy or borrow a funnel ... drive back.”

“Naw,” Dave sighed, “like Burt said, there’s nothing out there.” Demonstrating his pioneer spirit he added, “We can do this.”

“Well, hell. I guess our only choice is to make a funnel.” Stu pulled his hands from his pockets and shaped a rectangle in the air. “Anybody see any cardboard or heavy paper around?”

Burt blurted, “Wait a minute.” He went to the cab and retrieved his day pack. He dug around and pulled out a note pad with a glossy cover sheet. He tore it from the pad and handed it to Stu.

“Guess this’ll hafta do.” Stu rolled the sheet into a tight cone.

“Chris, grab that bucket.” Dave pointed to a plastic container. “We’ll use that instead of a Jerry can.”

By now Dave had assembled the pump and inserted the hose into the tank of Stu’s truck. I set the small bucket at his feet. With the open end over the bucket he began squeezing the accordion pump. Nothing.

Walt took a turn. Nothing.

Stu checked over the connections. Nothing.

Burt read the instructions. Nothing.

I finally conceded. “Look’s like it’ll hafta be the old fashioned way.” I disconnected the hose from the pump, preparing myself for a mouthful of high octane.

Dave stepped forward, “I’ll do it.”

“Hey ... no way, it’s my truck. I fucked-up. I should be the one with gasoline breath.”

“No, I didn’t fill the Jerry cans. I’ll do it. Really.” He took the hose from my hand. “I’ve done this a lot.” He winked. “Had to pay my way through school.”

Walt laughed.

I chuckled, “If you wanna be the sucker, that’s fine with me.”

“I’d much rather be the suckee.” Dave grinned.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” I backed away in mock terror. “Just get the job done.”

“No problem. I know how to do this without getting it in my mouth.”

“If you do,” Stu warned, “just don’t swallow.”

“Hey, that’s what I told her last night,” Walt laughed again. “Just don’t swallow.”

And, of course, Dave’s first drag on the hose produced a mouth-full of gasoline. He spit it into the bucket and was able to keep the flow coming.

With Stu’s make-shift funnel we lost more gas onto the pavement and ourselves than we were able to pour into my tank. It was a good thing none of us smoked. Yet somehow, through perseverance and Dave’s retching, we were able to get enough transferred to be satisfied it would get us to the next pump.

With our sophisticated equipment stowed, we cleaned up as best we could and were ready for the road. My truck wasn’t. It wouldn’t start. Nothing. Everyone climbed back out and took their turn playing with the key, looking at the engine, poking the battery, and wiggling the wires. Completely dead.

“It’s like the battery’s been drained,” Dave puzzled, “but it sparks.”

“Bastard engine just won’t turn over.” Walt backed away.

Just as we were about to give up, a pale blue BMW pulled to a stop on the far shoulder. It was something from a television commercial.

“Troubles?”

“Damn engine won’t turn over.” I threw my thumb over my shoulder.

“We’re pro mechanics. We’ll see what we can do. Might be nothing.”

They jumped out of their car wearing nice slacks and white pin-striped shirts. One slipped under the truck with no regard for his clothes. He found the problem immediately.

“Somebody’s got the starter switch wired to the clutch.”

“Strange,” the other said.

“You guys have jumper cables,” the one yelled from below.

“If you have jumper cables,” the one above explained, “we’ll hook them between the battery and the starter. Should get you goin’.”

We produced a set of cables.

Bang! It cranked over.

When they disconnected the cables we thanked them, offered our first born daughters, cold beer, or a couple of bucks. They turned it all down, brushed themselves off, waved goodbye, jumped back into their “Beemer,” and drove away.

• • •

Our little caravan was again on the move. We climbed the curving road to the crest of the ridge, drove through the pass, and started down the other side. Just past the cut, about a mile from where we had stalled, was a small gas station/grocery store/antique shop with a big sign proclaiming “Nothing, Arizona.” The desolate little haven was up for sale, but open.

A “full service” station, the owner balked at selling me gas.

“You gotta turn yer engine off.” He pointed to a sign. “It’s the law.”

“I can’t. Might not start again.”

“Can’t sell you gas then.”

“Well ... what am I gonna do?”

“Turn off the engine an’ I’ll sell yuh gas.”

“But I’ve had problems getting it started. What if it won’t start again?”

He just shrugged while he topped off the tank on Stu’s truck.

Walt strolled by, sucking a popsicle. “Shoot, turn the son-of-a-bitch off. There’s plenty of room here.” He indicated the large gravel covered lot with the end of his popsicle. “If the bastard doesn’t start we’ll just hafta spend the night camped here. Plenty room along that fence for the other bikes.”

The owner suddenly became more attentive. He cautiously looked from face to face. He saw long hair, beards, scruffy dusty clothes. I watched as his eyes rested upon the Kawasaki strapped in the back of Stu’s truck. I was convinced he had visions of black leather and silver chains.

I got my gas, bought a cold soda, and as we pulled away I yelled out, “Thanks for Nothing.” And there was, as Burt had predicted, almost nothing between us and Las Vegas.

• • •

Almost. We approached from the south, along the rugged slopes and desolate cliffs of the Colorado. We caught glimpses of the river to our left, down through roughly eroded brown scars.

The Sun had just dropped below the rim of the mountains, sky becoming pastel pink and purple with yellow streaks and a bright glow radiating from the place where Old Sol was hidden. The effect was psychedelic. Everything was given an eerie, surrealistic texture. The road became pink ribbon weaving in and out of crimson ridges, up and down golden bluffs. We had been on the road for maybe too long without a break. Time for a rest, with Vegas still over thirty miles away.

I am not sure Burt saw anything but God. And it was, in its way, a religious experience. One of those visions that is difficult to explain over beer and pizza in a small town bar. The setting was too complex and the mood too subtle to recreate effectively. The images lodge sideways in a mind and stick for the rest of one's life.

With all of this radiant pastel darkness sinking around us we began to ascend a steep cut on a curve. Then BLAMM! The End of the World! The Edge ... no, no ... not yet. Just a bright light stinging out of the dusk. Transparent red, pink, white flaring from four or five points along the pavement. *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*, or something from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Traveling at highway speeds, climbing, coming around a sharp curve at sunset with my mind fried from desert travel and a glorious cosmic sunset, it was hard to reckon with a jack-knifed semi, a Highway Patrol unit with all lights flashing, and a full set of warning flares smoking at full throttle. Whew!

Then ... as I regained control of the Ford and my brain, right as we passed the semi, we crested the saddle and were hit with hundreds of naked white lights and their shimmering reflections. Below us hunkered "The Dam" and its seething reservoir. The whole scene in deep blackness but for strings of naked bulbs wired to the fortification and its towers. It was like descending into the Devil's pit. Burt must have left a load in his pants as we began our descent. We fell off The Edge of the World and into one of those surrealistic night scenes from *Apocalypse Now*. A feeling of desolate coldness pervaded.

"Looks like a roller coaster, Burt. Hope we make it to the other side. Here we go! Good luck! Nice knowing you, buddy."

• • •

The dam rises more than 725 feet from bedrock. The two-lane highway along the crest is 1,244 feet long. The dam is 660 feet thick at its base, tapering to a mere 45 feet at the top. Three and a quarter million cubic yards of concrete and several lives were required for construction. Boulder Dam, in its day the greatest reclamation project in the world, was built for the control and utilization of the waters of the turbulent Colorado. Now that the river is caged in Lake Mead reservoir they think they have tamed it. It's still a wild animal raging to escape. And it will, one day. It will free itself with the help of time. That is one thing Man cannot conquer.

• • •

Black Canyon, an appropriate name, and it was—with the exception of those white lights dangling from towers and lines—a deep dark hole. The going down wasn't too bad; a lot of twisting, winding road. But then we faced the straight shot across the crest of the dam.

"You know, Burt, no matter how long a dam's been in place, no matter how many times I've driven or walked across dams, I still get this queasy feeling that the thing's gonna give way while I'm crossing."

"Scared of heights?"

"Mmm ... I don't know. A little, maybe. I come from the flatlands." I held the wheel tightly. "High bridges across chasms are bad enough, but a dam not only crosses a river, it holds it back." I was getting melodramatic again. "An angry churning beast vigilantly awaiting its chance to break free. Think of the pressure, the awesome numbers, the tons of water pressing against a relatively fragile man-made structure."

I took a quick glance to see if he was responding. He was looking to the right, through the window, at the blackness that was Lake Mead.

"Then think of our highways and streets and the condition they're in. If we can't even pave a road right, how can we be so self-assured a monumental structure like a dam is safe?"

Still nothing from Burt.

"The thought always lingers, when I cross, that there must be a flaw somewhere, some microscopic fracture, just ready to give way. It's just waiting for my weight and for me to be positioned at a crucial point where escape is impossible. Creak, crack, pop! Swoosh! A free voyage to the Sea of Cortez."

"I have more faith than you." He spoke nonchalantly.

I let his comment pass. "They have sensing devices, right? They must monitor stress and tension and a hundred other engineering factors to determine the reliability of such a huge structure. It must be safe. It's operated by the Bureau of Reclamation. They allow people ... tourists even ... to go down inside this thing on a daily basis. They wouldn't let tourists inside if they might be crushed by tons of raging water and shattered concrete, would they? That would be bad press."

One of my best hysterical performances and Burt sat there numbly peering at the darkness.

"Ah, yeah, guess you're right, there, old buddy." I turned toward him. "This is America. Nineteen-eighty. Who cares?" The front wheels rolled onto the dam. I howled, "Holy Shit! Let me get across just one last time." A twenty foot rental truck was the only other vehicle on the dam, heading our way. I hugged the right to squeeze the trailer past the big box.

And so we passed the first concrete tower, the one faced with a big round disk of a clock denoting Arizona time; Mountain Standard Time. Somewhere between the two towers we crossed the state line. Suddenly we were in Nevada, the Silver State, the state of sin and corruption, legal gambling, and prostitution. No wonder we had to cross that dark, satanic chasm to enter. It was like Charon guiding Odysseus across the River Styx. Hades awaited our arrival in the Underworld. Then we passed the second tower with its clock nonchalantly denoting the evil hour in Nevada; Pacific Standard Time. I wondered what trembled through Burt's holy mind.

• • •

We struggled out of that hole with the six banger threatening to choke. But with persistence we made it into Las Vegas. We found Randy Langan waiting for us at our motel. After a brief welcome and a quick review of our day's events, Randy turned to Dave.

"Failed your urine test, buddy boy. When you took your physical." He handed Dave an envelope. We all sat stunned. Dave's face turned red. "Ah," Randy smiled, "don't worry. Got you scheduled at a clinic here in Vegas. Late morning. You'll hafta pee in the cup again. That's all." He pointed toward the envelope in Dave's hand. "Address and bus tickets. Use a cab to get around. You've got cash?"

"Yeah."

"Good. We'll pick you up in Luning day after tomorrow. I'll call you tomorrow night to make sure everything went okay." I could tell Randy enjoyed this sort of torment.

"Jesus, man, you had me scared there for a minute." Dave still looked scared. "What's the problem?"

"Don't know. They just told me you'd hafta take the piss test again."

"Better do some studying tonight." I couldn't help myself.

"Yeah," was all Dave could say. "Wish it was that simple."

Stu, who had known Dave in school, chided, "Doin' a little grass again? Tsk-tsk."

Dave started to respond, but held back.

"Hey," I wondered, "does gasoline show up in urine specimens?"

That broke the tension and we explained the inside joke to Randy.

• • •

We ate a quick dinner, then strolled down The Strip. Most of us had never been to Vegas. Burt surprised me when he told us that he had.

"I was a senior in high school. My father attended a convention here for high school principals. He brought my mother and me."

"For spiritual sustenance," I prodded.

He hesitated. "No, for a vacation."

I was feeling ornery. "I'm sure it was to keep him guided down the proper path." I gestured toward the glittering lights on all sides. "After all, a lonely Christian in Sin City, no matter how well intentioned, might be coaxed into straying from the straight and narrow."

He clammed up and didn't say a word in my presence the rest of the night.

We found ourselves standing near the entrance to Caesar's Palace. Stu said, "Let's take a look."

"They won't let us in, will they?" I looked at my attire.

We checked each other out. Walt said, "We look like escapees from the desert."

"They want our money," Randy assured us. "They don't care what we look like. As long as we don't stink or raise too much hell."

So we went in, ogled the leggy waitresses dressed in cream colored togas, strolled through

the lobby and into the main casino area, were awed by the glitz and tinsel and mirrors and lights and all the fancy people breathing stale smoke, then we left.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ve seen Vegas. What’s next?”

^^^

Early on the morning of our second day Burt pulled a geology text from his day-pack, flipped pages until he found his subject, and settled back.

Spotting opportunity, I asked, “What you reading?”

He sighed. “Leet and Judson.”

Turkey. I could see that. I’m readin’ uh book. Duh!

“I mean, what’re you reading about?” I gave him a break.

“Quartz monzonite deposits in the Great Basin.”

“Oh. Sound’s profound.”

“No. Just refreshing my memory. We covered Great Basin geology Fall semester. Just reviewing.”

“That’s good. I suppose you’ll need it this summer?”

“Yes.”

Oh yeah. Real stimulating conversation. I let him go back to his book, concerning myself with the road and the potential for suddenly coming upon The Edge of the World.

...

“You know ...” I interrupted his reading, “Guy mentioned that book.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, at his little get together, you know, a couple weeks ago.”

“I wasn’t able to make it. I had choir practice.”

“Too bad, we had a good time. Mostly talked up what you guys are gonna do in Gabbs. Preliminary stuff, you know. I’m sure they went over that with you.”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“I’m sure Randy and Neil will cover it again in the field.”

“It’s all pretty basic.” His well manicured finger marked his place in the text.

“Guy tell you about his dog?”

“No,” uninterested, “he didn’t say anything about a dog.”

“Yeah. Sonar.”

Submitting to the inevitable, “What about this dog?”

“It was a warm Sunday afternoon. Real pleasant. Guy has a typical Southwestern home; Santa Fe style adobe brick and wood. He’s converted his backyard into a shady patio. Has a definite Mexican flair.”

“I thought this was about his dog?”

“Uh, yeah ... it is.”

He sat smugly in his corner of the cab.

“Sonar greeted each of us with barks and snarls. He’s a small, shaggy critter. Some real hyper mixed breed. Anyway, he’d rip around in an arc, darting in, stopping inches from our feet, then bounding away. Yipping and yapping in a real frenzy.” I imitated a small dog’s bark.

Without turning his head Burt eyed me, trying to decide if he should attempt escape now or wait until I stopped somewhere.

“Guy was the only one who could calm Sonar. His wife, Maria, tried. No dice. His son, Denny, chased him around, stirring him up even more. But when Guy commanded silence, Sonar melted into the grass and shut up. But his eyes were alive, watching every motion. His ears cocked when we spoke. A hand to a face, a leg flexed or shuffled, a stretch toward a nacho or Coors, and we’d stir a shallow growl.”

Burt could care less, but I had come too far to stop.

“Whenever someone arrived he’d go off on another round of yapping. Sonar would race to the bell, leaping and barking, pawing and romping, with Guy quick to his feet and firm in his command to quiet. And, of course, Guy would then lace his greetings with apologies.”

I glanced at Burt again. He was staring through the windshield at a horizon he hoped was not The Edge of the World.

“Guy would say, ‘Don’t mind the dog. He won’t bite. Does this to everyone. Just his breeding.’ But then, of course, there would be more snarls and yapping. ‘Quiet, Sonar!’ And again the dog would melt into the grass, his internal growls a distant thunder.”

I paused for a moment as a semi passed on my left side. The open road hadn’t brought any better performance from the six-banger. I had been fighting its gutless nature since we had hitched up the trailer. Once the big truck merged right I continued.

“This bark-command-silence pattern worked for everyone except Rob.”

“Rob?”

“Yeah, Rob Spurrier.”

“I haven’t met him.”

“Oh. Kinda looks like a young Mark Twain. I guess he’ll be up in a couple of weeks. Had to finish field camp or something. Should be interesting once he gets out here. Seemed like a lot of fun. Kinda crazy and weird.”

Burt’s face said, “Look who’s talking.”

I went on. “For some reason Rob stimulated some deep seated instinct. Some innate drive. Maybe it was some territorial imperative. Maybe it was Rob’s cologne. Whatever, Sonar was suddenly his master’s protector. He sat at Guy’s feet and would spring forward in a vicious snarl, just short of biting, whenever Rob moved an arm, a leg, or his head. But especially when Rob spoke. And Sonar no longer responded to Guy’s commands. He growled and pounced, sprang from side to side, charged and retreated in some primal warning.”

Finally Burt said, “How did this Rob react?”

“He took it pretty well, joking about it, but you could tell he was annoyed. He had this funny, almost sinister, grin on his face, like he wanted to strangle the mutt. He tried to make



friends, but almost got his hand bit.”

“Some dogs don’t like certain people.”

“Was obvious that day. Almost like Sonar knew something. Trying to say, ‘Boss, boss ... can’t you see, can’t you see? Smell this. Danger! Watch out! Don’t move.’”

“What did Guy do?”

“He finally quit laughing, hounded Sonar into the house, and trotted back to the lawn chairs around the cooler of Coors and the platter of nachos. With no more arrivals Sonar whimpered alone in the kitchen.”

Burt didn’t comment.

“Was pretty funny.”

No response.

“Guess you had to be there.” I let him go back to his reading.

• • •

About mid-morning Burt put down his text and stretched a bit. By then I was ready to say anything to stimulate conversation.

“Say, you know, I was thinking.” This stuff just pops into my head. “You’re the youngest guy on this crew. I’m the oldest. We should stick together. You know? Like when the other guys start in on one of us for whatever reason. Bound to happen. I’d be kind of like your big brother and confidant.”

His eyes locked on mine, deliberate, like I was talking horse shit. “I’m not sure I need a ‘Big Brother’.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

He was consciously slow to respond. “No.”

“Well? See? Maybe you need somebody older and wiser to guide you through the pitfalls, trials, and tribulations that potentially await us in this sort of venture.” I get so melodramatic at times. “I’ve been here before, so to speak.”

He stared at me, with a half-smile, trying to figure exactly how this old freak could help him—a Born Again Christian, the Seeker of Truth, the Lord’s Servant, the Kid from Burbank, California.

I turned back to the white line pointing toward The Edge.

• • •

I’ve come to realize that that day was a typical drive through desert scrub and barren mountains. Everything has a dull sameness. My first impression was one of nothingness; so open, so empty. It all looks so worthless. No wonder the government tested atomic bombs there.

That was my first exposure to the Great Basin. In spite of the “dead” look I was impressed by the endless ranges paralleling the highway. I grew up on the prairies of Nebraska, so all mountains seem spectacular. Yet Nevada’s are particularly interesting because they have such sparse vegetation covering their slopes, even compared to the Sonoran foothills around Tucson.

It's as if, without vegetation, without the flesh, we can see the exposed skeletal structure of the Earth.

In the Sonoran desert the lower slopes are covered by saguaro, ocotillo, palo verde, and a variety of cacti. Here, in Nevada, the basins and lower ranges are covered by low growing sage, ephedra, and a few scattered grasses. On the slopes there are juniper and pinyon and even some pine on the higher peaks. The color is more of a gray or faded green than a true verdant green, with bare rock between. Yet the area has its own beauty in a subtle, essential, bare bones sort of way.

Early in the season many ranges are still snow capped, especially those higher ranges to the west, like the Spring Mountains and the White Mountains farther north. It makes a beautiful contrast to the stark browns and grays of the desert floor and gives everything depth. The sky is a sharp blue with no clouds and reveals a richness only seen in areas of low humidity with only slight air pollution.

• • •

The scenery became repetitive. Burt pulled out a brochure he had picked up in the motel lobby. It was published by the Nevada State Historical Society and was full of tidbits about the region. After a bit of prompting he related a few highlights.

He read, "'The Great Basin encompasses two-hundred-and-ten thousand square miles and runs eight-hundred miles north to south and five-hundred-and-seventy-two miles east to west.'"

"Lot of land."

"It says 'This Intermountain Region includes a small portion of eastern Washington, central and southeastern Oregon, southern Idaho, most of Nevada and Utah, and a small portion of western Colorado and northern Arizona.'"

"Hits them all, huh?"

"I've read somewhere that parts of Death Valley are in the Great Basin as well."

"Why they call it 'The Great Basin'?"

"Let me see." He scanned the brochure. "It says 'The Great Basin consists of a series of more than one-hundred undrained basins separated by north-south trending mountains.' Uh ... most of the ranges are 'fifty to seventy-five miles long and roughly six to fifteen miles wide. Some peak at over ten thousand feet in elevation.'"

"Ah hah! That's why they call this basin and range topography."

"Yes, that makes sense." He put down the brochure for a moment. "I believe all these basins have internal drainage. None of the precipitation in the Great Basin makes its way to a river that drains into an ocean."

"It's all self-contained. Huh." I pondered that for a minute. "If all that moisture stays in the basin why does it look so dry here?"

He read more. "Uhm ... well, it's the northern most desert in North America, and the largest. It only gets four to eleven inches of precipitation per year. That's pretty dry. It's a high, cold, desert. Mostly above four thousand feet in elevation. It snows in the winter."

"So what they're saying is all the moisture stays but there's so little it really doesn't count."

What would this place look like if it drained to the sea?”

Burt just shrugged and read on. “The portion of the Great Basin that is now Nevada was originally part of Spanish America.”

“I knew California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas were once controlled by the Spaniards, but I didn’t know they had gotten this far north and east.” My interruption didn’t seem to phase him.

“Then, from 1820, Nevada was part of Mexico. It says that ‘After our war with Mexico and the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, in 1848, the northern portions of Nevada became part of the Utah Territory, while southern Nevada belonged to the Territory of New Mexico. The actual Territory of Nevada was organized in 1861 and became a state in 1864.’”

“Guadalupe-Hidalgo ... I’ve read about that.” I had to impress him with my knowledge of history. “I think we went to war with Mexico using Texas as an excuse so that we could gain California and its harbors on the Pacific. New Mexico, Arizona, and I guess Nevada, were sort of an unexpected bonus. 1846 ... an interesting year. A lot went down in those twelve months.”

Burt mumbled, “I haven’t studied much history.”

“Why not?”

“It was always boring. The text books are so dry.”

“You can read geology, but you can’t read history?”

“Yes. Besides, how do they really know what went on?” He looked at me for a moment. I thought he was going to continue. Nothing.

“The same way historical geologists know what went on with the Earth.” I glanced over. “You hafta get away from those text books. Read real historians. Their writing is more interesting. Some are so good you feel you’re reading a novel.” He didn’t seem convinced. “Like geologists, they look at bits and pieces. They put things together by doing research, studying letters, diaries, notes, historians of the period—some use archaeological evidence. I think they can usually formulate a pretty good idea of what went on.”

Burt had looked away and was again studying the brochure. “The name of the state comes from the Spanish ‘Sierra Nevada’, referring to the mountains to the west.”

“In California.”

“Yes.”

“That’s strange.”

“Maybe not. ‘Sierra’ means mountain; ‘nevada’ means snow or snow field.” He screwed up his face and looked out the window.

“Maybe yes. Unusual name for a barren, desert waste. I think of snow fields in Alaska or Canada, not Nevada.” Burt and I finally agreed on something.

His face lit up. “It says, in the late 1850s, gold and silver was discovered in the western part of the state.”

“That’s where we’re heading.”

“Yes. You’ll like this. It says that mining is the major part of Nevada’s history. Prospectors from California and the east ‘swarmed into the area and bounded from one strike to another in the hopes of striking it rich.’”

“Yeah. I like that,” I said. “Kind of like what we’ll be doing. ‘Swarming’ and ‘bounding’

from one strike to another, one old dump to another, collecting samples from what those old farts left behind.” I was fascinated. We were continuing a tradition. “I’ll bet there are as many old claim posts scattered over these ranges as there are trees.”

Burt seemed to grasp what I was saying. At least he shook his head and smiled. That was more positive response than I had gotten since we left Tucson.

I motioned toward the scenery moving by, “Randy told me the topography is pock-marked by thousands of prospects, played-out mines, and the remains of abandoned camps and boom towns.” Burt and I were finally on the same wave length. He was listening to what I was saying. “He said almost everywhere you look you can find an old adit, shaft, pit, or weathered dump.”

Burt contemplated the scenery, then found more interesting information. “It says that ‘Approximately eighty-two percent of the territory is owned or controlled by the Federal Government under the supervision of either the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, or the military.’”

“Whew! That’s a lot of Federal land.” It was my turn to look more closely at the scenery. “You know, this may be one of the last open places in the states. The last frontier. I wonder if it’s open for homesteading?”

Burt shrugged as we both pondered the possibility of free land.

“I wonder if it’s open for public use?”

Burt smiled. “Here’s your answer. It says that this is open range, mostly unfenced, ‘where a person can pull over anywhere, pitch a tent or throw down a sleeping bag, and spend a night or a week without being disturbed.’” He turned to me as if to say the people who had written this brochure had read my mind. A wonderful smile crossed his face.

He continued. “‘The area is so vast and the population so small that a person, if they wished, could spend weeks in the back country without seeing another human.’”

“A nice thought.” It was my turn to face him and smile.

• • •

The sign read “MERCURY.”

Looking down into that basin from the highway on its shoulder I could see only a few large boxy buildings and a long concrete air strip. Obviously a government installation of some importance. In fact, as we passed, a heavy propeller driven military transport rumbled right over our vehicle, preparing to land.

“Heard that name somewhere before,” I muttered, mostly to myself. But for the life of me I could not recall its significance. Then, a few barren desert miles later, I remembered. “Of course! Mercury’s the underground nuclear test site.”

The actual tests were conducted at nearby Frenchman Flat, a dry lake bed known to geologists as a playa. Mercury, itself, is a planned community built by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1953 to house civilian personnel working on Atomic Energy Commission projects.

“There’s another historical spot that looks bland and everyday.” I pointed back over my shoulder.

“It is certainly bland,” Burt commented, “but I don’t know about everyday.”

I caught what he meant. “Yet,” I pondered out loud, “there’s some awesome feeling emanating from that place. Like at Hoover Dam. You know what I mean?”

He obviously didn’t.

“Energy’s being harnessed and manipulated in both places. The wild beast of Nature is being corralled and ‘tamed’ to suit Man’s needs.”

“We do need electricity. Power.”

“Right, both are, supposedly, for ‘good’.”

“Yes.”

“Yet each harbor’s underlying negative aspects.”

“How’s that?”

“To make electricity we destroy a river and its canyons. To harness the atom we destroy subterranean geomorphology and spread radioactive particles throughout the atmosphere.”

“But that’s our right,” he said earnestly. “We are obligated to harness Nature. It’s here for our benefit.”

“Oh-oh,” I thought. “You’re kidding, right?” I looked him square in the face. “You really believe that?”

Burt went into his ‘good Christian’ mode. “The Bible says ... in Deuteronomy ... that God set Man over the works of his hands: the beast of the field, the fish of the sea, and the fowl of heaven. He made us the ruler over them all, giving to Man the dominion of the earth.”

I watched the dismal gray pavement bend toward the horizon. The Edge of the World seemed close. “Yeah ... well, it’s exactly that attitude that’s gotten us into this environmental mess we’re struggling with now. We act like we own everything, abuse it, and throw it away. I’d think ‘dominion’ would imply management for the long haul rather than dominance and mass consumption.”

“It is ours to use as we see fit. None of this will matter once the Millennial Kingdom arrives.”

“That’s right. Just toss the garbage off the old Edge of the World.”

He didn’t respond, but I could see color rising along his neck. This Edge of the World business was a real ‘button’ with him. And to be honest, I enjoyed pushing it. But I could also see where this line of thought was leading, and I wasn’t in the mood to travel down that twisted road with Burt. “Well ... anyway, both projects are somewhat frightening and incomprehensible in their scope. Perhaps that was the feeling I picked up. Man toying with the mighty forces of Nature and the Universe.”

We both let it drop.

...

“Look,” I saw it first. “A house of ill repute.” It was the first for each of us. Located near Lathrop Wells, it was a simple single-wide trailer parked not far off the road. It had a small sign and a gravel parking lot. “Looks temporary.”

“Yes, but it has an airport.” Burt seemed interested.

And he was right. The place had a short dirt runway with a lonely, limp, wind sock. “Customers must fly up from Vegas or over from California. A fellow would hafta be pretty desperate to go through all that just to get laid.”

• • •

A while later, as the miles wore on and my mind wandered, I said, “Hey, Burt ... see all those insects hitting the windshield?” We were passing through a swarm of what looked like Mayflies.

He seemed to come out of a trance, looked carefully at the windshield, said “Yes.”

“Did you ever wonder what’s the last thing to go through a bug’s tiny brain when it hits the glass?”

He was silent for a moment. “No. I’ve never pondered such a thing.”

“Well, what do you think’s the last thing to go through a bug’s brain when it hits the windshield?”

“I ... what?”

“Its ass hole!”

He looked away, sure, I’m sure, once again, that we must have fallen off The Edge of the World when we crossed Hoover Dam.

• • •

Near Scotty’s Junction, Nevada’s northernmost entrance to Death Valley, we saw our second recognizable whore house. The sign out front announced “The Cottontail Ranch.” This was an elaborate affair, with several buildings, trees, a high wooden fence between the structures and the road, and, a dirt runway with a lonely, limp, wind sock.

Burt didn’t commented, but I got the feeling he said a silent prayer for the wayward girls, abused women, and the poor bunnies who inhabited such places.

• • •

We stopped in Tonopah for lunch, munched burgers at a restaurant attached to the Golden Roads Motel on the southern edge of town, paid our bill, and left.

Before I got to my truck Randy pulled me aside. “Chris, your piece of crap’s slowing down the whole caravan.” He took on the air of a Crew Chief. “Gonna talk with Barber when I’m back. Gave us a bum truck.” James Barber was the Head Geologist back in Tucson. He signed our checks. “I’m gonna send the others on ahead.”

“Fine, whatever you think.”

“I’ll hold back with you ... in case there’s a problem.”

Randy turned to Burt. “You wanna stay back with Chris or go on ahead with the others?”

Burt didn’t take long to make his decision. He gathered his things, threw them into the back of Stu’s truck, and squeezed into the cab.

“Like a rat fleeing a sinking ship,” I mumbled to Randy.

Off we went. And though Randy was right there in front of me, I experienced a pang of loneliness; a sense of being left behind.

• • •

Much later, as we crossed the railroad tracks north of Luning and headed up 361 toward Gabbs, I was impressed by the long sloping highway climbing steadily into the Gabbs Valley Range. It just seemed to go on forever. Ascending, the Ford, as expected, worked harder and harder to make the grade. I shifted down into second almost immediately. The truck still chugged along, wanting to buck. I noticed mile posts along the side of the road, marking my progress. I made it to mile post five before I had to shift down into first gear. That scared me. I didn’t know if this machine was going to have enough oomph to pull the trailer over the pass. It was a straight, steady climb. We were nowhere near the canyons I could see looming ahead.

Somehow the damned thing made it. With sweating palms I entered the curving highway of the canyons and eventually pulled over the top and into the Gabbs Valley. From there it was gently sweeping curves contouring along generally down trending slopes. Although the Ford was painfully under powered, it did the job.

^^^

Dave threw his bag in the back of the truck and climbed into the cab. “Been waitin’ long?”

“Naw, just got here.” I turned the key in the ignition, pushed the six-banger into gear, and we rolled away from the Luning Post Office and LTR Bus Depot. “How was your vacation?”

“Huh! Some vacation.” Dave laughed. “That bus was a trip alright. Like the whole damn family crowded into a Pinto in the middle of July.”

“What’s wrong, no lookers?”

“Nope,” he moaned soberly, “not even a fat one with a pretty face.”

“Or an ugly one with a great bod?”

“Nope. Just squirming kids and crying brats.”

“Why, Dave, you don’t seem too pleased.”

“Aw, the whole deal was a waste of time. Sitting around that clinic reading Ladies Home Journal while waiting to piss in a cup is not my idea of how to spend a day in Vegas.”

“You pass?”

“Won’t know for a few days.” He looked up the highway toward the Gabbs’ Incline, as I called it. “Quite a road, there.”

“Yeah. Bit of a challenge for this old buggy.” I patted the steering wheel. “Made it to mile post five yesterday. Before down shifting to first.” I had the accelerator floored. “Should make it farther without the damn trailer.”

“How far to Gabbs?”

“Thirty miles. Hawthorne’s back thirty miles that way.” I pointed toward the north.

“Hawthorne pretty big?”

“Bigger than Gabbs. Got an airport. Just dropped Neil off.”

“Flying back to Tucson?”

“Yup.”

“What for?”

“He and Randy rotate. Ten days on, four days off. NORMMEX flies them back for R’n’R. Guess he’d been out ten days already.”

“Geez ... and we have six weeks before we go back.”

“Executive privilege, I guess.”

“Yeah, right.” Dave leaned forward and flipped on the radio. “Anything good out here?”

“During the day, nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing.” I pointed toward the scenery. “Out here, in the middle of nowhere, and we can’t even get a country station.”

“Might be a blessing. Anything at night?”

“Picked up a soft rock station out of Boise last night. Not too bad. Nothing to wait up for.”

“Shit! Good thing we brought our own tapes and players. I’d go nuts without tunes.”

“Wouldn’t we all?”

Dave gave up scanning the frequencies and turned off the static. “So, what’s the story since I’ve been gone?” He leaned against the door and faced me.

“Set up, mostly.” The truck gained a little momentum. “Made sure the trailers work. Stuff like that.”

“Where am I staying?”

“Put you in the Gabbs’ Motel.”

“What’re the rooms like?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen one yet. Can’t be any worse than the trailers, though.” I could feel the engine working harder, straining, beginning to falter.

“What about Gabbs?” Dave settled back into the bench seat.

“Hell, Guy told us it was small, but christ, it’s hardly a dimple in the contours.” I pointed through the windshield. “Mile post five. Set a new record. Maybe I can make six.”

“Power wagon,” Dave laughed.

“Right.” The truck responded to the back-handed compliments by slowing. I downshifted into second. It wanted to stall. I shifted into first. The engine calmed. “Damn! Can’t make it to six, even without the trailer.”

Dave laughed again. “Glad this isn’t my truck.”

“Grrr” I snarled.

...

“So, any women in Gabbs?”



“Haven’t seen any worth mentioning, but it’s too early to tell.” We made it over the top and were moving into the Gabbs Valley. “But we did meet some lookers in Tonopah.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yeah. We were exiting the restaurant and met these three chicks walking in. Walt knew one from the U.”

“Remember her name?”

“Carolyn something. Cute. Pale freckled complexion, bright eyes that smile easy. Got dark reddish-brown hair, looked about shoulder length, but was tied back in a pony-tail.”

“Yeah. I know her too. Carolyn Farris.”

“Slender, athletic build?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Seemed nice. Quiet. Kinda laid back.”

“Most of the time. But she can party.” Dave smiled knowingly. “But she’s engaged.”

“Too bad.”

“Yeah.” Dave shrugged. “So who were the other two?”

I thought for a second. “If I remember right, the brunette’s name was Denice, and the tall one was Javee. Didn’t catch the last names.”

“What they look like?”

“Well ... all three were quite attractive. Denice had a wonderful tan, very healthy skin, and dark brown eyes. And the shiniest dark brown hair I’ve ever seen.”

“Pretty?”

“You bet,” I nodded. “And she’s got one of those compact athletic bodies that seem to glow with health.”

“Sounds wonderful. Sign me up.”

“Yeah. Stand in line, I’m sure. She’s living with some geologist.”

“What about the third one?” Dave seemed eager for the details.

“Well ... she’s kind of strange. But ... well ... as attractive as the other two are, it was this Javee chick that got my attention. She’s obviously the oldest. Figure about thirty-four or -five. Tall, slender, maybe tending toward skinny, with long brown hair. Oh ... and she has this prominent silvery-gray river running’ through it.” I indicated with my hand how the lighter hairs wound through the cascade of brown.

“Sounds pretty sweet too.”

“Liked her for some reason. Has an expressive face, a weird sense of humor, and all the features a guy likes to see in a woman.” I looked at Dave. “Know what I mean?”

“You bet.” We both laughed lasciviously.

“But you know, with all that, she really doesn’t seem my type.”

“She’s a woman, isn’t she?” Dave made curves with both hands in front of him. “And she has all the necessary parts. Right?”

“Yeah. But she seems a bit flighty.”

“Jesus, man, you’re not looking to marry her or anything.”

“Oh yeah, I know. Besides, she’s already married to some geologist.”

“Another one out with her man for the summer, huh?” Dave pulled a pack of gum from his

shirt pocket.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t seem very outdoorsy.” He offered me a stick. “Naw, thanks.”

“How do you mean?” He took a stick for himself.

“Well ... she wore pastel knit shorts and some dadaist patterned blouse. Untucked. Made her look closer to a Hawaiian tourist than a western adventurer.”

“Yeah, but they don’t wear their clothes in bed.” Dave chewed heavily on his gum.

“Besides, she was a bit hyperactive. Too loud and outspoken for my tastes.”

“Oh well, you probably won’t run into her again anyway. It’s a big state.”

“You’re right.” I thought for a second, then added, “But you know ... even with her flaws ... there is something about her....”

“Told you. She’s a woman.”

“That’s for sure.”

Dave twisted restlessly in his seat. “Did Carolyn say where they were working?”

“From what I gathered it’s somewhere north of Tonopah. Town called Austin.”

“She say what company?”

“Federated Carbide, I think.”

“Hmmm ... good sized outfit.” Dave sat up straight. “Wonder what they’re looking for?”

“Don’t know,” I slowed a bit as we approached a cow standing on the shoulder of the road. “But Javee’s husband is the crew chief.”

As if he had suddenly heard enough about these women, Dave changed the subject. “There at least some trees?”

“In Gabbs?”

“Yeah.”

I formed a quick image in my mind. “Yeah. Cottonwood and elm. Just like the good ol’ Midwest.”

“At least there’ll be shade if it gets hot.” Dave seemed pleased by that.

“Don’t know,” I warned him. “Aren’t any trees where we parked the trailers.”

“Too bad. Guess we’ll hafta take refuge in the bar.”

“That’s an option, alright.”

“Sounds like Gabbs is really isolated. Who’d build a town in the middle of nowhere?”

Gabbs sits on the shoulder of the Gabbs Valley about two hundred miles east of where Nevada and California bend like lovers fallen asleep after an evening in each other’s arms.

“It’s below a magnesium mine. Guess the town grew around the work.”

“Who runs the mine?”

“There’s a big sign near the entrance. Says ‘Stokes Iron Mine and Basic Refractory operated by Basic, Inc.’”

“Never heard of them.”

“Neil told me the refractory was built during the Second World War to refine magnesium from brucite. For bombs. The main processing plant is at Henderson, near Vegas.”

“I suppose everyone works at the mine?”

“I guess,” I shrugged. “Not much else.”

• • •

Like Gabbs, the highway rides the shoulder of the Paradise Range. Below, to the west, north, and south, lies the Gabbs Valley, a bowl or dish shaped basin covering quite an area. “Look along this range.” I pointed through the windshield. “That big peak ... that’s Paradise Peak. Over eighty-six-hundred feet. Town’s just below, on that west facing slope.”

“All looks pretty barren in here. How the hell did it get a name like ‘Paradise’?”

“Probably the contrasting environments.” I pointed with my right hand as I spoke. “The relatively cool mountain peak versus the low, hot, sandy valley.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Hey, everything’s relative.”

We drove on in silence as Dave contemplated the panorama before us. Then he commented, “You know, these mountains are everywhere out here.”

“Yeah, but they’re not like the Rockies.”

“How’s that?”

“These seem more subdued, less grandiose.”

“They’re geologically different too.” Dave’s training kicked in. “These little ranges are sedimentary, and metamorphic. The Rockies are, for the most part, igneous.” He looked at me to see if I agreed. When I nodded he went on. “Each of these ranges has a massive pediment with a bajada flowing out into common basins.”

“Yeah, and for the most part, they’re barren you know, except for sage and a few other scrubby desert plants.”

“The Rockies definitely have a different vegetation type. That’s for sure.”

I nodded again. “I mean, look at the way that vegetation spreads down from the slopes and out across the distance like a patterned carpet.” I indicated the horizon.

“It’s still green,” Dave observed. “The soil must be holding moisture from the winter snows.”

“Noticed that. Suspect it won’t last.”

“What’s the town like,” Dave asked cautiously.

“You’ll see soon enough. Hate to disillusion you.”

“Shit, I was disillusioned from the time I took this job.”

“Okay. You asked.” I turned and grinned. “The houses are old, or at least look old. But the yards are fairly clean and tidy. You know, soft green lawns all fenced and shrub lined.”

“Sounds nice, like your basic *typical small town*.”

“At least ‘Lower Gabbs’.”

“Lower Gabbs?”

“Yeah, the residential section of town. Pretty pleasant and Midwesternish.”

“Where’re we located?”

“On the edge of Lower Gabbs, between the two sections.”

“What’s Upper Gabbs like?”

“Well, it’s across a short, barren, junk strewn stretch of desert. There’s kind of a *No-Man’s Land* between the residential area and the *thriving* business section.”

“A buffer zone?”

“No, more like a war zone.” I laughed. “From No-Man’s Land up into their *commercial district* it looks more like a ghost town. Junk everywhere. Old rusting cars. Rusting parts of mining equipment piled into heaps of weed infiltrated scrap. Weathered slabs of wood, beams, boards, brick, and stone. All sorts of rims and kegs and crates and metal tanks. And who knows what else. It’s all scattered around ramshackle houses and sheds and hard to figure businesses.”

“Sounds inviting,” Dave groaned. “What kinda businesses they got?”

“Oh, businesses like Milde’s Gabbs Motel and Restaurant, that’s attached to Milde’s Chevron Station and Garage. That’s where you’re staying.”

“Really. I’m privileged.”

“Don’t be so sarcastic. You’ll be located near the main crossroads in town. The hub of excitement.”

“I can hardly wait,” Dave conceded.

“Across the street, to the north, is their unique *Town Square*.”

“What’s so unique about it?”

“Well, it’s basically a flat, open area, paved over for parking for the new M&M Foods. That’s the major grocery store in town. About the size of a Circle K.” I dropped into a soft radio announcer’s voice. “Open ten a.m. to eight p.m. most days of the week for your shopping convenience.” Then back to myself. “Sharing the central parking lot is the only bar in town, Darby’s. Got about the same hours as the store.”

Dave looked at me with an unbelieving stare.

“You know you’re in a small small town when there’s only one bar.”

“Sound’s wild.”

“More Milde than wild.” He missed my pun. “Around the square, besides Milde’s Empire, is the Sheriff’s house, which I guess is also the Police Department, and the town hall/post office building.”

“Well, shit!” Dave groaned. “Anything north of town?”

“Highway Fifty is about thirty miles.” I let that hang for a few seconds. “Once you reach that maintained ribbon of concrete you still have a ways to go to reach any sort of relative civilization. Fallon is about seventy-five miles to the west. The map shows some kind of air base there. Austin is about ninety miles east. On the map it’s the same size dot as Gabbs.”

“What’s Gabbs’ population,” Dave asked gloomily.

“Think I heard eight-hundred-and-fifty something.”

“Sounds like the shit hole of the state.”

“Could be,” I tried to cheer him up, “but it’s soon to become a famous shit hole.”

“Why’s that?”

“Neil told us some big movie company was filming there. For a movie called *Melvin and Howard*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Of course not, it’s new,” I said. “Apparently it’s about some guy named Melvin Dumar who grew up in Gabbs. Guess one night he picked up Howard Hughes in the desert and gave him a lift into Vegas. When Hughes died he supposedly included Dumar in his will.”

“Yeah? Heard about that.” Dave perked up. “Big court battle over the will.”

“Me too,” I added. “Guess we missed the production crew by about two weeks. Neil said they really showed the town a good time. An ongoing party.”

“Poor timing,” Dave groaned. “Story of my life.” He contemplated the sage along the highway. “Anything else I should be concerned about,” he asked cautiously.

“Concerned? Why should you be concerned?” I gave him my best spooky character voice. “Gabbs is a fun loving town. Yes. Yes. They would do nothing to harm you. Yes. I mean, no. Just don’t drink the water.” I added a satanic cackle.

Dave frowned at my poor Boris Karloff imitation. “What’s wrong with the water?”

“Some of the best drinking water in the world.” I held my nose. “P-U! It’s full of magnesium.”

“Oh, great. Figures.” Dave shook his head. “With the mine right there I’m sure it’s leached from the substrata.”

“Locals drink bottled water. The Mildes recommend we do the same.”

“Guess so. Magnesium oxide acts as a laxative. Good old Milk of Magnesia.”

“Besides,” I added, “it tastes terrible.”

“Most water in the mountains tastes funny at first.”

“No. This’s not just metallic, like most mountainous areas,” I crinkled up my nose, “but actually terrible. It’s bad even when you mix it with tea or coffee or tang.”

“So what’s the solution?”

“Don’t drink it.”

Dave gave me that “Duh!” look.

“We’ve been drinking fruit juice and soda and beer.”

“Beer. Yeah!” Dave rubbed his hands together.

“Walt figures massive quantities of beer might be the solution to Gabbs in general.”

“Always like the way he thinks.”

...

“Looks like a dusting of snow along the upper peaks.” Dave indicated the Paradise Range.

“Yeah. Flurried off and on yesterday evening. Then snowed during the night and some this morning.”

“Great.”

“Not much accumulation in Gabbs, but the mountains ringing the basin were covered.”

“Just what we need.”

“Was actually kinda neat this morning. All white against low hanging gray clouds scuttling across the green valley. Really beautiful. Interesting contrasts for black and white photos.”

“I’m not worried about pictures,” Dave growled. “I’m more concerned about working in that stuff.”

“Aw ... it’s not that bad,” I tried encouragement. “You just hafta dress for it.”

No comment.

“There was a feel in the air ... maybe the stillness or the smell of snow. You know? The

entire scene ... something, somehow, reminded me of late autumn in the Midlands.” I was struggling to communicate my perceptions. “The clouds were that heavy wintry gray I always associate with that time of year.”

“You sound like a fucking poet,” Dave laughed.

“Maybe so.” I took his comment as a hidden compliment. I was in one of my moods. “But out here, where you can see so far across the basins, with sun catching the peaks, snow blanketing everything, gray clouds acting as contrast, I get the feeling of some awesome power at work. Some uncontrollable force saying ‘Look! This is a passive demonstration of what I can do. Beware of my anger.’”

“Yeah. Mount Saint Helens might be an example of that.” Dave laughed again, made uneasy by my sudden openness. “It’s still blowing its top.”

“Yes. Exactly.” My thoughts raced and tangled. “Perhaps it’s our fear of expressed anger that make’s something beautiful.”

Dave gave me that same look Burt had laid on me the day before, like he thought I’d gone off *The Edge of the World*. I tried to explain. “We fear the object or the person or the situation, perceive the potential hurt, and realize we have little control to prevent our discomfort. We’re angered by this lack of control, yet come to respect its dominance over us. Respect triggers the internal perception of beauty which evolves into *love*. Love becomes the positive balance to our negative fear.” I glanced at Dave. He was nodding as if he understood, but the blank expression on his face indicated his mind was drifting among personal thoughts. I finished quickly. “Thus, we....”

“Thus,” he said incredulously.

“Yeah, *thus*.” I looked toward him and adjusted into a haughty posture. “*Thus*, we maintain our stability. We function in our daily lives without cowering constantly, terrorized by the vast, uncontrollable Universe surrounding us.”

The only sound was road noise. Dave finally realized I’d stopped talking. In a flashback to the Sixties, he said, “Don’t go weird on me, man.”

I smiled and screwed up my face to look crazy and deranged. But my mind kept clicking along. “Just another thought. Okay? When this shit comes, I gotta get it out.”

“Spit it out then. Don’t let me be the one to stop you.” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t wanna have no shit in your head.” Dave looked out the window at the passing carpet of sage.

“Thanks.” I smiled, but he didn’t see. “I was just thinking that, you know, perhaps that’s why there’s such a close link between love and hate. Once we conquer our fear through love we no longer show the same respect. Once we no longer fear, resentment surfaces with the awareness we’ve been manipulated. Resentment becomes sublimated hate and produces a desire to control that which we’d previously feared. We wanna punish, to perhaps destroy what was once perceived to be our tormentor.”

“Familiarity breeds contempt,” Dave mumbled into the glass.

I paused, thinking maybe he had more to contribute. His gaze didn’t move from the window. I went on. “This is, maybe, where art comes in.”

“Art?” Our eyes made contact. “How does art have anything to do with this?”

“Well,” I tried to explain, “we try to capture what we fear and subdue it in the context of

our particular art. Once subdued we can admire it for the power it once had over us.”

“Hmm. Art, huh?”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s why mankind expends so much energy destroying the environment.”

“Environment! Man, you’re crazy. You bounce from beauty to hate to love and art and now the environment. Your mind is warped.”

“But it makes sense.” I was sure I could get him to understand. “You see, after all those unrecorded centuries of subjugation to Nature’s whims we’re now in a position where we think we understand how things work. Mankind, I mean. We no longer fear nor respect. We subconsciously, as a race, hate our tormentor. What we’ve failed to accept is we’re part of that Nature we seek to destroy. What bone heads.” I threw my hands in the air. “It’s like committing suicide without being conscious of the act.”

“Yeah. You’re squirrel bate, man. A nut. Just keep your hands on the fuckin’ wheel so we don’t become grease spots on Nature’s face.”

“Whatever.” I spoke softly, “In any case, while it was there, the snow across the Gabbs Valley and along the Paradise Range was beautiful.” We topped a small rise. “Speaking of beautiful, there you go,” I pointed through the windshield. “A still life water color. ‘Clump of Trees with Smoke Stacks.’ That’s Gabbs.”

“You mean with all that white dust floating overhead?”

“Yup.”

“Yuck.”

“Yup.”

Dave pondered for a moment. “The name fits. Drabs, Nevada.”

“Sounds more like some old gossip constantly on the party line to her cronies. ‘Yes ... and Gabbs, get this, you have just gotta hear what May Bell told Betty and Susie about Leona ... gab-gab-gab....’”

• • •

Dave placed a small television on the table.

“What’s this?”

“My tube. Gotta have my tube.”

“Okay,” I said condescendingly.

“Can you store it for me? There’s a big tube in my room.”

“Suppose so,” I looked around. “Stick it there.” I pointed to the narrow shelf above the table. “Should be out of the way.”

“You can watch it, if you want.”

“Thanks, but getting away from television was one of the pluses of this job.”

“Suit yourself. I can’t function without Joe Carchioni.”

“Who?”

“Joe Carchioni, the Green Grocer.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Yeah, Italian guy on the evening news. Talks about fresh fruit and veggies. Tells you when

and how to pick the right stuff. Funny guy. A funny guy. Never miss him.”

“I’ll hafta check him out sometime.”

“Yeah, try the tube whenever you want.”

^^^

Burt spotted the television the next morning, at breakfast. “This your’s?”

“Nope. Storing it for Dave.”

“Do you think he’d mind if I watched it?”

I let irritation inflect my words. “Said we could use it.”

Burt plugged it in, fiddled with the knobs and antenna, and located a station reaching in from Reno. The reception was lousy.

I stood by the counter, watching him eat his cereal, his eyes glued to the fuzz on the tiny screen. During a commercial he looked up. “It’s only black and white, but I can still get the morning weather.”

“Why worry about it?”

“It helps plan for the day.”

Somewhat perturbed, I said, “All you hafta do is look out the window ... or stand out in front of the trailer ... and you’ll feel what the weather’s like ... right here. Don’t need some weatherman two-hundred miles away to tell you the Sun ain’t shining.”

No response. He looked at me like I was some sort of heretic. When the commercial ended his eyes returned to the screen and he resumed munching his Wheaties.

But I was on a roll. “You don’t hafta listen to them.” I moved toward the little television. “Be prepared. Face it as it comes. Discovery is more exciting than anticipation.” I turned to the door, threw it open. “There’s nothing you can do about it.” I stepped outside into the cold air. “Rain, snow, or sunshine,” I raised my arms toward the gray sky, “you’re gonna be out in it.” I looked back through the open door. Burt sat with his hand delicately touching the spoon in the bowl. Maybe he thought I was gonna do a rain dance. I looked right at him, “Take precautions and go for it.”

No response. When he finished his cereal he rinsed the bowl and set it in the sink with his spoon. He turned off the tube, opened his Leet and Judson, and began to read. I was learning that silence was his ally. While I did the morning dishes I thought up ways to passively harass him.

...

Late in the morning Randy gathered us together to go over sampling techniques. We crowded around the side of his trailer, bitching about the cold.

“Why don’t we do this inside?” Stu ventured.

“Not enough room,” Randy replied firmly, “and you need to get conditioned to this



weather.”

“But it’s fucking cold out here,” Walt whined.

“Hey, that’s the way it is in exploration geology. You’re gonna hafta get used to it. Might as well start now.” Randy gave us all a broad, condescending smile.

We still grumbled.

“OKAY,” he began, “we need to cover a lot of territory.”

“Yeah, like half of fucking Nevada,” Dave interrupted with a chilled, humorless voice.

“Pretty close,” Randy brushed him off. “First, each of you assigned a vehicle get one of these.” He handed Dave, Stu, and me a small black metallic box printed with the words KEY SAFE. “It’s got a magnet on the bottom so you can attach it under your truck.” He pulled another from his pocket, slid the lid back, “Put your extra key inside.” He closed the lid. “This will give some security against losing your key in the field.”

Stu looked at the bottom of his box. “You really think this baby magnet will hold when we’re bangin’ over ruts and rocks?”

“Shit,” Walt laughed, “the little sucker will go flying.”

“Don’t think so,” Randy retorted. “I’ve used mine for months. Been there every time I’ve checked.”

“Oo ... lose your key a lot,” Dave chided.

Randy fidgeted. “Just make sure you put it where it’s protected.”

“In the glove box,” Dave spit back through frosted breath.

“Yeah, right, bone head.” Walt stamped his feet.

“Put it on top of the frame. That’s where I’ve got mine.” Randy pulled a folded map from a large coat pocket. “Okay, each of you will get a field map for the quad you’re be sampling.” He attempted to unfold the topo in the breeze. After he struggled a few moments I reached over and kept it from buckling. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

There was a sudden, sharp, boom that permeated the atmosphere, followed by a barely discernible rumble that seemed to come from overhead.

“What the hell,” Walt jumped.

We all looked into a heavy gray sky. The clouds hung suspended and ominous.

“Blasting at the mine,” Randy assured us.

“Don’t know,” I argued. “Don’t think so. More like a sonic boom.”

“Huh?” Dave kept searching the sky.

“Yeah, when I was a kid, back in Nebraska, we heard them all the time. Guess the military got too many complaints about broken windows and heart attacks and so they stopped supersonic flights over populated areas.”

“Never heard one before,” Dave seemed in awe.

Another sudden boom followed by a distant rumble.

“Man!” Walt jumped again. “Mother fuck! They come outta nowhere.”

“It is kinda eerie, how they blast the silence like that.” Stu crossed his arms and looked out toward the horizon, where the rumble seemed to go.

“Happens all the time out here.” Randy tried again to assure us. “If it’s not sonic booms it’s

miners blasting. There are military installations and exploration pits all over.”

We were all a bit unsettled as Randy drew our attention back to his discussion. He pointed to a cluster of numbers on the map. “You’ll mark your collection locations on your topo, using the consecutive number of the sample as it’s collected in that quad.”

Stu interrupted. “You mean, if I take ten samples in this quad I’d mark them one through ten?”

“Right. And you’ll write those same numbers on both the upper and lower part of one of these pre-numbered sample cards, and on your sample log sheet.” He showed us a six inch by three inch perforated sample card and an eight-and-a-half by eleven sample log sheet. “Make sure you put each number on a separate card.”

“How do you want us to locate our position?” Stu’s breath hung in the air, then drifted away on the breeze.

“Does everyone know basic compass technique?” Randy looked around the group.

The answer was affirmative.

“We should,” Dave said, “we’ve all been through field camp.”

Randy’s voice seemed crisp. “Most of the time you’ll know which dump you’re on by following the map. When in doubt, use your Brunton. We’ll set deviation and review triangulation techniques this afternoon, when we tour some sites.” Randy loved being in charge.

He continued. “Tear the sample card in half along the perforation. Put the lower part in the bag with your sample.” He demonstrated by tearing a card and sliding half into an empty ten inch by six inch cloth bag. He scooped gravel from the parking lot until the bag was three-quarters full. He tied the string. “Your samples should be about this size.”

“Looks easy.” Dave kicked at the crushed rock.

“Hope they’re all that easy,” Walt added.

“Not likely.” Randy played serious, but then softened. “Well, actually, because we’re sampling dumps, it will be mostly loose muck. Won’t be a lot of bedrock.” Just as suddenly he was back into his authoritative voice. “Also, I should mention, you’ll hafta write small on these maps to make everything fit. Keep your pencils sharp.”

“Yeah, they gave us little plastic sharpeners back in Tucson.” Stu indicated the size between his thumb and first finger.

“Good,” Randy went on, “and make your numbers legible. If you get too many samples from one dump, write the sample numbers off to the side and draw lines to the collection location.”

“And color between the lines,” Walt remarked in a phony Romper Room voice.

Randy tried to ignore him, as some of us chuckled. “We’ll go over this again, this afternoon ... but when you take a sample we want you to use one of these aluminum tags and a piece of this engineer’s flagging to mark the spot.” He held up a three inch piece of rectangular aluminum and a roll of bright pink plastic tape. “On the tag we want you to write the printed number from the sample card.” He did this with the tip of his pen. The soft aluminum took the impression of the number. “At the end of each day you’ll bring your field maps, top half of your sample cards, and your sample logs, to me. Give your samples to Chris.”

“Geez, I get the heavy stuff.”

“Just remember,” Randy took a stab at humor, “no job’s finished ‘til the paperwork’s done.”

“You’re not shittin’ us, are you?” Walt stole the laugh.

Randy smiled. “And ... one last thing. I want each of you to write your name across the top of your map somewhere.” He looked at each of us. “Any questions?”

“What goes on the sample log sheet?” Burt had been so quiet during the session I’d forgotten he was there.

“You’ll record the number from the sample card, your map location number, and a brief description of the material collected. Again, we’ll review mineral identification this afternoon.”

“What do you do with all this information, once these guys give it to you?” I was curious about Randy’s duties.

“Well...” he thought for a moment, “I’ll be transferring all this information from their field maps and log sheets to a master map and log. Their sample numbers get converted into master numbers that can be entered into the computer back in Tucson.”

“What about preparing samples for shipment? Is there a procedure, or am I on my own?” One of my responsibilities was to ship samples daily.

“You and I can go over that once we get some samples. Nothing complicated. But there’s some data you’ll hafta keep.”

After that the others jumped in with technical questions and comments. When it began to snow the meeting broke up.

• • •

When the others went off to examine a few dumps I drove into Hawthorne to pick up supplies and buy more groceries and beer. The beer drinkers in our group had quickly realized that, if the company was buying, they could afford the more expensive imported beers, like Heineken. On our first trip into town we had practically cleaned out the local Foodway. It looked as if I would become a company-paid beer runner.

Upon returning to Gabbs I put my “Push Burt to The Edge” plan into effect. Using a black magic marker, I drew up several signs and symbols on white paper, cut them out, and pasted them around the frame of the trailer’s door. Kind of a talisman for all seasons. I drew a pentagram, the Jewish star, the old sixties peace sign, a moibus loop, the yin/yang circle, a Christian fish with a spear through it, some Catholic symbols I’d seen before, the old ecology symbol from the early seventies, and whatever else looked like it represented something. It was all intended to stimulate Burt’s thought process, to perhaps confuse him, and, to be honest, to annoy him, to take him to The Edge and show him that he wouldn’t fall off. I wanted to make him angry enough to show some emotion, to open his eyes to some new possibilities and some different ways of looking at life. I wanted him to really see the world around him. I wanted to demonstrate that our world is a dynamic place with more than one possible view or one correct answer.

• • •

That evening at dinner Burt faced the door without reacting to my artistic efforts. I watched his face for some inkling of annoyance or curiosity. Nothing. Either he was totally oblivious to my cut-outs or he was smarter and more controlled than I anticipated. Perhaps he was quick to realize my purpose, and intentionally avoided a response.

Slightly agitated that my work had gone for naught, I laid down my fork, dramatically folded my hands in front of my face, and pretended to agonize. “There’s something you should know about me, Burt.” That got his attention. “I hafta confess.” A long, deliberate pause. “In spite of pressure from my friends, and especially my family,” another pause, “and even though it makes me a social outcast ... I ... I’ve become a Born Again Pagan.”

Right over his head. He looked at me, doe-eyed, blinked, and went back to his meal. The guy must have been locked into some middle class California mode of reality. Any deviation from the norm was ignored out of existence. Or, he thought I was completely absurd, and chose to ignore me, hoping I would just go away.

• • •

I gave Burt a ride to his room at the Gabbs’ Motel. Downtown Gabbs was swinging on that chilly Friday night. There were four cars at the bar, two in front of the motel, and I had seen a light through a window in a house across the street. On the way back I happened by the high school and discovered it was graduation night. Every car in town crowded the lot. It was likely the entire population knew at least one member of the graduating class.

I imagined the whoop-de-do big time partying that would follow. “More soda, Ralph? Another cookie? No, no, you deserve it. Don’t be so modest. You’ve made it, Hon. Your father never graduated.”

• • •

Resting on my bunk, pondering good old Burt, I sensed that I was taking the wrong approach. There was something about the guy that made me want to crack his controlled exterior, to break open his self-righteous shell. But his “silence” tactic and his general good nature made a direct assault ineffective. It dawned on me that one’s attitude is seldom changed by preaching; awareness can only be truly changed from within. I figured I had to let him think these new ideas were his own. I had to be more subtle. One of my college writing professors had said, “Show—don’t tell.” Maybe that was the key. Maybe old Burt wouldn’t be so resistant to change if he didn’t realize he was being changed. It would be a slower process, I would have to be patient, but the results would be more enduring. I accepted the view that real change, permanent change, takes time.

^^^

My image of Gabbs is one of low hanging gray clouds, cold air, and stinging wind. Snow flurries continued into the next day, as the mercury again dropped to below freezing over night. Of course, as luck would have it, the furnace in my trailer stopped working just before I turned in. What else could one expect under severe conditions? After all, we were visitors in that inhospitable territory famous for rugged individualists, self-reliant pioneers, and the ever present entrepreneur. I unrolled my sleeping bag and was fairly comfortable until morning.

After tracing the problem we found a blown fuse and blamed it on unreliable electric current. Throughout our short stay we had already experienced dim bulbs, brownouts, power surges, and complete blackouts. Being children of the Twentieth Century, we had to blame something, and Gabbs, in general, was quickly becoming our excuse for everything that didn't meet our expectations.

And Gabbs Hardware, as we had quickly come to expect, didn't carry the fuse I needed. I couldn't find the part in Hawthorne, either. So Randy had me make the 75 mile run into Fallon for the fuse and other supplies he needed.

...

Although we complained, living in those trailers was not really roughing it. For example, in my "Empire" the bedroom had four decent sized bunks with cloth covered solid foam mattresses. I used one, reserved one for Burt in case he needed to spend the night, and he and I used the top bunks to store our personal belongings. There were also storage cupboards under the two lower bunks and a closet/dresser combination between the two sets of beds.

In the kitchen we had access to a four burner propane stove and oven combination similar to those in small efficiency apartments. Our perishable foods were kept in a small gas/electric refrigerator with a tiny freezer the size of a half-gallon of ice cream. The power source was determined by the availability of electricity.

Next to the kitchen was our "living room/dining room," sporting a fold-up table positioned between two benches. The cloth covered foam cushions hid storage bunkers. There was limited storage in small cupboards above the table and over the sink in the kitchen and in a "broom closet" next to the refrigerator.

We had hot and cold running water in the kitchen and bathroom, if the thirty gallon supply tank was filled, or if we were hooked-up to a community water supply. There was a small shower in the bathroom, which, although welcome, was a tight fit. I always had to bend or squat to get my head under the flow. But hey, it was wet and clean and that's what counts. There was, of course, a chemical toilet and a tiny sink squeezed into the cramped space next to the shower.

When it was cold, we had a gas furnace; if the fuse didn't blow. When it got hot we had an air conditioner mounted on the roof.

There were lots of windows, with curtains, to let in lots of fresh desert air and scenery. The

company had provided sheets, blankets, towels, the essential pots and pans, plates and silverware, and bought all the food we could eat. All in all, a livable situation. A little piece of civilization in the midst of the Great Basin Desert.

• • •

“Chris,” Burt hesitated, “I found more information on Nevada.” We had been exchanging interesting tidbits as we ran across them.

“What you got?”

“I found this in a book called *The Complete Nevada Traveler*.” He smiled, proud of his discovery.

Burt was a nice looking kid when he wasn’t so darn somber. His face would light up with a hidden energy. It was hard not to like him when he was being open and friendly.

He’d jotted down a few notes. “It said Nevada has an area of a hundred-and-ten-thousand five-hundred-and-forty square miles.”

“As we figured, a lot of space.”

“It said Nevada is the seventh largest state.”

“Sits up there among the big boys, huh?”

Burt smiled again, happy that I was pleased with his discovery. I had thoughts that maybe he and I would be buddies after all. He went on. “The Nineteen-seventy census placed the population at four-hundred-and-eighty-seven-thousand seven-hundred-and-thirty-eight. That’s ranked forty-seventh in population.”

“A lot of space, no people. I like that. It’ll be our secret. We won’t let anyone else know. Don’t want them moving in and building condos all over the Paradise Range here, do we?”

He was on a roll, so let my absurdity slide. “The book also said there are seven-thousand four-hundred-and-thirty-eight miles of paved roads within the state and another nine-thousand six-hundred miles of travelable dirt roads.”

“Travelable?”

“That’s what it said.”

“Just sounds funny. Travel-uh-bull.” I think I hurt his feelings. “More dirt roads than highways ... huh? I suppose ‘cause of all the old mines and stuff.”

“Yes. And the small population. There are only the two major cities and a few small towns.”

“You’re right,” I tried to patch the chuck holes between us. “Why pave roads for a few rugged old ranchers.” But his look said he thought I was being sarcastic. “Anything else?” I tried to encourage him, hoping to keep things in the right lane.

“Yes. I made a few notes on climate.”

“Great!”

“Nevada has generally hot, very dry summers.”

“Couldn’t convince me from the weather we’ve seen.”

“The winters are cold with large amounts of snow in the Sierra Nevada region.”

“Here too.”

“The lowest recorded temperature was minus fifty Fahrenheit, the highest, one-hundred-and-twenty-two degrees.”

“Holy cow, that’s ... uh, a hundred-seventy-two degree swing. Geez, I hope those records didn’t fall the same year.”

“I don’t know. I doubt it.” Burt was back on track. “The average rainfall in the state is seven point four inches.”

“Wow! That’s less than Tucson. No wonder my skin itches.” I couldn’t help rubbing my arms, suddenly aware of the flaky dry skin.

“Mine too.” Burt did the same. His skin would look dry in any climate. He had that freckly-flaky fair skin that sometimes plagues red heads and blonds. In the right sunlight Burt’s hair appeared more reddish than brown. He had a Scottish, or an Irish, look about him.

“Burt, what nationality are you?”

“American.” Straight faced.

I wanted to club him, but there was a slim chance he was joking. “No, no. Your ancestry. What nationality are you descended from?”

“Oh,” he smiled, and I knew then that he’d gotten me. A break-through in itself. “Uh-m ... my father is British and my mother is Irish.”

“Oh. Did they name you after Sir Richard Burton, the English explorer/adventurer?”

“I doubt it.”

“And *James*? You’re not descended from King James of the King James version of the Bible, are you?” I toyed with blasphemy.

“Of course not.” He took everything I said so seriously.

We sat quietly for a few moments. “There is one last bit of information here,” Burt looked at his paper. “The book said Nevada gets snowfall ranging from about one inch in the south to two-hundred-and-fifty inches in the Sierra Nevadas.”

“We should move farther south. Least ‘til summer gets here.”

“Yes, that would be logical.”

With that he pushed the paper across the table. I glanced at his precise notations and even script. “Thanks, Burt. You’re a pal.”

“Just thought you’d be interested.”

“I am.”

And with that our conversation ended. After a few moments of silence Burt excused himself, put his bowl and spoon in the sink, and headed back to the motel to get ready for church. He was going off to meet the local congregation.

...

Sundays were for R&R. Stu popped in, “Hey, Randy ‘n’ me ‘er takin’ the Kawasakis for a ride. You know, just screwin’ aroun’. Wanna come?”

“Naw. Never ridden before.”

“Hey, now’s the time tuh learn. Come on.”

“You’d have to show me everything. I’m a total idiot when it comes to bikes. I’d just get in

the way.”

“It’s easy. No problem. We’ll show yuh the ropes.”

“All right. Just don’t laugh when I fall off.”

“It’s a deal.”

After years of avoidance I finally took the plunge.

• • •

Dave and Walt had slept late and were just crawling out of bed as we prepared the bikes. They wanted to go but weren’t functioning yet and had a week’s worth of laundry to do. The rest of us had done ours while they were sawing logs in dreamland.

We had loaded the bikes into the back of Randy’s truck and were strapping them down when this local fellow walked up. We had seen him around; he lived in a double-wide trailer just across the lot from our small camp. To be honest, the reason we had noticed him was his blond roommate. She was hard to miss among the generally plain women of Gabbs.

About twice her size, this fellow was a big hulk of a guy, with longish brown hair and a full beard. That Sunday morning he wore a red plaid flannel shirt, worn jeans, and heavy construction boots.

“Howdy ... been noticin’ you fellas.”

Uh oh, we thought, he’s seen us ogling his woman.

“Been meanin’ tuh come over’n say hi. My names Larney.”

I had to keep myself from smirking. The only Larney I had met was a wimpy little soft handed accountant; hardly a callused miner. We shook hands all around and introduced ourselves. I’m sure he forgot our names immediately.

In his coarse voice he got right to the point. “Who yuh fellas workin’ fer?”

“Mining company out of Denver,” Randy replied. Which was true, NORMMEX had its corporate headquarters there, as did half the mining companies in existence.

“Z’it gotta name?”

“Yeah. NORMMEX. Yourself? Who you with?” Randy foresaw the oncoming onslaught of questions and went on the offensive.

“Spellman. I’m sittin’ on a rig out by Petrified Summit,” he volunteered. “What’cha lookin’ for? Isn’t NORMMEX into moly?”

“Yep.” Randy gave a final tug to the last strap. “What’s Spellman’s thing?”

Larney paused. We could almost hear the little wheels grinding in his mind. He shoved his hands into his back pockets. “Oh, little o’ this, little o’ that. Gold, silver, the usual.” He kicked at the dirt. “You know, not much moly ‘round here. Everything’s magnesium, silver an’ gold. You fellas must know somethin’ the rest of us don’t.”

“That’s why we’re the biggest in the moly business.”

“How long you gonna be workin’ this area?”

“Hard to say. Five weeks, maybe. Maybe two months. Depends. How about you?”

“Been out six months. Prob’ly ‘nother two’er’three. Gettin’ tired this place.” Larney looked toward his trailer, then brought his eyes back to rest on the bikes. “What’cha doin’ with these



Kammasukeez?”

Slowly, deliberately, Randy said “Ka-wa-sa-kee,” then gave Larney a condescending smile. “We’re using them to reach remote locations. Saves these guys having to walk.”

“Beat’s walkin’.” Stu emphasized the point.

“Hey, great idea. Never heard uh that before. You guys’re pretty smart cookies.” Larney was definitely intrigued by the idea of using dirt bikes for reckon work.

Stu and I were anxious to go.

Randy sensed our eagerness. “Say, Larry...”

“Larney...”

“Uh, oh, sorry. Larney, we gotta get goin’. Got stuff to do. Was nice talking with you.”

Randy stuck out his hand.

Larney grabbed it in his coarse paw. “Hey, you fellas come over fer a beer sometime.” He threw his head back to indicate his trailer. “Anytime.”

“Yeah,” we all thought, “a beer and a closer look at your woman.”

Hands were shaken again, we thanked him for the invitation, jumped into our truck, and off we went.

...

We pulled down the bikes at the site of an old ghost town called Downeyville, about four miles northeast of Gabbs. It actually was more of a mining “camp” than a full-fledged town. From about 1877 to 1901 there had been about 200 men working the area. Apparently they had a few stores and saloons, stables, a post office, and a stage line to the railroad. Eventually they even had a lead smelter. But like so many other ghost towns, Downeyville eventually faded into the scrub. There wasn’t much left out there. Just piles of stone, remnants of the few actual structures built in the area, and a scattering of garbage dumps. We poked around a bit to see what we could find.

The three of us found a few interesting pieces of colored glass and twisted pieces of metal. I found a brass button from either a shirt or pair of pants, and Stu discovered several crucibles that had obviously been used in some sort of assay lab or kiln; perhaps in the smelter. It was fun poking around while imagining life “back then.” Obviously it must have been harsh, because they didn’t have the conveniences of our travel trailers.

After we tired of digging through old trash we found a good place to try the bikes. Randy and Stu instructed me on the do’s and don’ts of bikemanship and they had me try a few easy circles around a flat area, to make sure I could handle the “throbbing beast” between my legs. I seemed to grasp the essentials, so we pulled on our safety helmets and set off down a sandy wash.

Randy and Stu, being more familiar with motorcycles, took off at a quick pace. I sort of chugged along, learning the feel of the thing and attempting to shift gears up and down. It wasn’t long before I could travel at a pretty good clip, but nothing like the other two. They would zoom off in reckless abandon, then come racing back a few minutes later.

“How yuh doin’?” Stu questioned.

“Fine.”

“Got it figured out?” Randy worried like an anxious parent.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just need a while to gain confidence and a sense of control.”

They seemed to understand, but continued to come back every-so-often, thinking I might have spilled. If falling or stalling were the criteria, I did fairly well. I only stalled once, and never spilled.

• • •

At one point, as I was chugging along the wash, I came around a tight bend. There was Stu sprawled out in the sand. Randy had stopped and was turning to come back. Stu’s bike lay just in front of me, tangled in the sage brush, with the back wheel pointing toward him.

“What happened?” I yelled as I let my rasping engine die.

“Shit,” Stu started to get up, “oh, man,” pulling his helmet off.

Randy rode up, “You all right, man?” He turned off his engine.

“Yeah, I think so.” Stu was brushing sand from his jeans.

The three of us looked toward the downed bike. “Shit! Stupid!” Stu threw his helmet down and walked toward the bike. “What a dumb shit! Thought I was gonna be clever. Cut right through this sage.” He kicked at a small bush in the middle of the wash. “Nothin’ to it. Didn’t see this fuckin’ rock.”

“Hell, that’s no rock. That’s a boulder.” Randy laughed as he bent to pick up Stu’s bike. “You’re a lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

“It’s a good thing you wore your helmet.” I probably sounded like his mother. Stu had argued earlier that we didn’t need helmets for pleasure riding.

“Got that right.”

Stu and Randy examined the front wheel and frame of the fallen bike. It didn’t appear damaged. The front shocks had done their job and the soft sand of the wash kept Stu from injury. Other than being a bit shaken, and having his pride hurt, he was all right.

“Guess I’ll go ‘round next time.”

“That would be smart,” Randy laughed again.

We each became more cautious and the rest of our ride was uneventful. Eventually the sun started down behind the mountains, we headed back, loaded the bikes into the truck, and called it a good day. I felt pretty good myself, knowing my rookie riding didn’t end in a single crash. Especially when a veteran had totaled.

^^^

It was my responsibility to log and prepare samples for shipment. I completed a series of forms, then boxed the samples in cardboard containers for transport to an assay lab back in Tucson. Each box held about sixteen samples and weighed anywhere from 35 to 45 pounds, depending upon the type and volume of rock collected. I used a strong, one inch, nylon filament tape to secure the boxes, taping around all sides to assure the container wouldn't burst. During the project over 5,000 samples were shipped via bus lines without a single container arriving damaged. Amazing.

When I finished the preparations I would load the boxes into the bed of my truck and haul them into Hawthorne. Even after weeks of daily deliveries I felt awkward driving up to the main entrance of the El Capitan Casino in my dusty pickup. Under gaudy colored lights, with clusters of gray haired tourists shuffling by, I would stand in my work clothes off-loading the heavy boxes. I had no choice. The small storage room, used as the LTR bus terminal, opened within ten feet of that main portal. It seems, in business, especially in the old mining districts of Nevada, utility often overrides aesthetics. Not that the flashy baubles and colored lights of a casino entrance provide true aesthetic pleasure, but tourists and freight aren't usually grouped in the same category. Perhaps casino owners think differently; just so much potential income to move in and out.

To pay for a shipment I had to go inside and wait in line with the winners and losers buying chips and getting change at the Cashier's Cage. After a while I got to know the ladies behind the bars and we developed a friendly, joking relationship.

"Gotcha workin' today, Hon," Doris teased.

"Yeah, slave drivers," I moaned, "won't even give us Memorial Day."

"Me too. Ain't it a bitch? Everybody off at some picnic an' we gotta work." She pulled a pad from under the counter. "What'cha shippin', Hon?"

"Rocks."

"Rocks?" She looked over the tops of her glasses. "Naw, come on. Wasn't born yesterday, sweetie. What would yuh ship rocks for?"

I held my finger to my lips. "Sh-h-h-h, don't tell anyone. Can you be trusted?"

"Well, sure, Hon. I wouldn't be countin' this cash if they couldn't trust me." She picked up a bundle of twenties and fanned them in front of my face.

"Okay, I guess so. But this is much bigger than that."

"Well, what is it?"

I moved close to the bars. "It's a conspiracy."

"What?"

"A conspiracy. Don't say a thing. I could lose my job." I peered around real cautious like. "I work for the Arizona Highway Department." I waited for that to sink in. "Tourism's real big down there. You know, with the Grand Canyon and all. We gotta build more roads, but we don't wanna tear up our scenery. Tourists complain. So the Department hires guys like me to travel

‘round other states and steal their scenery, one box at a time.”

“I don’t un’erstand, Hon.” She counted a stack of twenties while she listened.

“They figure one box at a time, no one will notice.”

“But why you stealin’ this scenery?”

“To make gravel,” I explained, “to pave our highways. That way we don’t hafta tear up our countryside.”

“I don’t believe you, Hon.”

“Didn’t expect you would.” I shook my head. “One box at a time. And one day you’ll wake up and wonder what happened to that mountain outside your window.”

“What mountain outside my window?”

“See, it’s happening already!”

We shared a good laugh.

...

I had prepared Rock Cornish Hens for dinner, something special because it was Memorial Day. While we ate I asked Burt, “You see the dogfight?”

“What dog fight?”

“The one in the sky.” This confirmed my candidacy for Space Cadet status.

“No ... I didn’t see ... the dog fight ... in the sky.” Thinking this was another of my absurd jokes he refused to look at me as he sliced a crispy wing from his tiny bird, probably wishing I would leave him alone.

“Yeah, ‘round four this afternoon. I heard jets.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see anything.”

“Was working in the trailer and didn’t pay much attention at first, assuming, you know, they were just circling to return to the target range by Frenchman. But I kept hearing this roar.”

Burt dug at the stuffing buried in the small carcass.

I went on. “Curiosity finally got the best of me. I looked out there to the west, and saw about ... mm, ten fighters screaming around the sky. Must’ve been a mock dogfight. You know, war games. They were coming from everywhere, just seemed to pop into view, speeding in all directions, circling and diving, then blasting straight up with thin white contrails spewing off the tips of their wings. It was something. When they’d turn and fly straight away or straight at me they were invisible against the gray clouds. Then they’d bank and a glint of sun would catch a wing in a silver streak storming down on one of their playmates. They chased each other like scenes from an old war movie except faster and louder.”

Burt finally looked at me as he sucked the juicy meat from a slender bone. When he finished chewing, he said, “Sounds entertaining.”

Pleased that he was enjoying his meal, I said, “It was. I pulled up the lawn chair and sat back for a private air show.”

“I wish I would have been around to see it.”

“Yeah. Well, personal pleasures are often short lived. I barely sat down and it started to rain.”

^^^

The next morning everyone was gone by seven, except Randy, who had map work to complete. I was doing my usual thing, preparing samples in my “dining room,” when the trailer began to shake. At first I thought the concrete blocks wedged under the wheels had worked loose and the trailer had started to roll. A quick glance through the window removed that possibility.

“All right, jerk face,” I yelled as I dashed through the door, expecting to find Randy outside, acting innocent. He was nowhere in sight.

I cautiously walked to his trailer, anticipating a surprise attack. Nothing. I knocked on his door. “All right, Langan, what’re you up to?”

I heard his muffled voice through the closed bathroom door, “What the hell *you* up to?”

“Huh? You just shook my trailer?”

“What? I’m in the middle of a crap. Thought you shook mine.”

“No way. I’m working on samples.”

Both distrustful, we suspected the other of some clever attempt at covert activity.

“Maybe it was an earthquake,” I said sarcastically.

“Yeah, right. Maybe they’re blasting at the mine.” He hadn’t caught my tone through the layers of insulation.

“Or maybe you just farted.”

“Yeah. Could be. That’s probably it.” He laughed. “Better watch out. I might fart again.”

“Just don’t open the door.”

...

Later, in Hawthorne, while standing in line at Foodway, I overheard the locals gossiping about two small tremors and one good sized earthquake. The epicenter was near Mammoth Lakes, west and south of our area, just over the California line, up in the Sierras. All over town there was buzzing and speculation, associating the quake with the eruptions at Mount Saint Helens. And of course, everyone had a story about coffee slopping out of cups and heirlooms shattering on the floor. It suddenly made sense. The quake we felt in Gabbs was probably the third and largest, coming at the approximate time of the trailer episode. It wasn’t Randy farting after all.

...

“Well, how was your day, Burt?” I had fried up a batch of taco meat and was grating the cheese. Burt had settled at the table.

“Interesting,” he spoke passively, “I saw a rattlesnake.”

“Ah, you lucky dog. All I saw was a couple birds, another dog fight in the sky, and felt the

earth move under my feet.” I placed the cheese and the meat on the table with the shredded lettuce and the taco shells.

“Do we have any taco sauce,” Burt questioned politely.

“No sauce, per se, but we do have salsa. That okay?”

“Sure, that will do.”

I got the salsa and a chopped tomato from the refrigerator. “So, a snake, huh? Your first?”

“In the wild, yes.”

“What kind?”

“I think it was a Western Diamondback.” Self assured, he added, “They are prevalent out here.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

We began constructing our meals.

Burt said, “What type of birds did you see?”

“Well, outside the Foodway, in Hawthorne, I saw this big Sea Gull. I mean he was big. Large.”

Burt chuckled.

“I know, you probably saw them all the time in L.A. They’re still new to me.” I took a crunchy bite. When I finished chewing I said, “Anyway, this big gull just sauntered along as if he owned the lot. Was able to get within two feet. He just stood there and eyeballed me.”

“Probably looking for a handout.”

“I thought of that.” I lowered my taco to the plate as the shell crumbled and filling tumbled out. “All I had were cans of chili, bottles of Heineken, and a jar of peanut butter. He looked more like the baloney type to me.”

Burt laughed again.

“The other bird was a Bald Eagle.”

“A Bald Eagle? Around here? Are you sure it wasn’t a Golden Eagle?”

“Yeah. Had a light colored head. Looked like a small Bald Eagle to me. A young one.”

“Absolutely sure?”

“I’m sure, Burt, but you know ... nothing is absolute.” He made the mistake of triggering one of my “keywords.”

He sensed the deluge coming and attempted to redirect the conversation. “You said you saw another dogfight?”

“Yup. Pretty much like yesterday. Got to watch a bit longer this time. No rain.”

“Sounds neat.”

“Yeah. You know, it’s the speed and the tight curves that fascinate me. It’s amazing how agile those little planes are. They’re like little darts piercing the atmosphere.”

“What kind of jets? Do you know?”

“Not absolutely sure. Think they might be T-38 trainers.” That word again. I could see Burt fidget as he finished his first taco.

“The earthquake was exciting,” I volunteered. “My first. I thought Randy was shaking my trailer. Shook pretty good. You feel it?”

“No. What time?”

“About seven-thirty.”

“Oh. We were probably still driving to our locations.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’ve felt one before.”

“Oh yes. Many times. I’ve never liked them.”

“I suppose. Guess we expect weather to be unpredictable, but it’s disheartening when we can’t be sure about the ground we stand on. As I’ve said before ... nothing’s absolute.”

“It’s always there, it just moves.” He realized too late what he had done.

“Come on, Burt, nothing’s for sure. You build a house, the Earth shakes it down. You build a highway, the earth moves half of it three blocks away. When you get right down to it you really can’t count on anything.”

“The Sun comes up, the Sun goes down,” he smirked. “We can count on that everyday.”

“Can we? Maybe so, in our lifetime ... in all the lifetimes past. But we don’t know about the future. Someday our Sun may supernova. Boom! No more sunrise, no more sunset. It’ll be gone, consumed, like these tacos. You hafta factor time and its cycles into the process.”

“Energy is constant.” He bit into the hard shell and red chili juices streamed through his fingers.

“Yes, mister James, energy is constant. It’s the only thing we can truly expect without doubt. But energy, you see, is change.” I handed him a paper towel from above the sink.

He mumbled “thank you” through his mouthful of spicy meat.

I went on without pause. “It’s in a constant flux and flow. Vibrating. Throbbing. It’s particles and waves and motion. Constantly moving, changing. If energy wasn’t in motion, if it wasn’t changing, there would be no existence. Everything would be stagnant, in a state of entropy. Then you’d have your absolute. Nothing.”

After he swallowed, while he wiped his fingers, he remarked in a solemn voice, “Death is absolute. There is nothing we can do about that. It’s coming whether we like it or not.”

For a moment there I thought he had me. “The old Edge of the World, huh?” Then words started clicking into place. “Even death, in a specific sense, isn’t absolute. Life is matter surrounded and permeated by energy. Energy which keeps this matter in a dynamic state of being ... keeps it in constant change. We call that *growth*.” I was rolling again. “When matter and energy reach a state of balance, or stasis, the trapped energies are released. What we call death is only the departure of these dynamic energies from their bond with this particular bit of matter we call a *life form*.” I always love it when I can rattle off a string of BS like that. “This *death* releases the energy to seek new bonds with other particles of matter, creating new forms, while the matter previously energized returns to the general universal cosmic pool, where it too will be re-energized at some future time, again in some new form.” I paused to see if Burt wanted to argue.

No comment, so I continued. “Thus, my friend, death, as we know it, is only a phase in the constant change and interaction of energy and matter ... the cosmic forces. Therefore death is not absolute, it’s only a matter of perception and perspective. There’s no real, final, death. No end to things. It’s our egos that end. Our individuality. Which, in and of itself, is only an illusion. Ego wants to believe things are constant. Ego hates change. ‘Cause change can’t be controlled. Ego might get hurt. Ego loves control.”

Again I paused for response, thinking maybe I had pushed him closer to The Edge. I

thought for sure he would argue against the end of individuality. Maybe bring up religion, heaven, soul, or God. He just sat there, resolute, sucking taco juices from his fingers, figuring he would have to hear me out, but unwilling to deeply contemplate my rantings.

Without new fuel from Burt I was running out of steam. “There’s only a constant changing from phase to phase, form to form, from active to inactive bonding with energy.” I felt myself drifting, repeating, sliding to the end of this tirade. “Energy is the vital force. It causes or stimulates change. Energy is change. Therefore, energy is the only absolute. Change is the only constant.” I smiled, “As old Albert said, ‘E equals M-C squared’.” I let it hang after that.

There were moments of silence. Burt sighed, “I guess we are each entitled to our own opinions.”

I reached for another taco shell. “You’re absolutely right, Burt ol’ buddy. You’re *absolutely* right.”

...

After Burt left for the evening I printed Einstein’s equation in nice block letters on white paper and cut it out. I taped it above the door with the other Symbols of Thought. Another totem for Burt to contemplate over breakfast, while watching the news and weather on Dave’s tube.

“Good morning, America.” The anchor man, in crisp hair and expensive suit, yodels to the camera. “Today, nothing is absolute but change. This morning’s weather is unpredictable and subject to local interpretation. Weather patterns will fluctuate as unstable conditions reside over much of the nation. I would suggest staying indoors and reading a good book on relativity or the variable mating habits of dentherman orangutans in the rain forests of central Demuria.”

^^^

On one of my daily trips into Hawthorne I stopped by the local Ford dealer. My truck had a loose battery terminal and needed a new gas line installed. Those fellows in that shop sure knew how to take their sweet time, dawdling and bull shitting with every local that entered. What should have taken 20 minutes took over an hour. At least I was able to do some reading.

After the mechanic finished violating my truck I swung by the airport to pick up Neil.

Fresh from R&R in Tucson, by way of a greeting, Neil simply said “Hello Chris,” threw his bags in the back, then added firmly, “Let’s get this show on the road. Got work to do.”

“Oo ... must’ve gotten a little pep talk from Bradshaw or Barber, eh?”

“Both, actually.” He climbed into the cab. “They want us to be more productive. Afraid we’re treating this like a vacation.”

“Ha ... yeah, the Gabbs Resort and Dude Ranch for Wayward Geologists.”

“Actually ... that may not be too far from their impression. At least Barber. He suspects everything. Guy knows better.”



“That’s good,” as we drove away. “They make any threats?”

“No. It’s not that bad. They just want us to get moving. Guy’s anxious to see some assays.”

“I suppose impressing our boss is incentive enough.”

“Yes, but we really do need to get some work done.”

“Right, that’s what we’re here for, that’s why they pay us.”

“Exactly.”

“So,” with mild sarcasm, “I take it you’re glad to be back to this rainy weather?”

“Uhhmm ... yes. Actually, I am.” Neil sucked in a deep breath of cool air streaming through his open window. “The locals say that if you spend a year in Nevada you’ll never want to leave.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I laughed at first too. But you know, the longer I’m out here the more I like it. There’s a rugged beauty in these mountains. It’s a simple beauty. Buried. It’s not for everyone to see. Has to grow on you.”

“Certainly doesn’t hit you between the eyes,” I said.

“No. Looks so drab and barren at first. Yet ... maybe it’s the clean air, or the quiet ... I don’t know. I just like it and I’m usually glad to get back.”

“Wouldn’t let Judy hear you say that.” Judy was his fiancée.

“Yeah.” He laughed. “But you know, I think she would understand. She’s the main reason ... maybe the only reason ... I look forward to Tucson.”

“Beauty you can look at is great, but beauty you can hold is much better.” I grinned as Neil shook his head in agreement.

...

It rained hard on and off throughout the day, a miserable gray spring day, where everything stays damp and gloomy, the smell of wet sage hangs heavy in the air, and temperatures barely reaching the low sixties. By evening the sky cleared and the sunset was marvelous. We were drawn out of our trailers to absorb the fresh, clean feel of the atmosphere and to witness the spectacular view to the west.

Gathered there, Neil entertained us with his stories from home. Apparently attracted to the laughter and camaraderie, a local from the trailer park approached. He introduced himself as Mark Brinkers. I would guess he was about twenty, short, a real robust fellow, with sandy colored hair held down by a dirty baseball cap. A stereotypical small town good ol’ boy.

He told us, “I’m temper’rare’ly outta work up there to the Basic Refractory. Do to uh minor inj’ry. On short term dis’bility.” He made small talk and acted real friendly and tried to get buddy-buddy with everyone. After awhile, when it seemed everyone was comfortable with him, he said, “There ain’t no action ‘roun’ here. Only thing hap’nin’ ‘roun’ here’s grass.”

We all laughed at his rustic assessment of this isolated town, assuming this hick was referring to the sparse lawns’ lazy growth around the houses.

“You inna that shit.” He looked around the circle at each of us. Silence. Light bulbs went on. A caution light flashed. I wondered if we were being set up, if this might not be a sting

operation by local Sheriff Bill Bob Donahugh. Perhaps he sent mister Mark Brinkers here, the rural version of an undercover narc agent, to investigate us long-hairs from the big metropolis to the south. Maybe they thought we were out there harvesting cannabis instead of rocks.

I was surprised when Dave cautiously nibbled at the bait. "Suppose we were?"

"Well ... I might be able to git you some, if you needed some."

Stu asked, "What ya got?"

"Grass. Int'rested?"

"Depends," Stu spoke softly, "on the grade and the price."

With that Mark lifted his left pant leg and pulled a small plastic sandwich bag from inside his greasy railroad boot. He handed it to Stu as they closed ranks.

I checked Burt for his reaction. He had a stone sober stare, obviously not caring for what was transpiring. He and I stood back from the group.

Stu and Dave and Randy examined the contents, each pinching a bit and smelling it. Then Stu passed it back.

"Sorry man. This's inferior shit." Stu was amazingly straight forward.

"Poor quality, man." Dave backed away.

"We're used to top grade Mexican weed. This looks like local shit from down by the creek." Randy waved toward the basin. "Too many stems and seeds."

"Hey, you don't like my stuff? Okay. Jus'some stuff I had sittin' 'round." He wouldn't quit. He looked right at Randy. "I know this guy, lives near Fallon. Grows Super Shit. If yer int'rested I could git yuh some."

Randy said, "Maybe."

"Could get yuh some ... but I can't get there ... car threw a rod."

Randy was hooked. "Chris and I are driving to Reno tomorrow. Fallon's on the way. You could ride along. We could stop, pick up some of this *Super Shit*."

Randy looked at me. I'm sure the expression on my face told him I wasn't exactly thrilled with this arrangement. "But, you know," he said, "it might take a while in Reno. Chris needs to pick up a bunch of parts and supplies."

Mark seemed to be pondering. "Yeah, I could do that. Got nothin' else goin' on."

Randy added, in a second attempt to repair his mistake, "I've only been there a couple of times. Not too sure of the streets. Might get us lost. Could be late before Chris gets back."

"I've never been there," I quickly added. "Might take us a while to find our way around."

"Hey, great." Mark's face lit up. "I know Reno like the back'a my hand." Mark wanted to please us big city boys. He loved the idea of being our drug connection and tour guide. He probably thought it would make him a big shot in the eyes of his friends. If he had any friends. "I kin git you wherever you're goin' an' save lots uh time from drivin' in circles."

That was the only attractive aspect. Randy and I wouldn't get as lost and I would get back to Gabbs earlier.

So the deal was set.

^^^

“Thanks pal,” I was all set to drive Randy into Reno. He had to catch a flight back to Tucson. He’d put in his ten days in the field and was off for a few back in civilization.

“For what?” Randy grinned sheepishly.

We were sitting in my truck watching Mark kiss his wife goodbye. “I’m not real crazy about having this guy along.”

“I could tell. He’ll help us in Reno.”

“Yeah ... hope so.” I didn’t want to appear square, so I didn’t say anything, but it was the drug deal that concerned me the most. “Three in this cab won’t be a pleasant experience. Hope he showered this morning.”

“Unpleasant, unless one of the passengers is the opposite sex.”

“What, he bringing his wife too?”

Randy laughed.

“Mark isn’t exactly what we are, but I doubt he’s the opposite sex.” I squirreled up my face. “You get off lucky. I hafta ride all the way back with this guy. Alone.”

“Sorry.”

“You owe me.”

He nodded and frowned as Mark walked to the truck.

...

Fallon is 75 miles northwest of Gabbs, along the old Lincoln Highway, Highway 50, the first road paved coast to coast. With Brinkers along it was an interesting, if not an enjoyable, drive. He did know some local lore.

“Check this out,” Mark exclaimed, pointing toward the horizon.

Cruising an amazingly straight stretch of road, we watched small gray fighters screaming down from the north. They were almost invisible against the clouds until they leveled off a few hundred feet above the surface. Then they would blast across the highway, peeling off before they reached their targets. Those little darts would cut straight up into the clouded sky. If we watched closely we could see the tiny bombs complete their arc after release, followed by a small explosion.

“Check out this sign,” Mark pointed again.

The sign, just outside a little dimple of a place called Frenchman, read “WATCH FOR LOW FLYING AIRCRAFT.”

“Guess so,” I remarked.

Randy pulled out a topo sheet that described this area. “Holy shit, we’re smack in the middle of a war zone. This map says that’s the ‘U.S. NAVAL ELECTRONIC WARFARE TRAINING AREA,’” he looked out the window to the north, “and that’s the ‘U.S. NAVAL TARGET AREA BAKER 17,’” he nodded toward the south.”

“What the hell’s this town doing in the middle of all this,” I wondered out loud.

“Don’t know,” Mark replied.

“Besides, this area’s so desolate.”

“Barren,” Randy added.

“Flat,” Mark contributed.

“Who would wanna live like this, there’s nothing ‘round here for people to do?” I indicated the wide open landscape.

“They hafta make a living somehow,” Randy puzzled.

I laughed. “Maybe those pilots stop to take a piss and grab a quick beer on the way.”

“I don’t think so,” Brinkers replied in a serious tone. “There’s no runway here.”

• • •

The highway pulled over a saddle, and descending the other side, we came upon a huge beige sand dune.

“Impressive,” I remarked. “That’s some sandbox.”

“Sand Mountain,” Mark informed us.

“Looks like it’s working its way across this flat, swallowing the slopes of that range to the east.” Randy saw everything through a geologist’s eye. “That dune must be a couple hundred feet high. Maybe two miles long and a mile wide.”

“This’s Fourmile Flat we’re drivin’ in an’ that’s the Stillwater Range,” Mark was pleased to inform us.

“Shit, from here it looks infested with fleas.” I could see tiny black spots skittering across the surface like so many insane insects.

“Dune buggies,” Mark said patiently, like a mother explaining the wonders of life to her two year old.

“What they doing out here in the middle of the week,” Randy wondered.

“Prob’ly fly boys from the Navy base,” Mark replied knowingly.

“Yeah, yer *prob’ly* right.” I could tell Randy was already getting annoyed by Mark’s pseudo-superior attitude.

• • •

“What the hell’s that?” I pointed toward what looked like a typical, small, roadside town. But this town was surrounded by a 10 foot chain-link fence and painted entirely red.

Mark again took on an educator’s air. “That is Salt Wells.” He seemed proud.

“Why’s it red,” Randy wondered.

“It’s a whore house,” Mark replied, with no snigger in his voice.

“Wouldn’t red lights be sufficient,” I chuckled.

Mark shrugged.

“Probably a gimmick,” Randy suggested.

“Used to be a real town. Not that long ago. It’s still on the road maps.” Mark didn’t want to

diminish his credibility.

“Ah yes, a place for lonely, road weary gentlemen to top-off their tanks and recharge their batteries.” I pictured fat, sleazy salesmen stopping for a quicky.

• • •

Randy was pondering his topo sheet. “Looks like the Salt Wells Basin and Fourmile Flat are just a small finger extending from the larger Carson Sink.”

“The Carson Sink? I been reading about that,” I jumped in before Mark could say something stupid. “The Fortyniners dreaded this area.”

“Why they call it a sink?” Mark asked.

“Well,” Randy replied, “all the water comes in, but none leaves. It’s an evaporation basin; dry, alkaline ... barren of vegetation.”

“And it came at a point when the pioneers, their oxen and horses, and their wagons, were trail worn and exhausted.” It was exciting to see an area I had recently read so much about.

“Under the bright desert sun...”

“What sun,” Randy teased, implying the gray clouds hanging heavy overhead.

“I know. Doesn’t sound too convincing now.” I conceded the point. “But they usually arrived in late summer or early autumn. The sink was the last major obstacle they had to endure before reaching the Sierras. Once they reached Rag Town...”

“Yeah, I seen that,” Mark interrupted. “It’s west of Fallon, ‘long the road.”

“Will we pass it?” I asked.

“Yup. Go right by it.”

“Great! Always like putting places with names.” I went on. “Anyway, once they reached Rag Town they’d finished the worst part of their journey. All they had left was to climb that mountain. Then the promised land. California.”

“That’s if they arrived early enough to beat the snows.” Randy said flatly.

“Yeah. That was always a concern,” I agreed.

“The Donner party,” Randy said knowingly.

“The Donners,” I nodded. “Exactly.”

Mark sat there as if he had no idea what we were talking about. He said, “But why do they call it a sink?”

Randy looked at me across Mark’s blank stare, then back out the windshield. “The Carson Sink’s a huge alkali bed...”

“A salt flat,” I snuck in.

“Right. More technically, a playa lake.” Randy watched the white-washed scenery. “During the Pleistocene it was filled with fresh water. They say it was huge. Historical geologists call it Lake Lahontan.”

“You mean Lahontan Reservoir,” Mark questioned.

“No, no. That’s recent,” Randy answered.

“Man made,” I inserted.

“Lake Lahontan was a natural lake formed during the last Ice Age. What’s left is basically a

large, shallow evaporation basin.”

“Well, I still don’t un’erstand why they call it a sink.” Mark was persistent.

Randy’s patience was wearing thin. “The small amount of water that flows into the basin never leaves.”

“It sinks outta sight,” I tried to help.

“The water trapped in the basin spreads so thin across the surface it evaporates in the dry desert air, leaving behind any salts and minerals washed down from the surrounding slopes. Over thousands of years large saline deposits form.”

“Saline? That’s salt, right?” Mark’s mind slowly made connections.

“Close enough,” Randy sighed.

“Well, did you see that operation back there, ‘cross from Sand Mountain?”

“No,” Randy said sharply.

“Yeah,” I said, “saw a building out in the middle of the flat.”

“Well, that’s the Salt Works. They scrape the salt off Fourmile Flat. They got this big machine. My brother’n law worked there couple years back. Laid ‘im off.”

“Geez. What a place to work,” I said, “especially in the summer.”

• • •

“You see that sign?” I pointed over my shoulder as we zoomed by.

Both of the others missed it.

“It’s a historical marker for the Pony Express. I’ve seen them other places. They show where the Pony Express trail paralleled the road.”

They both shrugged.

I was unperturbed, “Think it’s fascinating to see the other end. It sure is a long, dry, distance from St. Joe, Missouri. Quite a change in topography and climate.”

Neither one responded.

“Looks like the old route crosses the Naval Bombing Ranges.” My mind drifted into a fantasy. “I can just see this young ghost rider and his agile horse dashing across the barren flats. Instead of a Paiute War Party in hot pursuit he’d be harassed by giant silver birds roaring through the sky, farting explosive eggs that thundered when they hit the ground.” I stared across the barren flat. “I wonder which he’d prefer.”

“Check this out,” Mark interrupted my reverie. “This’s Grimes Point.”

There was a small sign that read “GRIMES POINT PICNIC AREA.”

“So,” Randy wondered.

“It’s s’posed to be some kinda cave. They dug up some Indian stuff in there. Real old. Arrow heads and pots and stuff.”

“Ah, neat,” I said, “an archaeological site. I’ll hafta look into that. Do you know what culture occupied the site?”

“Uh ... no,” Mark said quietly.

“Ah well, I’ll find out.”

• • •

Just a short way from Grimes Point we noticed another “house of ill repute,” the Lazy-B Guest Ranch.

“Shoot, this place’s nothing compared to Salt Wells.” I played the critic. “Just another double-wide trailer off the side of the road.”

“Yeah,” Randy agreed, “but this one’s closer for the boys at the base.”

“You’re right. It’s a good location for general training missions and evening reckon exercises.” I looked at Mark, expecting some benign comment, but for once he didn’t contribute. I think he was still trying to interpret “archaeological site.”

• • •

“Check that out,” Mark’s brain again found something it could relate to. “That’s the Navy base.” He pointed to red and white checkered water towers and an array of military buildings scattered across the distance. It was so flat that everything seemed foreshortened.

“Looks big,” I noted.

“They put it here in World War Two,” Mark said proudly.

“Long ways from the sea,” I observed.

“It’s for trainin’ pilots,” Mark defended, “they need lots of room.”

Randy snarled, “Yeah, so when they crash they won’t kill anything but the pilot.”

Mark shifted in his seat, remained silent, but was obviously annoyed. Then he said, “It has a fourteen-thousand-foot runway. That’s the Navy’s longest.”

“Sure, ‘cause everywhere else they land on is a carrier.” Randy seemed determined to needle Mark. Brinkers was too focused on impressing us to pick up the sarcasm.

He blathered on. “Pilots take off from here to use those bombin’ ranges we came through. They gotta stay sharp in case we go back to war.” A good, red-blooded patriot.

• • •

The hay and alfalfa fields around Fallon reminded me of parts of Nebraska. The quiet, tree-shaded community sits below the Lahontan Dam in the midst of the Carson River delta, a rich agricultural area.

I looked at Mark. “They obviously grow alfalfa. Anything else?”

“Cataloupes.”

“You mean cantaloupes?”

“Yeah. Cantaloupes. They’re called Hearts O’Gold.”

“They’re pretty good,” Randy said, “I’ve had them in Vegas. They’re a big deal ‘round here. I guess they ship them all over the country to fancy-pantsy hotels and restaurants.”

“They grow turkeys too.” Mark seemed pleased with himself.

“You from Fallon originally,” Randy asked Mark. Grinning at me, we both laughed.

Right over Mark’s head. He said, “They got their own phone company. County owns it.

You know, like the gas company an' 'lectric company."

"You mean, like a public utility," I tried to help him out.

"Yeah, I think that's it. S'pose to be the only one in the whole country run that way."

"Interesting," I said.

"Yeah," Randy snarled, "they probably still use old crank phones with detached receivers."

• • •

Just outside Fallon we passed near the Lahontan Dam, on the Carson River, the center of the Newlands Reclamation Project, the first major dam built by the old U.S. Reclamation Service for the storage of irrigation water. Near there we made the planned detour to visit Mark's "friend," his "connection" with the Super Shit. We drove down several graded dirt roads lined with irrigation canals and neatly plowed fields until we came to this old run down farm house stuck back in a stand of cottonwood and elm. We pulled up to the front of the place and Mark practically pushed Randy out the door before I could come to a complete stop. He trotted up onto the porch and knocked several times on the loose screen door. A young woman answered. Mark spoke with her briefly. From her body language I got the impression she didn't know him. She shook her head, closed the door, and Mark stood there for a moment. He turned without facing us and walked slowly back to the truck.

Climbing in he moaned, "The shit head went to Reno for the day. Bummer!"

"What about her?" Randy asked in obvious irritation.

"Naw. 'S'not hers."

Another strike against old Mark. Randy made his disappointment obvious. He slammed the door.

As irritated as he was, I was relieved. If Randy had scored he would have surely asked me to take his purchase back to Gabbs and stash it. I doubt he would have carried it on the plane to Tucson. I really didn't want to get involved. I never was a real part of the drug culture back in the Sixties.

Just that little trip out there to that secluded farm had conjured up images from the evening news. I imagined camouflaged federal agents wearing flak jackets and armed to the teeth hiding in the trees, snapping photographs, preparing to pounce on us while making the deal. We would be forced to lie face down in the dirt, spread-eagled, while we were meticulously searched and hand-cuffed. Our criminal mugs would make the local segment of the five o'clock news in Reno. "Just lookit those faces, Martha. Hardened drug crazed criminals if I ever saw one. Han' me 'nother beer. I hope they fry 'em."

If we avoided that scenario we probably would have been stopped by the Highway Patrol for a malfunctioning left turn signal or for having an underpowered vehicle operating on state highways or for some seemingly inconsequential reason, and, of course, Randy's drugs would fall out of his pocket at some inopportune moment to be discovered by the grinning officer. A drug bust would look good on his otherwise bland weekly report. I, an innocent, non-assertive participant, would have been up shit creek with the others.

Of course, I didn't mention my concerns, before or after. I was too cool for that. I



rationalized that I was observing the “drug culture” in action, first hand. The risk of danger and arrest was just part of the adventure.

• • •

Reno is about a two hour drive from Gabbs. Once we pulled off the freeway it became evident that Mark didn’t know the town any better than he knew his drug connection. Another strike against him.

“Okay, Mister Tour Guide, which way do I go?” I sat patiently at a four way stop.

Mark looked to the left, then the right. “Go left. Virginia’s that way.”

“No,” Randy jumped in, “go right.”

I’d already started left, so continued through the intersection. Randy pulled a street map from the glove compartment. “You should have gone right back there.”

“Okay,” I said, “sorry. How do I get back that way?” It was warm, humid, we were cramped in that cab, and the traffic was heavy.

Mark said firmly, “You’re goin’ the right way. Jus’ keep goin’ straight.”

“Look,” Randy snarled, “the map shows Virginia Street should be back that way. To the west. We’re goin’ the wrong way.”

“No, it’s this way. I been here before.” Mark crossed his arms across his chest.

“Chapik. PULL OVER!” Randy’s anger was evident in his voice.

“You got it,” I said. I pulled up close to the curb.

Randy held the map so I could see. “This is north. We were heading south. Virginia should have been to our right, to the west. We need to turn around and head west.”

“Gotcha.”

“If you turn aroun’ you’ll be goin’ the wrong way. I’m tellin’ yuh.” Mark sat there smugly.

“And I’m telling you you don’t know your head from your ass-hole.” Randy’s face was red. “Chris, I’m your boss. You do what I tell you.”

“You got it.” I made a U-turn as soon as traffic allowed, and headed west. A few blocks later we came to Virginia Street.

“Turn left here,” Randy instructed.

I pulled into the turning lane and flipped on the signal.

“That’s not right,” Mark blurted. “Moana’s back the other way. I’m tellin’ yuh.”

“Look Mark, look at this fucking map.” Randy held it in front of Mark’s face. He stabbed at the unwieldy paper, “See this, that’s Moana Lane. You can read the print there, can’t you? It says *Moana*, right?”

Mark said defiantly, “Yeah.”

“Here’s where we are,” Randy pointed again. “Intersection of Second and Virginia. See that?”

“Yeah.”

“See the street signs there.” Randy pointed through the windshield.

“Yeah.”

“Second and Virginia. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Follow this pretty red line. It goes from where we are now to where we wanna go. Simple. Straight. Boom, we’ll get there.” Randy pulled the map back into his lap.

Mark sat quietly as I made the turn onto Virginia. Then he said in a calm, defiant voice, “Yer map mus’ be wrong.”

Randy turned. I thought he was going to hit Mark right there in the cab of the truck. “You fuck head,” Randy yelled. “Shut the fuck up.”

And that was that. Mark didn’t say another word until we finished our chores and we deposited Randy at Cannon International.

• • •

“Bad scene, huh?” Suddenly Mark was all buddy-buddy again.

“Yeah. Bad scene.”

I tried to make conversation with “good ol’ Mark” but his thoughts on life and love and society in general revolved around his job, his car, hunting, and getting his wife pregnant so he could have a son. I heard more about his wife’s anatomy than I really wanted to know.

We got back to Gabbs about 8:15 that evening, just in the nick of time. Mark had filled the inevitable silences by telling me his life’s story. He was up to his adventures in high school, complete with detailed descriptions of all the sweet young teeny-boppers he’d boinked.

^^^

We climbed from warm dreams into the chilling embrace of another rainy day. It was a frigid, leaden, sleet filled rain that whispered as it brushed the sides of the trailer. A steady, soaking rain that threatened snow. Yet the air was agreeably pungent with damp sage, thick and sweet like the aroma of an expensive cigar.

In spite of the weather we carried on as usual. The others donned rain gear and headed into the field while I hunkered inside my warm trailer and prepared the previous day’s samples. My truck didn’t have a cover and the tarp we had was ineffective, so Neil had me wait a day to make a shipment, hoping the weather would clear. With my work done I spent the remainder of the day reading, one of my favorite pastimes.

Late in the afternoon someone pounded at my door.

“Walt!” He looked like a wet dog. “Come on in.”

He climbed into my trailer.

“You guys are back early.” I closed the door.

“Just me.”

“What’s the deal?”

“Fuck Me! I rode that damn bike all the way from north of Lodi Valley.” His clothes were

soaked through.

“You need to dry off.” I went to the closet, pulling out a beach towel and a blanket.

Walt towed himself vigorously.

“You could’ve been nailed by Sheriff Bill Bob.”

“Fuck him if the bike’s not street legal.” The Kawasakis didn’t have the required equipment, registrations, and plates. “I had to get back.” A deep shiver ran through his body. “Stayed mostly on the shoulders much as I could. No lights and heavy rain. Didn’t wanna get crunched by some big fuckin’ semi.”

When he finished I handed him the blanket. He wrapped it tightly around his shoulders and sat down. “Man, I’m near froze.”

“Surprised you’re not. Gotta watch for hypothermia here.” I turned up the thermostat. “Want hot chocolate or tea?”

“Yeah, anything hot. Chocolate.”

He sat shivering as I prepared the hot drink. When I handed him the steaming cup, he said, “Stu’s still out there. He missed our connection. Waited long as I could, but it’s raining piss buckets. Didn’t know if he’d come back or if something happened.” He sipped at the drink. “Oh ... hot!” He blew on it and sipped again. “But good.” He held the cup in both hands and let the steam curl up along his body. “Was getting soaked. Couldn’t wait any longer. Figured he either came back or got stuck in a mud hole along the road. There’s slop all over out there. Then I thought maybe he got stung by a rattler. Figured I better get back and get help.”

“You’re right. We’d better get out there and find him.”

Walt finished his cocoa, then ran to his trailer for dry clothes. I made a thermos of hot tea and grabbed another blanket, just in case. Then he and I drove out to their rendezvous in my truck.

“Hope we don’t hafta go too far back in the range,” I worried out loud. “This sucker doesn’t have four-wheel drive. Not exactly a power wagon.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Walt moaned. “Have two vehicles stuck in the middle of nowhere on a fucked-up day.”

“Shit! Nobody will know where the hell I got off to. They’ll think I’m stuck somewhere between Snaggs and Hawthorne. Should have left a note for Burt or Neil. Damn!”

...

When we located their prearranged meeting place, we found Stu sitting in his truck. I pulled along side and Stu and I rolled down our windows. Stu yelled across to Walt, “Where the hell you been?”

“Fuck me, I was freezing to death.”

“Shit!” Stu was irritated. “I been sittin’ here worryin’ ‘bout you bein’ eaten by some humongous rattlesnake ... an’ yer back in camp all warm and cozy.”

“Hey, I waited for you, right here, and you never showed. Thought you got hurt or stuck or something. I went for help and got fuckin’ soaked.”

Stu looked at me. I nodded confirmation. He looked across at Walt. “Sorry man. You beat

me to it. I was tryin' to decide if I should head back to Gabbs an' get Chris here to come out an' help me find *you*."

"Thanks pard." Walt shrugged, "I waited long as I could. Was getting too wet. Freezing."

"Sorry. I jus' lost track'a time, caught up in sample collectin', I guess, and fightin' this shit awful rain."

"Let's get back before it snows," I said. "You two can make up later."

"Fuck that shit," Walt laughed.

"You got that right," Stu flipped him off.

I handed the thermos to Stu and we waited while he took a slow, warm, drink. Then we turned our vehicles and headed down the muck covered road.

• • •

On the short drive back to camp Walt told me he had seen his third rattlesnake of this young season. "Was in the bottom of an old prospect I was sampling. Didn't see it at first. Sucker blended right in. I climbed down into the pit and started banging some rocks. When I heard that buzz ... oh man ... my heart stopped. I looked up and saw that critter coiled and ready for business. Man, I got outta there fast. To hell with that sample."

"Ooo! Isn't that desertion in the face of the enemy?"

"Hey, joke'em if they can't take a fuck."

"Yeah. Tell them that when they say you're fired."

"Hey ... this job ain't worth no snake bite."

"With you there." I had only seen a poisonous snake once. A small prairie rattler a friend almost stepped on back in Nebraska. "Boy, you guys have seen a bunch so far. Hope that's not an omen for the rest of the season."

"Got us spooked, that's for sure."

"Don't blame you. I don't work out there with you guys, but listening to your stories has got *me* spooked. Western diamondbacks are nothing to spit at." I thought for a moment. "Even in Snaggs we're an hour away from any real medical care."

"Right. And we're working out farther in the hills. Not a fun thing to contemplate."

"Although," I thought for a moment, "the books say only four percent of those bitten ever die ... and those are mostly kids and old people."

"Yeah, right. You believe everything you read? I don't wanna take that chance. It's not just the chance of dying," Walt shook his damp, curly head, "it's the pain and discomfort, vomiting, swollen limbs ... I heard sometimes an arm or a leg swells 'til the skin splits. Not a fun image to contemplate, man ... no fun at all."

"Enough to make one cautious. For sure. I've also heard they're more venomous in the spring 'cause they haven't eaten all winter. The poison is saved up and at its most potent."

"Sounds right. The only good thing about spring snakes is they move slow. Air temp's too cool. They need sun to warm their bodies."

"You'll just hafta stay away from the beaches then," I teased. "Don't want no hot snakes."

"I dunno. I've got a *hot snake* that's ready to do some stinging this weekend." A broad

smile crossed his rugged face.

“Your poison is saved up and potent, huh?”

“Yeah, tomorrow night some lucky woman in Fallon is gonna get stung.”

• • •

I did most of the cooking and dish washing for Burt and me and kept the trailer clean. I guess I was like a housewife. I figured Burt was out working all day and I had more “free time” to do those kinds of chores. Besides, to be honest, I got to pick what I made for dinner.

The night of Walt’s rainy ride I whipped up a homemade pizza and baked a batch of Pillsbury chocolate chip cookies. They both went over well. Burt matched me slice for slice on the pizza and helped himself to several handfuls of warm cookies. By the time the two of us had finished there weren’t many left. I made a note that I would have to pick up more milk at the store.

While he wrestled the strings of hot pizza cheese Burt mentioned, “I spent most of the day in an old adit.”

“Being lazy,” I joked.

“No. Practical,” he countered. “The rain was very hard at times. And cold.”

“Must have been, to force you into an old mine. Those things can be dangerous.”

“I know. But there was nowhere else. I just went in far enough to get out of the rain.

Besides, I didn’t have my flashlight with me.”

“Uh oh, there goes your Boy Scout Preparedness Badge.”

“Yes.”

“Was it scary in there?”

“Yes, to be honest. There were two rats.”

“Hmm ... I wonder,” I reached for another slice of pizza. “There some hidden message here?”

He looked at me, puzzled.

“Maybe you’ll get to like sitting in adits with rats. You know, you, with your Born Again Christian ways.”

He still didn’t catch on.

“Maybe you’ll end up a monk like Saint Augustine and live an ascetic life in an isolated cave up in the Paradise Range.”

“I doubt it,” he replied, “I’m not Catholic.”

“Ah, but I’ll bet you can see The Edge of the World from in there.”

He didn’t respond and wouldn’t look at me until he finished his last bite of pizza.

To ease up on him, I told Burt, “I saw another Golden Eagle today. On the way back from rescuing Stu.”

“They are all over this area.”

“Yeah, they’re easy to spot.” I handed him the plate of cookies.

“Thank you. Did you bake these?”

“Yup. Sort of. They come in a roll. I just sliced them up and stuck them in the oven.”

“They’re good. Just like home made.”

“Thanks.” I am sure I smiled proudly.

After Burt swallowed his first bite, he said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you, about the eagles.”

“Oh, no biggie. They’re just so different from the hawks and other raptors.”

“Their size is the main difference,” Burt volunteered cautiously.

“True, but there’s also a stately air about them.”

“How’s that?”

I pondered for a moment. “It’s the way they carry themselves, the way they sit so regally upon those telephone poles, like they know they’re monarchs of the skies.”

^^^

Burt went off to sing with the holy hosts. Saturday night meant choir practice at the Gabbs Church of the Dismal Days.

Walt and Dave drove into Fallon to look for “wimin.”

“We’re gonna start our *own* religion,” Walt proclaimed as they piled into Randy’s truck. “The Church of the Former Virgin.”

“Can I be a priest?” Dave pleaded. “I wanna be in charge of the initiation ceremony.”

“Sure,” Walt started the engine, “long as I’m Head Priest.”

“What’s your religion based on?” I yelled over the noise.

Walt laughed. “What else? The Five Fs.”

“What’s that?” Stu asked in mock innocence.

Walt put the truck into gear, held down the clutch, laughing at his own inside joke. “You know. Find ‘em, feel ‘em, finger ‘em, fuck ‘em, and forget ‘em.” He popped the clutch and the pair sped away in a spray of dust and gravel. We could hear their testosterone laced laughter all the way to the road.

Stu and I followed a few minutes later in my truck, a little more subdued, declaring that we were mainly looking for a good steak and some live music. Neil remained in camp to nurse a headache.

...

We had agreed to meet the two “wiminizers” at the Golden Nugget casino on the main drag. By the time Stu and I arrived the dynamic duo had ordered and were well into their meals. Rather than disrupt them mid-course, we opted for a separate table.

Waiting for our meals, we overheard our work mates verbally fondling various women in the room, sizing up their attributes, comparing some to women conquered on previous nights in Tucson or other locales. Each bragging that he would end the night in the sack with some young

local beauty.

I commented to Stu, "Either I'm getting old or I'm losing interest in the opposite sex. I just can't see spending that much time and energy chasing a one-night-stand."

"Me neither. Mus' be gittin' old," he said with a heavy Tennessee twang.

"Of course, don't know if I spent that much time chasing women when I was younger."

"I did some ... but not as single mindedly as these guys."

"I guess I'm just not into the chasing. They just kinda hafta fall into my lap, so to speak." I let my hands drop to the table with a light plop.

"More mature approach," Stu commented.

"Well, don't know about that. If I was mature I'd probably be more straight forward, less shy."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't drool hormones like these guys." He pointed with a hitchhiker's thumb to the next table.

"Hope not. But I do sometimes wear my heart on my sleeve."

"Dangerous."

"Yeah. Risky. But when a woman inserts herself into my life, when she makes it plain she's interested, and if I think she's something special, I guess I let it show. Makes for heartache."

"One-night-stands carry that danger."

"Guess that's why I don't like one-night-stands." It was my turn to indicate the two studs salivating over the local "horse flesh." "I enjoy the sex, but I'd rather get close to a woman first. The physical aspect isn't everything. I wanna know them as a person. Care a bit. I'd hope they care for me, too. Then sex is more intimate. Something special. Not just to get my rocks off."

"Yeah, but sometimes women just wanna get their rocks off too."

"I suppose. 'Cause it's hard to believe women really fall for the bull-shit lines some of these guys use." I looked at our comrades. "So I can concede they have their needs too."

"Some women use men as much as some men use women." Stu's voice sounded deep and profound. "What bothers me're these jerks who think they're God's gift ... that think every woman they meet is ready to leap into bed. They fuck 'em then dump 'em."

"But as you said, there are women who fuck 'em and dump 'em too."

"Yeah, I know, but women're just more subtle. Usually. Guys go 'round braggin' 'bout every pussy they've known." Stu shook his head in disapproval.

"True." I took a drink of water. "Don't you think women do some talking of their own?"

"Maybe ... but not so much. Not as openly. Women're more sensitive, in general, than men. Even when it comes to a one-night-stand."

"Guess the women I'm attracted to are more sensitive and restrained. Maybe they're just not the one-night-stand type. I have a hard time believing women are as eager to jump into the sack with just any cock." Indicating our buddies, I added, "These guys will screw anything that's female and moves."

"Geez, you're gonna make some woman a good husban' someday."

"Already tried."

"What?" Stu's interest picked up. "You been married?"

"Yup. But I can't say I made a good husband."

“Divorced?”

“Not yet. Separated for some time. Probably for good.”

Our meals arrived, we thanked the waitress, prepared our food, and dug in. The wolves next to us finished as we were taking our first bites. They paid up, made sure they got receipts for their expense reports, picked up their drinks, said “Adios,” and headed toward the bar where a rock band was tuning up.

Departing, Walt claimed, “I can smell something fishy.” He stuck his nose in the air. “Mmm. Must be a fresh young pussy with its sex juices flowing, all warm and clammy, just waiting for me.”

Stu and I looked at each other and smiled.

• • •

When we finished our prime rib we paid our bill, collected our receipts, and wandered into the bar. The band was loud; too loud. You could feel the beat, but it was difficult to make out the words as they buzzed through the smoke. I finally recognized the song as a currently popular disco number. Great for dancing, I guess, but too overpowering for casual drink and intelligent conversation.

We found our two womanizers seated around a cluttered table with three attractive ladies who did indeed seem interested in the sexual potential of the night. There was obviously no room for Stu and me, even if we had wanted to stay. We came up and tried conversation, but the huge speakers blew our words away.

Dave tried to introduce us to each of his companions but we couldn’t hear. He finally stood up and, with Stu and I close together, told us, “Man, don’t blow this. These chicks think we’re ... MX project.”

“What?” We could see his lips moving but had a hard time catching everything he said.

“Yeah. ... MX missile project. Remember, ... doing environmental impact studies ... the area. ... told them we worked ... NORMMEX ... they thought we said ‘MX’. They think ... got lots of cash to spend. All ... our favor, man. Don’t let on.”

Neither Stu nor I wanted to disillusion anyone. We stood around for a few minutes, smiling at the three women whenever they looked our way, then yelled to Dave and Walt that we were heading out. We would see them back in camp tomorrow.

The last image I have of that group is of Walt with his right arm draped across the shoulders of the only blond. With his left arm across her stomach, his face was up against her neck. He was either nibbling at or sticking his tongue into her ear. The blond seemed stiff and uncomfortable. It was obvious she was resisting his advances. I chuckled to myself, feeling a personal vindication.

Stu and I got out of there and drove to the west end of town where I had noticed, on my previous trip through, a country-western bar. The place was packed, trucks parked everywhere, but we went in anyway. We quickly realized we were out of place. Everyone was dressed in their best cowboy and cowgirl costumes, from boots to wide brimmed hats. I felt uneasy, realizing we were the only ones here with long hair and beards.



We made our way to the bar, bought a Coors, and stood near the back listening to the band. I wasn't much into country music at that time, but that band wasn't bad, and the women were attractive, with a healthy, earthy glow. But it seemed there were twice as many cowboys as there were cowgirls.

At one point Stu set down his beer. "Guard my brew. I'm gonna dance." I watched him walk up to a nice looking woman standing by herself. He spoke a few words, she smiled, gave a polite, yet negative, response, and it looked like Stu thanked her before he turned and headed back. As he left, this healthy looking fellow in cowboy duds walked up to the woman with a beer in each hand. He said something to her, she made some reply, and he quickly turned and stared a hole through Stu's back.

When Stu reclaimed his beer I told him, "Uh, I think ... she has ... a boyfriend ... and he looks ... a little ... pissed."

He cautiously looked around and caught the local cowhand glaring at him. "I think we'd better mosey on," he said softly. "I don't like the looks of this crowd. Gives me bad vibes."

We set down our beers and slowly made our way to the door. When it seemed no one was watching we slipped out, quickly got into my truck, and we drove away.

"Didn't wanna be the victim in a hippie/cowboy war," Stu shrugged.

"Yeah, that was one slogan I really believed in, back in The Sixties."

"What was that?"

"You know ... 'Make Love, Not War.'"

"Good slogan," Stu nodded his agreement.

...

We drove through the streets of Fallon checking out the town and hoping to find some milder action. There was nothing else going on. Bored, we checked the time—about ten—decided it was late, and made the drive back to Gabbs and a peaceful night's rest.

^^^

Walt and Dave drove in around six Sunday morning. The big leaguers had struck out. Stu and I had already begun our day.

"Bitches," Dave moaned.

"Fucking whores," Walt proclaimed.

Stu and I laughed. "What's the story," Stu queried.

"Ah, the sluts teased us along," Walt replied.

"You saw them hanging on us." Dave didn't look well.

Walt finished a yawn. "They picked up some free drinks, then dumped us when the fucking Navy pilots came in."

“Apparently Navy money’s better than MX money.” Dave’s voice was rough from alcohol, smoke, and yelling over loud music.

“If they dumped you,” I asked, “why are you getting in so late?”

“When the bitches left,” Walt explained, “we tried the country-western bar.”

“Didn’t get past the door,” Dave said sourly.

Walt yawned again. “Was a big fight goin’ on. Cowboy hats flying every which way.”

“Fists too. We used our flight option.” Dave’s voice was getting weaker.

“Yeah,” Walt added. “We tried to fly back to Gabbs but had to stop twenty times so Davy Boy could puke on the side of the road.”

Dave shrugged. “Least I didn’t fall asleep at the wheel.”

“I didn’t fall asleep,” Walt defended himself, “I just blinked for a long time.”

“Yeah, and about got us blinked from existence,” Dave complained as he climbed back into the truck. He looked at Stu and me with glazed eyes. “The fucker fell asleep when we pulled off so I could puke.”

We got a good chuckle out of that.

“Hey, beer brain, I got us home in one piece.” Walt moved toward the Airstream. “Your puking tired me out.”

“Yeah. We woke up about half-hour ago near the Ione turnoff.” Dave started the engine. “I’m beat. I’m heading to those cool sheets and soft pillows at the Gabbs Motel. You gentlemen have a good one.”

“Hey, tequila tongue,” Walt moaned, “brush your teeth first. You got puke breath.”

“I’m outta here,” Dave whispered as he pulled away.

Walt climbed into the Airstream without speaking another word. Those two were useless the rest of the day. When they finally surfaced, late in the afternoon, they only had time for their laundry.

• • •

As expected, Burt went to church that morning, to pray for the excesses of his companions. Dressed for church, with his crisp white shirt, black tie, and black slacks, he looked like one of those young Mormon missionaries passing the word of the Latter Day Saints from door to door. Apparently his vocal abilities, demonstrated the prior evening, had gotten him elected into the church choir. He left around seven and didn’t return until after Noon. Of course, the rest of the day he exuded a “holier than thou” attitude, just knowing that he was on the right path to avoid confronting The Edge of the World.

• • •

Stu and I did our chores, then took the dirt bikes out sometime after Burt returned. After the previous weekend’s incident with the boulder, Stu was a bit more cautious. That was more to my liking. I found that I enjoyed the bikes at a slower speed where I could snatch quick looks at the scenery and not have to concentrate so completely on the riding.

To be honest, I was still frightened, afraid that when I did take that inevitable spill it would be in rugged terrain among sharp basaltic rocks or along a cliff or ledge where I would fall hundreds of feet to a prolonged, agonizing death among the sage and prickly pear below. Yet, as with other things in my life, I figured I would have to take it as it comes. Too much caution can be as dangerous as balls-out recklessness.

During the day's journey we climbed a saddle between Slate Mountain and Fairview Peak, just west of Bell Flat, near the old Nevada Crown Mine. We explored that area, then hiked up a steep, barren wash to peer over into the next valley. We caught a glimpse of State Highway 31 cutting south from Frenchman toward the ghost town of Rawhide. We made a mental note to mark Rawhide for future exploration.

On the way back to our truck we spooked up a badger who went scurrying along our trail. For some insane reason I followed the critter, figuring it would turn off into the sage. To my surprise it kept running down the path. I must have scared the day-lights out of that poor creature.

After a short while I slowed and stopped, letting it ramble off into the brush. Stu came up behind me. "Yer lucky," he said.

"What? Seeing a badger?"

"No. That sucker could'a turned on you." The tone was that of a father speaking to his bone headed son. "Ready to fight."

"You're right," I said humbly. "Don't know why I chased it so far. Curious, I guess."

"Stupid curiosity," Stu scolded.

"Sometimes I just don't think," I apologized. "It was stupid, you're right. I know better. I really didn't wanna scare it, or hurt it. It was just there. I was just watching it. Sometimes I do dumb things."

"Yer only human." Stu smacked me on the back like Wally trying to rebuild The Beaver's confidence after striking out in a Little League game.

"Gee, Wally," I tried to sound convincing, "guess I shouldn't have badgered the badger."

"Just remember," Stu grinned with recognition, sounding more like Eddie Haskell, "badgers eat beavers."

^^^

There was a small herd of kittens that roamed the trailer park, snooping into everything, begging for food, and acting like a gang of toughs looking for trouble. Four of these little desperados were prominent enough that we gave them names.

Two of the fuzz balls, perhaps siblings, were always together. Their personalities stood out from the rest. The one with silky black fur and a delicate face we called Ralph Abernathy. The second kitten, a caramel colored cotton candy, we called Berges Meridith. They were always around and always into something, especially at meal time. They weren't shy about getting right up onto our table, almost expecting their own plate.

A third kitten, a rugged, stocky, bossy little fellow, we called Napoleon. He took control of every situation and was not afraid to make himself at home in our trailers. If the door was open he would march in, inspect the territory, locate a comfortable throne, clean himself, and take a nap.

Then there was Jimmy, a pure white, delicate little critter with short hair. He always seemed so gentle and sensitive, a real lover that liked to rub and purr and be stroked. If you placed him in your lap he would lay there in calm contentment until you had to get up. He belonged to Larney's roommate.

Those four tiny fur brains kept us entertained in the evenings and were the closest thing to anything soft and warm and cuddly that any of us found while we were in Gabbs.

• • •

During our morning planning session Neil announced, "We'll be getting some much needed help. Rob Spurrier is coming in on the LTR today."

"Great," was the general response.

"Chris, you'll need to pick him up on your run to town." Neil checked his notes. "Around three."

"No problem," I confirmed. "I'll hold off and go in later."

Walt was scanning a topo and said, "We gonna sample Sheep Canyon?"

"Yes," Neil confirmed. "You volunteering?"

"Nope," Walt grinned. He looked at Dave. "We should give it to Spurrier."

Dave smirked. "That's right up his alley. Or should I say gutter."

"What's the deal?" I asked cautiously.

Walt had a huge smile on his face. "Let's just say Rob tends toward wild stories."

"Wild stories," Dave chortled. "Hell, the guy's a legend."

"What kinda stories?" Stu asked innocently.

"About all kinds of shit," Dave replied.

"Mostly about his amazing studliness and overwhelming sexual prowess."

I said, "Boy, you guys have a lot of room to talk."

"Oh hell ... we're small peanuts compared to Spurrier." Dave looked at Walt for confirmation.

"Besides," Walt added, "everything we say is true."

We had a good laugh at that.

"What's this got to do with Sheep Canyon?" Neil asked.

"We were in field camp with Rob last summer," Dave explained, "and he told us how he ... how should I put it ... sexually abused sheep."

"Oh brother," Stu grimaced, and we all had another good chuckle.

"By all means," Neil said, "we'll give Spurrier Sheep Canyon. He's the new guy. We want him to feel at home."

• • •

Rob Spurrier arrived in Hawthorne on the LTR from Vegas. He had delayed his employment with NORMMEX so that he could attend field camp and complete the class work necessary for graduation. With that out of the way, he was ready for some real geology.

I met Rob at the El Capitan late in the afternoon. He helped unload the samples for shipment, we loaded his gear into my truck, I introduced him to the ladies in the cage, and we were off for a brief sightseeing tour of Hawthorne. I discovered quickly that Rob had an unusual angle on just about everything and recognized right away that he would add some spice to our camp.

“How was the trip from Vegas?”

“Usual ... white trash ... no chicks.”

“See anything interesting?”

“Desert ... black top ... some burros ... whore houses ... usual.”

“Neat. You saw some burros, huh?”

“Yeah. About a dozen.”

“Never seen any myself.”

“No biggie,” he shrugged. “Far’s I’m concerned ... they can nuke the baby burros.”

“Oh. Okay.” I shook my head but didn’t challenge him, figuring he was just being facetious.

Approaching the grade, I explained the “Gabbs’ Incline” and why it had become such a challenge to me. He was good luck. I didn’t have to down-shift until I hit mile post six, the best I had done to that point.

• • •

With the initial greetings drifting off on a breeze, Rob began unloading his gear from my truck.

Walt set the tone. “So Spurrier, you bring your high topped boots?”

We all paused to listen.

“No ... why,” Rob responded tentatively, “there lots of mud?”

“Well, Robby my boy, you’re gonna need them,” Dave beamed as he helped Rob with a duffel bag.

“We’re sending you up Sheep Canyon to sample.” Walt’s grin could have been seen from Paradise Peak.

“Oh ... I see....” Rob had this way of pausing, drawing out his words in a slow, even cadence. “What’s ... up ... Sheep Canyon?”

“What the hell you think? Elephants?” Walt screwed up his face to look like an idiot. Something he was good at.

“I suppose ... sheep,” was Rob’s intentionally innocent reply.

“That’s right, Wolfman. There are lots of fresh little lamby-kins up there, just waiting for old sheep dipper Spurrier to make them happy.” Walt grabbed an imaginary lamb with both

hands and made several lascivious pelvic thrusts.

“That’s right,” I said. “Stu and I were up there just yesterday. Your reputation precedes you. All your little animal friends know your name.”

“You sly devil, you,” Stu played along, “it was pitiful.”

“They were all standing ‘round the meadow,” I went on, “forlornly calling your name. Rah-a-a-b, Rah-a-a-a-b.”

Everyone but Burt and Neil broke into a spontaneous chorus of “Rah-a-a-a-b.” We sounded like a small flock of seriously sick sheep.

Rob looked down at the ground, shuffled his feet, then said, “So ... the truth ... is out, the Big Bad ... Wolfman ... has arrived. I guess ... I’ll have to take them on ... one at a time. It’s gonna be a long summer.” He acted like he was wiping his brow.

...

By adding three-hundred miles, in a westward direction, we would have been on the Pacific coast. San Francisco wasn’t physically far, yet, it was a tremendous distance from Gabbs. Not in miles, so much, as in content. Not only in population, but in awareness.

Gabbs had one doctor, a good-looker who never married. (“You go figure, Marge. There’s something fishy there.”) The poor guy was variously rumored to be addicted to prescription drugs or supple teenage blonds, depending on who was gossiping; a nice, modern, school complex that couldn’t attract teachers; a community library set up in an old house down by the water treatment plant, open Tuesday and Thursday evenings; four churches of various denominations, including Burt’s favorite flavor; at least two softball diamonds that were in continuous use; and a new swimming pool, the sparkling pride of the community. Yet Gabbs was just about as subdued as a one night stand.

Generally a quiet town, there was something unsettling riding just beneath the surface. Maybe there was too much coming and going. Most of Gabbs’ population lived in trailers and mobile homes, producing a boom-town atmosphere, undermining the tight knit fabric you might expect from a community its size.

The Refractory and the mine drew many anxious young men right out of high school. Like our buddy Mark Brinkers, they came from all over the territory. The pay was excellent and, apparently, they felt it was a good place to start. Their plan was to suffer Gabbs for a few years, save a bundle, then move on to better jobs at bigger mines closer to larger towns. Those Gabbites who were employed at the Refractory worked one of the three shifts. That left many wives home alone at odd hours, and, at the same time, a number of bored, lonely men. You can fill in the rest. The local gossip surely did.

^^^

In his quest for molybdenum, Neil had found what he thought to be a promising gold prospect in the Shoshone Mountains near Grantsville, about 20 miles east of Gabbs. He was so confident in his find that he diverted Walt and Rob from their rendezvous with Rob's followers in Sheep Canyon and relieved me of my paperwork and sample duties for a day.

"I'm a bit rusty," I cautioned.

"I'll give you a refresher course ... teach you some Gonzo Geology," Spurrier offered encouragement.

"What's that?"

"Hunter S. Thompson invented Gonzo Journalism," Walt volunteered, "and Robert W. Spurrier invented Gonzo Geology."

"Let's just say ... for now ... it's everything you'll need to know about ... geology ... to work on this sampling crew." Rob gave me this sinister, mad scientist, grin.

Neil frowned, but didn't say a thing.

"Sounds good to me," I went along with the gag, having long ago discovered that geologists tend toward the peculiar. Besides, it was a change from my daily routine.

...

On the brief, early morning journey from Gabbs to Grantsville we saw a flight of about 20 jet fighters heading east, just above the peaks. Neil made a guess. "Look like F-14 Tomcats."

"Could be," I wasn't sure either. "Does look like the Navy's off for another round of war games. I've never seen that many planes in the air at one time."

"Quite a sight." Neil watched them as he drove along.

Then, as we passed through a heavily vegetated area, we came upon several mule deer feeding along the road. They didn't seem alarmed until we slowed to look, then scattered like jackrabbits, leaping and bounding through the sage and grasses, their long ears prominent and erect.

"I see this bunch in here every day," Neil commented. "At least four, but sometimes as many as a dozen."

"Neat," I said lamely, unable to find appropriate words. "Look almost as big as elk."

"Not quite, but they're good sized."

Then, suddenly, we scared up a fat pheasant hen. She went sailing across the road in an easy glide.

"Man," I exclaimed, "I haven't seen one of those since I left Nebraska."

"I've spooked one every now and then," Neil assured me.

"Surprised to see them in the mountains."

"They've been transplanted. Some Fish and Game project to encourage hunting in this area. Brought in prairie chickens as well. They've got big farms around somewhere that raise them."

“What, and then they just let them go?”

“Yes. Free them for hunting.” Neil pointed to a male pheasant standing in all his glory near the edge of the brush. “I read they’re doing well, establishing themselves.”

“Don’t they compete with the native birds?”

“You’d think so, but their only competition is the Chukar.”

“Chukar?”

“Yeah, a slate colored bird about the size of a chicken. I think it was introduced itself, back in the Thirties.” Neil swerved to avoid a rabbit dashing across the road. “I’ve seen a few nosing around. They’ve done wonderfully here.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “as long as they disappear when the guns go off.”

• • •

Bouncing into our work area, Neil had us pull our trucks into a stand of juniper and pinyon. I climbed out and immediately noticed Walt and Rob in an unmistakable stance.

“Good idea.” I sidled up to a friendly clump of sage, unzipped my pants, and began relieving myself.

“Kidneys take a beating on these roads,” Neil postulated as he joined us. “It’s the first order of business when you get into the field.”

Walt zipped his fly. “It’s tradition.”

“It’s a male thing,” Rob made his voice husky. “It’s macho. We’re marking our territories.” He grinned a shit-assing grin. “Piss on a bush and it’s yours.”

• • •

Neil explained the grid system that we would use. A sample was to be taken every 50 feet, logged, tagged, and triangulated, so its position could be marked on a map. Walt and Rob had some experience with this type of sampling, so they grabbed their maps and headed up the slope.

“So much for my training in Gonzo Geology,” I yelled after them.

“This’s part of it,” Rob yelled back. “You’re on your own.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, as they disappeared behind a stand of juniper.

We heard a yelp. “SHIT!” Walt’s voice came clear, through the stillness of the morning. “Fuckin’ snake!”

Neil and I hurried to their position. Rob had already grabbed a long stick and was poking into a pile of rocks. An angry buzz matched his probing, echoing as if in a chamber of some sort.

“Sucker scared the shit outta me,” Walt was sitting on a boulder. “Why they always goin’ after me?”

“Beause they like rodents, Rat Face.” Spurrier continued with the stick.

“You get hit,” Neil questioned.

“Nah. Just heard it when I stepped on those rocks.”

Rob poked around a bit longer but couldn’t dislodge the terrified serpent. We never did see it, but could sure hear its buzzing whenever Rob poked or pounded.



When Walt regained his composure the two continued on their way. Neil worked with me the first hour to make sure I mastered the sampling procedure and to help refresh my triangulation skills. Most of my prior experience had been in sedimentary rock; these igneous and metamorphic structures were new to me. Once Neil was satisfied with my efforts he went off to his own area higher in the range.

"I don't expect many hits to occur along your line," Neil explained. "I think the gold bearing ore body is further up."

"Great. Makes me feel worthwhile."

"Ah, but what you're doing is important," he assured me. "We need to define the perimeter of the body."

"Okay, if you say so." Only slightly convinced.

...

My job was to pace off fifty feet, find a likely outcrop, smash off a bag full of "chips" with a two pound sledge, and sniff them to determine if they contained sulfides.

"If it smells like rotten eggs, or sulfur," Neil had explained, "it's got sulfides. Sulfides indicate the possible presence of gold."

I placed the fragmented sample in a bag with half a sample card, triangulated my location, marked the map, tagged the spot, wrote my findings in a small log book, then moved on. Simple sulfide sampling.

I worked steadily and progressed along the ridge, spending more time fumbling with the triangulation than I wanted. Yet, from the position of the pounding I heard echoing from above, I could tell I was progressing with the others. By the end of the day I had collected 15 samples, just about equal to their production. We lugged our days work down to the trucks, heaved the heavy bags into the back, and prepared to return to Gabbs.

"You can tell it's getting warmer," Rob announced.

"How's that?" Neil replied.

"Scorpions are out." Rob proudly displayed a captured arachnid in a clear plastic pill bottle.

"Me too," Walt exclaimed, and he held up a similar bottle with its tiny crab-like creature posturing inside.

Although lethargic from captivity, the cool weather, and being bounced around, they were still nasty looking with their barbed tails poised for action.

Rob explained, "These aren't the ... really deadly scorpions we'd find ... back in the Sonoran desert and Tucson. These are too big. It's the little Bark Scorpions you hafta watch for. They can kill."

"That's good to know," I remarked as I pondered the straw colored stingers.

"Yeah ... but these will get you too." Rob took the bottles from me and handed one to Walt.

"These will just make you suffer. Lose a foot or hand, maybe." Walt shook his container and proudly put his bottled pet into his shirt pocket. "But they won't kill you."

• • •

Standing around the trucks, reviewing the day's efforts, we played a game of one-upmanship, each noting some unusual creature we had seen. Between the four of us we had observed a handful of lizards, a variety of mice and other small rodents, cotton tail and jackrabbits, Stellar's jays, the usual ravens, and the Nevada state bird, the Mountain Bluebird. All in all I had found it refreshing to be out among the pinyon and juniper, wandering among the sage and prickly pear, enjoying the natural sounds and smells.

"What's this plant here?" I asked. "I've seen this before." I pointed to a low, spindly, straw like bush by the side of the road. "It's all over where I sampled today."

"That's Mormon Tea," Neil replied.

"Ephedra," added Rob. "It's called Mormon Tea 'cause they used it as a paregoric."

"Paregoric? What's that?" I had heard the word before but couldn't remember its meaning.

"The pioneers in this area ... especially the early Mormons ... used to boil the leaves and make a tea that they gave to their children ... to soothe soar throats and stomach aches and stuff like that." Rob took on a professorial air.

"How you know this shit?" Walt questioned.

"I grew up 'round Jerome, you know. This stuff is all over the place."

"You ever try any?" I pried, figuring, of course, that he would claim that he had.

"No," he surprised me, "never got that desperate. Looks too much like straw."

• • •

On the way out we took a few minutes to explore the remains of Grantsville, another of the area's old mining towns. The ruins, and a relatively well-preserved cemetery, are situated in a picturesque canyon. With its slightly higher elevation and running water, the summers must have been bearable, compared to those old camps exposed in the basins. We found portions of several brick and adobe buildings still standing, a cluster of small rooms cut back into a cliff, and evidence of a few old frame structures. Of course, there are many prominent mine shafts and adits scattered throughout the area.

We also noted a group of newer structures that must have been built during a later boom period in this century. But the real gem is just south of the town site in a side canyon. Across from a large adit we found a beautifully rustic log cabin. The roof was starting to sag, but we could still walk inside. There were names and messages carved on all of the walls; old bed springs; broken down tables and chairs; bits of old newspapers; and all sorts of old junk. We had a good time exploring.

• • •

Neil slammed on the brakes. Dust and rocks flew everywhere. L.B. yelped once and galloped off for home, peering back in terror as he went. Neil just about had a heart attack, while Stu and Dave stood there laughing.

The two had been playing frisbee in the driveway. A local pet that we named L.B., for Little Bastard, was doing his usual doggie routine of chasing back and forth, biting at the socks and shoes of whomever had the disk. L.B. was a cute, nice looking spaniel who seemed friendly enough, but because of a damaged left eye he wouldn't let any of us pet him. Perhaps it was that injury that made him a bit ornery.

That orneriness almost got him squished. He connected with skin on Dave's ankle. Dave shouted. L.B. tore away without looking—right under the front end of Neil's truck. Fortunately he wasn't injured, but Neil, who loved dogs and cats, spent the next hour with the shakes.

• • •

Every day the guys gave me a list of supplies they wanted picked up in town. Rob's first list looked something like this:

- 1 ripe zucchini
- 6 large, fresh mushrooms
- 1 small can, sliced ripe olives
- 1 6 oz. can tomato paste
- 1 pkg. Carnation vermicelli
- 1 lb. lean hamburger
- 2 6 pks. Heineken
- 1 6 pk. Bud
- 1 tube Testers Glue
- 1 trip to the Magic Kingdom

"What's the glue for?" I asked coyly.

"Well ... I've heard from Stu here ... the local weed's pretty poor. I need something powerful ... so I collect only those samples ... containing economically valuable minerals." He lifted a pair of rock filled bags. "Gonzo Geology requires superlative measures."

"Why not meditate?" I argued.

"Out here ... in this vast wasteland, known to the intruding White Man as Nevada," he gestured with his arms, "it is difficult for one as sensitive and aware as I ... to attune my varied psychic powers and capabilities ... uhm, without the aid of chemical stimulants." He looked at me and grinned.

"Besides, Chris ... if Sheriff Bill Bob Donahugh ever stops me ... while I'm driving the peaceful streets of his lovely community ... he can hardly arrest me for carrying a concealed tube of glue ... whereas wacky weed is a painted horse of a peculiarly different color." He indicated

he wanted the list returned. He scratched at it with his pencil; handed it back. He requested two tubes of Testers. “Got two nostrils. Don’t wanna run short.”

• • •

The common denominator on all the lists, except Burt’s, was beer. The favored brew was the imported beer, Heineken. Dave had glanced at Rob’s list and asked, “What’s a sixer of Heinies running now?”

“Still four-twenty-five,” I answered.

“That’s robbery,” Dave grumbled.

Walt looked from his map. “Did you say four-twenty-five per six?”

“Yup.”

“Fuck ‘em,” he blared. “We oughta go down there and have a little talk with Mister Manager.”

“What’s the deal?” Rob looked at me, puzzled.

“Well, when we first started buying beer at the Hawthorne Foodway the price of a six pack of Heineken was three eighty-nine. These guys,” I pointed, “bought everything they had, plus some Bud. Two days later they had me clean off the shelf again; six more six packs.”

“Yeah, and it was still three-eighty-nine.” Dave was getting himself riled.

Walt took up the cause. “A week later we stopped in there and the fuckers had raised the price to four-twenty-five. We were pissed.”

“Like I told you,” I said, “company’s paying for it, not you.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Look,” I went on, “this is a prime example of supply and demand. They’re trying to find what the market will bear. If you stop buying Heinies the price will come down. As long as you’re willing to fork out the money the price will stay high.”

“Sounds like a free market to me,” Rob defended my position.

“Big fucking deal,” Walt responded.

“Hey,” Rob frowned, “you can always take your business to another store.”

“Ain’t no other fucking store.”

“Well, actually there is,” I countered.

“Yeah,” Dave sighed, “but they don’t sell Heinies.”

• • •

During those evening meals when the whole crew “slopped” together, our conversation usually turned to the lowest common denominator—our daily “sightings.”

“Man, we’re comparing peaches to cucumbers.” Dave was emphatic. “When you said she was ‘good lookin’,’ what did you mean? Compared to what?”

“Dave’s right,” I agreed, “everything’s relative.”

Burt furtively glanced my way.

“There has to be some agreement. We hafta agree on terms.” Dave was serious. After all,

understanding can only be obtained through communication.

“We need some way to quantify looks,” Rob stepped into it, sewing the seeds of an idea.

“Semantics,” I said. “You’re both right. We need a common symbolism. Symbolic communication allows us to perceive images exactly as depicted.”

“What you just say?” Dave was lost.

Walt’s eyes lit up. “A rating scale! From zero to ten, with ten being the highest.”

“Bit high-schoolish, don’t you think?” Stu cut at his old field partner.

“What else we gonna do, spend evenings in a circle jerk with Rosie Palmer?” Walt made a stroking motion with his fist.

“Hey, Rosie’s my girl,” Dave feigned anger. “Keep your filthy dick to yourself.”

“Yeah ... she doesn’t like you anymore. Says yours is so small it keeps slipping out.”

Walt’s reply left Dave fumbling for a comeback.

“Alright, jerkface, let’s try your system.” Dave settled back and took a breath. “The girl I told you about ... the one at the grocery store ... was an eight.”

Stu mocked gagging. “I was with you, man.” He pointed with his fork. “You mus’ be blind. What I saw was maybe a six or a five at most.”

“No way, man. She was a boner-fied eight.”

“You’re scale’s warped then, my friend. In my book she was a six, an’ I’m bein’ kind.” Stu continued eating as if there was no more to be said.

“Our whole communication system depends on this.” Walt would never let an important topic like this die.

“This is a critical point,” Rob spoke in a dreamy voice. “Chris is right. How can we draw ... detailed full-colored mental fantasy pictures ... for our nocturnal use ... without a firm basis of understanding?”

“I think maybe Walt’s rating scale is too rigid.” I was always the pragmatist.

“Chris is right again. You need more flexibility.” Neil was ready to defend a new approach.

“You see,” I continued, “we hafta place the observation in context. Like I said, everything’s relative.”

“Didn’t Einstein say that?” Stu zinged.

“Yeah, of course he did. Just borrowing a good line.”

Burt looked straight at me, like he feared another lecture on physics.

I smiled; pointed. “I think Burt here understands what I’m talking about. He’d hafta say, ‘I saw this girl at the grocery store today. On the Gabbs Scale she was an eight.’ Or he could say, ‘On the Hawthorne Scale, she was a seven.’ Whereas, the Tucson Scale would be the Standard by which the Scabbs and all other scales would be measured.”

Dave looked puzzled. “You lost me.”

“Quite simple,” Rob jumped in. “Chris struck pay dirt. In Tucson ... there are three good looking single women ... for every single man. The women ... are tan and blond. They wear tight short shorts ... and halter tops ... with bare feet and long bare legs,” he licked his lips, “and are just really beautiful ... all year ‘round.”

“I miss them,” Walt moaned.

“Me too,” Rob sighed. “We’re used to seeing lots of eights and nines ... even an occasional

ten.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You see, Dave, an eight on the Baggs Scale might only be a five on the Tucson Scale. A Hawthorne eight might be a six by the Tucson standard. Take Larney’s girlfriend as an example.”

“Thank you, I’d like to take her.” Dave smiled as if in a far off fantasy.

“I think we all agree she’s the best looking woman in Scabbs. In my book,” I said, “that means, on the Gabbs Scale, she’d hafta be a ten. In Tucson she might only be a seven.”

Burt bravely spoke up. “Why do we hafta go through all of this? It’s nonsense. You’re all treating women like cattle. It’s demeaning.”

“A lot of the women ‘round here are cows, aren’t they?” Walt pondered.

“Yeah,” Rob agreed, “breeding stock.”

“Burt, my friend, let me explain.” I was speaking in that big brother tone again. He visibly cringed.

Rob chimed in. “Burt, Chris might’ve saved our summer. You’d better listen ... and learn.”

Burt shook his head, looked down at the table.

“Listen,” I said, “all this is necessary, ‘cause, even out here in the boonies, who among us would ever wanna date a five or six?”

“Got that right,” Stu admitted the point.

“You nailed it,” Dave arrived on the team.

Rob was already there. Walt shook his head and said, “I’d never be seen with less than an eight myself. Even in Snaggs. I’d never lower myself to that level.” He looked toward the floor. “God ... could you imagine being that desperate?”

Neil smiled. “I’ve already got my ten, and that’s on the Tucson Scale.”

Everyone sighed in agreement, except Burt.

“You see, Burt, old buddy,” I couldn’t let a sleepy mongrel repose, “as I keep saying, everything is relative. We would either hafta lower our standards, or adjust the scale. We can’t stomach the thought of lowering our standards ... so we adjust the scale.”

Dave mused, “A floating scale. God, I can sleep tonight, without a guilty conscience.”

^^^

I found Randy in the El Cap, sucking on a coke at the bar.

“Hey, Chapik, you’re late,” he crowed.

“Yeah, like forty-five minutes.”

“Where you been?”

“Sitting at the damn airport, waiting for you.”

“Yeah, well ... they had to cancel my flight. Bad weather, I guess. Had to come LTR.”

I sat on the stool next to him. “That’s what the guy at the airport said. I figured your flight was late, so I didn’t even go inside until a few minutes ago. Was a good thing I brought a book to read.”

“Yeah. Didn’t know where else to leave a message. Sorry about the waiting.” Randy waved to the bartender. “Get my friend here a coke. Thanks.”

“Boy, that airport’s not exactly Tucson International, is it?”

“Nope.”

“A double-wide trailer, some antennas and weather equipment, a small hangar off to the side, and a fueling station.” I shook my head in amazement. “That’s it.”

“Good ol’ Hawthorne Terminal. Least they got a concrete runway.” Randy took another suck through his straw.

The bartender brought my drink, Randy paid him, and we sat there quietly for a few moments. Then Randy asked, “So, how have things been since I left?”

“Oh, pretty much the usual.”

“How’s my old buddy, Mark Brinkers?”

“You know, I haven’t seen him since our little trip to Reno.” I smiled. “I think he’s layin’ low.”

“What’s Neil been up to?”

“Had us out sampling a gold deposit yesterday.”

“Gold?”

“Yeah,” I nodded confirmation. “Different for me.”

“Gold, huh? He had you out collecting?”

“Yup.”

“Must be a good prospect. Hmm.”

“He thinks so.” I discarded my straw and drank from the tall frosted glass.

“Where’s it at?”

“Right in the middle of Grantsville. On that small range to the west of the town.”

“Lot of old prospects there.”

“Seems to be.” I took another drink.

Randy grew quiet, pondering Neil’s discovery.

“I had to call the Navy today,” I changed the subject.

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, Stu needed to sample that area west of Fairview Peak.”

“The one south of Frenchman?”

“Yeah. But there’s one problem. It’s isolated by the mountains on one side and that Navy target area on the other. Good old Baker 17.”

“Just drive through it.”

“Stu tried that. Road’s fenced off. Says there’s an official government sign on the locked gate,” I made my voice sound officious, “warning of the dangers and consequences of entering an active military target area.”

“So you called the Navy?”

“Yeah. Neil went out to his gold deposit, so he had me call the Naval Air Station in Fallon. Got lucky. The number was right there in the Baggs phone book. Surprised the hell out of me.” I took another drink. “What a pain. I hate using pay phones to make long distance calls. Especially when I get transferred from one officer to another.”

“Bureaucracy.”

“You got it. No one had the authority to allow us to enter. Finally reached an ordnance officer responsible for that area. A nice guy, real polite and helpful. Told me they’d be using Baker 17 heavily ‘til mid-July. And even after their war games it will be dangerous in there ‘cause of the ‘ordnance’ that doesn’t detonate.”

“So?”

“Well, the other option is for Stu to spend half a day hiking over the mountain from the east ... collecting the necessary samples ... then lugging them back over the mountain in the afternoon.”

“Not much of a choice,” Randy moaned.

“Stu wasn’t too thrilled either.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Neil decided to scrap the area for now. There were only a few potential samples. If there’s time later he said he’d send someone in.”

“It’s not a critical area,” Randy nodded. “Probably made the right decision.”

We finished our sodas, loaded Randy’s bags into the truck, and headed back to Gabbs. I couldn’t even make it to mile post five on the Gabbs’ Incline.

^^^

“Burt, ol’ Buddy ... I gotta drive our esteemed crew chief, mister Easton, into Reno this afternoon. Probably be back late. You’re on your own for dinner tonight.” I set my breakfast dishes—a spoon, a bowl, and a glass—in the sink.

Burt turned from the morning telecast and nodded acceptance of the information.

“There’s ‘burger in the fridge and canned stuff in the pantry. Help yourself.”

...

Randy had me make a quick trip into Luning to pick up two packages he’d shipped from our Tucson office. Some maps, new sample standards, rapidograph pens, and other small items.

“Sorry. Must’ve missed connections somewhere. Might be on the next bus.”

“When’s that?”

“Tomorrow. Same time.”

“Thanks.”

It was 60 miles round trip for nothing, and I couldn’t get past mile post five on the good ol’ Gabbs’ Incline.



• • •

That afternoon I drove Neil into Reno to catch a flight back to Tucson for his stint of R&R. To say the least, he was excited to be heading back.

“Today’s my one year anniversary,” he told me proudly.

“Of what?”

“Of living with Judy.”

“Of course,” I shrugged. “Guess that’s like being married.”

“Sure is,” he confirmed. “I’m looking forward to a romantic evening and some wonderful love-making.”

“That’s great,” I said half-heartedly, “while we’re out here hauling rocks you’ll be rockin’ in the sweet, soft arms of your lover.”

He smiled sheepishly.

“Boy ... you crew chiefs have it nice. Ten days in the field then back to the real world. At company expense. What a deal.”

“Yeah, but we have to work weekends.”

“Right.”

• • •

There was nothing much to mark that trip into Reno except that the Truckee was running high, near flood stage. It must have been full from spring run-off in the mountains.

We shipped our samples from the Greyhound depot in Sparks, a small town on the outskirts of Reno, then I delivered Neil to the airport and made the return trip to Gabbs. Even with a sinus headache the trip was much nicer without Mark Brinkers.

• • •

I walked into my trailer about eight-twenty and found Burt sitting at the table reading a textbook.

“You eat?” I asked.

“Yes. I made macaroni and cheese. There’s some in the refrigerator for you.”

“No thanks, I grabbed a burger in Fallon.”

Macaroni and cheese, from a box. Figured. At least he had fixed it for himself. I had suspected he might grab a granola bar and a glass of milk and call it a day.

Then I noticed the sink. “What about these dishes?”

He looked at me sideways, as if he hadn’t heard right. “I thought you would do them.”

“What?”

Patently he repeated, “I thought you would do them.”

I was incredulous. “You thought *I* would do them? Why?”

“You do them every day.”

My mouth must have dropped open. “Yeah, I been doing them every day. And other than

breakfast, I've been doing all the cooking."

"I thought it was your job."

"My job? Why would you think it was *my job*?"

"Because you always do it." He was serious. "Supper is always waiting when I get in from the field."

"WHAT?" I bellowed. "You think I'm your personal slave?" The hours on the road fighting a sinus headache had deteriorated my sense of humor. I was angry.

Burt seemed to cringe. He mouthed "No" in a weak voice.

"I've been cooking and doing the dishes partly out of kindness, and partly out of self preservation." My voice boomed, "IT'S NOT MY JOB!"

Burt sat there cowering on the cushioned bench, his hands on the corners of his book.

"I been cooking for you 'cause you're out in the field all day, you dumb shit! It's easier for me to whip up something good. I've got the time. I was trying to be your god-damned buddy. But it's NOT MY JOB!"

No response.

"And it's no big deal, doing the dishes. I don't mind. 'Cause I've learned most guys are lazy and careless and leave disgusting bits of their last meal stuck to the plates and rings of dried milk inside the glasses and chunks of cheese or egg yolk stuck between the tines of the forks. That's gross. Makes me wanna gag. So most of the time I'd just as soon do the dishes myself and know they're clean. That's why I do the dishes! It's NOT MY FUCKING JOB!"

Burt looked at me with his usual blank stare. It was as if his whole world had been knocked askance; as if his favorite grade school teacher had suddenly told him she thought he was a twit. Reality was vastly different from his sheltered perceptions. Somehow The Edge of the World loomed closer.

"Damn it," I continued, "you dirtied those god-damned dishes ... YOU'RE GONNA WASH 'EM!"

Without saying a word he closed his text and went to the sink like some android. He looked like a sad, hurt puppy.

I went outside, slammed the door, and unloaded the supplies from my truck.

When I went back inside I found he had completed his chore. Almost. In my morning rush to get to Luning, my chores, and to Reno, I had left a spoon, a bowl, and a glass sitting in the sink. Burt washed all of his dishes and left mine. He had obviously moved them when he filled the sink with water, then placed them back where I had left them when he was done. I stood there dumbfounded. He grabbed his book and walked out.

I dashed after him. "YOU BASTARD," I yelled, "I've had enough! You're gonna start cooking your own god-damned meals from now on ... and you're gonna wash *your own fucking dishes*! GOT THAT?"

He looked back over his shoulder, surprised. Once again, that innocent doe look, like, "What did I do?"

I continued yelling, "AND YOU'D BETTER DO'EM RIGHT or I'm gonna stuff 'em up your GOD-DAMNED tight Christian ass!"

I turned and climbed back into my trailer, slamming the aluminum door for emphasis. I was

sure the other's heard. I imagine Burt crawled sheepishly back to his motel room.

Through the open window I heard Rob say, "Well ... I guess the honeymoon's over."

Walt laughed.

Rob added, "Wonder if they're fighting over money or sex?"

• • •

A short time later Randy stopped by and questioned me about the blow-up. I explained the whole sad tale and he seemed sympathetic. Then he cautiously mentioned, "I need you to drive back to Reno tomorrow."

"Huh?" Once again I was dumbfounded.

"We need a couple of topo sheets bad. It's faster to drive to Reno than to have them shipped up. You're my man."

"Ah, man," I groaned, still weary from today's trip, "I was just there."

"Hey," he smiled, patting me on the back, "I know. But that's the way it is in exploration geology."

^^^

Without the topographic maps he needed, Randy claimed nothing to do, so he volunteered to ride along on my excursion. Preferring the power and better radio of his own truck, he offered to drive. I loaded the boxed samples and off we drove toward Reno.

Passing through Fallon, I spotted a place called Jeff's Stationary. Among the other items listed on the sign was the word "MAPS." On a long shot we went in.

Our first surprise was the attractive female clerk. She had a wonderful smile, a ready laugh, and turned out to be quite attentive.

"Do you sell topographic maps?" I asked.

"Sure do," the slender beauty replied, eyes twinkling, "follow me."

"Gladly," Randy murmured, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Surveyors?" the young woman questioned.

"Surveyors," Randy faked choking. "Geologists. Full-blooded geologists." He seemed to puff-up and went into a spiel about the geological work we were doing and how important our success might be to the overall economy of this area.

She tossed his effort aside. "I beg to differ," she toyed. "Last thing we need around here is another mine."

We followed her slight form down the aisle, through tidy displays of paper and pens and notebooks.

"Why's that?" Randy asked defiantly.

"Because," in a girlish voice, "I prefer my Nature natural."

We reached a wooden cabinet with a series of labeled drawers. When the woman spoke,

she looked directly into my eyes, as if searching for something. I felt uneasy, yet excited, like she was attempting to communicate subliminally. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, and her voice became soft and sensuous with just a hint of a country inflection. “Don’t you love things as they are, untouched, unaltered, and just the way they were meant to be?”

I nodded.

Randy became defensive. “Minerals are where you find them. There’s nothing we can do about that. We have to put the mine where the minerals are.” Flatly, he said, “Sometimes the pretty scenery has to go.”

I watched her face intently as her wonderful eyes narrowed slightly. “That seems to be the chauvinist’s view of things,” she replied. “Perhaps there are alternatives.”

I nodded again.

Her eyes widened as she said, “I know my favorite places are untouched by human hands.”

Randy moved closer, inserting himself into her gaze. “I could show you some places untouched by human hands.” His voice became intimate. “You doing anything Sunday afternoon?”

It was immediately obvious she saw through Randy’s innuendo. Releasing my eyes, she faced him directly. Politely she said, “Thank you for the offer, but I’m hoping to have other plans.” She glanced at me quickly, then said, “Here are the map cases.” She indicated the rows of drawers. “Which map would you like?”

That was our second surprise. She produced the exact sheets Randy described.

“We’ve had a lot of requests for these maps lately.” Her hand coyly brushed mine as she helped me place a sheet back in its drawer. “There are lots of geologists and surveyors looking at that same area.”

My heart raced. I couldn’t take my eyes from her’s. When I spoke I was sure my words were inane and garbled. Yet I kept digging for conversation.

On our way to the front of the store I asked, “Is there a bus terminal in Fallon?”

“No. Afraid not.”

“Too bad.”

“Do you need to ship something?”

“Yes. I have samples to ship to Tucson.”

“Samples?”

“For analysis.”

“Oh! Rocks.” She giggled. “We just had a salesman in here with lots of samples: pens and markers.” She moved to behind the counter, brushing back her light brown hair. “United Parcel stops at the Chevron station. The one at the main intersection.” Her eyes captured mine again. “But only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Shoot. Today’s Friday, right.”

“Yes. They won’t pick up again until next week.”

“Ah well. Guess we’ll take them to Hawthorne.”

“You can’t come back next week?”

Randy jumped in. “They can’t wait that long.”

“Too bad,” she said softly.

After Randy paid the bill he became anxious to leave. “Come on, Chris, we’d better get on the road. We’re Hawthorne bound.”

“Yeah.”

“Come again. I’d be glad to help you ... with anything.” Those eyes. They followed me all the way to the door.

A streak of corn suddenly hit. “Fare thee well, fair maiden. Thou hast been, upon this occasion, a great help. I shall fly to thee again someday. Fare thee well.”

I could hear her laughter as she shouted after me, “Bye ... Chris.”

And I was out the door, surprised that she had picked up my name.

“What the hell was that?” Randy grinned.

“Pseudo-Shakespeare.”

“Oh brother. A pretty face and you go all mushy.”

I shrugged. “You were sure in a hurry to leave.”

“Hey, why not? I wasn’t gonna strike out and stand there while you loaded the bases. It was time for a seventh inning stretch.”

...

We were just outside of Fallon when Randy’s truck started bucking. “Oops! Tank’s dry.”

“Great,” I moaned.

“No problem,” he said confidently, “I’ll flip to the reserve.” He reached beneath his seat. I could hear a solid click. Nothing happened.

“Great,” I moaned.

“Shit!” His confidence waning, “The damn switching solenoid must be out again.”

“This happened before?”

We coasted to the side of the highway, onto the gravel. “Yeah, last summer, down by Tonopah.” He flipped the switch back and forth several times, pumped the gas pedal, and turned the ignition. “Son-of-a-bitch!” No response. “God-damn-it!” He slumped back, defeated.

“Great,” I moaned.

We sat silently in the late morning heat, contemplating our options.

Randy spoke first, “We’ll hafta drain gas from the reserve tank and pour it into the other.” His confidence returned. “That’s what we did last time.”

“Sound’s like fun.” I had been there before. “Are we a mile from Nothing?”

“Huh?”

I reminded him of my experience earlier in the season.

“Naw, don’t worry. We got this licked.”

Climbing from the truck, Randy said, “There’s a drain on the bottom of the reserve tank. Getting the gas out is no problem. We just gotta find something to catch it with.”

“Yeah, and somehow to pour into the other tank.”

I looked in the back. “Only thing we’ve got is this Styrofoam cooler.” It was one of those cheap 99 cent disposable jobs you can buy at a convenience store to keep your beer cold. I handed it to Randy.

“It’ll hafta do.” He set it on the ground. “We’ll hafta cut the sides so it’ll fit under the tank.” He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and commenced slicing. It wasn’t as easy as he imagined. Instead of a neat line, the sharp knife ripped chunks of white Styrofoam. He had to struggle to keep from cracking the fragile sides.

The June Sun climbed higher toward Noon.

We were both sweating before the last chunk was removed. Cars and trucks zipped by, kicking up dust mixed with tiny Styrofoam beads. The air was swarming with gnats that went right for the moisture in our eyes, noses, and mouths. It was all in all a truly delightful situation.

I was relieved when Randy dropped to the gravel and crawled under the truck. Without comment he went to work. After a minute or so I could hear the gas splash into the plastic cooler. He shoved the half-filled container to me.

Easing it out, I noted, “This thing’s starting to dissolve.”

“Gas must be eating it. Be fast.”

“I hope this goo doesn’t hurt the engine.”

“Petroleum by-product.”

I did my best to pour from a jagged corner into the tank’s recessed spout. Gas splashed the side of the truck. After three coolers worth I got enough into the tank so we could start the engine.

We tossed the dissolving cooler into the back and retraced our route into Fallon. At the first service station we bought gas, had the solenoid replaced, and washed up as best we could. Smelling like refinery workers we drove down to the Nugget for lunch. The unmistakable smell of gasoline on our hands and clothes made for an enjoyable feast. I’m sure the waitress warned away smokers for fear we might explode at any moment.

• • •

“Now there is an astonishing sight.”

“Walker Lake,” Randy informed me. On our southward journey from Fallon we traveled the length of the lake, just north of Hawthorne.

“So calm ... it’s like a vast sheet of silvery blue glass.” I moved my hand along an invisible plane in front of me.

“Just a lake,” Randy retorted.

“Yeah, but it’s in such sharp contrast to the bland hues of the surrounding desert. The lake’s silvery blue contradicts the buffs and browns of the barren shoreline.”

“I suppose.”

“Reservoir?”

“No. Oh no. This is the terminus of the Walker River.”

“Ah ... so it’s an evaporation basin.”

“No outlet.”

“Guess that obvious,” I noted, “from the scummy bathtub rings along the shore.”

“Water level fluctuates considerably, depending upon precipitation in the Sierras.”

“The Walker’s origin, I assume?”

“Yup.”

“How big?”

“Pretty large,” Randy assured me. “Maybe fourteen ... fifteen miles long, and I’m betting at least five miles wide.”

“You just don’t expect a gem like this in such a dry, barren setting.”

When we finally made it into Hawthorne we shipped our samples, collected a few supplies, drove to Luning, picked up the two packages Randy expected, and arrived back in Gabbs about four. Randy spent the rest of the afternoon instructing me in the use of a Leroy pen and a Rapidograph so that I could transfer sample locations from the field maps onto the master map. The work was enjoyable, but tedious.

• • •

While Randy and I developed my skills with the Leroy, the others arrived from the field. Walt and Rob came right to Randy’s trailer.

“What’s up?”

“We got the last of the samples from Grantsville.” Rob looked toward their truck.

“Great,” Randy set down his pen. “We can move you to another area tomorrow.”

“You might not want to.” Walt showed a big grin.

“What’s up?”

Rob pulled out a small vial of lip balm. “After we started collecting this morning ... we spotted a truck working its way down the canyon road.”

“They spot you?” Randy asked, only half concerned.

“I really don’t think so,” Rob replied.

Walt added, “Our truck was pretty well hidden in the trees.”

“We ducked ... behind some boulders and watched.”

“What’d you see?”

“Well ... there was a male and a female. Looked like geology types. They dug around in the back of their truck, put on Filson ... vests ... and small packs ... checked their maps ... then started a sample line.”

“Ran right up the range,” Walt jumped in, “parallel to our line.”

Rob ventured, “They might work ... for AMINEX.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. They hold that large claim block on the west side of the range,” Randy confirmed. “They’ve done lots of work in that area.”

“That’s for sure,” Walt agreed, “they’ve got fresh drill roads and drill pads everywhere.”

Randy said, “Sounds like they’re doing some quick and dirty soil sampling.”

“Probably testing the ... peripheral areas of their claim.” Rob applied balm to his lower lip.

“Not familiar with soil testing,” I said. “Pretty much the same as rock sampling?”

Rob moved a sticky finger along his upper lip. “They were using a string counter....”

“A what?”

“A string counter,” Rob said patiently, making a smacking noise with his moist lips. “A little device ... that hangs on your belt.” He indicated how it would sit on a hip. “A piece of

string ... comes through a small hole ... in the back, and is tied to a tree or rock. You ... move out, using your Brunton to head in a straight line. There's a counter ... on the string box ... to let you know how far you walked."

"Roughly," Randy laughed.

Walt picked up the description, "At intervals they..."

"Say fifty feet," Rob cut him off. "It looked like they were doing fifty feet."

Randy added, "That's usual."

"Right. Every fifty feet they stopped, marked the spot with engineers flagging..."

"Like we use."

"Yeah. Do you wanna tell this, Rob?"

"Naw ... you're doing fine ... Pinhead."

"Geez, gimme a chance." Walt made an idiot's face. "They dig up a small soil sample, put it in a small paper bag, mark it, put it in their pack ... go on to the next location."

"Just like we do with rocks," Rob grinned at Walt, "but lighter."

"Sound's simple enough," I said.

"It's easy," Randy remarked, "but you gotta go in a straight line. Through trees, bushes, cactus, whatever. You gotta go in a straight line."

"Yeah. Least we can go 'round the bad stuff." Walt started unlacing his boots.

"When we were sure the other two weren't coming close, we finished our own sampling."

Rob had sealed his little jar of lip balm and slipped it into a pocket.

Randy was pleased. "Sounds like those AMINEX geologists left us a nice grid of string and tags. Right up the side of the mountain." He was pondering. "You two take Burt with you tomorrow. Save us some time. Use their measurements and tags. Let's find out what they sampled, what they got."

...

I cleaned the pens and stored away the maps and equipment and headed back to my trailer. I found Burt warming his leftover macaroni and cheese. Neither of us said a word. When he finished his "cooking" I replaced him at the stove and fried a couple of hamburgers. By the time I sat at the table Burt had eaten the last of his meal. He immediately went to the sink and prepared to wash his dishes. With hot water splashing in the basin, he turned to me and said, "I didn't see your dishes sitting in the sink last night."

I finished chewing. "You sure saw them enough to move them out of your way. And then put them back."

"I didn't see them," he pleaded.

"Hum ... I'd be curious to see your field notes."

"Why?"

"To see if you can properly identify rock types. You must be blind as a bat."



^^^

I was replacing empty propane cylinders on the Airstream when the trio from Grantsville returned. As soon as they turned off the engine Burt climbed out and walked past me, directly to the ever present ice chest sitting by the door. He reached in, grabbed a dripping can of Bud, popped the top in one motion, as if he had done it a thousand times, and without hesitation, chugged half the can before he came up for air.

I stared in amazement. Until that moment Burt had refused to even consider an alcoholic beverage.

Slowly drinking the second half of the beer, he sat on the cooler looking at me. His eyes seemed angry, or defiant. I wasn't sure which. Seconds stretch into minutes. I didn't say a thing, not wanting to let on that I was shocked. I sensed something ominous about to happen.

In a calm, matter-of-fact voice, Burt said, "I'll cook and wash dishes every other day." He never took his eyes from mine. "If you would like me to."

Amazed, I accepted. "Of course." Stunned into a conciliatory mood, I added, "On your days to cook, if you're running late, I'll do it." I had ulterior motives. I wouldn't have to sit around waiting for supper. "You know ... so you can do your paperwork." That pleased him.

He tossed his empty can into a bag by the door, stood up, walked over to me, and extended his hand.

I took it and we shook.

He said, "I'll cook tonight."

"If you'd like."

"Yes. I'll cook tonight." With that he walked off, collected the gear from the back of the truck, then headed toward the trailer.

...

Spurrier and Ellis had gone off toward Randy's Nomad. Walking up to the group, I said, "Boy, you guys really worked on Burt today."

Walt and Rob laughed.

Randy asked, "What's up?"

"Old Burt just chugged a can of Bud."

"Freak you out?" Walt asked.

"You bet."

"We told him it would." Rob grinned at Walt. "We had a long talk with him ... on our way out today."

"Old Burt has seen the light." Walt laughed again.

"Whatever you told him worked. He certainly did something radical."

"Maybe for him," Randy qualified my statement.

"Yeah, for him. A definite breakthrough."

"Thanks to Rob, here." Walt patted him on the back.

“Maybe Burt will turn out alright after all.” Rob licked his lips. “Just give me a little more time.”

• • •

“So, anyway,” Randy changed the subject, “how did your soil sampling go?”

“Collected a shit pile of samples,” Walt seemed proud. “Using their line saved a bunch of time locating ourselves on the ground.”

Randy nodded, “Beats taking bearings all day long, doesn’t it.”

“All we had to do was stroll along,” Rob postured, “and wherever we found engineer’s flagging ... we collected a sample and gave it one of ... our numbers.”

“Gonzo Geology in action,” Walt proclaimed.

“We trusted the two from yesterday ... knew what they were doing.” Rob grinned at Randy. “We only triangulated the beginning and the end ... of each line.”

“Yeah,” Walt added, “we plotted the other locations with a ruler.”

Randy gave them a quick look.

“Hey ... relax,” Rob tried to soothe, “everything was right ... right on.”

“Maybe for you guys,” I said. “But now I’ve got a shit pile of samples to ship and a plethora of points to plot.”

“Awe, poor baby.” The three taunted in unison.

Then Randy added, “Remember what I told you? That’s the way it is in exploration geology.”

• • •

We were sitting around outside the Argosy, enjoying the evening breeze, listening to Randy’s discourse on the pros and cons of Neil’s Grantsville prospect. During a lull in his monologue Dave asked, “So, what’s Neil’s fiancée like?”

“Judy?”

“Yeah.”

“Judy’s a dream. She’s damn good lookin’. Neil’s one lucky guy.”

“Yeah? But, what’s she look like?”

“Let me put it this way: she has the hair, the face, the bod, the legs, and the brains, to get almost any guy she wants. And she has money. And she’s gonna be a lawyer.”

“Ooo ... sounds like a ten to me,” Dave taunted.

“On the Tucson Scale,” Randy replied, matter-of-fact.

“Well, how can an average looking guy like Neil land a babe like that?” Dave voiced what we were all thinking.

“Yeah,” Stu added, “sunken chest, skinny legs....”

“He’s just skin and bones,” Rob noted.

“He’s not dumb,” I contributed, “but he’s no big brain, either.”

“Something must of clicked,” Randy grabbed his crotch. “They been living together over a

year.”

“I can identify with that,” Walt assured us. “When a woman first feels the power of my golden spike, things really start clicking.”

“Yeah,” Dave chuckled, “until they find out you can’t drive a spike with a tack hammer.”

“What you saying, Beer Brain?”

“You ain’t got no butt,” Dave chided.

Walt came back with, “No butt’s better than a fat ass like yours.”

“I don’t have a big butt,” Dave argued.

“You ain’t got any women, either.”

“Bull shit!”

“Yeah,” Walt said nonchalantly, “‘cause they all know you can’t drive a tack with a spike hammer.”

^^^

Burt’s beer episode was an anomalous psychological lapse instigated by Spurrier. Sunday morning he was off to church again, dragging his tail behind him, hoping for God’s forgiveness and understanding of the weakness of his flesh. If he were Catholic he would no doubt make a beeline to the confessional.

“Bless me Father for I have ... BURP! ... for I have ... BELCH!.... Bless me Father for I have consumed a can of beer.”

“What kind of beer, my son?”

“A cold beer, Father.”

“No, no, my son ... I mean what brand of beer?”

“Oh, pardon me Father. It was Miller Lite.”

“Did it taste great, or was it less filling?”

...

While the coin operated machines in the laundromat tortured our clothes, Stu and I sat outside my Empire enjoying the cool quiet of a Sunday morning. Perhaps it was the lonely sound of a church bell, or the smell of bacon frying, that drifted through our memories, tugged at lost moments, and set the tone for our conversation.

“You know,” I said, “thinking about Burt off doing his churchly thing makes me wonder about destiny.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, you know ... seems sometimes we don’t know where we’re goin’ ‘til we get there.”

“There’s a lotta people like that.”

“Yeah, suppose so. We follow blindly whichever path we happen to be on.”

“The path we’re born to,” Stu remarked.

“Yup. But other times,” I went on, “seems we can see way ahead, to where we’ll eventually be. And yet, no matter how hard we look for shortcuts, seems the only way to reach that destiny is still the long, lonely path we happen to be treading.”

“Life’s like travelin’ down a highway.” Speaking like an old timer, Stu motioned with his right arm, as if he were giving directions. “You can keep yer eyes open an’ see where you’ve been, where you are, and where yer goin’ ... or ... you can catch z’s in the passenger’s seat an’ let some other bozo do the drivin’. If’n you doze off you miss the pretty clouds an’ those mountains over there ... you miss the dumpy little towns as well’s them cluttered up, fancified, big cities, an’ ... worse of all ... you’ll miss the faces of all them be-you-tee-full wimin uh jus’ waitin’ fer yuh along the soft shoulders of the road.” He pointed toward the ground, saying in his fake hick voice, “You’ll git to yer dess-tination, sure ‘nough. But will yuh gain anythin’ ‘long the way?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled, “maybe a few precious Z’s.” We both laughed quietly. “That’s true, though,” I continued, “we’re all moving towards that same destination. Nothing we can do about that.” I looked down at my hands. “Guess it’s how we get there that matters.”

Stu didn’t respond, so I went on. “You’re right. The more wide open and awake we are ... the more we see, the richer we become, the more we have to offer our companions. If we let others control our course ... restrict our path ... we’ll never have lived.” I thought for a moment. “Yeah ... and this sounds kind of simplistic, I know ... but, ain’t the purpose of Life to Live. Ain’t it? There’s really nothing else.”

“You got that right.” Stu slouched back in his chair. “Television, radio ... the news media, government ... parents, employers, teachers ... and religion ... all try their darnedest to direct us an’ mold us into some common unit.”

“Uniformity, conformity.”

“Yup. They try to make us think their way.”

“Or think we think,” I threw in.

“They show us a life that’s illusion ... a mirage.” Stu held his hand in front of his eyes.

Nonchalantly, I said, “In Buddhism it’s called Maya. Illusion.”

“Whatever. Another label. What’s important’s for each of us to see life from his or her own point of view.”

“Based on personal experience.”

“Yes. To make our own personalized reality.” Stu became edgy. “That’s the only individuality we really have.”

“Right. Ultimately we’re all just minuscule fragments of the universal flux and flow of energy and matter.”

“We’re only individuals when we’re alive.”

“It’s death,” I said, “our reunion with the cosmic forces, that’s uniform.”

“Social conformity isn’t important. It’s the Self that matters.”

“Yeah. Once we’ve reached that final destination, the Edge of the World that Burt fears and longs for at the same time ... that unavoidable conclusion to our journey ... we’ll all be the same.”

“A pile of dust.”

“A pile of dust. It’s the differences ... the divergent characteristics ... the endless possibilities ... the paradoxes and contradictions ... that define a life.”

“Yeah,” Stu pointed, “like the endless possibilities there.” Larney’s roommate walked by, along the western edge of the trailer park, carrying her little kitten, Jimmy.

“Ah,” I took a deep breath, “one them be-you-tee-full wimin uh jus’ waitin’ fer us along the soft shoulders of our road.”

When he was sure she was out of earshot, Stu commented, “I sure enough like the way she moves.”

“She has definite appeal,” I agreed.

“I been out here too long without a woman,” Stu moaned. “Just watchin’ her’s got me all heated up.”

“I think she knows we’re watching her. Just by the way she walks.”

“I’d definitely like to find out if she moves like that in bed.”

“No thanks, not for me,” I said, “not with Larney around.”

“If she cared that much for Larney she wouldn’t be out showin’ her stuff.” Stu sighed. “If’n I had the chance I’d ask her to dance.”

“Sounds like you wanna do more than dance.”

“No, dancin’s just fine,” Stu grinned. “The horizontal bop.”

...

“Walt and Dave coming along?” Randy asked Stu.

“Naw, don’t think so.”

“They still crashed?”

“Yup. Struck out in Fallon again.” Stu shook his head slowly. “Think they crawled in ‘round three.”

Randy chuckled to himself. “Struck out and wiped out.” He opened the door to his truck. “Well, let’s get goin’ then. I got work to do and I know you guys wanna play.”

We climbed into two trucks loaded with the four bikes and headed into an area north of Gabbs, out along the Ione road. I was surprised when Burt came along, skipping the second part of his Sunday service. I remember thinking, again, that maybe there was a chink in his armor after all.

We split into two groups. Randy had some field work to do, so we off-loaded the two bikes and he took his truck. Rob and Burt wanted to explore an area closer to Ione, so they took the second truck. The others agreed to meet Stu and me at four, near an old corral and windmill close to the road.

Stu and I spent our time digging around mine dumps near two old shafts.

“I picked up some nifty specimens when I sampled this area,” Stu assured me. “With a little more time we might find something really good.”

Just then a pair of jet fighters blasted overhead, no more than a few hundred feet above.

“Man,” Stu shouted, “I could almost read the lettering on the sides of the cockpit.”

“I could see the pilots,” I yelled back.

We could feel the power of the engines as they zipped by. Watching them disappear over the range, Stu commented, "That was quite a shock."

"Kind of blew away the stillness of the desert, didn't it?"

"I think those suckers did that on purpose."

"Could be," I agreed. "If we'd seen them coming we could have thrown rocks."

"Yeah. That woulda shown 'em."

"Yeah. Disturbing the peace on a Sunday afternoon, like that."

"Maybe they're lookin' for Walt and Dave," Stu speculated, with a smile.

"How's that?"

"Maybe one of our guys tried movin' in on one of those air-jockey's territory last night. He's out lookin' to blast 'em for comin' on to his gal."

"Yeah, Walt and Dave better stay away from the Navy target areas for sure."

...

Toward the end of the day Randy drove his truck down the wash where Stu and I were exploring. We showed him the artifacts we had collected, loaded the bikes, and retraced his route back to the corral. There we waited for Rob and Burt.

Time passed. We grew tired of sitting on the old weathered fence. Yet no sign of the other two.

"It's close to four-thirty," Randy said impatiently. "I'm gonna see what's keeping them. You two stay here in case I miss them."

Stu and I watched Randy drive away, then gazed at the clouds and the mountains and the sage and the rocky soil and anything else that attracted our attention. And as one might expect, we grew bored and wandered off toward an interesting blow-out we spotted from the fence. There we found an old garbage dump with piles of rusting cans and shattered bottles.

Kicking through the scattered debris, we heard the high pitched whine of a Kawasaki. It was Burt, tearing across the sand and sage, dust hanging in his wake, hell bent for our location.

"Uh-oh," Stu hollered across the debris, "could mean trouble." He looked toward me, concerned.

Burt came sputtering up, stopped suddenly, and killed the engine.

"Hey, Burt. Somethin' up?" Stu stood with his hands in his pockets.

"Hi, guys." Burt, cool in the saddle. "No. I saw you here, thought I'd swing by."

"You seen Randy?"

"Yes. He's with Rob. We're meeting at the windmill by the corral."

"Great," Stu nodded.

"Hey, you got that bike all figured out, huh?" I walked up to them.

"Rob showed me the basics."

"Looks like you got it down. You fall any?" My one standard of good bikemanship.

"No. Not yet. I've stalled twice, though."

Stu smiled, looked at me. "Happens to the best."

Burt looked over the dump. "Did you find anything interesting?"

“Nothin’ here.” Stu peered around, kicked a can with the toe of his boot. “We did find some good stuff down that wash. There’s a small camp up there.”

“I found more colored glass.” I dug a lavender piece out of my shirt pocket.

Stu grinned. “It’s all over up there.” He wanted unbroken bottles, and thought fragments a waste. To a novice collector like me even a tiny bit of the past was exciting.

“Picked up some neat chunks of rusted metal, nails, a couple old mule shoes. Stuff like that.” I showed Burt the square headed nails.

“One site we found an’ old car body, nineteen-twenties vintage.” Stu was looking off into the distance, toward where Randy might appear.

“I grabbed an old rusted jack.” I tried to form it in the air with my hands. “Oh, and I found an old metal button from a shirt.”

“Or from button fly pants,” Stu argued.

“Could be. Hadn’t thought of that.”

“Sounds like you found some interesting artifacts.”

“Yeah,” Stu seemed impatient, “we’d better be gettin’ back to the road. Randy ‘n’ Rob oughta be showin’ soon.”

“They’d better,” I agreed, “I’m getting hungry.”

“They’d better, ‘cause I gotta take a shit.” Stu headed back toward the corral. “I really don’t wanna dump a load out here.”

Burt remained a few minutes to adjust his jacket, which he had tied to the back of his bike. Just as Stu and I reached the corral we could hear the bike rev to life, muffled by the sage and the distance. We heard Burt shift into gear, then the usual whine suddenly deepened, bogged down, and died, like a lawn mower in thick, wet grass. We turned, figuring he had killed it starting too fast.

We could see Burt kneeling near the rear of the bike, peering at something.

“Christ, did he hit a rock?” Stu’s impatience was showing.

Burt stood up and waved. We waved back.

“Prob’bly found somethin’ he thinks look’s int’restin’.” I hadn’t seen Stu this perturbed before.

Burt waved again, yelling something we couldn’t understand at this range.

“BURT, WE CAN’T HEAR YOU, YOU SACK UH SHIT.” Stu yelled and waved, knowing he couldn’t be heard. “Fergit it, you dip-wad,” Stu jeered. “COME ON BACK.”

All I could do was laugh at the comedy of the whole situation. It was a Laurel and Hardy movie come to life.

Burt tried yelling even louder, pointing at his bike.

Stu hollered, “YOU FUCK-WAD ... GOD-DAMN-SON-OF-A-BITCH!” He had all he could do to sound serious through his own laughter.

Burt finally gave up in frustration, grabbed the handle bars, and tried to push the bike. We could see it wouldn’t move. He was stuck somehow.

“Jesus-fucking-christ!”

“Oh well,” I said, and back we went.

Before we arrived we could see the damage. When the bike started forward Burt’s jacket

sleeve came loose and caught in the spokes. It wound itself around the axle, tight as a rope. The jacket was still in one piece, but obviously covered with black, filthy, grease.

“My mother gave me that jacket. I’ve only worn it a few times.”

“Think it’s dead, Burt.” Stu spoke solemnly.

“Doesn’t look too good to me, either.” I shook my head.

“We might be able to remove it,” Stu went on, “but I’m not too sure you’ll ever get it clean. That grease’s ground in.”

“We’ll hafta take the wheel off, I suppose.” I knelt to take a look.

“Yeah, but not out here. No tools.” Stu was still fighting his bowels.

“Gotta cut it out,” I concluded. “Jacket’s history.”

“We can’t disassemble the bike, so we’ll hafta disassemble the jacket.” Stu dug into his pocket for his knife. “The only alternative.”

“Couldn’t we do it in Gabbs,” Burt pleaded.

“You wanna carry this thing to the road?” Burt and I followed Stu’s gaze across the desert landscape.

Burt’s face looked red. I wasn’t sure if he was sun burnt, embarrassed, or pissed off. “I guess Mom will have to buy me another.”

Stu extended the blade, knelt, and began sawing the fabric. It took a while. Eventually he got enough cut away to allow us to push the bike back to the corral. By then Randy and Rob had arrived.

“What-in-hell were you guys doing out there?” Randy stood with his hands on his hips, imitating a concerned mother.

“We were showing Burt,” I explained, “why one should not put his finger in the fan.”

...

Rob had located a cool natural spring with great tasting water. Randy wanted to check it out.

“Oh, man ... we gotta get back to Baggs,” Stu growled. “I gotta take one healthy shit.”

Randy said, “I’d really like to see this spring while we’re out here.” He dug behind the seat in his truck, pulled out a roll of toilet paper, and tossed it to Stu. “Take a dump over behind that sage.”

“Let me take the other truck back,” Stu pleaded.

“I don’t think so,” Randy countered. “My main tank’s almost empty and I’m not sure about this new switching solenoid. I feel better with that truck along.”

Stu groaned. “Man....”

Randy handed him a shovel. “We’re not really interested in watching, you know. We’ll keep ourselves busy loading Burt’s bike.”

“Yeah,” I added, “that’s one deposit we won’t wanna sample.”

Stu pissed and moaned all the way to the bush and dug himself a hole.



• • •

After Stu fertilized the desert we drove to Rob's spring to check it out. Just off the road the water bubbled to the surface in a nice, clean pool. It was cold and clear and tasted great.

"Why is there a fence around it?" Burt puzzled.

"Keeps the range cattle out." Randy slurped from his hands. "This will be a good place for you guys to get fresh water."

"Right on our way." Rob knew he had scored big points.

"Sure tastes better'n that stuff we're forced to drink in Snaggs." Stu obviously felt much better.

We filled our canteens and a five gallon Gott cooler and headed back to town.

• • •

Burt went to a fund-raising dinner for his new church, so Stu and I decided to do something different. A couple days before Stu had purchased two "fresh" crabs from a refrigerated truck parked in upper Gabbs. "Had a cravin'," he explained.

"Never eaten crab," I admitted. "Not much for fish."

"Ah, this'll be great. Doesn't taste like fish."

"I don't know."

"Come on," he cajoled, "you didn't like vegetables 'til I had you try fresh broccoli and cauliflower. Now you like those, right."

"Yeah."

"You'll like crab." He grinned, "'Member what you said this morning?"

"I said a lot of things."

"You said the meanin' of Life is to Live. So live a little."

"How can I argue with a great mind?" I shrugged. "Alright, I'll try it. But you gotta cook."

"Never cooked 'em before, but I'll do what I can." He set the two dead creatures on the counter. They looked like something from a grade B science fiction movie. Staring at them, Stu admitted, "I'm not sure how to do this. You gut 'em first?"

"No idea."

"Geez. I'm tryin' to remember what they looked like when I ate 'em before." After standing there a few minutes he excused himself and ran next door to see if Rob or one of the other's had any ideas. When he came back, he said, "Simple. We just dump 'em in a large pot of boiling water." And so he did.

Once the water came to a boil and the crabs were tossing within the pot, the interior of the trailer became uncomfortably hot and humid. Without thinking, I turned on the air conditioner. The trailer cooled quickly, while the filter on the cooling unit absorbed the pungent smell of steaming crab.

"I have a feeling I just made a big mistake."

"How's that?"

"Well ... from now on, whenever I turn on the air, I'll be reminded of the tantalizing scent

of boiling crab.”

“Boy, I hope they come out good, then. I want you to have only pleasant memories.” Stu laughed wickedly.

• • •

They did come out okay. Stu was right. I enjoyed it. With side dishes of rice pilaf and fresh broccoli, it was a good meal.

“This fresh stuff tastes so much better than frozen.”

“Of course,” Stu said confidently. “We can afford to buy fresh ‘cause the company’s payin’. Everything tastes better when it’s fresh ‘n’ free.”

^^^

As the summer progressed the price of gold crept steadily toward record levels. Randy had a telephone conversation with Neil that enhanced the prospect of locating a gold mine in the Grantsville area. Some of the early assays showed traces of the precious metal. Randy directed Rob and Walt to continue their sampling near that locality.

“Chapik, I’m sending you along for a day to expedite the work.”

“What about the samples from Saturday,” I asked.

“The soil samples?”

“Yeah. And the regular samples.”

“They can wait a day. This is more important.” Randy was busy folding a map. “What’s wrong? Don’t wanna go into the field?”

“Naw, that’s no problem. I like that area. It’s a change from my routine.”

“Then what’re you griping about?”

“Well, with the new map work you’ve given me, my work days are growing longer.”

“Aww ... too much work?” He taunted. “There’s only one thing I can say.” He looked at me and smiled. “That’s the way it is in exploration geology.”

• • •

We were to sample around a small mesa on the west slope of the Shoshone Range, on the shoulder of the Ione Valley. Randy had assigned Walt to the west side of the mesa, delegated Rob to climb and sample across the top, and directed me to collect rocks along the eastern edge of the escarpment. Working through a canyon limited my view of the scenery, but at least I had some shade during the warmer part of the day.

Randy followed us to a jeep trail near the mouth of Milton Canyon, our end point for the day’s work. We parked our vehicle and piled into the back of Randy’s truck. He drove us around to the northern edge of the mesa.

With each of us facing our personally selected sage, Randy mentioned, “You’ve seen a few rattlers in here, haven’t you?”

“Almost every day,” Walt replied, matter of fact.

“Seems to be a lot in the Shoshones,” Randy unzipped his fly.

“Maybe it’s a hibernaculum,” I ventured, sidling up to my choice.

“Could be,” Rob pondered, “in the loose scree. Lots of deep cracks ... down to bedrock.”

“What the hell’s a hibernaculum?” Walt sounded suspicious. “I smell bull-shit on the wind.”

“Seriously,” I said. “It’s where snakes retreat during winter. They make a big ball. When spring comes they untangle.”

“And slither and slime to the surface,” Rob had a way of making everything sound like bull-shit, “to steal warmth from the Sun ... and eat poor, furry, baby mousies to fill their cavernous reptilian gullets.”

Unconvinced, Walt snickered, “Whatever you say, R-ah-ah-b,” referring to his ongoing contention that Rob was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “Wherever they crawl from they scare the piss outta me.” He began watering his bush.

“I haven’t seen one yet,” I said.

“Yeah you have,” Rob insisted. “The first day sampling Grantsville.”

“Heard that one, but didn’t see it.”

“True,” Rob agreed.

There was a moment’s silence as we drained our kidneys. Rob made a decision. “It’s not right ... you haven’t seen one.”

“But I have, back in Nebraska. Prairie rattlers. Just haven’t seen one here.”

“Yeah? Those aren’t real rattlers. These are more vicious ... real rattle snakes. Their venom is ten times more potent than anything ... on the prairie.” The words spewed from his mouth, but his face remained passive. “These are mountain snakes. More vigorous. You never met a rattler ... ‘til you face one of these vipers.” Rob stood up tall. “That really puts hair on your chest.”

“Right, Wolfman,” Walt crowed as he zipped his fly, “that’s why you got hairless pecs.”

Rob licked his lips, “It’s there, Pinhead. Short and soft and blond.”

“And kinky, like pubic hair.”

Rob ignored him, turned to me. “Face to face with a diamondback will make you a man. Gets your juices flowing ... stimulates testosterone. Makes you a better lover.” He placed his hands on his hips and made a few pelvic thrusts.

“Christ, the crap we listen to.” I motioned toward the mesa, “If I hafta meet a snake face to face to become a man ... if that’s what it takes ... if it’s my choice ... I’ll accept being a sissy the rest of my life.” I pointed to his shorts. “Keep your snakes.”

Rob looked down, saw his fly hanging open, smirked. “Few who see The King Snake escape its hooded sting.” He zipped closed its musky lair.

Walt and I gathered our equipment from Randy’s truck while Rob slid into one of his routines. His eyes squinted, his face screwed up, he started chanting some native-like rhythm, “dum-dum-dum-dum, dum-dum-dum-dum,” and so forth, like tom-toms. He waved his arms in front of him, letting his fingers fly about like thin sausages in a strong wind. “With the vast

cosmic forces of the heavens vested in the synapses of my brain, and with the power of four-wheel-drive, I command the creatures of the earth to obey.” He looked toward the sky, then quickly bent to the ground, ceremoniously collecting a handful of dust. He gently sprinkled the dirt in a shallow arc around my feet, keeping up his “dum-dum” rhythm, and tossed the last bit at my boots. Looking skyward, with raised arms, “May the spirit of the snake, the serpent of Adam and Eve, come forth to seek the witness of this faithless man.” He brought his arms down, stretched them toward me, right palm up, left palm facing the ground. “May the reluctant rattles of the serpent sing forth throughout this day.” He made a buzzing sound through his teeth. “May snake-eyes roll in matched pairs on the green felt tables of Vegas. May the sun shine bright on our old Kentucky home. May the skies be not cloudy all day.”

“Christ!” I turned back to my work.

“You cannot turn away,” Rob continued. “The power of the viper is upon you.” He walked in a circle. “You shall pass freely among the serpents of these stones ... on this day. You shall see their length and their beauty, yet shall be spared their fangs of death. Beware, and be warned. Take care in your step, my friend. Tread lightly. Be gone. Do your work well.” He brushed the air with his hands as if I were to depart.

I stood looking at him with my best imitation of a Burt James’ baby doe stare. “The bullshit I hafta put up with.”

...

It was a wonderful spring-like day, the sun pleasantly warm on backs bent to collecting samples. The scent of wild flowers, juniper, and sage permeated the high desert air. Bright light mingled with a dried-blood sheen to accent the sheer rock facies; a silicified limestone stained by goethite and limonite. The rock, when struck by a two pound sledge and pulverized, gave off the sure smell of sulfur. That meant sulfides. That meant there might be gold. Those were the samples we wanted. I gradually filled my pack.

Quiet and peaceful, I heard no sound from the other two. I didn’t expect to hear Walt, but I thought the sound of Rob demolishing stone would echo down these cliffs. The only disturbance was an occasional raven signaling up the canyon, or jays swarming the pinyon and juniper. There were the usual bees, flies, grasshoppers, and other buzzing insects, but mostly, it was just me and my thoughts. One of the finest rewards of field geology.

...

About three in the afternoon I spotted the jeep trail on which we had parked the truck, and began the downhill slope of my line, figuring to meet the others soon. I was working my way along a rock fall; a jumbled mess of broken altered limestone dislodged centuries before. Although difficult to traverse, this debris made my job easier, providing more angles to bash to fragment the stone. It was definitely less frustrating than beating against the smooth face of a larger slab. It also gave me an opportunity to peer deep into the mesa where huge gouges remained after the blocks had fallen. The composition of the rock looked boringly uniform.

I had bagged a sample and was pacing off fifty feet across a slide of rough-edged boulders and loose debris, careful not to lose my balance among the sharp edges and thorny desert scrub.

Suddenly, from above, “HEY ... how’s it goin’?” I looked up. Rob must have been close to the edge—the top of the mesa perhaps 40 feet above—but I couldn’t see him. “Seen any snakes?” His voice sounded hollow among the rocks.

I stepped back to gain a better view, yelling, “NOPE!” A sudden, terrifying buzz. Unmistakable. A flash of heat. My heart jumped. My throat constricted. I froze. My eyes focused on a spot six feet from where I stood. A soft spot, the same color as the ragged rock. A chill, or sweat, ran down my spine. There it was, where I had stepped a moment before. It must have been within inches of my foot.

With my senses returning, I saw no immediate danger. It couldn’t strike that far. My understanding was they could only strike a distance equal to half the length of their body. I backed away, caught my breath, not willing to check the validity of my knowledge.

“What’s up?” came down from above.

“Jee-zus Christ, Spurrier! I hadn’t seen a god-damned snake all day. You come ‘round and I’m practically standinh on one.” I took another deep breath. “Scared the shit outta me.”

I could finally see his shit-assin’ Cheshire cat grin peering over the edge. “Told you to watch out. I put the snake hex on you.” He made a hissing sound. “Works every time.”

I returned my attention to the snake. It was coiled and following my every move with its head and tongue. The little whip flicking out, testing the air.

“What kind is it?” Rob strained to look over the edge.

“Not sure. Looks a lot like the rattlers back in Nebraska. A prairie rattler.”

“This ain’t no prairie, Sod Buster. Does it have diamonds on its back?”

“Yeah. I guess you could call those diamonds. It’s not too big. Maybe two or three feet at the most. Thin.”

“Hungry. Looking for a big sod buster. Probably a western diamondback. They’re not large.”

“Looks a lot like a prairie rattler to me.”

“I told you ... no prairie ‘round here.”

I teased the critter with a long stick to see its response. It buzzed, hissed some, struck at the tip, rattled some more, and generally got pissed off. My heart was racing the whole time. It was like playing with a loaded gun.

I finally tired of the episode. Rob couldn’t see anything, so went back to his collecting, as I went back to mine. The rest of the afternoon was tense. I carefully checked the placement of every step, ready to retreat at the slightest sound. I threw small stones ahead, where I thought I’d pass, hoping to stir a response. I talked to myself and whistled loudly, hoping the coiled serpents might hear and give warning. Nothing stirred except my pulse. I just wanted to get out of there.

Collecting one of my next samples, I happened to look toward a section of cliff that had pulled away from the main face. There was a tangle of stone and sticks and debris jammed between. And there, facing me, was the head of a large snake. It must have been two inches across, flat, with the little pits in the nose that signal a viper—poisonous. Although I couldn’t see the body I could tell by the size and shape of the head this was a much larger snake of a different

type. The first snake's head was probably no larger than a thumb; this second creature's head was a quarter of the size of my palm.

I grabbed the last of my sample and backed off. It didn't move. A blank stare masked its face. Its eyes looked glazed. The scales along its back looked dull, dry, dusty. It looked dead, but I wasn't about to approach it. I tossed a stone, hitting within a foot or so of its snout. Nothing. It was in shadow, maybe too cool to be responsive. I let it be. Dead or alive, my sense of adventure did not compel me toward risking fang-prints at this time.

I moved on, even more cautious than before. Having seen two snakes within a hundred feet, every step was anxiously placed. I was a nervous wreck. Edgy. I kept hearing that buzz. Every grasshopper taking flight made me jump. Every lizard plowing through underbrush practically gave me a heart attack. Every time I stopped to take a sample I scanned the area thoroughly before pounding away. I was especially cautious where I placed my hands. I wore heavy leather boots and Levi jeans, so had a sense of some protection, however slight. My arms and hands were bare and felt vulnerable.

Trying to watch for snakes I misjudged a step and put my weight on a loose rock. My boot slipped to the side and I hyper-extended my right knee. I didn't go down, but white-heat pain shot through my leg. I had an old injury that flared whenever I was under stress and my muscles became fatigued. Unwilling to commune with the snakes I remained standing, placing all of my weight on the left leg. In a few minutes the pain subsided and I forced myself to move on before the knee stiffened.

• • •

Spurrier finally came over the southern tip of the mesa and worked his way down.

"I told you," he started right in, "I put a snake hex on you."

"Yeah, you probably slipped over the edge and planted them there."

We were still debating his ability as a snake charmer when Walt hiked up. He reported that he had encountered his daily quota of pit vipers. Rob had seen one as well. I related the frightening tale of my two. Rob, satisfied with his ability to conjure serpents, welcomed me into the club, and off we went, down the ridge, through the sage, toward our waiting truck. Happy to be done with Snakeland I hardly noticed the weight of my pack and my sore knee.

At the bottom of the ridge, along the southern edge of the mesa, coursed a narrow intermittent stream. We jumped the bed, worked our way through dry brush, and came to a flat clearing 50 feet from our truck. We halted in our tracks. Stretched full-length across our path was a chocolate and tan striped snake about five to six feet long. It was the longest snake I'd seen out of a cage. At its thickest it was perhaps an inch and a half to two inches across, so thin and straight that it looked like a painted stick.

"It's got the same head as the second snake I saw."

"We call these Coontails 'round Jerome," Rob said with authority.

"Well, I'm not sure what type it is," I replied in awe, "but it's definitely some sort of rattler."

It didn't move, apparently content to soak up the sparse sunlight filtered through desert

brush. Rob tossed a handful of sand. It slid forward, slowly, off to our right.

"Make a great hat band," Walt commented.

"Yep," Rob agreed. "And fresh spring snake makes good eating, too." He made smacking noises with his lips. "I'll get it for you." He bent to pick up a rock.

"Leave it," I demanded, surprising myself. "This is its territory. It's not bothering us."

"But ... it'll make babies ... and those babies will make more babies ... and one day one of us will get bitten ... by one of those babies ... and die."

"Unlikely," I said.

"An excruciating death." He dropped his stone. "It will be on your head."

"You couldn't have hit that thing anyway," Walt challenged.

"Would have been no problem," Rob said confidently, "I've done it before."

"Yeah, I'll bet you have," Walt taunted.

"Back in Jerome," Rob defended himself. "I was out hiking once, looking for Salado pots. Got too late. I knew I wouldn't make it ... home before dark. The trail was too rugged for night hiking, along the ... edge of some cliffs. So I made camp under a small overhang." He stuck his hands deep into his pockets, as if he was reliving the chill of that night. "Just before the Sun went down ... I spotted a rabbit near my camp, sitting under a juniper, waiting. I picked up a chunk of rhyolite, about the size of a golf ball. I stalked that rabbit ... slow and cautious, staying down wind, keeping a low profile, not making a sound. When I was in position ... I threw that rock ... and hit that bunny right between the eyes." Rob shrugged. "Roast Bugs for dinner."

"Bull shit, Spurrier. You're full of crap." Walt shook his head in disbelief.

"Believe what you want, Pinhead. I know the truth."

"Come on, Bull's Eye, let's get outta here."

We worked our way around the snake without causing it much concern. It had stopped and was lying among the weeds. When we reached the truck Rob grabbed a spade and headed back toward the clearing. Curious, I followed at some distance.

When he found the snake, he prodded with the shovel, "Come on, rattle."

The poor critter, too cold and lethargic to defend itself, tried to move away. It was like some slow motion sequence on a television drama. From the snake's perspective it must have been one of those nightmares where you try to run from some horrifying terror but can't get away, your legs and arms suddenly wet bags of sand. Like wading upstream in a swift flowing current.

"Come on, Rob," I pleaded, "leave the damn thing alone. Let it go its own way."

He didn't respond.

"There's no reason to kill it. We've invaded its territory. It's got as much right to life as we do."

He looked at the snake for a moment, then sighed. I thought I had won and headed back toward the truck with Rob close behind. Suddenly he turned, walked quickly back to the snake, and "whack," sliced off its head with the blade.

He hollered, "Snake steaks for dinner!"

Walt yelled back from the truck, "Maybe for you, Spurrier. Not for me. I'm not eating lizard. Looks too much like my pecker."

Spurrier lifted the limp body and returned to the vehicle. “We’ll tan it, make a nice hat band.”

“That’s bull-shit,” was all I could say, half under my breath.

He threw the body into the back, among the shovels and packs and rocks and coolers. “Looks like seven years old, from the rattles.”

I glanced away, uninterested, not giving him the satisfaction of my attention.

• • •

“Shit!” Walt grew suddenly serious. “You guys better check yourselves over. I just found a tick crawling by my ear. Sonofabitch!”

We each did a quick body search and found nothing more. “Damn it!” Walt barked. “Why these critters always find me?”

“Because you’re so sweet.” Rob winked and extended a limp wrist.

“Get outta here, you queer.”

“Oo ... a little touchy about our masculinity, are we?” Rob taunted.

“No. Just tired, hot, and bug infested. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

We climbed into the truck and headed back to Gabbs.

• • •

On the drive in Rob and Walt discussed the day’s sampling and the various minerals they had identified. Rob opened his ever present container of lip balm, saying, “I found stringers of leaverite ... along the east-west ridge near the top.”

Still upset about the snake incident, I ignored their conversation.

After a few moments of silence Walt chuckled as Rob prodded me, “You know what leaverite is?”

“No,” I said sharply. “Not a mineralogist.”

He rubbed ointment onto his lower lip. “Leaverite is one of the most common minerals ... found all over the world. It’s usually plain or dull....”

“Like Burt, huh?” Walt enjoyed his own joke.

“There’s no common crystalline structure,” Rob persisted. “Leaverite varies in color from plain buffs and browns to undistinguished ... blacks and grays. Its mineral content varies widely ... with no specific....”

“Sounds boring,” I cut him off.

“Well ... wait. I’m not done.” Rob applied the moisturizing cream to his upper lip. “Its identification is a matter of personal taste and perception. Collection of samples depends on time of day and relative weight of the sampler’s pack.”

“I love it,” Walt guided the truck around a dead rabbit on the road. “Another lesson in Gonzo Geology.”

“Yes ... one of the main tenets.” Rob was visibly pleased. He smacked his lips together. “This sampling technique is most often accompanied by the exclamation ‘Leaverite!’,” he licked



his lips, ““Leave her right there.””

Walt let out a horse laugh as Rob grinned.

I groaned, “Got me!” and shook my head. Trying to be a good sport I smiled, then peered out the window at the passing sage.

Walt seemed suddenly inspired. “In some social settings, such as the small communities and back waters of the Great Basin, leaverite refers to a woman of varying age. In this context the word has sexual connotations and is usually associated with a similar phrase. ‘Leaverite! Leave her right there. I wouldn’t touch her with a ten foot pole.’”

“Yeah ... unless you’ve been drinking, Pinhead.” Rob smirked, and I had to chuckle too.

^^^

Our trailers were like four loaves of bread sitting side by side in what had been a gravel parking lot. My Empire was the loaf on the southern end, closest to the large, formerly white, edifice locally described as the “laundry-mat.” The dominant structure in the trailer park, the place was a dump. The six washing machines, old scum colored units, seldom completed a load without some irritating malfunction. The two electric dryers produced enough heat to maybe keep buns warm but were hardly sufficient to dry clothes; it typically took two to three cycles per load. Even so, some heavy things, like towels and jeans, always came out damp, no matter how many cycles they tumbled.

And oh what a pleasant environment. The interior was cavernous, dark, and damp, with an acrid stench as if someone had used a murky corner as a public urinal. That was no doubt the case, because I often heard people exclaim “Piss on it!” as they left in a rage.

It was common for the patrons of this enticing facility to sit outside the entrance in their car or truck, waiting and hoping. More than once I heard an irritated male voice declare, “Those god-damned machines better do what in hell we pay’em to do or I’ll shoot the mothers.” Once or twice, when a vehicle backfired, I thought their end had come.

...

When I did my paper work and map transfers I sat at the table in my trailer facing a small window looking out upon that magnificent monument to washing technology. The open door to the building was in plain view, about 20 feet from where I sat.

One morning, while working, I sensed motion out of the corner of my eye. Glancing up, I saw Ginny, Larney’s roommate, outside the laundry’s door. Intrigued, as usual, I watched as she leaned against the frame and tilted her face at a peculiar angle, one arm raised loosely above her head, like a model in one of those staged photos. At first I was puzzled by her unusual pose, then realized she had positioned herself in a sun beam. Mornings were still cool and the direct sunlight must have felt like a friendly embrace. With her laundry sacrificed to the whims of a

machine, she did not dare venture too far for fear of having it eaten, or her underwear desecrated, by a wayward agitator. She stood guard outside, avoiding the interior stench while catching a few rays.

• • •

Ginny was clearly the most attractive woman we had observed in Gabbs. Her fine, shoulder length, dishwater-blond hair framed a clear complexion on a pleasing angular face. With a petite nose and thin lips she was pretty, in a womanly way, having lost her girlish looks, as if she had seen more than—our guess—her 22 years. Her eyes seemed to have a distant, vacant look, even when she smiled. But not that vacuous drugged-out stare you see late Saturday nights around campus bars in college towns.

Of about average height, Ginny's figure was slender, well proportioned, and yet not spectacular in any particular way. During the four weeks we had lived in Gabbs, Ginny had worn shorts almost exclusively, even when it was chilly. So we were well aware of her lovely legs; unanimously rated her best feature.

Beyond a doubt, she grew more attractive the longer we stayed. She was almost an obsession with our group, our "Gabbs Standard": a Ten.

In fact, Ginny was really the only woman in Gabbs that compelled discussion over breakfast, dinner, or a beer. Especially on those mornings when Larney left early. Ginny would come out in a short, flimsy—though opaque—night gown, to see him off. After their kisses and waves she would always stroll around their lot checking her flowers and searching for her kitten, Jimmy. When she found him she would cuddle and hold him close to her face, talking to him in a soft motherly voice. Those mornings always brought our lust to the surface, though we were acutely aware there was no hope.

Early on we supposed Ginny and Larney were married. But Rob, bating Mark Brinkers—one of his favorite evening past-times—discovered they just lived together, stimulating regular gossip along the Gabbs party-line network. At first that tidbit raised hope among those of us influenced by youthful levels of testosterone.

"She's probably easy," Walt ventured, "just waiting for one of us to make a move."

"Maybe," Stu agreed, "but ol' Larney there strikes me as a big, hard workin', brute of a fellow."

"That's right," I jumped in, catching Stu's line of thought, "the kind that wants to earn just enough to get by and live comfortably day by day."

"A good day's work," Stu added, "a home cooked meal, a can or two of his favorite brew, and an hour with the tube."

"Then a tumble on the sheets with his lovely lady," Rob licked his lips.

"Yep, then a solid night's sleep," Stu stretched and yawned himself, "then start all over."

I winked at Stu, "Whatever it takes to get through life."

"Yup. Ol' Larney there ... he's the kinda fellow wouldn't hesitate to smash your face if he thought you were messin' with his woman."

With Larney around, even wild hormones could be bullied into listening to reason. Besides,

being unattainable added to Ginny's attractiveness, while allowing us to be chauvinistic and talk macho without having to prove ourselves.

• • •

As Ginny sunned herself outside the laundry, I fondled her with my eyes. She wore a tight tank top, the pull over type made of thin cotton material that fits nice and snug to show off what a woman has to offer. Ginny wasn't over-endowed in the breast department, but what she had was well formed, and, as Dave was fond of proclaiming, "She has sun pointers." Meaning, of course, that with no bra her breasts were firm with erect nipples pointing slightly upward, not droopy and shapeless like some larger models. To a man who had been out in the field, away from civilization for three weeks, without having spoken to a "real" woman, this sight was quite stimulating, to say the least.

Ginny was wearing her usual tight shorts, demonstrating every contour of her firm hips and thighs, her splendid legs pouring out toward bare feet. Still early in the season, she didn't have much of a tan, but the way the sun reflected off her smooth, glistening skin, and the way she moved, as if making love to the rays, really got to me. I couldn't keep from staring. At that moment, in that place, she was the most appealing, sensuous, woman I had seen.

Fantasies poured through my brain with the inevitable flood of hormones. I wondered what it would be like to make love with her, to lay in her arms against smooth skin, to stroke her hips and legs, to caress her breasts and taste her lips in a passionate kiss. Dave claimed thin women are more sensitive, more responsive in bed. I imagined her trembling at my every touch. Standing there, exposed to the sun and my lust, she looked, as Walt might say, "ripe for the picking."

Was it possible she knew I was watching? If so, was she trying to seduce me, tempting me into a morning of passion and sexual bliss. We were, both of us, alone for the day. Maybe she was waiting for me to make the first move. My mind rolled through several approaches, electrified by the possibilities stretching before me.

But fantasies have a way of dissolving in the face of reality. The machines started eating her undies. She suddenly turned and disappeared into the dim wastes of the laundromat. My bubble popped. Resentfully, I went back to work.

A while later, after wrestling the machine for her clothes, she returned. Again I stopped to watch. She took the same position, the same pose; seemed to pick up where she had left off in her sun worship. But the mood had changed. Reality overpowered fantasy. My wild hormone levels had dissipated and were not ready for recycling. Other than an occasional glance and a deep sigh, I was able to keep to my work.

I never told the others about this episode, knowing they would have been disappointed by the lack of a conclusion. But some of life's stories don't have endings. There are beginnings and middles and lots of possibilities, but no true climax. Just wishful thinking, a lot of "what ifs," and the story goes on. It seems most of life is that way. Close to, but never quite reaching, The Edge of the World. It's only death that brings us face to face with that finality.

• • •

Crossing a cattle guard near the entrance, I was stopped by a park ranger. “Welcome to Berlin-Ichthyosaur State Park,” he said politely, happy to have a visitor. “Have you been here before?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well very good. First time visitors are our favorites. We’re glad to have you stop by.” He adjusted his wide brimmed hat. “If you have any questions I’d be happy to oblige.”

“If you’re serious, you could tell me about Berlin here.”

“Sure enough.” He seemed really pleased. “Pull over and I’ll give you some background.”

I moved the truck to the side of the road and climbed out.

“If I might ask, what brings you way out here?”

“Oh, I’m working out of Gabbs,” I said. “Finished up early today. And this weather is too nice to stay inside. I’d seen the park on a map and figured I’d see what’s up here.”

“Great.”

Leaning against the truck, I looked out across the mouth of Union Canyon where a cluster of rustic buildings huddled beneath the remains of a large stamp mill.

The ranger directed my gaze toward a dump. “The mine was originally constructed in Eighteen-sixty-nine, but it didn’t do well. Something like four tons of silver ore for the entire year. Twenty-nine years later, when they sold the operation, it had produced six-thousand tons of silver ore.” He pointed toward the prominent structure on the side of the canyon. “The thirty-stamp mill was built around then to improve production.”

“How many people lived here?”

“Between the mine and mill, Berlin had a peak population of something like two-hundred-and-fifty people.”

“So it wasn’t a large camp, compared to some.”

“No ... guess not. Not like Rawhide. Berlin’s just better preserved. But they did have a stage line.” He pointed up the canyon, toward the east. “Ran along the Reese River to Austin, shadowing present State Highway Twenty-one.”

“The Reese is on the east side of the Shoshone’s here?”

“Yes. Next valley over. I understand a round trip ticket cost eleven dollars.”

“Pretty expensive back then.”

“I believe so.”

“When did all this shut down?”

“Round Nineteen-oh-nine. The operation closed and everyone disappeared.”

“Always wonder where the people went when these towns disappeared.”

“Me too.” The ranger paused for a moment. “I suppose they went on to other towns just like Berlin.”

“Yeah, ‘til they closed down too.”

“There was a lot of that back then.”

We looked out over the weathered structures, trying to imagine Berlin as an active community.

I broke the silence. “When this become a park?”

“Nineteen-seventy. The Nevada Parks Department purchased the site and began restoring the old mill.” He indicated the corrugated structure again. “Their plans are to eventually restore the entire town, using those thirteen remaining buildings as a nucleus.”

“Have they identified what those buildings were used for?”

“Most,” he stood up straight. As he spoke he pointed to the various structures. “There’s the miners’ boarding house ... the assay office ... the superintendent’s house ... and the rest are just a handful of cabins and out-buildings.”

“The cabins seem in pretty good shape.”

“They are. We restored them first. We use them for our residences while we’re out here working. There’s no electricity or running water, but we get by.”

“Pretty primitive.”

“We rigged an outdoor shower, have our water trucked in. We dug a privy, first thing, and set an old out-building on it. Two holer. We use generators when we need power. It is primitive, by modern standards, but it has its pluses.”

“Yeah, like quiet evenings, clear skies, and no civilization.”

“Exactly.”

We paused again to let the silence engulf us. A slight breeze tugged at the grasses. An unseen bird twirped and chattered in the sage. A flying insect hummed by. The sun was warm and pleasing.

“You a geologist?” the ranger asked.

“Yeah. With a crew sampling old dumps.”

“Prospecting for gold, eh?”

“We’ve done a bit, down near Grantsville,” I motioned toward the south, “but we’re mostly interested in molybdenum.”

“Ah, molybdenum.” He shook his head in recognition. “Much around here?”

“Company seems to think so.”

“I suppose, or they wouldn’t send you out here.”

“It’s costing them a bundle, that’s for sure.”

“Well, you fellows should be careful,” he stroked the brim of his Smokey the Bear hat. “Snakes are out in full force.”

“Oh yeah. We’ve seen our share of rattlers and bull snakes already.”

“Well, if you fellows are working up here in Union Canyon,” he pointed the way, “be extra careful.” His voice became very serious, very controlled. “The local rattlers and bulls are cross-breeding.” He paused for effect. “They’re producing a rattle-less rattle snake.”

This didn’t sound right. I could only respond with a non-committal, “Hmm.”

“Looks like a bull snake but with a rattlers head and fangs. And poison.”

“Ouch! Sounds like an awful lot of bull.” I laughed.

The ranger stared at me, uncertain how to take my comment. Very seriously, he said, “The lesson is to avoid them all.”

“Thanks for the warning. And thanks for the conversation.”

“Any time. If you have more questions ... you know where to find me.”

We shook hands, I got back into my truck, and drove slowly up the canyon road, suspecting that perhaps I was the target of the local version of tourist baiting, like the jackalope myth, porcupine eggs, ho-dangs, and hoop snakes perpetrated in other areas.

• • •

When I got to the ichthyosaur exhibit I discovered Dave lined up for the guided tour. “Thought you were supposed to be sampling?”

Blushing, and uncharacteristically meek, he replied, “Yeah. Been coming up here for almost a week. Drive right by the place. Curiosity got the best of me.”

There was a young family of four and a well dressed elderly couple on our tour. Our guide introduced herself, asked each of us to tell the group where they were from, she teased the two young boys a bit, then went into her spiel. She told us that, “One hundred and eighty million years ago much of what we know as Nevada was beneath the surface of a vast inland sea. For a period of roughly one hundred and ten million years, sixty-five-foot-long ichthyosaur, or fish lizards, inhabited that sea.” She pointed to a life size relief of a fleshed out creature carved into the retaining wall across the parking lot. “They were the largest animals of their day. Their bodies were eight feet in diameter ... their ribs were nine feet long ... they had eight foot snouts lined with two-inch teeth ... and were the largest except for several dinosaurs of a later period, and a few modern whale species.”

“That’s a pretty big fish,” the elderly man remarked, pointing with a well manicured finger.

The guide smiled. Very politely and with practiced patience she explained, “Although an ichthyosaur may look similar to a fish, they were actually air-breathing reptiles, similar in body form and habits to some whales and porpoises of today.”

The mother of the two young boys chuckled, “I’d hate to have to cook for something that big.”

“They did have an appetite to match their size,” the guide confirmed.

The husband asked, “What did they eat?”

“We’re not sure, of course. But it appears that an adult ichthyosaur ate anything it could out-swim, including other ichthyosaur.” That drew several comments from the small group.

The guide then took us into the A-frame structure housing the exhibit of the fossil remains of six specimens. A metal railing surrounded an oval pit cut into the local shale, revealing the tangled skeletal remains. The guide climbed over the railing and into the pit where she pointed to various body parts.

The elderly man asked, “How did all these big fish get into this one place?”

The guide paused for a moment, then explained. “Once again, for clarity’s sake, the ichthyosaur was not a fish. It was a reptile. Not everything that lives in the ocean is a fish.” She smiled kindly, then went on. “To answer your question ... over time, individual ichthyosaurs became beached along the shoreline of this sea. They were probably trapped here by the rapidly receding waters. Their bodies, washed parallel with the shore by incoming tides, decayed, leaving only their hard skeletons, which were then buried in the soft alluvial ooze of the shore. Eventually this ooze was overlain by as much as three thousand feet of muck and slime that

hardened into shale.”

The oldest boy seemed puzzled. “You dug down three thousand feet to get these bones?”

The guide smiled again. “It might look that way. But no, we didn’t have to dig through three thousand feet of shale. Thank goodness Mother Nature helped us out. What happened was this shale stratum was uplifted and subjected to hundreds of thousands of years of erosion that exposed the fossils that we see here. We’ve just helped the erosional process at bit at the end.”

“Who discovered these big fish?” the elderly man asked, unperturbed.

The guide sighed audibly, but let the big fish off the hook. “You all drove through the ghost town on your way in here today. One of Berlin’s early prospectors stumbled upon a plate-sized vertebrae of one of these ancient sea lizards and took it home as a hearthstone, for above his fireplace. He apparently thought it was just a smooth rock.” Speaking as she climbed back over the railing, she moved us toward the exit. “The official discovery, by Doctor Simon Muller of Stanford University, came years later, in Nineteen-twenty-eight. It’s taken years to excavate, but so far we’ve unearthed thirty-seven giant ichthyosaur.”

“Are there other places in the park where we can see these fossils?” The husband put his arm around his wife’s waist.

“No, not really. You are free to hike and explore the park, but if you do run across any fossil remains, please do not touch them. Leave them right where you find them.”

“Leaverite,” I whispered to Dave. He smiled.

“Do you want us to notify you if we find anything?” The husband was ready to lead his family on an expedition.

“If you would like. However, most of the exposed specimens have been tagged and cataloged.”

“Why haven’t you dug them up, like here?” The husband pointed toward the pit.

“Money. We simply don’t have the funding. It’s an annual battle just to get budgeted for another year.”

Trooping through the exit we could hear the elderly man comment to his wife, “It would be a shame if they lost their funding to exhibit these big fish.”

The guide whispered to Dave and me as she closed the door behind her. “Maybe if a few more big fish,” nodding toward the elderly couple, “paid their fair share at tax time, we wouldn’t have to worry.”

^^^

Randy was having difficulty locking his truck into four-wheel-drive, so he had me take it into Hawthorne for repairs. He had set up an appointment with the Ford dealer and advised me to get there as soon as they opened so I wouldn’t have to hang around town all day. I left Gabbs about 6:30, shipped my samples from the LTR terminal, and got to the Ford dealer just before eight. After all my rushing I found they didn’t open until 8:30.

I sat in the truck and read while I waited for the doors to open. Then I had to stand at the counter while the two mechanics dawdled through their morning chit-chat and yesterday's paperwork. The one with "Harly" stitched over his pocket snarled, "D'jew hear 'bout them Oh-Peck bastards raisin' the price uh oil?"

"Uh, yup," replied the one with "Slick" stitched in red, "up to sumpthin' like 'round thirty-two bucks per barrel."

"Tha's it," Harly went on, "tha's eggs-zactly what I heard. Them A-rabs is gonna suck us dry."

"They tryin' awful hard," Slick concurred.

"We oughta fix it so's we help all them rag heads meet their Ali Ali oxen freeze."

Slick laughed.

"Know what I mean?" Harly came up close to Slick, leaned on the counter, looked him square in the eyes, emphasizing his point with his already greasy finger. "We ought to blast those god-damned moo-zlems with a friggin H-bomb. 'Specially those Iranian sons-uh-bitches got our embassy people. Bastards. Know what I mean?"

Slick looked back at his paperwork, "I'm with yuh there. I really am."

"Yeah, we'll blast them rags right off'n their frizzy black heads. That's what we'll do."

Harly glanced at me, then walked off into the back office. I could hear him slam something as he yelled, "Pisses me off, Slick. It really pisses me off."

Slick looked at me, squinted his eyes, and finally acknowledged my presence. He took the pertinent information and the keys.

"How long you think it'll take?"

"Oh ... uh ... hmm ... prolly mos' duh day."

So it goes.

...

I spent the rest of the morning doing little chores around town. I walked from the post office to the bank, from the hardware store to the drug store, from the auto parts store to a clothing store, and so on. I must have looked like a Christmas shopper taking advantage of summer sales. My arms were loaded with bags and packages. I took my purchases back to the truck, which hadn't moved, and stacked them in the cab.

With nothing else to do and nowhere to go I sat there reading for about 45 minutes, until Slick finally displaced me to pull the vehicle into the garage.

With the morning's progress I had developed a horrible, splitting, sinus headache that nearly drove me to my knees. It was tearing at my forehead when Slick asked, "D'you use four-wheel ev'ry day?"

"What difference does it make?" I snapped.

Startled, Slick said quietly, "Jus' aksin'."

I knew I should apologize and explain, but I wasn't in the mood. Slick acted as if it were no big deal. Yet, from that point on he moseyed along deliberately. After he drove the truck into the garage I overheard him say to Harly, loud enough so he was sure I heard, "I ain't got no care in



the worl’.”

I had to get out of there, so I walked next door to the drug store and picked up some aspirin. The clerk let me use their rest room so that I could swallow a couple of the precious white tablets. They didn’t even faze the horrendous pain in my head.

• • •

I had promised Doris Downum that I would buy her lunch at the El Cap. She worked the cage there and handled my freight shipments. Every time I needed something in town I asked her and she pointed me in the right direction. She even called a friend of hers once to get some special help. She was a real buddy, in a motherly sort of way. We had a fun, joking type, relationship.

Lunch was kind of payback. I sat and listened to her whole life’s story. About her early pregnancy and the birth of her daughter; her eventual marriage to the reluctant father; about how horribly he mistreated her; about their “as to be expected d-i-v-o-r-c-e;” about the difficulties of being a single mother and a 42 year old divorcee in a small isolated town; and on and on. Even so, her story wouldn’t have been half bad if it weren’t for my pounding head.

Then Doris told me, “I just don’t know what I would’ve done without my Connie Ann. She’s such a wonderful child. A woman couldn’t ask for a better daughter. And so attractive. She was always so popular with the boys, all through school. But she learned from her mother’s mistakes and was careful ‘nough not to get pregers, you know?” She paused long enough to take a long drag from her cigarette, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling.

“But then, of course, Connie Ann got married to Scott. Bastard! He seemed such a nice boy at first. Not from around here. He was in the Army, assigned to the bomb plant up to Babbitt. Good payin’ job. But they ‘ventually had to move away. Transferred. My Connie Ann went with him.” She stubbed out her cigarette in a filthy ash tray, took a drink of her Coke, and went on.

“They were stationed back east, in Georgia. Connie Ann didn’t like it. Too humid. She liked the green, but she wasn’t used to all that moisture in the air. After six months they split up. Scott wouldn’t come back here, Connie Ann wouldn’t stay there. She ‘ventually filed for divorce.” Doris pulled out another cigarette and lit it. “Now she’s twenty-six, free ‘n’ single again, lookin’ for a nice guy.” She looked me in the eye for an uncomfortable moment.

“Uh-oh,” came the warning, clear enough, even through my headache clogged brain.

“She’s been so lonely since the divorce. She needs a new relationship.” She pointed with her fresh cigarette, “I’d like you to meet her. Connie Ann’s a nice girl. You should meet her. You’d hit it off together. You have a lot in common.”

The only things that came to mind were that we both knew Doris, each had a previous marriage, and we were both life-long members of the human race. Connie Ann was 26 and I was pushing 30. I am from a mid-western urban environment and she is from a small desert town. It sounded like she barely made it through high school while I had a college degree. We definitely had a lot in common. Just what I needed, to get hooked up with a local girl desperate for a husband. Oh boy!

“What you think?”

“I don’t know ... (Maybe she’s good looking,) ... I’m just getting out of one relationship ... (and we’ll be moving on,) ... you know, and I’m afraid ... (and Doris’s been so helpful,) ... you know, to get into something new ... (and I do owe her,) ... but ... (and who knows, it could be fun.) ... if you’d like, I’d be glad to meet her. (Oh god what have I done?)”

• • •

After lunch I met Neil at the LTR counter. He had just arrived from his latest visit to Tucson. I explained the situation with the truck and he became visibly irritated. I gathered from his reaction that things didn’t go well back home. Neil was, to say the least, on edge.

Doris was kind enough to stash his gear inside the cage, and he and I walked to the Ford dealer. Neil was unusually aggressive and let poor Slick have an ear full. I was surprised and a bit embarrassed. Neil was usually laid back and casual about that sort of small town incompetence. He definitely was a changed person.

In spite of the tongue lashing, the truck was not ready. With nothing else to do we wandered around town, eventually returning to the coffee shop at the El Cap.

Waiting to be served, Neil asked, “You guys hear about Richard Pryor?”

“The comedian?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I haven’t heard anything lately. Why? What’s up?”

“He was critically injured.”

“Wow. What happened?”

“It’s stupid. Dumb. Apparently he mixed ether with cocaine and it exploded in his face.”

“This is a joke, right?”

“No. He was making free-base and it exploded in his face. Guess he’s hurt pretty badly.”

“Maybe I’m stupid, but what’s free base?”

“Well, I don’t know first hand, but I understand it’s a euphoric cocaine derivative. Users mix cocaine with ether and it becomes more powerful. I guess.”

“But how did it explode?”

“Oh, I guess they heat it over an open flame. They have to melt the cocaine or something. Anyway....”

“Ether is flammable. Open flame. Boom!”

“You got it.”

“Stupid. Really stupid.”

• • •

Around four we walked back to the Ford dealer and found Slick just finishing the work on Randy's truck. The sign on the door indicated that the service department would close at 4:30. Slick finished our greasy paperwork right at 4:28, I swear. I'm sure he was being deliberate in his slowness, to repay my rudeness and Neil's demands for speed. After all, they are the only Ford dealership, with an authorized Ford mechanic, between Tonopah and Reno. We could take their attitude, or shove off. The choice was ours. Slick didn't act like he needed our business. He did know we needed him. So it goes.

• • •

We stopped by the El Cap, collected Neil's gear, and headed home to Gabbs. With Randy's truck, I was able to make mile post 12 on the Gabbs' Incline; a new record. With my truck, I had barely been making mile post five. Twelve might be an impossible standard.

• • •

When we got back to Gabbs I discovered Burt hadn't locked the trailer when he left that morning. The damn thing sat open all day. With opportunists like Mark Brinkers snooping around, I was lucky to have anything left. As soon as Burt came in from the field I jumped on his case.

"Hey, dim wit, you forgot to lock the damn door this morning."

He looked at me with his baby doe eyes. "I'm sorry. I guess I forgot."

"Yeah, you could have forgot us right out of everything we have here." My voice raised in decibels as I released my day's frustrations. "Stupid son-of-a-bitch!"

He cringed.

"Aw, I see, not used to people yelling at you?" My voice became sarcastic. "Poor baby. Maybe you been sheltered too damn long by Mummsy and Popsy. Always had someone to look after you, do everything for you."

He sat, staring at his hands. I knew I was being cruel, but I couldn't stop myself.

"Burt, you're basically a nice guy, but your little inconsiderations annoy me. Especially when my sinuses destroy my reasoning abilities."

"I'm sorry. I'll try harder."

"You're like my wife."

"You're married?"

"Not really. Not any more. Separated." I was a little embarrassed. "You're like her 'cause she always depended on me for everything. Couldn't make a decision by herself. I was like a damn father to her."

He looked at me without responding.

"You gotta become self-reliant, Burt. You gotta stand on your own feet. Don't let others push you through life with their expectations. You gotta be your own person." I scratched my

head. “But you also hafta be considerate of others. Understand?”

“I think so.” He looked at me, trying to smile. “You have to give me time. I’m still learning.”

“That’s true. Like I said, you gotta stop letting others direct your life. Even me. One of these days, Burt, you’re gonna tell me to get fucked. That’s when I’ll know you’re there.”

“I could never use that word. It’s just not polite.”

“It’s just a word. It’s people who give words meaning. Try it.”

“No. Please. I don’t like words like that.”

I looked at him for a long moment, unsure if I should pursue this angle. “Okay. But someday I want you to tell me to get fucked.”

“I doubt that I will.”

“Whatever. We’ll see.”

“I will try to be more thoughtful, though, in the future,” Burt stuck out his hand, still trying to smile.

“Okay. And I promise to be less volatile.”

• • •

At the group dinner that night Randy gave us good news. “We’re getting out of here. Moving from Gabbs.”

“Alright,” Dave cheered. “Where we goin’?”

“Not far. Hawthorne.”

“Better than Baggs,” I said.

“When?” Walt asked.

“Probably in a week,” Randy filled his fork with Rob’s enchilada casserole. “We’ll do about two weeks work from there.”

“Then the good part,” Neil burst in. “You guys will take your break and fly back to Tucson for a week’s vacation.”

“Yeah, but then you’ll hafta fly back to Hawthorne again,” Randy grinned.

Neil said, “There’s always a down side to everything.”

“What’a we doin’ after that?” Stu probed.

“From Hawthorne we’ll either go to Austin or Tonopah,” Randy spoke around a mouthful of cheese and meat. “We haven’t decided yet.”

“Alright!” Dave was jubilant. “We’re goin’ home!”

“Speaking of home,” Randy turned to Neil, “how was your little anniversary celebration?”

Anticipating a juicy description of sexual encounter and lascivious acts, the rest of us seconded the request.

“Okay, okay. It’s not what you think.” Neil grinned. “Guess I can laugh about it now.”

We settled down and listened up.

“The last time I was back in Tucson Judy had her period. No sex. So this time I was horny as hell and ready for a sweet roll in the sheets.”

“Oo, sticky buns.” Walt laughed at his own joke. “I prefer crackers.”

Neil ignored him. “It was also our first anniversary of moving-in together; a special occasion for us. I was primed ... ready, figuring on a nice meal out, a pitcher of margaritas to get loose, then rush home and jump into the fresh sheets of my own bed.”

“Didn’t work out that way,” Stu jabbed, “did it?”

Neil shook his head, “The dinner and the drinks all happened. The rush home went about as planned.” His voice got soft, sensuous. Playing to his audience, he said, “We undressed each other ... slowly, you know, one piece of clothing at a time. Then we danced, flesh against flesh, and kissed, until our knees grew weak. Trembling, we fell into bed,” emphasizing key words, “bound in a passionate embrace; arms and legs entangled; kissing ... lips, mouth, tongue....” he was really getting into it, “touching ... breasts, stomach, thigh ... stroking smooth flesh, wanton flesh, sweat beading on hot flesh.” He was building toward crescendo. “We were in love, hungry for each other.” He became melodramatic. “Our bodies responded, the excitement grew.” He knew how to play this image to stir our hunger and lust. “As Judy’s slender fingers explored my body I had all I could do to keep from coming. I was close to the edge, ready to press the issue. Then Judy stopped.”

Neil alternated between a male and female voice.

“What’s that?” she whispered, her hand between my legs.

“What?” I could hardly speak. “My scrotum.”

“No, silly. There’s something on it.” Her finger gently probing, “What is that?”

“I don’t know.” I reached down and touched it. “Christ! Maybe a pimple.” My breathing was heavy. I tried to direct her back to our inevitable climax. But she persisted, reaching over and turning on the lamp. She crawled around and examined my balls.

“Oh, yuck! I think ... yuck!” She looked closer. “It’s a tick, Neil. YUCK!”

“Huh? Shit! Will it come off?”

“I don’t wanna touch it.” She backed away.

I sat up and tried to examine it, but could barely see it. It was way back toward my anus. I tried to flick it off but it wouldn’t budge.

Judy looked more closely. “I think it’s imbedded. It’s swelled up, too. God.”

“What am I gonna do?”

“They say to use a cigarette.”

“I’m not about to stick a burning cigarette down there.”

We sat on the bed discussing the situation.

“Like it or not, you’re going to go in to the emergency room and have that thing removed.”

So ended our passionate night of reunion.

“After the interns removed the tick my scrotum became inflamed. The spot where the tick had imbedded became infected. It got quite painful. I had a hard time even walking. There was no way I could even think of having sex. The thought of an erection was out of the question.” Neil shook his head like a defeated man.

“Bummer, man.” Stu was the first to offer sympathy.

“Thanks. As my luck would have it, the swelling and the pain both subsided about the time I boarded the plane.”

“Hell, no wonder you were in such a shitty mood when I picked you up.” I feigned

enlightenment. “All I had was a crummy sinus headache. You had...”

“A severe case of D-S-B.” Rob had that bullshit look on his face.

“Huh?” Neil looked puzzled.

The rest of us glanced at each other, no one willing to bite. Finally Dave succumbed. “All right, Spurrier, what’s this D-B-S bullshit?”

“D-S-B. You don’t know about D-S-B?” He looked around the gathering with faked astonishment. Turning back to Dave, he said, “D-S-B is a crippling disease found only in mature males ... of our species. It’s a social disease ... but it’s not contagious. It creeps up on its victim, day by day, in some cases ... severe cases ... week after week. Suddenly pressure builds ... the heart pounds ... the victim becomes rigid ... some salivate ... or pant ... most hold back their anxiety ... their drive ... until there is nothing they can do but find a woman ... or ... a quiet spot where they can be by themselves.”

I glanced at the grinning faces, each anticipating some wicked punch line.

Walt volunteered. “Okay, I like the woman part better. What does a woman have to do with this D-S-B disease? Suck puss from your body or something?”

“Close, very close, Pinhead.” Spurrier should have been a stand up comedian. His timing and delivery were perfect. He slowly licked his lips, and with a straight face announced, “D ... S ... B ... stands for ... Deadly Sperm Buildup.” He leaned back against the sink to watch our reaction. Mostly groans sliding into laughter.

“Hell, I’ve had that before,” Walt continued to play along. “I swear my eyes turned white.”

“I’ve got it now.” We all peered into Neil’s eyes.

“You know, that doesn’t seem fair. To be that close to a beautiful woman and not get any.” Walt’s empathy seemed sincere.

“It’s not,” Neil grinned. “But for me it’s only ten days. Then I can get back and pick up where I left off on my night of passion.” He pointed toward Walt, “You slobs have almost three weeks to go.” He and Randy laughed wickedly.

“Be careful,” Rob interjected, “we can fix things so Judy won’t wanna touch you again.”

Neil smiled. “Point well taken.”

^^^

There are some days you might as well blow off, when nothing is really accomplished and you seem to lose ground. They are not really bad days, but perhaps lost days.

...

When Randy, Neil, and I returned from a tour of the Basic Refractory, Dave, Burt, and Rob emerged from the Airstream.

“Taking a little vacation?” Randy contended as he stepped from the truck.

“Don’t we wish,” Dave replied. “The Gray Beast blew its transmission.”

“What?” Randy’s face flushed. “Shit!”

Dave glanced furtively at Burt. Burt quickly looked away, then at the ground. In his soft, penitent voice, he admitted, “I was driving.” The GMC truck had an automatic transmission with self-locking hubs. “When I drove in last night I forgot to shift out of four-wheel-drive.”

Dave jumped in. “Running at highway speeds this morning cooked the sucker. She overheated. Pieces of transmission flew every-which-where. Gears and casing scattered all over the road.” He patted Burt on the shoulder. “It was spectacular. I thought we were gonna die.”

“Where’d it happen?” Neil didn’t seem sympathetic.

“On the way to Union Canyon, just before the pavement turns to dirt. Didn’t even make it to our first collection sites.”

“Shit, man! Another truck down.” Randy shook his head. “We’re killing ourselves with truck problems.”

“How did you get back?” I asked, a bit more sympathetic than our crew chiefs.

“Didn’t have much choice. Parnelli James here is a natural with his thumb. First rancher came along gave us a ride.”

Rob moved into the conversation. “I talked to Milde.” He licked his lips. “The closest tow’s in Hawthorne.”

“Oh man! That’s gonna cost a bundle.” Randy kicked at the gravel.

“We don’t have much choice,” Neil shrugged. “Did you ask Milde about a tow bar?”

“He said there aren’t any people willing to rent.”

Randy looked at Rob. “By the way, what are you doing in camp?”

“Came in early. Knew these guys would need my help.”

Neil stepped in. “I had him come back early to plot sample points on the Grantsville map.”

“You never told me,” Randy seemed hurt.

“Sorry. Didn’t think it was all that important.”

“Whatever. I just like knowing what’s goin’ on ‘round here.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Neil snapped. “Right now we’d better get to a phone and give Guy a call.” Neil headed for the truck. “Let’s see what he suggests.”

Randy jumped in on the passenger side; slammed the door.

As they drove away Rob turned on Burt. “Boy, you really fucked up bad. Real bad. Langan’s madder than a hornet.”

Rob and Dave headed back to the Airstream. I felt badly for Burt. It was just one of those situations. I took a step toward him, said “Burt, you...”

“I don’t want to hear it.” His face and neck were crimson. There was fire in his eyes. He stepped around me and headed up the road toward his motel room.

• • •

When Neil and Randy returned they were their old selves. “Guy told us not to sweat it.” Randy was definitely relieved. “We called for a tow truck.”

“From Hawthorne?” Rob asked.

“Yes. He’s on his way now. He’s going to stop by here first.” Neil turned to face Dave.

“Ride out with him, show him the way. Make sure you pick up the pieces, get them off the road.”

“We pretty much did that already.”

“Great,” Neil nodded.

“Guy said his truck is at the airport in Vegas.” Randy pointed at Rob. “You get a mini-vacation after all. Guy is making arrangements for you to pick it up.”

Rob fought a smile. “How am I gonna get there.”

“You’ll ride to Reno with Chapik and me this afternoon. There will be tickets waiting at the airport. You’ll fly to Vegas tonight and drive Guy’s truck back here tomorrow.”

• • •

The three of us hit the road after lunch. Randy was scheduled on a 6:30 flight to Tucson, while Rob’s flight to Vegas departed an hour later.

“So, Chris,” Randy leaned around Rob, looking for conversation, “you didn’t tell me how you liked your tour of the Basic Refractory.”

“Was okay.”

“What did you see?” Rob asked.

“Oh,” I said matter-of-fact, “the manager took us through most of the operation, pointing out all sorts of interesting pieces of equipment and demonstrating various processes in their production facility. Even got to look inside the blast furnace, roaring at full steam.”

“It was all pretty interesting,” Randy inserted. “Typical dog and pony show.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, “but, to be honest, after about thirty minutes I got bored with examining massive pieces of machinery. I wanted to see more of the mine.”

“Me too,” Randy agreed. “All we got was a quick drive through. Like he was afraid we might see too much.”

“Oh well,” I didn’t want to seem ungrateful, “it was still worthwhile. I’d never been to a plant like that.”

“Neither had I,” Randy admitted.

I kept my eyes on the road. “I guess now we know why they call it ‘Basic.’”

Rob said dryly, “It would have to be basic if they hire people like Mark Brinkers.”

“Yeah,” Randy chuckled, “we saw him there. Some big shot he turned out to be.”

“Yeah, right,” I laughed.

“He works in the bag room filling big sacks with pulverized magnesium.” Randy shook his head. “What a mess.”

I tossed out casually, “Proof that not all people are created equal.” Three magpies scattered as I maneuvered around a dead rabbit.

Rob watched one of the birds glide to a fence post. “Uh oh, sounds like we have a neo-Nazi in our midst.”

“No. Not at all.”

“You just said some people are better than others. Sounds like a white supremacist to me.”

“No,” maybe taking his ribbing too seriously, “I said that not all people are created equal. There’s a difference.”



“How you figure?” Rob probed.

“Okay,” figuring this might be good to pass the time on the long drive, “isn’t it possible some individuals are, by heredity, born with characteristics potentially superior to others?”

“You mean like, how black guys usually run faster than white guys?” Randy shifted in his seat.

“For some,” I said, “it’s physical, others it’s intellectual. For some it could be both.”

“Sounds like a racist to me,” Rob nudged Randy.

“Superiority is not racial,” I stood my ground—a good line of B-S is hard to find—“if we follow this train of thought. Inequality cuts across racial lines. No one race or nationality has the edge on superior potential. It’s an individual trait.”

“You been reading Nietzsche,” Rob accused.

“This is way different,” I shook my head.

“Which religion is best,” Randy tried to stay involved.

“Religion has nothing to do with it ... that’s just pasted on top of the biological process.”

“A social veneer,” Rob supported me.

“Right,” I agreed, “however, besides hereditary, or biological inequality, each individual is raised in a different environment.”

“This is where religion comes in, right?” Randy was starting to catch on.

“Exactly,” I said. “Religion, society, politics, neighbors, family, tradition. All that crap. No two individuals perceive the world quite the same. We’re all unique. Even brothers and sisters ... twins.”

“Twins?” Randy wouldn’t buy that.

“Sure,” I explained, “our experiences affect us each according to our innate ability to absorb and utilize information. Those best adapted for survival, in whatever society they’re born into, will, for the most part, survive, breed, and pass on their seed. As Darwin said, the fittest will survive.”

“Yeah, but what about guys like Mark Brinkers?” Rob struggled to get his jar of lip balm out of his pocket. “He’s gonna pass on his seed ... make baby Brinkers ... who’ll scatter across the countryside.”

“Well, you know, now that you mention it, maybe Brinkers is superior.”

They both laughed.

“Hey, he’s surviving and breeding. If he succeeds in impregnating his wife there’ll be little Brinkers running ‘round Snaggs. Biologically, that’s success.”

“What?” Randy was incredulous.

“Yeah,” I said, “nature doesn’t care if you make shit piles of money or drive a shiny Corvette or marry a beautiful woman. Procreation is the end product of biological success.”

Rob was moistening his lips. “That’s why we have a population problem. All the world’s Brinkers fucking like rabbits.”

“That’s right,” I said, “the world is reaching the point where the ill, weak, aged, and infirm will hafta be allowed to die, maybe even be put away, ‘cause of environmental limitations caused by over-breeding.”

“Population pressures,” Rob asserted.

“Exactly. Caused by a world full of guys like Mark Brinkers.”

“They don’t know any better,” Rob tucked his jar of lip balm into his shirt pocket. “Like I said, they’re like rabbits. They just keep popping kids.”

“I don’t know,” Randy shifted again, uncomfortable with the truck’s tight quarters. “The world’s a big place. Look at all the empty space out here. There’s still plenty of space for people.”

“Yeah, but remember you gotta feed all those people.” Rob faked eating a sandwich. “Agriculture takes lots of room. The more mouths to feed the more room it takes.”

“And resources,” I said. “The more people the more of everything everybody wants. There’s only so much to go around.”

“I don’t know,” Randy argued weakly, “I just don’t see all this as much of a concern. I think all this worry about the environment is so much hype. Elitists and extremists. They’re just trying to stir things up. Gives them something to do.” He seemed pleased with himself. “Science will figure things out.”

“We can only hope,” I countered, “but there’s no question population has gotten way out of hand. Most of the world’s problems can be traced to over population and the pressures it causes on the economy, society, behavior, and the environment.”

“Right,” Rob seemed pleased. “It somehow seems wrong for countries ... like the United States ... to ship tons of food to countries who can’t support themselves.”

“You mean you’d let them starve?” Randy seemed incredulous.

“Perhaps we’re actually doing those cultures a disservice,” I defended Rob’s position this time.

“How you figure?”

“Well, you hafta look at the long run.” I pointed to a golden eagle just coming to rest on a telephone pole. They both nodded. “By feeding these poor individuals we may be helping them survive a week or a month longer, but we’re not really removing the reason they’re in that condition. While we’re keeping them alive, artificially, they’re breeding, perpetuating their problem.”

“So you’d just let them starve?”

“Aren’t we short-circuiting the natural selection process by feeding them? After all, like it or not, we’re part of Nature. Wouldn’t it be better to feed the countries who are close to self-sufficiency, giving them a boost until they can take care of themselves? By then the population of the poorer countries will become stable through natural selection. At that point, with our help, they can develop the ability to feed their own.”

“Those countries hafta take responsibility ... for their own situation.” Rob turned toward Randy. “They’re like children. If parents do everything ... they never learn.”

“Sometimes parents hafta let their children burn a finger to teach a lesson. It’s hard to do at the time, but it’s in the kid’s best interest. Part of growing up.” I pointed toward another golden eagle perched on top of a telephone pole, tearing at something trapped in its talons. “Why artificially counter Nature’s way? When the deer population explodes the Fish and Game Department increases the hunting licenses. So they can control their population.”

“You’re not gonna tell me you’re against hunting?” Randy leaned to look at me again.

“That’s a different quagmire. Let’s argue that some other time.”

He sat back.

I went on. “We’ve removed the natural predators. We hafta manage the population ourselves. Otherwise we won’t have any forests. Why not use the same logic with chronically hungry countries? Let’s look for permanent solutions rather than short term patch jobs.”

Neither of my partners responded.

I continued. “No one likes to see suffering, but maybe our present methods are actually prolonging the suffering, making things worse for the long haul.”

“Euthanasia is one solution,” Rob suggested brightly.

“Right,” I said cautiously.

“Euthanasia should be allowed ... for those who wanna end their misery from cancer or old age ... or starvation.”

“Suicide is illegal,” Randy argued.

I argued back, “Shouldn’t a person have the right to end their own life. Long as it doesn’t hurt someone else?”

“I don’t know,” Randy seemed distressed. “You guys sound like poets, or philosophers.”

“Maybe, but who listens to poets anymore?” Rob was pleased.

I said, “Other poets and philosophers.”

“And women,” licking his lips, “of course.” He pulled out his jar of lip balm again.

“Yeah,” I said, “but even in this enlightened age, who really listens to women?”

Applying ointment to his lips, Rob mumbled, “Other women.”

“That’s about right,” I laughed. “In spite of all our big talk of liberation and equality, our society still treats women as inferior.”

“Come on, that’s not true at all.” Randy grew defensive again. “They got jobs,” he argued, “they got the same opportunities we do.”

“That’s not necessarily what I’m talking about.” I took on a superior air. “Not to be hypocritical, but look at us, the way we ogle Ginny, the way we rate every woman we see. You can’t deny we treat them like objects. It’s gonna take a long time for that to change.”

Randy said flatly, “If I hafta give up looking at women, I hope it never changes.”

...

We sat quietly for a mile or so, each wrapped in our own thoughts. I broke the silence. “Goin’ back to that over-population thing ... if you think about it ... Nature has built in some natural checks to curb excess growth.”

“Like what?” Randy replied automatically.

“Well ... like we said, famine for one. And disease.”

“Disease, sure. But that’s always there.” Randy still didn’t seem interested.

“Yeah, but as population pressure increases ... as people get shoved closer and closer together ... the likelihood that terminal diseases will get passed on also increases.”

“He’s right,” Rob stressed. “Contagious diseases spread way more quickly through urban environments than through small rural towns.”

“And,” I went on, “sterility and impotency seem to increase.”

“Why would that be?” Randy was beginning to get back into the conversation.

“I’m not sure ... really,” I shrugged. “Can’t remember the reasoning behind that one.”

“Maybe anxiety,” Rob suggested, “or stress due to the pressures of diminished territory and increased competition for food and mates.”

“Makes sense,” I replied. “The old territorial imperative.”

“That’s right,” Rob agreed.

Three small jets streaked across the highway just in front of us.

I suspected I would get Randy’s full attention with my next comment. “One of the other ways Nature uses to control population is homosexuality.”

“What?” The reaction I had expected. Randy leaned forward and looked at me. I glanced at him with a shit-assing grin on my face. “What do those perverts have to do with population?” Randy’s face was flushing. “They can’t even have kids.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“Come on, Langan. Think about it.” Rob started to chuckle.

Randy sat back. “They’re a bunch of sissy queers.”

“Randy,” I probably said this in a condescending tone, “the mere fact that they can’t have offspring *is* population control. They’re part of nature. It’s Nature’s way.”

“Takes potential breeders out of the gene pool.” Rob picked up my tone and ran with it. “They’re harmless ... don’t hurt anyone ... they’re productive members of society...”

“When we let them be,” I inserted.

“When we let them be,” Rob continued. “And they don’t breed.”

“It’s perverted, man ... gross.” Randy fidgeted in his seat. “You guys telling me you support those limp-wristed queers?”

“I’ve got homosexual friends,” I offered.

“Me too,” Rob added. “They’re generally nice, intelligent people.”

“They’re just like the rest of us ... they just have a different sexual preference, that’s all.”

“Man ... maybe I should have you guys drop me off right here ... so you could be alone.” Randy feigned unlocking his door.

“Hey, we’re heteros. But we accept variance from what’s considered the norm.” I shifted in my seat to revive my numbing butt. “There’s room in this world for all types of people ... gays, lesbians, straights like Mark Brinkers....”

“Well,” Rob interrupted, “I can accept the gays and lesbians ... but I don’t know about Mark Brinkers.”

“You guys are sick,” Randy crossed his arms, “sick.” He slumped in his seat, and we let the subject drop.

• • •

We arrived in Reno hours before Randy's flight, so we killed some time at the new MGM Grand. A huge casino, it seemed blocks long. Although it had all the glitter and tinsel of the better known places in Vegas, it also had a laid back atmosphere, an easier pace, and was more casual. I liked that. Besides, I won two bucks from the slots. Big time gambler.

What impressed me were the shops downstairs, catering to the extravagant tastes of the suddenly rich. Furs, clothes, expensive hand made items, glass and plastic and chrome, exquisite candies, flowers, and a wide range of imported specialties. Of course there were classy looking restaurants, ball rooms, meeting rooms, and, upstairs, the hotel rooms. It was all so incredible. I felt like a country hick visiting the big city for the first time.

After delivering my passengers to Terminal Way I picked up a new antenna for Stu's truck. He'd knocked his off driving under a tree. He seemed really anxious to get it replaced. God knows why. We couldn't pick up any stations during the day. I guess maybe he liked listening to static.

• • •

When I got back to Gabbs the guys were sitting around outside the Nomad with Larney and Ginny. They were sharing a six pack and having a good laugh telling drilling rig stories. From what I gathered, Burt hadn't even come down for dinner. Stu had tried to talk with him, but he refused to come out of his room. Apparently Rob's off-handed criticism really got to him.

^^^

It was one of those pleasant summer mornings when the birds are happy, the breeze is warm and fresh, and the desert sky is crystal blue. I took the opportunity to work outside, using the tail gate of my truck to box samples. The scene was complete when Ginny walked past with a small load of laundry and her long beautiful legs.

"Good morning," I smiled.

"Hello," came her timid reply, as she disappeared into the pungent dungeon of the erratic machines.

• • •

The slow moving cogs of my mind clicked into action with the inevitable rush of hormones. I said to myself, "Maybe she'd like a ride into town."

"Yeah," I replied, "that would break the boredom of her usual routine."

"Right. And I'd get a chance to know her ... uh, better, and, of course, once she becomes aware of my charm, wit, and great intellectual personality she'll fall passionately in love with

me.”

“Of course,” I flattered myself, “and all my wild fantasies will come true.”

“Without a doubt,” I agreed. “We’ll run away over the Paradise Mountains and live happily ever after in some beautifully rustic cabin by a crystalline stream.”

“That’s great,” I sighed, “but don’t be too obvious.”

“Of course not.”

• • •

When Ginny returned from the depths of darkness, I said, “I’m driving into Hawthorne. Anything I can pick up for you?” I kept my mental fingers crossed, hoping she’d get the hint and ask to go along. “Anything you folks need?” Subtle, huh?

She stood motionless, an absent minded expression blanking her face, as if contemplating some imponderable philosophical question and formulating an appropriate response. She watched my eyes for the longest time. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable when she said, “Incense.”

“Huh?”

“You could pick up some incense for me.”

My ego crashed. I was shattered. “What scent?” I asked stiffly, hoping my disappointment didn’t show.

“Oh ... maybe a Rainbow pack. With a lot of different flavors.”

“Flavors,” I thought, “do they make edible incense now?” I asked hopefully, “Anything else?”

“No,” a smile filled her face, “not that I can think of.”

And that was that.

• • •

“Incense,” I chided myself, “I agreed to pick up incense. What I really want is to pick her up and carry her off to bed.”

“Somehow my fantasies never work out,” I moaned.

“That’s right,” I said, “I’m too cautious. I gotta be more straight forward.”

“I know, I know.”

“Now I’ll probably go horny the rest of my life.”

“Feels that way,” I agreed, “doesn’t it.”

“Yup, I can see it all now. Horny for the rest of my life.”

“Well,” I had second thoughts, “maybe just for the rest of this summer.”

“Maybe,” I argued. “Women are a curse.”

“Right. Who the hell needs them anyway?”

“Isn’t that what a real mountain man would say?”

“That’s right.” I thought for a second. “Of course, they had their squaws.”

“And their beaver.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled, “and their horses.”

“Oh well.”

• • •

I looked all over Hawthorne but couldn’t find incense of any “flavor.” I’m sure the clerks wondered what a big hairy fellow would want with a sissy thing like incense. They probably assumed I wanted to cover the scent of illegal drugs.

I finished my usual grocery shopping, ran some errands, and drove back to good ol’ Gabbs. Home of my heartbreak.

• • •

In the afternoon, Ginny watered her flowers. I walked over with the bad news.

“Did you look in Safeway?” she asked accusingly.

“What?” Oh man, how embarrassing. “A grocery store?”

“Yeah.” The breeze caught a cool mist from the hose that suddenly washed across us. She shivered. I was suddenly aware of firm nipples pressed against a thin white blouse. I think she noticed my gaze. “You know,” she went on, “where the candles are. And the other house stuff.” She glanced away. “Did you look there?”

Doubly embarrassed at being caught, I said, “I saw the candles and that kinda stuff.”

“No incense?” she questioned softly.

“Sorry. I didn’t think there would be any there.”

We stood silently watching the water bead on lush green leaves. She seemed to have dismissed me already.

“It just didn’t connect. Never thought a grocery store would have incense. Sorry.” I’m sure I blushed. As I walked away, I said, “I’ll get you some next trip.”

She didn’t reply.

• • •

Just a few days after Rob had arrived, he and Walt were pulled over by Sheriff Donahugh. They had been out cruising the town looking for some kind of action.

“You boys’re drivin’ a bit too fast through this business area. An’ I just noticed you crossin’ this solid yellow line.” He pointed to the stripe down the middle of the road. “They may allow that where you come from, but we got rules here. We expect’em to be followed. Un’erstand?”

“Yes sir,” Rob said respectfully.

“I’m gonna give you a warnin’ ticket. Just’a help you remember.” He wrote out the ticket. “Here.”

Rob took the slip.

“Now, I’m goin’na explain to you. We don’t put up with no foolishness in this here town.

Un'erstand?"

They both nodded.

"I know where you boys'er stayin'. I been by your trailers. I'll be watchin'. Jus' remember, you boys're guests here. I know yer jus' passin' through. We want yuh to have a good time. Yer welcome in our town. But I expect good behavior."

That little episode made us all a bit paranoid. We didn't like the feeling of being watched. As a result, we spent more time around the trailers and less time in Upper Gabbs.

• • •

We gathered in my trailer after dinner to discuss the next day's work assignments. When the deputy sheriff pulled into our camp we had a fright.

"Oh man," Dave whispered, "we're busted for something."

"Who fucked up?" Walt said softly.

Stu quietly added, "Smokey's comin' to evict us from town."

He came to my door.

"Can I help you?" I tried to speak evenly, calmly.

"Yes. Do you know a Robert Spurrier?"

"Oh shit," I thought, "he had an accident." I opened the door a little wider, "Yes."

"He called our office. He couldn't reach you directly by phone. He asked that we inform you that his truck has broken down." The deputy read from a slip of paper. "Apparently the water pump went out. Somewhere north of Las Vegas. Your friend evidently picked up a ride into Tonopah. He's hired a tow truck." The officer looked at me again. "He needs someone to pick him up tomorrow at the garage across from the Chevron station."

Whoo! "Thanks," I sighed. "Thought you were bringing bad news. Hope this didn't inconvenience you?"

"Misconception most people have." He smiled. "Don't always bring bad news. Was no problem. Part of the job." He gave a quick, casual salute. "You fellows have a nice evening." And he was off.

I looked at Neil as he said, "Well, guess who'll be going to Tonopah tomorrow."

"Oh well," I shrugged.

"You can ship the samples from there."

Walt took a swallow from his beer, belched, then said, "Can't believe they wouldn't have a water pump in Tonopah."

"Tourist season," Neil pointed out. "Maybe they've had a run on pumps."

"Yeah. Or maybe Spurrier's fuckin' off." Walt smiled. "Wouldn't put it past the sneaky son-of-a-bitch."

Trying to be impartial, Neil said, "I doubt he'd do anything like that."

"I don't know," Walt said quietly. "His evil little mind weaves some elaborate plots."

"Let's have an example," Neil challenged.

"How 'bout this?" Walt leaned back. "His favorite saying is, if I can get it right, 'The great masses of people,' uhm, 'will more easily,' uh, 'fall victim to a great lie than a small one.'"



“Who said that?” Dave asked.

Walt grinned. “Spurrier.”

“No, fuck-wad. Who did Spurrier quote?”

“You’re gonna love this.” Walt sat up straight. “One of the all time greats. Just the kinda guy we’d all wanna emulate. Adolph Hitler.”

“You mean immolate,” Neil responded.

“Anything to get outta work,” Dave joked. “That’s our Rob.”

“That goes for all of us, though.” Stu stood to leave. “Anyhow,” he patted me on the back, “you’ll get a nice change in scenery.”

“Yeah. At least it’s not Hawthorne or Reno.”

^^^

I rescued Rob from his isolation in the desert wastes of Tonopah. I pulled into town just before Noon and found him where the deputy had indicated. Rob was standing out front of the garage with his hands stuck deep into the pockets of his baggy shorts. When he saw me a grin spread across his face. “Bout time you got here.”

“Yeah, well, I had to get my samples ready first.”

“A wasted trip.” He nodded toward an open bay. “They’re almost done. They found a water pump in Goldfield.”

“No shit?” I only half believed him.

“No shit.”

“Ah well,” I said, looking for the silver lining, “least it was a break in the routine.”

“Let’s grab some lunch. Should be done when we get back.”

“Sounds good to me, but I gotta ship samples first. You spot the LTR depot?”

Rob looked up the street. “Think it’s up at the Mizpah. Seen a couple buses there this morning.”

“Let’s check it out. We can eat there.”

...

Over burgers Rob related the story of his great adventure. “The truck broke down about two miles north of Goldfield. Wasn’t much I could do. Knew it was ... the water pump ... right away.”

“You walk back to Goldfield?”

“Was ready to.” Rob removed the top part of the bun from his burger and pulled off the three slices of pickle. He ate them one after the other. He replaced the bun and pressed it down firm against the meat, lettuce, and tomato. After he swallowed the last pickle he went on. “This Volkswagen mini-bus pulled over. Was loaded with hippies and some French Canadian guy.”

His eyes twinkled. “Good shit happens to good guys, you know? You gotta have those positive vibes.”

“Good Karma. I’ve always believed that,” I mumbled through a mouthful of french fried potato.

He licked mustard from his lips. “One of the hippie chicks ... looked like Kathryn Ross ... started coming on to me. Said she liked my curly hair.” Rob had his hair permed before leaving Tucson. When the light was just right it gave him a light brown halo.

“She wasn’t attached to anyone?”

“She was. Her old man didn’t mind. Said he was groovin’ on her groovin’ on me.”

“The old ‘Peace, Love, and Understanding’ trip.”

“Right on.” We both laughed. Rob continued. “Her old man was cool, but the French Canadian guy ... wasn’t too pleased. Think the chick was hitting on him ... before I came along.”

Thinking I already knew the answer, I asked, “You get any?”

“Nothing came of it.”

I was astonished. I thought for sure he would go into great detail about crawling into the back of the bus and “bangin’” her with everyone watching.

His voice got soft. “Too many people for me ... to get into her pants. She sure tried ... to get into mine.” He sighed. “Thought I was gonna get a blow job right then and there.”

“So that was it, huh?”

“They gave me a ride to Tonopah ... she gave me a hug ... that was it. I hired a tow truck. He and I went out and towed in Guy’s Chevy.”

Of course that left poor Rob alone in a strange town.

“After I checked in at the Silver Queen I came over here to the bar. Mizpah has a nice bar. You ought to check it out.”

“I will.”

“Soon as I sat down ... this woman ... maybe thirty-five or forty ... good looking ... came up right away ... started talking like she knew me. Told me she was hot for a good time.”

I was sure I knew the ending of this episode.

“We had a few drinks. Mostly on her. We shot some craps with her money ... then she ... took me to her room upstairs,” very softly, “fucked my brains out.”

“Right.” I was disappointed. I thought he would go into greater detail. That was his usual style when embellishing the truth. He should have been a fiction writer. “She was probably a dog.”

“Good looking, swear to God.” He looked at his plate. “Great looking.”

...

I stirred up a batch of Hamburger Helper for Burt and me. Not exactly a gourmet meal, but it was filling and easy to prepare.

“How was your trip to Tonopah?” Burt asked politely.

“Alright. Not too eventful.”

“Same old scenery?”

“Yah, for the most part. We took a shortcut back.”

“How did you find that?”

“Rob noticed it on one of the field maps.”

“How was it?” Burt was unusually inquisitive.

“Not much of a short cut.” I finished a bite. “It’s a phone line road. Cuts straight across the Big Smokey Valley, right over the Paradise Mountains. I mean straight, from Tonopah to Gabbs.”

“It sounds like a good route.”

“Yeah. On the map it looked considerably shorter than the paved highway. Sixty-nine miles along a dirt and gravel road. A hundred-and-twenty over the highway.”

“How long did it take you?”

“Two hours. Same as on the highway.”

“It wasn’t much of a short cut then, was it?” He sort of chuckled.

“Nope. And definitely less comfortable than the pavement.” I paused to take a drink of milk. “We could only do between forty and fifty miles per.”

“Why’s that?”

“All loose gravel. Badly wash-boarded with deep ruts. Hasn’t been graded yet this year.” I took another bite of potato and ground beef.

“Most of the roads we drive over every day are like that. We hafta drive slowly. Sometimes the ruts are so deep it’s hard to steer.”

I was amazed at how talkative Burt had become. “Yeah. I suppose they’re all like that out here. This one was definitely a dusty roller coaster ride through desolate country. But it was interesting. I’m just glad it wasn’t my own truck.”

“We should treat these trucks like they are our own.” Burt glanced at me furtively.

I wanted to say something about him killing the Gray Beast, but let it ride. “You’re right.”

We ate silently for a few moments, then I said, “We stopped at a spot about fifteen miles outside of Gabbs. There were some interesting outcrops, similar to those near the Ichthyosaur site. You been up there yet?”

“No. I haven’t had the chance. We’ve driven through Union Canyon a couple of times. So I know the outcrops you’re talking about.”

“Was an interesting area. Really rugged. Like badlands.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Not really. Was hoping for some fossils, but all we found were pieces of flint and obsidian.”

“Around here?” He looked puzzled. “I didn’t know there was any actual volcanic activity ‘round here.”

“Might have been brought in. Rob claimed it showed signs of work by paleo-indians.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know there was archaeological evidence ‘round here. This is really a pretty interesting area.”

“You know, I think you’re right. This desert isn’t as boring as we were led to believe.”

We went back to our meal. Working our way through second helpings, I said, “You know, I’ll bet most people would miss what this desert has to offer. They would walk right over

exciting artifacts and wouldn't even know what they are."

"I think you're right. It seems a lot of people are preoccupied with their own concerns."

"Yeah. But you know, Burt, it just struck me. I guess that's okay. It doesn't really matter who you are or what you are, or what you do. What matters is that you *are*."

He gave me a confused look. "Yes, but if they are so preoccupied that they don't see what's around them then they miss a lot."

"Exactly." I felt I was getting through to him. It was suddenly evident that old Burt was subconsciously absorbing some of my views. "You're right. You can't be a robot. You hafta realize you exist. You're alive. You hafta absorb life ... live."

"As long as one follows the rules."

"Why? Most rules keep you from being alive."

"But you have to do what's right," he was almost pleading.

"Burt, people make the rules. There's no good ... no evil. Those are only states of mind. Points of perception. Everything ... everything ... is relative to the individual."

"But we have to have rules or everything falls apart."

"In society, yes. Its government, its laws, its taboos, its religions are all designed to control individuality. To mold a common, controllable view."

"What's wrong with that?"

"That creates a false sense of reality ... a false security."

"But there is safety in numbers."

"Not really," I shook my head. "In a society everything has to be viewed from the perspective of the masses. A social, or societal, view. So society determines what's right ... good ... and what's wrong ... evil."

"Somebody has to."

"The right of self-determination and personal opinion is removed from the individual. Good and evil become opposing forces instead of part of a metaphysical whole."

Burt looked at me with his typical blank expression. "So much of what you say is just gibberish."

I smiled at him. "Exactly."

"The Bible says that the truly wise are those humble ones who are willing to be taught of God through the Scriptures." Burt looked at me with a strangely steady gaze. "The wise shall understand the Truth."

"But *which* truth, Burt?"

"Only a few have ears to hear the truth." He was obviously locked into a scriptural mode.

"And what about those of us who don't hear, or won't listen?"

"They will be passed by when the day of salvation comes." He broke his stare momentarily, then refocused. "At the Time of the End."

I sat back and smiled. "Ah, yes. Restitution at the Edge of the World."

^^^

Stu, Rob and I had finished our laundry early, utilizing the element of surprise and safety in numbers. Sometimes it took covert measures to get our money's worth from those wretched machines. After our successful escape from the clutches of the evil laundromat we celebrated with a large breakfast of sausage, eggs, toast, and juice and a two day old copy of the Las Vegas newspaper, all provided by Rob. Burt dropped in to share our meal while his clothes tumbled in lonely terror.

We were in the midst of our morning feast when Walt lurched in from the usual Saturday night binge. This week he and Dave moved on the women in Hawthorne.

"Any luck, Pinhead," Rob opened in a sing-song voice.

Walt moaned.

"I assume that means you struck out again." Rob raised his glass of milk. "Here's to you, my friend. I believe you now have a terminal case ... of D-S-B."

"Not by choice." Walt looked worn, his eyes red and baggy. The hair on the left side of his head was matted.

"You guys sleep on the road again?" Stu smiled as he examined Walt's face.

"Yeah, literally, for Dave. Pulled over so he could puke. He fell asleep on the shoulder. I zonked waiting for him. Drank too much."

"I'd say so," Stu grinned wickedly. "Where'd you crash?"

"Think near Petrified Summit."

"Appropriate," I said cheerfully. "Now I know how it got its name."

"So you didn't bag any babes," Rob shook his head. "An awful waste of effort."

"We had some delicious sightings," Walt spoke weakly.

"Close doesn't reduce your sperm count."

And so, once again, the dynamic duo slept through most of their one day off.

...

Burt, bearing witness to Walt's testament of the Devil, marched off to church to cleanse the evil images from his heart. Rob had mending to do, and plans to attend a barbecue in the afternoon. So Stu and I decided to drive out to Sand Mountain and listen to the singing sands. I had passed the location several times on my trips to Fallon and Reno. Intrigued by its spectacular ridges and the immense size, I had sworn to visit before our departure.

...

Approaching the 950 foot Sahara-like dunes known as Sand Mountain, we came upon a small camp where four fellows sat in lawn chairs drinking beer. They waved us over.

"Howdy," Stu waved back as he turned off the engine.

"You fellows out to see our mountain?" A jovial fellow waved a beer toward the huge drift

that is probably two to three miles long, and almost a mile wide.

“Yep.”

“First time here?” another asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “We’re working out of Gabbs. Thought we’d see what this place is all about.”

“Come and join us. We’ll give you the scoop,” the second fellow invited.

Stu winked at me. I nodded, “Sure, why not?”

As we closed our doors a third fellow was already digging into a cooler. “Offer you a beer?”

“A bit early, but why the hell not?” Stu accepted the wet can. I nodded, and a second can flew my way.

“Have a seat,” the second fellow pointed to a wooden plank braced across two five gallon buckets. “Where you fellas from?”

Stu popped the top on his beer, “Outta Tucson, most recently. You from Fallon?”

All four had a good laugh. “Naw,” the first fellow responded, “we drove over Friday night from Reno. We get out here maybe six ... seven times a year.”

“Sometimes we bring the families,” the third fellow offered, “but this trip’s for us.”

There was a moment of silence as the six of us swallowed the cool brew. “Locals call this the Singing Mountain?” I pointed with my can. “Why is that?”

“Got a rare kind of sand,” Number Two replied.

“Yeah, angular or something,” Three added. “Comes in from over there in the Carson Sink.” He pointed off toward the northwest. “When the winds swirl over the flats they pick up fine grains of jagged quartz. And when they blow against the Stillwaters here,” he used his beer can to indicate the low range behind him, “it breaks the wind, and the sand drops.”

“It’s constantly reworked,” Number Two added. “Always changing.”

“Okay. But ... well how ... how does it sing?” I pressed on.

“I’ve only heard it a couple times. Conditions hafta be just right,” Number One took over. “It’s kind of like someone speaking ... ghostly like.”

“Or singing,” Number Three added. “When I heard it, it sounded like singing.”

“What causes the sound?” I wasn’t satisfied.

“Is it the wind?” Stu volunteered.

One moved his hand horizontally. “When wind blows across the surface just right.”

“It’s haunting,” Three admitted.

“A beautiful sound, especially in the quiet of evening or early morning,” Number Four spoke for the first time.

“Yeah,” Three came back, “but to the unsuspecting it can be eerie.”

Stu nodded toward their machines. “These work pretty good on these dunes?”

They had four sand rails—long bodied dune buggies with huge balloon tires.

“These babies make all the difference.” Number One pointed to flexible rubber fins protruding from the rear tires. “These paddles scoop the sand and give us all the traction we need.”

“Why are the front wheels smooth?” I thought that curious.

“They’re only used for guidance,” Two answered. “You guys want a ride?” He looked at the others.

I wasn’t too thrilled by the prospect, wanting to live at least a few more years. But Stu seemed excited by the offer and I didn’t want to be labeled a coward. “What the hell ... it’s a good day to die.”

They laughed with glee. It became apparent they had been waiting all morning for some “tourists” to drop by so they could show off their toys.

• • •

Because I was built larger than Stu they assigned me to ride with Number Four. His rail was the largest, with the most powerful engine.

“Name’s Willie.” He extended his paw.

“Chris.” We shook hands.

“Welcome aboard, Chris.”

The whole experience, from that moment on, was incredible. We went roaring across the dunes, then blasted straight up the side of a sand cliff, like we were taking off for the sky. Then we would tear along the crest, rear tires kicking up a plume of sand ten feet high. With the engine cut back, we would glide down several hundred feet to do it all again.

After our hosts tired of the up and down they blasted straight over the crest. Beyond we found another world totally engulfed by the dunes. There was only sand and sky. Inside the dune we swirled round and round a deep pit.

“THEY CALL THIS THE BLOW-HOLE,” Willie yelled.

I tried to smile as fine grained sand pelted my face.

While Willie and I were circling the rim the others swarmed below. We swirled around like water flushing down a toilet. The others would climb out and we would swoop down across the bottom of the pit. Looking up and seeing those rails hanging overhead, spewing plumes of sand in a beige cascade, was like staring at an Escher drawing. You sense that something isn’t right, yet everything looks natural. It was like the rails should be falling, but their centrifugal force kept them aloft. It was one of the most exhilarating and frightening experiences I had ever had. I was terrified, but it was fun.

“DO THESE THINGS EVER ROLL?” I tried not to sound too concerned.

“WHAT?” Willie yelled through the noise.

“THESE THINGS EVER ROLL?”

“THAT’S WHAT ROLL BARS ARE FOR,” he pointed to the three inch tubing over our heads. “IF WE GO OVER KEEP YOUR HANDS AND FEET INSIDE THE FRAME AND YOU’LL BE OKAY. A ROLL WON’T KILL YOU, BUT IT’LL SURE SCARE THE PISS OUTTA YOU.”

Oh great. I tightened my grip on the edge of the seat. My fingers numb, my knuckles white.

After we rode along the crest a ways we zipped over some smaller dunes and all four vehicles stopped in a row, facing a wall of rock. The main dune was gradually swallowing the side of the mountain, engulfing it with minute particles, the remains of another mountain farther

west.

Looking at that formidable outcrop, perhaps 100 to 200 feet high, I noticed a narrow band of sand that seemed to pour from over the top of the range, cascading down to meet the dune we sat upon.

Apprehensive, I thought, “They’re not goin’ up there, climbing that mess, are they? Holy shit!”

Of course they weren’t. “Should we try The Slide,” Number Two asked.

“Not for me,” Number One backed away. “Not enough power.”

“Me neither,” Three agreed.

“None of us do,” Two added.

“I don’t know aout that. Willie does.” One nodded toward the rig I sat in.

“Yeah,” Two confirmed. “Willie could make it, even with the big guy on board.”

“Yeah, go for it Willie.” Number Three gave the thumbs up.

My heart stopped. “Oh God,” I thought, “I’m gonna die!”

Before I could bail the engine roared to life. Off we went, Willie and me, to meet our destiny. We rattled along across the packed surface, engine screaming behind us, sand flying everywhere: sand in my eyes, sand in my mouth, sand in my hair and ears and under my clothes. My mind struggled to keep up. I feared he would miss the narrow strip of sand and smash into the surrounding rock. But as we approached I could see the sand was broader than I thought. Willie throttled up. I could feel the sudden acceleration.

The ascent seemed more gradual than I anticipated, then boom, we were blasting—what felt like—straight up. I was looking at sky. The front wheels kept coming off the ground, spinning freely. Sand flew around us in a storm. I could sense rock close on my right. I gripped the frame for dear life. My fingers numb again, my knuckles white. Although I was strapped in under the protective roll bars I just knew we would be crushed to death or buried under tons of singing sand.

The engine chugged and pushed as we fishtailed back and forth in our forward thrust. Then suddenly, we were there. We made it. There was a wide spot near the top where Willie abruptly turned. We drifted sideways. Willie goosed it and got the nose pointed down slope. We stopped. The engine died. In the sudden silence I could hear the soft sand settle around us with a hiss. We seemed to be sinking, downward and forward. Momentarily everything equalized and we came to rest.

I felt myself hanging in the harness. We sat looking down the slope we had just ascended. Solid rock on either side, weathered black against the beige sand. Below, and out a thousand yards or so, were the other three rails. Small figures stood next to them, all waving and shouting with excitement.

“How many times you done this?” I asked bravely, trying to seem unfazed by the whole thing.

“This is the first. Never seen it done before,” he replied nonchalantly.

Oh shit.

“Bit scary, huh?” He looked at me.

“Yeah, just a bit.” We still had to get back. I could already feel the push of the heavy engine



wanting to tumble over our heads. “How we get down?”

“Same way we came up.”

“Won’t we tumble over, all that weight in the back?”

“She might. We’ll just hafta gun it.” He pumped the gas pedal, then turned to check something on the exposed engine. “Read a book ... uh, called *Gravity’s Rainbow*, by a fella named Thomas Pynchon.”

“Yeah. Read that too.” Didn’t seem like the appropriate place for a literary discussion.

“Maybe you remember. This character in the book said ‘the object of Life is to make sure you die a weird death. To make sure that however it finds you, it will find you under very weird circumstances. To live that kind of life’.” He looked at me for a long second. Then he looked down the slope. “We’re livin’, my friend. This is livin’.”

He pumped the gas pedal again. “Keep your fingers crossed momentum pulls us faster than she wants to come over. Hold on!”

He turned the key, the engine roared to life. He jammed into first, played footsies with the pedals, and down we went. Man! We blasted out of there in a blur. Zip—we were down and horizontal again; my knuckles a permanent part of his frame, welded by body heat and fear.

When we reached the bottom we headed toward the others. They started toward their camp. Moving in a column, each rail, in turn, made a sweeping arc up the side of the main sand ridge. Each successive vehicle went further up the side, the last reaching to half the height. I sensed Willie would want to do better. By now I just wanted to stop and catch my breath and see if I could free my hands from this tubular steel.

Instead of heading toward the sand dune, like the others, Willie made a gradual left turn and headed straight for the camp. I figured he must be low on gas or had enough excitement for one afternoon. I was relieved.

Then, without warning, we swept to the right and headed straight for the top of the big pile. “Oh my God, here we go again.”

We climbed and climbed and I didn’t think we were going to make it. The engine wanted to stall. If we lost power we would surely roll. Then there we were, skidding along sideways just below the crest. Willie blasted up to the edge, our right front wheel hanging suspended over the other side. Bumping along, I could look over the crest and see the blow-hole we had played in earlier. It looked small from up here. Then over we went.

We crested the ridge and were suddenly tearing down the steep slope on the other side. Willie brought the thing around and we blasted back up and over once more, almost airborne. I looked to the side as we ruined the perfect single grained edge of the top.

Down we went in a bee line for the camp. Over some small mounds, around a sand canyon, and suddenly it was over. The whirlwind tour of the dune had lasted about an hour.

They offered another cold beer to relax our nerves and wash down the grit. We gladly accepted, chugged it, thanked them for the excitement and the opportunity, and took our leave.

“How’re your hands?” Stu smiled.

“What?”

“Your knuckles got a little white there, Chris.”

“That obvious, huh?” Sheepish, “Yeah, thought my fingers were welded to that seat.”

“That was a great time.”

“An experience I’ll never forget.”

“Hey ... you know, to be honest ... I was scared too.” Stu glanced at me as he drove toward the highway.

“Great,” I sighed. “Now I don’t feel so cowardly.”

“We just gotta let ourselves go. We almost made thirty, and survived. Maybe it’s time to live a little.” He turned onto the highway. “We did something dangerous today.”

“Something neither of us would have done before.”

“And we didn’t die.”

“You sure?”

• • •

We drove back to Gabbs along the pleasantly verdant Reese River, following the old stage route from Austin to Berlin. We stopped in Ione at the Ore Bar, having heard it had a certain territorial flavor. It was actually pretty common; just an old wooden bar along one wall, two or three round tables, and a pool table in the back. The place was empty. We ordered a beer and played three rounds of Eight Ball. Rather dull compared to our earlier experience.

Ione is about 23 miles northeast of Gabbs, attractively located in a beautiful canyon setting in the Shoshone Range. The bartender, a talkative older fellow, apparently used to our touristy questions, told us, “Ione got itself settled back in the fall of eighteen-sixty-three ... it was ... when some fellers found uh silver lode up there in them hills.”

He paused to swallow. It looked like he adjusted his false teeth with his tongue. He continued, “The town grew purdy dern fast. Had a pop’lation ‘tween five an’ six hun’ret. Got named county seat fer Nye County. First county seat. It was.” He walked over to a wall near the front window, looked at several framed drawings, and pointed to one. “This here’s a pi’ture somebody drewed of the ‘riginal courthouse.” We went over to take a look. He walked back behind the bar. “Minin’ ‘bout dis’peared by eighteen-sixty-six ... when Belmont opened ... up to the southeast uh here. Pulled mos’ miners away. County seat follered nex’ year.”

“When did the town finally close up?” I asked between shots.

“Never did. Never did. Never been ‘pletely ‘bandoned.” He looked out the front window. “All’s we got left’s the store ‘cross the street ... them gas pumps nex’ door ... an’ this here s’loon. Tha’s the business distric’ for yuh. Downtown Ione.” He smiled.

“Well ... uh, how do you get by? Where’s your income?” I was curious how these few businesses could stay in operation.

“Oh,” he stroked his chin as he thought, “low overhead ... an’ we survive on ‘casional trade from tourists to Icky’sour Park. An’, I guess, from lonely geologis’s like yerselves.”

“How many people livin’ here now?” Stu asked.

“Um ... there’s ‘bout eleven us perm’nent. Scattered ‘round the sage an’ up the crick. Up the crick, yeah.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Get a few more come fer summer. Kind that like to get away from the cities.”

He walked up to the front window with us as we were getting ready to leave. “If you wanna

explore, take a lookit the old rock jail house an' wha's left uh the 'riginal courthouse." He pointed to the north. "Jus' don't go stealin' none uh the bricks. Don't like that 'roun' here." He raised a crooked finger like he was scolding school children. "An' right over there's the ol' barber shop. It's all right to look through the winder, but don't go inside. Fellow owns it gets upset."

We thanked him and promised to be careful if we looked around. He was back behind the bar before we made it through the door.

...

Back in Gabbs Stu and I learned the final decision had been made to move on to Hawthorne. We had completed our work in this area and would relocate our little caravan Tuesday. Our spirits lifted. We were moving on to new adventures.

We spent the late afternoon playing frisbee. About the time we tired of tossing the plastic Rob and Walt drove in. We gave them the good news about leaving and we opened a few Heinies to celebrate. Sipping from the green bottles, they told us of their afternoon adventure at the local barbecue.

"Who was this guy put on the feast?" I asked

"All we know is his name is John," Walt shrugged.

"He's a young guy ... about thirty ... lives in Ione." Rob was always good at filling in the details. "Dresses like a hippie ... but he's not dirty or untidy."

"Some guy there told us he owns a big chunk of Ione," Walt belched, "including that bar."

"The Ore Bar?" Stu asked.

"Think that's it," Walt shrugged again.

"From the stories we heard this John guy seems to have unlimited funds." Rob leaned back on one of the Kawasakis.

Walt nodded. "Nobody knows where he got his stash."

"One guy there guessed it's from an inheritance," Rob countered.

"Yeah, but that other rancher dude," Walt came back, "the one with the green cowboy hat..."

"Looked like felt from a pool table," Rob laughed.

"Yeah, that guy. He said he'd heard something about a rich ore deposit."

"Hell," Stu interjected, "he probably made it sellin' drugs."

"Yeah," I supported Stu, "he's out here hiding out 'til things cool down."

"Shit," Dave finally got into the conversation, "he's probably a bank robber, hiding out."

"Who knows?" Walt shrugged again.

"We do know he's got a gorgeous blond girlfriend." Rob licked his lips.

"A ten on any scale." Walt smiled broadly. "On any scale."

"She lives out there with this John guy?" Dave asked.

"Yeah."

"Intriguing," Stu said softly.

"Yes," Rob hissed. "You'd think a beautiful woman ... obviously ... by her clothes ... a

city girl ... would need the social life of a civilized community.”

“She’s something else,” Walt sighed.

“How did you guys hook up with these people?” I hadn’t heard how they got invited.

“Oh, well,” Walt yawned, “the other day we were sampling near Grantsville. All of a sudden there they were.”

“They were out hiking ... for pleasure.” Rob emptied the last of his brew. “We talked to them a while and he invited us to drop by his *ranch* for the barbecue.”

“What was the big shindig for?” Stu questioned.

“He does this every year,” Walt answered.

“Throws a pig roast, beer guzzling affair for all the locals every year.” Rob dropped his bottle into a plastic garbage bag hanging on a hook near the Airstream door. “Supposed to be *The Event* ‘round here.”

“So, other than the host and his woman, was there anything exciting goin’ on?” Stu twirled a frisbee on one finger.

“Wasn’t too exciting,” Walt volunteered. “Couldn’t put the moves on the honeys. Pops was hovering near.”

“There was only one worth eyeing, anyway. And when daddy got one look at old Pinhead here he saw rape headlines in the Snaggs Gazette.”

“You didn’t do any better, Wolfman.”

“Only ‘cause I didn’t wanna show you up.”

“Shit.”

“So, what happened?” Dave got impatient with their usual ranking.

“We had a few beers. Watched the locals.” Walt shrugged. “There were a lot of people...”

“Lots of food and beer.” Rob forced a belch.

“I gotta say again,” Walt smiled, “John’s honey looked fantastic.”

“Yeah, in her new cowgirly outfit,” Rob sneered. “Must of had it flown in from Macy’s in San Francisco.”

“I don’t care what she was wearing,” Walt pretended to pant like a dog, “she’s the best I’ve seen all summer. There weren’t many eligible women there.”

“The best only five or six on the Snaggs scale,” Rob informed us. “And those worth the effort were young.”

“I like ‘em young and fresh,” Walt said in a rough, dirty old man voice.

“Yeah, but not with mommy and daddy so close by.”

“Hey, they could have watched if they wanted.”

...

I tired of the usual line of bull, so excused myself. I went to my trailer to read. I had only gotten through a few pages when Rob came to my door.

“You have plastic garbage bags?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Shh.” He held his finger to his mouth. “Quiet. Don’t say anything ... you know what I

mean?”

I nodded.

“Neil just squashed Jimmy. Backed over him. Smashed him flat. Shplut!”

“Oh no! Shit! Ginny know?”

“No. We’re not gonna tell her. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. We figure ... it’s better she thinks he ran away ... or something.”

“Not likely.”

“Well, we’re gonna try that, anyway. We’ll be gone in a couple days.”

I handed him the white bag and he walked off. A few minutes later he came back with Walt. They placed the bag in the back of my truck, among other trash destined for the landfill.

“Gimme your keys. Walt and me are gonna drive this mess to the dump. Before somebody sees.”

I tossed him the keys. “Nobody saw it happen?”

“Don’t think so. We just wanna get outta here without trouble. We’ll dump this stuff.”

Before they could leave Neil walked over. The four of us stood around the back of the truck. The pink, distorted outline of the white kitten contoured the translucent bag.

“Flattened it good,” I said solemnly, shaking my head.

“Didn’t know it was there. Must’ve been up on top of the wheel. You know how these cats are. They spend their whole day chasing around under our trailers, climbing up on the frames and wheels, batting at each other, wrestling in the dust, terrorizing each other.”

“Hey, we all enjoy the little herd of ruffians.” I patted him on the shoulder. “We can’t watch them constantly. Stuff like this just happens. Not your fault.”

“When I backed up it must of gotten trapped. I didn’t know it was there.”

“We know,” we all mumbled, each glad it hadn’t been us.

“God,” Neil blurted, “get this thing dumped. Bury it under a lot of junk so no one can find it. I hope we get out of here before they figure what happened.”

...

With his fair skin and short hair, Burt’s neck burned easily. We teased him about being a red neck, with all that implies. So in self-defense he bought himself a bandanna. Of course that just shifted our focus.

“Burt, s’there some symb’lism in a red bandanna?” Stu questioned when he first showed it to us. “This jus’ enhances your red neckedness.”

He shrugged that off in typical Burton James fashion. “It’s protection against the sun,” he tried to explain, “and to wipe off sweat.”

We always kept the poor guy off balance. Each evening he would rinse his one lonely bandanna in the sink for use the next day. Having tired of our red neck ploy we began tormenting him about that.

“You don’t rinse your dirty underwear every night, do you?” I looked to Stu for support.

“Or your socks?” Stu added.

“Splurge, Burt, buy a few more.” I reached for my wallet. “You need cash?”

He shook his head. "One will be fine."

We repeated this routine about every other night for a week. The dialog was almost word for word. Stu and I finally got tired of that line of thought and moved on to other concerns.

^^^

"Remember," Neil said, holding up his fork, "molybdenum is used as an alloy with other metals."

"Exactly," Rob added, "like in bicycle frames ... the space program ... military weaponry ... hand tools ... stuff like that."

"Yes, I know," Burt said impatiently, "to make them harder and more rigid, yet lighter."

Walt grabbed a naked hotdog from the plate in the middle of the table. He held an end between his thumb and first finger. As he spoke he used a third finger to slowly move its curved length into a straight up position. "I don't know what it does for you, Burt, but moly makes my tool hard." We all laughed as Burt's face turned red.

Then Neil said, "We had a secretary in the Tucson office named Molly."

"She make your tool hard?" Walt teased, sliding his "phallus" between the halves of a bun.

"Probably," he said good-naturedly, "she was mighty good looking. Shapely."

"How shapely?" Dave, suddenly interested, set his drink aside.

"Well, she had everything in the right places. Large breasts."

"Large breasts, huh? I like big tits." Walt held his hands in front of his chest to fondle imaginary mounds of flesh.

"Big breasts," Neil continued, "and a sense of humor."

"You can't fuck a sense of humor," Walt replied.

"Suit yourself," Neil laughed. "Would be your loss." He got a big smile on his face, like he was reminiscing.

Stu said quietly, "What's on your mind there, chief? You look like yer remembrin' somethin' you should be tellin' us about."

"Not what you think," Neil chuckled. "This goes back a few years." He stirred his beans with the tines of his fork. "A bunch of the older geologists used to tease Molly about her busty figure. One day they got together and bought her a custom made T-shirt. They gave it to her on her birthday." Neil's eyes sparkled. "They intentionally bought a size too small."

"Oo, nice and tight, huh?" Dave hung on every word.

"Yeah, real tight." Neil loved the attention, and the suspense. "Those guys tormented poor Molly until she agreed to put it on. But being a good sport, she did them one better." Neil leaned back on the bench. "She gave a real show. When she returned from changing the rest room she wore the tight T-Shirt, alright. But she'd also removed her bra." Neil couldn't contain his laughter. "The front of the shirt said, in big red letters, 'MOLY MAKES YOUR TOOL HARD'."

^^^

And then it arrived, our final day in Gabbs. We had completed our work in the local sections and were moving on to Hawthorne. Yet our mood was strangely subdued as we made our final preparations and loaded up. The motorcycles were secured in the beds of the trucks. Equipment and tools were stored. Everything was moving along, but not going well. There was a thickness in our motions, a heavy feel to the air. The sky, again that steel gray, threatened rain.

The first bit of bad luck struck when the drain to the main septic tank backed up. We couldn't empty the holding tanks in our trailers.

"I know," Stu frowned, "it's not really a problem. We can empty the tanks in Hawthorne." He shook his head, "It's jus' the idea of haulin' all that shit around. There's somethin' not right about that."

...

Later, as I backed my truck to hitch the Empire, Burt stopped me. "Your tire is going flat." He pointed to the left rear of the truck.

"Damn!" I jumped out and could see the tire was indeed low. "Looks like a slow leak. Don't have time to fix it now. We'll top it off with the hand pump."

We grabbed the small pump we used for the bikes and added enough pressure to make the tire round again. We hitched the truck to the trailer, and as I cautiously pulled forward, Burt shouted, "Chris! STOP!"

I applied the brakes. "What now?"

"The back tire's flat." This time he pointed to the left rear tire of the trailer.

"JESUS!" I bellowed as I jumped out of the truck.

We tried the pump on this small tire, but it was no use, it just wouldn't hold. I was starting to get aggravated.

"Man," I whined, "I had to change the right front tire of the damned truck yesterday." I kicked at the deflated rubber. "The left rear this morning. Now this. Rob and Walt must have picked up a couple of nails when they dumped that damn cat."

Burt stood calmly to the side, relieved that my anger wasn't directed at him.

We jacked the trailer and put on the spare. It went flat as soon as it touched the ground. "So ... Burt old buddy, one last trip up the hill to I.M.'s. We'll fill the original tire with a pressure hose. That should at least get us to Hawthorne."

After our quick trip to Upper Gabbs we replaced the tire on the trailer and seemed to be ready. Just then two B-52 jet bombers rumbled over at low altitude. Sinister looking, the aircraft disappeared across the basin. Stu stood up to watch. "It's amazin' somethin' that huge can stay in the air."

I agreed. "Even though they're weapons of destruction, they're still impressive."

"I could almost read the lettering on the sides and see the pilots." Burt stood beside Stu, watching the black smoke make trails across the sky.

I chuckled as I picked up the lug wrench. “Yeah, we can put monsters like those in the air, but we can’t make a tire that’ll stay inflated.”

• • •

While I was inside my trailer washing my hands I heard a soft knock on the door. I looked out to see Ginny’s concerned face.

“Sorry to bother you.”

“No problem,” I said.

In a smooth, shy voice she asked, “Have you seem a white kitten around here?”

“You mean Jimmy?”

“Yeah,” she seemed hopeful, “my kitty.”

I thought, “Uh-oh. Be careful.” I scratched my chin and looked thoughtful. “Uh ... no, can’t say I’ve seen him today.” I glanced around my trailer, trying to be convincing. “He and the others climb ‘round here sometimes, but I haven’t seen any of them today.”

She looked tremendously disappointed.

“Have you asked the others?” I indicated Burt and Stu outside.

“Yes. They haven’t seen him either.” She sighed. “He’s been gone for two days.” She seemed so sad, so vulnerable. My inclination was to step outside and hold her and tell her everything.

“Well, I’m sure he’s around somewhere. He’ll show up. You know how kittens are. They start exploring and wander off and get tired and take a nap and who knows when they’ll come back. But I think they usually do.”

“I hope so.”

“Probably when he’s hungry enough.” I thought an elaborate lie, a la Rob Spurrier, might set the scene for his later “no show.”

“I hope that’s all.” Her voice unsteady, “He usually doesn’t stay away this long.”

“We’re leaving soon, but I’ll keep my eyes open for him while we’re here.”

“Thanks.” She walked away.

I had the distinct feeling she suspected cat-napping. I’m sure that’s what it looked like after we were gone and the cat never returned. Coincidental ... hm? The thought of cat-napping had crossed our minds. But our choice would have been Napoleon. Thinking clearly, for once, we realized our mobile life style made a pet impractical.

I felt sorry for Ginny. My conscience tormented me. I thought maybe I should explain what happened, knowing it would be tragic at first, but she would get over it in a day or two. At least she would know the truth, because not knowing would gnaw on her for weeks before she stopped wondering and hoping. When I had built up enough nerve to go to her, Rob came by.

“You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“No, of course not.” I must have blushed.

“It’s better we don’t. Neil wants us out of here in one piece.”

Being the coward that I am, I let it drop. We would soon be on the road headed for Hawthorne.



Before we left, Stu made a sign for the back of my Empire. It read, “HAWTHORNE OR BUST;” the traditional *Westward Ho!* Of course, he touched up the lettering, using different colored paint, adding two additional letters that couldn’t be seen unless one looked carefully. An observant driver, following my rig, would read, “HAWTHORNE fOR BUSTs.” A reference, of course, to the supposedly attractive women Walt and Dave had seen in Hawthorne on their previous Saturday night prowl. After four weeks in the female barrens of Gabbs, anything would be a step up. As I said, our spirits were high.

• • •

I finally pulled out of Gabbs about 9:00 a.m. The others left sometime later. I had to meet Randy at the Hawthorne airport at 9:30. There was no way I could make it. I didn’t even pass Luning until 10:00. My damn truck had no power under a load. I had to use first gear on most of the hills. But for once the Gabbs’ Incline was a cinch. Going down hill had never been a problem with that stupid truck. I hoped that was the last time I would have to see that god-awful hill.

I pulled into Hawthorne about 10:40 and drove straight to the airport. They told me Randy had hitched a ride to the El Cap. I drove up there but couldn’t get my trailer anywhere near the place. Already late, I drove to the trailer park and unhitched my rig. By that time Stu and Walt had come in. I drove over to the El Cap, found Randy, and by the time we returned, the others had arrived.

We set up, with all of the usual hassles. The sky had cleared and the sun got hot. The air was still thick and humid, loaded with lots of nasty mosquitoes and gnats. Tempers boiled. Nothing seemed to go right.

While walking to Neil’s trailer to borrow a roll of duct tape, I noticed Rob and Walt struggling with their large ice chest. “Why you pouring out that water?”

Walt lifted the cooler while Rob held the drain plug to the side. A clear stream of cold water poured through the opening onto the ground. Crushed ice sloshed inside. They looked at me and Walt replied, “To get rid of it ... duh.”

“No,” I became slightly flustered. “I mean, why don’t you leave it?”

“Because we wanna keep our food cold.” Rob spoke like a teacher trying to explain a simple concept to a kindergarten class.

“Your food will stay colder longer if you keep the ice water.”

“Bull shit. Ice keeps the food cold. Something happen to your brain?” Walt shook his head in disbelief.

“No,” his tone irritated me. “Well, yeah, the ice keeps the food cold. But so does the water.”

“Look,” Rob said, “the water is melted ice. It’s no good anymore. It’s broken, okay. We gotta get rid of it ... so the ice can do its work.”

“If you drain the water, that leaves air spaces between the cubes. Air doesn’t stay cold as long as water. Doesn’t insulate as well. Water has greater density and will keep your food cold longer.”

“Doesn’t make sense, man.” Walt shifted the weight so that more water poured from the

spout.

“The air acts as insulation to keep the cold in. Water drains the cold from the food.” Rob’s self assurance was aggravating.

“I can’t believe you guys. Haven’t you had physics?”

They both looked at me like they didn’t know what the hell the word “physics” meant.

“You’re wrong, Rob.” I was getting frustrated. “Air does act as an insulator in some cases, but not here. If the water in the cooler is produced from melting ice, your food will stay cold longer. If you don’t drain the water. When you drain off the cold water the space it occupied has to be filled by something. Simple physics. It’s replaced by dry, warm air. The ice and the cooled food hafta cool that air, to reach a state of equilibrium. Simple as that.”

They looked at each other and shook their heads. They continued their efforts, unconvinced. I let the matter drop, swearing to myself that someday I would prove my point.

Randy and Neil noticed our short tempers and treated us to lunch at, where else, the El Cap. Sitting in that air conditioned atmosphere seemed to help. On the way out I won a few nickels at the slots. That helped a bit too.

The whole group went grocery shopping. We must have bought eight cart loads of supplies and a small barbecue grill. People stared at our load of goodies.

Once we had our groceries stored we had a short group meeting. Randy told us, “We’re gonna start work at six-thirty from now on.”

“Six-thirty!” Dave moaned.

“Why?” Walt followed.

“Because of the heat.” Randy smiled with a sinister pleasure. “The earlier hour gives us more daylight. We’ll get more work done each day. More samples.”

“You mean we gotta have breakfast done by six-thirty?” Walt pleaded.

“Nope. You gotta have breakfast done and your bikes prepped and everything ready to go by six-thirty. I wanna see the dust settling from your tires by six-thirty-one.”

It was no big deal to me, because I was usually up and going by six anyway. But for those late night partiers, their life style definitely had to change.

• • •

We did have one pleasant surprise that day. We discovered the laundry room at the trailer park. What a step up from Gabbs. Not only did that place have nice, clean, properly operating modern washers and dryers, it also had hot showers. No more squatting in the cramped space of my Empire. We were excited.

The other decent news for that day was that four of the guys would be staying at the motel, across the street from the trailer park. Not only convenient, that also meant there would continue to be only one of us per trailer: Stu, Randy, Rob, and myself. Nice.



Sitting along the main route between Vegas and Reno, Hawthorne is much larger than Gabbs. One factor is the towns close proximity to the Naval Ammunition Depot in the village of Babbitt, less than a mile to the north. I assume the military calculates an explosion there would create relatively little property damage and loss of life. Of course that's a fine and logical calculation if you are sitting thousands of miles away in the Pentagon pondering a relatively vacant spot on a topographic map. But when your trailer is parked just up the road it's not a real comforting thought knowing that at any second we could be blown into the purer spirit of the cosmos.

From what Doris tells me, the plant used to assemble rockets, mines, depth charges, and torpedoes. And at one time, during the Korean War or the Vietnam Conflict, it was the largest ammunition factory and dump in the United States. Ammunition bunkers still clutter the landscape on the hills surrounding the town.

Though the ammunition depot continues to provide the town's economic foundation, the mining of tourists has become increasingly important, as it is everywhere in Nevada. Although Hawthorne is not historically distinctive, and is not set in one of the prettiest areas of the state, it is popular because of its proximity to recreational destinations. The locals claim excellent bass and cutthroat trout fishing in Walker Lake, deer and game bird hunting in the surrounding ranges, and the Sierra Nevada mountains are just a long stone's throw to the west.

Of course the largest local recreational attraction is Walker Lake, sitting like a precious stone in a box of sand, just a few miles north of town. Against the barren but striking Mount Grant and the Wassuk Range, with its snow capped peaks, the lake's deep, placid blue does make a pretty picture.

Though the town is surrounded by conspicuous ammunition bunkers filled with weapons of mass destruction, I was more fascinated by the local sea gulls. Coming from the Midwest, I had a difficult time accepting their presence in a desert setting. By my calculations, they should have been floating gracefully near a pier instead of drifting aimlessly over sage. But I came to understand that they nest at the lake, and only fly into town for handouts. They are the cautious beggars of the desert.

There were always a few gulls outside the Foodway store, strutting around like they owned the place. Several times one would walk me to my truck, then stand watching as if waiting for an escort fee. I never knew what was good for them, so I never paid for the service.

The day after we moved from Gabbs the desert steamed at a hot, humid 90 degrees. There were lots of gnats, and little brown mosquitos just aiming to attack any or all of the town's 2,400 inhabitants. Yet, in spite of that, we thought Hawthorne was Big Time. Well, at least for a small town in the middle of nowhere. There were two hardware stores, several gas stations, a Chevy dealer, good ol' Slick's Ford dealership, a fancy new Convention Center, a whole bunch of bars that were open 24 hours every day, drug stores, clothing stores, a variety store, and other shops I never got the chance to explore. And five—we counted them—restaurants.

Down the road a piece, toward Luning, was the Doll House, home of the Champagne Kittens, who, like sirens calling through the night, promised to fulfill our wildest fantasy—for 20 to 50 bucks, depending upon our desires. Fortunately, most of us didn't get that desperate, although some came close. Even the big, full-figured women around town were starting to look good, because it quickly became apparent that most of the good looking women were married, with a couple of rug rats fastened securely to their luscious hips via a golden chain welded to a wedding ring visible from three blocks away. In spite of that, Dave and Walt and Rob anticipated more women and exciting possibilities. They weren't wrong.

• • •

I drove Neil into Reno for his next attempt at releasing his Deadly Sperm Buildup.

"I checked myself from head to toe." He scratched behind his right ear. "No ticks this time."

"No excuses either," I said.

"No excuses."

"Judy better watch out. Sounds like a wild, horny, geologist is on his way into her arms to get his rocks off."

"Something better get off, that's all I've got to say."

"You're not the only one. The rest of us are getting a bit edgy, too."

"I know. Only a couple more weeks to go."

"Yeah. If I can last that long." I faked muscle spasms.

"You haven't found any prospects around town, huh?" Neil was trying to be sympathetic.

"Mm, not really. There was one the other day that was interesting. Real nice woman."

"What's the deal?"

"Well ... she's a teller in the bank. Name's Gwyn. Kind of attractive in an earthy sort of way. Not beautiful, but appealing. Slender, tall, light brown hair. Anyway, I've gotten to know her a bit, you know, when I cash our expense checks. We talk a bit. Chit chat, mostly. Then the other day we got to talking more. We seem to hit it off real well. She invited me to come see her dance this coming Saturday night."

"Dance ... what?"

"She's a dancer. An instructor. I guess they have some sort of local modern dance group and she teaches them. They got some sort of recital this weekend. Some big annual deal. She wants me to come."

"Go then. Score some points. Maybe you'll get laid."

"Yeah. It's tempting. But she also let me know she's married. Doesn't seem too happy about it, but ... you know ... in a small town like this, if we messed around ... everybody would know."

"Including her husband."

"Including her husband."

"Yeah, I see your point."

"Some things are better left untouched."

“Hey, look,” Neil pointed to the right, through the bug spattered windshield. “Couple of B-52s.”

“Yeah. Neat.”

We watched them lumbering across the horizon, barely off the deck.

“You know,” Neil commented, “they’re like man-made eagles.”

“Yeah, but nowhere as beautiful.”

“It’s amazing those things can fly.” Neil watched them disappear behind a small range.

“Especially when we can’t even keep trucks running.”

“What, having trouble again?”

“Yeah. This damn thing.” I smacked the dash.

“What’s it doing now?”

“It’s what it’s not doing. Sometimes it just doesn’t wanna start. It’s a real pain in the butt. Especially when I need to move samples or pick up supplies.”

“Could be the starter.”

“Probably,” I conceded.

“Back to old Slick for more repairs, I guess.”

“Yeah. I guess,” I frowned. “Been putting it off as long as I could.”

“Hey, if he gives you shit ... tell him you’ll write to Ford.”

“Yeah, and have my truck fall apart in the mean time.”

• • •

When I returned to Hawthorne the guys were lounging on plastic lawn chairs, enjoying the spectacular sunset, swatting mosquitoes, and downing frosty cold beer. I pulled up a cooler, popped the top on a Coors, and casually listened to their discussion of our latest objectives. They worked out the logistics of who would sample what, where, and with whom. I drifted mindlessly with the evening breeze.

Later Dave brought out a portable radio and pulled in a station from Boise, Idaho. We waited anxiously for round by round reports on the Roberto Duran/Sugar Ray Leonard Welterweight Title Fight. Between reports, Rob entertained us with his fantastically elaborate, but supposedly true, stories. That led Dave to tell a joke. Then everyone had a turn with at least one terrible quip. As usual, the quality deteriorated until we groaned more than we laughed.

Then there were mixed groans and cheers when we heard that Duran had beaten Leonard, the first loss of his career. Another hero down for the count.

^^^

Dave dropped his field map and sample cards on the table. Sliding onto the bench, he sighed, "I need a change." He leaned back in a slouch. "I gotta break this weekend cycle. All this chasing women and drinking is gonna kill me."

In an intentionally unsympathetic voice, I said, "What's wrong? Getting old, there?"

"May be. Just know it takes all week to recover after an all-nighter with Walt."

"You need to break away, try something different."

"That's what I was thinking." He sat up. "You like to camp?"

"Sure. What you have in mind?"

"Yosemite National Park is just over the state line, maybe an hour's drive. Was thinking about heading up there for the weekend."

"Never been there."

"Neither have I. Heard it's spectacular. Wanna go?"

I thought for a second. "Sure. Why not? I need an excuse to be somewhere else Saturday night anyway."

"Alright! We'll get some shit together and be ready to leave Saturday afternoon when I get in from the field. A deal?" Dave was excited.

"Deal."

We shook hands and made a quick list of the things we would need.

^^^

Our first view of the Sierra Nevada mountains was really something. Approached from the east, the range suddenly appears, stretched across the horizon, a 6,000 foot wall rising above the arid basin below. The peaks look so rugged, compared to the less impressive Great Basin ranges.

Driving west, we followed the highway as it edged Mono Lake's northern shore. Late in the afternoon its surface looked glassy and still with a gray, pearly opalescence. Like Walker Lake, Mono seemed out of place, lying in a fault basin surrounded by barren volcanic debris.

"See those cinder cones, there, south of the lake?" Dave pointed through the driver's side window.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, that's neat. Maybe we can come back and explore down there."

"Yeah."

We watched the scenery drift by.

"You know," I said, "even with that backdrop of mountains and volcanos, Mono's not one of the prettiest lakes around."

"But it's impressive, never the less."

"Agreed."

• • •

We pulled into a scenic overlook. Climbing out of the truck, I noticed a small informational gazebo. We walked over and found several posters with photographs and colorful maps. We both scanned the information.

"Says here the lake's ten by fourteen miles across and a hundred-fifty feet deep." Dave, of course, went right for the poster on the geology of the area. "Used to be a thousand feet deep."

"During the last ice age, huh?"

"Or right after it, more likely."

"That's a lot of water gone somewhere."

"It's the desert," Dave looked around. "It's all those years of drought and evaporation."

"Yeah, that's what you'd think." I tapped the smudged glass over a poster. "But it says here the diversion of the Rush Creek watershed to the Los Angeles Aqueduct reduced the annual recharge. To the point where the lake is on the verge of drying up."

Dave didn't respond. He stood with his hands in his pockets and absorbed the view.

"The water here is supposed to be saltier than the ocean." I moved up beside him.

"A little Great Salt Lake, huh?"

"Yeah. Maybe worse. The only things live in this water are a brine-tolerant fly and one kind of shrimp."

"You know," Dave nodded with his head, "those two islands look volcanic too."

"Looks like they're covered with sea gulls."

"Yeah, I can see. Mostly on the small island."

"Says it's the biggest rookery in the west."

"You would figure they nest along the coast."

"Yeah. Hard for me to reconcile sea birds in the desert."

Dave looked toward the mountains to the west, "They probably fly with the seasons."

"Well, yeah. What I figure. They come to nest and rear their young, then head back to the coast in the fall."

"That sign said the big island is Paoha." He struggled with the pronunciation. "Supposed to have hot and cold flowing springs and a small lake of its own. The island with the birds is Negit."

"Fresh water?"

"Don't know," Dave shrugged, "it's in a volcanic crater."

"Oh. And here I thought you were making a geologic observation."

"What do you mean?" Dave looked puzzled.

"Thought you were guessing those islands were volcanic, and here I find you'd read it."

"Guess it didn't stick."

"Some things don't."

Walking back to the truck, I said, "There are supposed to be rabbits and goats out there on the big island."

"Must be fresh water then."

"Yeah," I frowned, "Should have deduced that. Guess they were abandoned by early

settlers.”

“What, the islands?”

“Well, yeah, I suppose. But I was talking about the goats and rabbits.”

“They’ve got a pretty good deal.” Dave climbed into the driver’s side. “Protected from predators by all that water.”

“Yeah, but the seasonal drawdown for L.A. makes a land bridge in the summer. Coyotes get across to the little island. The spiel back there said the rookery is doomed.”

• • •

Along the western and southern edges of the lake we saw strange white and gray tufa towers that looked like miniature castles, something from a dream, or another planet. They were thought to have formed in the depths of the lake by the accumulation of plant life around calcareous fresh water springs escaping from the bottom. When the waters evaporated and the surface level dropped they became exposed to the atmosphere and solidified into their present other-worldly forms.

At Lee Vining we headed up into the range over one of the most spectacular roads I have traveled, toward the east entrance of Yosemite, at Tioga Pass. The canyon walls are so massive and precipitous it was hard to look up without losing balance. I was glad Dave had volunteered to drive so that I could look around at those sheer walls. But he also wanted to see, swerving back and forth across the road as he gawked. Weaving on this steep road made me nervous, especially when we were close to the edge. And looking back down from an overlook we realized just how narrow a paved path can be. I was glad when we finally reached the summit.

• • •

“I want you gentlemen to have a pleasant experience while you visit.” The ranger at the entrance station eyed the two Kawasakis strapped in the back of the truck. “I would like to remind you, though, that off-road vehicles are prohibited in this park.”

“They’re for our work,” Dave assured him. “We’re geologists. We use them in our sampling work in Nevada.”

“That’s fine. As long as you don’t use them here.”

“No problem.”

We had brought the bikes at Dave’s insistence. “Come on,” he’d said, “leave them there. They won’t hurt anything. We’ll lose too much time hauling them down now. Maybe some chicks will think we’re dirt racers or something.”

“Whatever,” I shrugged. “Seems like extra baggage to me. Something more to worry about.”

“Yeah, you’ll see. They’re babe magnets.”

We paid our fees and the ranger let us enter.

There were still several feet of snow at the pass and the streams were running at or above flood stage. It was exciting—exhilarating—hearing roaring, rushing water all around. My senses



were overwhelmed by the breathlessly beautiful sights, the constant sound of roaring water, the smell of fresh pine, and crisp, clean air. There was so much to see, to absorb. Everything is so huge, so massive, so unique. Exfoliation domes everywhere; hanging valleys with stunning white water falls; glacial features: tarns, moraines, cirques, aretes, cols, horns; all those geomorphic structures I read about in college. And after seeing all of that, my favorite is perhaps the wonderfully crystalline blue glacial lakes. They are set like jewels against the silver gray of the granite and the lush green of the pines.

There are almost too many spectacular scenes for such a compact area. The whole thing is awesome, inspiring. It's easy to see why Yosemite has become such a popular tourist attraction.

Dave and I oo'ed and ah'ed until darkness forced us to set up camp. We pulled into Tuolumne Campground around 9:30.

"It's the last site available. I'm not sure I should let you have it." The ranger was stern. "It's right along the Tuolumne, a low spot, subject to flooding at night."

He drove to the location, we followed behind. He wanted to look the site over.

"It's in its banks," Dave tried to assure him.

"It rises at night." The ranger used his foot-long flashlight to show water already covering part of the dirt road. "The melt from above hasn't reached here yet. It crests about three a.m."

"We could sleep in the bed of the truck," I suggested.

"Yeah, the water shouldn't reach that high. We'd be parked up here." Dave indicated the higher location where the truck sat.

"I don't know. What about your motorcycles?" His beam played across the orange frames.

"We'll pull them off for the night." Dave pointed to the ramp stored along the side.

"You're not planning on using those in the park, are you?"

"No sir. We use them in our work in Nevada. We were in a hurry to get here. Besides, we...."

I thought for a moment Dave was going to say they attracted women. We had already learned differently. We had forgotten that most of the single women who frequent places like Yosemite are Nature oriented, well educated, and, most likely, actually turned-off by the dirt bike mentality. The frowns we got at pull-outs quickly reminded us. In their view, powered off-road vehicles tear up pristine countryside, disrupt quiet solitude, pollute the air, and generally contribute to the rape of our environment. As Dave admitted, "Pimple faced teenage boys think our bikes are cool. We're such dildo heads."

"Okay," the ranger capitulated. "Use the site. Pay on your way out in the morning." He walked to his truck. "Don't start those bikes, and be prepared to move to higher ground."

After he left we pulled the bikes from the truck. Using their brace straps as a crisscross above the bed, we secured the tent fly over them to give us some protection from cold air and morning dew. It worked great.

We used our flashlights to find wood, got a small fire going, and heated two small cans of chili. Canned food always tastes better on cool nights in the wilderness. After dinner we crawled into our make-shift tent, got comfortable in our sleeping bags, and drifted off to sleep listening to the continuous splashing of the rising waters.

^^^

The next morning we took our time crawling from our bags. The air was cold and crisp; thin ice covered still puddles. In the daylight we saw large banks of snow, especially under the shade of the trees. Maybe it was the night's cold temperature that kept the river from flooding. Although, it had risen, as the ranger predicted, but hadn't consumed our site, as he feared. And, as he told us it would, the waters had receded by daylight.

Inevitably our bladders couldn't wait, so we faced the morning chill. After our brisk jaunt to the restrooms we washed up, ate a quick breakfast of dry granola bars, loaded our bikes, and spent the rest of the day driving around the park checking out the incredible sights.

...

We saw several deer; marmots—rock chucks—that came right up to us begging for food; Stellar's Jays; chipmunks and ground squirrels; and a raccoon that came down into Yosemite Village to let the tourists feed it.

We saw several small Sequoias, but the dirt road to the big grove was still closed from winter snow. That was probably our only disappointment of the day. We visited all the water falls in the main valley, and walked under Bridalveil and Yosemite Falls, where the water is like rain and the wind pushes the spray back up the cliff. Both falls were really pouring out the water. Coming from the desert we weren't used to seeing that much liquid running free.

At Yosemite Village we encountered three bus loads of Chinese tourists. We had a good time watching them watch us. I think Dave and I got into at least one group photo.

...

It was lunch time, so we pulled our heavy Gott cooler from the back of our truck. Each of us grabbed a handle and we let it hang between us. Dave saw a nice grassy area, with lots of sun, just across a small, shallow, stream. We walked past the Chinese and when we came to the shallow waters—maybe an inch or two—we walked right across without hesitation, the current barely rippling across our oiled field boots. But an unintelligible chatter sure rippled across the gathering of Chinese. We must have looked brazen in our field clothes, long hair, and quick splash across the stream.

We spread a blanket, opened the cooler, and commenced to prepare our meal. Across the stream we could see the Chinese eating their own boxed lunches.

"Wonder what they got in there?" Dave questioned nonchalantly.

"I don't know, probably something oriental." I looked more closely. "I can't imagine eating fried chicken or mashed potatoes with chop sticks."

Dave chuckled at the image.

Throughout our meal we watched them watching us, especially a group of giggly teenage girls.

Once they emptied their cardboard boxes most of the Chinese moved off toward the parking lot and their buses. The group of giggly girls hung back.

“Uh oh,” I said, “I think we’re getting our picture taken.”

Dave followed my glance. One of girls with a camera was positioning her companions for a group photo. We could hear her tinny chatter as she directed them to align themselves with their backs toward us. There was more giggling. We were quite amused at the whole process of moving this girl here and that girl there and squeezing a tall one behind a shorter one. Then suddenly they split into two groups, with a six foot gap between them.

“See, I knew it. She’s gonna take our picture.” I nudged Dave and we both smiled. “We’re in a straight line of sight through that gap to the one with the camera.”

“Must be an interesting composition,” Dave commented. “Chinese girls on the right and left and two American hippies right smack dab in the middle.”

“Maybe we should ask for a copy.”

“Hell, I don’t want a copy. I wanna get paid. What are male models getting these days?”

I laughed. “Maybe to them we’re natural wonders. I just hope they treat our images with respect.”

“Got that right.”

“Who knows,” I fantasized, “we may become enshrined in glass in some young Chinese girl’s bedroom, like famous rock stars.”

When the camera work was done all of the girls turned and giggled. We waved and they all turned away and dashed back to their buses.

...

After touring just about the entire accessible part of the park we headed back to Hawthorne. We had learned our lesson about the dirt bikes. We hadn’t met a single woman. But we did have a good time watching the Chinese. And we knew we wanted to return for a closer look at that wonderful scenery.

^^^

Once we settled in Hawthorne we started picking up talk that the economy was in the midst of a new mining boom, a new “gold rush.” The price of the soft yellow metal was extremely high and there was an excitement in the air. Geologists were everywhere: at the gas stations, in the restaurants, plying the aisles at the grocery store, even out in the field. They were mostly recognizable by the ubiquitous hand lens hanging from a lanyard around their tanned necks, and a generally rugged, yet urbanized look.

The excitement and increased activity got me thinking about the original “Boomers,” those men, and sometimes women, who tramped out west in the early days to seek precious metals and work the mines. I wondered if they were like us; mostly young, adventurous, crazy, and hungry

for life. Did they have our warped sense of humor, or was this, to them, a serious undertaking?

I think they were, as the books imply, gamblers of the land, searching for a vein, a bonanza, and their personal fortune. Or misfortune. It may have been the promise of riches that coaxed them here, but it was the freedom and the space, the mountains and the basins, the blue skies and thunder rolling down the canyons, or showers sweeping in gray curtains across playas, that encouraged them to remain. For some it was the simple adventure of climbing a new summit to gaze upon the distant desolation of an alkali lake or the surprise of a rich grassy valley with a shimmering marsh or verdant stream.

It was hard, tedious work with sweat and bruises, lonely nights with only grizzled male faces to stare upon, and graveled, curse-laden voices to respond. It was brothels and hurdy-gurdy girls, stiff drinks, and gun play. It was one boom after another, with few finding more than sustenance, and fewer finding the means to bring their families from the States. Only a few saved enough to return themselves.

They were good men, mostly, in a rough land, a land that could bend a body and reshape a mind. A harsh, dry, barren environment with a beauty and subtle richness only time can reveal. It is a land of the large and the small. It is 9,000 foot peaks overshadowing delicate yellow flowers blooming among the thorns of a prickly pear cactus.

These men, sensitive or brutish as they may have been, left their mark upon this land as the land carved its way upon them. And as it was then, except for modern technology, it remains so to this day.

^^^

I went down to the El Cap to ship my samples as usual. Doris was on duty and asked, “You got a few minutes? Any place you hafta be?”

“Nope,” I replied innocently, “should be a slow day.”

“Good. Stay right there.” She hurriedly locked her cash drawer, came out of the cage, took me by the arm, said, “Come along, there’s someone I want you to meet,” and guided me to the dollar slots. We stopped behind a young woman pulling lazily on the handle.

“Oh my god,” I thought, “how do I get outta this?”

“Connie Ann, this’s Chris Chapik, the young man I was tellin’ you about. He works for a mining comp’ny.”

“Yes, mother.” She didn’t look up.

“Chris, this’s Connie, my one and only precious daughter.”

“Hi,” I said to the back of her head, embarrassed by the whole episode.

A bored “Heh-low” between pulls on the handle, glancing at me with a forced smile.

“Nice to meet you,” trying to be polite, not sure what to say next. “Doris’s told me a lot about you.”

Doris smiled, standing at Connie’s back with her hands placed gently upon her shoulders.

Connie was not my idea of cute, as Doris had described her. I was quickly reminded that

mothers are often too generous when it comes to their children. She looked about 25; pale, fleshing out, and soft, like she hadn't done a day's work in her life. Her hair had that wiry, reddish bleached-blond appearance that looks so frizzy when not well kept. Her's wasn't. Her clothes were sloppy and loose, giving her an air of unconcern. Needless to say, I was not impressed, and definitely uncomfortable.

"Here, Chris, sit here." Doris pulled a stool from the slot next to Connie's. "I've gotta get back to the cage. You two sit and get to know each other. See yuh." She was gone.

Dutifully I sat on the stool, not wanting to hurt Doris. Connie continued to play the slot, winning a few coins on double cherries. When she hit three oranges, a five coin jack-pot, she said, "Hey, you're good luck." She turned and smiled, more pleasantly this time, then turned back to her machine. She picked up her coins and faced me. "So Mom's tryin' tuh fix us up, huh?"

"I guess so."

"Sorry."

"Naw, it's all right. She's a nice lady. I've gotten to know her from shipping LTR everyday. She's just looking out for you."

"I know ... she's just a pain sometimes. Wish she'd let me live my own life. You know?"

"Yeah."

She openly looked me over. I watched her eyes focus on my face, my hair, my body, whatever it is that women look at when they first see a man. She smiled and turned back to her machine.

Silent moments passed. My mind raced, searching for a polite way to extract myself from the situation, to get on with the rest of my day. Nothing plausible, I started fumbling for an excuse. I was beginning to panic, visualizing a long, boring afternoon sitting in front of a slot machine trying to be courteous while forcing some sort of conversation from this local used nymphet.

"Hey," she said, "me an' some friends're goin' out to the lake this afternoon. Wanna come?" She actually turned toward me with a seductive smile. Her face lit up, and for an instant there was a glimmer of cute.

"Oh boy," my inner self moaned, "how do I get out of this?" I had already told Doris I expected a slow day. "Uh ... I don't know. Supposed to be working."

"Aw, come on. It'll be fun." She was finally showing some enthusiasm. "We can swim, have a few beers, play 'round on the beach. You'd like it. Bob an' Betty're nice people. Come on."

My mind misfired; just wouldn't work. The weather was hot, I was curious about the lake, but I really didn't want to get involved with this woman. I could tell right away she was the type that could drain one's energy and leave you lying, an empty hulk. My lips spoke while my brain was disengaged. "Okay. When you goin'?" I internally cursed my cowardice.

"They're gonna pick me up at one. Meet us out front."

"Want me to bring anything?"

"Just your bod, we'll take care of the rest. What kinda beer you drink?"

"Anything. Coors, Bud. Doesn't matter."

“Great. We’ll bring both. Munchies too. Anything you want?”

“Naw, nothing particular. Whatever you bring will be fine.”

“Great. See yuh out front. At one.” She gave me another cute smile, then turned back to the machine, her coin darkened fingers grabbing the handle and giving it a swift yank. The three fruit marked cylinders whizzed by, clicking into place. Cherries again. Two coins fell. “See, you’re lucky.”

I smiled and walked away, kicking myself for being so damn lucky.

• • •

And so, at one in the afternoon, ashamed of my inability to say no, I sat in my truck in front of the El Cap. Connie and her friends drove through, spotted me, waved, and took off. I followed them out to the lake, relieved Connie hadn’t climbed in with me.

When we arrived at their spot, Connie introduced me to Bob and Betty and the four of us placed large beach towels and sat around drinking beer, eating chips, and getting acquainted.

When we got hot we tried the water.

“Nice beach, huh?” Connie seemed proud.

“Uh, yeah, not bad,” if you like sand mixed with your sticks and dead grass.

I stopped at the edge of the water while the others charged right in, the women squealing from the frigid plunge.

“Come on,” Connie prodded.

“Looks cold,” and green and scummy. I walked into the emerald soup, staying close to the shore. The bottom was a slimy muck.

“What’s wrong?” Connie came close.

“Bottom feels weird.”

“Don’t like how it gooshes between your toes?” Connie taunted. “I think it feels sexy.”

“It’s unsettling.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

I walked around gingerly, waiting for a slime monster to grab my ankle or some huge sucker fish to nibble off a toe.

Connie splashed me, and I splashed back. The water was cold, but not unbearable, and tasted salty.

“It’s too cold,” Betty yelled, and headed for the shore.

“I’m with you,” I said, and followed. Bob and Connie held out maybe a minute more, then hit the sand as well.

Back at the towels we laughed at each other’s goose bumps and sat around in the sun drinking beer and shooting the bull.

Sitting there, I realized that Connie didn’t look any more appealing in her swimsuit than in full clothing. And while our conversation bounced from subject to subject, I became aware that Connie was sarcastic and negative about practically everything. Without looks or personality, I was definitely not interested.

Bob and Betty, on the other hand, were down to earth and seemed pretty nice. But none of

the three had much to offer in the way of intelligent or original ideas. Their life's experience was pretty much limited to local adventures, which consisted mostly of drinking parties out in the boonies, and occasional trips into Vegas or Reno.

After a few beers Connie moved closer, eventually leaning on me a few times. It was becoming obvious she wanted to know me better. Just what I had feared.

When Bob and Betty ran back to their truck for more munchies Connie leaned in close, practically putting her head on my shoulder. In a kittenish voice she purred, "Maybe we should get together sometime. Just the two of us. Go drinking or whatever. You know," coyly raising her eyebrows, "have a good time."

I was such a coward. "Sure, why not?" I said, knowing if there was anything I could do, it would never happen. I rationalized my cowardice as not wanting to be rude or hurt her feelings. After all, she was trying to show me a good time, and I appreciated that.

About 4:30 I excused myself. "I gotta be in camp when the others get back. Part of my job. Thanks for the good time. And the beer."

"Hey, no problemo." Bob stood up and shook my hand.

"Yeah," Betty squinted into the low sun, "it was fun. Thanks for helpin' us have a good time."

"Was nice meeting all you folks."

Connie walked me to my truck. "Let's stay in touch."

"You bet. I see your mother every day."

Silence. My mind fumbled, again. "She's not waiting for a kiss, is she? Or does she want me to ask her out?"

Taking her hand with my right, and cupping it with my left, in a soft voice, I said, "I had a nice time, Connie. I'm glad Doris introduced us."

"Me too. Thanks for coming."

When I stepped up into my truck, she turned and walked back to her friends. They all waved as I drove away. I chalked up the afternoon to experience, the lake, and gathering local color.

• • •

Back at camp I cleaned up and was waiting for the guys when they arrived. After collecting their maps and samples, Rob and I prepared dinner for the crew. Although we weren't creative in our selection, we were at least able to put together a palatable meal. More than the others could say.

Frying hamburger, Spurrier said, "Man, it's getting hot out there. No shade."

"A bit exposed, huh?"

"We're right out there in that sun all day."

"Not like Grantsville?" I tried to be sympathetic.

"Not at all. No trees. It's hard to crawl under a sage. I hate eating my lunch with sweat dripping down my face."

With a half-smile, I said, "They say all that salt is bad for you."

“Yeah ... and I hate soggy bread.”

Rob poured the taco seasoning onto the meat, added some water, and began to stir the steamy mass. “You keeping cool back here in camp?”

“Yeah, I guess. As much as I can.” In a moment of camaraderie I told him of my adventure at the lake. As I spoke I could see the expression on his face change from one of humor to something more like hate, or envy.

When I had finished my story he stood back, spoon in hand. “Eat shit and die, you gravy sucking pig.”

“What?” I had to laugh.

“We go out ... working our asses off all day ... and here you sit at a god-damned beach ... drinking cold brews and fondling some local babe.”

“Hey, I told you, she wasn’t that great.”

“Even if she’s ugly ... it beats climbing in and outta old mine pits ... in this heat ... sweat dripping off the tip of your nose ... your shirt soaked and stinking ... sticking to your back ... your crotch hot and clammy ... feet swelling in leather boots ... burning ... itching ... and the whole time you’re sitting at some beach chugging ice cold beer with a live one.”

“Forget it, Rob. She wasn’t anything to write home about.”

“She’s got two breasts, two legs, and a slit. That’s all that counts.”

“Shit, man! You can have her. I’ll never touch her.”

I turned and started grating the cheese. Rob continued stirring the meat. I couldn’t let it lie. “The beach was the pits, full of crap. And the water was green and slimy.”

“So what? At least it was cold. Eh-say-ah-day.”

“Huh?”

“Eh-say-ah-day.” Rob got that bull-shit look on his face. “It’s Lubricano, for E-S-A-D.”

I shrugged.

“The Mexican letters, E-eh; S-say; A-ah; D-day. Eh-say-ah-day.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Dense, man, really dense.” He shook his head. “You must of got water in your ears. Eat ... Shit ... And ... Die.” He paused for effect. “You gravy sucking pig.”

“Ah, I see, said the blind man. This conversation is goin’ nowhere. Thanks for the Spanish lesson.”

^^^

Guy, Neil, and a new geologist, Walter Coffman, arrived in camp one morning about 9:30. They had rented a Pinto station wagon in Reno. The compact car looked out of place in this four-wheel drive, half-ton truck environment. I chatted with them for a while, then Randy pulled out the maps. The four of them discussed field strategy while I finished my work and hauled the samples off for shipment.



• • •

From what I gathered, Walter had been attending geology field camp, finishing his course work. He was a good sized fellow with broad shoulders, about my height and build, with short brown hair, a solid Germanic brow, and rigid chin; generally Slavic or eastern European in appearance. Right away he seemed a bit standoffish, yet straight forward when he spoke. I was never sure if he was being aloof, if he was just shy, or, as some of the others thought, plain anti-social. At first I gave him the benefit of the doubt, assuming his apparent arrogance was a reaction to becoming part of an established group. But time seemed to lead to other conclusions.

• • •

Late that afternoon, when the others arrived back in camp, Guy began his introductions.

“Glad to meet you, Walter. How was field camp?” Dave was always one of the first to shake hands.

“Too short. I didn’t complete my map work.”

“Ah, who does? Camp is for having a good time.” Walt Ellison stepped forward.

“Oh-oh,” I said, “I see confusion ahead, with two Walts in camp.”

“We’ll just call this one ...” Spurrier pointed to Ellison, “Pinhead.” He grinned as Guy introduced him.

“Hey, why me,” Walt complained, “he’s the new guy? Give him a new name.”

“Perhaps we will ... Pinhead.” Rob stepped aside as Stu made his way forward.

“Where ya’all from, Walter?” With an exaggerated drawl.

“I’ve been living in Tucson, while attending the university, but I’m from Alaska.”

“Whoa ...” Dave exclaimed, “that’s a ways. Why you come all this way south to get educated?”

“Arizona is one of the best geology schools. My parents paid for it. I wanted to see what the desert was like.”

“Did’ja like it?” Stu tried to make conversation.

“Some ... but I want to get back to Alaska. Everything is so much prettier there. There’s no doubt about it ... it is the best state in the Union.”

“Uh-oh,” I whispered to Dave, “this guy’s opinionated. Could be another Burt, but more vocal. With his short hair he does have that Born Again look.” Another peculiar addition to our already unusual group, and more samples for me to ship each day.

The last fellow to come forward was Burt, who said nothing, smiled, shook Walter’s hand, and stepped back. Maybe Burt sensed competition in the holier than thou department.

Guy then turned to Dave. “And you, my friend ... we’re going to send you to the clinic again.” I couldn’t believe he was saying this in front of the whole crew. “Another urine analysis.”

“Again?” Dave seemed really perturbed. “Where?”

“Here in Hawthorne,” Guy stated with his usual matter-of-fact tone.

“This is my third test.”

Stu stepped beside Dave and put his arm across his shoulder. “Been suckin’ on that syphon

hose again?”

“Not funny, man.” Dave pulled away. “I’m tired of this shit. I hate doctors.”

I wondered if it was drugs, or some medical problem. I hadn’t seen him use anything illegal. But I hadn’t heard anything about a medical problem either. Dave, obviously, was not thrilled by this turn of events, so we let the subject drop.

Then Guy spoke to me. “The folks at Skyview Labs,” where I sent the samples, “think you’re a hero.” He had a sheepish grin.

“A hero? Why is that?” I hadn’t done anything special, as far as I was concerned.

“Because of all the samples you send them to process.” Guys smile became broader.

“They’re not my samples. These guys are the one’s collecting them.”

“Yes, but they don’t know that. All the submittal forms have your name. They think you collect those samples yourself.”

Laughing at the irony, I said, “You tell them the truth?”

“Naw. Doesn’t matter,” he shook his head, “Let them have their hero.”

“Why are our samples such a big deal?” I pondered out loud.

“Apparently it’s keeping them in work. I suppose they’re temporaries. No work, no job.” He laughed. “When you get back to Tucson you should stop in. It would be a great ego boost, you might get a free lunch, and, you never know, you could pick up a few life-long friends.”

Then Guy told us, “A good many of the samples you fellows collected at Grantsville had good hits.”

“All right!” Ellison, Spurrier and I cheered. Burt smiled.

“Interestingly, those with the best values weren’t collected by a hard rock geologist.”

A collective “Huh?” sounded from the group.

“The best hits came from Chapik’s samples.”

I thought that was great, being a sedimentary man with limited mineralogy experience. “Luck of the draw, I guess.”

“Shoot,” Guy beamed, “some of the samples you collected were ore grade.”

I could tell Rob and Walt were pissed. Rob was silently mouthing “Eh-say-ah-day” during the entire conversation.

“It fits the pattern,” Guy went on. “Very few gold mines are discovered by hard rock geologist. Mostly old prospectors, desert rats, and weekend rock hounds find the big ones.”

I didn’t think that helped ease Rob’s consternation.

“The samples looked so good, in fact, we’re going to stake some claims and bring in a drilling crew.”

I felt exhilarated up to that point. But with Guy’s last words, I suddenly realized that I would be partially responsible for cutting down perfectly healthy trees and for defacing a mountain with road scars and drilling pits.

“Because of the jump in the price of gold,” Guy continued, “we’re gonna switch our operation from moly to gold sampling. When you guys go back for your break I expect you to stop by the office and pick up reports on NORMMEX’s gold model.”

“Gold model?” I questioned.

Guy said patiently, “The geological structures in which NORMMEX feels gold should

appear. Every company has their own ideas. They call that their model.”

Guy looked at each of us. “You should also read as much as you can on the rock types associated with known gold locations. Become familiar with these old mining districts. It’s a different geology than that associated with moly.”

• • •

Neil made a phone call and found that the lumber yard was open late. He and I and Guy and Randy drove down there and bought four truck loads of claim posts. They are ten foot lengths of five inch PVC irrigation pipe cut in half, making two five foot posts.

Randy commented, “Better than carrying wooden post any day.”

Neil agreed, “Hope we never have to pack wooden posts again.”

Back in camp Guy told all of us, “We’ll be leaving early in the morning, before light. I want you up and ready by four. So get your equipment set and trucks gassed tonight.”

He looked at Randy, “You have tarps?”

“Yep.”

“Good. I want those posts covered right away. We want as few people knowing what we’re up to as possible. Don’t want a claiming war. And we surely don’t want local yokels staking annoyance claims within our group.”

To all of us, “Keep your mouths shut about this when you’re not in camp. You never know who’s listening to your conversation.”

Neil added, “In the second world war they said ‘Loose lips sink ships’. Works the same here.”

“Any questions?” Guy looked around.

Walter said, “I’ve never staked claims before. I’m not sure of the procedure.”

“Have any of you, besides Randy and Neil, staked claims?” Again he looked for confirmation. “No? Didn’t think so. We’ll go over the procedures when we get to the site in the morning.”

“You didn’t say ...” I was uncertain, “do I get to go along.”

Guy smiled. “Most definitely.”

^^^

“If you get these claims in the ground you can go home as scheduled.” Guy was emphatic, “But, we have to set these claims first.”

We left Hawthorne under cover of darkness, drove the 60 miles to Gabbs, then down the road to Grantsville. We took our trucks up a narrow track among low hills and hid them behind a cluster of tall sage.

After the obligatory Draining of the Kidneys ceremony, we unloaded our posts. To facilitate their transport over uneven terrain, we bound them into bundles of seven or eight, using huge

rubber bands cut from truck tire inner tubes. Then we began the tedious task of untangling our 300 foot chains; essentially a long tape measure made of white nylon.

“Why they call these chains?” I asked.

“Not sure,” Neil replied. “But I suspect they actually used a metal chain before they had plastics. Name stuck.”

“Gather around,” Guy motioned. “Neil, Randy, and I have done this before. We’ll split up into three groups.” He scanned the circle. “Neil, you take Dave and Stu. Randy, you got Rob and Mr. Ellison there. And Chapik. I’ll take Coffman and Burt.” He pulled out maps, handing one each to Randy and Neil, keeping one for himself. “Wait. Think I’ll take Chris with me today. If there’s a snag on one of the lines I can slip away. Everything won’t come to a standstill.” He moved to the hood of his truck, opened his map. We came in close. Guy outlined the area to be claimed, but in the pre-dawn light it was difficult to see where he pointed.

“If you haven’t done it yet, and you should have, set your magnetic declination at seventeen point five. You all brought your Brunton’s, right?”

Affirmative.

“Okay, now ... Neil, do you have those claim diagrams?”

Neil held them up.

“Good. Pass them out.” He took one himself. “We worked these up last night. Might help you understand what we’re doing.” Guy squinted at his sheet of paper. “As you can see, the long line of these claims runs due north. So all our corner lines will be east-west. Makes things a lot easier.”

“And faster,” Randy inserted.

Guy leaned back against the truck, stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. We all felt the chill in the morning breeze. I noticed Walt had his hands down the front of his jeans. He saw my stare. “Hey, it’s warm down there.”

“Playing pocket pool?” Rob whispered.

The rest of us kept our hands deep in our pants pockets.

“These are lode claims,” Guy went on. “Neil, what are the dimensions?”

“Lode claims are also called locations. They run fifteen-hundred feet long by six-hundred feet wide.”

“Right. Now, each claim has to have a location marker or monument where the location notice is posted. Randy, where do we place the location monument?”

Very formal, like a grade school recitation. “NORMMEX places its monuments three-hundred feet from the corner along the monument line and fifty feet perpendicular from that line into the claim.” Knowing he had it right, he relaxed. “That way we’re sure the monument’s within the claim. You know, in case the claim lines are screwed up somehow.”

“That’s right.” Guy motioned toward the bundles, “The most important post you’ll place will be the monument. It absolutely has to be on the claim ... within the claim boundaries ... or the claim will be invalid.”

“What’s this location notice?” Coffman wasn’t afraid to ask questions. Fresh from school he acted like it was a class field trip.

“A location notice is a written document prominently posted on a claim. Gives the name of

the locator ... that's us ... and a description of the claim's extent and boundaries. Neil ... give them each a copy of our location notice. Thanks."

Neil passed out the sheets.

"These are blank. We worked up the actual notices last night. You won't have to mess with them too much out here. Just sign them, date them, and post them on the monument." Guy looked over the sheet. "Mostly self explanatory. Name and number of the claim ...."

"What's the name of these claims?" Dave blurted out.

Guy smiled. "Rosa ... one through twenty." He watched for reaction. Everyone looked puzzled.

"Rosa is Maria's middle name. My wife's middle name. I used her first name on a group last year."

"So you can name claims anything you want?" I was surprised.

"Anything you want," Guy grinned, "as long as it's clean. Anyway ... we also have to put the general course of the claim; whether it's north-south, east-west, north forty-five degrees east, or whatever. Then we have to put the distance and direction from the discovery to both ...."

"A location monument is sometimes called a discovery."

"Thanks, Neil. He's right. We have to put the distance and direction from the discovery ... or location monument ... to both end lines. In our case that's fifty feet in one direction and one-thousand-four-hundred-and-fifty feet the other direction. Then we have to record all sections, townships, and ranges, and the county, where the claim resides. We get most of that from the topo sheet. Then they want to know the mining district. We get that from the county court house. Then we fill in the date the paper's posted on the discovery, sign it, and witness it. That means two of you have to sign here at the bottom."

Randy seemed anxious. "We'll show you how to set posts when we get to the first corner. Just remember, at least three feet of the post has to show above ground."

"As if we're gonna dig a two foot hole in this rock," Walt sneered.

Stu spoke up. "I'm a bit confused. Are the claim posts just for the discovery monuments?"

Guy and Randy both spoke. Guy deferred. "No. There'll be a post at each corner and one seven-hundred-and-fifty feet along each long side. Plus the one for the monument."

"On this diagram you show claims butting against each other. Does each claim hafta have its own corner post?"

"No," Randy again. "Where they have common corners they share the post. Every post, including discoveries, will have one of these tags," he pulled a three by five metal tag from a pocket and held it up, "stapled to it. These tags will show the name of the claim, its number, and its relationship to any surrounding claims in the group."

"Staple them high," Neil added, "near the top. We've seen where the rodents have chewed them to shreds."

"You're kidding," Dave said, "why would rats mess with tags?"

"Don't know for sure," Neil shrugged.

"Might be 'cause they're shiny," Randy volunteered.

"How do you post the location notice on the monument?" Walter questioned. "Won't the weather destroy it?"

“No, weather won’t bother it.” Guy dug around in his field pack. “We use one of these fifty dram plastic pill bottles. The paper’s folded and stuffed inside. Then we wrap wire around the bottle and attach it to the post.”

“The PVC pipe,” Randy pointed to the white posts, “has holes in it for irrigation. Works great. You just run one end of the wire through there, bend it together with the other end, and fold your bottle inside the top. Keeps it outta the sun. Lasts longer.”

“After the posts are up, we’ll mark them with engineer’s flagging. We use orange for monuments and blue for corners.” Neil started handing out rolls of the plastic tape.

“That’s right,” Guy added, “use lots of flagging. Don’t spare. It makes it easier for back sighting and to find the posts later, when we have to come back for assessment work.”

“What’s that?” Walt seemed suddenly awake.

“Bad word, there, huh? Work,” Guy teased. “Assessment work’s required by law to be done on mining claims within sixty days of location.” Guy started folding his map. “In order to establish ownership. We usually bring in a drilling rig and sample a few holes. The cost of building roads for the rig also counts.”

Oh boy, just what I wanted to hear. Tearing up more countryside.

“Collecting surface ...” Neil yawned and stretched, “ohh ... samples as well.”

We were all getting anxious. The Sun was beginning to peek over the horizon.

“Okay ... a few last things. Stake your claims short. Fourteen-ninety by five-ninety. Cuts down on oversize claims. Eliminates gaps. We don’t want some local creating annoyance claims between ours.” Guy started pacing, looking at the ground. “Close all your lines. When you reach the end of a line chain back to the end of the previous line and record a bearing and distance. Oh ... and, yeah, tie into your grid the location of any prospect pits, mines, old claim posts, or anything you find that might be pertinent. Plot and label them on your maps.”

“What about witness posts?” Randy asked.

“Don’t think we’ll have any problems that way. This range isn’t that rugged. But ... if placing a post is impractical, or dangerous to life and limb ... and I mean really dangerous ... place the post where it’s safe. Then describe, on a metal tag, where that post should be located. Attach the tag to the post. That’s a witness post. Don’t abuse it. I don’t expect to see any in this claim block.”

“What about putting our posts on someone else’s claim?” Rob seemed to be waking with the rising Sun.

“Well ... you have to be careful.” Guy contemplated. “I would consider placing a post on a competitor’s prior claim as potentially dangerous to life and limb, especially if the competitor happens to carry a 30-30 in the back of his truck.”

A few nervous chuckles.

“It’s happened. But I wouldn’t worry out here. There are some claims on the west side of the range, but we haven’t seen much activity there.”

“Just those soil samplers a few weeks back,” Randy reminded Guy.

“Yes, that’s true. But they haven’t been back since. We’re not even sure they had anything to do with that group. If we overlap them, go ahead, set your posts. The point is, don’t put your life at risk. None of this is worth that.” Guy looked around. “More questions?”

“Yeah. What did you decide about slope corrections?”

“Good point, Neil. Hmm ... let’s forget them this time. We want to short claim anyway. If we measure full size and don’t adjust for slope we should be short. That’ll work good. Thanks for reminding me. Anything else?”

Nothing.

“Okay, then, lets get going. Split up into your groups. We’ve got nine lines to run. Randy and Neil ... like we talked about last night. You guys run the two monument lines. I’ll take my guys and catch the north end and mid-corners.”

And off we went into the damp sage smell that permeated the early morning air.

...

The actual work was pretty routine. We all started from a common corner. Neil and Guy located our position on the map and we set our first post. From there Guy, Walter, Burt and I chained north to our first line. The others chained south to find their monument lines.

Chaining is pretty simple. One person uses a Brunton to make a sighting along the appropriate line. They hike off pulling the chain. A second person stands on the spot of the initial post watching the numbers on the chain. When it gets to 300 he yells “CHAIN!” and the lead person stops, pulls the chain tight, and flags the spot. If it’s a monument line, additional measurements would be made and the monument would be placed. If it’s an end line or a side-corner line, the lead person takes another sighting and moves on. The second person follows and stops at the marked spot. When the chain reaches 300 he yells “CHAIN!” again. The lead person stops, marks the spot, and waits. At this spot a post is set by the third person, who has been carrying the posts and the shovel. Once the post is set and the metal tags marked and attached, the lead person takes another bearing and heads out again and the whole process is repeated. Up and down the mountain side.

...

Late in the morning, in the midst of our work, Burt spotted two trucks pulling into Grantsville. The four of us hunkered down.

Guy watched carefully through binoculars. “I think they’re from that barite plant on the other side of the range. We came by there this morning. Someone on the swing shift might’ve seen our lights. Probably curious about what we’re up to.”

We watched them wander around for close to an hour, apparently trying to figure who had driven through and where we went. They never did spot our trucks. When they left we resumed our work.

• • •

When we regrouped at the end of the day we had finished the two monument lines and the northern corners and mid-line. It was too close to dark to start another line, yet Guy didn't want to leave until after sunset. So ... we sat around drinking soda and listened to Neil, Randy, and Guy tell old claim staking stories.

Neil related a story about the first time he and Randy staked claims. "We were working out of Tonopah. A bit north and west, near the ghost town Gilbert, in the Monte Cristo Range."

"The Sister and Checker claims," Randy added.

"That's right," Neil agreed.

"Why Sister and Checker?" Dave's inquiring mind wanted to know.

Neil sighed. "That's a long story in itself, for another time." He looked at Randy, and they both nodded agreement. "The story I want to tell is about the claim posts we used."

"Wooden," Randy offered.

"Yes they were, my friends," Neil was getting into his story mode, "yes they were. Solid pine four by four inches by five feet long." He looked each of us in the eye. "They felt like they weighed at least ten pounds each."

"Could have," Randy agreed, "easy."

"Twelve pounds," Guy assured us. "The average wooden claim post weighs twelve pounds."

"Yes. And we bundled them in groups of four ... sometimes six, when we had to finish a line and didn't want to make a trip back." Neil looked off toward a distant range. "So that comes to forty-eight, or sixty pounds, depending."

"Right," Randy jumped in, "and figuring maybe three pounds apiece for the posts you guys carried, six or eight at a time, that would be eighteen to twenty-four pounds a load."

"That's right," Neil took over again, "so you can see what kind of load we were carrying."

"You can have it," Walt moaned. "I don't want any part of carrying sixty pounds of splinters over these mountains."

"You wouldn't have any shoulders left," Stu grimaced.

"Got that right," Randy leaned back against the wheel of his truck. "That kind of work breaks a man's spirit faster than a woman on the war path."

"So you can see," Neil continued, "how we felt when we returned to Tucson. We ran into our New Mexico crew and we swapped stories. They had just finished a claim group near Silver City." Neil glanced at Randy. "When we told them we had to carry up to six claim posts they laughed at us. Called us wimps."

Randy interjected, "When we asked them how many posts they carried..."

"They said eight or ten." Neil shook his head. "We just couldn't believe that."

Guy chuckled quietly, but didn't say a thing.

"Those guys weren't any bigger than us." Randy acted like his pride was hurt. "But they swore they could easily handle eight to ten posts at a time."

"Each," Stu seemed incredulous.

"Each," came Neil's reply. "So we went around for three days with our heads hanging,



eating crow, and feeling pretty bad for ourselves.” He hung his head and stared at his hands. We sat silently waiting. “So then ... well ... Guy here asked us why we seemed so gloomy.” Neil looked over at Guy. “And when we told him he got a big charge out of our misery.”

“A big chuckle,” Randy confirmed.

Guy sat there with a knowing smile on his face, arms crossed over his chest.

“And then he told us we had nothing to be ashamed of.” Neil sat up straight. “He explained that we were actually carrying a much larger load than our New Mexico counterparts.” He smiled at Randy, then Guy. “As it turns out, in New Mexico, they stake claims using ... two by two inches by five foot posts. Two by two by five.”

Randy felt like he needed to elaborate. “Each one of their’s was only a quarter the weight of one of ours. So their ten was equal to only two and a half of ours.”

“Maybe about thirty pounds,” Neil said proudly. “Not much more than eight PVC posts.”

“Boy we let those guys have it,” Randy became excited by the memory. “We nailed them good.”

“We still remind them every once in a while, just to keep them in line.” Neil held his hands up, palms out, in front of him. “And that’s our story.”

As interesting as it was, it didn’t compensate for the long day. And as we got hungry, the waiting became a real drag.

The air cooled fast once the sun started down. When Guy gave the word we quickly loaded up and quietly left without witnesses.

That night my legs stiffened and my feet ached. I wasn’t used to all that hiking over rugged terrain. We had covered a lot of territory.

^^^

The next day was much the same as the day before. An early morning drive to Grantsville; hide the trucks; lug claim posts over the range; place them, and move on until dark; then drive back to Hawthorne. We did get all of the important ground covered, so we knew we would be heading back to Tucson as planned. And we would no longer need to sneak out of town under the cover of darkness. Guy, Neil, and Walter would finish whatever we didn’t complete.

...

Guy assigned me to work with Rob and Walt. We found ourselves in dense stands of juniper and pinyon with thick undergrowth that made progress difficult. At least the weather was cool and the day was cloudy, so the effort wasn’t as rigorous as if it were hot.

Working our way into the range, we found ourselves in a shallow wooded canyon. Rob and Walt had moved on ahead, doing their sightings and flagging the spots where I placed the posts.

I came over a small ridge to find them examining an object in a pile of leaves. Rob lifted it with the toe of his boot and carefully tossed it. It landed several feet in front of me.

“Another snake, huh?”

“Dead meat,” Spurrier grinned in his usual cherubic manner.

“What kind?” I cringed internally, knowing I had set myself up for some sort of lecture on the varieties of pit viper within the Great Basin.

“A dead one,” Walt interjected.

“Yuk, yuk.” The only thing I could think to say.

“It’s a bay-bee rattle snake,” Spurrier said in a childish voice. “See ... only one rattle.” He pointed with the tip of his boot. “Hasn’t been dead long. Still soft. Pliable. Rigor mortis hasn’t set in.”

“You guys didn’t kill it?”

“Naw ... we found it.” Rob put on his serious look. “I think ... it’s a female. If you look...”

Ellison laughed. “Great. I’m so horny I’d fuck a snake. Wouldn’t matter to my throbbing purple reitnoid.”

“Jesus!” I kicked a few leaves over the corpse to protect it from Walt’s lurid stares.

Silence. A slight breeze passed through the trees. Thinking aloud, I said, “I wonder what you’d call that? Sex with a snake.”

“Bestiality.” Rob knew about that from Sheep Canyon.

“Yeah, but there has to be a better word, something more appropriate, more descriptive. What’s Latin for snake?”

“Herpetology is the study of snakes.” I could see Rob’s mental wheels turning.

Walt laughed, “Herpes-bestiality.”

“Would that make it a venereal sin if you were a Catholic?” I couldn’t miss such a blatant opportunity. “This snake’s dead. How about necro-herpo-bestiality?” I thought we were on the right track.

“Sound’s good. But it’s freshly dead. Does that count?” Rob always had to find some exception.

“Neo means new, right? Fresh,” I proposed. “So how about neo-necro-herpo-bestiality?”

“Has a ring to it. Neo-necro-herpo-bestiality. I like it. I’m gonna have a little neo-necro-herpo-bestiality right now.” Walt pantomimed unzipping his pants.

“Wait, we’re not done yet.” Rob was still thinking, wanting a part of this new word. “This is a young snake ... we’ve gotta mention that. Nympho means young, you know ... like a wood nymph ... or a virgin ... like the girls in Snaggs.”

“Nymph connotes beauty. The girls in Snaggs sure miss that mark.” I couldn’t miss a slam at those two for eyeballing the school girls in Gabbs.

“Ooo-ouch! Got us that time.” Spurrier sneered. “Eh ... say ... ah ... day,” he whispered slowly.

I smiled, knowing sooner or later he would nail me with something just as indiscreet.

“How about nympho-neo-necro-herpo-bestiality?” Rob repeated it, “Nympho-neo-necro-herpo-bestiality.”

“Nympho-necro-neo-herpo-bestiality?” Walt struggled with the increasing complexity of the act he had first proposed.

“Don’t know. I think we’ve got the elements, but not the order. How about, uh, mmm ... neo-nympho-necro-herpo-bestiality? A new young dead ... no. Wait. Neo-necro-nympho-herpo-bestiality. A freshly dead young snake. Having sex with a freshly dead young snake.” I had it.

“Yeah.”

“Yes!”

They both agreed. That was it. We repeated it over and over so we wouldn’t forget. It became almost a chant. It’s not every day you coin a new word for the English language. A round of cheers echoed through the damp trees and still mountain air.

Then reality set in. We had claims to stake. We got back to our work and the rest of the day.

After they moved off I decided I had better write down this new, amazing word; so I wouldn’t forget, and so posterity would know this important thing. While they trudged off the next three hundred feet I took out my black marker and wrote the word down the length of the handle on my spade. “Neonecronymphoherpobestialtiy.”

“CHAIN!” I yelled. I held on as they stretched it tight. “Got it,” came the muffled voice through the trees. Before I moved on I took a spade full of soil and buried the snake; safe from Walt.

^^^

The next day was much the same as the two previous: up and down the range placing PVC to mark our claims; our territory. We didn’t have to get up as early and stay out as late. And Guy actually told us that he would let us head back early so we could get our gear together for the trip home.

During our lunch break, while Walt and Rob took a short snooze in the sun, I sat staring out over the hazy basin, wondering if the old prospectors paid much attention to this scenery, or if they were as hardened and single minded as they’ve been portrayed.

...

My prospector sat casually upon the smooth surface of a tilted stone; just large enough for his slender butt. His two burros wandered into a stand of pinyon in search of something sweet. He could hear their harnesses creak and complain as the animals made their way; twigs snapped under their weight; metal shoes clattered across stone.

He forgot them as a jay screeched its way across the slope to rest on a tall pine; one of the few along this range. He noticed the bird’s gray color and cocky stance. Noticed, too, the distance from those branches to the flatness of the valley floor. How far was that? Miles. Had to be miles.

He studied the several dust devils climbing toward the sky; the way they gently swirled from side to side in a seductive dance, like a woman, tempting but allusive. He noticed how they shortened and billowed at the base then suddenly shot skyward like the trail of a Fourth of July rocket.

They dance upon a playa stage—alkali flats marking the floor of every basin in Nevada—the ghost of an Ice Age lake; as characteristic as sage, pinyon, and the ranges that divide these valleys. They are all part of it, part of his reason.

He looks up and out to those distant mountains, the Whites and the Sierras. They rim it all with their snow peaks and massive size; become part of the vision he sees, the reason to walk these ridges looking for color, searching for the lode, the bonanza.

He knows—unconsciously hopes—he will never find it. Somehow the journey matters more.

^^^

Finally they flew us out, back to Tucson for a week of rest and relaxation.

We left Hawthorne a little after 8:00 and arrived in Reno about 11:00. Stu, Walt, and I drove the blue Ford, while Burt, Randy, Dave and Rob drove Guy's Chevy. We had lunch at Virginia Station, then dropped off the dirt bikes at a Kawasaki dealer on South Virginia. They were in for a much needed tune-up.

We left the Ford at a Ford dealer for some engine work. The place wasn't open Sundays, so Randy had made prior arrangements to leave it. He put the key in an envelope and dropped it through a slot in the door. It was supposed to be ready for us when we returned. After six hard weeks everything needed servicing, including us.

Randy then drove us to the airport; his flight wasn't until much later. We must have been a sight. All these scruffy guys piling from the back of a pick-up in front of the terminal, like so many migrant farm workers moving on to the next harvest.

Everything went smooth inside. Our tickets were waiting. But the terminal itself was a mess. It was in the midst of expansion, with barricades and plastic tarps and warning signs all over. The plans they displayed looked nice, but during that summer of construction that terminal was the pits.

...

Dave flew off to Colorado Springs to seduce an old girlfriend; Walt headed to Buffalo, New York to see his parents; Rob was off to Jerome, Arizona to visit friends and family; Burt tripped on down to Livermore, California to be with "Mother and Father" and get his head re-aligned after being perverted by us heathens; and Randy was to fly over the Rockies to Denver for a round of meetings at corporate headquarters. Stu and I were the only two who actually flew back to Tucson. So much for the guys picking up reading material on the NORMMEX gold model. Stu agreed to bring back something for everyone.

The nice thing about all of that travel was that NORMMEX paid for most of it. The guys who flew to other parts had to cover the difference in their tickets from what it would cost to fly

to Tucson. They still got a gonga deal.

I felt sorry for poor old Neil and Walter back there in Hawthorne by themselves. But, I told myself, Walter just got there and Neil just returned from his passionate weekend with Judy. He had returned as his old self, the debilitating threat of D-S-B removed once again.

^^^

During my week in Tucson I stayed with Nancy, my estranged wife, and our son, Danny. It's amazing how six weeks away from physical contact with a woman can heal old wounds. We were actually glad to see each other. It was almost like dating again; that initial excitement and strangeness. A pleasant surprise after the barren wastes of Nevada.

...

One afternoon I tried to pay for an item at a drug store with six silver dollars that I had carried back from Hawthorne. In Nevada silver dollars are as common as paper. You pay for something with a \$10 bill and they'll give you six silver dollars for change. I suppose it's a ploy to encourage use of the slots. In Tucson the young woman behind the counter wanted to know what they were. She wasn't sure if they were real, foreign, or phony. She was ready to call a manager. I convinced her they were real money and she finally did take them. It was probably a bench mark in her life.

^^^

It was nice being away from the crew for a while, to see some different faces. And it felt good being with Nancy and Danny again.

While I was in Tucson I went down to the NORMMEX office to turn in expense reports and pick up information. I visited briefly with James Barber, the NORMMEX General Manager. "What're the possibilities of a permanent position?" Their original commitment to me was for three months, with the possibility of an extension.

He thought about it for a minute, then told me, "I'm sorry, but it's still going to have to be month by month."

"Ah well ... it never hurts to ask." I started to get up.

"But wait," he motioned me back down, "with the price of gold so high you never know. We may have a position for you through the winter. Maybe even through the next field season."

"That would be wonderful," I nodded with pleasure.

"Don't get your hopes up yet," he cautioned. "This's just a possibility. A lot depends on

next year's budget."

"As usual."

I thanked him, collected the information I needed, and was ready to head home when one of the field assistants assigned to Southern California asked for a lift.

"Where you heading?" I asked.

"Anywhere near the University."

"I can drop you there."

So we headed out together. His name was Bob Reetz. He seemed like a nice guy, a little unusual, but then, so was I. When we neared the campus, Bob commented, "Do you dig the number of good lookin' women going to summer school?"

"I noticed."

"Don't know where the males are," he ventured as he watched the tan beauties stroll along the shaded walks. "Seems the whole campus is populated by beautiful young women."

"Guess the guys are out doing field work in isolated places like Gabbs, Nevada."

• • •

I stopped by Tad's Bargain Barn, a camping supply store, and bought a new pair of field boots. My old clunkers were no longer adequate. They were the same boots I had used for years. The leather was dry and cracked and the Vibram soles were practically worn flat. I had hoped that the new boots would be much better.

Unfortunately the only pair that fit comfortably had a high heel, similar to a motorcycle boot. But I was sure they would be okay if I got the chance to break them in before I had to do any heavy duty hiking. I also bought mole-skin, just in case.

^^^

Then all too quickly we were back in Hawthorne.

Stu and I flew from Tucson to Phoenix, then to Las Vegas. Disembarking at McCarran, an attractive young woman in a floor length, floral patterned dress appeared next to me. She had a fresh face, bright eyes, and yellow blossoms in her shiny brown hair. I thought she was part of some casino's promotional gimmick. She handed me a rose. "What's this?" I said.

In a soft, wonderful voice she announced, "This delicate flower, in fullest bloom ... this blossom of the earth ... is yours to enjoy ... for a modest contribution. A beautiful rose, for a beautiful cause."

I sensed Stu move away.

Puzzled, caught off guard, and the sucker that I am, I fished coins from my pocket. "All I've got is seventy-five cents."

She extended her slender, finely manicured hand. "By His Divine Grace, I bless you." She quickly turned to another passenger.

I found Stu in the crowd, having a good laugh at my expense.

“What was that?”

“You got suckered by a Hare Krishna.”

I spun around, looking for the woman. “Yer kidding.” I couldn’t see her for all of the people milling around. “Never met one before.”

Stu laughed louder, “Obviously.” He slapping me on the back. “An’ they say we’re hayseeds in Tennessee.”

I left the rose in the trash, but anyone looking would have seen the red on my face.

• • •

On our flight from Vegas we met up with Rob. He had flown in from Prescott. We were initially surprised, but then figured it probably wasn’t that unusual. There are only a few flights to Reno coming from the south. Most are routed through Vegas.

What did freak us out were our seat assignments. Stu and I were given the same seats, in row 13, as on our flight out of Reno the week before.

“Good or bad omen,” Stu frowned.

“Maybe we should play the slots when we get to the airport,” I suggested.

“Yeah, if we get to the airport.”

“No-no, nothing like that.” I tried to counter his negative vibes. “I like closing circles. Fate’s just closing a circle. We’re making a circuit.”

“Well, I hope this plane makes the circuit.”

We had forgotten all about it by the time we landed.

• • •

Neil was waiting for us at the airport in Reno. Everyone was there except Walter. Apparently he had flown off to destinations unknown sometime during our absence. We weren’t sure if he was at the airport or not, so we had him paged.

“TANK MACNAMARA, YOUR PARTY IS AT THE HERTZ COUNTER. TANK MACNAMARA, YOUR PARTY IS AT THE HERTZ COUNTER.”

Ellison and Spurrier laughed uncontrollably.

“What’s that about?” Neil seemed confused.

“We started calling him Tank MacNamara before we left Hawthorne.” Walt grinned.

“‘Cause he’s built like the cartoon guy. You know, Tank MacNamara.”

“Got the same jaw,” Spurrier sputtered. “So we paged him.”

“Yeah. Got tired of being Pinhead just ‘cause we have the same name. So we’re calling him Tank from now on.”

Of course, there was no response to the page. Neil had him paged again, as Walter Coffman. And sure enough, he came lumbering up, looking like the character from the comic page. Stu and I struggled to subdue our laughter. Old Tank had been off in some corner reading a paperback about Alaska.

• • •

We retrieved the truck from the Ford dealer, collected the bikes from the Kawasaki dealer, and ate lunch at Victoria Station.

“See, Stu, we’re closing more circles.”

“It’s just a cheeseburger, Chris, not a cosmic event.”

“No ... the truck, the bikes, Victoria Station. We had lunch here before we left for Tucson. Before we had seats in row thirteen. We just closed another circle. I love it.”

Stu shrugged and took another bite from his burger.

• • •

Neil was flying out again, back home to his Judy, so we returned him to the airport. Rob and Walt would follow later because Rob’s luggage hadn’t arrived. We had hoped by the time we returned Neil to the terminal it would have shown up; no dice. From there it was the usual drive back to Hawthorne. I piloted the blue Ford with Stu and Tank as my companions. Randy drove the tan Chevy with Dave and Burt.

When I entered my Empire I found a note from Neil.

“Used your truck. Sprung the door. In the shop. Ready Monday. Sorry.”

“JERK!” I shouted at the ceiling. “Couldn’t tell me face to face.”

When I picked it up the next day the door seemed fine. Of course, the whole thing was a piece of junk, so it really didn’t matter.

• • •

While Stu and I unloaded the blue Ford we noticed this woman walking away from us across the trailer park. She was short and thin, had long beautiful brown hair, was wearing a lightly colored sun dress, and had wonderfully tanned, athletic legs.

“Oh yeah!” I exclaimed.

“Fin’lly someone,” Stu smiled, “int’restin’.”

“Our luck, she’s probably with a geologist.” I watched her go into the laundry.

“Or some tourist.”

“Yeah, just passing through.”

“Hey, what the heck?” Stu turned back to his work. “Fantasies’re harmless.”

We kept an eye out, but didn’t see her again.

Later Guy came in from the field. He welcomed us back and asked about our trip to Tucson. We chatted a bit, then he walked over to talk with Dave and Tank.

Stu slipped up beside me and whispered, “It’s a good thing we didn’t mention that woman; the one we saw goin’ to the laundry. I think it’s Maria.”

I looked at him. “Huh? Guy’s wife. No!”

“Yes. She must’a come up while we were gone.”

“Holy cow! Now that you mention it.” Stu was right. The woman was Guy’s wife. The only



time we had seen Maria was our first meeting at Guy's house months ago. "Boy, she sure looks different with a tan."

"Yeah," Stu faked wiping his brow, "that could'a been tragic. We could'a made a pass at her; made fools of ourselves...."

"And gotten in hot water with the boss."

"Woo ... that was close."

...

While I was in Tucson I stepped on a scale and found I had gained 20 pounds. Twenty pounds! In only six weeks. I couldn't believe it. In spite of all the exercise I was getting.

Then I recalled all the soda and beer I drank in Gabbs because of the bad water. And all the big meals we consumed: the pasta, beans, bread, and on and on, that we stuffed ourselves with. And all the candy and chips we were always nibbling. Looked like diet time for the rest of the summer.

^^^

I rode to Tonopah with Randy. He wanted to check the validity of a claim in the Nye County courthouse. That didn't take long. We spent the majority of our time there looking for a place to park our trailers when it came time to move into that region. We found "no room in the inn." We drove all over town; nothing. There were lots of trailer parks, but no available spaces. Even the motels were booked solid.

Everywhere we went the explanation was the same. "Lot of military activity 'round here. It's that MX missile 'Vironmental Impact Study. Those guys're all over this state." Or, "There's a minin' boom. 'Cause uh the high price uh gold. Them geologist fellas's everywhere." We finally gave up and headed back to Hawthorne.

...

Randy picked up a cowboy hitch-hiker on the outskirts of Tonopah. "Where you from?"

"Tey-hahs. Hey-ded up'ta Or-eh-gone." He had a definite Texas drawl, but seemed like a nice fellow; looked like Fran Tarkenton, the football player.

"What's in Oregon?" Randy pried.

"Change, ah guess." He shrugged. "M'thirty-five. Married twice. Relationships seem ... they don't work fer long with me."

"Yeah. In the middle of a separation myself." I tried to identify with his situation.

"Just ended a stay with a very nice Mexicano gal. Could'a been somethin' special. Jus' fell apart. Cain't figure." He dug his wallet from his back pocket. "Got some pitchers." He handed me several Polaroid snapshots of a pretty young Mexican woman. Two of the photos were full

frontal nude poses. She looked like a nice, sweet girl, in spite of the suggestive photography.

“Whoa!” Randy almost swerved off the pavement when he flipped to the nude shots. “Nice bod!”

“Yep ... good lay, too. Wild ride,” the cowboy said proudly.

“What happened?” I asked with no real interest. It just seemed like a way to keep the conversation going.

“Jus’ don’t rightly know. Screwed one night, kicked me out the next mornin’. You figure.”

We couldn’t. The rest of the drive was weather and politics and sports. We dropped him off at the motel.

I said, “Interesting fella.”

“Yeah. Been around.” Randy grinned. “Nice pics, huh?”

“Yeah.” I shook my head, “but I can’t understand why some women let their boyfriends take shots like those.”

“Hey, their guy wants them to.”

“Suppose.” I watched the pedestrians as we cruised through town. “No matter what they promise, the jerks usually end up showing them around.”

“For some guys it’s a trophy.”

“Yeah, macho.”

“You got it,” Randy smiled broadly. “See what I conquered? Loves it so much she’d do anything for me. Aren’t you envious?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “But from the woman’s perspective, maybe she feels compelled to please her man. Maybe she’s desperate. Do anything to keep him.”

“Could be,” he shook his head, “then again she just might be proud of her bod. Expects him to flash those shots around.”

“Could be.”

Randy looked at me. “I know I’d show snaps if I had a babe like that.”

“Come on, why would you need photos like that if you’ve got a gorgeous woman in the flesh?”

“I’m macho, I guess. I want everyone to know.”

I looked away. “I just don’t understand.”

• • •

Burt walked into camp that afternoon. The Gray Beast had broken down again. He hitch-hiked most of the way. That would have been something to see. Even though he had done it before, out there alone it must have taken him lots of nerve to stick that thumb out the first time. In spite of Burt broadening his horizons and gaining experience, the company had another towing bill, and another truck down.

^^^

As I had feared, I didn't get a chance to break-in my new boots. Guy determined that we needed samples from the periphery of our claim block at Grantsville. That work would also fulfill some of the assessment requirements for the claims. He sent Rob, Walt, and me because we were the most familiar with that range. The others went off to sample the dumps around the ghost town of Rawhide.

I figured right off I would probably generate a few blisters because the boots were new and stiff. What I hadn't anticipated was the instability of the higher heel on a slope or when crossing loose rock. And, of course, the entire range slopes and most of what we sampled was in loose debris.

By the end of the morning I could hardly walk. My ankles throbbed and the soles of my feet burned, stung, and felt terribly blistered. But I didn't dare remove my boots to check, sure I'd never get them on again. There was nothing I could do except curse myself for being so dumb. I had to live with my stupidity until I could find a cobbler to replace the heel with something lower. But what might be couldn't help me through the situation that was.

After lunch I was to walk an end line over a ridge toward the west, follow the claim posts until I reached the last corner, then turn back toward the Grantsville site, where I was to meet Rob and Walt. I was to collect a sample near every post I passed. This should have been a cake walk. Instead it was like walking on eggs.

The day became hotter; the sun, relentless. The dark stained rock absorbed every ray striking its surface. And, of course, my boots transferred that heat and radiated fire directly to my aching, blistering soles. To be more emphatic, my feet were killing me. Each step was extremely painful. In the torment of the moment I imagined being crippled for life. I wanted to sit down and die, or wait for the others to come find me and rescue me and carry me back to the truck. I was sure they would have to amputate. I wanted to be anywhere but out there among those scorching rocks.

The heat and my steaming feet and my overall discomfort made me thirsty. I drained my water supply too quickly. Half way through the afternoon I emptied the last swallow of warm water. That really made me miserable. I knew better than that. I still had a couple of hours to go.

Somehow I pushed on and forced myself to finish my line. I hefted my samples and headed toward the road. With the added weight of the rocks, the bottoms of my feet felt like they had become annealed to the insole. Unbelievably they burned worse than before. More and more I had to fight the urge to quit and remove my boots. I knew I had to at least make the road.

Once there I convinced myself to go on. Rob and Walt would be waiting at the town site, a mile away, up this hot dusty road; this relatively level road. I could do it.

I hid my samples in the sage and built a small cairn to mark the spot. Then I forced myself on, step by step.

Plodding on, I suddenly remembered the cool spring and small pool in the middle of town. Some mining company had tapped the source while drilling. The thought of refreshing water raised my spirits. I visualized steam rising as my molten toes became engulfed by chilling waters.

On I went.

Step by excruciating step I got closer. The bottoms of my feet continued to burn and sting. I imagined raw open sores, the flesh torn aside, my bodily juices oozing, sticky and red. There was no way I could walk comfortably. An observer would have guessed I had hot coals in my boots. I tried walking on the sides, but that only aggravated my throbbing ankles.

Then I could see the first out buildings in the town site. Then the pool, low and open along the side of the road. Oh god, I had finally made it. The shallow sparkling waters perhaps 20 feet across with a small two inch pipe pouring a thin but steady stream of clear liquid pleasure into its far side. Ripples gleamed and sparkled in the afternoon sun like so many icy diamonds. The run off poured down a narrow ditch into a nearby wash where the life giving water quickly sank beneath the dry desert sand and disappeared.

Kneeling, preparing to quench my thirst, a warning light flashed through my brain. “Arsenic,” I thought, “there was arsenic in the rocks we sampled. Could this water be contaminated?”

“Christ!”

“Do I dare drink it?” I sat back in frustration. “I could die an excruciating death.”

“But there are no signs.” I argued.

“Yeah,” I agreed with myself, “you’d figure they would post warning signs if the water was dangerous. Wouldn’t they? I mean, what would stop some unsuspecting tourist from dipping this sierra cup and sharing a drink of wild water with his trusting children?”

“They’d find the whole family dead in their Oldsmobile, six miles south of Ione, stranded in the sage.”

I reasoned with myself. “I don’t wanna die in Grantsville.”

“True, but hey,” I remembered my wilderness training, “if there’s vegetation ... and any form of animal life ... the water should be okay. Well ... except for Giardia, E. Coli, and some other human contaminants.”

“But you’re right. They won’t kill you.”

“No, they won’t,” I cautioned myself, “they’ll just make you violently ill.”

I looked around, scrutinizing the edge, the surface, and the bottom of the pond. “Nothing,” I said out loud.

My inner self concurred. “No vegetation, and no animal life whatsoever. Not even a water strider or a boatman. Nothing.”

“Of course! Dummy.” Again out loud. “The pond has been scooped out. Probably within the last few years. Not enough time for an ecosystem to form.”

Internally again, “All that takes time.”

“True, but you’d still think there would be something; some algae or something.”

“Right. And there’s no assurance that recent disturbance is the case.”

“Looks like no drink.”

“Agreed. No drink.”

“Shit!”

I started unlacing my boots. “At least I can soak my feet.”

“Uh ... wait a minute,” that voice kept coming back inside my head. “Can a person absorb

arsenic through the skin?”

“Ah, geez,” I blurted.

“If I soak my steaming, swelled feet ... will I die anyway?”

“I don’t think so,” I argued. “I think the poison has to be ingested.”

“Okay, maybe so. But what about open sores?”

“Like torn blisters?”

“Yup. Could arsenic get into the body that way?”

“Naw.”

Off came my boots. To my surprise my flesh didn’t peel away with my socks. In fact, my feet didn’t look nearly as bad as they felt. I had blisters, for sure, but nothing torn or bleeding. Without further argument my miserable feet went into the cooling water. No steam. The water didn’t boil. But oh yes, I felt instant relief.

“Ahhhh!”

With my feet approaching normal body temperatures, I dipped my bandanna and wiped my face and neck and let the lovely drops pour down across my shoulders and into my shirt and down my chest. Heaven. Almost. And much of the day’s pain was forgotten.

About half-an-hour later Rob and Walt pulled up in the truck. I reluctantly slid wrinkled feet into stiff boots. I left the laces loose. Walt offered a cold container of Gatorade, and though I knew better, I chugged it, climbed into the cab, and we called it a day.

^^^

“Tao, baby,” Rob grinned as Walt approached from his room.

“Yeah, right, sphincter breath.” Walt was obviously in one of his morning moods.

Rob smiled broadly as he stuffed his hands deep into the large pockets of his tan camp shorts. He slowly licked his lips, spoke softly, “I told you, Reltnoid. All you hafta do is wait ... the chicks will come.”

“Right. Was a first for me.”

“How do you mean?”

“First time I fucked a two.” Walt pretended to be disgusted with himself.

“On which scale?” Rob smirked.

“Eat shit, buddy fucker.”

Those sitting around the picnic table laughed, except Burt. He sat quietly grinning with an almost sinister, almost idiotic expression defining his face.

“What you smiling at, Blow Job?” Walt glared.

Burt stared back, incredulous.

• • •

The damn laundromat in the trailer park was put out of commission by some overall electrical problem. Just when we had become accustomed to a nice, clean, efficient set of machines the place shuts down. Even the water heater wouldn't work for the showers. They had to send for parts that took days to arrive.

There was another laundromat in town, attached to a Mom and Pop grocery store. It wasn't too bad, especially compared to what we faced in Gabbs. And it was clean, with fringe benefits. Once you started your laundry you could go shopping next door, or browse the magazine rack. But in any case, doing laundry was always a drag.

• • •

I met a nice couple, Wally and Evy Cumberland, who were staying in the trailer park. They told me their permanent home was in Modesto, California. My guess was that they were in their upper twenties. He was a part-time geologist with the United States Geological Survey and she was an English teacher, "K through 6th, and Junior High." They seemed very bright, very positive, and very intelligent. He was a Mr. Peepers type, she was all legs.

We were relating interesting experiences in the desert. Evy told me, "This Airstream has a story." She closed the door to the refrigerator.

"Is it yours?" I indicated the trailer.

"No," Wally laughed, "I wish. It's on loan from the government."

"It was once used by a Survey geologist," Evy continued.

"In the Mojave desert," Wally added.

"He was well known, I guess. Wouldn't you say?" She moved to the sink.

"Umm, yeah ... I suppose. In geological circles, anyway."

Evy was preparing their dinner. As she spoke she chopped vegetables. "They said he was a solid family man."

"That's tough these days," I volunteered.

"You bet," Wally looked at Evy. "We're lucky. Evy gets three months off, right in the middle of field season. Works out great. I do intensive field work in the summer, then the book work, map work, and reports the rest of the year."

"We can't count on that forever. Someday Wally'll have to go off by himself. Won't be much fun. I like following him around out here." They smiled at each other.

"You guys are lucky. I read a statistic somewhere, not too long ago, that geologists have one of the highest divorce rates. Spend too much time away from their spouses and other responsibilities at home."

"Yeah ... I saw that too." Wally reached out and patted Evy's hip. "We're doing what we can to avoid becoming a statistic."

Evy smiled lovingly. "Anyway, one day this guy just disappeared. They found his trailer ... this trailer ... and eventually his vehicle, but no geologist." She shrugged and cut at a carrot. "Search parties found nothing. After a time they gave up. Assumed he'd walked off and died

somewhere in the desert.”

“They didn’t know if it was suicide or some mishap. There were no signs of foul play.” Wally looked down at the table. “It’s always dangerous working alone. One slip at the wrong time....”

“Don’t even mention it, Wally. I don’t like thinking about it.” She gave him a stern look, as if they had worked through this discussion before. “Anyway, months later, a former colleague discovered him shackled up with an Indian woman. He had long hair and a scraggly beard.”

“Like a hippie. Living off the land.” Wally scratched at his own afternoon shadow.

“He had apparently given up on society, his wife, and his children.” She sighed.

I was fascinated. “Did they ever get him back, you know, into society?”

“I don’t know. Probably messed up his wife pretty bad.” Wally shrugged again. “There are always victims in that sort of thing.”

...

Stu and I had dinner that evening and he mentioned that Burt had apparently fallen for a waitress at a local restaurant.

“Her name’s Shannon,” he told me. “Works at that steak house, you know ... we ate there once. Uh ... the Beef Platter, the one hooked to the side of the El Cap.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“She was the short one with light brown hair,” Stu measured her height off the floor with his hand.

“The young one, maybe eighteen, nineteen.” I tried to visualize her. “With long hair, pulled back.”

“Yep. That’s her.”

“Well, yeah ... I could see her and Burt. She’s wholesome looking; clean, and attractive.”

“Very nice, soft spoken.”

“Yeah, an a little shy,” I added.

“But friendly, very pretty, and very attentive to Burt.”

I smiled. “I’m sure he likes that. It’s my guess he’s looking for a proper wife.”

We ate a bit, then I asked, “Do you think she likes our boy?”

“Apparently,” he nodded. “Like I said, she’s been real attentive whenever he eats there. And he and Tank eat there almost every night.”

“Has he asked her out?”

“Nope.” Stu finished a mouthful. “I think he wants to, but he’s so shy ‘round women.”

“Maybe she’ll ask him.”

“I don’t know,” he said thoughtfully, “she seems pretty traditional.” Stu seemed to be thinking. “I’m sure she finds Burt’s quiet nature appealing. He’s not as brash as the rest of us.”

“That’s for sure. He’s gentlemanly, polite, well-spoken....”

“Has a cute smile and nice eyes,” he looked at me, winked, “in her view, of course.”

I got a chuckle out of that.

“And he’s a well educated man of the world.” Stu sat up like a proud father. “I’m sure a

small town girl would find that attractive.”

“Well,” I said, “we’ll just hafta watch developments.”

“I’m bettin’ ol’ Burt’ll come through,” Stu nodded again, “an’ ask her out.”

“Eventually,” I agreed. “Eventually.”

• • •

In my own moment of weakness I made a date with Becky Trappman, one of the young women that work with Doris in the cage at the El Cap. I was apprehensive at first, thinking Doris would be upset. I hadn’t seen Connie Ann since the beach party. But Doris didn’t seem to mind.

I had gotten to know Becky on my daily shipping trips. As with Doris, I would tease her and gossip and carry on superficial conversations. There had been nothing deeper than why my boxes were so heavy. But she seemed to have a bubbly personality.

While our crew was in Gabbs, Becky seemed casual about any sort of a relationship. I really didn’t feel any interest from her side. But once we moved into Hawthorne she became more forward. She started dropping hints. Then one morning she asked, “You goin’ to the boat races Sunday?”

“Hadn’t planned on it.”

“Oh.” Pause. She looked me in the eyes. “I thought about goin’. Never seen a boat race before.” Hint. Hint. “Have you?”

Not thinking I blurted, “Nope. Can’t say that I have.”

She got a twinkle in her eyes. “I hate goin’ alone.”

Too late to stop myself from getting in deeper, I asked, “Want some company?”

“Sure.” She didn’t hide her smile.

“Okay,” I tried to sound enthusiastic, “great.”

“It’s a date then,” she beamed.

“Uh ... yeah. A date. We’ll talk tomorrow, set the time.”

^^^

July progressed and the days got hotter. It was still windy, but it was more consistent, less gusty. Not as violent. The increased heat seemed to keep the mosquitoes and gnats in hiding during the day. The cooler hours of the evening and morning were a different story.

And we had more flat tires. Studying the problem we realized that it was the sidewalls that were giving out; punctured by the sharp rocks along the old jeep trails approaching some of the dumps.

While talking to the dealer he told me, “What you call a six ply isn’t.”

“Says six ply on the side,” I reminded him.

“It’s not,” he said with authority. “They don’t make actual six-plys no more.”

“Okay,” I said confused, “what should we buy then?”



He thought for a second, then said, “What you need’re four ply tires with a six ply rating.” He flipped pages in a large catalog. “Here yuh go. What you oughta get is a set of seven-hundred by fifteen Tracker nylon ply tubeless tires. That’ll give yuh the side-wall protection yuh need.”

All I had to do was convince Guy and the company controller in Tucson that we needed better tires.

• • •

My feet finally stopped hurting, although my right ankle stayed sore for quite a while. The few blisters that I did get were healing nicely. I was desperate to get that boot heal replaced before I had field duty again.

• • •

Hawthorne was coming alive. It was suddenly crawling with people. Of course there were the locals, and the regular blue haired tourists, but there were also hoards of young men moving along the streets in bright colored uniforms. A regional softball tournament drew teams from all over Nevada and eastern California. Baseball caps and numbered jerseys moved in a steady stream along the sidewalks.

But the big deal, the main event, the show that excited the blood of the locals, was the annual National Speed Boat Competition on Walker Lake—The Walker 100. Needless to say, there were streamlined inboards and outboards with massive engines secured aboard trailers and flat-beds and parked almost everywhere. Racing team members, dressed in matching wind breakers or T-shirts, kept busy waxing hulls, tuning engines, and talking shop with whomever wandered by.

Caught up in the excitement, and generally bored with our daily routine, we all planned on taking in the big event. We stocked up on the essentials: brew, munchies, and ice; and looked forward to “checkin’ out the babes on the beach.”

“Too bad NORMMEX doesn’t have company shirts,” Dave dreamed out loud, “we’d look like a racing team.”

“Huh, yeah ... I can picture silver-gray shirts with black trim and N-O-R-M-E-X emblazoned across the back in rust red letters.” Stu was pleased with the image.

“Yeah, and Moly Makes Your Tool Hard stitched in an arc,” I couldn’t resist, “over the left nipple.”

...

When I took my samples to the El Cap that morning Becky was in front of the counter, repairing a small sign. It was the first time I saw her out of the cage. I knew she was short, that had been pretty obvious, but the counter had hidden the fact that her hips were a bit on the rounded side. You might even say she was pudgy. Right away my internal projector extrapolated into the future. What I saw was one of those well rounded, matronly types, with two or three rug rats clinging to her thick ankles. Perhaps even later she would become Aunt Bee from the Andy Griffith show.

Suddenly I remembered our date. My shallow, superficial nature surfaced as my testosterone evaporated. (Oh lord what have I done? How am I gonna get outta this?) Although she had a cute face, a pleasant smile, and a friendly demeanor, she also had no real distinguishing features. (God, the guys will be at the lake.) She was one of those people that exists in our peripheral vision. The only time we notice them is when we have direct contact and they become a part of our immediate concern. (I can't let them see me with her. On their Hawthorne scale she'd probably rate a five.) With her mousy brown hair and plump stature, most men wouldn't take a second look. (I can just imagine their cuts and criticism. I'd never live it down.) She was, essentially, nondescript.

Being a coward I wasn't sure what to do. "Hey, about the boat race...."

"Oh ... yeah," she frowned, "I need to talk to you." She turned to face me. "They changed my hours."

(Good, maybe I'm off the hook.) I said, "What did they change them to?"

"I gotta work 'til one." She sounded discouraged.

"Oh ... (The guys wanted to go at ten. Maybe if I tell her to meet me there after work she won't come.) ... well ... (But if she did come, and I'd met some good looking thing, there could be trouble.) ... you know, that works out okay. You see ... (You lying sack of shit.) ... we're behind on our sampling. It's possible I'll hafta work tomorrow anyway."

"Oh...." I could tell she was disappointed.

Stealing from Randy, I said, "That's the way it is in exploration geology."

Weakly she mumbled, "I understand."

Feeling bad, I stammered out, "But look ... let's get together tomorrow evening, say, for a burger. Ummm ... say, seven, in the coffee shop?"

"Okay." She seemed to feel better.

And I didn't feel like such a big creep. Just a little one. Although I still worried that she might show up and find me relaxing in the sand.

Then, later in the day, I had to pick up an expected package. Becky was still there.

"Oh," she seemed pleased, "I'm glad you stopped by."

"What's up?"

"I didn't know how to get hold of you. They changed my hours again."

Cautiously, I said, "That's nice of them."

"Well ... I have to work the afternoon shift tomorrow. I won't be getting off 'til 'leven thirty."

Still feeling like a louse I offered, “Would you like me to meet you here then. In the coffee shop.”

“You’d do that?” She seemed excited. “That would be great.”

• • •

Because I was around town it usually fell to me to pick up everyone’s mail at the Post Office. One day Rob had a postal slip with his letters. A package had arrived that required his signature. So the next day he and Burt cut their field work short so he could pick it up.

When he opened the package he found a letter, a paperback book, and a container of brownies. A female friend in Tucson had borrowed the book during the school year, failing to return it before he left. The brownies were payment for being overdue.

Sitting in the cab of the truck, Rob read the long, typed letter. Burt, apparently an avid brownie aficionado, or, perhaps, missing his mother’s cooking, sheepishly asked, “May I have one. Please.”

“Sure. Help yourself.”

“Thank you.”

Before Rob reached the end of the letter Burt had consumed one large chocolate square.

“How was it?”

“Very good. Still moist.”

“Anything ... different about it?” Rob asked coyly.

“Uh ... why?”

“Oh ... I dunno.” Rob was intentionally evasive. “Reay usually ... makes up her own recipes. You know, throws in extra stuff.”

“Oh.” Burt thought for a second. “No ... they taste fine. Would you mind if I had another?”

“Uh ... well ... sure, go ahead. Help yerself.”

Driving around town to complete a few chores, Burt ate two more large squares. By the time they got to camp Burt was definitely a different person.

When he handed me his field map, he said, “How ... are ... you ... to ... day?”

I looked at him. “Fine Burt. Okay. How are you?”

Usually careful with his samples, he turned his pack upside down, dumping them in a pile on the ground by the step to my trailer. “I’m fee-ling ... a lit-tull ... light and ... free.” He smiled pleasantly, then stood there grinning. He looked like a helium filled balloon held down by the weight of his field boots. His pupils were dilated, his eyes solid brown disks. His speech was slow and slurred. He had a case of the giggles.

“You be careful, Burt.”

I watched him float across the lot toward his room.

“What’s with him, Spurrier? Give him another beer?”

“Naw. He ate some brownies.”

“Brownies?”

Rob shrugged. “Alice B. Toklas brownies.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He gave me his shit-faced look.

“Shit, man! Where’d he get spiked brownies out here?”

“That package I picked up. From a friend in Tucson.”

“Man ... he doesn’t even drink.” I was incredulous. “That shit could zap him.”

“Hey, he asked for them.”

“Yeah ... did he know what was in them?”

“Well ... no,” Rob confessed. “But I wasn’t sure either ‘til I read the letter. He’d eaten a big chunk by then.” Then he said nonchalantly, “He asked for more. It’s his life.”

“You jerk! He didn’t know what he was eating.” Convinced Rob knew, or at least suspected the brownies were spiked, I became angered. “Toying with his mind is one thing, but messing with him physically is something else all together.”

Rob stuck his hands deep into his pockets, shrugged sheepishly.

“How many did he have?”

“Three. Four.”

“Jesus christ, man ... you...”

“Hey, I’m innocent. Okay?” He gestured with his arms. “I didn’t know they were loaded.”

“Bull shit! You hafta know your friend better than that.”

No response.

“Well Burt’s loaded now. He could be up there puking his guts out. You don’t know what that shit could do to him.” I’m sure my face was red. “His body hasn’t built a tolerance. For any kind of drug.” I looked away, then back. “How strong were they?”

“Don’t know ... for sure. Reay usually makes them potent.”

“Well, man, you’re responsible for that kid this evening.” I pointed off toward Burt’s room. “You better watch him like a hawk and make sure nothing happens while he’s like this.”

Casually he said, “It’ll wear off.”

“Yeah, but ‘til then he’s your puppy. If he gets fucked-up your butts cooked.”

“What are you, his mother?”

“Could be,” I said.

He didn’t say anything more. But I could tell he was seething, feeling he had been unfairly saddled with Burt’s condition. He finally walked away, toward Burt’s room.

After I caught my breath and relaxed, I thought about the whole episode. In spite of the danger, I must say, the starry look on Burt’s face was something else.

...

That night a few of us went out, stirred by the crowds, the energy, the excitement, and the prospect of meeting some “women type females.”

At the El Cap, while the others hit the bar and downed a few brews, I slipped in between two blue hairs and played the nickel slots. I had become addicted to the nasty things. But at five cents a pop you can’t lose your shirt. Of course, you can’t win a fortune either. My challenge was to see how long a two dollar roll would last.

That night I slipped so many coins into the slot that my finger tips turned lead gray. But I

won the five dollar jackpot twice and ended up with the two bucks I started with.

Stu came up behind me. “Hear that Joe’s Bar, ‘cross the street, brought in a country band from Reno. The Cow Punchers. Live music always attracts women.”

“Well then, lets go.”

We moseyed across the street. Peering through the smoke and sound, Stu commented, “Course ... looks like these fine ladies’re escorted by conspicuously protective male-type boyfriends and/or husbands. So....”

We played eight ball, shuffle board, foosball, and generally just stood around “drankin’”—as one local put it—beer. We enjoyed the music, and kept an eye out for good looking unattached women. Of course, we eyed the attached women as well, playing a game of Catch Me If You Can with their partners. However, there were 20 other guys in the bar playing the same games.

Then she appeared.

Awe swept the room.

A fantastic blond. By herself.

Twenty pairs of lungs grabbed a smoky deep breath. I swear it was audible.

She was tall, thin, with a nice tan and long, straight, natural blond hair almost to her waist.

I heard Dave moan, “A perfect ten....”

She had a beautiful complexion, bright blue eyes, with delicate features, except for her mouth. Her wide lips were pouty and ripe and when she smiled her face lit up with an irresistible radiance.

“On any scale.” Stu’s voice seemed hushed, reverent.

She wore a short, simple, one piece yellow sun dress and white sandals that accentuated her long, exquisite legs. A desert angel. A geologist’s dream.

To a man we acted cool, tried not to be obvious. But in spite of the band the bar grew strangely silent. Beers lifted to lips, we tried to be inconspicuous with our stare. It was as if we couldn’t look away. An ambiguous tension permeated the stale air; something acrid; perhaps the collective electrical charge emanating from 20 rapidly rising testosterone levels.

I felt embarrassed for her, empathized with her obvious discomfort. She must have felt every one of us mentally undressing her, visually raping her where she stood, publicly fantasizing about what it would be like with her. She stood, tentative, near the entrance, by the end of the bar, anxiously searching the room.

Two cowboy types—undaunted—sauntered up, as cowboy types will.

“Buy you a beer, Ma’am?”

She shook her wonderful head, refused.

Rejected, they sidled up to the bar and gradually turned their backs on her.

Viewing the room and our hungry eyes she became self-conscious, took a step back, brought her arms from her sides, clutched her small purse in both hands close to her body, looked ready to leave.

A geologist for one of our competitors made his approach. He looked suave, educated, and self-assured; a technique that probably scored easily back home in the city. But sure enough, to the relief of those queued up, his advances were also rejected. Hope lingered.

Attention shifted, and the spell was broken, when a tall, well-built black man entered. Dressed in military camouflage, obviously just off duty at the Bomb Plant, he was oblivious to our stares. He moved easily toward the woman. Familiar. She smiled broadly; relieved, as if a door closed. She spoke, her soft voice inaudible. He grinned, glanced around the room, slipped his arm easily around her waist and guided her out.

From one of the fellows along the bar, “She was waitin’ fer *him*?”

“Shit!” His partner tipped back his beer.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Another griped.

I would almost bet you could hear the groans and racial slurs clear across Walker Lake.

Someone let loose with “Fuckin’ nigger!”

“Hell,” came a comment from the other side of the room, “pretty obvious none of us white boys’re big ‘nough to satisfy her.”

“Bitch.” I was surprised by a woman’s voice.

A cowboy bending over a pool table said with disgust, “Nigger ... lovin’ ... slut ...”

Stu looked at me. I shook my head and said, “Ah well ... the human condition.”

The cowboy took his shot and scratched the eight ball.

• • •

Dave left the bar for a while, then returned with some interesting news.

“Hey, catch this.” Dave wedged between Stu and I. “That Shannon chick asked Burt out.”

“Where’d you hear this?” Stu seemed interested.

“From Tank,” Dave explained. “He and Burt went to dinner together.”

“Typical,” I said. “The brownies must’ve worn off.”

“Yeah,” Dave went on in a conspiratorial voice, “I guess she finally got tired of waiting.

Tank said she followed them right out the door after their meal.”

“What she say?” I thought the whole thing was kind of funny.

Dave shrugged. “Don’t know for sure. Tank said she asked old Blow Job to some sort of dance that’s coming up.”

“What’d Burt say?” Stu was getting a chuckle out of this as well. “Did he accept?”

“Naw. You kidding?” Dave shook his head. “He told her he’s gotta work the next day or something. That he’s gotta get to bed so he can get up early.”

“Man, as smart as that guy is about geology, he’s sure a dim bulb when it comes to women.” Stu downed the last of a beer, then set the glass on a crowded table.

“God,” I agreed with Stu, “you’d think loaded brownies would have given him some courage. How did Shannon take it?”

“What do you think?” Dave sighed. “She’s disappointed. But I guess she told Burt she understood.”

“I think we’re gonna have a long talk with that boy,” Stu promised. “Or he’s gonna end up a bachelor.”

• • •

Surprisingly, Stu and I were the last of our group to pack it in that night. We crawled into bed around 2:00 a.m. That was definitely not our usual thing. And it was definitely rough getting up the next morning. It was a good thing it was Sunday.

^^^

Everyone in the crew, except Tank, went to The Walker 100 boat races. Even Burt, who skipped church to participate in a Pagan ritual. In spite of blowing it with Shannon, those brownies must have miraculously given him an altered vision of his Creator.

We had a good time. Our cooler was full of beer and soda, we had plenty of munchies, and there were lots of women. Oh, and ... yeah ... there were two spectacular boat races.

The first, for boats with outboard engines, was a close, exciting, competition. The second, for boats with inboard engines, was even closer, until the last five laps. One of the two leaders, who had been neck and neck, broke a propeller. He fixed it, amazingly, but was in such a hurry to regain his position he blew his engine. It was pretty much a macho trip, because he really didn't have much of a chance. He was already three long laps behind.

Throughout the day we spotted and chatted with a number of people we had seen around town, mostly locals we dealt with for one reason or another. For most of the afternoon we spread our blankets near Wally and Evy Cumberland, the couple from California. They seemed like really nice folks and I got along with them really well. We had a lot of fun, but I was never sure what they thought of our group. We might have been just a little too off the wall for them.

During the races, about 40 hang-gliders descended from Mount Grant and landed on the beaches. They swirled and somersaulted and tumbled in a colorful kaleidoscope set against the sharp blue of the sky. That added a spectacular carnival atmosphere to the whole event. As if there wasn't enough activity already.

• • •

Dave got up and brushed off the sand that clung to everything. "I'm goin' to the bar." He looked toward the club house. "Need something stronger. A mixed drink."

"Fare-thee-well, old buddy." Walt watched as he wove through the blankets and coolers. "He's on the prowl. Solo is the only way to score."

• • •

We soaked up rays; followed the boat launchings; drank cold beer; envied the hang gliders; gulped cold beer; listened to bits of local gossip and conversation; swallowed cold beer; eyed the soft bellied, flabby thighed women in their bright colored two piece swim suits; consumed cold beer; endured the angry stares of beer bellied men who stayed strategically close to their scantily clad bathing beauties; belched warm beer; and absorbed the rush of activity in general.

• • •

We had forgotten about Dave when suddenly he appeared with a woman at his side. “Guys ... this is Romalyn. Romalyn, these are the bozos I work with.”

“Hi,” in unison.

“Hello,” she said shyly.

“Howdy hi,” etcetera.

And, as is our nature, we looked her over in our secret little ways. It was hard to tell her age. She could have been either in her early 30s or early 40s, depending on what kind of life she lived. She definitely looked used, like she had been around a bit. She didn’t look bad, but not really good, either. Soft; she looked soft. She was busty and a bit hippy, but for Hawthorne she wasn’t too bad of a catch.

She was definitely over-dressed for the beach, in a one piece lavender pants suit with flared bottoms the like of which I hadn’t seen in maybe five years. Something you might have seen at a cocktail party or an evening pool party. It featured light chains around her hips and circular cut outs at the sides of her waist so you could see her tummy in profile. It looked unexpectedly slender, but soft.

Her sand blond hair was foo-fooed up into some sort of loose bee hive affair and accented by a large pair of white plastic earrings. From head to toe she looked put together rather than coordinated. But she seemed willing, and that was enough for Dave.

“I’m outta here. We’re taking a little ride into town.” He took Romalyn by the arm. “See you guys for dinner.” He turned away with a shit-assing grin on his face. “Chow.”

The comments upon his departure ranged from envious to rude and crude. Even Burt made an off-color comment. We enjoyed a good laugh and went on about our previous business.

• • •

“Seems ta be a lot’a womens we ain’t ne’er seen afore,” Stu drawled in a phony hillbilly accent. “Mussa kep’ theyselves in hidin’ fer this here big e-vent.”

“They’s from t’other parts, I reckon.” I could play Stu’s game.

“You can tell ... the local girls from the tourists,” Rob noted. “The local girls have plush bottoms.” He described droopy buttocks with his hands, as if holding two melons, and inclined his head toward a group of girls we had seen around town. Sure enough, he was right. Though they were only in their early 20s they all carried extra baggage in their tail ends.



Walt said slowly, “The bigger the cushion the better the pushin’.”

“I’d never be caught dead in a two piece if I had a fanny like theirs,” Evy shook her head, ignoring the previous comment.

“I’d never let you get a fanny like theirs,” Wally teased.

“I never could, the way you chase me around the house.”

Several of us cleared our throats. Wally turned red.

“Uh ... do you two want us to leave for a while,” I asked, “so you can ... uhm ... reduce some fanny?”

Evy giggled and rolled over and tickled Wally. “How ‘bout it, big fella?” That added to his embarrassment.

• • •

On the other end of the scale: a hang glider landed near our location. I went to check it out, to see one up-close. On the way I heard a female voice call my name. My first thought was Connie Ann, Doris’ daughter. I looked around.

“Chris! Over here.”

I was dumbfounded. It was a striking brunette, sitting by herself on a large beach towel. I stumbled over.

“Remember me?” Her voice was heavenly, seductive. “We met in Tonopah, oh ... six ... seven weeks ago. Denice King. I was with two other women ... going into the restaurant. You were with a bunch of guys, coming out.” She removed her sun glasses.

“Yeah ... I remember you.” I had no idea in Tonopah that she was this good looking. A bikini and a tan reveal wonders.

“Where ya headed?”

“Oh ... was gonna check out that hang-glider there.” I looked toward the colorful fabric and aluminum frame. I’d suddenly lost interest.

“Too bad ... I was looking for some company.”

“Hey ... I can see a hang-glider some other time.”

“Great. Have a seat, then.” She moved over on the large towel. “Like a drink?”

“Naw ... thanks. Got a cooler full over there.”

“I know. I saw you. Looks like you guys are having a good time.”

“Usually do. It’s a strange bunch.”

Conversation sagged for an awkward moment. She reached into her bag and removed a bottle of tanning oil. Pouring the clear liquid into her left palm, she said, “So ... I know you’re not from around here. Where do you call home?”

“Tucson, most recently.” I watched as she rubbed her palms together. “But I’m originally from Nebraska.”

“Hey, me too. Lincoln.” I followed her hands as she smoothed the oil over the lustrous tanned flesh of her right leg. I wondered if she knew how seductive that was, how difficult it was for me to concentrate. I hoped to god I wouldn’t get an erection.

“Lincoln, hum?” I tried to act nonchalant, as if I associated with gorgeous women daily.

“Me too. Practically neighbors.”

“Yeah. Great...”

“Where ya live now?”

“Washoe City, just south of Reno.” She poured more oil.

“Never heard of it.”

“Between Reno and Carson City.” She smoothed oil onto her shapely left leg.

I hoped she wouldn’t ask me to put oil on her back. Sort of, anyway. “Hm ... how long you been out here?”

“Oh, geez. Ten years. I left Nebraska in Seventy. Never been back.” She rubbed oil onto her arms and stomach and the exposed parts of her breasts.

“Part of the migration, huh?” I spoke in what I hoped was a knowing tone. “Lot of people left ‘round then.”

“Yeah, I guess. A restless time. I picked up and left one day. Couldn’t stand the monotony and the pressure ... tied down to one man and a kid.” She stretched out on her right side and propped her head up with her hand.

“You have a kid ... huh? Boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

“Me too,” I said proudly, “he’s seven.”

“Forrest is uh ... sixteen.”

“Whoa ... you must of had him young.” I winked.

“Yeah. Got knocked up when I was his age. Had to get married and all that. Figure that’s why it never worked.” Her short dark hair framed an expressive face.

“Don’t look that old.” I sat back in exaggerated scrutiny. She wore a skimpy yellow bikini that highlighted her tight athletic body. It was obvious she took care of herself.

“I’m thirty-three. Feelin’ twenty.” Her dark eyes sparkled.

“Wouldn’t have guessed you were out of your twenties.”

“Thanks. I like you. I like having guys like you around.” She smiled coyly.

I felt suddenly uneasy, suddenly aware that most of her splendid body was exposed, for me to view, and she didn’t mind. The swell of her breasts, her wonderfully smooth skin glistening with oil, the long lovely contours of her legs. I fought the urge to touch her, to caress her.

“Uhm ... is your son, uh, out here with you?” I tried to remain under control.

“Hell no.” She reacted to my impertinence, yet smiled in that controlled way women do when they sense a man’s desire. “Haven’t seen him all these years. After the divorce I left him with his father. He’s got custody. I just couldn’t handle having a kid.” She sat up, crossed her legs in front of her, faced me. If she had been one of those touchy-feely type people—constantly in physical contact during conversation—I would have melted into the sand.

“Boy, that’s uh ... a long time. Aren’t you curious to see, you know, how he’s doing?”

“Oh sure. My mother sent a picture once. But you see, I’ve got no deep motherly drive.” Her voice was no longer as seductive. Perhaps a bit more coarse, gravely. “Guess I’m weird or something. Selfish. I like the free life I’m living.”

I couldn’t think of a reply.

“Besides ... I’m glad I didn’t have a kid around. Sort of ran with a bad crowd. Hooked up

with some bikers for awhile. Got into some bad shit. Bad shit.”

“We all go through phases.”

“Yeah ... your right. But drinking and drugs ... bad stuff. And, well ... I got gang raped ... got the crap beat outta me. Was really messed up for a while.” I could see her watching my eyes.

“Not sure what to say,” never good at the sympathy game. “Looks like you’ve got yer act together now.”

“Not much anyone can say. Shit happens, you know. But, yeah ... I’ve kind of got my act together. Cleaned up, cleaned out. Eating right. Exercise. Took a few classes. Got my head screwed on. Got a good life now. Can’t complain.”

“What you doing in Hawthorne? Here for the race?”

“No. Mainly the sun.” She gazed down the length of her body, admiring the deep richness of her skin. She had a fantastic tan. A beach tan. Something she must have worked on for weeks.

“Actually,” she looked me square in the face, “I’m out here with a National Borax geologist. Bob Cooper.” She studied my expression. “Hear of him?”

“No ... can’t say I have.”

“We’re shacked-up at the El Cap. But no commitment. Probably just for the summer. He’s heading back to Berkeley for graduate work in the fall.”

“Oh well,” I thought, “another disappointment.” I should have known. Someone else always seems to get the beautiful women, and Denice was a definite 10, on any scale. She really stood out among all those plush bottoms.

• • •

The second race ended about 3:30. Just in time. Clouds appeared from behind the mountains, and as the last boat crossed the finish line a gentle rain drifted across the beach.

Among squeals and laughter and the general commotion, I said, “Better get back. They’ll need help carrying the wreckage of our consumption back to the trucks.”

“Okay. I’m gonna stay here awhile. This rain feels good.”

“It does, doesn’t it.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around town.” She smiled pleasantly.

“Hope so.” I’m sure lust was written across my face.

“Me too.” She reached up and gently touched my left hand. “You’ve got nice eyes.” She let her hand fall back into her scrumptious lap.

I’m sure I blushed. “Thanks.” I waved as I dashed off through the confusion of the crowd. Needless to say, we didn’t hang around for the trophy presentations.

Because Dave had escaped with one of our vehicles, I rode into town with Wally and Evy. I spent another hour at their place talking The Sixties. Wally was heavy into the music of that period and Evy was fond of the popular writers from that era. Both right up my alley. We had a really stimulating discussion without the usual apologies for being stuck in the past.

• • •

That night, at dinner, we got the whole story about Dave's adventure with Romalyn.

"Where you want me to start?"

"The beginning, Dave. At ... the ... beginning." Stu held up one finger.

"Alright," Dave began, "if that's what you want." He finished chewing. "I was sitting at the bar. It was crowded. The guy next to me got up and left."

"Guess you weren't his type." I love doing that to self-proclaimed lady-killers.

"Romalyn took his spot." Dave ignored my jab and forced a sarcastic grin. "I said hello, but didn't pay much attention."

"Right." Walt smirked.

"Well, shit, she wasn't what I had in mind. I was after something...."

"Younger," I volunteered. Stu about choked, trying to laugh with a mouth full.

"And firm." I almost expected Rob to lick his lips.

"I really didn't wanna get involved. But the next thing I knew she'd slipped off her shoe and was rubbing my leg with her foot."

"Probably liked your tight shorts," Rob interjected.

"I know I did," I spoke softly, effeminately.

"Fag," Dave sneered.

"Chicks like those tight shorts," Rob went on, "I told you those were lady killers."

Dave chewed a fork full of steak; took a slug of his beer. "I looked over at her and down at her foot. 'Like what I'm doin'?' she asked. 'Yeah, sure, who wouldn't?' I answered. 'Would you like me to do that to your whole body?' she asked. I said, 'Sure, who wouldn't?' 'You have a room in town?' she asked. I said, 'Sure, who doesn't?'"

Another sip of beer. "That's when I figured she was a hooker. I wanted to find out how much, but didn't know how ... you know, to ask, in case she wasn't."

He downed another gulp of beef and beer.

"So I let it stand. Figured I'd work it out later. That's when we showed on the beach and went to my room at the motel. She had done this before. Oh yeah. She was fast. By the time I had the shades drawn and the door locked she was buck naked on the bed. Christ, my dick was rock hard. Had to struggle getting my shorts off."

I visualized him dancing around the room in his Jockey Juniors tugging at his groin.

"But she knew what to do ... had all the moves. She was already juiced up and ready when I jumped on and in and christ it was over before I knew it."

"Minute man," Walt chided.

"Shit, it's been a while. She seemed disappointed. But who cares. By then I was trying to figure how much it was gonna cost."

"It's a good thing for her she didn't charge by the minute." I felt ornery.

"Hey, just wait," Dave waved his empty fork around. "While we laid there she kept playing with me. Touching me all over. Working my member. Licking my face and neck."

Dave swallowed another mouthful of beer.

"I think if it were anyone else it would have turned me on. But she was like a pig wallowin'

in the mud. All over me. I just laid there figuring I'd better go along. Maybe it was part of the package, you know. And sure enough, she messed around long enough I got hard again. She seemed real happy. Pleased with herself. Practically pulled me into her in one motion."

"You gotta satisfy these women, Dave." Stu sounded like a stern father.

"Man, I've never been manipulated like that before. She knew exactly what she wanted. My long hard cock in her juicy cunt. That's all. I don't think she even cared if I touched her anywhere else."

More steak, beer, a belch, beer, belch, and more steak.

"Christ! She moved. Got wild. Thrashed around. Grunted and groaned and acted like she hadn't been laid in months. Years."

"Man, I doubt that." Walt seemed extremely interested. "As eager as she seemed, with all these horny guys 'round here ... huh, she probably gives every night. How much you pay?"

"Shit. After she finished I rolled off. Think we fell asleep. When we woke she started talking about where she was from and that she was the mother of two children but they took them away 'cause they thought she was crazy."

"Least she didn't smoke." Stu chuckled to himself.

"Where did she say she's from?" I was curious.

"Said Luning. Lives there with her aunt and uncle. Said she fell off a float in the Founder's Day parade a few years back. Got her head stepped on or something. Said they gave her a frontal lobotomy."

"Huh? Frontal lobotomy? Ain't that for crazies?" Walt seemed puzzled.

"Thought so," I said.

"Maybe it knocked her senseless," Rob laughed.

"Whatever. Everyone thinks she's crazy. But she's not. Says she's not. Said she used to be a performer in St. Louis. Sang and danced. But she's gotta stay here now 'til she's better. Who knows?"

He finished the last of his steak and his beer. "Tank, throw me another brew from the fridge."

Tank, leaning against the sink, frowned, but opened the fridge and pulled out a beer. He acted like the mere touch of the aluminum would pollute his system.

"Thanks." Dave didn't even look at him. "Anyway," he went on, "as we got dressed, I took out a twenty. Handed it to her. 'What's this for?' she said. I said, 'Thought you'd want it.' She got all bent out of shape. 'You think I'm a whore. Jesus christ!' and all that, you know."

We all started laughing, except Tank and Burt.

"Hey, I had all I could do to keep her from tearing my face off. Finally got her calmed down and apologized and told her it was her approach in the bar. That worked. She sat down and cried. She said, 'That's the only way I can meet interesting men. I've never taken money for sex. Never.' I felt like shit, but she seemed okay after that. We talked some more, then she left. Says she wants to see me again."

Dave paused and looked around the room, as if pleading. "When are we getting outta here?"

Everyone laughed.

• • •

After the others had gone, Burt and I cleared the dishes. Trying to make conversation, I said, “So ... I hear that cute gal from the steak house asked you out?”

He blushed. “Yes.”

“You gonna go?” I played dumb.

“I wasn’t at first.”

“Uh oh ... having second thoughts?”

He looked at me for a long moment, then said softly, “She ... she is very attractive. She caught me off guard when she asked. I guess I was embarrassed.”

“She is very attractive. You should accept. I don’t think you could go wrong. I think she’s just your type.”

He watched my face for sarcasm. But I was serious. He said, “I’m thinking I will tell her yes when I see her at dinner tomorrow evening.”

“Good for you, Burt. I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

He seemed pleased to get my support for a change. I felt we had drawn a little closer.

• • •

About 11:30 that night I met Becky in the El Cap coffee shop, as I said I would. I was extremely tired after the day’s activities, excitement, and drinking, but I felt a certain obligation since I had lied to her the day before.

We had a piece of pie, then, preparing to leave, we ended up standing in the parking lot talking until 3:00 in the morning. I don’t know how I made it.

Becky turned out to be very nice, but insecure. She told me, “You aren’t going to believe this ... but I been married four times.”

She watched for my reaction. I was so tired I hardly responded.

“To the same man,” she continued.

“That’s pretty incredible.”

“You think so?” She smiled. “I been divorced four times too.” She paused for effect. “All from the same man.”

It was too late or too early for all of that to sink in. I just shrugged and said, “Life.”

I think she was a bit disappointed by my subdued reaction. She went on, “I moved down here ‘bout a month ago. Had to get away from that bad scene.”

“Where’s home?” was all I could think to say. As far as my numb brain was concerned that conversation should have ended hours before.

“Jerome. Up in Idaho.”

“Why did you come to Hawthorne?”

“Oh ... I’m staying with my sister. Her husband works at the ammo plant.”

Becky was a peculiar person, but interesting. Even so, I finally had to take my leave. The next day’s work was approaching way too fast.

^^^

I struggled to stay awake through breakfast, figuring that once the guys were gone I could sneak an extra hour or two of shut eye.

Through the haze of sleep deprivation I heard Walt taunt Rob. “Told you you wouldn’t get laid last night.”

“How you know I didn’t?”

“Man, I was with you most the night.” Walt yawned. “You never even talked to a chick.”

“I got me a nice ... fresh ... piece.” Rob licked his lips, softening his expression.

Walt replied with a drawn out “Bull ... shit.”

“After I dropped you off ... Pin-head.” Rob emphasized his favorite name for Walt.

“Bull crap, man,” Walt shook his head in disbelief. “Who was she?”

“I made one last pass near the El Cap. Shannon ... the chick from the Beef Platter ... and her friend ... Clair ... were walking along. I talked to them ... and we ended up cruising town.”

“Cruising ain’t getting laid,” Walt spoke emphatically.

“I dropped Clair at her place ... and brought Shannon back here.” Rob grinned. “Just to talk ... you know.”

I glanced at Burt. Stu did the same. Burt remained expressionless, eating his Cheerios.

Rob saw us, went on. “Said she never tried drugs ... wanted to ... was afraid.” His voice became sincere, fatherly. “Poor ... innocent ... child.” He held out his arms like he was ready to hug a young one. His voice became wicked. “She came to the right man. I gave her ... acid ... a quarter tab. Got her high.” He shrugged and smiled sheepishly at Walt. “She wanted to fuck. Said she had never ... done that before ... either. Wanted to ... but was afraid.” Back to his fatherly voice. “Poor ... innocent ... child.” He cupped his groin. “She came to the right man.” He made a couple of exaggerated pelvic thrusts. “I fucked the innocence ... right outta her.”

“Bull shit,” Walt kept saying. “Bull shit.”

Rob ignored him. “Got her cherry ... too. She was wild ... wanted it bad. I unleashed the woman ... in her.”

Rob turned toward Burt. In a condescending tone, “That means ... she was still a *virgin*. I was her first. She loved every inch ... every minute.”

“Yeah, one inch. And one minute,” Walt sneered.

Burt wouldn’t look up. His freckled cheeks flushed red. He stopped eating.

Rob went into extreme detail, step by vivid step, as to what he had done with her. He would look at Burt’s bowed head and emphasize words like “smooth young flesh ... supple, fresh thighs ... firm and strong ... lovely sweet breasts ... a mouth warm and full ... no plush bottom here ... hard, tight muscles that played under the tan flesh of her lovely young legs.” He concluded by sighing, “I could feel her calves strain against mine when she had her final orgasm.”

Although Rob’s words were meant for Burt, he didn’t say a word, didn’t respond. I am sure he wanted to believe Rob was lying, making it up for the sake of bravado. But he knew with Rob you could never be positive.

“Man, there ain’t no virgins left.” Dave shook his head.

“Not after last night,” Rob retorted.

“Shit!” Walt declared, “No virgin is gonna give herself to an old Wolfman like you.”

Rob held up his hand as if he wanted us to wait. He retreated into the depths of his trailer. When he returned he produced the sheet from his bed and held it up. “Blood stains ... proves it.” He seemed pleased with his evidence.

Walt said, “So what? You fucked her during her period.”

Randy moved close, “Looks like dried catsup to me.”

I thought so too. “What did you do, Wolfman? Fuck a cheeseburger?”

“She was cheesy, alright?” Rob grinned.

Burt got up and left.

• • •

I couldn’t find any 700 x 15 Tracker nylon ply tubeless tires in Hawthorne. I called around and contacted a place in Fallon that said they had them in stock. So I drove up to procure tires for two of our vehicles. When I got there the clerk was none too cooperative.

“Can’t open an account without a Purchase Order,” he said flatly.

“I have a number.” I unfolded the slip where I had written down the NORMMEX Purchase Order number for this project.

“Won’t do,” he shook his head, “nope. Gotta have a actual order.”

“They never gave me an order form. Just this number.” I laid it on the counter and pointed to it. “It works everywhere else.”

“Well, son,” he said sarcastically, “this ain’t everywhere else.”

I was getting frustrated and confused. I wasn’t sure what to do next. “This is all I’ve got. If it won’t do I guess we can’t do business.” I folded the paper and stuck it in my pocket, preparing to leave.

“Now wait ... maybe we can do business.” He reached under the counter and pulled out a small notebook. “I can sell you those tires. But I hafta have a serial number, an odometer readin’, and a license plate number.”

Not anticipating where this was going, I said, “The trucks are in the field. I can’t get to them until tonight.”

“Come on back tomorrow then.”

My shoulders sank. “Drove all the way up from Hawthorne.”

“Sorry.”

“What if I give you the numbers from my truck?” I was grasping at straws.

“Nope. Sorry.” He droned on in a monotone. “Gotta be the vehicles they’re gonna be mounted on.”

“Oh come on,” I was getting irritated. I felt like he was pulling my chain. “What difference does it make? If this is for security purposes, my truck’s numbers are just as good as the others.”

“Don’t get snotty with me, bub.” He threw the notebook back under the counter.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry.” I tried back-peddling. “But I’ve gotta get tires for these trucks. I called first. I drove up from Hawthorne. I don’t see why you can’t use my truck for security.”



“S’not security. It’s warranty. I’ve gotta know the mileage off the trucks for the warranty.” He wouldn’t relent.

I shrugged, “I’ll get the damn tires somewhere else,” and walked out.

• • •

Stu told me that evening, “Burt ‘n’ Rob’re workin’ south of town, together. Rob said Burt refused to speak to him all day.”

I frowned and shook my head. “Doesn’t surprise me, after what Rob pulled this morning. Didn’t realize they were still paired up. Poor Burt’s world is getting a bit turned ‘round.”

“Yeah.” I could tell by his expression that Stu felt bad. “Tank told me Burt’s decided he never wants to see Shannon again.”

“No more Beef Platter?”

“No more Beef Platter.”

• • •

When I took my leave from Becky in the parking lot of the El Cap I had carelessly invited her to visit me in my Empire. The next night, when she got off work at 11:30, she drove over and we talked again until 4:30 in the morning. The late hours were starting to get to me. It was getting harder to get up and going in the mornings. On the previous two days I had been lucky, getting a chance to take an afternoon nap before the others came in, but I knew that couldn’t continue.

After a quick tour of the trailer she settled in at the table. Trying to stimulate some sort of conversation, I said, “Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure. Anything.”

“Just curious. What’s the deal with you being married four times? Most people get hitched just once, or twice. But four times?”

She laughed. “I’ve been married four times ... to the same man.” She said it as if she were proud or had accomplished something unique on a world class level.

“I know, you mentioned that.” I placed our beers on the table and sat down next to her. “What’s the deal?”

“I married Phil right after graduation.”

“High school?”

“Uh-huh. That lasted six months. He liked to drink and hang around with his friends. Some nights he wouldn’t come home ‘til dawn.”

“Was he messing ‘round?”

“Don’t think so.” She played with the top of her can. “Just out with the guys.”

“Liked to party, huh?”

“He always figured I’d be there.” She looked toward the floor. “And ... well ... the nights when he came home drunk he’d usually rough me up. You know, if I asked where he was an’ stuff. Then he’d accuse me of cheating on him. Sometimes—I didn’t like being near him when

he smelled like booze and cigarettes—he'd force me to have sex with him."

I didn't say a thing. Just looked at my hands between glances at her face.

"Couple times when I had my period."

"Sounds like wife rape."

"It felt like rape. If I resisted he'd get rough. He was always inconsiderate, even when he wasn't drunk. When he was in one of his moods he'd rip my clothes and pinch my ... nipples, you know." She brought her right hand to her left breast as if I might not know where a nipple was located. "And bite my breast so hard I'd have teeth marks and bruises for a week after."

"You put up with that for six months?"

"Well ... I didn't know. I was young and new at bein' a wife. Thought maybe that's the way things were. I finally had enough, though, and left."

"Why did you go back?"

"Well ... six months after the divorce was final we ran into each other at a party. We talked and ... well, ended up in bed. Everything seemed wonderful again. We decided maybe we could work things out. Phil was so cute, you know. So we moved in together and things went okay. So we got, you know, married again. Same minister as the first time."

"Okay ... that's two marriages," I held up two fingers, "two to go," I brought up two more fingers.

"Well, okay, that second marriage lasted a year."

"Ooo, twice as long."

"Yeah. But he finally got back to his old ways. I left him again. Same story."

"Some people never change. They say by the time you're two years old your personality's in place. With a guy like Phil I guess you've gotta love him or leave him."

"Yes. I suppose. I should've learned my lesson. But I was lonely. Missed the good parts. The snuggling and the touching. When Phil wasn't drunk he was a lot of fun. He laughed a lot. Made me laugh. I missed that."

"But other guys can give you that."

"You make me laugh ... now. But nobody came along then. I didn't meet nobody I liked. Where were you then?" She reached up and gently brushed the hair back from the side of my face.

I shrugged, not sure I liked what she was implying.

"Well ... a few months after that divorce was final he started coming around. He'd knock on the door and I'd let him in. He practically begged to come back. Promised to take treatment for the booze. He said he'd really work on his aggressiveness, be more gentle. I fell for it. Married him again."

"A sucker for a good sales pitch, huh? I've got some beautiful beach front property down in Arizona. Interested?"

She punched me gently in the arm and smiled.

"So," I said, "what happened this third time?"

"Same result, three months later. D-I-V-O-R-C-E."

"Only three months? Did he even start the treatments?"

"Of course not. There was never 'nough time, or money."

“And, so, that brings us around to marriage number four. Same thing again?”

“Same thing again. He started coming around. I’d moved back with my parents. They didn’t know what to do with me. I don’t blame ’em. Everyone told me I was an idiot to keep taking Phil back. But I loved him. Had his good sides. I just couldn’t stand living with ’im. I swore to my parents and friends that I would never be with him again. But after months of Phil’s cute smiles and persistence I got ... horny,” she looked at me slyly, “gave in and fell back in his arms. And ... our fourth marriage.”

“I’ll bet there weren’t any wedding presents that time.”

“That’s a good guess.”

“Okay,” I said, slightly annoyed by the monotony of her story, “now we’re into your fourth marriage. Did anything change? I mean, I would think this guy would’ve seen the light. (‘Even if you didn’t,’ I thought.) At least to some degree.”

“Phil did try to stop drinking. Stayed home with me more. You know, we’d sit an’ watch T.V. or play cards or sometimes we’d even go for a walk. Like I said, the nice times were very nice. I thought he was finally settling down. Then, one Saturday ... a bunch of his old pals came by. I hated it. I knew they’d cause problems. They ended up goin’ to a bar for a quick one. For old times’ sake.”

“The beginning of the end, huh?”

“Yup. A quick one. Phil didn’t come home for two days. I panicked. I tried finding him, called all around. A friend of his told me he was shackled up with some chick he picked up at the bar. I found out where she lived and drove by the place. Sure enough, there was his truck.”

“Fireworks, huh?”

“Not yet. I didn’t stop. I was so shook I could barely drive. I had to think, but I couldn’t stop crying. Drinking was one thing, but another woman ... I couldn’t handle that. The thought of him with another woman ... that was the last straw. No more. I decided to leave him and leave town as well. Had to get away from him all together. Get away from all his negative influences. That was the only way. Distance and time. I phoned my sister, Carol, here in Hawthorne, and started making plans.”

“So, did you ever confront him? Or just leave?”

“He came home, unexpectedly. Still drunk as a skunk. I could smell the booze and the cigarettes and her stinky perfume. I lost it. ‘Back from humpin’ your little slut, huh?’ I said. He said, ‘You bitch! Don’t call anyone a slut you don’t know.’ He started toward me. Shouted at me. Called me a whore. What nerve. Then he puked on the living room carpet, staggered down the hall, and collapsed on our bed.”

I noticed a gleam in her eyes. A broad smile came as she said, “I suddenly saw a way for revenge. As he slept I folded the sheet over the top of him. You know, so it was all around him. I got out my sewing kit and stitched the two halves together. Used my heaviest thread. When I was done he was like a kitten in a gunny sack, ready to be drowned. All that stuck out was his head. I made sure the stitches were tight so he couldn’t break ‘em. I even double stitched around the top for extra strength. Then I continued packing.”

“I think I see where this is goin’.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she said coyly. “When Phil woke the next mornin’ he couldn’t get up.

He was trapped in the bag. I took my cue and told him everything on my mind. Every time he tried to get up I kicked him back down or whacked him with one of his shoes. He pleaded to go the bathroom. I wouldn't let him. Finally pissed all over himself. Could see the stains through the sheet."

"Yuk ... what a mess."

"That's nothin'. When I ran out of words and my voice gave out I was so worked up and angry I started beating him with his shoe. I just pounded away. There was nothing he could do but curl up in a ball and take it. It felt like I whacked 'im for fifteen minutes. Finally I was exhausted. It felt great. I kicked 'im one last time in the butt. Hard."

"Violent lady," I teased.

"It felt so good. All that frustration saved up."

"So that's how you left him, holed in the bag, so to speak?"

"I left him in the sheet while I loaded my stuff in the car. But I got more ideas." Again, that sinister broad smile. "Before I left I poured all the cereal from the boxes onto the kitchen table. I opened every can in the place and poured the stuff into the sink and on the kitchen counter. I opened the refrigerator and pulled out the eggs. I took those into the other room and pelted Phil, who was lying there suffering and tryin' to get outta the bag. I poured Karo syrup in the silverware drawer. I dumped a box of detergent into the wash machine and started it and left the lid open. I pulled all his clothes off their hangers and from their drawers and piled 'em in the bathtub and turned on the water. Every time I passed Phil lying on the bed I'd give 'im a swift kick."

"Boy, better stay on your good side."

"Wait, I'm not done yet. I found a bottle of his cologne and poured it all through the house, soaking the carpets and drapes. I took the jackets off of his favorite albums and let them fly against the wall. I turned on his stereo to the rock station and cranked it up full blast. The speakers rattled. Before I left I let the air out of all four of the tires on his truck. I turned on the headlights so the battery would drain. Then I walked to my car, got in, turned the key, backed out of the drive, and headed south to Nevada."

"Divorce number four."

...

We sat drinking beer and I told her some about my separation from Nancy. She got real touchy-feely, things got intimate, and we ended the conversation on my bunk. That had never been my intention. Becky was just not appealing to me physically. But, I guess I was horny and tired and her coming on to me pushed me over the edge. Once in bed I can't say we made love. It was simply sexual release, the old "bim-bam, thank you, Ma'am."

I will have to admit, it was nice having a woman's body next to mine, and the touching was pleasant, but the whole act just didn't seem right. It just happened. I'm not sure how she felt afterward, or if she got more out of the experience than I did, but she did ask to come back. What can you say after being intimate? Not wanting to hurt her feelings, I said, "Sure, why not?"

^^^

I delivered my truck into the trained hands of the Ford mechanic for a tune-up. I was spending way too much time down there. Slick got to know me by name. But that didn't improve the service. He still took his own sweet time.

...

I saw Denice while I was hoofing it through town. I was leaving the phone booth next to the Texaco station when she pulled up to the pumps. Her partners from Tonopah—Carolyn and Javee—were with her. Waving and laughing, they were obviously in a raucous mood. I wasn't. I had a sinus headache, a list of chores, and samples to prepare and ship. So I waved, smiled, and hurried on.

I could hear Javee's voice cutting through the girlish giggles and laughter. She stood half in and half out of the Mustang, directing some lewd comment my way. I couldn't make out most of what she said, so I waved again, shrugged my shoulders, and turned the corner toward the post office.

Thinking back, I could kick myself for not stopping to talk. What man in his right mind passes up the chance to speak with three attractive women? Especially in Hawthorne, Nevada. Oh well ... I guess I can blame it on the sinus headache.

...

Rob and Burt worked together for another day. They were sampling a few scattered dumps above the Doll House, a few miles south of Hawthorne. The dirt road that they needed to follow passed next to the isolated business. Rob suddenly decided that he needed to use the phone and get some fresh water.

"An excuse," Rob admitted. "I wanted to see a whore house up close."

"Yeah, and freak out old Burt." I was still riding his case.

"Of course," he sneered.

Making eye contact, I said, "How did he take it?"

"Nervous as hell."

"Prob'bly afraid his preacher'd see'im there." Knowing how I felt, Stu nudged me, trying to defuse a potentially tense situation.

"Yeah, that would be a scene." I smiled at Stu, thanking him with my eyes. "His preacher walking out as Burt is walking in. 'Uh ... sorry sir, uh ... I was just getting some ... water, yeah, water for my canteen.' 'Me too, my son. I required water for my Baptismal Font.'"

"Nuh ... he stayed in the truck, with the windows rolled up. Wouldn't even let me refresh his water bottle."

"Don't wanna get contaminated by no whores now." Dave laughed. "What're the girls

like?”

“Mmm ... they’re really friendly, even once they realized I wasn’t a paying customer. They obviously liked me.” Rob seemed to puff up, as if being inflated. “In fact ... one of them told me ... if I wanna come back sometime ... she’d gimme a head-job. Free.”

“Bull shit!” Dave, Stu and I blasted simultaneously.

“Hey, they gave me a Doll House T-shirt ... for free.”

“T-shirt’s different’n a blow-job.” Stu waved off Rob’s rationale.

“Nice looking.” I grabbed the shirt from Rob.

“Ooo, sexy.” Dave took it from me.

Their logo is a lusciously formed nude female reclining seductively in a tilted champagne glass full of bubbly. Across the top of the flesh colored shirt are the words: The Doll House, Hawthorne, Nevada. Under the glass they had printed their slogan: Home of the Champagne Kittens.

“Look anything like this one?” Dave fingered the drawing.

“Uh, well ... except for ... the one that wants me ... they’re all pretty average. There were two fat ones and two real skinny ones.”

“Yeah, the one that wants you is probably got some dee-zees.” I was finding it harder and harder to tolerate his bull-shit.

“Disease? The only disease she’s got is lust ... for me.” Rob recovered the shirt from Dave’s firm grasp.

“Shit, Spurrier,” Stu moaned, “give us a break.”

“Hey,” Dave jumped in, “I want one of these shirts.”

“I gotta go back that way Monday. What size?”

“What’s this one ... medium?” Dave grabbed at the neck line. Rob tilted it toward him.

“Yeah. Medium. Get me a medium.”

“That’ll cost you,” Rob said smugly. “They only give it to me for free.”

“Get me one too,” Stu announced. “Medium.”

“Me too,” I joined in. “Extra-large. How much?”

“Twelve bucks,” Rob replied without thought.

“Not a bad price to make people think you been to a whore house.” Dave contemplated.

“Yeah. But be careful where you wear it back home.” Stu was always the pragmatist.

“Those feminists ‘round the campus won’t understand.”

“Right,” I agreed. “But what I wanna know is,” looking at Rob, “if they gave you that shirt, how did you know the price?”

Rob said slowly, “I ... saw the tag ... before they pulled it off.”

I had no response.

...

That same day was Burt’s twenty-first birthday. Feeling bad for him because of the Shannon incident, the brownies, and for dumping on him in general, I held a gala dinner in my trailer to celebrate. But the whole thing was casual, of course.

I persuaded Rob to cook up a pot of his very best spaghetti sauce and the rest of us contributed other essentials to the meal. Amazingly, everyone was in a good mood, even after a tough, hot day in the field.

Just as we sat down to eat there was a knock at the trailer door. It was Romalyn. My spirits sank. “Oh shit,” I said under my breath, “all we need is some floozy to spoil the party.”

Conversation stopped dead.

“Hi ... uh ... we’re just sitting down to eat.” I glanced back toward the crowded table, hoping that would discourage her. But trying to be polite, I added, “Uh ... you’re, uh, welcome to join us if you’d like.”

She didn’t even flinch. “I haven’t eaten yet. Sure. I’d love to.”

She stepped right in, “Hi, guys,” scanning the faces, “I think I’ll sit here next to my buddy,” and squirmed in between Dave and the birthday boy. “This’s cozy.” Everyone had to adjust to make room.

I handed her a plate, “Help yourself.”

She removed a lady like portion of spaghetti and carefully placed it on her plate. She delicately cut a bit with her fork and sampled it. “This’s delicious. Who’s the chef?”

“Rob, there.” I pointed with my fork as he lifted his left hand to be recognized. He had an arrogant “of course its delicious” look on his face.

“Mmm ... you’re gonna make some woman a good wife someday.” Zing.

I started liking that “floozy” right about then.

Thus stimulated, the conversation livened, bouncing from topic to topic. Romalyn fit right in, holding her own, and distributing zings as if she had known us for months. It was great fun and her presence added a sexual spark to the chemistry.

At one point I asked her facetiously, “What’s a bright girl like you doing in a town like this?”

“This’s where I live,” she smiled pleasantly. “I grew up here.”

Remembering that Dave told us she had been a performer in St. Louis, I asked, “Do you still work?”

“Don’t we all?” she laughed. Then a slight change came over her expression. “But not like I used to.”

“What’d you used to do?” Stu questioned her, anticipating, I’m sure, that she had been some sort of cocktail lounge singer or perhaps a dancer at some small club.

“Well, for several years I was a legal secretary in New Orleans.” She finished a small bite of bread. “Worked for one of the biggest firms in that city.”

Stu and I looked at Dave. Stu asked, “Why’d you quit?”

The expression on her face went from bright to sad then back to a soft knowing smile, all within a few short seconds. “I had a little accident.” She set her fork down on her plate, but held onto it. “I was invited back here one year ... to be the Grand Marshal in the Founder’s Day parade. The float I was on jerked forward and I ... fell off the back. A fellow on a scooter accidentally knocked me on the head.”

No one said a thing.

“I haven’t been the same since.” She looked from Dave, to me, then to Stu. “It changed

everything.”

No one had the nerve to question the discrepancies in her story, although I could tell by the raised eyebrows that most of us had noticed.

Seeing Romalyn at a closer proximity, and spending a little time with her, I was able to determine that she was about 40. She definitely looked better that night at dinner than she did on the beach. At dinner she wore almost no make-up, her hair was down, softening her face, and she looked comfortable in her bright T-shirt and faded jeans. She appeared more natural, relaxed, and not on the make. My opinion of her changed. She actually seemed like a nice, friendly, down to earth, educated person. But there was a weird edge to her comments. There was something about her that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

• • •

After dinner I pulled out a few surprises; some gifts I purchased for Burt.

“Come on,” Burt blushed, “you didn't have to do this.”

I handed him the first package. “You're our buddy, Burt.” It was wrapped in a dismembered brown paper bag. “Besides,” I turned to Stu, “this stuff will be good for a few laughs.”

Burt cautiously unwrapped the first package. He held up a red bandanna for all to see.

“Another one for your massive collection,” I pointed out.

The bandanna got a few mild laughs. We were constantly on Burt about his one lonely red bandanna.

“Hey,” Stu tossed out, “you won't hafta rinse your dirty underwear every night now.”

“What's this have to do with underwear?” Burt puzzled.

“Hey, a bandanna's just underwear that shows.” Stu smiled at his analogy.

“I couldn't get you to splurge,” I said, “so I got you another one.” I reached for my wallet.

“But the offer still stands. If you want more I'll loan you some cash?”

He shook his head, as always. “No, thanks, this one will be fine.”

I reminded him of our previous conversations. “Now you have a matching pair. You can rotate. You won't hafta wash them every night.”

The second gift was a book: *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*. That brought a good round of laughs and more color to Burt's sun rosy cheeks.

“If there's anything confusing in there,” Romalyn snuggled coyly against Burt, her left breast firm against his left arm, “I'd be glad to be your tutor.”

Hoots and hollers.

“Go for it, Burt.” Walt pounded the table. Dishes rattled. “Go for it.”

Burt squirmed. A fork covered in red sauce slid from a plate and into Burt's lap. He looked down, astonished; picked up the fork.

Romalyn snatched her paper napkin and started to wipe at the glop. Dave slid out of his seat to give her room.

“No ... I'll get it. Here,” Burt grabbed her hand. As if burnt, he let it go.

“You'd better put water on that. Before it sets.” Romalyn slid along the bench, moved from



the table. Burt escaped to the sink.

I handed him the dish cloth, he soaked it, then rubbed at the spot on his jeans. The moisture spread to look like he pissed his pants. I wanted to comment, but held my tongue. Romalyn, satisfied Burt had things under control, returned to her seat. Dave followed. Burt remained standing, out of Romalyn's reach.

"There's still one more gift," I announced. "Party's not over yet."

I opened a cupboard and pulled a brown paper bag from the shelf. I had intentionally twisted it around a bottle; something a wino would do. The top of the bottle protruded from the bag. "All right!" and other hoots of recognition. It was a pint bottle of Jack Daniels.

Burt simply said, "Oh...."

Rob took the bottle, popped the seal. "We should make a toast ... and take a drink ... for solidarity ... and Burt's continued good health. After all ... we're a team."

A cheer went up.

Walt sang out, "All for one and one for all."

Another cheer.

Burt shook his head, refusing. But with a little prodding from the guys and gentle cooing from Romalyn, he softened.

"Come on, Burt, it's for The Team," Dave coaxed.

"Yeah. Just one," I pleaded.

"A small one, Burt." Stu's father voice again. "Just a small one."

"One drink leads to another," Burt argued. "All you want is to get me drunk."

"I won't let 'em get you drunk," Stu promised.

"Besides," I pointed out, "with a bottle this size, if we each take a swallow, there won't be enough for anyone to get drunk."

He frowned at the bottle, but saw the point, and capitulated.

"All right, Burt," we shouted in unison.

Spurrier ceremoniously unscrewed the cap, then handed the bottle to the initiate.

"Happy birthday, Burt," we cheered.

"Thanks," he said cautiously, hefting the small bottle, feeling its weight. Then he quickly put it to his lips, tipped it back slightly, and accepted a controlled swallow. His body shivered. Tears welled-up in his eyes. He passed the bottle back to Rob.

"To the team ... to Burt ... to the crew." Rob took a drink, smacked his lips, and started the bottle on its way. When it got to Tank he refused, passed it on.

"Oh ... wait a minute," Walt halted everything.

"Yeah, come on, Tank," Dave chided, "don't be a party pooper."

Stu looked at him square on. In a pissed voice, he said, "Be one of the guys for a change."

"Don't be a jerk," Walt moaned.

"Hey, it's Burt's birthday," Rob noted.

Randy pleaded. "Just one taste, Tank."

"Burt did it," I said. "Come on, Tank, it won't hurt."

"Just this once," on and on. But the big bastard was just too god-damned stubborn.

Finally, Burt, being a good sport, said, "Do it for me, Walter. It's my birthday."

Tank raised his glass of milk. “Burt, you’re my buddy. You should understand.” Tank forced a smile. “Happy birthday, Burt. But no booze.”

I watched Burt’s face.

Burt forced a smile, nodded. “Thanks, Tank.” Sarcasm wasn’t his usual style, but the way he let the final “k” catch in the back of his throat I knew he was one step closer to The Edge.

There were a few mumbled curses at Tank’s reticence, and the bottle was kissed by other lips. I was the last.

“God, if any of you are diseased ... I’m in real trouble.”

“Hell,” Walt slurred intentionally, “that liquor’ll kill anything.”

I took my drink and passed what was left back to Burt. “A souvenir.”

He smiled with a shit-assing grin, “I’ll drink Tank’s share,” and with one hefty swallow he emptied the bottle.

That really brought cheers from the group.

“Good ol’ Burt.”

“One of the guys.”

“Part of the crew.”

Burt blushed again, but was beaming from the adulation. Of course, the liquor might have contributed to his higher spirits.

And we all had a good time, except, of course, Tank, who became sullen and even more withdrawn than usual.

“I swear,” Rob raised his right hand, placing his left on an imaginary bible, “that it is my solemn duty ... to take any means necessary ... in an attempt to get you drunk.” He looked straight at Tank.

“Yes! Me too,” Walt jumped in.

“Even if it means spiking your Kool Aid,” Rob got a sinister grin, “or moo juice.”

Tank shook his head. “I’d be able to smell it.”

“Don’t ... be ... so ... sure,” Rob’s mad-scientist look crossed his face. “We’ll use Everclear ... or Vodka. No smell, no taste. It’ll sneak up on you ... POW!” He smacked his right fist into his left hand.

“It’ll never happen.” Tank downed the last of his milk and excused himself.

“Don’t be so sure, Tank,” Rob promised. “Don’t be so sure.”

The party ended on that sour note, and the others followed Tank out the door.

But Romalyn hung back. “Let me help with these dishes.”

“Nah-nah-nah,” I shook my head, “you’re our guest.”

“I insist. I was uninvited. Please.” Big brown eyes.

“Okay ... if you insist. I’ll wash, you dry.”

While we did the dishes, she said, “Look, you guys’ve been nice to me ... let me fix dinner tomorrow. Something homemade, special. I’d love to do it. You guys’re a blast.”

I couldn’t think of a good argument. “Why not?”

^^^

Becky was working at the El Cap the next morning when I dropped off my samples. Since our “dates” she had become possessive and demanding, hinting at another “conversation in the sheets.” I knew I didn’t want to be involved with her that way. Our first and only close encounter had just happened. I wished it hadn’t. I felt she was a nice young woman, but not what I fantasize about for a serious, long range relationship. I tried to be friendly, but intentionally ignored her suggestive comments.

On our previous “date” she had mentioned that she had never been to Yosemite. After I described the park in glowing terms and great detail, she was excited to go. In another of my ever increasing number of incautious moments, I had agreed to take her. After signing the last of my shipping slips I was preparing to leave, when she asked, “We’re still on for tomorrow, aren’t we?”

I had nearly forgotten. My brain locked up. I tried to think of some excuse, but nothing viable surfaced. I did remember how I lied to her about the boat race. I said, “Yeah. I suppose.” My lack of enthusiasm was apparent.

“You still wanna use my car?” she asked dryly.

“Yeah, that would be best. I’ll pack a lunch, bring a cooler and something to drink.”

“Ten o’clock, your place then?”

I shook my head. “Sounds good. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

...

I drove Randy to Reno for the usual reason. Cruising through the monotony of the desert, he stared quietly through the bug spattered windshield. Then he spoke, as if finally convinced. “When I’m in Tucson I’m gonna propose to Nina.”

I didn’t respond at first. Then I said, “Guess living out here in the middle of nowhere pushes one toward substantiating a relationship back home.”

“Suppose so,” he said without interest.

“Maybe that’s why you been so quiet lately.”

He didn’t respond, lost in his fantasy of domesticated bliss.

We saw more jets, north of Schurz, performing bombing runs. We also noted that most of the small lakes along the Truckee River were drying up. The spring floods were over. Summer was taking its toll. It was hot and humid again that day.

On my return trip I did observe several Curlew along the shores. They were always interesting, with their long legs and distinctive markings. They look so stilted and regal strolling along the shallows.

• • •

Romalyn, true to her word, showed up about 3:00. She and I chatted as she prepared a home cooked meal. Her Mexican specialty was sour-cream enchiladas with refried beans, Mexican rice, shredded lettuce, grated Monterey Jack cheese, salsa and corn chips and guacamole. For dessert she had bought some strawberries and had baked a pound cake at home. With great dollops of whipped cream it topped off a wonderful meal.

The guys loved it, gobbled up everything, thanked her, and departed. She and I washed the dishes and chatted some more.

"I love doing this," she sighed. "You guys treat me so good ... I wouldn't mind doing this every night."

"Be my guest," I teased, "I'm sure the others wouldn't mind."

"I couldn't afford to buy the food like this all the time," she qualified her offer.

"We'd buy the food," I strung her along, "that's only fair. We could go shopping together. You pick out what you need, I'll pay for it. In fact, let me reimburse you for tonight's meal."

"Oh no, no ... this one's on me."

"You sure? Be glad to cover it. Was great having you cook."

"Thanks. No. I like cooking. It's no fun for just my aunt an' uncle an' me. I think women get more pleasure cooking for men."

"Men are the big eaters." I patted my stomach.

"They seem to get the most pleasure from a well cooked meal," she agreed.

"Huh? Don't know about that," I feigned disbelief. "The way this bunch wolfs down their meals I doubt they taste a thing. Not to say they didn't appreciate it. It's just that, well, by the time they get in at the end of the day, they're so hungry they usually eat anything placed in front of them." Then I quickly added, "But tonight's meal ... your cooking ... they loved it."

She smiled, slid her arm around my waist, gave me a little squeeze. "I like you. You try so hard to make me feel good. There're a lot of women looking for a guy like you."

I'm sure I blushed. I shrugged a "Thanks, I try."

She stood there, close to me, slowly drying her hands with the dish towel, looking at me from soft brown eyes, her face suddenly serene and thoughtful.

I felt awkward, like I should be saying something appropriate, but nothing came. "I doubt Burt would agree with your assessment."

"Aw ... he likes you too. He just doesn't know how to show it. You did a good thing for him yesterday."

"Don't know. I pick on him a lot. Don't mean to; just happens. He's such an easy target. Can't help myself."

"I'm sure he likes the attention. I know I do."

She hung the towel neatly over the edge of the sink while I put the last of the dishes on a shelf. She watched me close the cupboard door. I could tell she was about to say something, wanted to say something. I was afraid of what it might be, yet somehow wanted it to be. I was aware of the stillness in the summer air, of the night and its darkness closing in. Moments passed like minutes.

Our eyes became entwined in that awkward silence. A moment of warm realization flowed over me: she was caring, intelligent, and understanding. Although parts of her story seemed to fit her persona, other aspects were more disjointed and off-the-wall. She seemed to be searching for her way back to something, something she had lost but couldn't define, couldn't quite remember exactly. She seemed confused, lonely, angry, and frustrated by circumstances. It was as if her life had once been successful, yet, because of something beyond her control, it was on indefinite hold. She was struggling to get off the mark but was stuck in a quagmire and couldn't move in any viable direction. I felt a sudden compassion. She was a sad case, and much deeper and more interesting than I originally thought. In those few brief moments that we were silent, I felt the beginnings of some connection move within me. It was a physical warmth that spread from my chest and passed throughout my body. I felt weak, but somehow exhilarated and enlivened at the same time.

Taking a step forward, I became conscious of footsteps kicking through the gravel outside. "Anyone for Backgammon?" Stu's face was suddenly visible through the screen door.

The spell was broken. I stepped back.

Romalyn looked toward the door, then back to me. She smiled as if it were the only thing she could do. "Chris ... I need to get back to Luning." Her voice was slightly apologetic.

I tried not to sigh. Slightly embarrassed I turned to Stu. "Sure, I'll play you." A combination of relief and disappointment passed over me.

Stu and I stood outside my Empire and watched Romalyn drive away. He scratched the back of his head, "You know, that old T-bird coupe convertible ain't no cheap car. She's had money at some point."

"Could be," I said sadly. "She musta had something goin' for her."

...

Some on the crew worked the dumps near Rawhide, a ghost town a few miles north and west of Gabbs. They would drive north of Hawthorne to Schurz, then leave the highway to take a two-rut road cross-country. In spite of its condition, that primitive trail was much faster than the more circuitous route from Gabbs.

Setting up the Backgammon stones, I asked, "So, how's it goin' up there in Rawhide?"

"Not bad," Stu shrugged. "It's interestin'."

"The town?"

"Yeah. There's old buildings still standin'." He placed his markers and was ready to begin. "Pretty weather beaten though. But you can still get inside some of'em. Otherwise it's just the pits an' scars left from minin'."

"Mostly stores and houses left?"

"Mmm ... naw. Most people lived in tents. Easier to pick up an' leave. The buildings look like businesses; maybe small stores. My favorite's the old sheriff's office. Got an old rusty squirrel cage jail cell."

"Hey, neat." I placed the last of my markers. "I'm surprised somebody hasn't yanked it outta there."

“No way,” he shook his head emphatically. “They’d hafta tear down the rest’a the building and use a good sized crane an’ heavy flatbed to haul it away.”

“How did they get it in there?” I wondered out loud.

“Built in place, probably.”

“Yeah. Must’ve,” I agreed.

A bright smile crossed Stu’s face. “The jail’s at the mouth of Stingaree Gulch.”

“Stingaree Gulch? What’s that?”

“Oh,” he smiled knowingly, “that’s the red light district. With the jail sittin’ at the mouth of the Gulch, the sheriff could keep track of the wild ones and rowdies and keep ’em separate from the respectable upstanding citizens out on the flats.”

“Yeah, and partake of the pleasures of the district at his own whim,” I suggested. “You’ll hafta take me out there some Sunday. Sounds fascinating.”

“You kiddin’?” He picked up the cup and dice. “I work out there every day. Don’t wanna go near there on my day off. Yer on yer own.”

We got the game going, each moving a few of our markers. Then I asked, “So, was Rawhide a pretty good sized place?”

“Uhm ... think I read its population was over ten thousand.”

“Boy, that’s a lot of people to just pick up and leave.”

Stu finished his turn. “Town was around for ten years. Don’t know if they jus’ picked up an’ left.”

“Suppose,” I cupped the dice, “but you’d think with that many people some would’ve stayed around.”

“Yeah ... maybe.” Stu smiled wickedly at my move. I had already placed myself in a weak position. He picked up the dice. “Had three years of real prosperity. That’s probably when it hit ten thousand. After that everybody scattered to more promisin’ prospects.”

^^^

Randy left several assignments for me to complete while he was gone. The major project was to find housing and/or trailer space somewhere near Tonopah. He wanted me to drive down to Carver Station, Tonopah, and Round Mountain to look around. That seemed a bit senseless to me, because we had been down there the week before. I got out the phone book and called all of the motels and trailer parks listed. Again, nothing available. In spite of my efforts I was sure Langan would be pissed because I didn’t physically drive down.

• • •

Our tan Chevy became the newest vehicular problem and complicated my day. Walt had driven the truck to his collection site near Rawhide. Every time he turned the key it was a struggle to get the engine to turn over. Frustrated and concerned about being stranded, he drove back to camp to pick up one of the Kawasakis, just in case. At that point he had collected only one sample.

Rob hadn't left yet because he was assigned to pick up the Gray Beast at the Chevy dealer. That truck was in for a new battery and automatic transmission fluid. It shouldn't have been a major operation, but typical of the service we came to expect, it still wasn't ready by late morning.

With Rob acting the part of an auto mechanic, he and Walt poked at the starter on the tan Chevy. They decided they really couldn't do much more damage without better tools and that it would be unwise to take the truck out before it was repaired. So they agreed to go out together once the Gray Beast was set free.

Their presence made things difficult. I hadn't counted on them being there. I expected Becky at 10:00. I didn't know her number, or her sister's last name, so I couldn't look it up. There was no way I could reach her to change our plans.

Originally I didn't think a few hours off would be a problem, as long as I got my work done first. I calculated we could get up to Yosemite and back without any of the crew knowing I had gone. But with the two most vocal crew members stuck in camp, my plans seemed destined for controversy.

When Becky pulled up to my Empire, Rob and Walt were still molesting the engine of the tan Chevy. Before I could say anything she jumped out and opened the trunk of her car. Without even saying hello, she said, "Put the cooler back here."

The two mechanics glanced over, then gave me a look I couldn't quite interpret. They were either pissed because I was taking an unauthorized day off, or, they felt pity because I was so desperate, really scraping the bottom, in their view, by involving myself with someone like Becky. Or both.

And I was embarrassed. Not only because I was caught cheating the company, but also because Becky was wearing tight shorts that did not flatter her chubby white legs. They seemed like sparkling beacons in the late morning sun. I quickly introduced her, tried to explain the time off, knew I would have to deal with their shit when I got back, and hustled to get my things. I could see Walt making his assessment, placing her on our floating scale. I imagined him saying to Rob, "A five ... maybe a six ... on the Hawthorne Scale." What could I say? The truth hurts. I dropped the cooler into the trunk.

Becky closed it and handed me the keys. "You drive," she commanded.

Adjusting the seat, I happened to look up to see Rob mouthing "Eat Shit And Die" at least three times. I waved sheepishly as we drove away.

• • •

Yosemite was as nice as before, but with less snow. The streams weren't as fast nor as full, there were more hikers and young people, and fewer tourists. The falls were just as incredible; photographs can't do them justice.

We drove down the one-way road past the giant sequoias. Wow! Those are some big trees; huge trees. But there are only a few of the really big guys. The rest are giant redwoods. They are impressive in themselves, but next to the sequoias they look small.

Under the giant trees, Becky renewed her questioning on a subject I had tormented her with since we first met. "Chris?" she asked coyly.

"Yes," I said in a forced, playful voice.

She reached over and played with the hair at the back of my neck. "Why won't you tell me your last name?"

"I told you," I glanced over at her, "I'm famous and rich and want people to like me for myself, not my money."

"That would be nice if you were," she said sweetly, "but I don't believe you."

"Calling me a liar?" I teased.

"No. I know you're not." She seemed to be tiring of this game; pulled her hand back to her lap. "I just wanna know your name."

"Chris. My name's Chris."

"Your last name, idiot."

For some reason I was obstinate, didn't want to give it up yet. "Well ... okay. You see, it's really hard to pronounce and even more difficult to spell."

"So. What is it?" She demanded.

I didn't like her tone. No dice. "Well ... I really can't tell you. I'm embarrassed by it."

I laughed and she scowled.

• • •

We ate a picnic lunch at Yosemite Falls and did the normal tourist things. In spite of my lack of deeper feelings for Becky, I did want to show her a good time. I had brought a Summer Sausage, a small round of Edam cheese, a package of stone ground wheat crackers, a light fruity wine, and a bunch of grapes and an orange. Classy stuff, I thought.

Unpacking the lunch, I said, "Hope you like sausage and cheese."

"Mmm ... not much." Her voice was soft and distant.

"Oh, sorry." I was disappointed. "Thought it would be a nice treat."

"Not for me." She seemed annoyed.

"Should have asked what you wanted." I cut a bit of sausage and offered it to her. She waved it away. "What should I have gotten?"

"Sandwiches. Or fried chicken. Or something."

I offered a small wedge of cheese. She took it, but only nibbled at it. She seemed really distracted. Suddenly her mood intensified. "Why'd you bring me here?"



“Huh?” I had trouble comprehending her sudden anger. “I thought you wanted to come.”

“I don’t know why you brought me here.” There was anger in her voice. “I want you to take me home.”

I was flabbergasted. I had no idea what caused her sudden change in attitude and obvious anger.

While loading the trunk I became angry myself. I hadn’t done or said anything that I was aware of. A sense of hurt lodged in the pit of my stomach because she didn’t appreciate the special effort I put into our meal. That bothered me. It was then that I determined our relationship had gone as far as it ever would.

The drive back to Hawthorne was definitely less festive. There was an almost visible tension between us. It was as much my fault as it was hers. I am not sure what her reasons were, maybe she sensed my embarrassment when I introduced her to Walt and Rob, but mine were plain and shallow. I did not want to be trapped in any sort of exclusive relationship at that time, especially with her.

• • •

Back in camp I unloaded my things and Becky hurried away in her car. I hoped that was that.

And, as expected, when they got in, Rob and Walt gave me a good rash of shit. I tried to explain, but they wouldn’t buy any of it. I was stigmatized, and I would have to live with it.

Later, Burt dropped off his samples. Feeling somewhat sorry for myself, I thought that perhaps he would be less critical. But I started off on the wrong foot. “What’s with the beard,” I pointed casually toward his scraggly face. He hadn’t shaved for several days.

“Who cares?”

Oops! I let it drop.

• • •

After dinner Rob stopped by my trailer to collect his field map. I sorted the short stack of folded topo sheets, suspecting that he was going to continue his harangue about my day with Becky. Sometimes the best defense is a good offense. I said, “So ... you get those blood stains out of your sheet?”

I figured he would go into a long dissertation on stain removal. Instead he sat down across from me and sighed. He spoke slowly, “You better not repeat this ... Chapik. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.” He gave me one of his infamous—what we called his buddy fucker—smiles.

Expecting his usual spew of bullshit, I agreed. “Sure. Whatever you say stays here with me.” I had found his map and handed it to him.

“Okay.” He took the map and peeked at it to make sure it was his. “Thanks.” He stuffed it in one of the large front pockets on his shorts. “This Shannon business ... I really didn’t mean to piss off Burt.”

“Well you certainly did a great job for not trying.”

“I was just trying to rank Pinhead. Burt got in the way.” Rob seemed almost sincere.

“So you really didn’t nail Shannon?”

I could tell by his hesitation that he didn’t want to admit his lack of a conquest. Finally he said, “No. All fabricated.”

“The whole thing?”

“Well ... I did pick them up. I gave Clair a ride home. And Shannon did come to my trailer.” He stood up, ready to leave.

“So the stain was real?”

He smiled and stuck his hands down into his pockets. “No. Was ketchup, like everybody thought.”

“So why was Shannon in your trailer?”

“She has the hots for Burt. She thought he might be around. She made that quite clear ... every other word she spoke was his name. I never touched her.” He shrugged.

“What about the drugs?”

“Nope. Made it up, for Walt and Burt. She’s as straight laced and probably just as religious as he is.” He shrugged again. “It’s too bad. She’s one hell of a looker.”

Just then we heard a thump. I saw Burt’s face just visible through the screen door. He seemed embarrassed, but had a weak smile.

“Burt!” I blurted.

“Ah, uh,” he struggled with the words, “I came to get my, uh, map. For tomorrow.”

I looked from Burt to Rob. “I’ll, uh, get it for you.”

I turned to the maps when Rob opened the door. “See you guys in the morning.” He slipped by Burt and was gone into the night.

Burt grabbed the open door and stepped in slowly. When I turned to hand him his sheet he still had a smile on his face. “You hear our little conversation?”

He looked away and his face reddened. “I just ... well, yes, I heard a little of it.”

“So ... what do you think?”

He looked at me for a long moment, unsure of his response. Then he said, “I’m gladdened.”

“Gladdened?” I thought. “Where did this guy come from?” I said, “So you heard what he said about Shannon?”

“Yes.”

“Well?” He didn’t respond. “Now you can ask her out.”

“It might be too late,” he said soberly. “She’s probably going with someone else.”

“You’ll never know unless you ask.”

A blank look crossed his face. “I’ll have to think about it.”

I dug down into the old cliché warehouse. “Don’t think too long when opportunity knocks. She’s a winner Burt.” I couldn’t help myself. “Don’t be a loser.”



I'd never been to Lake Tahoe, so Stu and I drove up one Saturday evening. We grabbed a MacBurger in Carson City, then climbed up Highway 50 into the Tahoe basin. It was dark, around 8:30, when we first saw the lights of the houses and businesses and casinos around the lake. The area was much more developed than I had anticipated, yet still exciting.

We planned on camping, but couldn't find a campground with an open site. So, what the heck, we located a relatively inexpensive motel just over the California border in Kings Beach, the next town west of Crystal Bay. All we could get was a two room, four bed kitchenette for \$40.00. We took it.

We showered and headed out to see if we could find a good country band. The Sundowners were playing at the Crystal Bay Club, so we settled there. The place was packed and the only open seats were at the bar. That had its advantages. From the high stools we could see above the crowd and scan the room for single women.

Stu immediately pointed out a pretty cowgirl who was spending most of her time on the dance floor. She was wearing the traditional white hat over long, straight, dark hair; a red scarf; a red plaid shirt; faded jeans that highlighted a shapely, slender figure; and a rodeo buckle and boots; the whole get-up. We observed her for a while until Stu finally said, "She's got a different partner every dance. Bingo! I think it's my turn." He wove his way to the dance floor.

They danced a few numbers, then sat down at her table. Stu signaled me to come over. I waved him off. Then the cowgirl waved and pointed to an empty chair. I smiled, waved back, and shook my head. Stu was making good time. I didn't want to get in his way. Three's a crowd, and all that.

I sat at the bar nursing a drink, feeling sorry for my lack of nerve, watching the dancers and the band and Stu and his cowgirl until around 2:00 a.m. While checking out a woman sitting alone at a table I suddenly became aware of Stu standing in front of me.

"Chris, this's Sunny."

"Geez ... I didn't see you coming," I stared at Stu. Then turning toward his companion I said, "Hi ... Sunny."

She smiled, looked deep into my eyes. The sound of the band and the noise from the crowd suddenly faded into a background hum. There was something ... some kind of a message ... being passed. But I was too entranced by her fabulous eyes and smooth complexion to comprehend. She wanted to say something, I sensed the words beginning to form on her soft lips, but she didn't speak.

Stu continued, "We're headin' outta here. Here're the keys to the room. You got the truck keys, right?"

"Yup."

Sunny moved to the bar, grabbed a napkin, and pulled a pen from her tooled-leather purse. "Here's my number." She wrote rapidly. "Just in case ... you know," she looked at Stu.

"Thanks." I took the paper, folded it, and stuck it in my shirt pocket.

"Why don't you come along, Chris?" She gave me this wonderful brown eyed smile as she

sidled up close to Stu, wrapping long thin fingers of both hands around his left arm. "I've got a big couch in the livingroom. You're welcome to it."

I was thrown a bit. There was something in her voice, in her gestures, that carried some subliminal message. I was baffled; found myself wishing she was wrapping those lovely fingers around my arm. I was beginning to melt from her warm smile. Afraid it showed, I looked at Stu. He grinned, shrugged. I would love to have gone, but "Well, uhm ... three's a crowd."

"Not necessarily," Sunny shot back coyly.

"Holy shit!" I thought. "Is she serious?"

I answered myself, "Naw ... couldn't be. She's just playing with me, teasing, having fun."

Her implication was tempting, I hated the thought of being alone in a strange bar late at night, and I was curious about her. Was she toying, or serious? Stu's expression was no help. He seemed non-committal. I wanted to go, but didn't want to mess up his plans.

"Come on, Chris. Come along." I couldn't believe Stu was saying this. "No problem."

I wanted to say, "Okay," to see where this would lead. But I figured Stu was trying to be nice. We were buddies and he didn't want to leave me stranded. Or maybe he didn't want to seem too eager, for Sunny's benefit. Either way, underneath, I suspected he would really rather be alone with her.

"No. Thanks. Just wanna sit around here a bit longer. Catch another set. It's a good band."

"They're really good," Sunny agreed. "I always come to see 'um when they're here." She seemed so full of energy for this late hour.

"Yeah? That's great. I haven't heard good live music in quite a while." I smiled at both of them. "Another drink or two and I'll pack it in for the night."

"Okay. Whatever you want." Stu started to turn, "See you in the mornin'."

"Yeah. Morning."

"Bye Chris. Nice meeting you." She turned back as they walked away. "You can really come if you want." She was almost pleading.

"No. Really. I appreciate the offer. You guys have fun. See you around."

"Bye, then," her eyes twinkled one last time and they were gone into the crowd.

...

I stayed around, drinking, listening to the band, and playing eye contact games with a woman who was sitting alone. I have never been much of a pick-up artist; too shy or too cautious to score; too afraid of rejection, I guess.

I watched as various people stopped by and talked to her, then moved on. I thought she must have been a regular, or with the band. But the musicians didn't seem to notice her when they went on break.

Her body language suggested interest. She seemed to be looking back, almost inviting me to make my move. But I couldn't muster enough courage to face possible rejection. I kept hoping she would make the first move, maybe find some excuse to come to the bar. Then I could make some off-hand comment, we would begin a conversation, and the rest would fall into place.

My heart stopped for a moment. She got up from her table. My pulse quickened. She

glanced my way, then headed toward the rest room. Oh well.

I waited for a few minutes, thinking maybe that when she came back she would come over. But no, she sat down at the same table and ordered another drink from the waitress. I went back to watching the band.

The band finished their last set. My mind was beginning to fog over in a major way. It was 4:00 in the morning. I couldn't believe I sat there that long. The woman I had been eyeing got up and headed toward the rest room again. I took that as my cue to leave.

Back at the motel I slept lousy. It was probably a combination of a strange room, the drinks, the smoke, the late hour, and my general sexual frustration. My mind kept replaying an image of Stu lying in Sunny's sweet arms, looking into those fantastic eyes, tasting those soft lips.

Lucky sucker.

^^^

I finally gave up trying to sleep around 8:30. I climbed up from the sheets, took a long, hot shower, loaded our stuff into the truck, and drove into Crystal Bay. I found a pay phone and called Sunny's number.

Her bright voice came on the line. "Hello?"

"Sunny? This's Chris. Stu's friend. Can I talk to him?"

"Hi, Chris. Sure. Hold on."

I heard some talking, then, "Chris ... hey, how you doin' this mornin'?" He was way too chipper for the way I felt.

"Okay, I guess. Slept lousy. How are you doing"? (You lucky sack of shit.)"

"Wonderful." I could have guessed.

"Great. What's up?"

"Well ... we're gonna have breakfast at a little place Sunny knows here in Kings Beach. She wants to know if you're interested."

"Sure. Why not? Where's it at?"

"She says it's easier for us to come get you. Where you at?"

"Across the road from the Crystal Bay Club."

"Okay. Stay there. We'll be right over to get you."

...

They picked me up and we drove back into California and ate breakfast at a small health food restaurant. Sunny was transformed. No longer a cowgirl, she wore a loose, lavender, floral print blouse with matching shorts. Her long, dark brown hair and matching eyes made her look wonderful. She had a fantastic tan that I hadn't noticed in the smokey lights of the bar. And her long, thin, well-shaped legs completed the fantasy. Stu had done very well for himself.

During breakfast Sunny asked, "What're your plans for the day?"

Stu and I looked at each other. He offered, “We haven’t given it much thought.”

I said, “I just wanna see the lake. You know, whatever’s around it.”

“Neither of us’s been here before,” Stu added. “Any ideas?”

“Well,” Sunny thought briefly, “if you want to see the lake ... up close ... I know where there’s a nude beach, on the Nevada side.”

Stu grinned at me. I said, “Don’t know. Never done that before.”

“It’s a lot of fun. I go there often.” That explained her tan. “I’ll take you if you like.”

Stu and I hemmed and hawed and debated back and forth without really saying much of anything. Stu finally offered, “If God intended us to be nudists we woulda been born nekked.”

Sunny loved that.

I drug my feet a little longer, but finally capitulated, “What the hell. If we can survive sand rails we can survive nude-id-ity.”

“After all,” Stu assured me, “there won’t be anyone we know.”

“That’s for sure.”

Sunny seemed really excited.

...

After breakfast my two companions drove me back to the truck. I was really tired and wasn’t sure I would be staying long at the beach. I followed them south, along the eastern shore of the lake, to a place where the beach was hidden by the forest and a cluster of large outcrops. There were quite a few vehicles parked along the road, which made me nervous.

Gathering our things, Stu reassured me. “What could a little fleshly exposure hurt?”

“Right,” I said without commitment.

We walked bravely down a Forest Service fire road to the beach.

“No way,” my inner voice announced when we first viewed the long stretch of sand. There were perhaps a hundred people down there, sprawled out on beach towels along the narrow shore. All bare-assed buck naked.

I didn’t mind the women so much, with their sensuous curves and alluring forms. Although common courtesy subdued my testosterone rush and prevented me from my primal inclination to stare. What instantly bothered me were the guys. And it wasn’t their nudity—I had seen plenty of naked guys in locker rooms—so much as their attitude. The women were pretty much docile, lying or sitting on their beach towels, while the men seemed to strut around like roosters in some macho parade, their genitals dangling between their legs, their chests all inflated as if their penises reached to their knees. But then I noticed that many of the women were sprawled on their towels with their long luscious legs spread wide as if they were exhibiting their capabilities to accept the genitalia dangling before them. It was almost like a cake walk at a county fair. I almost expected a whistle to blow and see the men diving between the wide spread legs of those bathing beauties. The last one standing doesn’t get a prize. There would be grunts and groans and ecstatic screaming amidst flying sand and the rhythm of the waves gently washing the shore. The whole scene was too exhibitionist for me.

I stopped in my tracks. “Sorry, guys. I can’t handle this.” I looked at Stu. “Sorry, man. I’m

dropping out of this adventure.”

“Whatever.” He didn’t act surprised. “If it doesn’t feel right.”

But Sunny seemed really disappointed. “There a problem?”

“I ... I just can’t handle all these people.” I took another look at the activity on the beach. “Like I said, I’ve never done this before.” I shrugged. “If it was more private, you know, I might be able to handle it. Sorry. Just didn’t expect this many people.”

She smiled. “Okay, I guess I understand. Wish you’d reconsider.”

I shook my head. “Besides, I’m tired as hell. I’m gonna grab my sleeping bag and take a nap under the pines near the truck. I’ll wait for you there.”

I turned and left them standing on the beach, returned to the truck, and picked up my bag. About the time I got it laid out in a nice shady spot Sunny and Stu appeared.

Walking up, Stu said, “You’re right, Chris. It’s intimidating as hell down there.” He looked at Sunny. “At least for us first timers.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Her face lit up. “I know this place farther down the shore. It’s more private. If there’s no one there already, we could have the whole spot to ourselves.”

“That sounds better,” I said.

Stu agreed.

So off we went, back through the forest.

Breaking from the trees, we could see that the little cove was empty. It was a small beach, perhaps 20 feet of shore line, six to 12 feet deep, surrounded by huge weathered granite boulders and tall pines. It faced west and the sun was high above the sparkling blue waters of the lake. The air was warm and wonderful.

Stu looked at me and said, “Why not?”

I said, “Let’s do it.”

Sunny dropped her things and stripped down. She was so fast I could hardly believe it. Stu and I were more cautious, more deliberate, like guys undressing in a locker room.

Then there we were, in our birthday suits and buck naked glory, exposed and vulnerable to the eyes of the world. Tanned arms and faces and necks and legs and gleaming white flesh everywhere else.

Stu and I, both obviously self-conscious, not knowing the rules of this new game, weren’t sure where to look. We avoided eyeing each other, being educated in the strict, unspoken, high school locker room code. But we couldn’t help glancing at Sunny. And to our pleasant surprise, she didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she seemed to enjoy the attention.

She walked to the water, leaving us to watch her beautiful behind. And she was lovely; her long brown hair complimenting a completely tan body. There was not a strap line or a suit mark to mar her unblemished skin. It was quite apparent that she spent a lot of time on these beaches.

Stu and I, both on the threshold of 30, craving what we had come to call our true life experience, were trying to be cool, as if we had done this many times before. We followed our Siren to the edge of the enchanted lake.

Attempting to be nonchalant, I stretched my foot into the crystal water. “Whoa! This water’s cold.”

Sunny laughed, stepping right in. “Average temperature this time of year is sixty-two

degrees.” She got goose bumps and her nipples hardened. She had large breasts, especially for her thin build. They were slightly droopy, probably from going bra-less most of her 27 years.

“I believe it,” I stuttered.

“You’ll get used to it. A little.” She laughed again.

I thought, “I could get used to you. A lot.”

She was in excellent shape, with a firm tummy and thighs. There was just the beginnings of a slight bulge at her hips, but not bad. Maybe that was due to water retention from taking the pill. I don’t know.

I hardly noticed the chill as I stood watching tantalizing waves gently wash her long lovely legs. I was fascinated by the water beading upon the oils of her smooth tan flesh. She was something from a fairy tale, some popular adventure novel, the kind of woman most men buy magazines to see. I wondered how two average guys could even attract a beauty like Sunny, let alone find themselves with that beauty on a nude beach along the crystal turquoise waters of magnificent Lake Tahoe. It was all too unreal.

When Stu finally ventured into the gentle waves, he yelled, “Yikes! This is cold!” He backed off a bit. “As cold as this water is ... you wouldn’t think these beaches’d be so popular.”

“They’re too popular,” Sunny announced.

“How’s that?” I awakened from my revery.

“Well, like I told Stu last night, I’m a dealer at the Crystal Bay Club.”

“(God, her face is beautiful.) Oh yeah?” I waded further out. “What do you deal?”

“Blackjack, mostly. On the night shift.” She shrugged her narrow shoulders.

“Sometimes you gotta take what you can get.” I was trying to be encouraging.

Stu came to her defense. “Most’a the good payin’ jobs ‘round here’er at night.” He moved back into the water.

“Oh. Good.” I tried to cover.

“Anyway,” she said, “our manager told us the lake gets more than fifteen million visitors a year.”

“Holy shit! That’s a lot of people for such a small area.” I was beginning to notice the gravel on the bottom of the lake. It felt sharp, even on my cold numbed feet. I bent to take a look. “Are they mostly on the south shore, in the big casinos?”

“Yeah.” She watched as I scooped up a handful of the gray rock. “They come for the gambling and the shows.” She moved closer. Stu moved in as well. “But I think a lot come for the lake. The beaches and the pines. Sun in the summer, skiing in the winter. It’s year ‘round.”

Stu fingered the gravel in my palm. “Pulverized granite. The water must wash these crystals out. They stay sharp, don’t they?”

“Yes in-deedy,” I joked.

“You’ll get used to it. A little.” Sunny giggled.

I let the gravel fall back into the water. “Yeah, you know, I was surprised when we pulled in last night. I’d always thought Tahoe was this little resort area way off the beaten path. I’d always thought people came here to get away from people.” And I suddenly thought how strange it was that here we were, three people, carrying on an everyday discussion, standing naked in a lake. And yet, it felt right.



“Used to be that way.” She moved toward shore. “Since the fifties the basin’s gone from a quiet summer retreat to a year-round metropolis. Traffic, crowds, urban sprawl. All the fast food burger places. Specialty stores and all the services people think they need.”

“We always ruin everything, don’t we?” I hit at the water with my hand.

She nodded agreement.

It was like we had known her for years. No pretenses. It all seemed so natural. She made us feel at ease. We were doing something radical—for us—something revolutionary, something out of the ordinary. My inner voice kept saying “All right!”

Back on our tiny beach we carefully tossed a frisbee. There was not much room to really let go, but it was fun watching Sunny stretch and turn, her breasts swaying with every move. I wondered to myself if that hurt. She didn’t let it show, if it did.

Stu had brought along his banjo. When he tired of frisbee he pulled it from its case and waded carefully to a large granite boulder a few feet from shore. He climbed up and stood there playing like some wild naked Hillbilly at the Grand Ol’ Opry. When we recognized a tune Sunny and I would sing along, madly off key. We got Stu laughing so hard he almost fell off his stage.

The three of us must have been a sight to the tour boats passing off-shore. We could see the passengers, crowded to our side, staring through sun glasses and binoculars.

“I can imagine the wild stories they’ll take back to Topeka about the crazy banjo playing nudists at Lake Tahoe.” I waved. A solitary woman waved back.

Sunny waved. Five men raised their arms in unison.

“Ah, yes,” I thought, “I’d be watching her too.”

“Wouldn’t it be funny,” I offered, “if my aunt and uncle from North Platte were on that boat?”

Stu and Sunny both laughed.

• • •

I played out the scenario. “Hey, Suzie, isn’t that my brother Bob’s boy ... Chris?”

“Let me have them ‘noculars.” She takes a long look.

“Well? Yer starin’ long ‘nough,” my Uncle Joe exclaims.

“Gimme time. Don’t rush me. I gotta make sure it’s him.”

“Well come on, Suzie. Can’t you recognize yer own nephew?”

“Not without his clothes on.” She hands back the binoculars. “I ain’t seen his pee-wee since it was pee-wee. He’s a growed boy now. But yeah, I think it’s him.”

“Well shucks, Suzie, what in tarnation’s he doin’ out here without any gall-darn clothes on?”

“Joe ... I really don’t know.” She shakes her graying head. “Why don’t you swim on over yonder an’ ask him?”

• • •

Exhausted, I sat on the beach and stared at the lake. Sunny noticed Stu's Backgammon set among his things and asked if he would like to play. He declined, but I took up the challenge. Stu watched Sunny and I place the stones, then excused himself to take a nap in the shade of a boulder. I should have joined him, but somehow Sunny's presence invigorated me. I would like to think my mind was still fogged over, because I was hardly a challenge in Backgammon. She quickly beat me.

"Enough," she said, "let's wade out to that rock." She pointed to a good sized hunk of granite about 20 feet offshore. "A tiny island in the Sea of Tahoe."

"How can I refuse?" I closed the board and stashed it among Stu's things.

• • •

And what a setting. Lake Tahoe has got to be one of the most beautiful places on Earth. The water is so cold, so clear, and so wonderfully blue. The shoreline, where there aren't beaches, is a pale gray granite, which, as I found out, is very rough. Even the water washed boulders are uncomfortable for sitting without a towel or something to protect your butt. But the scene, with its lake and mountains and pines, makes one forget one's behind.

We sat hip to hip, watching waves quietly lap the shore and lick the boulders. Sunny gently took my right hand, lifting it to her lips for a soft kiss, then laid it, palm down, on her inner thigh. She placed her hand at the same spot on mine.

Looking at me, she gently commanded, "Do to me what I do to you."

I stared into her dark eyes. Her pupils dilated.

"Oh yeah," I thought, "I hope I'm doing to you what you're doing to me."

And it was great. Everything was relaxed and relaxing. She moved her soft touch over my stomach and legs. I copied her moves like a mirror, trying to out-gentle her.

When she stroked my penis and genitals I suddenly became afraid of an erection. As more hormones entered my rapidly flowing blood stream my inner voices became audible within the empty chambers of my brain.

"Is that cool?" I asked.

"What," I replied, "an erection?"

"Yeah. Is that allowed?"

"Maybe that's what she wants," I argued.

"Or maybe it's some sort of game, you know, to see if you can control your urges."

"Yeah, but I doubt it."

"Yeah, yeah, but you know, on the other hand," I concluded, "maybe she'll be disappointed if I don't get sexually aroused."

I moved my hand over her pubic mound, using a finger to carefully probe and stimulate.

"Yes," she said softly, "like that." She squirmed a bit, opening her legs to more exploration.

She was moist, receptive. She pressed closer, whispered, "You have such a nice touch. Sensitive. You excite me."

My erection sprouted, whether I wanted it or not. Her long, slender fingers stroked its length. Still whispering, she said, “I like how you feel. Very much. You have nice muscles and long legs. Strong legs. I’ll bet you’re a good lover.”

I didn’t know how to respond. But my ego swelled. I have never been confident about my looks, or, for that matter, my “abilities.”

Sunny twisted to look toward the beach, saw Stu still asleep in the shadow. She turned back. “I wanted to dance with you last night.”

“What?”

“Before Stu came over I’d noticed you. I liked your looks. But you seemed disinterested.”

“Oh, but I wasn’t. I liked the way you looked too. From the moment I saw you. Just not a dancer.”

“I would’ve taken you home anyway,” she teased.

“Now you tell me.”

She smiled. “This is nice, though. Touching like this. I really like it. I wish we were alone. There’s so much more.” She kissed my ear, my neck, my shoulder, then stopped and sighed. She let herself off the rock, into the chilling lake. “Come on. We need to cool off.” She reached out her hand. “Come on.”

Obedient, I carefully slid down the rough surface to meet her in the waist-high water.

We stood face to face. She placed one arm on each shoulder with her hands clasped behind my neck. “Maybe later.” She gave me a swift, warm kiss on the lips.

“Maybe,” I said. Then I immediately thought of Stu.

Those voices again. “Does he think of Sunny as his girl?” I thought.

“Of course, you idiot. He found her.”

“You’re right,” I agreed with myself, “I couldn’t make love with her if he has claims.”

“He’s my buddy,” I offered.

“That’s right,” I said, “I wouldn’t screw him over.”

“What I’ve done so far is bad enough.”

“Well, then,” I said to myself, “I figure I’ll just hafta see where things lead.”

• • •

After we cooled down we climbed back onto the boulder. Sunny continued to gently stroke my leg, but not in a way meant to arouse. At least physically.

I looked out across that magnificent mountain lake, at its heavenly scenery, and asked, point blank, “What’s the elevation here?” How spiritual.

“Mmmm ... a little over ... uhm ... sixty-two-hundred feet. Why?”

“Oh ... it’s just so strange. Sitting way up here in the Sierra Nevada mountains, on the west rim of the Great Basin desert, looking at such a huge body of ice cold water.”

“They say it’s the largest lake on the continent ... at this elevation.” She lay back on her towel, the sun gleaming off her fine skin.

“How big is it? I mean, you know, how long?”

She glanced at my withered penis. Grinned. I gently slapped her shoulder with the back of

my hand.

“Ah ha,” she laughed. “If I’m remembering right, it’s twenty-three miles long and thirteen miles wide.”

“Is it deep?” I tickled her pubic hairs.

It was her turn to swat me.

“Ah ha,” I said, mocking her tone.

She smiled a wonderful wide smile. “Supposed to be over sixteen-hundred feet, at the deepest. Out there.” She pointed slightly toward the southwest. “That’s what gives the water its blue color.” She turned onto her stomach. “The really deep water is midnight blue, almost black.”

I heard voices and turned. A young couple stood at the edge of our beach, saw it was occupied, seemed embarrassed, turned, and left.

I returned my attention to the sublime range of colors painted before me. The vast sheet of steely noble blue, the silent grays of the shore, the deep shadowed greens of the forest, and the splendid cosmic blue of the sky. I took in a full breath of the thin pine-scented air and glanced at Sunny, wondering if it could get much better than that.

Sunny interrupted my reverie. “They say it’s the third deepest lake in North America. One of the clearest in the world.”

“Does have an exquisite clarity.” I thought a fifty-cent word might impress her.

“When you’re out in a boat you can see fish as deep as a hundred feet.”

“Whoa ... really?”

She nodded.

“Easy on the fishermen, huh?”

She laughed. Something she did quite easily.

“Is there,” I ran a finger up her spine, “a lot of that here?”

“Oh yeah. But not like before. I guess back around Eighteen-eighty ... or sometime like that ... fishermen ... commercial fishermen ... caught seventy-thousand pounds of Cutthroat trout.”

“Seventy-thousand pounds? Shit ... that’s a lot of fish.”

“Cutthroat’s extinct in Tahoe.”

“Gee,” I played dumb, “I wonder why?”

“Exactly. So Fish and Game stocked Kokanee salmon and Mackinaw. Rainbow and brown trout too.”

“Yeah, we gotta artificially put back what Nature gave us free.”

“Some of those deep water Mackinaw average five to fifteen pounds. Heard of some up to thirty.”

I plucked a gray crystal from the boulder, tossed it aimlessly toward the far shore. “Never been much of a fisherman myself. A few Blue Gill and Croppie, when I was a kid. Threw them back. That’s it.”

“Good.” She gave me another wide smile.

“Okay, smarty ... so why’s this water stay so clear?”

“Don’t know. Guess the lake doesn’t get much sediment. You know, soil and stuff, uhm ... and minerals.”

“There’s not much algae, for sure. Reservoirs I knew in the mid-west were covered with it.”

“Most of Tahoe’s water comes from snow melt. Something like sixty-three little streams run into it. But they don’t bring the stuff plants need to live. I heard some guy on the News say Tahoe’s a young lake....”

“Oh yeah ... like an old, mature, or youthful stream. Hmm. Didn’t know they applied that to lakes. Makes sense though.”

“But it’s undergoing ... uh ... what did he call it ... uh, entropication. That sound right?” She frowned.

“You mean eutrophication?”

“Yeah, I think that’s it.” She nodded. “What’s that?”

“Well, let me see if I can remember ... eutrophication.” I stroked my beard, imitating a college professor. “Ah, yeah. Okay.” I shifted to face her more. “Say, gradually ... over a long time ... decades ... the streams dump the minerals and organic debris necessary for the growth of algae. All the conditions are right. The algae population increases to the point where it takes over everything ... covers everything.”

“Kind of like people, huh?”

“Exactly. It would cover the rocks on the bottom and the shallow areas ‘round the shore. They’d get kind of swampy looking.”

“Yuck.”

“You’d definitely lose the clarity. The color would go from blue to a greenish tint. Sometimes ... in the right light ... it has sort of a satiny sheen.”

“Why’s that?”

“Can be pretty. It’s from all the microscopic plankton suspended in the water. Like a soup.”

“Split-pea soup.”

“That’s about right,” I concurred. “Then, ‘cause of all this organic matter, oxygen depletion occurs. Of course it’s an endless cycle. More plants die ... adding more nutrients to the stew ... and you end up with an ugly, smelly, dead lake.”

“That’s what the guy said on the News. Development around the lake is speeding up the aging process.”

“I believe it. I noticed mossy-looking stuff on the piers and rocks near the place we ate breakfast.”

“See. The News guy said there’s slime forming on boat hulls, ropes, piles ... it was never there before. And, you know ... you’re right. I’ve seen more algae along the edges of the lake than when I moved here five years ago. Especially on the south side ... in the spring.”

“Probably from all the construction. They grade off vegetation for homes, roads, and businesses ... and more soil washes into the lake.”

“I hate it.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think it’ll happen here. Least not all the way. Tahoe’s deep. I’d think the quantity of organic debris ... you know ... the ratio of that to the volume of water, is much less than it would be in a shallow lake. I think the lake would have to fill in and get shallow before it would get bad.”

“Hope you’re right.”

“Me too.”

Sunny turned over and sat up. Her tummy had little dimples where the sharp granite had pressed through her towel. She said, "You know ... it's not just the water. On some days smog hazes-over the mountains." She moved her arm parallel to the western horizon.

"Wouldn't think that would be a problem up here."

"Some days there are close to two-hundred thousand people around the lake. Permanent population's only forty-five thousand."

"That kind of fluctuation strains any system."

"They figure fifty-thousand cars cross the state line at South Shore every day."

"I'm having a hard time comprehending this. This is the middle of nowhere. It's not suppose to be like this."

"Some days the smog exceeds federal air quality standards," she spoke grimly.

"You're kidding? Up here?" I was incredulous.

"They say our air is like in San Francisco. Some days the carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons exceed those in downtown L.A." Her voice became sober. "Can you believe that?"

"Don't want to." I mocked blindness, placing my hands over my eyes. "Can't they do something? Enforce regulations, you know?"

"Wish they could, but it's hard. There are five counties around the lake, one incorporated city, two state governments, and a handful of agencies. They all wanna be involved."

"Of course," I cupped my hands as if begging, "everyone wants a piece of the tourist pie."

"They formed the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency...."

"Another agency," I interrupted with a sarcastic tone, "just what they need."

"Well, this one is suppose to make up a regional plan, adopt ordinances to protect the lake, and balance natural beauty with orderly development."

"Sounds good, anyway."

"Give you one guess which side wins most often."

Suddenly we were showered by ice cold shards of water. Our squeals were met by Stu's deep laughter. He joined us on the boulder, with Sunny between.

Once we settled, he said, "Been layin' there wonderin'. What does the word Tahoe mean?"

We both looked at Sunny.

"Go back to sleep." She shoved him. "Chris already fried my brain with all his questions." She and I laughed. Then she said, "Think it's Washoe Indian." She pulled him back, gave him a little hug. "Something like tah-hoe-he." She stroked the back of his head. "Means big water."

"Thanks. That wasn't so hard. Makes sense." He feigned moving away. "Don't push me. I got another."

Sunny put her hands in her lap, faked a pout, "I'll be a good little girl. Promise."

"Is there an outlet for this lake?"

"Truckee River," she said matter of fact.

"Ahhh," the light bulbs went on, "I wondered where it came from."

"Pours through a gap in the northwest shore, just west of where I live."

"Man," I shook my head, "it flows from here," I pointed at the lake, "down through Reno, across that desert," I pointed eastward, "and into Pyramid Lake and the irrigation ditches near Fallon? What a dismal end to something so cool and clear."

• • •

Sitting on our rock, Sunny continued her touching, dividing her attentions between the two of us. The talk, as could be expected, turned intimate and personal. We each began revealing little secrets and fantasies.

Sunny told us, "Promise not to laugh. This probably sounds cliché. But my one persistent fantasy ... is to ... well, make love with two gorgeous men ... at the same time."

"A lotta guys have that fantasy," Stu commented, "but with the odds switched."

She took each of us by a hand and squeezed gently. "I'd like the two of you to fulfill my fantasy."

I couldn't help but get a slight erection. I hoped Stu wouldn't notice. We glanced tentatively at each other.

"What the hell?" Stu said.

Trying not to be a stick-in-the-mud, I said, "Sure. What the hell? We're close enough friends."

"We could handle it." Stu looked back at Sunny. "We'll give it a try."

I think the sun and exposure and a beautiful woman warped our reasoning and distorted our sense of reality.

• • •

We played some more on the beach until about 4:00, then dressed and hiked back up to the road. Sunny offered to bake a vegetarian lasagna, so on the way through town we stopped for groceries. I wondered what the local shoppers thought when they saw this beautiful woman strolling through the aisles with two hairy fellows following on her heels like obedient dogs waiting for a treat.

At Sunny's place we sat around listening to Willie and Waylon while she cooked. Stu got restless and went outside to practice his banjo under the pines.

Once the meal was in the oven Sunny sat by me on the couch. "I'm gonna shower. Wanna join me?"

"Sure," was all I could say.

So off we went.

It was a strange and confusing experience. After our earlier intimacy I thought this would be one of those romantic interludes: warm water, slick soapy bodies, touching and fondling and kissing.

But as rivulets of water streamed across her light brown flesh I held up the wash cloth and asked, "Would you like me to ... uh, soap you up?"

"No. Please don't."

I was stunned. "Okay." Her tone implied she didn't even want me to touch her.

The voice inside said, "Perhaps the confines of civilization have reinstated the usual restrictive sexual taboos."

"I don't know, I'm confused," I replied to myself, "why did she ask me in here?"

“You have a point,” I agreed, “it’s definitely crowded for two.”

“Maybe she’s testing me some way,” I concluded.

Then she confused me even more when she said, “Would you like me to shampoo your hair?”

“Uh, sure. If you’d like.” How could I say no?

Her fingers massaging my scalp, she brought her body up close to mine. I could feel her moist breasts press against my back. Just briefly. Then she was done. There was no lingering or seductive touching. We rinsed away the soap, and that was it.

I toweled off, dressed, and went back into the livingroom. Sunny remained in the bathroom, arranging herself.

By the time she finished, dinner was ready. She was setting the table when the back door opened and this fellow walked in.

“Cal!” Sunny seemed startled.

When he saw Stu and I standing by the sink he stopped and caught the door before it closed. “Oh!...” He looked at Sunny with many questions tormenting his expression. His neck flared to crimson; from embarrassment or hurt, I wasn’t sure.

“Cal, these are friends of mine from Nevada. Stu Oliver and Chris Chapik. Guys, this’s my neighbor, Cal Olson.”

He sort of nodded without really looking at us, his attention focused upon Sunny. His face shifted to a hurt puppy-dog expression. “Sunny ... would you come to my place for a minute?”

“What?” She stopped placing the forks and knives. “Cal, I’m obviously busy.”

“But I need to talk to you.”

“I’ve got house guests. We can talk tomorrow.”

Cal quickly turned and left, without looking at Stu or me. He held the door so it wouldn’t slam. His steps crunched across pine needles in the yard.

“Shit!” Sunny frowned, thinking out loud, “Steve’s coming at 7:30.” She turned to us. “Steve comes by once in a while to play his guitar for me. We like to sing together. I forgot.”

“Hey, we can be gone by then. Just say the word.” Stu was always the gentleman.

“No.” She placed the casserole on the table. “I’d rather spend the time with you two.” She pulled the wine from the refrigerator. “Now come on, let’s eat. I’ll hafta deal with Steve when he gets here.”

“Why don’t you call him,” I plopped down in a chair, “save him a trip?”

“Don’t know his number, if he’s even got one.”

And as if by magic the phone rang. It was Steve, and she was able to sweet talk him into some other evening.

“Man,” I thought, “she’s got guys coming out of the woodwork.”

“Idiot,” I replied to myself, “if I lived near here I’d be one of them.”



• • •

Sunny's vegetarian lasagna was delicious. The wine, just right. We ate and talked and drank and laughed. It was great. She was a good cook and a fine hostess. Everything seemed so easy and natural. It was like we had all been friends for years.

• • •

After dinner I started to fill the sink with hot water so that I could wash the dishes. Sunny and Stu moved into the livingroom to watch T.V. Some habits are hard to break.

Sunny suddenly yelped, "Turn off the water, Chris!"

I did as I was told.

I could hear her in the other room telling Stu, "My water heater's small. If you're going to shower you'd better do it before Chris drains the tank."

"A shower'd be nice," Stu confirmed. "Think I'll take you up on that."

Sunny lead Stu into the bathroom to explain the convoluted process for extracting acceptable water temperatures from the shower fixtures.

I dried my hands, walked into the livingroom, stretched out on the couch, my hands behind my head, and reflected upon the wondrous adventures of the day. Once Stu grasped the cosmic intricacies of Sunny's bathroom she came and laid down with me, between my legs, both of us on our backs. She took my hands and placed them upon her breasts. I gently massaged them through her blouse and shortly she became excited. I could hear her breathing become heavy and feel her body squirm deliciously. She turned, kissing me passionately.

"Let's go upstairs."

"Okay," my hormones agreed. I made a mental note to deal with Stu later. Passion had the best of me at that moment.

Sunny lived in one of those A-frame houses so popular in the mountains and around lakes. Her bedroom was in a loft with a tight angled ceiling, open to the livingroom. Her bed was jammed into a corner between the lone window at the back and one of the ceilings.

And what can I say? We made love. Very slowly, with lots of touching, and kissing. It was very nice. I became extremely excited, and worried that I would finish too soon. But Sunny was experienced and kept everything under control. When it seemed I was ready to explode she recognized the signs and knowingly back off. It was wonderful, the way she toyed with me and kept me on the edge, the whole time manipulating my body to her best advantage for her own maximum stimulation. When she felt she was ready she let me cross that threshold of no return. We almost climaxed simultaneously.

While we were still tangled in the last throws of lustful ecstasy I heard Stu talking in the kitchen, as if he assumed we were in the livingroom. Then he suddenly stopped, with an understanding "Oh!" He got the point. Although he didn't climb to the loft or say anything to us, my knowing he was down there, knowing there was another person who knew what just transpired, was weird. Up until that moment my sex life had always been totally private, intimate, one on one, behind closed doors. It was a strange sensation, knowing that he knew.

Sunny whispered, perhaps sensing my apprehension, “You turn me on more than he does. I liked it with him, too. But you’re better.” She squeezed me with her legs and forced my withering penis deeper inside her. Then she released me. I was exhausted and rolled to her side.

She told me, in a soft voice, as we dressed, “I want to do that again. With you. Later.”

“I’m for it,” I said enthusiastically.

“You know what I liked best?” She moved in close. “The love in your eyes just before we finished.” She kissed me on the cheek. “And a suggestion ... okay?”

“Shoot.”

“You should be careful,” her eyes locked on mine. “Don’t gain any more weight. Your body’s so nice the way it is. I love it.” She brought her finger across my chest. “But if you put on more weight you’ll start getting a tire.” She patted my stomach. “And that’d be a shame.”

I took that to heart, and gave her a short hug. “I know you’re right. I’ll try.”

...

It was strange as the two of us climbed down from the loft, with Stu sitting quietly reading *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues*, knowing that he knew. I was concerned that he was pissed.

Sunny went into the bathroom to arrange herself again.

“Stu,” I said meekly, “are we okay?”

He looked up at me and smiled. “Of course. It’s okay, man.”

“I just ... you know ... didn’t wanna take your girl.”

He gave a quick little laughing sound. “She’s not my girl. We just had a good time last night, that’s all. A one night stand.” He closed his book. “I’m not pissed about anything. In fact, she’s yours if you want her.”

“No hard feelings,” I pleaded.

“No hard feelings.” He smiled. “Was it good?”

“Fantastic!” I’m sure I was glowing.

“This’s been one great weekend, huh?”

“You bet. Beats sand rails any day.”

Sunny came back and sat next to Stu. I went to the kitchen and the dishes. They played more Willie Nelson on the stereo.

When I finished the three of us stretched out on the carpet in the middle of the floor. Sunny took the position between Stu and I. There was a lot of touching, with, of course, Sunny getting most of the attention.

“You do weed?” Stu asked Sunny.

“Some. When it’s free.”

Stu sat up, rummaged through his things, and pulled out a joint Spurrier had slipped him.

“You know,” I said, “I’m almost thirty years old. I grew up in the Sixties with all sorts of free drugs around. Anything you could name, and some you couldn’t pronounce. Never once have I smoked grass.”

“Amazing,” Sunny looked at me, as if seeing me in a new light.

“Never felt I needed it,” I shrugged. “Just wasn’t interested.”

Stu found a book of matches. “What’cha do at parties when they passed it around?”

“Passed it on. My friends were cool. I didn’t preach to them about the evils of drugs and they didn’t force their habits on me.”

“You gonna try some of this?” He got the joint to light.

“Think I will.” I looked at Sunny. “The situation’s right.”

We shared the joint, and solidified our friendship. When the last smoke of the roach had been inhaled, I said, “To be honest ... didn’t do much for me.”

“Maybe ‘cause it’s your first time,” Stu offered.

“Yeah,” Sunny added, “and one joint might not be enough to really get three of us high.”

Stu nodded, “Wish I had more. But that’s it.”

We listened to more country music and drank more wine.

Sunny told us, “Two years ago I met Willie after one of his concerts at a casino in South Tahoe.”

“He a nice guy?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. A sweetheart. I really have this thing for him. I offered to spend the night with him.”

“How’d that work out?” Stu stroked the inside of her arm.

“He refused. Told me he’d just got married. Loved his wife and would be faithful.”

“Bummer for you, huh?” Stu traced a vein up the side of her neck.

“I was disappointed, sure, but loved him even more.”

• • •

About 10:00 Sunny suggested that we go up to bed. She was really intent on fulfilling her fantasy. We set her alarm clock for 1:00 a.m. so that Stu and I could drive back to Hawthorne by work time the next day.

By the time we climbed up to that loft it was easy for the three of us to get undressed in front of one another. Stu climbed in bed first, up against the wall, then Sunny, then me. It was a single sized bed, so it was a tight fit. Stu’s back was right up under the slanted ceiling, kind of crunching him into the corner. He wasn’t going anywhere. I was hanging off the side of the bed, doing what I could to hold on. With those close quarters it was all flesh against flesh. I’m sure Sunny loved it, pressed tightly between two nude men, each lusting after her perfect body.

Sunny was on her left side, facing me. Stu was contoured around her from behind. We were all touching, stroking, fondling, with both Stu and I focusing our attentions on Sunny. She really got into that massive dose of tactile stimulation coming from all of her erogenous zones at once; different pressures, different strokes, different angles. She moaned with ecstasy as we proceeded to give her what she wanted.

I reached down to stroke her leg and knee. I was excited by the firmness of her muscles. But somehow they didn’t feel right. “Boy, you’ve suddenly got hairy legs.”

Stu and I pulled back simultaneously, each astonished by our temporary pleasure from my touch. And with that, reality flooded our weary minds. Our testosterone levels crashed. We were hit with the realization that we couldn’t do this without some physical contact between Stu and I.

Everything changed. The touching was more hesitant and restricted. Stu and I became self-conscious, repulsed by the possibility of touching each other. The whole scene became dream like, subdued, and the three of us drifted in and out of sleep.

Suddenly Stu tried to sit up, knocking his head on the ceiling. "I'm goin' downstairs to sleep on the couch. Guess this three-some thing ain't for me after all."

I let myself slide to the floor. Sunny moved out of his way.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Don't mean to spoil your fantasy."

"It's alright. We tried," she whispered sadly.

"We're all tired," I offered. "Maybe if we'd started earlier."

"Maybe," Stu replied as he made his way to the edge of the loft, "but I sorta doubt it." Climbing down, he spoke in a weary voice. "Let me know when that alarm goes off. We're gonna hafta get a move on when it does." When he stepped to the floor below he quietly said, "Goodnight."

I climbed in next to Sunny. Remembering what she said earlier, about wanting to make love again with me, I tried to make amends for her shattered fantasy. I placed every ounce of energy I could muster toward arousing her desire.

"Chris ... please," she pleaded. "Let it go."

"Thought you wanted to make love again," I pleaded.

"That was before. It's not the same now. Besides ... I'm not wearing my diaphragm."

"Wait," I thought, "weren't we about to have sex just a few minutes ago? Wouldn't you have needed your protection then?" Rather than argue with her I let her inconsistency pass. Sex is always the woman's prerogative, for her to give freely or retain. I wasn't about to force myself on her. I said, "Sorry," and rolled to my side with my back to her.

We had shattered her dream and left her hanging in the lurch. No single man could give her what she wanted that night.

With all of the emotional and physical highs and lows, with all of the wine and pot, and with that last minute rejection, I couldn't sleep. I passed in and out of a treacherous fog that made me numb, but kept my mind swirling through possibilities and endless avenues of doubt.

When the alarm splintered the sticky silence, Stu and I quickly dressed and said our goodbyes. We thanked Sunny for a great day and delightful memories, apologized for not coming through, exchanged addresses, hugged her, then headed out.

Stu drove the first half, while I tried to sleep. We switched for the second half.

"I think what happened up there should be our own little secret." Stu's voice revealed his exhaustion.

"You're right," I agreed, "no one would believe us anyway." I tried to settle against the seat and the door. "You know, it was all too much like something from a novel."

"A novel," Stu's voice brightened, "I like that. Was like a novel."

"It was something special, for sure. Sunny's a wonderful woman. Why desecrate her memory with the cheap comments we'd get from the others?" I closed my eyes against the oncoming headlights. "Was almost too good to be true."

Stu sighed. "Yeah. Hope it stays that way."

"How you mean?"

“Well, as nice as Sunny is,” he said with that fatherly tone he often used with Burt, “it’s pretty obvious she sleeps around. We’ve got four weeks before we head back to Tucson. If she gave us a souvenir of Lake Tahoe we should know by then.” He was silent for a moment. “Don’t wanna pass anything to Deb.”

“Shit,” the adrenalin of fear suddenly squirted through my veins, “you’re right. Was so wrapped up in her looks I didn’t think about...”

“We’re prob’bly okay,” he tried to assure me. “She’s a classy lady. Seems clean enough and, well, intelligent enough, for sure, to avoid scuzz-balls.”

With that to ponder, I couldn’t sleep at all as we drove down the dark tunnel of the night.

“No matter the outcome,” Stu went on, “this little episode will bond us together for the rest of our lives.”

“You’ve got that right,” I sat up a bit. “When we get to be old, retired prospectors telling tall tales, we’ll think back on this summer and think of Lake Tahoe and Sunny, and we’ll surely think of each other.”

“Yeah,” Stu sighed, “that’s prob’bly true. An’ you know what they say ‘bout old prospectors, don’t you?”

I thought for a second, shook my head, cautiously said “No.”

I sensed that Stu was smiling. “They say old prospectors never die ... they just lose their mines.”

^^^

At 6:00 a.m. Spurrier’s voice came breezing through my trailer’s window.

“Hey, Night Owl ... Guy Bradshaw’s here.”

“What?” I could hardly open my eyes.

“Came in yesterday afternoon.”

“Shit! Thanks.”

Starting away, he mumbled, “Thought I’d let you know.” I could hear his sadistic laughter fade into the morning.

...

Stu and I drifted and fumbled through our morning chores, making it obvious to everyone that we were both in dire straits. Guy smiled knowingly and said, “As long as you can do the job, whatever you do on your own time is fine with me.”

Of course we were questioned by the others. Dragging in after 4:00 a.m. was not our style. We forced a conspiratorial smile that stirred their curiosity even more.

Finally I said, “You wouldn’t believe us if we told you.”

Spurrier and Ellison persisted.

Stu responded coolly. “Let’s just say we had a wonderful time, saw some intriguing sights,”

I chuckled at his implication, intentionally annoying the other two, “and brought back some fabulous memories.” Then Stu and I both sighed emphatically for their benefit.

The inquisitors didn’t like that. They loathed secrets. But that’s all they got.

Spurrier finally groaned with frustration. With emphasis on each word, he said, “Eat ... Shit ... And ... Die ... You ... Gravy ... Sucking ... Pigs.”

• • •

By late morning I became acutely aware of something Stu and I had overlooked. My hips and butt were badly burned. I was literally as red as a boiled lobster. I bought lotion and oh so carefully applied several layers throughout the day. The sting did not subside. The burn, coupled with sleep deprivation, had me really zonked. Once everyone cleared camp I raced through my duties and then settled in my bunk for a long nap.

Stu spent the day sampling in Rawhide with Walt, Rob, and Burt. He brought in only four samples.

“Found a shady spot in an old building and sawed some logs.” Then he yanked down the back of his jeans. “You the same?”

“Like a fire truck.”

“Bad news, man. I hafta walk around in the heat and sweat with my equipment belt rubbin’ these hot spots.”

I shrugged. “What they say must be true. There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

“Yeah,” he forced a smile, “or a Lake Tahoe Sunny Delight.”

• • •

Guy cornered me early in the evening. “We’re coming to the end of our stay here.”

“Great. We still heading south?”

“That’s the plan. I need you to drive to Tonopah and locate a site for these trailers.”

“Randy and I tried that a week ago,” I explained, “and I called around again just the other day.”

“Maybe things’ve changed. Make sure you try Round Mountain and Carver’s Station.”

“You’re the boss. I’ll do what I can.” I was too tired to argue. “When do you want me to go?”

“Better head down tomorrow morning. You’ve gotta find something or we’ll have to go remote.” He gave me a phoney left handed salute and headed toward his trailer.

Romalyn, who was making dinner in my Empire, caught wind of the conversation. “Can I ride along?”

“Sure, why not?” It would be a long, lonely drive. At least she would provide a diversion.

“I’ll drive up to meet you,” she offered.

“That’s not necessary. I’ll pick you up on my way through Luning.”

“No,” she insisted. “I ... uhm ... have some shopping to do when we get back. It’s easier for me to meet you here.”

“Fine. Whatever.” It was her time. I assumed she didn’t want to explain me to her aunt and uncle.

• • •

After Romalyn left, Rob, Walt, Dave, Stu and I sat around bull-shitting.

“You know,” Dave instigated the conversation, “now that Burt’s legal he needs to get laid.”

“Right on,” Walt agreed. “We gotta find someone to pop his cherry.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Dave smirked. “No guy should survive his twenty-first year a virgin.”

“Who do we get?” Rob prodded.

When no one responded, he suggested, “We all know he likes Shannon.”

He had gained my attention. “Naw. She likes him but she’d never do it. The farthest they’d ever go, before they got married, would be to hold hands, open a Bible, and denounce Sodom and Gomorrah.”

We sat silently playing with our half-empty beer cans.

Stu’s father voice commented, “We need someone who won’t hurt him, who’ll treat him gently. Don’t want a traumatic experience for’im.”

“Someone motherly,” I explained. “Someone who’ll show him the way, guide him without embarrassing him.”

“A hooker,” Walt blurted.

“No.” Rob’s mind spun into gear, obvious by the blank expression on his face. “But close.” His lips trembled. “Romalyn!”

“That’s it,” Stu agreed.

Dave squirmed in his seat. “But she’s almost old enough *to be* his mother.”

“Exactly,” Stu smiled wickedly, “that’s why using her’s so brilliant.”

“Yeah,” I taunted, “Oedipus Rex.”

“She’d be perfect for Blow Job,” Walt reiterated. “She’d fuck his Sunday go-to-meetin’ socks off.”

“Yeah,” Dave conceded, “and leave him begging for more.”

“Course you know,” Stu cautioned, “we won’t get any work outta him after this.” Then he waxed poetic, in a sweet, melodic voice. “He’ll be moonin’ over the soft gentle swell of her breast.”

“Very good, bravo,” I cheered him, and clapped. “But how we gonna set this up?”

Rob turned to me, still with that thoughtful, conspiratorial look on his face. “Tomorrow ... didn’t you say she’s riding with you?”

“Yeah,” I said, not liking where this was going.

“You talk her into it,” he suggested, “somewhere ... somehow ... on your way to Round Mountain.”

“Whoa! Why me?”

“Who else has a chance?” he argued. “You’ll be with her all day. Besides, you got a way with words.”

“How?” I squirmed. “She ain’t gonna buy this crap.”

“You’ll figure somethin’,” Stu sided against me.

“Sweet talk her. Give her a line of bull.” Rob grinned from ear to ear.

“Yeah,” Walt giggled, “tell her his prick’s twelve inches long.”

“She’ll believe anything,” Dave said. “Tell her whatever comes to mind.”

“Just set it up,” Rob spoke firmly, “and we’ll handle the details.”

I was silent, trying to find a good argument to get out of this. Nothing came. The fate of our latest project rested firmly upon my shoulders. The challenge was before me. I had to come through. “Alright, I’ll try. I’ll do my best. But I won’t guarantee she’ll do it.”

Walt said admiringly, “You’re our man. We’ll pull this off.”

^^^

Romalyn drove up to Hawthorne from Luning. She arrived before we finished breakfast. After she helped me with the dishes we climbed into my squirrely truck and off we went. She was good luck, the truck responded fairly well for a change. But it should have. I had the damn thing tuned the day before.

Our initial conversation ranged from local folk-lore to gossip to my stories of Tucson and Lincoln. We had a good exchange, and the time passed quickly.

In Tonopah I checked a few likely places concerning lodging and/or trailer spaces. Everything was still booked solid. So off we went to Round Mountain, up the Big Smokey Valley. It was the same story there. Everything filled because of the mining boom and the MX Missile Project.

I tried Carver’s Station next, with no better luck. At the suggestion of the clerk at the only store, we drove up into Pineacre State Park, on the way back to Tonopah. But there was nothing there, either. My ideas ran out, and I feared we would be going remote, camping without electricity or running water.

“What a waste of time,” I said angrily.

Romalyn didn’t say a word, but touched my arm, as if to sooth my frustration.

“Still have a two hour drive ahead of us,” I moaned.

“But,” she offered, “with good company.”

“Of course.” I gave her a smile, and the return miles accumulated in silence.

I was meditating to the hum of the tires on the pavement and the wind washing over the truck when Romalyn blurted, “I’m thirty-three. I’ll be thirty-four in October.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. She looked more like 43. “Oh ... we’re not that far apart,” I brushed by the subject, “I’ll be thirty next month.”

“The thirties are nice,” she said. “I’m havin’ a great time.”

We were silent for a few more miles, then she volunteered, “Did you know?... No.... I’m sure you don’t.... How could you?... I’ve never told you.... I’ve been married three times.”

She watched my face for a response. “Well, so what?” I countered. “I know a woman ...



she lives in Hawthorne ... she's been married four times. To the same guy."

It was my turn to watch the expression on her face. Outdone, she seemed to absorb my reply, and changed the subject. She retold the story about falling from the float on Founder's Day. "That was back when I was twenty-four. Almost ten years ago."

"You mentioned this before." I tried to sound sympathetic. "Have you recovered all the way?"

She brought her hand to her head. "No, I don't think so. My skull was crushed. They put in a metal plate, and give me a frontal lobotomy."

I had reservations about her so called "lobotomy," but didn't want to upset her by contradicting her story. Besides, she always seemed a bit unstable and on the edge of insane. I didn't want her going off in my truck in the middle of nowhere. "Must've been terrible."

"Traumatic. What I remember. Had amnesia for four years."

I could buy that. She did seem to be piecing bits of her life together. That could maybe explain the gaps and contradictions. "So you've really only been recovered for about five years?"

She ignored my question. Speaking in a dreamy voice, as if her thoughts were far away, she told me, "I have two sons. But I haven't seen 'em for a long time. They live somewhere else."

"With their father?"

"No. Well ... yes, maybe." Her voice quavered. "Don't know. No one will tell me."

I didn't pry, sensing the approach of a barrier past which I did not want to venture. Trying to change the subject again, I asked, "How you spend your time? Any hobbies?"

"Like to read. Work in the garden some. I sleep way too much. How 'bout you? You have hobbies?"

"Not out here. This job and those guys keep me too busy."

"How 'bout back home?"

"Well ... I like to write a bit. You know," I was a little hesitant, "poems ... mostly ... a few short stories, stuff like that. And I do water colors sometimes. Nothing very good."

Her face lit up. "I used to be a writer, and a painter."

Here we go again, another twist in her story. "Oh! What did you write?"

"Nothing special," she admitted. "Short articles for a Sunday supplement back east in Indianapolis. Was just getting started when the accident came."

...

"Ah ha!" The little bastard inside my head woke up. "She's a mirror, reflecting whoever she's with." So smug in his interpretation. "With Dave she played a legal secretary."

"Dave's not a lawyer," I countered.

"Well ... she must have thought he was. He's got that look."

"Weak ... weak."

"Then Dave passed her off to Walt. She played his sex-starved bimbo. Nothing deeper there."

"That's for sure."

"He usually ignores her 'til bed time, when he wants a moist, warm place to 'get his rocks

off' or to 'dip his wick,' as he puts it."

"Maybe she's looking for reassurance."

"Trying to regain some of the charm of her youth, eh, before those lost years."

"Maybe."

"You know, even at thirty-three she's not bad looking."

"She looks older."

"Ah! Imagine away a few pounds and the puffiness 'round her eyes. She was a knock-out when she was younger."

"Maybe that's it."

"Sure. She wants the same attention she had when she was whole."

"Even so, it bothers me the way Dave and Walt use her."

"She's using them as well. Sex takes two to tangle."

"Perhaps. Or maybe she wants love so desperately she's blind to their abuse."

"Or she doesn't mind."

"Hmm. Could be. But either way ... I feel sorry for her."

"You're just empathizing with her emotional confusion."

"Maybe."

"And maybe you're attracted to her."

"Oh! Hell no!"

"Overly emphatic, there, I'd say."

"Well ... shit! There is a certain warmth and naturalness about her."

"But there are those contradictions in her story."

"Yes. Yes. But they don't seem contrived. It's like they're unintended, rooted in the tragedy of her past. Maybe she truly is confused, searching, reaching out, looking for her lost Self."

"Ah, you're so noble."

"Not really."

"You know ... you gotta be cautious here. Keep your eyes open and your fly zipped. She's playing to your weaknesses. With you she's always earthy, domestic, and literate. Perhaps all that natural warmth is just a facet of some elaborate insanity; part of her web; part of her innate, subliminal ability to adapt.."

"Could be right."

"Like I said, she's a mirror. She's got the ability to perceive a man's character and mold herself too it."

"But toward what end?"

"It's obvious. To capture his affection."

"True." I answered myself. "And whether that affection is real or contrived is another story."

• • •

We stopped in Tonopah to eat. Harry's Restaurant was as crowded as usual. After a quick patty melt we bought gas and were back on the black-top.

Approaching Coaldale Junction, she asked, "Mind if I sit next to you?"

I kept my eyes on the road. "Guess not, if you'd like."

She slid over. "Just like we're dating," she teased.

"Yeah. Guess so." Certain that her ultimate goal involved me and my bunk, I was just as certain that I would not plunge into sloppy thirds behind Dave and Walt. That was too sticky a situation to get that deeply involved. Besides, my sun burned rump and genitals wouldn't be much good to her for at least several more days.

Timidly, lightly, she laid her hand on my right leg. I wore shorts, so the effect was immediate. She gently massaged and stroked in a soothing rhythm. "You have very strong legs," she cooed. "Very nice. I like men with muscles."

"Thank you. If you say so." Her touch felt good—almost too good.

She continued to move her hand along my bare leg, down around my knee, then back toward my hip, then inside, between my legs. Slightly embarrassed, I fought back the waves of testosterone spilling into my veins. I had to do something fast, or succumb.

For once my brain functioned when needed. I remembered the scheme to get Burt laid. I hadn't intended to ask her, tossing it off as an idiotic prank. But I desperately needed a way out of her clutches.

"Uhm," I hesitated, "there's something I wanted to ask you."

"What's that?" she said with a coy smile, thinking, I think, I would propose a tryst.

"Well, you know Burt, right? You were there for his birthday."

"Yes. He turned twenty-one. Nice age. Nice young man."

"Well, you know," I struggled on, "I don't know quite how to say this."

"Go on," she encouraged. "You can say anything to me. Don't be shy."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. Well, some of us guys were talking ... last night ... and we realized Burt's still a virgin." I checked her expression. "He's never been with a woman." I swallowed melodramatically. "We don't think he's ever even been on a date."

"You're kidding," she frowned. "He's kinda cute." She continued her finger exercises on my leg, turning her body toward mine, pressing her left breast against my shoulder.

"No, I'm *not* kidding," I said emphatically. "So we thought we should find him someone."

She gave me a little appreciative squeeze. "That's nice of you guys. Kind of push him in the right direction." She chuckled.

"Yeah. But we're concerned." I tried to sound serious. "We don't want him to get hurt. Like you said, he's a nice guy." I glanced at her. "I know we kid him a lot, and put him down, but that's all part of the fun. Kind of an initiation into manhood." I let that sink in. "We really like him, and want to find him someone who ... will, well ... who'll be kind and guide him, and show him the ropes." In a very serious voice I added. "We don't want him damaged for life."

She didn't say a thing, but stopped stroking my leg. Her hand lay limp on my thigh.

"A guy's first time has to be special. Should be something he'll remember forever." I tried

sounding brighter, more positive. “Should be romantic and wonderful. Soft and gentle. Caring.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” She sounded thoughtful. “For a woman, too.”

“Of course. It’s important.”

She seemed to be pondering what I said, perhaps searching her memory for her first experience. Finally she said, in a concerned tone, “I can’t think of a single women in Hawthorne who would be right. They’re all engaged, or too prudish. Most are looking to get married.”

“I know,” I said, realizing she was moving herself toward my objective. “We reviewed all our contacts in town. Nothing.” I sighed in mock frustration. “We don’t want some floozy from a bar. It’s gotta be someone sophisticated, someone special.” I set my trap.

She was quiet for a time, contemplating, nibbling at the bait. Telephone poles zipped by endlessly, yet the mountain ranges didn’t seem to budge in our passage. The tires hummed on the hot pavement. The air roared by our open windows. I watched the road and tried to calculate the appropriate time to say what must finally be said.

“Romalyn?” I spoke calmly, clearly. “This may sound weird. Don’t get angry with me. Please.” I turned to give her a friendly smile. “This is just a crazy idea.”

“What? Go ahead.” She seemed anxious.

“It just came to me,” I lied. A long pause for effect. “Would *you* be interested?”

Nothing. Silence. No body movement.

“It would work,” I encouraged her. “He knows you, would trust you. He likes you. And you ... you’re mature, motherly in a way, with all your cooking for us and doing the dishes and looking after us.” I took my right hand from the wheel and placed it on her bare leg. “And you’re definitely sensitive.” I let my fingers move against her skin. “Just what Burt would need.”

I heard her take a deep breath, but she remained silent.

My inner voice cautioned, “Give her time.”

I moved my hand back to the wheel and drove on, watching white lines divide sage.

“You might have gone too far,” I tormented myself.

But then she asked, in a casual voice, “How would this come about?” She slid her left arm across the back of my shoulders, turning to face me even more, stroking my beard with her right hand.

“Well ... we’ll be leaving Hawthorne soon. There isn’t much time. What about tonight? If you’re willing.” I looked at her with a serious expression, but smiled inside. “We’ll make sure he’s in his room,” I went on. “He always leaves the door unlocked. You could just go up, knock, and go in.”

She didn’t respond, so I added, “I’m sure he’ll be resistant at first, but you know how to make a guy feel right. All of that would be up to you. Play it by ear.”

“Yes, I could do it,” she said with renewed enthusiasm. “Would be an adventure.”

“Yes,” I encouraged.

“Would be an experience to have a virgin. I don’t think I ever have.” She paused to consider. “Men’re always after virgins, why not women?”

“There you go. What do you say?”

“Sure. I’ll do it! Tonight.”

“Great,” I said with relief. “I think it’s a wonderful thing you’ll be doing. You might like it,

besides.”

“I hope so.” She ran her fingernail down my chest, around my right nipple. “What if I drive all the way up there and he’s not there? What if I can’t get into his room? What then? Can I come stay with you?”

“Uh oh,” I thought. “I can’t say no, or she’ll back out.” I remained silent.

She filled the void. “Burt’s a nice kid, but I’d rather spend the night with an experienced man like you.” Her voice was close to my ear. “Someone who *knows* how to make *me* feel good.” Her voice almost a whisper. “I like your muscles, your strong legs. I like your beard. I want your...”

“Well, you see,” I interrupted her, “I’d like too ... really. But I’ve got a date tonight.”

“Cancel.” Her disappointment was obvious.

“I’d rather not. She’s counting on it. She knows we’re leaving soon.”

“Darn,” she sat back. “Lucky girl.”

Feeling guilty, I said, “Look ... I should be back by ten or so. If you’re still in town come on over.” I figured she would be long gone by then. “How’s that?”

“Great. Burt first, then you.”

I chuckled, but thought to myself, “Oh great. Sloppy fourths, to a virgin.” I had the sensation of opening a flood gate that I couldn’t close.

...

Romalyn and I got back to Hawthorne by early afternoon. She gave me a little peck on the cheek, jumped into her car, yelled that she would see me tonight, and zoomed off to complete her chores.

When my co-conspirators pulled in that afternoon I proudly told them, “Romalyn agreed to do it.”

“Great,” Rob said, “Burt doesn’t have a clue.”

“We better leave Tank outta this,” Stu cautioned. “He’ll warn him, just to be a jerk.”

“Someone better distract Tank,” I suggested, “or he could be in Burt’s room when she shows up.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Dave volunteered. “I’ll ask him about his sample area. That’ll keep him talking for at least an hour.”

“Great,” Rob took over the planning from there. “Burt usually watches T.V. Pinhead, you go up to Burt’s room around seven-forty-five.”

“Why?” Walt seemed to be dragging his feet. “What’s my excuse?”

“Borrow a book or something,” Rob seemed irritated by Walt’s reluctance. “That way we can be sure the door’s unlocked.”

Walt still wasn’t convinced. “Why don’t you do it, Wolfman?”

“Because I never go to his room,” Rob responded. “He’d suspect something. I’ll handle Romalyn when she gets here.”

“Bet you will,” Dave taunted.

Rob grinned, then turned to me. “What time she coming?”

“She said around eight.”

“Great,” he smirked, “I’ll walk her to Burt’s door. The rest is in her hands.”

• • •

Romalyn drove in just as Walt exited Burt’s room, wearing the same outdated outfit she wore on the day of the boat races.

I whispered to Stu, “So much for taste.”

He whispered back, “Must be her pick-up outfit.”

Dave bravely corralled Tank in his room, debating the necessity of adjusting compass declination when it was below 10 degrees off of true north.

The rest of us gave Romalyn her last minute instructions.

Rob told her, “Be nice to our boy.”

Stu encouraged her to “Be gentle.”

I added, “Remember, he’s never done this before. You’ve gotta guide him.”

“Enjoy yourself,” Walt patted her fanny. “If your passions run away with you, go for it. Do your thing.”

Rob escorted her across the trailer park, with the rest of us watching. The scene had the feel of a convicted criminal trudging off to a firing squad. I commented to Stu, “I’d love to be in her mind right now. Wonder what she’s thinking?”

“Don’t know ‘bout her,” Stu replied, “but I’m sure as hell glad I ain’t Burt right now.”

Burt’s room was on the second floor. Rob left Romalyn when they reached the stairs. She climbed alone, walked along the balcony, came to his door, paused briefly, then walked in. She didn’t even knock. The door closed behind her.

• • •

I lied to Romalyn about having a date, so I figured I should be gone when she exited Burt’s room. I walked to the El Cap and ran into Becky. She had just gotten off work. I offered her a shake at the El Cap Café. She eagerly accepted.

Making small talk, I mentioned, “We’re leaving in a day or two.”

She was visibly upset. “For good?”

“Probably. We’re heading down to Tonopah, then maybe Austin or Round Mountain. We never know for sure.”

She played with her shake. Then she came right out and asked, “Can I spend the night with you? At your place?”

I didn’t even have to lie. “Not tonight. Stu and I spent the weekend in Tahoe and I’m really bushed. Wouldn’t be any good. I gotta get some rest.”

She appeared disappointed, but said, “I understand. Guess I was a little forward. I am gonna miss you, though.”

“Thanks for understanding.” And from there we returned to our small talk.

Once our straws sucked air we said our goodbyes and I returned to my Empire. Around

10:00, as I had predicted. Rob and Stu were sitting in front of the Airstream, having a quiet conversation over a cold beer.

“Well ... how’d our little project go?” I sat down on the cooler next to them.

They both laughed. Stu recovered first and said, “All we know’s what Romalyn told us.”

“Okay, that’ll do.”

“When she went in, Burt was sittin’ on his bed in his underwear.” Even in the darkness I could see the broad smile of Stu’s face and the twinkle in his eye. “He was watchin’ T.V., as we expected.”

Rob didn’t want to be left out of the telling. He added, “She said he yanked his bed spread over himself ... then demanded to know ... what she was doing in his room.”

“What she say?” I was anxious for the good stuff.

Stu finished a swallow of beer and replied, “She told’im she was there to see him.”

“He wanted to know why she didn’t knock,” Rob inserted.

“She told him she wanted to surprise him.” Stu chuckled as he said, “Oh boy, was he.”

Rob went on with the story. “Then he demanded to know what she wanted.”

“By that time,” Stu continued, “she’d turned off the tube and had crossed over to his bed. She sat down next to him.”

“She said he was ... obviously nervous.” Rob loved those little details.

“He probably thought she was the devil, there to tempt him,” I commented.

Rob began to lick his lips like he always did when he was getting into a story. “She spoke to him gently ... trying to be ... persuasive and seductive. He pulled the blanket tighter around himself ... moved away from her.”

“The devil herself,” I emphasized my point.

Rob’s voice became soft and seductive as he spoke. “She said she told him ... she wanted to ... make love with him ... that she thought he was cute ... and sexy ... and that he turned ... her ... on.”

“What he say to that?”

Stu jumped in. “Told her flat out he wasn’t interested. That she should leave.”

Rob said, “She told him she really wanted to stay.”

“He started gettin’ angry,” Stu frowned.

“She started to unzip her top.” Rob set his empty bottle on the ground. “He threatened to call the police.” He motioned for me to get off the cooler. “She tried to talk him through it ... convince him that ... it would be,” he licked his lower lip, “a wonderful experience.” He sifted through the icy water for another beer.

Stu added, “He wouldn’t budge.” He nodded, “You gotta hand it to her for sticking it out and tryin’. After ‘bout ten minutes of goin’ nowhere she left.”

Rob twisted the cap off his beer. “She came back really bummed. Told us she’d never been rejected before.”

Stu agreed. “You musta done one hell of a sale’s job. She had herself really psyched for knocking off a virgin.”

“Yeah,” Rob tipped his bottle toward me, “and when she didn’t find you here ... she got really upset.”

“You musta been her fall back,” Stu laughed.

“Yeah, that’s why I got outta here so fast.”

“Worked out for her, though.” Rob sucked a little beer from his bottle and swished it around in his mouth and swallowed. “She and Pinhead went off to a bar to drown her sorrows. He’ll hose her later for good measure.”

“Too bad for Burt,” I said as I stood up. “Had his chance, all dished out on a silver platter, and he blew it.”

Stu, with a pragmatic tone, said, “Jus’ hope Burt never ‘spects we put her up to that little escapade. Could be a touchy scene.”

Heading toward my trailer, I offered, “We’ll tell him it was Tank’s idea.”

^^^

Guy had me drive back to Tonopah to make reservations at several motels. The day before I looked for clusters of rooms in the same establishment. After contemplating going remote with the trailers we decided that a room here and there was a better option. We left the trailers where they were in Hawthorne.

I set it up so that Stu and I shared a room at the Golden Hills; Rob and Walt occupied a room at the Silver Queen; and the last three guys took up residence at the First Rate Motel, something less than its name indicated, on the north side of town. Of course I heard lots of grumbling from Dave and Tank, but that’s all there was. The consensus was that the four of us who had lived in the trailers all summer should have the nicer rooms.

For some reason during that long drive to and from Tonopah I thought of little else than Sunny. Even though she was a popular girl, she had touched me more deeply than I first suspected. For me she was more than just a one night stand. I liked her attitude and her looks and really didn’t want to let go. But inside, I think, I knew she could be nothing more than a special memory.

...

On my way back from Tonopah, just as I passed through Luning, I decided to try the Gabbs Incline again. With my truck freshly tuned it seemed to have more power. And the extra gas tank in the back was practically empty. I made it all the way to mile post eight, a new record for me. But that effort was still disappointing overall. Oh well, some goals can never be achieved.



• • •

When I dropped off my last boxes of samples at the El Cap, Becky was working the cage. She still seemed upset that I was leaving. I lied and told her I would write and keep her posted of my whereabouts. I promised that if I passed through Hawthorne again I would look her up. I knew I never would, relieved that the relationship had come to an amicable conclusion. I knew the damage she could do when angry.

• • •

Even though Burt discovered the truth about Rob and Shannon, he didn't shave off his beard. It really didn't look half-bad, for a young guy. Even though it was a bit patchy, what was there was thick and red and gave him a rugged, outdoorsy, look.

The evening of our last day in Hawthorne Burt and I ran into Shannon in the parking lot at the grocery store. I sat in the cab eavesdropping as they talked near the back of my truck.

"So you're leaving?" she asked.

"Yes."

I could see her face in the mirror. She was shaken by the news. "When?"

"Tomorrow."

"This isn't fair," she pleaded. "We haven't had any time together."

Burt hesitated at first, then said, "I'll try to get back when I can."

"When?"

"I don't know. I don't always have access to a vehicle. But I'll try."

"Please try."

"I will," Burt promised, "but I'll be leaving for Tucson and the University in just a few weeks. I don't know...."

Shannon looked down at her feet, wanted to say something that was hard to put into words.

"Burt ... I really like you."

He didn't respond.

"I wish you weren't going so soon."

Finally Burt responded. He reached out and took her hands in his. "Shannon, you're the first girl I've ever really liked. And I hardly even know you. I wish I had more time to ... to see ... well, to see if we could be friends."

"I feel the same, Burt."

I could tell they wanted to kiss, but with me sitting in the truck Burt's shyness prevailed. He gently shook her hand as they said goodbye.

^^^

We moved from Hawthorne with mixed emotions. Although the town was not as progressive and forward looking as we had hoped, we did get to know some of the locals and generally had fond memories of the community. And once again, as with Burt and Shannon, the timing was not right. Or, maybe, it was.

On our last day in town I stopped by the Western Union Office located in the lobby of the motel across from the trailer park. I needed to pick up a \$2000 expense check from NORMMEX and settle our account with the motel. Over the course of our stay in Hawthorne I had gotten to know the clerk, an attractive woman roughly my age. As with Doris at the El Cap, Norma and I had developed a joking relationship that we both seemed to enjoy.

Our conversation on that last day was filled with the usual teasing, but the subject was a bit more stimulating. “Too bad you’re leaving,” Norma said coyly.

“Ah, you know, it’s just time to move on,” I said with my usual playful tone. “We stay ‘round here much longer we’ll just get ourselves into trouble.”

“Too bad we ... didn’t get to know each other ... better.” She exaggerated fluttering her eyelashes.

Her statement struck like an echo from Shannon’s conversation with Burt the night before. I smiled, a bit uneasy with the implications.

“You know,” she whispered conspiratorially, “my husband’s a loader at a pit near Carlin. He’s out of town five days a week.”

Acting like I couldn’t read between the lines, I tossed off, “Oh ... he’s a miner. Who’s he work for?”

Her mind stayed focused. She knew I had gotten the point. “Get’s very lonely at night. I get itchy.”

“You might wanna use an ointment on that ... before it spreads.”

Her eyes flashed and a beautiful white toothed smile spread across her face. “You could be my ointment.” She pointed a finger my way.

“I could, huh?”

“Yes,” she looked me square in the eyes. “I like you. You’re fun. Always look forward to ... havin’ you ... come ... in.” She spoke very deliberately, very suggestively.

“Ooo ... sounds interesting,” I played her game. “Maybe I should’ve come more often.”

“I wish you would,” she invited. “You’n I could have a good time together.” She leaned over the counter in a way that allowed her loose blouse to hang open, revealing her breasts cradled in a light bra. “No one would know.”

Looking for excuses, I pointed out, “Your neighbors would see me coming and goin’. They’d squeal to your husband.”

“No problem,” she responded. “I live away from town, in a small farm house. Nearest neighbor’s five miles away.”

“That’s convenient.”

“We could make love under the stars ... we could chase each other naked ‘round the yard

... we could hoot and howler and grunt and groan and no one'd know."

Her straight forward suggestions caught me by surprise. I'm sure I blushed. I told her, "This all sounds intriguing," I took a long, obvious look at the treasures revealed by her open blouse, "and looks inviting," I grinned and winked. "I just wish you would've suggested this sooner. Maybe we could've engaged in a deeply fulfilling intercourse with mutual benefits."

She said in a very serious voice. "I'm suggesting it now."

She was a good looking woman, in a plain, next door neighbor, sort of way. She had an average build, an attractive face, short brown hair, and a nice personality. The offer was tempting, but dangerous. I wasn't too sure I wanted some burly heavy equipment operator tracking me down and blowing my "friggin' head" away. I knew I would have to pass. "I'm flattered. But as I said, we're leaving today. Not sure if and when we'll be back."

She stood up, disappointed, but hopeful. "Okay ... your loss." She was almost flip.

"You bet it is. If there were a way, I'd stay."

"Well, my handsome friend, if you ever come back you better look me up. I'll be right here behind this counter." She flashed me a quick smile. "I guarantee a good time."

"I'll do that," I assured her. "I'd hate to miss a sure thing."

"Just don't come on Friday night, Saturday, or Sunday." She reached back and fixed her hair with both of her hands. "That's when my old man's home."

The guys were always talking about how the odds were stacked against them in Nevada, how there were so many more men than women. They were always trying to score but could never get close enough to make their move, except with Romalyn. And here I was, just minding my own business, and it seemed like women were suddenly everywhere, trying to seduce me. Maybe there was something to that eastern philosophy about letting things come to you. The harder you chase, the farther away the object of your desire. Sit and wait, and it falls into your lap. No matter what, my self confidence was certainly getting a boost.

...

The general plan, as laid out by Guy, was to spend about a week operating out of Tonopah, then move everything up to Austin. That was good news, because we had heard that Austin was located at a nice, high elevation where things would be cooler and the fresh scent of pine would be a pleasant change from Hawthorne's heat and sage.

Guy also assigned Stu, Burt, and Tank to finish the sampling near Rawhide. They would bunk in the trailers, which we were leaving until the trip to Austin. When they finished, they would meet us in Tonopah.

In addition, Guy had us switch the trailers to internal water and battery power to see if they could go remote. At the time we pulled out, my Empire and the Nomad were working fine, but both the Argosy and the Airstream had developed water problems; something we had to deal with later.

Needless to say, Stu was not happy about being left behind with the two most exciting guys in Nevada. Although Tonopah was literally a dump compared to Hawthorne, the rest of us would find or make some action. Stu always liked being a part of what was happening, if only as an

observer. Being left in Hawthorne he felt abandoned.

Randy was quick to advise us. "We're not here for a vacation." Then he reminded Stu, "That's the way it is in exploration geology."

• • •

Rob and I got into it again over emptying their ice chest. It was the same argument we had before. When they poured off the icy water, I blasted them with, "Man, I told you guys you shouldn't do that."

They gave me a here we go again look.

I didn't let that stop me. "Cold water will keep your beer colder longer."

Rob said flatly, "Bull-shit."

"Water's denser than air," I contended.

"Better to dump the water," Rob retorted.

"Let the ice do its job," Walt supported him.

"You're plain wrong," I told them.

"Get lost," Rob leered at me as they struggled with the large container.

Then Tank walked by.

"Hey, Tank," I waved him over, "you know this kind of stuff. We need you to settle this argument."

He moved closer and I explained both sides of the issue. "What's your opinion?"

He looked at the three of us and said, "I think I'm going to stay out of your idiotic discussions."

I was surprised. For once Tank didn't offer an opinion.

When Tank walked away, Rob said, "We can assume that our buddy Tank is not happy about staying here an extra day."

"Naw," Walt replied. "He's pissed 'cause he won't have a T.V. for a couple of days. Gonna miss Mr. Roger's Neighborhood."

Rob and I each left the discussion thinking we were right.

• • •

When we got to Tonopah I checked into the Golden Hills, Rob and Walt were in one room, and Randy and Neil checked into another, right next to them, at the Silver Queen.

Neil commented, "That's probably too close for comfort. You two guys better keep quiet and act like human beings or I'm going to move you down the road with Dave."

That was a threat they took to heart. The First Rate Motel was the dump of dumps. Poor Dave not only drew the worst motel in town, but he had to stay there alone, until Burt and Tank arrived. Needless to say, we had another unhappy camper.

• • •

Tonopah sits at an elevation of 6,033 feet, which makes it a bit cooler than Hawthorne, but not much. There is little vegetation throughout the town, which is built on and among the old mining dumps. There is the feeling that the whole town is sitting on the top of a huge rock. In fact, approaching from the north, the setting looks much like one of those coastal buttresses surrounded by the sea and home to a rookery of seagulls. Tonopah looks like a rookery sitting upon a guano spattered rock surrounded by sage. Instead of a coast line, this rookery is situated in the southern reaches of the San Antonio Mountains. It is 104 miles southeast of Hawthorne, 207 miles northwest of Las Vegas, and 116 miles south of Austin, and it is the isolated seat of Nye County.

^^^

When the three refugees from Hawthorne arrived in Tonopah Stu moved in with me at the Golden Hill. He brought a letter from Sunny, addressed to Stewart Lamar Oliver and Christopher James Chapik.

Opening the envelope, I commented, "A bit formal, huh?"

"In most situations, maybe," Stu replied.

"We get a Dear John?"

"Naw," Stu brushed off my concern. "It's nice. Think she's showin' she remembers our full names, and the little details of our visit."

"Geez ... I don't remember telling her mine."

"She's a sharp gal," Stu smiled. "You remember her real name?"

I held my hand up like a stop sign. "Wait," I said, "gimme a second." I closed my eyes, trying to visualize the scene where she explained her pseudonym. "It's Deanna," I said proudly.

"Deanna Judith Gilbert, to be exact."

"You got me beat," I said, as I unfolded the pages. Then I noticed the signature at the bottom. "Jerk," I blasted. "That's how she signed off."

Stu shrugged and smiled. He continued to unpack his gear as I read the letter.

As Stu had said, it was nice. Some paragraphs were meant for Stu, others for me, and some spoke to both of us. She said she already missed us, and would like to come down to visit if an opportunity arose. She apologized for the way things had ended and hoped that we weren't angry. She said she really felt a special warmth for both of us. She finished by inviting us to come to Tahoe anytime, that we would always be welcome to stay with her.

I reinserted the pages into the envelope and started to hand it to Stu.

"Keep it," he said. "It's yours if you want."

"You gonna reply?" I asked him.

"No, you be in charge of that. Never been a letter writer."

"Okay," I put the letter with my things, "I'll tell her you said hello."

"Yeah. Do that." He folded his clothes into a drawer. "If she comes down to visit ... she's

yours.” He glanced at me with little expression on his face. “Still a few days in the incubation period to see if we caught anything. So far, so good, for me. You showin’ any signs?”

I had forgotten our earlier concern. “No. Nothing unusual so far,” I said with a sigh. My elation after hearing from Sunny was quickly replaced by a sour spot in the pit of my stomach. “I really think we’ll be okay,” I said, trying to convince myself.

“Probably,” Stu agreed, “but it’s a good thing we’ve got some time before headin’ back to Tucson.”

In spite of the downer I got from Stu’s comments, I found myself thinking of Sunny and planning to see her again. There was something about her that I really liked. Maybe it was her aura of freedom, her free spirit, and her disregard of danger. Maybe it was because she was living on the edge, or maybe it was because she was living. I couldn’t define it, but there was something special about her.

• • •

That night in Tonopah the entire crew, including Tank, Burt, Randy, and Neil, had a fabulous meal at the Mizpah Hotel. The place has been fixed up to look like it did at the turn of the century. They even had a very short fellow dressed in the traditional bellhop uniform of that period, with the little round red hat and all. The atmosphere was entertaining and the food was just right.

What added to the festive atmosphere was the whole crew being together in one place and actually enjoying each other’s company. Rob went mild with his sarcasm, Tank laid off of his usual dose of negative vibes, leaving his sullen self back in his room at the First Rate Motel, and Burt—good old Burt—even had a small glass of wine.

Stu quietly commented to me, “He might turn into a regular guy yet.”

^^^

I called Sunny the day after I read her letter. We had a nice conversation with some intimate talk and a quick review of recent activities.

“Promise you’ll keep in touch,” she pleaded. She seemed a bit down.

“You bet,” I said, “a letter will be on it’s way this week.”

She emphasized, “I really want to see you guys again.”

I wanted her to drop the word “guys” from her thought process and replace it with the singular you. “The feeling’s mutual,” I tried to cheer her.

“When can you come up again?”

“Not sure,” I hesitated, knowing that Stu never would. “Now that we’ve moved to Tonopah it’s farther to drive.”

“Maybe I’ll drive down there.”

“That’d be great. You could stay here with me.” I liked that prospect, but wasn’t sure what to do with Stu. “You’d definitely be a major attraction in this town.”

• • •

That night most of us ate dinner at the Golden Hill Restaurant. Rob and Walt and Dave took their sweet time getting dressed, so the rest of us went on without them. The trio showed up later and had to take a separate table on the other side of the room. When our group finished we left them to their own devices.

We took a casual walk down the main street to the Silver Queen and Stu and I remained out front in the evening darkness, watching traffic, eyeing the locals, and scanning for attractive unattached women, as if there were such a thing in Tonopah. After a time we spied Rob, Dave, and Walt stepping down the sidewalk. The growing darkness hid most of the details, but we could hear their sharp laughter and knew they were up to something.

When they were closer Stu pointed toward Walt’s jeans. “Check that out.”

Protruding from Walt’s zipper was the tail end of a lobster. Rob had one as well.

“What’s that,” Stu cut through their idiotic laughter, “some sort of new cod piece?”

Their laughter increased after a couple of deep groans.

“Look’s more like Poseidon’s phallus,” I observed. “It’s all red and raw looking. Must be well used.”

Walt grabbed the base of his tail with his left hand and gave it a few swift pumping strokes with his right, as if he were masturbating.

“God,” I stepped back dramatically, “hope it’s not a Sperm Whale.”

“Thar she blows,” Walt shouted. The whole display was quite obscene.

“You guys look like a couple of sex maniacs with newfangled French ticklers.” Stu scanned the street. “Yer lucky the sheriff hasn’t cruised by.”

“Or that some prudish local religious-type ladies haven’t seen you,” I added.

“You guys could get into a shit pile of trouble,” Stu warned.

“What for?” Walt acted innocent.

“Public ludeness,” Stu offered. “Or indecent exposure.”

I chuckled. “Or defiling a decapitated crustacean.” Then I added, “Or turning your lobster red in a public place.”

“Yeah,” Stu looked at me, “and public display of an engorged phallic fantasy.”

“Who knows,” I said, “in a small town like this they’d find something.”

We convinced the two lobster conspirators to deposit their defiled tails in the trash and the five of us headed down the hill to The Joker; a pizzeria, bar, dance hall, and laundromat. We played pool and the jukebox for about an hour.

Later we hiked back up the hill to this hole-in-the-wall place in the middle of town, across from the Mizpah, where they had advertised a live country band. The group wasn’t too bad, but the place was smokey and filled with anxious men. There were very few women and those that ventured in were kept busy on the dance floor. Sometimes two or three guys hung around a single woman, each vying for her undivided attention. Whenever a woman walked through the door

thirty heads turned in unison and stared.

There was a surrealistic tinge: the loud country music permeating the smoke filled air; the smell of stale beer and sweaty bodies hanging like a damp mildewed blanket over the crowded room; the shouts and loud conversation mingling with the clink of glasses and the whoops of a cowboy finding excitement on the dance floor; it wasn't a pretty scene. We stayed just long enough to chug our beers, then headed for the door.

"Come on, Pinhead," Rob turned to Walt, who refused to move.

"Hey, come on," he pleaded, "I can score here."

"Fat chance," Dave countered. "Let's try the Mizpah."

Walt was reluctant. "This is the only place with any women."

"There's nothin' here better'n a five," Stu made his point by nodding toward the dance floor, "on the Tonopah scale."

Walt got up and came along.

Crossing the street, I commented, "How you figure? There're nice looking men in there ... guys that would have babes chasing them ... drooling and slobbering over homely chicks."

"Ugly women," Dave clarified my observation.

"Chicks that would find it difficult to attract any man ... in a big city." Rob made a shivering sound.

Stu said, in his quiet, steady voice, "Out here women're so scarce they can take their pick. Supply'n'demand."

"No matter what," I said, "that was an unusual scene."

"Hunks and double-baggers dancing cheek to cheek." Dave reached the door of the Mizpah first and held it open for the rest of us.

"Guys actually arguing over fat women," I finished my thought. "Women who'd normally be sitting in a corner somewhere drinking by themselves."

Walt said, as he entered the lobby, "We gotta get somewhere where the gettin's good."

^^^

There was not much to do in Tonopah on a Sunday. We laid around our room reading, watching television, and playing cards. When we got tired of that we went down to The Joker for some pool, and to do our laundry.

The laundromat shared a common door with The Joker. The machines were in a room attached to the side of the building as an afterthought. There were 10 washing machines and four dryers, all gas, that seldom worked. And when they did, the dryers usually took two cycles to dry jeans and our heavier shirts. The double cycles and discrepancy in number between the washers and dryers really backed things up and caused a certain amount of grumbling.

That first Sunday in Tonopah the laundry was crowded and dense with steam. It was our guess that most of the patrons worked during the week and could only get there on weekends. A good number looked like miners or surveyors.



The overall maleness of the patrons added to the ongoing struggle to claim a dryer. If you left your post to buy a beer, and the dryer you were waiting for became free, someone else would be quick to grab it. It was a dog-eat-dog business. Someone had posted a hand written sign on the bulletin board that read: ALL IS FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR AND LAUNDROMATS. That pretty much summed up the prevalent attitude.

After we learned the ropes we discovered something only the regulars knew but seldom volunteered. There was one super large dryer that was designed for sleeping bags, large blankets, and that sort of thing. That sucker would dry everything you shoved into it the first time around. It became our habit for the entire crew to dump their jeans into it at the same time. That sped things up, worked pretty well, and eased the tension some.

We also discovered the legendary Dryer That Never Stopped. Long ago, in ancient times, someone's coins must have jammed or something. The dryer just kept going and going and going, as long as the door was closed. The only drawback was that we had to time our load and check it regularly to make sure our undies didn't fry. Obviously, that was a popular machine, and we made every effort to employ its service.

...

We weren't sure what happened to Burt and Tank that Sunday.

"Their truck's been out front of the First Rate all day," Stu noted.

"Either they walked somewhere," I suggested, "or they stayed holed up in the gloom of that room with the curtains drawn."

Stu stroked his chin, "Don't think Burt went to church."

"Maybe they stayed inside to read the scriptures."

"More'n likely they bought a whole carton uh Hostess Cream Filled Twinkies an' a gallon of pasteurized homogenized whole milk an' they're gorgin' themselves while watchin' some old John Wayne movie, like *Rio Concho*, or somethin'."

"Who knows," I chuckled, "maybe they're watching *Apocalypse Now*."

...

Late that afternoon Stu and I watched some television ourselves, catching the national evening news for the first time since we returned from Tucson. The network presented a five minute special on the MX Missile Project currently underway in Nevada. They described how the government was present in the Great Basin conducting preliminary studies and preparing environmental impact reports and generally checking things out to see if a defense system based on the old shell game was actually feasible.

During the report, they interviewed various military people, environmentalists, ranchers, and citizens, attempting to give the rest of the nation a perspective on what an emotional issue the MX had become out in the Intermountain West. They flashed photos of stop signs with the letters M and X spray-painted in such a way so that the sign read: STOP MX. We had seen those signs all over during our travels. That was kind of a kick and made us feel like we were somehow

in the middle of what was happening. Then they spoke with some military officer who was stationed right there in Tonopah. We really felt a part of things.

Then they took their cameras to Eureka, Nevada, a small mining town about half-way between Austin and Ely, some distance to the northeast of Tonopah. They focused on the rural aspect of the town, how it boomed and busted and boomed and busted and was presently in a state of lethargy, barely existing on local agriculture and a sparse amount of tourist trade. They aimed their lenses toward the rustic buildings and weathered signs to reveal a sense of time and decay and things best left to the past. Then they focused on an old Sun-beaten fellow sitting on the curb of the main drag. The commentator asked him what he thought of the MX Missile Project.

“Well,” the old timer paused to think, “don’t mind so much ‘bout this MX thing. Not really sure what the dang thing’s fer. They say it’s gonna bring lots of money ... we can all use that. Businesses here can use money.” He pointed across the street and waved his arm down the row of mostly empty store fronts. “What concerns me,” he continued in a slightly angered voice, “is people. They say it’ll bring lots’a construction people. An’ their families.” He paused to swallow a breath, coughed, and continued. “Who knows where they come from? Lots’a rabble work that kinda work. That ain’t too bad.” He wiped his nose with the side of a long, bony finger. “What scares me,” he looked straight into the camera, “they might bring some niggers to town.” His old head shook perceptibly. “People here don’t want no niggers livin’ ‘roun’ here. They bring their families too, you know?”

Stu and I stared at the screen.

“What the hell?” I said.

“Hard to believe,” Stu closed his eyes. “Thought I left that shit back home.”

“Scares the hell outta me.” I was still dumbfounded.

“Yeah,” Stu sighed, “that gives me a real secure feelin’, knowin’ we’re workin’ ‘round such nice, friendly people.”

“Nice neighborly folks.” I turned off the television. “Maybe we’re better off without the national news.”

^^^

We entered a period of stormy weather, with heavy thundershowers almost every afternoon. The pattern was very similar to the monsoons in the desert southwest. The afternoon rain didn’t affect me, but the others came in every day with muddy boots and edgy tempers.

During an unusual morning storm I drove up to Hawthorne to retrieve The Gray Beast. It had been left in the shop awaiting the arrival of parts for its transmission. I left my clunker at the trailer park with our trailers, intending to pick it up when we headed north to Austin. I thought briefly about visiting Norma at the motel across from the trailer park, but decided to let that fruit die on the vine.

I made it back to Tonopah in time for lunch at Harry’s, but I would have been better off

eating somewhere else. Almost like one of those worn jokes, I found a moth in my soup. That was real appetizing, but the waitress was apologetic for messing up my order, and the management didn't charge extra.

• • •

At dinner that night Randy announced that he was being transferred to the company's California Moly Project in Bridgeport. He had worked that claim group the summer before, and with the assessment work showing great values, they needed his expertise. He would be leaving us once we reached Austin, sometime later in the following week.

• • •

Looking back now, it seems our short time in Tonopah was the fulcrum. In spite of our differences, our teasing and taunting, and our wide individual travels, before Tonopah we were a team, energetic, generally positive, and unified by our relative isolation from our norm by the expanse of Nevada's desert. But after Tonopah, as we moved on to Austin and our later destinations, and as we lost members of the original crew, the nature of our group gradually evolved, then rapidly deteriorated, into something less appealing and more disheartening. My memories of the time before Tonopah are painted with bright colors, while the later days are pigmented by grays and the darker hues.

^^^

We left for Austin.

Well, when I say we, I mean everyone except Stu and Dave. There were still two quads to complete and those two were elected. That put Stu into a funk again. He did not appreciate being left behind a second time. I knew he was considering leaving NORMMEX to take a job with an oil company and feared that being left would push him over the edge. I didn't want to lose my best friend on the crew, but there was nothing I could say to sway Neil from his decision.

We said our farewells to Randy, and as Stu and Dave headed out into the field, the rest of us loaded up and drove back to Hawthorne to round up the trailers we had let out to pasture. We arrived at the trailer park about 10:30, just as the cooler night air evaporated into the realm of hot and humid. Neil assured us that Austin was going to be much more pleasant. Then, to boost our morale, he treated us to pizza at the Tai Winds, across the street. But not allowing us to kick back after the heavy meal, he herded the crew toward the trailer park to hitch up our metal homes.

I had to go into the registration office to pay off our debt, but Norma had the day off. I was both disappointed and relieved.

Our trailers were a mess. The plastic cover over my air-conditioning had come lose and had

to be screwed back on, and I had to remove a tire and haul it to the gas station for air. The others corrected similar problems.

Once it looked like we were getting close to departure, Neil took off with Tank, pulling the Nomad. Rob left shortly thereafter in The Gray Beast with Burt, pulling the Argosy.

Anxious to follow, I somehow lost my set of keys to the six-banger. I looked all over, knowing I had them that morning in Hawthorne, but I couldn't find them anywhere. I had Walt drive me back to the gas station, but no luck. At Walt's urging I finally gave up and used the extra set I kept hidden in the magnetic box under the truck. I had to mentally thank Randy for forcing each of us to do that while we were back in Gabbs. But I was still pissed at myself. That kind of personal stupidity always angered me. I hated losing anything.

The two of us finally took off, me pulling my Empire and Walt towing the Airstream. We got within sight of Spurrier near Luning, but were caught at the railway crossing at the foot of the Gabbs Incline. It took a full 20 minutes for that slow moving freight to pass. While we waited, the usual afternoon storm moved in and it started pouring. The wet sage contributed its pungent smell to the dismal gray of the afternoon.

And as we sat there near Luning, I realized that I hadn't said my goodbyes to Romalyn. In fact, I had never spoken to her again after our trip to Tonopah and her visit to Burt's room. I wondered if she had any regrets, or if she had just let us slip from her limited memory, just part of so much unnecessary mental clutter.

Once we got through the crossing I was eager to face the Gabbs Incline one last time. But my hopes were dashed as that damn truck couldn't pull any better than before its recent tune-up. I only made it to Mile Post Three before I had to down-shift. I was forced to use first and second gear most of the way.

I followed Walt as he pulled into the Gas-Mart just outside of Gabbs. The switching solenoid that controlled the two gas tanks on his truck had malfunctioned. He needed to fill up with unleaded gas. That side trip cost us more time, especially because the unleaded pump would only spill out 28 cents worth of the liquid gold. The helpful fellow behind the counter just shrugged.

So with sheets of rain washing across the lot, Walt crawled under his truck and manually switched the hoses. That way he could draw from the full tank. And off we went. We got about 300 feet before his engine stalled. He had connected the wrong hose. After a return trip under the frame he finally got that corrected. But he was soaking wet and shivering.

I walked back to my trailer to get him a dry towel. Passing the rear of my truck, I discovered my lost keys. They were in plain sight, sitting precariously on the wooden frame that surrounded the bed of my truck. It was amazing that they hadn't been bounced off somewhere in the 60 miles from Hawthorne, especially back along the bumpy railroad tracks near Luning.

In spite of recovering my keys, our troubles were not yet over. On the other side of Gabbs we ran into road construction. The rain had stopped briefly and there was a big water truck washing dirt from the road. Traffic was backed up for quite a ways. Walt joined me in my cab while we waited.

"Wonder where all this traffic came from," I commented. "Don't remember seeing this many cars in a day while we were here."

“Beats me,” Walt mumbled, trying to stay warm.

“Hey, check this out,” I said, pointing to an oncoming car creeping along behind a pilot truck.

Walt tried to look from his side, but could see no more than the top of the car. “What you see?”

“Cute chick, wearing shorts, with a guy sleeping with his head in her lap and his feet sticking out the window.” I chuckled. “Their plate says they’re from Idaho.”

Walt sighed. “Wish I was that guy.” Then he added, “But I’d be face down and grinning.”

We finally passed through that mess and pulled into a small roadside business called Middle Gate, at the junction of highways 23 and 50. But they had no unleaded gas either, only regular. So, in desperation, we unhooked the pump from the gas barrel on the back of my truck and stuck its tip loosely into each of the two five-gallon cans of unleaded that I kept on my truck for emergencies. That procedure was a mess, but it worked. By the time we got back on the road and headed east we both smelled of gasoline.

After that, somewhere along Highway 50, I noticed, in my rear view mirror, that the awning on Walt’s Airstream had come loose and was flapping in the wind. I pulled over, Walt followed, and we secured it. Of course the rain returned as we struggled with the frame and we both got soaked again.

But at least the scenery was improving. The mountains seemed higher and more rugged, the valleys were narrower. The vegetation was greener and water was actually flowing in some of the streams.

Of course the rain continued and the wind blew, threatening to push our trailers off the road. At one point we faced into a small dust storm that impeded our progress, but somehow we persevered.

It was about then that I started getting nervous, thinking that I might run out of gas before Austin. But suddenly there it was, sitting within the mouth of Pony Canyon, pouring out of the Toiyabe range. As Neil had promised, the town sits at a cool 7,000 feet, smells of pine, looks rustic but inviting, and is surrounded by rugged mountains. It was a wonderful change from the desert scenery we had experienced up to that point. Much relieved, I pulled into the first gas station on the western edge of town and filled up. Walt went on ahead to our camp.

The highway climbs at a steep angle, winding through town to the head of Pony Canyon, three miles to the east, where I needed to be. When I left the gas station, pulling my Empire, I couldn’t make it up that hill. I had no momentum, and the damn truck didn’t have the horsepower to gut it out.

I managed to get the whole rig onto the main road, but was frustrated in my attempts to get the thing into gear. Because of the steep incline the trailer and truck wanted to roll backward as soon as I took my foot off the brake. Without a clear view behind me I couldn’t tell if I was going to roll into anything, and I couldn’t get my feet off the clutch and brake and onto the gas pedal fast enough. I could smell the clutch burning. I killed the engine and restarted it and killed it again. I was stuck.

I finally gave up and left the damn thing parked in front of a motel driveway. I entered the registration office to get help. “Can I use your phone?”

“You gotta move that trailer,” the counter jockey blared.

“That’s why I need to use your phone.”

“Your trailer’s preventing my customers from getting here to register.”

“I understand that,” I tried to speak patiently. “That’s why I need the phone.”

“You gotta move that damn trailer first,” he almost yelled.

“I can’t do that,” I was starting to return his anger. “The engine’s shot. It won’t go any further. I gotta use the phone to get someone to come tow me.”

He glared at me, obviously arguing within himself. “Jesus Christ,” he practically shouted. “Do whatever you have to.” He pointed through the window. “Just move that piece of shit from in front of my drive.” He angrily handed me the phone.

Sheepishly I asked, “Do you have a local phone book?”

In a slightly calmer voice he asked, “Who you tryin’ to reach?”

I said, “The Pin-E-Con-E Trailer Park. That’s where the rest of my crew is.”

“Pin-E-Con-E,” he seemed puzzled.

“Yeah. That’s where our Crew Chief said we’d be staying. If I can get through, they’ll come down and pull me outta your way.”

“We don’t have no Pin-E-Con-E Trailer Park here.” Then he thought a bit more. A sly grin came over his face. “You probably mean the Pine Cone Trailer Park, up the top of Pony Canyon.”

Randy had printed it out for us, telling us to look for the Pin-E-Con-E Trailer Park. He thought it was a Shoshone word. Later, when I saw the sign out front of the camp I could see how he made his mistake. The words Pine Cone were spread out around a circle, encompassing a picture of a pine cone, which gave the effect Randy had misinterpreted. I figured I gave this local another tourist story to tell over beers and burgers at the next town cookout.

“That could be it,” I said. “You know the number?”

He glanced at a typed sheet taped to his counter. He fingered down the list and stopped by a name. He took one of the business cards from a small holder and wrote down the number on the back.

I finally got through to Neil, who drove down to help.

The first thing we did was to use his truck to tow my rig forward about 20 feet, so I wasn’t across the motel’s drive. Then we blocked the wheels of the trailer with a couple of large bricks, unhitched my truck, and towed it to the Chevron station. They replaced the battery, and the stupid truck worked fine. To this day I don’t understand how that resolved the problem. It seemed fishy to me then, and just as strange today.

While Neil and I dealt with the truck, Rob and Tank came down into town to get rooms. They saw the situation and pulled my trailer up into camp at the head of the canyon. I was relieved when I finally made it there myself and got my Empire up and running. It had been a long weary day. As if Nature wanted to make amends, while I was outside, hooking up the sewer connections, the clouds parted and the late afternoon sun broke through with a spectacular array of light and shadow. It was the most pleasant experience I had that day.

• • •

There, in the Pine Cone Campground, Neil had settled into the Nomad, I was in my Empire, Walt commanded the Airstream, and Burt had decided to try living in the Argosy. Rob had taken a room at the Pony Canyon Lodge, where I had blocked the drive, and Tank took a room at the old International Hotel. We had finally escaped the desert.

^^^

The first morning in Austin, Tank showed up at camp with all of his things. He couldn't take the thin walls and the noise from the bar down at the International Hotel. He moved into the Argosy with Burt.

"Birds of a feather," Walt explained.

"Yeah," I agreed, "Tank's a hard case. But I am glad Burt decided against a motel."

Rob chuckled, "You're just relieved he didn't move back with you."

"That too," I said. "But living in the Argosy ... he's gotta do his own thing. Make his own bunk, select his own meals, do his own cooking, wash his own dishes. Generally become more independent. That's a big step for him. And he did it by choice."

"Long as he don't trip," Walt smirked. "Mommy's not here to pick him up."

• • •

Neil came by my Empire early that morning. "We're going to blow-off the day."

"Why's that?"

"Guys need time to set up and clean out their trailers."

"God knows they needed it." I could never understand how responsible adults could let their living quarters get so trashed out.

"They certainly do," Neil shook his head with understanding.

"But you know," I said, "it amazes me how long it takes them to set up after a move. They're masters at dragging out simple chores."

"Yes," Neil smiled, "especially when they don't want field work." He stood for a moment, peering at the far side of the canyon. Then he said in almost a whisper, "I'm sure Guy would be pissed if he knew." He looked at me. "About letting them off for a day. We're way under our quota." He involuntarily rubbed his hands together, nervously. "Should've collected a lot more samples by this point."

"You would know."

"Yeah ... I would know." He started to walk away, then stopped. He turned back toward me and said in a steady voice, "I'm sure you don't know. I'm calling it quits. Only got a couple more days, and I'm heading back for good."

I really didn't know what to say. I looked at him with what must have appeared to be a

blank stare.

He explained, “Decided to go back to school.”

“What for?”

“To become a mining lawyer.”

“A lawyer?”

“Yeah,” he smiled confidently. “With my geology background I’d have an edge. Judy and I’ve been talking about it for some time. She and I’re going to form a partnership. Form our own little company. Specialize in mining disputes.”

“That’s quite a change from exploration geology.”

“But I think I’ll be happier. I’m not much for this field work anymore. Too many hassles.” He kicked at a clump of weeds with the toe of his shoe.

“Hey, if it makes you happy,” I tried to encourage him, “I guess that’s what counts.”

“Yeah,” he smiled broadly, “and I’ll be with Judy all the time.”

Again he started away and stopped. “Hey, before I forget. I meant to tell you yesterday.” He pointed toward the registration office for the campground. “There’s a small store in there. Pretty good selection, except for fresh fruit and meats.”

“Thanks. That’s convenient.”

“Figured you’d like that. The guys can pick up their own stuff for a change.”

“Long as they have beer, they’ll be happy.”

“They’ll be happy.”

• • •

We spent the day cleaning up our living space, setting up the trailers, and catching up on paper work and generally preparing for our next assault on the old dumps of this mining district. By late afternoon we pretty much finished our chores and a group of us headed down to the International Hotel to check out the bar and grill on the main floor.

We played some pool, shoved coins into the jukebox, drank a few beers, and got to know the bartender, Ed, who, as it turned out, was also the owner of the hotel. He was quite the talkative sort. We were the only patrons in his place that afternoon, so, while we waited for our turn to shoot, Ed filled us in on his version of the history of Austin.

“Interesting establishment you got here,” Neil glanced around the large room with its dusty artifacts nailed to the walls. “This is quite the place.”

“Oldest hotel in Nevada,” Ed beamed. “Moved it here from Virginia City in 1863.”

“Moved it here?” Walt seemed amazed.

“Yup. Dismantled it to make room for a bigger buildin’. Hauled it to Austin in pieces and put it back together.” Ed mimed using a hammer and nails.

“They kept the same name as the original in Virginia City, then?” I thought I’d read of an International Hotel there.

“Yup.”

Walt couldn’t pass up an opportunity. “So this really isn’t the oldest hotel in Nevada.”

“Sure is,” Ed became slightly defensive.



“Well,” Walt was in one of his ornery moods, “if there’s still an International Hotel in Virginia City, and the original there was the oldest, then this really isn’t the oldest hotel in Nevada.”

“Sure is,” Ed said confidently, like he had been through this argument before, “this is the original International Hotel building. They just moved its location. Same building. This is the building that was the first, and the oldest. Doesn’t matter where it sits.”

Trying to defuse an argument, Neil said, “Well, either way, this bar certainly is a rustic piece of art.” He moved his palm across the solid wood top. “This the original?”

“Yup,” Ed confirmed. “Well ... we had it refinished when we took over. Was pretty bunged up, you know. We sanded it down and varnished it. But it’s the original wood.”

“Looks great,” Neil complemented him, and the rest of us agreed.

“Yeah,” Ed went on, “this used to be quite an exciting place. Lots of characters came through here. Was like a social center, back in the old days. The Sazerac Lying Club used to meet here regularly.”

“The what?” Walt squawked, as he chalked his cue.

“The Sazerac Lying Club,” Ed explained. “Was an organization founded here in Austin, oh ... ‘bout a cent’ry ago. Their only purpose was to have a good time and swap tall tales.”

“They met here, huh?” Walt’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Yup, right here,” Ed pointed toward the floor.

Walt grinned and looked toward Rob. “Hey, Wolfman? You should’ve lived back then. You would’ve been president of that club.”

“Eat shit, Pinhead.” Rob took his shot, but only moved a few balls around.

“What’s the story here?” Neil questioned Ed. “How did Austin come about?”

Ed fiddled around under the bar for a moment, arranging some glasses and trays. Then he stood up and leaned against a solid wooden shelf behind him. Like an old timer winding up for a long winded story, he said, “Well ... back in 1862 silver was located near here, up there at the head’a this canyon.” He pointed toward the main window, facing the highway. “From there they mapped out the Reese River Minin’ District.”

Walt scratched a ball that went flying off the table. Ed stopped speaking to watch the ball roll across the rugged wooden floor. In a monotone, he said, “Happens.” Then he continued his story. “The town sprang up fast, rivaled Virginia City. Had a pop’lation ‘roun’ ten thousand. Most came from Virginia City.”

“The two cities become rivals?” I asked.

“Yes ‘n’ no,” Ed seemed unconcerned. It was obviously not a big part of the town’s history. Neil asked, “Is it named after the city in Texas?”

Ed closed his eyes, apparently trying to maintain his cool. “Nope,” he practically spit out the word. “Austin’s named after George Austin, the guy who founded the town. S’got nothin’ ta do with that place in Texas.”

“Besides mining and this hotel,” I asked cautiously, “does Austin have any other claims to fame?”

“Sure does,” Ed moved to the bar. “You ready for a refill?”

I shoved my empty glass his way. “Sure. Coors. Thanks.”

Ed filled my glass from the tap. “We got the oldest newspaper in Nevada. The Reese River Reveille. Been published ‘tinuously since 1863.”

“That’s a lot of newsprint,” Neil observed.

“Yup,” Ed handed me the glass of foaming brew. “Lotta words read ‘tween then ‘n’ now.” He wiped his hands on a damp towel and went on. “Austin, here, was the home ... when she was a kid ... of Emma Nevada.”

“Who?” Walt smirked.

“Emma Nevada.”

“Never heard of her,” Walt shook his head.

Ed looked at each of us, and we each shook our head in sequence.

“She was supposed to be world famous. Back then. Some sort of prima donna. An actress or somethin’.” Ed realized he wasn’t scoring points with old Emma’s story, so he let it drop.

“How many people live here now?” I asked.

“Think there’s fewer’n four hundred.” He thought about it a moment. “The main street’s withered to half its old size.” He pointed through the main window again. “I mean ... you can see the gaps ‘tween the buildin’s.” He laughed at an inside joke. “Looks like somebody got half their teeth knocked out in a fight.”

The conversation lagged as our first game of eight ball came to an end and we racked the balls for the second round. Rob drew the honor of breaking, and we picked up our turns from there.

Ed, feeling left out, finally said, “Here’s somethin’ you fellas might find int’restin’. For awhile they used camels to carry salt from the marshes near Walker Lake. They used the salt in the quartz mills down the end of town.”

“Probably for the reduction process,” Neil offered. “Part of processing silver chloride ores.”

“They used camels, huh?” Walt seemed truly interested this time.

“Yup. But the mules and horses hated ‘em.” Ed was playing with an unopened bottle of lime juice, rolling it back and forth to mix the contents. “They stunk. The camel jockeys had’a keep ‘em outside uh town.”

“Whatever happened to them?” I asked, preparing to take a shot.

“Most died. Some got away. Rest they let loose.” Ed smiled, “Every now an’ then we get somebody in here says they saw one roamin’ the foothills somewhere.” He looked at us. “Who knows?”

Listening to Ed expound on Austin’s past, I noticed a yellowed news clip secured in a beat up frame and covered by a dingy piece of glass. Curious, I walked closer and read what appeared to be an early news article from some old paper. It said:

*I have heard of men who contrived to get through the coldest part of the season by sleeping when the sun was warm, and running up and down Lander Hill all night; and another man who staved off the pangs of hunger by lying on his back for an hour or so at meal times with a quartz-boulder on his stomach.*

“And we think we have it bad,” I said. I turned to Neil. “Check this out.”

He walked over and read the clip. “Pretty funny,” he commented. “When I was younger I wondered if putting something heavy on my stomach would make me less hungry. I guess it worked for that fellow.”

Between shots, Rob moved over to the framed piece and took a look. He didn’t make a comment.

I turned my attention back to Ed. “I see the name Reese ‘round here quite a bit. They must have been prominent way back, huh?”

“The Reese brothers,” Ed confirmed, “made their fortune swindling eastern investors.”

“I suppose the Reese River’s named after them,” Neil suggested.

“Sure is. Flows out’a the Toiyabes, then passes the mouth’a Pony Canyon on its way north to the Humboldt near Battle Mountain.”

“Ain’t much of a river,” Walt broke his silence.

“That’s for sure,” Ed agreed, “but it was one of the few landmarks on the early maps of central Nevada. Back in the eighteen-sixties. The Reese’s spec’lated on an opportunity to mine some eastern bank accounts. They sold shares in what they called the Reese River Navigation Company. S’pposedly formed to freight ore ... in barges none the less ... to the railroad up there near Battle Mountain. The Reese’s ... clever sons-a-bitches ... they reminded those greedy easterners how important the Sacramento River was to the mines in the Mother Lode out there in California ... back in the eighteen-fifties. So the stupid easterners bought heav’ly ... ‘spectin’ great returns.”

“They took it in the shorts, huh?” Walt smirked.

“Yep, they sure did.” Ed pointed to Neil’s glass, silently asking if he wanted a refill. Neil shook his head no. “Unfortunate for them deep pockets back east ... the Reese River ... even when it’s floodin’ ... s’barely as wide as a man’s arm. Prob’bly no deeper’n his fingers. They say stagecoaches could ford the stream at full gallop. Their passengers only got a little bump on their rump. An’ in the summer,” Ed frowned, “shit ... Reese’s even less spectac’lar.”

And he was right. Driving across the valley the day before, I had noticed that the river was only visible as a band of lush vegetation meandering through the otherwise umber landscape.

We each took a few more shots, then Rob scratched the eight ball and our second game was over. As we racked up the balls, Ed asked, “Anybody tell you fellas ‘bout the big ol’ Methodist Church up here on the hill?” He waved his arm toward one of the walls of the bar.

“No,” Neil spoke for all of us.

“Well, you see ... it’s got a story too.”

“Everything’s got a story in this town, Ed.” Walt was definitely feeling feisty.

“It sure does, my friend. Austin was an important town in the old days.”

“Just ‘cause it’s old doesn’t make it important,” Walt grinned as he prepared to break.

Neil sensed a growing tension between Ed and Walt and quickly jumped in. “So what about this big church?”

Ed didn’t speak for a moment, then told us, “They were tryin’ to raise the money to build the thing. But they got so many minin’ shares, you know, as donations to their fund, that the church ‘corporated itself The Methodist Mining Company. Sold their own shares in other parts the country. Made a bundle. The buildin’ they ‘rected’s the most spectac’lar church’n the state.”

“Gee,” Rob finally spoke, “maybe we oughta ... let Burt in on that tidbit. Maybe he could ... get into the choir.”

“Is this Burt the religious sort?” Ed asked.

“Guess you could say that,” I answered.

“Well then, he’s in the right community,” Ed suggested. “Good Christian brotherhood goes way back here.” He stopped, as if he were thinking. Then he went on. “The first national fund-raising campaign started here.”

“That’s not something I’d necessarily be proud of,” Walt chided, “depending on your outlook.”

Ed gave him a stern look, but continued. “In eighteen-sixty-four a guy named Reuel Gridley made a bet with one of his buddies over the outcome of one of our municipal ‘lections. We take our politics pretty serious here.”

“What else have you got?” Walt sniped.

Ed ignored him. “Gridley lost the bet. To pay off he shouldered a fifty pound sack’a flour, decorated with all sorts of falderal and small Union flags ... and marched the length’a main street.” Once again Ed pointed through the front window. “Town band marched ‘hind him. From the stories ... they were pretty dang bad. Guess they squawked ‘n’ squeaked their way through what was supposed to be a bunch’a patriotic tunes.”

“Sounds like some of the tunes on this here jukebox,” Walt was unrelenting.

“At Clifton,” Ed waved off to his right, generally toward the wall behind the bar, “‘bout a mile down canyon ... the sack of flour was auctioned off. For three-hundred-and-fifty bucks in gold coin. The money went to the Sanitary Fund.”

“What,” Walt laughed, “to build a city dump?”

Neil gave Walt a dirty look, but Ed once again let the comment slip by. “The Sanitary Fund’s what they called the Red Cross durin’ the Civil War.”

“That’s pretty charitable,” Neil jumped in before Walt could respond with more venom. “Three hundred dollars back then was a lot of money.”

“You bet. But wait,” Ed raised his hand to prevent further comment. “The guy who purchased the flour gave it back ... to be auctioned again. They did that over’n’over ‘til they raised over forty-five hun’red dollars in gold’n’silver. They also got some county scrip, city lots ... and a couple dozen fancy-bound ledger books.”

“Sounds like everybody got into the act,” I added.

“Yup. But that’s still jus’ the beginnin’. Gridley took the sack’a flour to western Nevada ... held auctions at Dayton, Silver City, Gold Hill, and Virginia City. Raised ‘nother twenty-five thousan’.” Ed reached under the bar and pulled out a glass of some clear liquid. He looked at it for a moment, then brought it to his lips and drank just a bit. He swallowed the liquid with obvious pleasure, then placed the glass back under the counter. “Gridley ‘tinued on to Sacramento and San Francisco ... then took a ship to the east coast. Had a few more auctions an’ turned the money over to the fund. By the time he returned home near a year’d passed. They say he sold his sack’a flour to more’an ten thousand people ... an’ raised more’n a hundred thousan’ dollars.”

“That’s an interesting story,” Neil said.

“Gridley’s store’s still standin’,” Ed added. “In case you guys get up to the top of town.” I was thrilled. “Is that it ... that little stone building ... up there by the trailer park?”

“Yup. Sure is.”

“Shit,” I exclaimed, “Walt and Rob and I looked at that place just this morning.” I glanced at the other two. “Seems so small,” I looked at Ed. Not wanting him to think I was another Walt, I added, “Compared to modern, wood frame structures.”

“Looks more like an old garage ... or storage shed,” Rob agreed.

“A very small garage,” I added. “Our trucks wouldn’t fit.”

“They might,” Walt laughed, “but you’d never get out.”

“Gridley couldn’t have had much of a selection in a tiny store like that.” I tried to imagine merchandise, Gridley, and a couple of customers trying to transact business within the confines of those four walls. “Wonder why he didn’t make it bigger?”

“Shit,” Walt pointed out the obvious, “you wouldn’t make it any bigger either. Not if you had to haul those heavy rocks, and fit them into place. You’d probably decide smaller was just fine.”

Again we concentrated on our game of eight ball. And again Rob scratched, knocking the eight ball in before all of the other balls had cleared the table. It was my turn to rack the balls. Neil said, from across the room, “Hey, Ed. This is an old map of Austin, right?”

“Yup.”

“Well, what’s this long arm going way out toward Battle Mountain?”

Ed laughed. “One of our better stories. Wanna hear it?” He looked at Neil first, then glanced at Walt.

Neil said, “Sure.”

“Well, even though Austin witnessed some amazin’ silver production, it was bypassed by the Central Pacific Railroad. Uhm ... back in eighteen-sixty-eight, I think. You know, when the transcontinental railroad worked its way through. The railroad fig’red the Humboldt River route was more practical. That took it through Battle Mountain ... ninety-two miles north’a here. That drew off Austin’s overlan’ wagon traffic ... which was pretty heavy ‘long this central route.”

“Does make sense,” I said. “Along the river they wouldn’t hafta cut through so many mountains.”

“That’s prob’bly true,” Ed admitted, “but the people here didn’t like it. For years they tried to get a spur route down from Battle Mountain. Finally ... in eighteen-seventy-nine ... construction got approved for the Nevada Central. They passed a bill in the state leg’slature grantin’ Lander County ‘thority to issue two-hun’red-thousan’ dollars in bon’s. But by the time the first rails were spiked, the deadline for completion was only five months away. Winter was comin’ fast. If the railroad failed to reach Austin’s city limits within the stip’lated time, the subs’dy’d lapse and the railroad’d go bankrupt’. Through blizzards and freezin’ weather the construction gangs made good time. But even with heroic efforts they were still miles short. The midnight deadline got close. The Town Council met in ‘mergency session. They took a vote and made a hasty dash into the desert in the middle’a the night. They stuck a sign nex’ to the rails that read: *‘Austin City Limits.’* There were only minutes to spare. Town council fig’red if the rails wouldn’t come to the town ... they’d take the town to the rails.”

Ed seemed to be storied out. He retrieved his glass once again, from below the bar, and we continued our game of pool. After a time Neil broke the silence. “Ed, can I ask you one last question?”

“Sure,” was all he said.

“Well ... on the way into town ... about a quarter mile out ... I noticed this big structure,” Neil shaped it in the air with his hands. “Looks like a huge, rectangular water tower.”

“Stokes Castle,” Ed said with confidence.

“Doesn’t look much like a Castle,” Walt said as he moved to the bar. “I’ll have another.” He pushed his glass across the bar.

Ed was slow to take it up.

“What about it?” Neil prodded. “What’s the deal?”

“Guy named Anson Stokes built it for his family, ‘round the turn of the century. They lived in it for a while, I guess.”

“Looks pretty big for a house,” Neil mused.

“It is,” Ed agreed. “It’s fifty feet square and three stories high. Made’a hand-hewn granite.”

“Rock solid,” I inserted.

“First floor had the kitch’n an’ dinin’ room. Secon’ floor had a big livin’ room an’ bath. The bedrooms an’ ‘nother bath were up on the third floor. I guess they used the roof as a sun deck and observation platform.”

“Can you get in to see it?” Neil asked.

“Nope. Got it all fenced and locked up. To prevent looting, I guess. An’ to keep stupid tourists from takin’ a head dive off the top.” Ed pushed a full glass of frothing brew across the bar to Walt.

Walt laid down his money and said, “Thanks,” then headed back to the table to retrieve his cue.

“Shit ... shit,” Rob cursed under his breath, as the eight ball rolled into a pocket for another scratch.

“Well that’s it for me,” Neil said. “I’m heading back up the hill.”

“I’m with you,” I said.

“I’ve gotta finish this beer,” Walt explained. “I’m gonna stay for another game.”

“Me too,” Rob moaned. “I’m gonna win one of these games yet.”

Neil and I took our leave, thanking Ed for his history of Austin. On the way out I noticed another framed news clip close to the door. This one was written by a local Austin correspondent to a California journal, during the January rush of 1863:

*Readers planning to come to Austin should be advised. Purchase yourself a plug for \$40 to \$75 at Sacramento, Carson City or Virginia City, array yourself in homely apparel, hang a bag of lunch, a six-shooter and a canteen on the horn of the saddle, and tie carefully behind the same two substantial California blankets. You may then establish yourself in the saddle and wheel off. The horse had better not be a mare.*

I showed the clip to Neil, then commented on my way through the door, “After reading that

last sentence, my guess is Rob and Walt's great-grandfathers must've worked these mines."

^^^

After our move from Hawthorne to Tonopah, and from that town to Austin, all within a relatively short period of time, it was difficult to get back into the usual routine. Besides, Austin brought challenges of its own. On our second night the power went off about 11:30 and came back on sometime between three and four in the morning. That messed up alarm clocks and gave the guys a new excuse to head out late.

Then I busted the fresh water inlet to my Empire while trying to stop a drip. I tightened the pipe one turn too far and cracked the plastic coupling. With no place in town that carried that part, I had to use the holding tank until I could get to Fallon.

But, in my quest to find a new plastic coupling, I met the young woman who worked in the convenience store at the trailer park. Her name was Ann Sweepe. She looked to be about 20, seemed very nice, on the quiet side, and for some reason mentioned, in our brief conversation, that she was born in California and had lived in Austin for only five years. The way she fixed her hair, and her overall appearance, reminded me of a young Sunny.

And wouldn't you know it? We finally settled somewhere that was supposed to be cool and found ourselves in the midst of a depressing heat wave. The hot, dry winds blew incessantly along the canyon walls. Sometimes you just can't win.

...

I prepared 12 boxes of samples that day, caught up on all of my map work, and finished just as Neil, Tank, and Burt pulled in. It was all work left over from Tonopah.

Then Ann knocked on my door. Through the screen she said, "Hi. Chris?" She seemed so timid; unsure.

"Hi," I replied, a bit startled. I wasn't wearing a shirt, because of the heat, and felt exposed. "Hi, Ann." Moving toward the door, I grabbed my t-shirt. "This is a pleasant surprise."

She was all business, being slightly embarrassed herself. "There's some guy on the phone ... Walt ... says he needs to speak to you."

"At the store?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." I pulled the shirt over my head and walked with her across the lot.

"Hey, what's up, Walt?"

"Usual bummer, man. I'm calling from the Standard station. Rob and I missed connections. He didn't show. I'm thinking maybe something happened."

"You at the Standard in the lower part of town?"

"Yeah. I got the bike. You better come and get me. Don't wanna drive this thing through town. And we'd better go out and check on Rob."

“Got yuh. I’ll be right there.”

I thanked Ann, told Neil Walt’s story, grabbed the Gray Beast, and drove down to retrieve Walt and his bike. With the Kawasaki secured in the back of the truck, Walt expressed his concern that Rob might have been bitten by a snake. He had seen two, himself, just that morning. But as we drove out into the desert west of town, we spotted Spurrier cruising up the highway toward Austin. We stopped and he pulled along side of us.

He had his usual shit-assin’ grin, the one he flashed whenever he screwed up and knew he would have to do some fast talking.

“Where the fuck you been?” Walt yelled across me, toward the open window.

“Hey, Pinhead ... just a matter of poor timing.”

“Fuck that poor timing bull shit,” Walt blared. “I sat there in that burning ass sun for an hour waiting for your sorry butt. I was outta water, man. Dying of thirst. I had to ride that fuckin’ bike all the way back. Asshole.”

Rob looked away, up the highway, and took a deep breath.

“Thought you got bit by a snake or something.” Walt’s voice softened.

“I was running late,” Rob explained. “Had to collect my last sample. When I got to the rendezvous ... you weren’t there ... figured you’d gone on ahead on your bike.”

“Fuck me,” Walt’s anger returned. “What if I were out there hurting? You’re cruising in for dinner.”

“I was just heading in to check on you,” Rob smiled, pleased with his answer.

“Fuck that shit,” Walt snapped. “You were blowin’ me off, asshole.”

Rob looked at Walt with his hurt look. “I would never leave you stranded. I don’t see a problem here ... just a waste of time.” And with that said, he gave us a quick salute, shifted into first, said “Bye,” and drove off toward Austin.

I turned the Gray Beast and accelerated toward our evening meal. Walt slumped back in the seat and mumbled, “Cock suckin’ buddy fucker’s gonna get his kicked in big time.”

...

After dinner everyone but Tank went down to the International to play pool and listen to the jukebox. Ed kept the juke filled with lots of good country tunes; lots of Willie and Waylon and the country-rock that was popular at that time. Because of the lack of anything else, we were all becoming country-western fans. Even techno-pop addicts like Rob and Walt had their country favorites. It was a little bit of Devo gone country.

There were only two locals in the bar that night, and I remember wondering how Ed could stay in business if that was a typical Saturday night.

Burt and I tired of the place about 11:30 and drove back up the canyon. Burt almost stepped into the Empire.

“Whoops, Burt, old buddy,” I laughed, “you got the wrong cabin.”

He tried smiling through the sleepy haze that crossed his face. “Force of habit,” he said softly.

“You got your own place now,” I reminded him, pointing off through the darkness.



“Yeah, I know,” he said wearily. “But I gotta share it with Tank.”

“Thought you and Tank were buddies?”

“Some. He snores terribly, and talks in his sleep.”

I told him, “You could stay here, but I talk in my sleep from time to time too. Probably wouldn’t be any better company at night.” Feeling ornery, I said, “Besides, you’re really not my type. We’d probably divorce after six months and you’d be back with old Tank anyway.”

I could tell that annoyed him, so I rubbed it in. “You and Tank make a cute couple. I hope you never break up, and live happily ever after in your tan Argosy.”

At first he didn’t say a thing, looking at me with his sad puppy-dog eyes. It was as if he were trying to comprehend why I was always so cruel, so unrelentingly mean. I am sure he wondered what he had done to make me hate him so much. His innocence and personal peace of mind was always being shattered by my disrespectful banter and arrogant manner. He blinked once or twice, then simply said, “Good night,” turned, and walked toward the Argosy, and his good buddy Tank.

^^^

My troubles with the Empire continued. I had filled my potable water holding tank and had been using the internal pump to provide water for the sink and bathroom. I needed to remove the cracked coupling so that I could take it with me for comparison when I bought a new one. When I removed a plate and unscrewed a plastic attachment, water spewed everywhere. I got soaked. With curses flying and water dripping I ran inside and shut off the pump. After drying off and calming down, I discovered a one-way valve that had to stay in place for the system to operate properly. Once I replaced the valve everything worked fine. But my ego hoped that no one had witnessed that little escapade. Especially Ann in the convenience store.

...

Neil’s last day in the field suddenly arrived. He had gone out to finish mapping and returned to camp about mid afternoon.

“Back a little early,” I teased.

“Lost my hammer,” he grumbled.

“Oh,” I said cautiously, “won’t the company buy another?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah ... but this was my own. A gift from my parents. When I graduated.” His voice trembled, like he was on the verge of tears. “Been using it for years.”

“When’d you have it last?” I tried to be helpful.

“I don’t know.” He started to wave me away, like he had already covered this ground. But then he reviewed his day. “Didn’t miss it ‘til my second stop.”

“Did you go back to the first?”

“Yeah,” he shook his head. “Was an hour drive.”

“Holy cow,” I whistled, “must be a special hammer.”

“It is. Very special.” He went to the cooler in front of the Airstream and pulled out a beer. “I checked all over my work area. Found all my tags. It was nowhere.”

“No luck, huh?”

“No luck,” he said solemnly. “It’s like it walked away.” Then he twisted off the cap and took a deep swallow of the cool liquid.

Watching him drink made me thirsty, so I helped myself to a brew. Pulling the bottle from the ice, I said, “Sometimes I wonder if inanimate objects don’t have a mind ... or soul ... of their own.”

“How’s that?” Neil asked without much interest.

“Well, perhaps your hammer sensed you’d never use it again in the field.” I took a swallow. “It’s function and purpose in life would be over.”

“We’re talking about a hammer here,” Neil frowned.

“Exactly,” I responded. “A rock hammer belongs in the field, smashing rocks. When you laid it down it saw its opportunity and buried itself under loose soil or leaves. Now it’s in rock hammer heaven ... among the stones and boulders that it loves.”

“Well,” Neil finally smiled, “I hope it’s happy.”

^^^

I drove Neil to Ely to catch a flight to Salt Lake City. From there he would fly to Tucson.

“Last day with NORMMEX,” I said. “Better enjoy it.”

“I am,” Neil smiled, “but I’ll be working in Tucson ‘til Thursday. Then it’s off to law school.”

“Assuming you didn’t catch anything.”

“How’s that?” he looked momentarily concerned.

“Well, with Rob lying in camp, shittin’ and pukin’, you never know.”

Neil shook his head. “That guy. I hope it’s something he ate, and not contagious.”

“I certainly wouldn’t wanna look like he did this morning.”

“Terrible,” Neil confirmed.

“If he’s fakin’ it,” I volunteered, “just to get outta work, he deserves an academy award.”

“And should get the day off anyway,” Neil laughed.

It was a nice drive through mountains, pines, and desert basins. There were several interesting canyons and old towns. When we passed through Eureka I looked to see if that old fart from the evening news was still sitting on that curb along the main drag, on guard against “niggers.” But I didn’t see him. He must have been off chasing camels across the hills.

At one point, with a little hint of conspiracy, Neil said, “Heard you had a little female companionship last night.”

I smiled. “Not what you think.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Was all innocent, as much as I wish otherwise.”

“Either way, that was pretty quick. Who do you know in Austin?”

“Her name’s Ann. She works in the store at the trailer park.”

“Oh,” Neil frowned, “hmm ... don’t think I’ve seen her.”

“You’d remember if you did.” I shifted in my seat, keeping my hands on the wheel. “When I was in there shopping yesterday morning she was real friendly. Had the place to ourselves. No other customers. So we talked ... don’t know ... maybe thirty minutes. Mostly chit-chat ... but it went so well I took a chance and asked her over for dinner. Surprised she accepted.”

“Romantic meal, huh?”

“Hardly,” I laughed. “Baked the fanciest thing I knew how. Mexican casserole. With store bought strawberry shortcake for dessert.”

“Not exactly candle light, steaks, and wine,” Neil had to chuckle. “But I’m still curious. What’s she look like?”

“Well,” I contemplated, “she’s attractive, in a plain sort of way.” I looked at Neil. “You know what I mean?”

“Think so. Sort of the girl next door?”

“Yeah. That’s it.” I nodded, bringing Ann’s image up in my mind. “She has dark brown hair that falls straight to her shoulders ... with a little flip underneath ... right at the end.”

“I like dark hair,” Neil smiled. “Judy has straight dark hair. Very soft.”

“Ann’s looks soft ... with a subtle shine.” I had to down shift as we climbed with the road through a steep canyon. “She has dark eyes, and a fine complexion. A bit on the pale side ... especially for this late in the summer.” I thought of Sunny then, and how tan she was, everywhere. “And she has a pretty smile ... when she smiles.”

“Doesn’t smile much?”

“A bit sullen ... yet kind of listless, at the same time. Like she’s anticipating something terrible, something tragic.”

“Maybe things haven’t gone too well for her,” Neil suggested.

“Possible,” I replied. “She mentioned something about hooking up with some older fella for a short time and getting stung.”

“That’d do it.”

“Seems edgy and uncertain about beginning a new relationship, yet seems to crave excitement.” We reached the pass and the road almost immediately started down the other side, in sweeping arcs through a scrubby forest of juniper and pinyon. The rapid descent was exhilarating.

“Maybe she should get out of Austin.”

“Suggested that. Told her she should travel around, see how the rest of this country lives. But she rejected that. Said she doesn’t have the money or a car and no one to go with.”

“Sounds like an excuse to me.” Neil braced himself as we zipped through an especially tight curve.

“It’s as if she’s holed up, hiding from something, waiting to see what happens next.”

“Austin’s a good place to hide,” Neil chuckled.

I laughed with him. Then added, “She seems willing to go along for the ride, but unable to

make decisions herself. From the things she said ... if I read between the lines ... she'd run off with me, if I told her to ... and lead the way."

"Maybe she needs guidance, someone to lean on."

"Maybe," I said. "She is interesting, and pretty sharp for a twenty-year-old ... but there's that mysterious side to her. That's a little unsettling."

"I'd be hesitant to get too close," Neil advised.

"For me," I agreed, "yeah. There's too big an age difference. Besides, there's danger written all over her," I tapped the brakes as a rabbit blasted across the road, "like she's ready to explode."

I waited for Neil to reply, but he didn't say a thing.

I looked at him and smiled, "Certainly don't wanna be around when she goes off."

"A woman can turn into a wild cat so quickly," Neil stared straight ahead, apparently speaking from experience.

"Yes sir," I said. "And Ann's personality seems to indicate that potential. About ten-thirty she suddenly stopped in mid-conversation and announced she had to leave."

"You say something she didn't like?"

"Wondered about that ... but couldn't think of anything. Was on my best behavior."

"Heck," Neil laughed again, "maybe your casserole got to her."

"Could be," I moaned. "Gives me gas."

"Well, at least you had a nice evening with an attractive woman."

"Yeah, but I came away feeling sad." I put both hands on the wheel. "For someone so young and pretty to be so insecure and lost."

...

I was surprised by Ely. We found what appeared to be a thriving little town, at least compared to Hawthorne, Tonopah, and Austin. It sits fairly high in a mountain canyon and seemed cool and shady compared to those other locations.

Coming in from the west we passed an impressive open pit mine with massive dumps, piles of old equipment, and huge trucks, steam powered scoops, and long cranes. We hadn't run across anything quite that extensive on our travels through Nevada. But even with those deep mining scars it was a nice looking community.

I also had a surprise at the airport. I expected a tiny operation like that at Hawthorne. But Ely had an actual terminal, even if it was a small building with only one door exiting to the runway and passengers had to walk across the tarmac to board.

Neil and I sat there waiting, until a full-sized United jet airliner drifted in from the north and touched down. I was in awe. I expected some little tree top airline with 12 seats and the luggage strapped on top. Neil was leaving on a full-sized jet.

We said our farewells, he boarded the plane, and he was off. I watched the big jet leave the runway, then drove back through the canyons, desert, and mountains to Austin.

When I pulled into camp I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. I glanced over toward Neil's truck. It was listing to the left with two flat tires. He must have run into some pretty rugged terrain while searching for his lost hammer. "Shit! Something else to pick up in

Fallon.”

...

Spurrier’s illness had passed. In fact, by late afternoon he said he was so hungry that he volunteered to fix the entire crew his special spaghetti sauce and pasta. In my mind I seconded Neil’s nomination of Rob for an Academy Award. But I didn’t present the trophy. With Rob cooking I could have a leisurely evening.

When Spurrier announced the completion of his preparations we all piled into the Airstream. Walt, Rob and I were there first and sat at the cluttered table, gorging ourselves on red covered pasta, and swilling beer. Tank and Burt stood in the aisle, holding their plates in one hand while eating with the other.

“Come on, Tank, have a seat.” I pointed toward the open spot at the table.

“No,” he said flatly. “I don’t like the smell of beer.”

I shrugged and looked at Burt, indicating the open seat with my eyes.

He shook his head. “Beer,” is all he said, wrinkling up his nose.

The two Tea Totalers always seemed uncomfortable around the rest of us, their body language warning of their inclination to leave at the slightest insult. But they never did. My suspicion was that they wanted to be part of the group, but could never let go of their inhibitions long enough to fit in. Even late in the season they didn’t know quite how to take us. From their perspective we played a game with no set rules. There was nothing solid to hold and examine. As soon as they thought they had us pegged, we slipped off into some other realm of misused reason and illusive fantasy. It was like a running inside joke in which they were never able to participate.

The trailer was stuffy inside, the late August air still and warm, even at Austin’s elevation. The small compartment was steamy, smelling of boiled pasta, oregano, stewed tomatoes, beer, and sweaty male bodies. We all wore grubby cut-offs or skimpy gym shorts, except for Tank and Burt. They wore jeans and T-shirts. The rest of us were shirtless.

Between mouthfuls Walt said, “Been wondering.” He pointed toward each of us with the tines of his fork. “It’s hard to figure.” He twirled the long noodles entangling his fork, preparing to feed his face. “Why do we all crowd into such a small, uncomfortable space ... when we could be enjoying the fresh air outside?”

We each pondered his observation as his lips engulfed his fork. I volunteered, “None of us wants to miss a single minute of our deeply philosophical conversations.”

“He’s right,” Rob added, “our contribution toward the advancement of humanitarian thinking ... and Western cosmology and metaphysical understanding ... are well beyond the scope of ... shall we say ... the proletariat’s ability to comprehend.”

Burt and Tank didn’t respond. They didn’t dare look our way. They maintained the steady rhythm of their evening meal.

I was seated in the corner, behind the table, farthest from the door, listening intently and contributing my part to the ever weirder vocal garbage that passed as conversation. As the meal progressed, the three of us blurted out increasingly bombastic strings of nonsense, our mouths full of mashed pasta, with beer slopping from cans and bottles, food and drink everywhere, and

the whole scene becoming quite raunchy.

Near the end of this revelry I remember hearing the unmistakable rubber band whine that only a Volkswagen engine can produce. It was not a common sound along the highways and within the isolated communities of Nevada. The whine came to a huffing, sputtering stop outside our door. The laughter stilled as Rob and Walt spilled out into the lot. Loud greetings could be heard through the open door. Concentrating on the completion of my meal, I didn't recognize the voices, and only half-heard what was being said.

Tank and Burt finished their portions, dutifully deposited their dishes in the sink, excused themselves, and headed back to their trailer. I could hear half-assed casual introductions as each emerged from the passage.

Suddenly, she was there, popping through the door, a broad smile across her face. Javee, one of the women from Tonopah and Hawthorne, Denice King's friend, was carrying on a long range conversation with someone outside, apparently about nothing in particular. Whatever it was must have been ridiculous, because I could hear everyone laughing. She walked through the trailer, looking at the fixtures, peering into the bathroom, and stopping just short of the bedroom. She turned and said, "Looking for decorator tips."

I smiled, again embarrassed at being shirtless in the presence of a woman. "Find anything," I said weakly.

"Nothing more than the latest American Ghetto Decor."

"Ah," I played along, "I see you have an eye for subtle detail." From floor to ceiling, front to back, the Airstream was cluttered with trash. "And the neat thing is," I paused for effect, "we did it all ourselves."

Rob and Walt stepped in. Carolyn, their friend from the University, stood outside at the door. My two compatriots picked up the conversation and I watched the whole circus while I continued to eat.

"So," Walt seemed eager, "we goin' or not?"

"Sure," Javee said as she moved back toward the door, Rob and Walt moving ahead of her, "Spenser's Hot Springs it is."

Rob and Walt exited and Javee started out behind them. She suddenly turned, pointing casually toward me with a wave of her arm, and asked, "Who's this quiet, handsome, stranger?"

Our eyes locked amid the laughter and jeers from outside. Rob's face appeared at the door. "Javee, this's Chris. He's the Expediter for our crew. He does half the work in half the time with half a brain."

"That's all he needs," Walt's voice cut through. "'Cause he's only half a man."

Walt laughed heartily at his own joke.

I blushed and mumbled, "Hello."

"He's a geologist ... but he wants to be a poet," Rob added, attempting to make amends.

"Yeah," Walt blurted, "but how can you be a poet if all you got are rocks in your head?"

Javee's face became serious. Our eyes stayed tangled in the moment. Then she said, "So you're a poet, huh? Nice bod for an academic type."

Her tone seemed almost mocking. I felt exposed and self-conscious. I reddened, tried to smile, didn't reply, and looked back to my plate.

She said in a softer voice, “Let’s get together sometime. I write a bit of poetry too. And I know a few writers in Taos. Have you ever heard of John Nichols? *The Milagro Beanfield War*?”

“No. Haven’t heard of him.”

“Good book. You’d like it.” She stepped out the door, then re-appeared. “You’re cute.” Her eyes flashed. This time she seemed serious. My ego swelled, but I suspected nothing would come of it. It all seemed to be part of her rambling, disjointed conversation. Besides, by their attentiveness, I could tell Walt and Rob were setting their sights on her. I was not in the mood for that kind of competition. I would never have a chance against the hormone levels pumping through their young veins.

I smiled again, and when she left I went back to finishing my meal.

• • •

When I stepped out of the Airstream the two women were still there, occupied by Rob and Walt’s attempts at scoring points. Carolyn was already in the car, door closed. Javee was standing, half-in, half-out, unable to break off the ever humorous dialogue. She saw me and waved.

I waved back, wanted to go over, but felt like a vulture scrambling for a few scraps of a fresh kill. Besides, from the way the other two vultures were posturing, it looked as if she was already claimed, or would be soon.

“Chris, come with us,” she shouted.

I stopped where I was. “Naw, thanks.”

“Awe, come on,” she pleaded. “We’re goin’ over into the Big Smoky and do some skinny dippin’ in the hot springs. It’ll be fun.”

“Thanks. But I have work to do. Maybe some other time.” Skinny dipping at the hot springs seemed like a prelude to sex, especially for this bunch of genitally oriented young studs. I didn’t want to go and get all worked up and then be the odd man out. I waved and headed for my trailer.

I barely plopped down on the step when Javee appeared. She just seemed to pop into view. She stood, in a loose pose, almost as if displaying her slender figure and the way her breasts filled her knit pull-over top. It was then that I noticed that her long, brown, slightly wind-blown hair was streaked with thin strands of gray and white. She was tan, beautiful, and quite distinctive.

In those few seconds before she spoke, a cascade of thoughts tumbled through my mind. Physical urges battled emotional considerations, while ego shot holes through any sensibility I had left. Insight prevailed over my subliminal meanderings. Perhaps her outspoken, aggressive nature was a defense mechanism, a protective measure to hide her own nervousness and uncertainty. I could identify with that.

“Come with us,” she pleaded. “We’re going to the hot springs. Come along.”

I looked up into her intriguing eyes, wanting to say yes, to be with her. “It’s a pretty rowdy group,” I said.

“So, it’ll be fun.”

“Naw, not tonight,” I looked down at the ground in front of her, catching a glimpse of bare

feet in worn sandals. “There’ll be constant cutting and taunting. I’m not in the mood.”

“Besides,” I went on in my mind, “you mentioned skinny dipping. With the group. That’s different than with Stu and Sunny. That was more intimate.” I reached down and picked up a handful of gravel and began tossing the chips to the side, one after another.

“The spring is nice and warm and relaxing. It’ll be good for you. Put you in the mood,” she coaxed.

I looked up into her eyes again. I thought, “I would prefer to know you on a one-to-one basis.” What I said was, “Sometimes my worst side ... my silly side ... comes out with those guys. Especially when I’m nervous or drinking.”

“I like silly,” she smiled, then added, “sometimes.”

“Ah, I don’t wanna give you a bad impression.” Then I thought, “But what would that matter?” Rob or Walt will be more aggressive and monopolize her time. One of them will end up with her, while I sit there in my own self-pity and let it happen. And I’ll come back frustrated, as usual, having lost the evening in the bargain. I don’t need that. I need comforting and support, and a woman’s touch; not negative re-enforcement. Not right now. So I said, “I’d like to, but I do have work to do.”

“What work? Leave it for tomorrow.”

“I can’t. The guys hafta have their maps when they leave in the morning. I’ve gotta get today’s points plotted. Takes a couple hours. I’d better not.”

“You sure,” she asked coyly, “I’d ... we’d love to have you. Come on.”

“No,” I said firmly, but weakly. “But thanks anyway. Some other time.”

“Oh-kay!” She took a deep breath. “But I’ll see you again.” She pointed with her lovely, slender finger to emphasize the “you.” “You’re not getting off so easy. I’m gonna get to know you.” Then abruptly she said, “Bye,” turned, and walked to the others still huddled around the car.

I watched her limber, casual body flow across the lot, as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

^^^

The next morning Rob collected his map and asked, “You heading to Reno soon?”

“Yeah,” I answered, “Making a sample shipment and supply run tomorrow.”

“Great.” A broad good ol’ buddy smile crossed his face. “Mind having ... Carolyn ... ride along?”

“The one that was here last night?”

“Yes. She needs to get to Reno ... to pick up supplies for her crew ... but hates to drive that distance alone.” Rob’s voice softened into a slightly conspiratorial tone. “If you wouldn’t mind the company ... she’s excited about the chance to go with you.”

“Heard she’s engaged,” I countered his implication.

Rob shrugged and gave me one of his many smiles.

What could I say? “Hell no ... she’s more than welcome. Any company’s great on a long



drive, and if the company's good lookin', then all the better."

"Great." As he started away he added, "I'll have her get with you about the time. Owe you one."

"Hey," I yelled after him, "no big deal. I hafta go anyway."

...

After dinner that evening I was sitting on a boulder behind my trailer, looking toward the west, across Pony Canyon, evaluating the spectacle potential of the approaching sunset. From my perch I was aware of an occasional vehicle moving along the bottom of the canyon on Highway 50, the old Lincoln Highway, the first paved transcontinental roadway, the "loneliest road in America."

Sitting in the calm evening air, considering those who might have traveled that paved road, I noticed two figures walking along the shoulder. Facing into the sun, it took my eyes a few moments to adjusted to the long shadows below. When I was able to focus I recognized Javee and Carolyn descending from their trailer park on the opposite terrace. They were heading into town.

Even in those deep shadows I could make out tan legs and arms, and I did recognize the dadaist Hawaiian blouse that Javee wore, reminding me of our first encounter in Tonopah. It was sitting there on that rock that I realized Javee wasn't as flaky in Austin as she seemed earlier in the season. Either she had calmed down, or my perspective had changed.

While I watched, Javee happened to look up. She must have said something, because both women waved. Javee shouted several words, but they were garbled by the distance.

I waved back and yelled, "EVENING."

Javee yelled again, but I still couldn't understand her words.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU. WHATEVER," agreeing to anything. I waved again, encouraging them to continue on their journey. I could see Javee's smile as she returned my wave, and they proceeded down the canyon.

My eyes followed the women and the Sun until all were hidden behind the mountain. My thoughts were drifting toward memories of Sunny when I heard footsteps approaching from behind. I turned to see Ann's smiling face.

"Hey," I said, "you just missed sunset."

"I know ... I'm slow."

"Wanna join me," I patted the boulder.

She didn't respond at first. Then said, "I was thinking about going into town for ice cream."

"An ice cream cone?"

"Yes. Would you like to go with me?" She seemed eager, but almost shy.

"Well, sure," I said brightly, "I wouldn't pass up a chance to spend time with a beautiful woman."

She turned away slightly, breaking eye contact.

"Want me to drive?"

She looked toward me, but not into my eyes. "You'll have to. I don't have a car."

“Oh, I see,” I teased, with an exaggerated hurt in my voice, “you just want me for my wheels.”

Her neck reddened. She didn’t respond.

Trying to put her at ease, I said, “Hey, just teasing. I’m flattered you asked.”

• • •

While we sat in my truck licking the cool, sweet cream, I said, “You know, this is the first cone I’ve had all summer. This is great.”

“It’s a nice treat.”

We sat quietly, enjoying one of life’s simple pleasures. When she finished munching, Ann asked, “You ever been out to Stokes Castle?”

“That big tower down at the edge of town?”

“Yes.”

“No, never been there.”

“Wanna go?” With sudden enthusiasm. “Gets really dark out there. It’s where a lot of kids go to make out.”

“Sure, if you’d like,” wondering if that last bit of information was simply a statement of fact or meant as an expectation.

We drove out to the secluded spot and found that we were the only couple there. I parked near the edge of the clearing where we could look out over the dark void of the distant valley. The tower was to our right, a massive black monolith against the star filled sky. We sat quietly at first, looking at the stars and the occasional headlights piercing the darkness along the open highway. Occasionally a cool summer breeze drifted through our open windows, carrying the unmistakable scent of sage and juniper.

Ann broke the silence. “So ... you haven’t told me ... how was your day?” Her tone was that of a housewife speaking to her husband.

“Oh, nothing exciting,” I responded, like hundreds of thousands of husbands across the continent. “I drove to Tonopah to pick up samples.” We each positioned ourselves with our back to a door, facing each other across the distance of the cab.

“What kind of samples?”

“Rock samples. Chip samples. Hand samples.” I wasn’t sure she understood. “We left two geologist down there to finish sampling the area. Their samples needed to get shipped, so we can assay them for minerals. Part of my job.”

“You do assays?” Her interest picked up.

“No. I ship them to Tucson to be assayed.”

She seemed a bit disappointed. “Which way did’ja go?”

“To Tonopah?”

I think she shook her head, but I wasn’t looking at her.

I shifted my weight. “Took the Big Smokey Valley.” The window crank was poking me in the back. I finally had to turn it a notch to get it out of the way.

I settled back as Ann asked, “How was the drive?”

“Nice, scenic drive,” I said, “but a bit long. There’s nothing between here and there but sage and Carver’s Station.”

“Not much at Carver’s, if I remember right. I’ve only been down there once.” Her voice seemed distant, as if she were somewhere back in time, remembering.

“That’s probably all you need.” I watched two sets of headlights drifting across the valley floor. I mused, “The return trip seemed especially long.”

“Did you come back the same way?”

“Yeah, and it actually took the same two hours as the trip down.” I laid my right arm across the back of the bench seat. “For some reason return trips always seem longer.”

“I think you’re right.”

“There has to be some psychological or physiological reason for that phenomena,” I speculated.

“Perhaps boredom,” she said flatly. After a few moments of silence, she asked, “So you just picked up these samples and came back?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “Got down there about noon, ate lunch at the El Matador....”

“The El Matador?”

“Yeah, a Mexican restaurant. You like Mexican?”

“Sometimes,” she said cautiously, “if it’s not too spicy.”

“Uh-oh,” I thought, “maybe she didn’t like my casserole.” Suppressing my concern, I went on with my account. “Then ... let’s see ... I got the motel manager to let me into the room so I could box the samples. About the time I finished, Stu and Dave came in. They’re the geologists we left there.”

She didn’t respond, so I continued. “We shot the sh ... breeze ... until about four. They’re not too happy about being in Tonopah.”

“They’d rather be in Austin?”

Looking at her heavily shadowed features, I said, “Austin has much more to offer.”

In the darkness I couldn’t tell if she got my point or not. If she did, she chose not to respond.

I thought for a moment, then said, “It was interesting. Stu mentioned that he’d seen more para-military survivalists.”

“What’re those?”

“Mostly weekend warriors and soldier-of-fortune wanna-bes.”

“Where’d they see these guys?”

“Well, they first ran into them when they worked the dumps near Rawhide. They had small arms, machine guns ... and even some small artillery.”

“You mean cannons?” Her voice had a frightened edge.

“Yeah. Scared the hell out of our guys.”

“They do anything?”

“No. We figure they’re just a bunch of kooks out playing army on the weekends. They dress up in camouflage and march around like storm troopers taking Poland.”

Again I wasn’t sure if she understood my references and we sat there quietly, staring out the front window into the emptiness.

This time I broke the silence. “I’ve gotta drive to Reno tomorrow to drop off those samples, and the one’s the other guys have collected around here.”

“That’ll be fun,” her voice revealed a touch of excitement. “When’re you leaving?”

“Sometime in the morning. Early. By eight, I suppose.”

She thought for a moment, then asked, “Could I ride along? I haven’t been to Reno since last year.”

“Sure, if you’d like.”

“Fantastic.” I could see she was smiling. “We can spend some time together.”

“Great,” I said. “But there’s someone else going too.”

“Who’s that?”

“Her name’s Carolyn. She’s a geologist that works for another company. She needed a ride over ... asked to go along.”

I could see her silhouette become rigid. “Did you know there are men out there who love women too much?” There was a disquieting heaviness in her voice.

Her sudden change in subject and tone caught me off guard. I cautiously said, “Might’ve heard something like that before.” She moved closer to her door, as if hugging it.

“Men have deep urges,” she spoke toward the windshield, “painful urges, all twisted in their minds and tangled up with their desire for women. For a woman’s flesh.” She seemed to be shying away from me, yet I hadn’t made any aggressive moves, other than putting my arm on the back of the seat. But even my outstretched hand was nowhere near touching her.

“That may be true,” I said, “but I think most men control those urges.”

“Urges come from the soul,” she said dramatically. “You’re born with them. You wanna eat, you eat. You wanna sleep, you sleep. You want a woman, you ...” she turned toward the open window, spoke out into the night, as if someone were standing 10 feet away, “men just take what they want. They’re pigs.”

I pulled my arm back and sat there in silence, not sure what to say.

Ominously she went on, “Life is no tragedy. It’s just a series of misadventures and small problems and uncomfortable situations with guys.”

“Like now,” I thought, still confused by her sudden change. Her tone was accusing and direct. I expected her to tell me she had been raped or assaulted by some man from her past. I said slowly, “Would you like me to drive you home?”

“No. This is the place,” she mumbled, as her voice was directed my way. “This is the blackness here ... it conceals the foundations of ugliness. There’re evil longings and demons of the flesh ... fine white linens and bedroom ideas. All made by men. They eat the souls of women spread upon table cloths and bed sheets.” Her voice was almost hysterical.

“Ann,” I tried to speak softly, and deliberately, careful not to move toward her, “let me drive you home now. I think it’s time we left this place.”

But she ignored my suggestion. “Standing room only,” she blurted. Then she said in her normal voice, “I’m not ready to go back yet.”

“Let me know when you want to leave.”

Even in the darkness, then, I could see she was looking straight at me. I was becoming concerned, even a bit scared. Something weird was going on within her young mind. A brief

thought entered mine. “Maybe she actually wants me to make a pass.” But even if I had wanted her physically, her erratic dialogue would have kept me in my place. “Maybe this is some sort of test,” I thought, “to see how I’ll react.”

“No, no,” I told myself, “this is just too weird. Could get dangerous. Stay cool, be careful, and you can get yourself out of this.”

She stayed calm and quiet for a few minutes. I shifted my body, intending to sit up and start the truck, but stopped moving when she burst into a long dialog of nonsense. “See ... this ... this place has no value. There are strong things and weak things and men think they’re so damn strong but they’re weak with their minds warped and full of worm holes that leave them begging for more from every beautiful woman they meet and when women don’t give them what they want they just take it or beat them or run off with some other slut who’ll give ’em what they want and when she dumps them they come running and whining back for more and stupid stupid stupid women take them back ... want them back ... and sleep with them just to keep them and keep them happy so they don’t run off again with some other bitch who shows up wanting what her man has to offer and he gives it to her because he’s a man and men do this all the time all the time they just never stop ... they’re always lookin’ ... always wanting what they don’t have ... always tryin’ to get more to grab ... some loose piece of ass that comes wiggling by just at the wrong time and you lose them again ... they’re pieces of shit. God damn them. Pieces of crap. And ... and then they take you somewhere ... some place where you’ve never been before ... and when you think things are going oh so well ... just swell and all peachy ... they dump you ... leave you standing somewhere where you don’t know where the hell you are and you feel so lost so alone so cold and there’s no one around to help but those men ... those other men ... who are, you forget, men ... who ask to help and say they want to help you find your way back to where you were before the creep shoved you into this corner and they pretend to listen and tell you that not all men are the same that some men are different ... they are different and they would never treat you like shit and you fall for it oh so easily you fall for it because you want to believe and you need to believe that men can be what they should be ... but those other men are just as bad as all the other men ... all they want is sex and the stuff between your legs and they wanna feel your breasts and taste your lips and stick their tobacco stained alcoholic tongues down your throat and paw you all over with their rough filthy stinkin’ hands.” She stopped.

I was too terrified to say a word, or to even move. She slid forward and looked me square in the eyes. Her expression softened. I thought she was going to cry, and maybe ask to be held. But then she said angrily, “You’re one of them. You’re a man.” She turned quickly, unlocked her door, lifted the handle, and jumped out of the truck. She paused there a moment, then moved about 20 feet away and stood facing the tower. I somehow knew that her arms were crossed over her stomach.

I was astonished and completely confused. She acted like I had assaulted her or touched her in some inappropriate way. I sat there patiently for perhaps 15 minutes, waiting and wondering what in hell’s name was going on. All kinds of possibilities crossed my mind.

“Am I being set-up for something?” I wondered.

“Is this one of those small town Twilight Zone episodes,” I thought to myself, “where the outsider is accused of raping the local beauty?”

“Yeah,” I toyed with that idea, “where it will be just her word against mine.”

“I can see it now,” I was setting myself up, “the worldly older guy, long-haired, bearded, roving geologist, tries to seduce the much younger local girl. When she refuses his advances he tries to force himself on her. She resists and struggles until she miraculously frees herself and flees through the night for help. It’s her word against his.”

“I’m doomed,” I thought.

Then just as quickly as she had left, Ann came back, opened the door, climbed in, and said, “You can take me home now.”

She didn’t speak again until I turned onto the main road. “You’re unusual,” she spoke softly, in a subdued voice.

I thought, “Me, unusual, compared to you?” What I actually said was simply, “How’s that?”

“Most guys would’ve driven away and left me there.”

I told her, “I would never do that. When someone’s with me I feel responsible for them. If I would’ve left and something happened to you I’d feel terrible.” I didn’t tell her, but I thought, “Yeah, and the law would find it mighty interesting that I was the last person you were seen with.” In fact, no matter how strange she acted, I felt obligated to protect her. I remember thinking, as we drove up through the canyon and the empty businesses lining the main drag, that “She’s looking for her Knight in Shining Armor.”

“Or is that amour,” I responded to myself.

^^^

I awoke still confused by Ann’s performance. That concern drifted into a background hum as I hurried through my morning chores in anticipation of the sweet miles ahead with Carolyn. When she drove up I stepped out to greet her. “Mornin’,” I said with a smile.

“Good morning, Chris.” She stuck her hands into her jean pockets as she moved toward me. She gave a slight little shrug and looked me square in the face. “I can’t go today.”

“What?” I didn’t want to hear that. “Why not?”

Sensing my disappointment she spoke with sincerity. “I’m sorry, but we’re having a bit of an emergency with our project. Can’t go into details, but I’ve gotta stick around.”

I squirreled up my face into a forced, clownish frown. “Well ... shoot. Was looking forward to getting better acquainted.”

“Me too,” she moved a step closer. “I still need to get to Reno. Maybe on your next run,” she tried to console me.

“Sure,” my enthusiasm returned. “Always got samples to ship. Let me know when you wanna go.”

“That’s a deal. I was looking forward to our drive. Sorry.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. You take care of your emergency.”

“I will.” She climbed into her truck and I went back to my chores.

Then I remembered Ann asking to go along. I was re-energized momentarily, until I mentally replayed her little episode near Stokes Castle. I decided that unless she showed up I would forget her request to ride along.

From the prospect of two female companions down to none made for a lonely drive along wide-open Highway 50. Without the friendly company of a female companion I decided to cut the trip short and ship from Fallon. I dropped off 28 boxes of samples that day; our biggest single shipment to that point.

On my way back through Austin I stopped at the post office and found two letters from Sunny and one from Becky.

At the end of several paragraphs of personal chit chat, Sunny asked me to come up to Tahoe for the weekend. I really wanted to go, but wasn't sure I could swing the extra time off. I figured I would have to wing it and see how things developed.

Becky didn't have much to say in her letter. She addressed it using only my first name. Among the few words she printed there she once again demanded to know my last name, explaining that absurd replies like MacGillicughy or Dorffman were no longer acceptable. I wanted to write her back and tell her that if she were smart all she would have to do is look on some of my old shipping statements. Every one of them had my full name printed clearly within the appropriate box. Instead, I decided to ignore her letter completely.

...

Stu and Dave finally moved up from Tonopah, arriving shortly after I returned from Fallon. That day also happened to be Dave's twenty-seventh birthday. Once the crew returned from the field and washed off the day's grime, all of us headed down to the International to celebrate. I was tired and really not into the inherent hassles, but I went anyway, if for no other reason than to visit with Stu.

While we consumed our first beer, racked up the pool balls, and congratulated the birthday boy for all of his profound effort in achieving twenty-seven years of life, Walt commented, "Poor Dave. No Romalyn to jump out of your cake."

"Thank god for some things," Stu said.

"Shoot no," Dave frowned, "I could use her services about now. Haven't had a piece of ass since we left Hawthorne."

"Well there ain't no ass here neither, Davy old buddy." Walt held up his can of Bud in a salute. We all laughed and took a swallow and shook our heads in agreement. But no sooner was that said than Walt visually prowled the bar room. He said, "Damn! All this talk about ass makes me horny."

"Shit," Rob laughed, "spreading mustard on a hot dog bun ... makes you horny."

Walt set down his beer, then cupped his groin with both hands. "My throbbing purple reitnoid is anxious for release ... seeking the perfect hose monster."

He glanced once more around the room. There were few women in the bar, and none of any consequence to Walt. He grudgingly retrieved his beer and played pocket pool like the rest of us.

Sometime later an impressive group of five large men and one woman came in and found a

table along the main wall. They ordered drinks and were having a good time among themselves. Stu whispered to me, “We’d better send word to the calvary ... I think the Injuns have us outnumbered.”

“If they’re from around here,” I whispered back, “they’re probably Shoshone.”

“Could be,” Stu agreed, “but it looks like any two of them could take all of us. We’d better watch our step.”

“I don’t know, they look like an amiable bunch.”

Stu fished a few quarters from his pocket. “Let’s hope so.” He headed toward the jukebox.

Walt’s attention immediately turned toward the woman surrounded by her entourage of warriors. She looked to be in her early twenties, with a pretty face and long raven hair, shiny even in the dull light of the bar. But her physical attractiveness ended there. She had already taken on that peculiar physique that so many Native American women develop. Kind of a roly-poly earth goddess design, with thick sagging arms, no waist, large bulbous thighs and hips, and well rounded calves. But Walt was in such a state that he was drawn to her anyway.

“All right,” he proclaimed to our group, “there’s my woman for the night.”

We stood around the pool table, incredulous. Rob spoke first, “Hey, Dildo Brain, in case you haven’t noticed, ... she’s protected by Chief Sitting Bull and his band of angry Dog Soldiers. What’re you gonna do, call in the 7th Calvary?”

“I’ll finger something out,” Walt grinned.

Stu finished a swallow of beer, then added, “This life’s gettin’ stranger all the time. What’s Austin done to you guys?” There was no comment, so he went on. “When Walt goes ga-ga over a fat Injun squaw guarded by the entire local population of the Shoshone Nation, we’ve all been doin’ the wrong drugs.”

The rest of us chimed in with our own cuts. Finally Walt capitulated, “Alright, alright. I admit it. It’s my balls talking.” He took his shot, scattered the field, but didn’t drop a stripe or a solid. “Do you assholes really think I’d lower myself that far? The floating scale doesn’t dip that low.”

“Besides,” Dave added, “even *your* reputation would never recover.”

“You’re right, Davy ol’ Bud. Romalyn was bad enough. My rep’s still recovering from that little misguided adventure.” Walt looked sheepishly at Dave. “I’ve got pride. Only the best for me from now on.”

“Yeah. Right. Until DSB ... strikes again.” Spurrier made a loud popping noise with his finger and his mouth.

“Oo-god ... Ivory Liquid all over the place,” I tried to fill in the details. “The tender swelled head of Walt’s elongated reitnoid ripped open by the force of the blast. Blood and tissue and jizzim splattered against the four walls. I’d watch out, Stu. Don’t think I’d want Walt as a roommate right now. He’s libel to bugger you in the night while you sleep in dreams of sweet Tennessee. You’ll wake up with a sore bung hole.”

“Christ! Gimme a break,” Walt blurted. “I don’t go for sphincters. Just soft luscious virgin vagina.”

“You ain’t gonna find that ‘round here.” Dave glanced around the room. “There ain’t too much vagina around anyway, and I doubt you could find one over fourteen that ain’t been



desecrated.”

“And from what we’ve seen,” Rob contributed, “they don’t allow luscious in this state.”

Stu and I looked at each other, knowing better, and smiled. Rob caught the glance and was ready to say something, but I beat him to the punch. “With Spurrier around there ain’t a virgin over twelve.”

Rob grinned, “I like ’em ... tight. What can I say?”

“Rack the balls, Wolfman.” Walt glanced toward the Indian woman, shook his head. “Oh well, I guess it’s Rosie Palmer again tonight.”

• • •

Stu and I found ourselves sitting with Burt and Tank at a small table in the corner by the jukebox. Stu asked, “How’s our buddy Burt doin’?”

Burt shrugged. “Okay.”

I glanced at Burt and said, “Think he’s starting to come around.”

“How’s that?” Stu smiled.

“Well, for one thing,” I said proudly, “his language is changing. He’s more open and less judgmental.” I looked at Burt like I was his own father.

“I noticed he seems to smile more,” Stu observed.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “he does seem to laugh more, and even tells a joke now and then.”

Burt fidgeted in his chair, his neck turning slightly pink. But I think he enjoyed the attention.

“You’re kiddin’?” Stu acted shocked.

“Nope,” I said. “But they’re usually clean. Nevertheless ... he’s trying to be one of us.” I took a sip from my drink. “He’s even worn shorts a few times.”

Stu smiled at that image. “I’ve gotta see that.” He looked at Burt and raised his glass in a toast.

“Yeah, and I think our boy here’s got his eye on another girl.”

Feigning concern, Stu said, “He’s forgotten Shannon already?”

“I guess,” I sighed, “he doesn’t talk much about his feelings.”

There were a few moments of silence. Burt was glancing at Tank, when Stu asked, “So, who’s the chick?”

Burt didn’t respond. He stared at his hands, placed gently around his glass of cola.

“Name’s Lynn,” I volunteered, and nodded toward the bar. “Think she lives upstairs.”

“That her, Burt, behind the bar?” The four of us turned in unison to watch the short brunette fill a glass from the tap. She pushed it across to Spurrier, who sat down on a stool and struck up a conversation.

I watched Burt’s eyes narrow. “Yup,” I picked up my glass and swallowed the last of the yellow liquid. “Can’t compare to Shannon, huh?”

“No sir, she ain’t no Shannon,” Stu agreed.

Fearing that we might have offended Burt’s taste in women, I quickly added, “But she seems nice.” I volunteered, “Friendly. But I don’t know if she’s really your type.”

“You spoken to her?” Stu aimed his question at Burt.

“Some, the other day,” he said weakly.

“Hell,” I said, “he sat and chewed the fat with her for over an hour while she mixed drinks.”

“All right, Burt!” Stu spoke enthusiastically. “Tryin’ to convert her?”

“Hadn’t thought of it.” Burt continued to stroke the moist sides of his glass.

“What about you, Tank?” Stu pointed with his can. “What you been up to?”

Tank was in the midst of sucking on an A&W. He shrugged.

Stu looked at me. “What’s he been up to?”

I laughed. “Humuhumunukunukuahepuah.”

“What?”

“Humuhumunukunukuahepuah. It’s a tiny Hawaiian fish.”

Burt and Tank both looked at me as if I’d breached some sacred vow.

“I mentioned it to these two the other day. Tank here accused me of making it up. We got into an interesting discussion about truth, honesty, and quality.”

“That’s quite a jump, from a fish to quality.” Stu shook his head.

“These two believe truth is absolute. That view is a Christian thing. My point was truth is relative, based on culture, time, and perspective.”

“Hey, this here’s a bar. It’s late. We got Don Williams on the juke. Let’s not break the mood with a philosophical discussion right now. My brain’s too fried for deep thinkin’.” Stu made his point with a swallow of beer.

“Got it,” I said sheepishly. Looking at Burt, I said, “Besides ... we went ‘round and ‘round and got nowhere.”

“Of course,” Stu spoke flatly.

“Of course.” I brought the glass to my lips, then realized there was nothing left.

The conversation came to an abrupt halt as the four of us sat watching the pool table. Then the jukebox played Willie Nelson’s *Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain*. Stu spoke in a slow, steady voice. “Singin’ an’ song writin’ don’t git any better’n this.”

Tank fidgeted in his seat. I glanced at him and asked, “What’s on your mind?”

He sat up straight. “In my opinion ... this guy can’t sing worth beans.”

Stu squinted at him across the table; real cool and calm. His eyes said, “Who gives a shit what you think?” When he spoke his voice was flat and slightly gravelly. “No one will ever dare remake this song.”

Tank said in an arrogant tone, “Then they should have made it right the first time.”

Stu sat forward in his chair. “Tank....”

“Uh,” I jumped in, “guess you’ve been gone.” I was looking at Stu as I continued. “Tank’s big push now is doing things right the first time. You gotta forgive him, he’s on a crusade.” I glanced at Tank, then back toward Stu. “He’s jumped on Spurrier and Ellison a couple times since we been up here.”

“Someone had to set them straight,” Tank stated confidently.

“Wouldn’t think that’d go over real well,” Stu observed.

“You’re right,” I nodded. “Think old Tank here’s setting himself up for a comeuppance.” I

looked at Tank. “You’re gonna get nailed good ... one of these days.”

Tank’s face shifted into an arrogant grin. “I’m not worried. I’ve got truth on my side.”

Before I could speak, Stu said, “Tank, you have a way of irritatin’ the hell outta me. Christ! You complain ‘bout everything. It’s too hot ... it’s too cold ... too windy ... too calm. There’re too many gnats or mosquitoes or flies. Jesus. Why don’t you go back to Alaska where everything’s so goll-damned perfect?”

I took a deep breath. The table became the focus of a silent void.

Tank replied, “I only speak the truth. What else can I say?”

Stu set his can on the table. “Yeah,” he said, “but you’re too bull headed to even recognize the truth when it hits you between the eyes.”

“Ah-ah,” I fiddled with my empty glass, moving it around a wet spot on the table, “I thought we weren’t gonna talk philosophy.”

Stu gave me a quick glance, nodded, and sat back in his chair.

Tank was too much taken with himself to let things rest there. “Like what? What truths have I missed?”

Stu crossed his arms over his chest.

“Like that car business,” I volunteered, not willing to concede to Tank’s pseudo-superiority.

Stu looked at me. “Guess I don’t know ‘bout that.”

“Hum ... it all started back in Hawthorne.” I thought for a moment. “Figured you knew.”

“Guess not,” Stu shrugged.

“Nothing much,” I smiled, turning toward Tank. “Our expert here calls our trucks cars. He and Rob have gone ‘round on that one several times.”

“They’re cars,” Tank said flatly.

“Rob says a truck’s a truck and a car’s a car.” I used my hands to shape the two vehicles in the air. “A truck’s for hauling things, a car carries people.”

Tank reiterated his earlier argument. “A truck carries people too.”

“See, they just go in circles,” I said. “It’s given those guys one more strike against him.”

Stu said, “I hafta agree with Rob. We don’t have cars out here. Just trucks.”

“They are cars as well,” Tank insisted.

“Maybe in Alaska,” Stu got caught up in the useless argument, “they call ‘em cars. But this, down here ... this is the civilized world....”

“Or some close facsimile,” I interrupted.

“And they’re called trucks down here,” Stu concluded.

Becoming sarcastic, I said, “Just so you can recognize one when you see it, Tank: a car has seats for people to sit in in the back, a truck has a bed.” Then I quickly added, “And not the kind of bed you can sleep in.”

Tank replied, “Yeah, but you and Dave slept in the bed of a truck when you went to Yosemite. At least that’s all you *said* you did back there.”

“Oo,” Stu seemed delighted, “score an off-color cut for Tank.” He marked an imaginary point in the air.

Becoming frustrated, I offered a solution. “Look, cars and trucks are both vehicles. Why don’t we all agree to call them ‘vehicles?’ Then we can all be happy and get on to arguing about

other stuff.”

Tank seemed to think about that for a moment, then said, “That’s true. But I call them cars ... and that’s what they are.”

“You’re so full of crap and stupidity,” was the only asinine thing I could think to say.

Stu was only slightly more eloquent. “You’re a self-righteousness bastard, that’s fer sure.”

Tank acted like we handed him a compliment. I would swear that smug grin didn’t leave his face for the rest of the night.

It was Burt’s turn to play Eight Ball. When he moved to select his cue, Stu sat up straight in his chair and nodded toward the bar.

Spurrier was leaning across the counter, speaking softly to Lynn. When he moved back she nodded and walked over to Ed the bartender. She said something to him, he in turn nodded agreement, she appeared to thank him, then turned back to Spurrier. She smiled and motioned for him to follow. The two proceeded to the stairs in the corner of the room and slowly climbed to a dark hallway and disappeared. I turned and caught a flash of anger as it trembled across Burt’s face.

About fifteen minutes later Rob came down alone, wearing his usual shit-assing grin. We were all curious to know what was up, but none wanted to hurt Burt or give Rob the pleasure of fabricating some elaborate story. With no one taking the bait, and aware of Burt’s discomfort, he brought up the subject himself. Rob spoke in his usual subdued manner. “This bar ... is my kind of place. Cold beer ... Eight Ball ... a good sounding jukebox ... and a bar maid that’ll ... blow you ... for a few tokes on a joint.” Looking at Walt, he said, “And man ... let me tell you ... she gives good head.” Looking at Dave, he added, “Experienced. Ready for more adventure.” Turning to Burt, he taunted, “Why don’t you ... go up ... and try her, Burt. She’s waiting ... all primed ... for you.”

Burt stared back into Rob’s eyes with a look that was a cross between hatred and disgust. They just stood there, silent, a tension building that could only lead to one thing.

I found myself next to Rob. “You asshole. We’re getting tired of this bullshit.”

Rob turned his head toward me, maintaining a blank expression.

“Specially when it’s meant to hurt.” Stu moved to Rob’s other side.

Rob turned toward him, then took a step backward, sensing a trap.

I said, “It’s one thing to cut us guys that fight back. We really don’t give a shit.”

“But it’s another thing to keep dumpin’ on Burt,” Stu moved between the two, with his back to Burt.

My voice got louder. “He believes everything you say.”

Rob held up his hands, palms out, as if saying stop. He moved backward several more steps. “Hey,” he said, “it’s only a joke.”

“This time it just ain’t funny.” Stu turned to Burt, crossed between Spurrier and me, and sat down once again at our table. I glanced at Spurrier, then Burt, then turned and joined Stu. Rob went to the bar and ordered a beer from Ed, who had been watching our little episode, but seemed unaware of what had transpired.

Burt moved over to Tank, said something in a soft voice that I couldn’t quite hear, and the two walked across the room and out the door.

Stu turned to me. “Burt might be openin’ up, but his feelings toward Spurrier are definitely turnin’ black.”

• • •

After one last tense game of pool we all had enough excitement and drove back to the trailers and turned in. Somewhere in there, as I drifted off to sleep, I heard a truck door close, an engine start, and a vehicle slowly drive away. I guessed that one of the guys had a late night craving and was off to find a convenience store.

^^^

We entered a period of cooler nights. Very pleasant, almost closed window, weather. The early mornings remained cool, enough to make a cup of hot tea a welcome pleasure. It was a nice change.

That morning I took my tea to Stu and Walt’s trailer to visit while they ate breakfast. It was pretty obvious that Walt was beat. “You look terrible,” I greeted him. “You coming down with Rob’s affliction?”

Stu chuckled. “Shit! Only thing he’s comin’ down with is a lack of pride.”

“Uh-oh,” I taunted, “that you I heard pulling out last night?”

He moaned, “Didn’t pull out soon enough.”

“That’s why truckers don’t wear condoms,” Stu scrambled eggs in a skillet on the stove. “They always pull out on time.”

Walt moaned again, “Never make it as a trucker, but I’m a damn good fucker.”

“You went back after the Indian girl.” I sat down.

When Walt didn’t reply, Stu volunteered. “Somehow wormed his way ‘tween her an’ her companions.”

“She took me to her teepee,” Walt admitted without emphasis, as if he were still half asleep. “Spent the night rolling ‘round her brass bed.”

“Oo ... brass bed,” I laughed. “Made it worth it, I’m sure.”

“Shit,” Walt rubbed his face, trying to wake up. “Wild bitch. Loud ... demanding.”

Stu placed a cup of steaming coffee in Walt’s hand.

“Thanks,” Walt mumbled. He took a sip, but the liquid seared his lips. He set the cup on the table. “She wanted more, more, more. After about three times I just couldn’t go no more. When she got up to use the can I threw on my clothes and flew outta there.”

“What time you get in?”

“‘Bout four,” Stu answered for him.

After he picked up the cup and tried to sip again, Walt groaned, “Man ... I fucked up bad.”

“Sure did,” Stu pulled a loaf of bread from a cupboard.

“She was very persistent about knowing my name and where I’m staying.”

“You tell her?” I prodded.

“Held out for a while,” Walt blew on the liquid in the cup, “but I was too drunk to know better. Couldn’t think fast enough to lie.”

“So you told her?” Stu said sternly.

“Yeah ... guess I did.”

Stu brought the bread and two plates to the table. “Sure hope you don’t pay for last night’s indiscretion with a paternity suit, or worse.”

“Can’t believe I done what I did.”

“That was pretty desperate, that’s for sure.” I watched as Stu scraped scrambled eggs onto the two plates.

“Least she was better than fresh liver,” Walt laughed at his own joke.

“Laugh now, my friend,” Stu slid into his seat, “‘cause you probably won’t be laughin’ much ‘round Noon when yer butts draggin’.”

Walt’s smile turned to a frown.

“Yes sir, Walt,” I had to kick him while he was down, “once again you’re in real good shape for the field.”

• • •

I was walking back to my Empire when Carolyn drove up.

“Well, good mornin’, Miss Carolyn. Didn’t expect to see you this fine day.”

“Good morning,” she said brightly.

“What can I do you for?” I asked without thinking, kicking myself as soon as the words hit the air, hating that phrase.

“Well,” she smiled coyly, “I was wondering if you might be going to Reno today?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh,” she sighed.

“But I am going to Fallon.”

Her eyes lit up. “Could I ride along?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to sound too eager.

“That’d be great. Javee and I need some things we just can’t find here.” She gave me a big, broad smile. “When you leaving?”

“Oh ... soon as I prepare my samples,” I smiled back. “Should be no more than a couple hours. I’ll drop by when I’m ready.”

“That’d be swell. I’ll be waiting.”

• • •

An hour later I finished my work, cleaned up, and drove over to Carolyn's. The first few miles down the canyon and out into the Reese River Valley were slightly uncomfortable. There seemed to be a tension in the air and a stiffness in our conversation, almost as if we were on a first date. Then Carolyn said point blank, probably comprehending the cause, "Just so you know ... I'm seeing a guy named Eric back in Tucson, on a steady basis. Our plans are to get married someday."

"Thought I'd heard you were engaged," I replied, trying to suggest that I had no intention of coming on to her.

"Well, not yet. Not officially."

Her statement of affection for another man did ease the tension and kept me from developing expectations beyond a pleasant day with an attractive woman. From that point on the conversation was easy and open.

"Okay ... since you've already started, tell me about yourself."

She seemed to relax and said, "I don't know. There's nothing too interesting about me." She reached down and untied her tennis shoes. "What kinds of things do you want to know?"

"Oh, well ... for starters ... to be blunt ... how old are you?"

She started pulling her shoes off. "Twenty-two."

"Kinda young to be doing this work already, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I graduated this spring. But I worked in the field last summer as well." She pulled off her socks.

"You like this work?"

"Oh yeah. But eventually I want to do more cartography. The lab work will keep me home once Eric and I get married."

Because of the anticipated heat of the day, Carolyn had worn shorts. Unable to avoid noticing her tan, athletic legs, I said, "Even with that tan," I let her see me glance at her legs, "your complexion and hair give you away. I'll bet you're Irish."

"You got it. Irish Catholic. Both my parents were born in Ireland and emigrated to Virginia."

"That where you were born?"

"That's where I was raised."

"You don't have a southern accent."

"Probably 'cause my parents have such a strong Irish brogue." She accented the last three words with an Irish dialect.

"But you don't have an Irish accent either."

"The two accents probably canceled each other out."

...

When we got to Fallon I shipped my samples. Carolyn suggested that we stop by the Ace Hardware to see if they had the parts she needed. I was surprised by what we found. It was like taking a modern franchise and setting it down 50 years in the past. It was exceptionally rustic, with worn, creaky wooden floors; buckets and tools and implements hanging from pegs and beams and pillars; and rows of bins with all sorts of parts and pieces. We had a great time, checking out all sorts of interesting devices and farm equipment; trying to figure out just how each strangely contrived tool could be used.

Carolyn was like a kid in a toy store. She would see something and grab me by the arm and pull me over to it. At one point she moved up close to me and leaned against me while we were looking at wire egg baskets. That physical contact was confusing, but I took it as a compliment, that she felt safe and free with me.

Typically, the touching stimulated hormonal secretions and I momentarily forgot about her pending engagement. My fantasies went wild, filling my easily distracted brain with visions of Carolyn and I making wonderful love in my trailer; then setting up together in some loose relationship where we would get together as often as our jobs allowed. In my mind I knew she offered everything any guy could want: a pretty face, a nice slender athletic build, a pleasant voice, a fantastic smile, wit, intelligence, a sense of humor, nice legs, she liked the outdoors and travel ... it was all there. What else could there be? Maybe she couldn't cook. But who cares?

We spent 45 minutes wandering through the aisles like we were long time lovers exploring an antique shop. We seemed that close; that free with each other. I'm sure the clerks thought we were an item. But even with all of their inventory we didn't find the piece she needed.

We ate lunch at a small café, then stopped by several more stores until Carolyn found what she was after. The drive back to Austin was filled with conversation about the day and the adventures we had survived over the course of the summer. And all too soon, it seemed, we arrived at Carolyn's trailer. It was about 5:30.

"I had a wonderfully nice time," she said.

"Me too." I smiled, took her hand, and gave it a slight squeeze. "Any time you wanna ride along, just let me know. You're always welcome."

"Thanks. I'll remember that." She climbed out of the cab.

I noticed a new truck parked in front of her trailer. "Looks like you've got company," I commented.

"Bob Cooper," she frowned. "Was sort of expecting him."

"Is that *the* Bob Cooper," I asked, "the guy Denise shacks with?"

"Was the last I heard," Carolyn smiled. "I'd better give him his maps so I can get him outta here. He makes me nervous. He's one of those guys that thinks he's god's gift. You know?"

"Yeah. I know a few."



• • •

After I left Carolyn, I drove down to the post office. There was another letter from Sunny. Her tone was very positive, open, and intimate. She again invited me to come up to Tahoe for the weekend. Apparently there was a big rodeo and she wanted me to take her. I wasn't into that sort of animal abuse, but it would give me an excuse to be with her.

I tried calling her from the booth near the ice cream shop, but there was no answer. I assumed she was still working the second shift and already dealing cards.

• • •

When I got back to my trailer I was in the mood for Mexican, so I started working up the fixings for burritos. With the hamburger sizzling and sputtering in the skillet, I almost missed the light knock on my door. I turned to find Ann standing there.

"Hi."

She seemed hesitant. "Hello. I brought you something."

I moved to the door and opened it. "What you got?"

A pleasant smile appeared on her face. She handed me an envelope. "This is for you. I gotta go." She turned to leave.

"Wait. Ann ... what is this?"

She turned back and stepped closer. "It's a card, for you. You'll see. Read it. I've gotta go." She suddenly seemed girlish; innocent.

"I'm fixing some dinner. Wanna stay?"

"I'd love to, but I can't. I gotta go." This time she walked slowly away.

I watched her cross the lot. She seemed so small, so young, so fragile, and, really, so distant. She didn't seem to be The Strange Woman From Stokes Castle anymore.

When I stepped back inside I opened the card. It was one of those humorous pieces apologizing for misdeeds. At the bottom she penned, simply: Sorry for Stokes Castle.

• • •

Through the quiet, cooling air of the evening I could hear pots and pans clinking upon stove tops, mixed with the mumbled voices of conversation. The hamburger for my meal was still frying when I heard that now familiar Vee-Dub pull up in front of the Airstream. I invented an excuse to go over, and turned off the heat under my meat.

Rob and Walt were already outside, rummaging through Javee's groceries, which were in paper bags sitting in the passenger's seat. She attempted to divert their attention until Rob came upon a cucumber.

"What yuh gonna do with this?" Rob smiled suggestively, as he held up the long, thick vegetable.

"Oh, it's just for dinner," Javee pretended to be unconcerned.

"You mean you're actually gonna ... eat it?" Rob held the blunt end to his mouth, faking a

bite.

“What else?” Javee replied.

“What else? Looks like some kind of dildo.” Walt broke down the barriers of suggestion and opened the dam.

“Christ! You guys. Put it back.” Of course her feigned distress fueled their creativity.

Rob picked up on Walt’s lead. “Your own personal ... green dildo ... with little ridges ... and dimples. Bet you’ll get a charge outta this.”

“Yeah. A dildumber,” I said.

“Come on, put it back before you bruise it,” Javee tried to grab it from Rob.

“Wouldn’t wanna do that.” Rob moved it out of her reach. “Not before you get a chance ... to use it ... while it’s still ... hard.” He stroked it gently in mock affection, his eyes softening as if in ecstasy.

“Yes. A cumcumber,” I interjected, causing Walt to shake his head.

“That’s right,” she said, finally accepting the game. “I want it long and hard, thick and green. If any of you pickle-brains can match that, then I’ll take you instead. Now put it back.”

“All right.” Rob placed it gently in the bag. “But where ... do you put the batteries?”

“There are no batteries,” Javee laughed.

“You don’t ... do this by hand ... do you? It’s not *that* primitive out here.”

I laughed at my own thoughts. I spoke in an exaggerated announcer’s voice. “Elecucumber, the Green Grocer’s own patented sexual appliance and salad fixin’s. The personal electric masturbation assistant specially designed for the active woman who doesn’t have time for a man *and* a meal.” That got laughter from everyone.

But Javee, true to her nature, got in the last cut. “This thing’s better than you bastards ... any day. It would take one hell of a man to better my lovely, green, electric cucumber.”

With the shoe now uncomfortably on the other foot, the conversation switched to other food items until Javee tired of our obnoxious word-mongering and drove on, across the highway, to her own trailer.

...

After dinner I decided a dose of Carolyn and Javee’s company would be a pleasant way to end the evening. Driving over, I came upon Burt, walking along the road.

I stopped. “Where you off to?”

“Just going to Javee’s.”

“I’m heading there myself. Want a ride?”

“No. Thanks. It’s a nice night for a walk. Besides, I just need to drop off this pair of batteries.”

“What’re those for?”

“Well, Rob and Walt asked me to take them to Javee. They said she needed them for some sort of appliance.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. As usual he thought I was making fun of him. “Burt, don’t get mad. I’m not laughing at you.”

He shrugged.

“I’m going that way myself. Want me to take them for you?”

He handed them over without saying a word.

I had visions of some sort of elaborate practical joke, something that could be turned back upon Rob and Walt. I would have to enlist Javee’s help. But more immediately, I thought I could have a few more laughs with her myself.

When I reached Javee and Carolyn’s, Tank was there. He had been in one of Carolyn’s classes and decided to reminisce about some philosophical lecture on global plate tectonics. I could tell she was bored stiff, but being polite.

I entered as Javee stormed down the short hall from the bedroom. “Bastard hung up on me.” She was speaking to Carolyn, but waved a half-hearted welcome in my direction.

Realizing her mood I kept my mouth shut, waving back.

She gave me a phony smile, then said to Carolyn, “Floyd won’t be here for another week.” In a sing-songy sassy voice, she said, “He has some important work to finish in Winnemucca.”

Carolyn looked concerned, but didn’t say anything.

“Damn him. I came all the way out here from Taos to spend the summer with that man and he’s dumped me in this trailer while he travels all over this god damned state. Bastard.”

Javee plopped herself down on the couch, next to Carolyn, and crossed her arms in anger. Silence followed as she fumed.

Feeling awkward, I stepped over to her and gave her the batteries. “Maybe these will lighten your mood.”

She accepted them as the phone rang. Springing to her feet, she tossed the batteries onto the counter near the sink. “If that’s Floyd he’s in for a....” and the rest was mumbled. When she reached the bedroom she closed the door.

I looked at Carolyn. “This is not a good time to visit.”

“It’s not for Javee,” she frowned.

I said my farewells and drifted back to my trailer.

Around eleven I was lying half-asleep in my bunk. The windows were open and the cooling night air filled my trailer with the scent of pine. All was quiet and peaceful as I drifted toward sleep.

Through the stillness I heard a vehicle drive up, slowly, tires crunching gravel. The sound came to a halt near the Airstream, on my bunk side. I could hear a door squeak open, then quietly close. There were footsteps scratching gravel, then a slight rap on the aluminum door of the Airstream. No answer. I knew Walt was out of it, having fallen into his bunk right after dinner. Stu was probably sawing logs as well.

Another knock. I wondered what was up. Was it the local Sheriff with more bad news? Had one of the guys screwed up in town and gone berserk?

Another knock ... this time more persistent. I heard mumbles, then a set of feet hit the floor. The door squeaked open on tight hinges. There were indistinguishable voices. The door creaked, but didn’t latch. Footsteps back through the trailer. Voices again, muffled through aluminum walls. Another, heavier set of feet, hit the floor. It had to be Walt. He in turn shuffled through the trailer. I could hear the door creak open, those damn hinges again. It always amazes

me how some sounds are amplified in the quiet of night.

Voices; just a jumble of sound, with the tone of an argument. Louder, but still indistinguishable. The trailer door slammed shut. Heavy footsteps pounded back to a bunk. The sound of gravel hitting metal objects, like it was being kicked in anger. Hurried footsteps. The vehicle door opened ... and was slammed shut. The engine started with a roar and was revved two or three times. Tires squealed, gravel kicked up and splattered our trucks and trailers. Even after the rocks and dust settled the vehicle could be heard moving off down the canyon, gears shifting into silence.

Puzzled and curious, I listened for conversation. Nothing. Just the same calm silence as before. Then, without warning, I heard Stu make the stereotypical Indian war sound, “Woo-woo-woo ... woo-woo-woo ... woo-woo...,” imagining his flattened palm moving to and from his mouth.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!!!,” Walt’s voice boomed through the night.

I could vaguely hear Stu chuckle, and a hint of righteous laughter rolling through the darkness along the edge of the night. Or was it from the Argosy, just on the other side.

^^^

The next morning my suspicions were confirmed. Entering the Airstream, I asked, “Who was that mysterious visitor in the night?”

“Walt’s Injun lover,” Stu smirked, “come back for more.”

“Fuck you guys,” Walt said without conviction.

Stu looked at me and winked. “Now Walter, it’s obvious that the young woman is in love. She just wants more of what you gave her the other night. And now you’ve gone and broke her poor little heart.”

“From what I heard,” I contributed, “you not only broke her heart, but you pissed her off.”

“Just a tad,” Stu commented, rinsing off their breakfast dishes. “We’d be best advised to draw the trailers into a circle tonight, and post guards. There’ll probably be a war party out to capture the honky with the screamin’ purple relnoid.”

Walt tried to ignore us.

Stu went on. “Any god-fearing white man with a huge relnoid should know better’n to go pokin’ ‘round Injin womens.”

“That’s right,” I confirmed, “you deserve whatever consequences come of this.”

All Walt offered in his defense was, “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke.”

“You ought’ta go down to the tribe and surrender yourself.” Stu wiped his hands on a towel.

“That’s right,” I said. “Beg forgiveness, as a gesture to the rest of us, to save our scalps.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Stu looked at me. “I agree one-hundred percent. Why should he take the rest of us with ‘im when it was his stupid indiscretion that got ‘im into this mess?”

Walt stood up and headed toward the bathroom. “Fuck off.” Closing the door, he grumbled,

“I’m tired of this whole business.”

• • •

I had to drive to Fallon again to ship more samples and buy more supplies. It definitely wasn’t as much fun without Carolyn. The drive seemed to take forever.

In the area of Middle Gate I passed Guy going the opposite direction. We stopped and exchanged information on the number of samples shipped and the general status of the crew. “Sounds good,” he said. “Not the numbers I’d hoped for, but adequate.”

“I think the guys are getting tired,” I suggested. “The heat, long days, and lack of excitement.”

“All adds up,” he replied.

“Yeah.”

The conversation ran its course. Guy said, “See you in Austin tonight.”

“Great.”

“Yeah, I’ll be staying for a few days.” He smiled. “Got to see if we can’t squeeze out a few more samples before our short timers call it quits.” He was referring to Stu, Burt, and Dave, each of whom had recently announced that they would not be continuing on with the crew. Stu had accepted a permanent position with an oil company somewhere in Texas. Burt was going back to school. And Dave, well, he had decided that he couldn’t handle the heat, dirt, and general discomfort associated with field work. I suspected that the lack of women had something to do with it as well.

We shook hands and headed toward our vehicles. Guy stopped. “Hey, I almost forgot.”

“What’s that?”

“Yeah,” he smiled broadly, “I talked to this little lady at the El Cap in Hawthorne. She seemed pretty excited when she found out I work for NORMMEX.”

I smiled, anticipating what he was going to say.

“She asked if I knew you.”

“Becky,” I said. “Works in the cage, right?”

“Yes. And when I told her you worked for me she wanted to know your last name.”

I shrugged.

“Kind of a strange request, isn’t it?” He gave me a knowing look.

I explained the running joke.

“Mmm ... don’t know,” he teased. “Sounds more like your trying to avoid a paternity suit.”

“No danger of that,” I assured him.

We both had a good laugh.

“So? You give her my name?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see ... when she sends her next letter.”

• • •

That evening, as we sat around talking with Guy, I mentioned a discovery I made on my trip to Fallon. “Hey, Rob ... Walt ... I picked up a new cooler for you in Fallon.” I looked toward Guy, “To replace one that got smashed.”

“Sort of got crunched,” Walt said sheepishly, “accidentally.”

“We don’t want that sort of thing to become a habit,” Guy replied, “but the company expects there’ll be some losses on a project this big.”

I let that sink in, then I continued. “Well ... I found some info attached to the bottom inside the cooler. Was a sheet from the manufacturer ... explaining the care and feeding of this particular species of chest. Also some info that I found extremely interesting.”

I paused to make sure I still had my audience. I looked at Guy and explained, “Back in Gabbs and Hawthorne we got into a ... Walt and Rob and I ... discussion ... about draining water from a cooler.” I glanced at Rob, then Walt. “Was my contention that melted ice water keeps the contents colder. These two,” and I pointed casually toward Rob and Walt, “said draining off the water worked better.” I imagined Rob silently mouthing “eh ... say ... ah ... dey ... you gravy sucking pig.”

There was no response, so I pulled the sheet from my pocket and went on. “The Coleman product information sheet,” I held it up, “that came with the new cooler, says this about proper cooler technique.” I read from the sheet, “First, ‘Put the ice in last. Cold air travels down, so if you want your beverages well chilled, load cans and bottles first, then cover with ice.’ Second, ‘Keep coolers out of the sun. Ice lasts up to twice as long when in the shade.’ Third, ‘Crushed or Block Ice. Use crushed ice to cool food or drink fast and block ice to keep it cold longer.’” I scanned around the group for reactions so far. Everyone had a blank stare, waiting for me to make my point. I went on reading. “Finally, Rob ... Walt ... it says right here ... and I quote, ‘Don’t drain cold water. Just melted water keeps food and drinks cold, too ... and preserves ice much better than *empty air space*.’” I emphasized the last words, offered the page to Rob, and when he refused, I folded it and stuck it back into my rear pants pocket. I let my case rest.

Javee drove up in time to stave off further damage to Rob’s ego. After we introduced her to Guy and told him who she was, she said, “Can’t stay. I’m expecting a phone call. But we want to invite all of you to our place tomorrow for dinner.”

“That’d be great,” Walt and I said simultaneously.

There were other nods and positive responses all around.

But Guy wasn’t so sure. “We’d love to accept, but,” looking at our group, “we’re not really suppose to fraternize with the competition.”

Javee, as usual, was undaunted. “It’ll be okay. It’s just me and Carolyn. Carolyn’s just working on a drilling rig, and I’m not even a geologist. Neither of us could care less about what your crew’s doing out here.” Then she slipped into an innocent, girlish voice. “Besides, maybe we’ll be foolish enough to pass on some of our secrets.” She smiled broadly at Guy.

He sat there for a moment, contemplating.

Javee coaxed, “We’re making lasagna. With fresh tossed salad. Chilled wine. Garlic bread. Home made cheese cake for desert.”

“Lasagna, huh? I love lasagna.” Guy smiled, “Okay. We’ll come.”

The crew cheered.

“Great,” Javee seemed relieved, “we’ll have a good time. See you guys about seven. Gotta go.” She started away, then stopped and turned back. “Nice meeting you, Guy.”

He smiled and waved.

After she left, Guy told us, “We have to watch our conversation tomorrow. Even though they don’t seem to care, they might pick up something and inadvertently pass it on. I don’t want any mention of our project areas, or our findings.”

He looked at each of us as we nodded agreement.

• • •

Later, as we continued our casual meeting, Rob mentioned, “I found the old powder shed ... for the mine I been working. Piles of old wooden dynamite cases.”

“You bring some back?” Stu asked.

“Yeah ... brought back a couple ... ends. They’re pretty interesting. Got them in my room. I’ll bring some up ... tomorrow ... if you wanna see.”

“Sure do,” Stu nodded.

“There was some live dynamite too,” Rob went on in his typical bull-shit tone.

Not familiar with Rob’s way of elaborating a story, Guy said, “That’s not good.” He seemed concerned. “Was it Gelamite?”

“Yes ... that’s what the boxes said. Hercules Gelamite. Forty-five percent strength. Fifty pounds per box.”

“That stuff is extremely unstable,” Guy cautioned.

“Well ... I’ve handled dynamite before. I took care of it.” Rob smiled confidently. “I knew it wasn’t safe ... lying around. You never know ... when one of these local kids’ll be kicking ‘round out there ... exploring ... and run across it. Could blow his head off.”

“I hope ... you left it alone,” Guy’s concern deepened.

“I was very careful,” Rob assured him.

“That old stuff is really unstable,” Guy cautioned again. “Doesn’t take much to set it off.”

“Well,” Rob went on, puffing himself up, “there was some lengths of fuse and some blasting caps. I piled everything into that shed ... ran the prima-cord as far out as it would go ... maybe eighty ... ninety feet. Got down behind some boulders. Pretty safe distance. I set the blasting cap under the live sticks,” he looked at Guy, “I didn’t want to take a chance ... by inserting it in a stick.”

“Come on, Spurrier,” Dave moaned, “you gonna tell us you blew up this building out there today?”

“Was just a shack ... an old worn down powder shed.”

“I was just over the ridge from you,” Dave contended. “I didn’t hear any explosion.”

“Maybe the wind was blowing away,” Walt volunteered.

Rob went on, undaunted by his detractor. “I blew it up ... to prevent some innocent kids ... or tourists ... from finding it.”

Guy looked squarely at Rob and shook his head. “Don’t ever let me hear of you doing something foolish like that again. That was really stupid, if you really did it. You could’ve gotten injured. Besides, that was probably someone’s property.”

“It was old, abandoned. Old stuff,” Rob squirmed. “I’ve got the cases in my room. I’ll bring them up and show you. You’ll see ... they’re old.”

“You might’ve destroyed some prospector’s stash. Some of those old fellows are so poor they risk dynamite that’s been around for years. It’s stupid, but they do it.” Again Guy focused directly on Rob. “Don’t be as stupid as they are.”

Rob was crushed; put down twice in one evening. He didn’t like that, but sat quietly with the group for another five to ten minutes before he excused himself and drove down to his room in town.

^^^

The entire crew drove over to Javee and Carolyn’s trailer. With all of the trucks parked around, it looked like they were holding an auction. Javee met us at the door. “Help yourselves to beer or soda, there, in the cooler. Have a seat.” She pointed to several lawn chairs leaning against the side of the trailer. “Floyd called and I didn’t get the lasagna in on time. It’s gonna be a few minutes yet. But it’s coming.” She popped back inside.

We each selected a drink and found ourselves a seat. Guy opened the conversation when he held up his beer and said, “This is for Burt, Stu, and Dave. Let me be the first to congratulate them on completing their last day in the field. I hope all three of you are successful in your future endeavors. And thanks for the great work out here.”

We all raised our drinks and gave the three our best wishes, reviewing and sharing the adventures spent with the threesome.

When Javee announced that dinner was served, we went in to fill our plates, returning to our seats outside, where we could eat and joke in the cool evening air.

Guy was in especially good spirits, everyone had a good time, and even Tank seemed to enjoy himself. He always did best when Guy was around because the rest of us toned down our usual slams. After all, Guy was our boss, and we didn’t want to make a bad impression.

After plates were emptied, most of the guys drifted back across to the Pine Cone Trailer Park. I volunteered to wash the dishes, while Javee dried. Walt slouched on the couch sucking a beer. Carolyn was being polite and sat outside listening to Tank’s discourse on the joys of the Alaskan summer compared to the deleterious effects of the Tucsonian sun.

“You two interested in a dip in the hot spring tonight?” Javee looked toward Walt.

He said, “Sure. Long’s I don’t hafta do any swimming with this baby.” He patted his bloated stomach.

Javee laughed. “No. You just hafta sit there on your fat butt.” Picking up the next plate she spoke to me in a soft voice. “So how about you, Chris? You gonna come to the hot spring with us?”



My first inclination was to answer in the negative. But there was something inviting, almost seductive, about her tone, and I'd had just enough alcohol to loosen me up. "Yeah. I'll go."

"Great. Let's get these dishes done."

• • •

The three of us rode over the range into the Big Smokey Valley and headed for Spencer's Hot Spring. Walt drove, Javee sat in the middle, and I took the passenger seat.

Bracing myself against our rapid descent into the valley, I felt Javee's hand on my bare knee. Her thin fingers played around the curves and contours and set off a blast of testosterone that raced unabated through my body. Just as I was about to reciprocate, I noticed she was doing the same to Walt.

My first thought was of Sunny and her fantasy. I envisioned skinny dipping at the spring, followed by sleepy talk of long suppressed personal fantasies, then a threesome in Javee's bed in the cramped quarters of her trailer.

"Oh no," I thought, "I've got no interest in witnessing Walt's screaming purple reitnoid in action."

Javee's delightful touching continued as we bounced along the gravel road toward the spring. Suddenly two meteors flashed across the sky in rapid succession. The sight gave me uncontrollable shivers and brought tears to my eyes.

Javee sensed something. "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Yet I felt my body shaking. "Did you see those two meteors just now?"

She immediately looked upward through the windshield. "No. Where?"

I pointed to my right and upward with the index finger on my right hand.

I think she suspected my tears. "What's wrong?"

"Don't know," I spoke with a slight quaver to my voice. "Must be some deep emotional connection here." I felt exposed and vulnerable.

She was looking at me carefully, studying my features. She was so close. I wanted so desperately for her to hold me. She said, "What's going through your mind right now?"

I thought for a moment. "Don't know," I said, trying to avoid verbalizing what I suspected was hidden inside.

"Come on," she coaxed. "What've you got buried in there?" Her hand slid farther up my leg.

I hesitated, then spoke in an unusually clear, calm voice. "I suddenly *felt* the relative insignificance of our lives ... when placed against the passage of infinite time and space. Perhaps even our relative unimportance to the overall scheme of existence."

Javee's hand became firm upon my leg, as if trying to reassure me. She said, "That's pretty hard on one's ego."

"Yes, the inexplicable realization," I added, "that all of Man's history ... our efforts and achievements ... are hardly a blip among the swirls of the ever changing cosmos."

Javee whispered "It's okay" into my ear, then kissed me on the cheek. She squeezed my knee and said, "It's okay to show emotion."

“Man, you’re a freak,” Walt blurted. “You sound like Carl Sagan or somebody.”

Approaching the spring in the deep shadows of late evening, we found three fellows standing by their truck, hurriedly slipping on their clothes. They had obviously just stepped from the warm waters.

“Howdy,” I said, as we climbed from our vehicle.

They each waved and said hello.

“How’s the water this evening?” Javee stood facing them as they buttoned their shirts. I got the impression she was checking them out.

“Warm. Nice and warm.” One of the three replied.

“There’re some good seats on the far side there. Just mud on this side,” one of the others offered.

“Thanks,” Javee replied, “we’ve been here before. We know those seats quite well.”

“Ah,” the first speaker responded, “you three from ‘round here?”

We all laughed.

“Shit no,” Walt spit.

“Just working out here for the summer,” I said.

“Geologists?” The first of the three questioned.

“Yes and no,” Javee spoke for us. “These two are ... and I’m married to one. Least for now.”

“We work for Standard Oil,” the first speaker informed us. “Mapping deep sedimentary deposits near here. Oil shale, that sort of thing. Heard about the spring and thought we’d check it out.”

“Great. And I think we will too.” Javee moved toward the steaming blackness of the spring, untucking her cotton shirt as she went.

“Enjoy. We’re on our way out.” The quiet two had already climbed into their vehicle. “Nice chatting with you. Have a nice evening.”

As soon as their headlights swung toward the road and away from us, Javee commenced to strip off her clothes. Just as quickly she was in the water. Walt and I dropped ours to the ground as fast as we could and stepped in.

“You guys are poky,” she teased.

“We didn’t hear anyone say ‘GO’,” Walt replied.

“Yeah,” I said, “you got a jump start.”

We settled onto the smooth stones that made the underwater seats.

“Boy-oh-boy,” I exclaimed, “this water’s warm ... very warm.”

“Shit,” Walt said flatly, “this water’s hot.”

“That’s why they call it a hot spring,” Javee laughed.

I let my feet settle to the bottom and was surprised by the unusual sensation. “Oo ... that’s weird,” I said, “didn’t expect it to feel like this.”

“Your first time in a natural hot spring?” Javee wanted to laugh again.

“Yeah. It’s so slimy and ookey feeling.” I felt heated mush slip between my toes.

“You’ll get used to it,” Javee assured me. Then I felt her leg slide along mine. From that point on she played footsies with me until we got out. But I suspected she was doing the same

with Walt.

We relaxed, peered at the star crowded sky, and let the soothing waters wash across our bodies. We spoke of other times and other friends and pleasant evenings long gone in the steady passage of time. And after about 45 minutes of cooking in that natural cauldron we decided we'd had enough. Toweling myself dry, I couldn't help but notice how appealing Javee looked in dark silhouette. I didn't want to be impolite, but I had a hard time keeping my eyes from drifting her way as she dressed.

She caught me watching, smiled, and said, "I like watching you, too."

I was glad that I had already put my shorts on. My hormones bubbled and roiled and deep pressures built toward eruption. I felt like the thermal waters just under the surface, constantly boiling, but never released.

We drove back to Austin, telling old dirty jokes, and laughing our heads off. Again, Javee fondled my leg and Walt's arm, as he shifted through the gears. I think we each thought we would end up with her that night, as soon as the other tired. This time I was determined to stick it out.

The three of us played pool and listened to the jukebox at the International until Ed kicked us out about 2 a.m. By the time we said goodnight to Javee and crawled into our trailers it was close to 2:30. But I couldn't sleep. I laid there on my bunk for about 15 minutes, fully clothed, listening for some sign that Walt was leaving the Airstream to head back to Javee's. The squeaking door never sounded.

I contemplated my own late night rendezvous, but couldn't get up the nerve to face probable rejection. The ungodly hour and my self-doubts convinced me to undress, and thoughts of Javee helped me drift into sleep.

^^^

The next morning Stu, Walt, and I got lazy and decided to have someone else cook our breakfast. The only place open on Sunday was the International Café, adjacent to the International Bar.

Walt and I had french toast, sausage, and orange juice, while Stu had the more traditional bacon and eggs, with whole wheat toast, and tea.

Standing in front of the restaurant shortly after our meal, I complained, "Man, I think I've got food poisoning. My gut's ready to explode."

"Must've been the damn sausage," Walt moaned, as he let loose with a loud, drawn out, fart. "Got me too."

"Smells like it," I replied, quickly moving away. "After that one your sphincter needs realignment."

Stu stepped back as well.

Walt ripped off another one. "Uh ... don't know. Sounds pretty tight to me."

"Might be tight," Stu said, "but the stench is deadly. Try'ta stay down wind, would ya?"

“Bite me,” Walt laughed. “I’m heading to camp for some Pepto. You guys coming?”

“Gonna do laundry,” Stu pointed to the white bag in the back of his truck.

“Shit, man, you’re leaving tomorrow.” Walt moved along the walk toward his vehicle.

“Leave it ‘til you get home.”

“Naw. Best not arrive home with dirty clothes.” Stu lifted his laundry bag. “Deb’d have a cow; figure I was a typical helpless male. Got nothin’ else to do this mornin’ anyway. I’ll do ‘em here. Keep peace on the home front.”

Walt looked at me. “What about you? Need a ride?”

“Nope. Gotta get my own clothes done. Thanks.”

With that Walt went putting off up the hill.

• • •

Austin had only one public laundromat; a small trailer located about half a block off the main drag, just up from the International Bar. It had two washers and two dryers, a small unsteady table for sorting clothes, a couple of cheap folding chairs, and some old magazines in various stages of decomposition.

“Boy,” I said, “what’s your pleasure this morning? Good Housekeeping, Redbook, or Ladies Home Journal?”

“Think I’ll pass,” Stu waved off my offer. “Rather watch my clothes tumble in the dryer.”

I loaded our underwear into one machine while Stu stuffed jeans into the other. “Sure is warm and damp in here,” I complained.

“Usual for a public wash room.” Stu added soap powder to the jeans and closed the lid.

“Least it doesn’t smell like some jerk pissed in the corner.”

“Also has about ten percent of Austin’s allotment of flies.” I swatted a few from a pile of clothes.

“Yes sir,” Stu agreed, as he shoved the coins into their slots and pushed in the lever.

“All’n’all a real pleasant place to spend a sunny Sunday morning.”

“Ah, yes,” I said, “be pessimistic if you want. But duty calls ... and sweaty, smelly underwear demands attention.” I dumped in our duds, poured in the suds, pushed in the quarters, and let the machine have its way with our undies.

“Hey,” Stu motioned toward a Redbook magazine, “this chick on the cover looks a little like Sunny.” He picked it up to show me.

“You’re right,” I smiled. “Definitely her hair and eyes.”

“Thought you were gonna drive up an’ see her this weekend?”

“Was ... but, well ... couldn’t get her on the phone ... Guy showed up ... and Javee invited us for dinner. And, I guess, I figured I should hang around some ‘cause it’s your last weekend here. I can go see Sunny some other time.” I walked to the soda machine to see what it offered.

Stu stood beside me, checking out the selection. “None of this shit. I need a beer.”

“This early? Right after breakfast?”

“Yeah. Gotta wash down them eggs.” He checked his wallet. “Goin’ to the International. Watch the clothes?”

“Sure.”

“Want anything?”

“No way. Think I’ll sip a Seven-Up to settle my stomach.”

After Stu left, I settled back to read my paperback, swat flies, and occasionally stare at the overlooked pieces of clothing gracing the window sills and corners of the unswept floor.

Miraculously the machines did what they were programmed to do, and I was soon loading our underwear and jeans into the pair of dryers. It was about then that Javee trudged in, loaded down with laundry, soap, hangers, a thick novel, and who knows what else. She plopped it all on the wobbly table, steadied its legs before it collapsed, smiled, and took a deep breath.

I in turn held my breath and dropped two quarters into the first dryer. “Son-of-a-gun,” I exclaimed, “it works.” Dropping quarters into the second machine, I wondered out loud, “How many cycles is this gonna take before our clothes dry?”

“I’d have a pocket full of change,” Javee sniped. “These rundown laundromats are the bane of the mobile life style.”

“And one of the biggest pains, too.” I forced a laugh.

We carried on a rather casual, friendly conversation about laundry, drudgery, the possibilities of disposable underwear, the nasty swarms of flies, the heat and humidity within the confines of that small room, the best pop in the machine, the reliability of the washers, and life’s daily toils in general.

Listening to Javee’s witty comments, watching her animated facial expressions, and following her actions as she moved around the room, triggered a deeper awareness of how much she attracted me. She was intelligent, if slightly wacky; sensuous in appearance; sometimes off color with her often sarcastic humor, yet sensitive and deeper than a person might expect after only a casual glance. My first impressions in Tonopah had been way off. Her surface beauty camouflaged an uncertain, self-doubting, yet educated, good-natured, and good hearted individual.

And her energy level amazed me. She was always moving, tossing clothes into piles and attending the machines, flitting here and there around the room, all while conducting a running conversation. And watching her long, tanned legs, slender hips, and firm, round behind added to her appeal. Right then, sitting in that fly infested enclosure, I knew I wanted her. Sunny had been replaced. No matter what, no matter which of the guys chased after her, and even though she was married, I was going to become her friend. Perhaps her special friend; her lover, or as close as she would let me become.

In the midst of my reverie, Stu strolled back, our clothes dried, and while I was bundling them up to leave, Javee asked me, “Feel like a drive today?”

“Maybe,” I looked at Stu, thinking that I should spend the day with him. “Where you headed?”

“Over into the Big Smokey. To find this cave with pictographs.”

Stu, suspecting my dilemma, mouthed “Go for it.”

“Sure. I’ll go.”

“Swell. I’ll pick you up after lunch.”

“See you then,” I said, and I left the laundromat in a state of excitement.

When we got back to our trailers Walt mentioned that Burt was acting strange. “Been like that all morning. Been stand-offish. Didn’t go to church. Just seems down.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to go back,” Stu suggested. “Even with its problems, this life out here’s addictive.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe he’s at a crossroads, looking down that path less traveled, but knowing he’ll probably take the busier highway to hell.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t see it that way,” Stu noted.

“Probably not,” I agreed, “but he’s definitely standing nearer to The Edge of the World than ever before.”

Later we noted that Burt drove off into town. Tank told us later that he ate lunch by himself, down at the International Café.

• • •

He was seated in the third booth, facing the window. He was wearing his straw cowboy hat, had a red scarf around his neck, and wore a wrinkled blue shirt and dusty jeans. On his feet were the same scuffed field boots he had worn all summer. His neck and face were flushed a crimson hue that wouldn’t tan. His beard now a full three week’s growth. His large brown eyes, normally sparkling beneath the moisture of his contact lenses, were almost a dull glaze.

The jukebox played a country tune as he looked out through the reversed lettering of the International Café and its greasy window to the gray GMC parked out front; his vehicle, his workhorse for this past season. The dust caked side reminded him of the field, of the long hours spent hiking and sampling and sweating. It triggered thoughts of the faces and places he’d known. Of Gabbs and Ginny’s kitten, of Hawthorne and Shannon’s smile, of Austin and it’s incredible sunsets.

He looked down at his table, the Formica top chipped and stained from too many crude customers, or age. He reached for his water glass and took a full throated drink, but there was a dryness that water could not quench. Ice cubes tinkled back into place as he set the glass on the table, but he didn’t let go. His fingers suddenly felt the chill sensation of the damp glass. The hardness that wasn’t actually hard. The moisture that wasn’t really wet. The half-full, half-empty glass containing half-frozen, half-liquid water. Everything was good, and bad. Everything was soft, and hard. Everything was black and white, at the same time.

His awareness shifted. If he were sitting on the other side of the table he would see in instead of out. His back would be turned on one experience, but he would then face another, a whole new set of circumstances. But which would be real, which would be the truth? Did the observation of one diminish the reality of the other?

As the jukebox played a sad tune he slowly moved the glass within the moist ring on the table, pushing the beaded water across the marbled green surface, creating a film, a temporary moist spot, a stretched puddle. And it was transparent. Everything could be seen through the thin molecular structure. He moved the glass faster; it scraped the surface. He moved it slower, delicately; it skated across the film as if on ice; smooth, silent—he had touched a balance. Nothing was absolute, but everything mattered. All things existed in a kind of motion, and yet in

stasis. Everything was in balance.

He looked back to his truck with the Kawasaki strapped in the back. The orange tank rushed his mind, filled his consciousness with the lost moments, the full spectrum of experience that had been laid out naked at his feet, the words that had terrified his Christian heart, the hollow, obscure words that meant nothing and so much, the dangerous suggestive words that only had meaning in one's heart. He closed his eyes.

One hand, his left, lay calmly in his lap, palm up, fingers slightly curled. Almost fetal. His right hand still held the glass, its fingers slowly, sensuously sliding up and down the cool sides. His right arm rested firmly upon the table: the waitress lodged her hip against the edge.

"Take your order?"

Burt's eyes flew open, flared. He looked up, straight into the young woman's face. Very precisely he said, "Yes...."

He turned on the vinyl seat. The waitress stepped back. He still held the glass. His arm shook slightly. He raised his arm as if to smash the fragile container on the floor. But he didn't release.

"Fuck it," he said softly, and stood up. "Just fuck it all," he shouted.

The five other customers went silent. The waitress moved further away, hands clutching her note pad. Burt scanned the room, steady in his determination.

He turned; turned his whole body so that his back was exposed to most of the eyes glaring at him. He slowly placed the clear, cool glass upon the moist spot silently drying on the plastic table. He squeezed it just enough ... let it go. It made a slight "clink" and became silent.

He turned again, toward the door. His footsteps and the jukebox were the only sound. Reaching the door he paused, flipped everyone the bird over his right shoulder, and let the door slam behind him.

The sharp bang of the slamming door was replaced by the words of Willie Nelson strumming from the box in the corner:

Don't boss him, don't cross him,  
He's wild in his sorrow,  
He's ridin' and hidin' his pain;

Don't spite him, don't fight him,  
Just wait till tomorrow,  
Maybe he'll ride on again.

And that is how I thought I would end this story. The young geologist finding revelation at the end of his tour. Accepting change and relative truth as part of the color of life. Going back, and going on. But there turned out to be much more to learn, and many more possibilities to encounter. And the others—the other members of the crew—they were not ready to have it end. There were more adventures and changes yet to come.

• • •

About 12:30 Javee picked me up at my trailer. We drove east in her Vee-Dub, over the Toiyabes.

“Where we going?” I questioned her.

“To find Toquima Cave ... somewhere east of Spencer’s Hot Spring.”

“On the east side of the Big Smoky?”

“Yup, in the Toquima Range.”

We surprised ourselves and found the cave easily.

“Shoot!” Javee disappointment was obvious, “Some university or museum put up a chain-link fence.”

“Probably feared vandals or pot hunters,” I offered.

We poked around, but couldn’t find a way into the cave. We could see a few pictographs at the back, and smoke stains on the ceiling, but couldn’t get a closer look.

Peering through the fence, Javee mentioned, “Reminds me of Hidden Cave.”

“Where’s that?”

“I’m sure you’ve been by there. Near Grimes Point.”

“Oh yeah,” I exclaimed, “near Fallon.”

“The cave has some similar pictographs, and Grimes Point has some interesting petroglyphs.”

“What are the dates are here?”

Javee pondered a moment, then replied, “If I’m remembering right, Hidden Cave was occupied between two thousand and six thousand years ago. This might be the same.”

“Big Game Hunter, Desert Culture, or Fremont. One of those,” I guessed.

“Could be,” she shrugged. “Don’t remember for sure.”

Rather than head back, we agreed on a short hike. We walked up an old jeep trail through the low pines and found a nice secluded spot with a huge smooth boulder positioned so that we could sit and talk and look at the scenery and listen to the wind in the pinyon and juniper.

Absorbing the view, I said, “So ... you were in the Forest Service, huh?”

She was loosening the laces on her boots. “Yes. Until my operation.”

“Operation?” I looked at her, maybe looking for visible scars.

“Gallbladder. Nothing too serious. I survived.”

“Geez! Thought that was for old farts.” I gave her a little smile.

She back handed me on the shoulder. “I’m not that old, butt head.”

I laughed and followed her lead, loosening the laces on my boots. She kicked her’s off.

A warm breeze drifted across the range and pressed gently against our backs. The sun felt good. The setting was peaceful and relaxing.

“Okay, Miss Forest Service, tell me about these trees.” I was being a bit absurd, taunting her, trying to be playful.

She set her boots to her right, pulled her socks off, wiggled her toes, then peered back over her left shoulder, accepting my challenge. “These trees here,” she pointed to a cluster a few feet away to our right, “are pinyon pine.”



“I know that.”

“Ah, but do you know that there are actually two different species? Huh, mister smart ass?”

“No.”

“Ah, ha. See? You don’t know everything then, do you?” It was her turn to give me a playful smile. “Those there,” she pointed to a trio not too far away, “are a low-growing tree. They’re all over the lower, dryer ranges of the Great Basin.”

I nodded slowly, hoping to indicate interest and understanding.

“The most common variety ‘round here is *Pinus edulis*, with two short needles.”

“Gonna hafta take your word for it,” continuing to nod my head.

“The other pinyon ... peculiar to Nevada ... is *Pinus monophylla* ... with a single needle. That’s the Nevada nut pine ... the State tree.” She leaned toward me, placing her left hand on my right shoulder. Leaning across me she pointed to an example not more than ten feet away. I can’t say that I paid much attention to the structure of the tree, but it wasn’t hard to focus on the pressure of her touch and the closeness of her body.

She moved back and took her arm from my shoulder. “The *monophylla* seed is larger, richer, and tastes better than the *edulis*.”

“That’s the one the Big Game Hunting and Fremont cultures collected for food. Right?”

“Hey, you’re pretty smart for a man.” She reached over and patted my bare leg. “Not only for the ancient ones,” she continued. “The pinyon nut was a staple of the Shoshone and Paiute Indians during the autumn and winter, in pre-Caucasian times.”

“What’s it taste like?”

“I don’t like them.” She made a sour face. “Reminds me of turpentine. But a lot of people roast them and eat them by the handful.”

“Guess I’ll pass. Not into paint thinner.”

We stared off toward the surrounding pinyons, each lost in our own thoughts. Finally I tried to describe my vision of a typical nut harvest scene. “Guess I can envision the ancient ones beating on the branches, knocking the sticky nuts onto woven mats.”

“Yes,” Javee saw it too. “Tan faced children giggling as the nuts rained down. Their winter nourishment bouncing and hopping like crickets in the sun.”

“Wonder if it was the men or the women who did the work, or both?”

“I think it was the women,” Javee offered. “Anthropologists pretty much believe that their culture segregated the hunting and gathering activities, separating the men’s chores from those only a woman was expected to do.”

In my mind’s eye I focused upon this imagined activity. Javee continued, but I was only half listening.

When I again became conscious of her words she was saying, “... and if I remember correctly, the name of the tree is Spanish.”

“Everything around here is either Spanish or Shoshone,” I said off-hand.

“Think it comes from ‘pen-ya’, which, I think, means plume.”

“Plume?”

“Yeah, check it out. They have plume-like branches.”

“I guess.” I waved my arm, indicating the view of the distant range. “I’ve noticed this runt

of a tree always seems to grow with the junipers. All across the landscape. Like tufts in a rumpled bedspread. Throw in the sage ... and look at it from a ridge ... and you've got a thick green carpet."

"Hadn't thought of it that way before." She stroked the back of my head as a mother would reward an observant child.

I felt that closeness again. That animal attraction. I wanted to lean over and kiss her, pull her close and....

"Butt-head Floyd," her harsh words shattered my mood, "he wouldn't ever imagine anything like that. Facts, just facts. That's all that interests him."

Frustrated, I asked, "Do women have emotional radar to warn them of impending male contact?"

I don't think my question registered. She went on. "Bastard. Brings me all the way out here from Taos, then dumps me in this nothing of a town. Then he runs off all over the rest of the state, supposedly sampling potential mining properties. Bullshit. He's probably sampling the local female population."

"Ooo ... do I sense a bit of hostility toward your main man?"

"Yes, I'm just a bit pissed off." Her eyes narrowed. "He makes me so mad sometimes. After three years of marriage ... I just don't think it's working."

I wasn't sure how to respond. I wanted to be compassionate, but ... well, I saw an opening for myself. To be honest, the whole time she spoke I was noticing how enticing her bare legs looked in the warm glow of the sun, how the light created a sheen on her smooth flesh, and I imagined what it might be like to have those long limbs tangled with mine while making love. Selfishly, I said, "Why don't you dump him?"

She took my right hand with her left, squeezing gently. "I've thought about it. Oh, boy, have I thought about it. And it just may happen."

I edged a bit closer, bringing our joined hands into my lap.

"If he'd just show some concern," she shook her head. "But he just shrugs me off whenever I try to talk to him. Won't listen. Thinks I'm some object to be used and put on a shelf until he needs me again. Doesn't he see I've got needs too?"

"He should," I tried to comfort. "It's not fair that anyone should be ignored by their mate. I know I'd never ignore you."

She pulled her hand from mine.

"Ooops," I thought, "maybe that wasn't such a smart thing to say."

But then she placed her hand on my bare leg, near my knee. What a sensation.

"Some men understand women better than others," she said with a contemplative voice. "Some men only think of themselves. Some men only think with their crotch." She moved her hand gently along my inner thigh. I thought for sure that would be it. She would make her move and soon we would be rolling passionately upon that smooth boulder with the sun glistening from our sweat moistened bodies.

But she stopped. She gently took her hand away and turned toward me. We looked at each other in silence.

I wondered, "Is she waiting for me to make the first move?" I knew I wanted her, but for

some reason I held back, waiting, sensing patience was the path to follow.

We were very close, our foreheads almost touching. She reached up and gently played with my hair. Stroking and smoothing and sending me into emotional somersaults. Everything she did seemed to indicate that we were headed for physical consummation. But I was afraid to touch her, some cultural taboo having its effect. It was acceptable for her to touch me, but if I were to breach the gap the spell might be broken and the day would end in disappointment.

“Javee,” I finally spoke softly, deliberately, thinking maybe the right words would bridge the gap, “I find you extremely attractive. This may sound naive, but if you and Floyd split I want to be next in line to share some moments of your life.” When I finished I looked down, glimpsing the soft texture of her luscious thigh.

She ran her hand from the back of my head to a spot in the middle of my back. She tenderly massaged as she said, “That would be wonderful.”

She kissed me on the cheek, then pulled back slightly, just out of range for me to reciprocate. She spoke slowly, softly, in an almost bedroom voice. “Dearest Chris, some things just can’t be, for now.” She looked me straight in the eyes. Smiled. “You’re a very sweet, sensitive man. I find you physically attractive and mentally stimulating. You can make me laugh. Under different circumstances I’d definitely take you for my lover.” She brought both hands to my knees, squeezed affectionately. “And even though Floyd’s a jerk, I *am* still married. And even though you’re separated from your wife, you *are* still married.”

“I know,” I said weakly. “Legally, anyway.”

“That’s right. And until we’re both free, a more traditional, hands off, approach is the better part of discretion.”

“Oh well” was all I could say.

...

Hiking back to Javee’s Volkswagen we heard a vehicle plodding up an old jeep trail in low gear. Javee pointed toward the noise. “Check this out. Look at this old prospector dude.”

“A bit stereotypical, huh?”

“Yes, but instead of a burro he’s got an old beat-up Volkswagen bus.”

“Yeah,” I couldn’t help but laugh, “with all that stuff piled high on the top rack it looks like he’s gonna tip over.” There were huge tarps and odd rusted pieces of mining equipment strapped in piles to the roof rack.

“Close to it,” Javee waved.

The old fellow leered back, but did raise his right hand from the wheel for a half-hearted wave. He didn’t seem inclined to stop.

“Check out that little trailer,” Javee pointed as the whine of the weathered bus moved past. “It’s only got three wheels.”

“Sure enough,” I watched as the dust settled. “I’ll bet he’s got his whole life piled around him there.”

“The junk of existence, for sure.”

And we walked on.

• • •

By the time we got back to her car I'd developed a serious sinus headache. I hadn't brought any aspirin, so I had to ride it out. Javee drove the old road up on top of the plateau for a couple of miles, where we had seen the old prospector. We didn't see any sign of the Volkswagen. We turned back. By then my headache had almost brought tears to my eyes. I wasn't much company on the drive back to Austin.

"I think I've hurt your feelings," Javee volunteered, unaware of my problem.

"No," I said painfully. "Not at all." I just wanted to curl up in a ball in the back seat until we reached town. "I just have a splitting headache. My sinuses are acting up for some reason."

"You sure I didn't say something wrong?"

"You're fine."

And we left it at that.

• • •

When I got back to camp I learned that Burt, Stu, and Dave had decided to leave for Tucson that night. "We opted to get a head start," Stu informed me, "so we can reach Tucson sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"How you gonna stay awake?" It was not the decision I would have made. "You were up early this morning."

"We're just anxious to go," Stu grinned. "We've spent too many days cooped up in these tiny towns. Got a need for speed to get back to civilization."

"Yeah, 'til you've been there a week and wanna get away from that weird craziness."

"You're probably right ... but hey ... we gotta take one day at a time."

It was close to ten before they made their final preparations to leave. As they tossed the last of their belongings into the trucks there were the usual goodbyes, pats on the back, hand-shakes, joking, and "let's write and keep in touch" kind of things.

Burt and I faced each other for the last time. He said, in his cryptic way, "The last few weeks haven't been too bad." He smiled slightly.

"Good ... the whole summer hasn't been a waste then."

"In some instances it was actually nice."

"You don't hate me then?"

"No," he smiled, "even when I was angry with you, I never hated you."

"That's great ... a good Christian through it all."

"But during the first weeks," he took his straw hat off, "back in Gabbs," he wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve and put his hat back on, "I should have told you ... to fuck off."

The surrounding conversations stopped. I loved it. I couldn't speak.

Dave asked, "What happened?"

"Burt just said the 'F' word," Rob explained with exaggerated awe.

"Burt told Chris to fuck off," Walt filled in the details.

Burt and I became the center of attention.

“Burt,” I said in mock shock, “I’ve been trying to get you to say that all summer.” I stuck out my hand, he took it, and we shook vigorously. “Alright Burt!”

The others, except Tank, crowded around and shook his hand and patted him on the back.

Rob came up and said, “Congratulations for finally lowering yourself to our level.”

Stu stood there like a proud father at his son’s graduation.

I felt a sense of relief and accomplishment. When the others had gone back to their own farewells I spoke quietly with Burt. “At least for today you’ve opened up to an alternative way of looking at things.”

He shrugged, said, “Guess so.”

“I mean ... you can still be yourself ... but maybe now you realize that words are just words.” He gave me that glazed over doe eyed look one last time. But I went on, “It’s people who give words their meaning, and their power. A word’s just a symbol, not the thing itself.”

He picked up his day pack and hung it over his right shoulder.

“Burt, you’ve changed this summer.” I was excited for him, but felt he was slipping away once again. “You’re going back a new man, different, with a broader set of values and understanding. You’re fundamentally the same. You’re that same good guy underneath. But this summer, all the crap I’ve fed you, all the tricks we’ve played on you ... this all makes you a better person. Now maybe you know ... you hafta understand contrast. You hafta know dark to understand light. Maybe you’ve seen a little of that now.”

He stood there like a robot, that blank stare still masking his face. But I had to finish, I had to close. My time with him was ending. “I think, in the end, you taught us something too.”

That got his attention. “How’s that?”

I shook his hand again and pulled him to me for a quick hug. “I can’t speak for the others, but you showed me ... that I hafta know light to understand dark.”

He gave me a large dose of that doe-eyed stare, then broke into laughter. We ended on common ground.

Carolyn drove over to say goodbye to our departing companions. She gave each a hug. I’m sure Burt enjoyed hugging her much more than embracing me.

“Hey, what about the rest of us? Don’t we get a hug.” Walt feigned jealousy.

“You’ll just have to wait until you leave.” She slipped an arm around Burt’s waist. “Then you’ll get equal time.”

After that they moved to leave. Stu took my old six-banger. I was finally rid of it. He pulled the Argosy, which the company had decided to return to the dealer in Tucson. From that point on the light-blue Ford was mine. A 4x4 at last. Dave drove Guy’s truck, which needed servicing in Las Vegas. Burt rode along with Stu.

To reach the summit at the head of Pony Canyon we hooked a chain between Guy’s truck and the six-banger. There was just no way that truck could have pulled the Argosy up that incline by itself. Standing below, watching their slow progress up those switchbacks, it sounded like neither truck got out of second gear. But they finally pulled over the top.

Once they disappeared from sight I thought of Burt riding shotgun for Stu. He was completing a cycle, closing a circle. It was as if he had finally made it to The Edge of the World, and gone over. He had fallen off, but I was still here. I wondered if he would have understood the

irony.

And strangely, looking back from the distance of time, it was as if those three companions had truly fallen off The Edge of the World. I never saw two of them again. In fact, I never heard from, or even heard of, either again.

Once the three were gone, Guy climbed into The Gray Beast and headed back to Hawthorne. "I'll be bringing Maria and Denny with me. I'm moving my trailer up here. Give them a break from the heat."

"Great," we all acknowledged, uncertain of what that might bring.

"It's definitely much prettier here. Maria will like that." He shoved it into gear and drove off.

I thought then of Floyd leaving Javee stranded there in Austin. Guy definitely had the better approach.

...

Tank had moved his belongings from the Argosy into the Nomad and retired for his night's beauty sleep. Rob, Walt and I settled into the Airstream to reminisce and to drink a beer to our departed friends' safe return to the homeland.

Walt went to his bunk and pulled out a joint. When he returned he inserted it into the opening of a plastic bottle. Water, or some other liquid, sloshed within the container as he maneuvered to secure the tiny cigarette.

"What you got there?"

"Called a Power Hitter," Rob explained. "Like a hookah ... but better. Smoke goes in ... cools and loses its edge ... then blows deep into your lungs."

"Takes average weed," Walt tried to light the joint, "and makes it stronger."

"Wanna try?" Rob offered.

As was my habit, I started to decline. Then I remembered my evening with Stu and Sunny. "What the hell? I'll do it for Stu."

I tried a few hits in my turn. But again, like at Tahoe, it didn't seem to do much for me. I guess I expected to float back to my trailer, or reach for the stars. No such luck.

Once the last smoke had been drawn out of the resulting roach, Rob took a chocolate cake from the refrigerator. "I baked this ... for our departed comrades. We never got around to eating it." He set it on the table and went for three plates and forks. Placing them in front of us, he said, "Dig in ... there's a lot here."

We each consumed a huge piece, followed by a cold glass of milk. "Mm-mm," I slumped back in my seat, "nothin' like home baked chocolate cake and cold milk on Coors Lite and marijuana. Just what I need for pleasant dreams tonight."

And sure enough, I tossed and turned until I got up at five. I hate nights like that.

^^^

Guy moved Maria and Denny from the summer's heat in Hawthorne to the cooler breezes of Austin. Since Neil and Randy had moved on, he decided to leave his trailer in Hawthorne and occupy the Nomad. That meant Tank had to remove his belongings and himself and find other digs. Rather than share the Empire with me, he rented a room at the International.

"I think he's afraid ... you'll slip him drugs ... in the middle of the night," Rob commented later, when he heard of Tank's departure.

When they arrived I helped the Bradshaw's with their bags.

"I already like this place," Maria commented. "It's so much cooler. And this scenery is much more pleasant than those barren brown bunkers around Hawthorne."

"Uh-huh, and just wait 'til this evening," I promised, "the sunsets are spectacular." But we had black clouds by the end of the day, with thunder and lightning, and the threat of rain. She had to wait until another evening.

...

"With all these women 'round here," I commented to the group in general, "we're gonna get fat."

Maria had prepared a spaghetti and Italian meatball feast.

"This is excellent."

"This is great."

"This is fantastic."

"Where'd you learn to cook like this?" Walt asked.

She smiled at Guy, pleased by our pleasure. "I was born and raised in Italy."

"I met her when she was an art student," Guy said proudly, "traveling around the South Pacific."

"What were you doing there?" I asked between mouthfuls.

"Inspecting the geology in the Fiji Islands, for NORMMEX." He looked toward Maria and gave her a huge smile. "And I found a gold mine." She reached over and gave his arm a loving squeeze.

With dinner winding down, our conversation turned toward field assignments and increased sample collection. But before Guy could detail his thoughts, a revving car engine virtually drowned his words.

Walt looked through the open door, then grinned at Rob. "Those chicks in the 'Stang convertible."

The two womanizers excused themselves, and with sheepish grins, went out to greet the locals.

Guy, obviously annoyed by their sudden departure, moved to the door and watched as the two studs hung on the car, teasing the young women. "Those girls can't be over sixteen," he seemed concerned. "They come around a lot?"

“Mmm ... sometimes,” I said.

“Almost daily,” Tank volunteered. “They come driving by in that old Mustang and stop to talk.”

“They better be careful.” Guy wasn’t pleased. “They start something with pimply faced girls in braces and they’ll be angling for statutory rape charges.”

“I don’t know,” I said, “they know enough to stay away from any serious encounter.”

“I hope so,” Guy returned to his seat.

“Well, so far anyway,” I covered myself.

When Rob and Walt returned, Guy asked, “You aren’t ... messing around ... with those youngsters, are you?”

They looked at each other, both blushed, and Rob assured Guy, “They’re way too young for us.”

“Just babies,” Walt sounded insulted. “We’re just playin’ with them.”

“Not much else to do,” Rob added.

“You have to understand. I don’t want statutory rape charges involving this crew.” Guy’s tone was serious and fatherly. “We don’t want NORMMEX to get a bad name out here. We need to stay on the positive side with these locals, just in case we make a strike and have to come in and develop a property. We don’t want any hard feelings or our dealings with the property owners could become more difficult and emotional. That could cost the company big dollars.”

“We’re only playing with them,” Rob reiterated. “What you saw is it.”

“And it’s always right here in the lot in front of the trailers,” Walt added.

“That’s right,” Rob went on, “they never even get out of their car.”

“You meet them anywhere else?” Guy questioned, looking from one to the other.

“Only here,” Rob raised his right hand as if in a court of law, “I swear.”

Guy turned toward me. “That true?”

“It’s all true,” I responded, “as far as I know.”

Turning toward Walt, “Well, then, good. Let’s keep it that way.” He looked at Rob. “We don’t want any trouble out here.” Guy got up from the table and moved toward the bathroom. “I’ll see you all in the morning. Bright and early.”

Dismissed, Walt, Rob and I walked toward the Airstream and Empire.

“Haven’t touched them yet,” Walt commented, “but I wouldn’t mind nailin’ the one driving.”

“Stay away from that young flesh,” Rob taunted, wagging his finger as if scolding.

“Young, yes,” Walt licked his lips in imitation of Rob, “I like them young. She’s got a tight looking little bod and I’d love to be the one to make her bleed.”

• • •

Later, during the lightning and thunder, Walt and I drove down to the International and played pool. About 10:00 I petered out and Walt drove me to my trailer, then headed back to the bar.

“Haven’t you had enough adventure for a while?”



“Never enough,” he said energetically. “Never enough. And then you get old.”

^^^

Tank had a date. With a girl. That was so hard for us to believe.

Her name was Mary, a geologist from California doing research near Kingston Canyon, a few miles south of Austin. Apparently Tank ran into her while he was sampling, and for once in his life moved quick enough to beat an excuse.

We were all anxious to meet the woman in Tank’s life. You see, Tank was not one of the most handsome men in the world, although, I suppose, some women might find his large frame and apparent rugged countenance somewhat appealing. But locale being an important factor, you wouldn’t expect Tank to land a date in a state where women are as rare as diamonds.

...

Walt and I went cruising before dinner, to kill some time. We ended up eating burgers at the ice cream shop. Then, as usual, we drifted into the International where we connected with Rob and Lynn. She was working the bar and he was entertaining her with stories from the wilds of northern Arizona. Since we were just about the only patrons that night, we monopolized the jukebox and the pool table.

Then Tank arrived with his date.

“Holy Shit,” Walt stood up after making his shot, “she’s a doll.”

I concurred. “Tank landed a beaut.” Mary was quite attractive, with blond hair, a slim figure, and a perky demeanor.

Tank acted the part of a gentleman, pulling out a chair and gently guiding Mary to her seat.

“Pretty obvious,” Walt noted, “she’s used to better things than Tank can offer.”

“I think ol’ Tank let us down.” I shook my head, taking in his attire. “Must’ve figured ‘cause she’s from the coast he should dress the part.” Tank was outfitted in a white and yellow vertically stripped shirt, a la The Beach Boys; chocolate brown knit dress pants; and wore dark brown dress socks in leather sandals.

“A real swinger,” Walt mumbled as he stood aside so I could take my shot.

“Yes sir,” I said as I bent to check my angle, “he’s showed us he can be a wild and crazy kind of guy ... just like the rest of us.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think Mary’s too impressed.”

“How’s that?”

“From the expression on her face I don’t think this date can be over soon enough.”

“Come on,” I said, “you don’t think Tank comes off as dashing in his West Coast Look?”

We had our private laugh, then drifted over to annoy Tank and to meet his date.

“Mary, this is Walter Ellison.”

“Walt. Please.” Walt gave Tank a squinty glance, but flashed his most seductive smile

when he faced Mary.

“Nice to meet you,” she returned his smile.

“This is Chris Chapik.”

I smiled, nodded, and extended my hand. She took it and we gently shook hands.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said.

“And over there, standing by the bar ... that’s Rob Spurrier. You can meet him later.”

“Is this your whole crew?” she asked.

“No ... well yes. It is now. Some of our geologists left for Tucson on Sunday.” Tank noticed how our eyes stayed glued on Mary. Speaking to Walt, he asked, “How is your pool game going?”

“It’s Eight Ball, Tank.” Walt knew that would irritate our neo-Casanova.

Tank grimaced and turned immediately to Mary. She seemed a bit confused. “They call me that all the time.”

“Cause he looks like Tank MacNamara, the cartoon character,” Walt volunteered.

Mary studied Tank for a moment, then shrugged.

I noticed there were no glasses on the table. “Can I buy the two of you a drink? What’s your poison, Mary?”

“Thank you,” she spoke in a soft, clear voice. “I’ll have a Vodka Collins, if they make them here.”

“I’m sure they do,” Walt assured her.

“And you, Tank,” I spoke directly to him, “you having your usual?”

“What’s that?” he almost cringed, fearing something from out of the blue.

“A Harvey Wallbanger, isn’t it?” I tried to keep from laughing.

Then Walt suggested, “No, wait! Isn’t it a Shirley Temple.”

I nearly lost my composure. “That’s right, I forgot.” I turned toward the bar. “Lynn, excuse me. Lynn ... we need one Vodka Collins over here,” I pointed to Mary, “and a Shirley Temple for Tank.”

When I turned to see Tank’s reaction I caught the fury in his eyes. His neck and lower face were bright red.

He faced Mary. “Don’t listen to these jokers. They’re just rude.”

Mary, looking back at Tank, spoke in an even voice, “These guy’s are just fine. They’re funny. And cute.”

“It gets old after a while,” Tank became serious, playing his sympathy card.

Mary wouldn’t bite. “Yes, maybe for you. For me it’s a nice change.”

When the drinks arrived I paid Lynn. “I hope this is okay.” She set the colorful drink in front of Tank. “I’ve only made about three Shirlies before.” She started away. Over her shoulder she said, “Don’t get many kids in here.”

Realizing we had done our damage, Walt and I excused ourselves and went back to our game. About 30 minutes later Tank led Mary to the door and, and, unfortunately, we never saw her again.

• • •

As was becoming our habit, Walt dropped me off at my trailer around 10:00, and drove back into town.

^^^

My alarm woke me at 5:30. I stretched, yawned, pulled on my shorts, and stepped into the kitchen to brew some tea. As the water hissed into the kettle I heard a truck pull up in front of the Airstream. Looking through the window I saw Walt behind the wheel. He turned off the engine and slumped back in the seat. I shut off the water and walked outside.

Standing at the open passenger side window, I asked, “Out cattin’ again?”

Without opening his eyes, “More like pussy-footin’ around.”

I laughed to myself. “Struck out again, huh?”

“Don’t know. But I was hot on the trail. Had two babes hot after me. But I don’t think I got laid.”

“You don’t think you got laid? You mean you don’t remember?”

“Naw. Got drunk and tired. Maybe they drugged me. Can’t remember a whole lot of anything.”

I leaned on the truck, my arms upon the window sill. “So what happened? You picked up a couple of women, I take it?”

He brought his hands to his face and tried to rub away the morning’s cobwebs. He pulled himself upright. “On my way back to the International last night I picked up two chicks. They’re hitch-hikin’ to San Fran.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Best time to travel, they said. It’s cool, and people driving across the desert at night always want company. Said they been back and forth across the country a couple times.”

“So you gave them a ride?”

“Later. They were hungry, so I bought them a snack and drinks at the International.”

“How old were they?”

“Don’t know. Somewhere in their late twenties, early thirties. I think they fucked me over, man.”

“How’s that?” I laughed, knowing they had at least conned him out of a meal.

“I was driving, but they took me for a ride. Thought those hose monsters wanted my screaming purple reitnoid.”

“Well, what did they do?”

“Not sure. I think those hose monsters led me on a wild-goose chase through the desert. Out there west of town. Woke up this morning, face down in the desert. Out near Ione. Man, I was ninety-three miles from Austin.”

“And you don’t have any idea what happened?”

“Man, I’m clueless. At first I thought they stole the truck. But it was back by the road with the keys in the ignition. Then I thought I was outta gas. But the reserve tank was full. Don’t know what happened to the chicks. Maybe I left them out in the desert somewhere. Maybe they’re camped in the sage. Don’t know. It’s weird. After a couple drinks everything seems blank.”

“You don’t know why you were out in the desert?”

“Man, I couldn’t even figure where I was. Had to wait ‘til the sun came up just to know which way was east.”

I shook my head. “Did Lynn fix your drinks?”

“Yeah, but I think those bitches slipped me something. Vaguely remember something about Spurrier being lost in the field. Might’ve been out looking for him.”

“Walt, that was a few days back. Don’t you remember, you and Spurrier got your wires crossed? You rode back to town on your bike. Spurrier was still out there. Don’t you remember?”

“Man, I don’t even remember who you are right now. I gotta piss and get some sleep.”

Struggling to open the door, he mumbled, “All this shit and I don’t think I even got laid.” As the door swung open he moaned, “Fuck me.”

• • •

That was our last day in Austin. After Walt got a couple hours of sleep he and Tank drove down the Big Smokey Valley to find a new camp for our return. They found a spot on a ranch at the mouth of Pablo Canyon.

Rob spent most of his day in town attempting to get the trucks fixed, making reservations for our flights, and carrying out other Spurrier type details. I stayed in camp preparing our latest samples, finishing map work, and closing out other routine chores.

Javee took off in search of her long delinquent husband. That hurt a bit, because she didn’t even take the time for a quick “See you later.” I was convinced that I would never see her again.

Guy and Maria and Denny left for Hawthorne in the middle of the afternoon. Guy told me he would see us next at Pablo Canyon.

• • •

I finally wrote a reply to Becky’s latest letter and told her I would be in Tucson for a while and when I returned to Nevada our crew would be located in a remote area of the state where it would be difficult for me to get mail. I told her I would let her know when we moved again. Somehow I had to shake her from my trail.

I also wrote Sunny a long letter, trying to explain why I hadn’t come to visit. I told her of our temporary return to Tucson, but promised her that as soon as I got back to Nevada I would figure some way to get up to Tahoe and see her.

Both letters were pretty lame, but I was running low on energy. My feelings for Javee had siphoned off my emotional strength and I had difficulty thinking of any other woman right then.

^^^

We were set for our second trip back to Tucson. But on the morning of our departure Spurrier was at his worst. He had been on a power trip since Guy declared him our temporary crew chief. It went right to his head. That morning he told us, “We’re gonna give Ed and Lynn a ride to Reno.”

“Great,” I moaned, annoyed by the potential delay in an already tight schedule. “What’s the deal?”

“Ed’s got business ... back there. Lynn’s going for the ride.” Rob acted perturbed that he had to explain. “She’s riding with Pinhead and me.”

“Fantastic,” I shook my head. “You expect the three of us to fit in one cab?”

“Hey, it’s your problem,” he grinned annoyingly.

“Look,” I moved closer, “I’ve already gotta spend the drive with Tank. He and I and Ed are the three biggest. That makes for a tight, sweaty drive.”

“You’ll figure something out,” he smirked, as he moved off to complete his chores.

“Wait, where’s our tickets?”

“I’ll give them to you at the airport.”

“Why not now?” I dared once again to question his authority. “What if we get separated?”

“We’re all scheduled on the same flight,” he said smugly.

“Yeah, but it’s gonna be tight getting there, especially now you’ve saddled me with Ed.” I looked him square in the eyes. “If departure time comes and we’re not there, I’m sure you won’t wait around. It’ll be easier if you just give us our tickets now.”

He gave me his hurt, “you don’t trust me,” look. “No. I think I’ll hold onto them.”

I was pissed, and unfortunately he knew it. There was no way he would relent when he knew I was down. I let it drop.

...

Ed’s not a bad guy, but he smokes, he has a large frame like Tank and me, and his arrogant attitude and cynical approach to life tended, at times, to rub me the wrong way. With Tank’s usually stoic behavior, I anticipated some verbal sparks.

Stepping toward the cab, Ed produced a pack of cigarettes and prepared to light up. Tank announced flatly, “There’s no smoking in this car.”

Ed looked at me, pleading.

“I’m with Tank on this one,” I smiled weakly. “Sorry.”

Ed capitulated, but made his annoyance obvious. He began a string of haughty rantings about society in general and the lack of respect for individual freedom, all before we left the Austin city limits. What a pleasant way to leave that part of Nevada. Surprisingly, Tank bit his tongue and remained quiet on his side of the cab.

After Ed cooled his jets he did tell us one interesting story. “This cowboy come to the bar ... tol’ me he’d been a hand on a dude ranch a few years back. Somewheres up in Montana. Tol’

me each day they'd take a group out trail ridin' through the canyons an' up a ways into the mountains. Guess this was a big thrill to the dudes from back east, 'specially them urbanites."

Tank continued his disinterest. Besides, he was angry because there wasn't room enough for him to read his paperback.

Ed went on. "On this one day, one of the dudeens..."

"What?" I interrupted. "You say *dudeen*?"

"Yeah. This cowboy tol' me female patrons were called dudeens. Guys were dudes and gals was dudeens."

"Makes sense, I guess."

"Anyways, this gal asks the cowpoke if she could ride along. He tol' her 'sure enough' an' asks her if she was a sperienced rider. She tol' him she'd ridden on some trails back east, but she wasn't comfor'ble on no ornery animule. At this point the cowpke asks her which type'a saddle she's perferin'. She says to him she didn't realize there was more'n one type. The cowboy tol' her there's the Western Saddle and the English Ridin' Saddle. She could have her choice." Ed paused for emphasis, then went on. "What's the diff'rence, the lady asks. The cowboy thought a sec, then tol' her the Western Saddle has a horn, while the English Saddle doesn't." Again Ed paused. "A horn? The lady couldn't believe it. She tol' the cowboy, if the trails're that crowded she'd perfer not to go."

I got a chuckle out of it, but Tank stayed grumpy along the door.

...

Spurrier was a much faster driver and got quite a distance ahead. All of a sudden we caught up, their vehicle pulled to the side of the road. Lynn stood in the gravel of the shoulder as Walt and Rob removed a flat right rear tire.

We stopped and I yelled through Tank's open window. "Need some assistance?"

"Naw. Got it dicked," Walt shouted back.

"Wait for us in Fallon," Rob instructed.

"Sure enough," I yelled back. "We'll meet you on the main drag through town."

And off we went.

...

With the sun faded miles moving past I remembered something I'd asked Burt on our first day. "Hey Ed," I motioned toward the insect splattered windshield, "you ever wonder what's the last thing to go through a bug's tiny brain when it hits the windshield?"

He thought about it for a few seconds, then said, "Ain't got no clue."

I remained quiet for a minute or two, as if I were contemplating. Then I said, "You know, Ed, I think it's its ass hole."

"Huh?" He'd obviously drifted off toward other thoughts.

"Its ass hole. The last thing to go through a bug's brain when it hits the windshield is its ass hole."

“Oh.”

As I watched the gray pavement I could tell he was looking at me. Then he said, “Is that supposed to be funny?”

I turned and smiled. “It’s a lot like life, Ed. Your traveling along, minding your own god damned business, figuring you’re finally getting somewhere, then BLAMM ... a fucking windshield. You lose your fucking mind ‘cause of some asshole.”

He faced forward again, but didn’t say a word.

“We gotta watch out for that fucking windshield at The Edge of the World.” I turned to check his reaction and saw that Tank had caught that last phrase. He turned and gave me the Burt James “I don’t want to hear this” look. I let it drop as we approached Salt Wells.

• • •

In Fallon we stopped for gas. When I slid back into the truck, Ed said, “Gotta pick up somethin’ at the hardware store.”

“Can’t you get it in Reno?”

“They got exactly what I need here,” he seemed annoyed by my reluctance. “It’s just off the main drag.” He pointed down a side street.

“Alright,” I capitulated. “But I’m nervous about leaving the highway. Don’t wanna miss the others.”

“Yeah. Well, this’ll only take a second. They’ll wait.”

Ed ran in quickly and came back out within about three minutes. “See, I tol’ yuh it’d only take a minute.” His superior tone was annoying.

We drove back to the highway, parked in a shady spot, and sat and waited.

“Think I saw ‘em drive by when we was headin’ back from the store.” Ed moved his thumb in the direction of Reno. “Think they’re already gone by.”

“I was watching the intersection all along. They haven’t come by yet.” I was sure they were still behind us.

Ed and I argued back and forth. After 20 minutes his argument started to sway me.

Then Tank said, “They blew us off, like all those other times. They went on ahead.”

“Okay guys, guess I’m wrong. It’s on to Reno.”

“At least you can admit your error,” Ed said pompously.

So we drove off in hopes of catching them and securing our tickets.

• • •

Ed directed us to drop him off in Sparks. We found the place he indicated, he climbed out, and Tank and I sighed with relief as we drove away.

We rushed to the airport, parked the truck, grabbed our bags, and raced through the terminal to find Spurrier and Ellison. They weren’t there. We checked at the airline counter and were told they hadn’t checked in yet. I had been right. They hadn’t passed us. We had gotten ahead of them. So we sat down, waited, nervously watched the clock, and prepared to eat crow.

The two came in about 30 minutes later. The first thing out of Rob's mouth was, "Eat shit and die, you gravy sucking pigs."

"Why the fuck didn't you wait for us in Fallon?" Walt's glare stabbed me like the sharp end of a rock hammer.

"Hey, we did," I tried to defend my actions. "But your good ol' buddy Ed convinced us he'd seen you drive past."

"Yeah, right, buddy fuckers." Walt's voice carried through the terminal. People turned to witness the commotion.

"We waited fifteen minutes," Rob's voice was more controlled.

"Fifteen god-damned minutes, sitting there in that fuckin' sun, waiting for you guys to show." Walt brought his volume down to conversational levels, yet his intensity hadn't diminished.

"We couldn't wait any longer," Rob explained. "We figured you'd ditched us."

"Think about it," I argued, "why would we wanna ditch you? You've got the tickets."

"Eh Say Ah Day," Rob whispered.

Walt mumbled, "Joke 'em."

"We had nothing to gain by dumping you," I argued.

"Well you ain't getting no fuckin' tickets 'til the last fuckin' second," Walt picked up his bag.

"That's right," Rob smiled. "You guys are our slaves until we board that plane." Rob handed me his carry on bag. I took it.

Walt shoved his suitcase toward Tank. "You'll take this for me, won't you?" He flashed a forced smile.

Tank took two steps back. "Carry your own bag."

"Oo... Tank doesn't want his little tickets now, does he?" Rob brought out a syrupy pre-school teacher's voice.

Tank glared.

I handed Rob's bag back to him. "You assholes carry your own shit."

There were a few moments of staring and posturing and finally Rob and Walt picked up their bags and moved to the counter to check in. Needless to say, we left Reno in a state of tension and hard feelings.

...

Our flight was routed through LAX, where we had a two hour lay-over. At the top of the escalator in our terminal Walt announced, "I'm grabbing a beer," and headed toward a bar a few feet away.

"A cold brew," Rob agreed, "would help to wash down today's miles."

"Care if we join you?" I asked hesitantly.

"Come on, you assholes, it's a free world." Walt waved us along.

Tank held back.

"What's up?" I turned to him.



“I’m not going in there.”

“Come on. You can get a coke or something.”

He wouldn’t budge, then said, “As long as you guys don’t bug me about drinking.”

“Promise. Now come on.”

• • •

Half way between the escalators and the bar we encountered this fellow holding a huge sign. In carefully drawn letters, it said, “JANE FONDA IS A COMMUNIST SUPPORTER AND A DETRACTOR OF NUCLEAR POWER.” He stopped Walt.

“Sign this petition,” he urged. “Send her back to Hanoi where she belongs.”

“This guy can’t be real,” I whispered to Tank. The fellow looked to be about 25, had short dark hair, wore dark rimmed glasses with thick coke-bottle lenses, wore a wrinkled bright white shirt, open at the collar, with a plastic pocket protector in his upper pocket stuffed with an assortment of pens, mechanical pencils, and small engineering scales. He wore baggy black slacks and black wing tip shoes. “Looks like something out of the Absent Minded Professor’s yearbook.”

Tank and I stopped to listen to his spiel.

He was telling Rob, “Nuclear power plants are mankind’s greatest creations.” He looked at the four of us. “I can’t comprehend why everyone doesn’t realize the vast hidden potential buried within the tiny atom. Nuclear energy is the savior of mankind and the sooner we realize that the sooner we will all be saved and the Earth will become Utopia.”

“What about radioactive waste?” Rob countered his spiel.

“Simple. We’ll build atomic powered spaceships and blast it into the cosmos.” He raised his right arm toward the ceiling.

“Really?” I said. “How we gonna fund these space ships?”

“Simple. Our government already has such ships. But they are hiding the development of such vehicles because they don’t want the cities to know.”

“Why would the cities care?” Walt seemed puzzled.

“Simple. They want to use space vehicles to dump municipal garbage into the upper atmosphere.”

“What’s with this Jane Fonda thing?” Rob pointed to the sign.

“The bitch. She’s spoken out against one of our nuclear reactors that is being constructed a few miles up the coast.”

“It’s a free country, isn’t it?” I felt a certain amount of anger rising up my spine.

“She’s just a dumb actress who doesn’t know protons from peroxide. She should have stayed in Hanoi with the rest of the traitors. We don’t need a spokesman like her.”

I said, “Don’t you mean spokeswoman?”

“I have my doubts about her actually being a woman.” He waited for a reaction, then went on, “I have evidence that she is a transvestite queer that has everyone fooled.”

“For all these years?” Rob laughed.

“Maybe she’s just Peter Fonda in drag,” the nerd added, attempting humor.

“Well who should be a spokesperson for the cause of nuclear energy?” I wanted to see just how squirrely this guy really was.

He looked at me and said, flat out, “I would be a likely candidate.”

“Man,” Walt spoke out loud as he started to move away, “this guy’s on some kind of atomic ego drug.”

Suddenly the nerd exclaimed, “I gotta go. I’m close to experiencing melt down and have to find a Men’s room.” He lifted his sign and took off down the terminal at a rapid trot.

We took the opportunity to split our atoms and drift away into the flux and flow of the terminal and deposited our quanta upon the seats at the end table in the bar, close to the entrance, so we could observe the throngs of humanity radiating toward the various destinations of their randomly programmed lives.

• • •

We sipped our drinks and watched the travelers passing by.

Rob said, “Check this out.” He pointed toward two guys handing out booklets and pamphlets. “How’d we get by those clowns?”

“Shit,” Walt licked a bit of foam from his upper lip, “they probably steer clear of that atom smasher Fonda basher.”

“They’re both dressed the same,” I observed. They could have been twins. They both wore crisp white shirts with dark pleated trousers and black shoes, a conservative hair style with no side-burns, an expressionless, clean shaven face, and a lean, almost skeletal build.

“There’s something ... unusual about them,” Rob admitted, “but I just can’t put my finger ... on it.”

“Tank, why don’t you walk out there and collect one of those handouts?” Walt waved toward the pair with his left arm. “So we can see what they’re selling.”

Tank had a mouth full of ice and simply said, “No thanks.”

So we watched while we nursed our beers.

The younger looking fellow seemed a bit awkward in his approach. He would cautiously walk up to someone topping the escalator and tentatively hand them a booklet. He would start in with his spiel, but the person would take the book, and without a word, they would walk away. The poor guy would try to finish his speech, but his target would walk on, refusing to listen.

“Notice how most toss the book as soon as they get to that trash bin?” I directed their attention a short distance down the terminal.

Finally the older looking fellow came up to the kid. He pulled the young guy over to a place along a wall where there was a cardboard box; apparently their stash of booklets. The older guy seemed to be coaching, but was quite demonstrative, waving his arms toward the escalator, pointing to the books, sticking his hand out as if asking for a donation, then waving at the terminal in general. The young man stood with his shoulders slumped, his head tilted to one side, looking down at the floor, shuffling his feet.

The coach walked over to the head of the escalator and proceeded to show the trainee just what his approach should be. But the instructor had no better success, though he was more

persistent and usually was able to retrieve his book before the target walked away. In spite of his efforts, he didn't collect a dime. Obviously discouraged and unable to demonstrate his skills, he stomped back to the trainee, energetically explained a few technical points, then walked off, apparently to check on his other charges.

The young guy dutifully went back to work at the top of the escalator. Eventually we forgot about him.

"I've died and gone to heaven." Walt's eyes were locked on to a beautiful woman drifting up the escalator. "She must be some star."

"Don't recognize her," Rob noted.

"Me neither," I added, "but the way she holds herself, the way she's dressed, and the way she's acting, I'd say she could be."

"Man, she's built." Walt was totally immersed.

The Star had lustrous blond hair pinned up under a large brimmed straw hat. She had large eyes, a fine nose, wonderful sensuous lips, and a gorgeous, even tan. Her blouse was loose, Hawaiian style, but her large voluptuous breasts were still evident. She was wonderfully slender, yet shapely, like a sports model. She wore tight bright-pink shorts that formed to her narrow hips.

"She's got the greatest pair of legs I've ever seen in person." Walt's voice was hushed, reverent, as if he were visiting a church or temple.

All four of us stared. She was something to behold.

Immediately behind her was this husky guy who looked like he was a nobody wanting to be somebody. "Is that guy with her?" I wondered out loud.

"May be her agent," Rob volunteered.

"Or her bodyguard," Tank suggested.

"He can't be her husband, can he?" Walt sounded concerned.

The Attendant was short, stocky, wore a panama hat, a flowered Hawaiian shirt, light blue shorts, had a dark mustache, and hairy legs stuck into dirty tennis shoes. He carried two small overnight bags.

The Star and her Attendant stuck out in that L.A. crowd, an airport crowd, with every conceivable type and style.

"These two are either somebodies," I suggested, "or want everybody to think they're somebodies. Either way they're doing a good job."

It seemed as if every eye in the terminal was directed toward them. The woman was that striking. Stepping forward, off the moving stairway, the tight muscles in her lovely legs flexed and shimmered in the diffused light. There seemed to be an aura, a foggy golden glow, around her.

The young book peddler suddenly moved forward, extended his hand, holding a booklet, and prepared to make his pitch.

Looking directly at the young man, the Attendant bellowed out, in evenly spaced words, for all to hear, "If ... you ... say ... one ... word ... I'll knock ... your fucking ... wig off!"

The terminal seemed suddenly silent. His forceful words echoed along tile walls. The woman continued on, as if this sort of incident were usual. The Attendant continued to glare at the trainee as he moved from the escalator. The poor kid melted into the floor. He stepped back,

looked down at his shoes, turned, and sped to the wall where the books were kept. He gently tossed those he held into the big box. Then he stood there like a statue. Perhaps meditating.

The legs and the panama hat moved out of our sight, down the passage to other gates.

“Knock your wig off? What’s that mean?” Walt looked at Rob and me, puzzled.

“Christ,” I said. “That guy’s Harry Krishna. That’s what was weird about them. They’re wearing wigs.”

“No orange robes.” Lights went on in Rob’s eyes. “That’s why we couldn’t figure them out. They used to wear robes ... have shaved heads.”

“Must be the new image,” I mused. “Get’s their foot in the door if they look like their enemy ... I suppose.”

“Oh man,” Walt laughed. “They’re all wearing wigs now. They’re real *hairy* Krishnas.”

The trainee remained by the wall and was standing there 15 minutes later when we left to catch our flight. Walking near, I tried to make eye contact. But he was closed up, somber in his wig and pure white shirt. I sent him my thoughts anyway. “Krishna, El Eh, Krishna.”

^^^

After Stu left the crew I toyed with calling it quits myself. I thought that perhaps I would locate a more permanent position with regular hours that offered some sort of life beyond the road. I hoped that the journey back to “civilization” might settle things; that seeing friendly faces would bury any desire to return to the emptiness of Nevada. But no—there was some attracting force, some power that pulled upon the free spirit, the part of me that wanted to be separate, unhindered—perhaps unbridled.

I found that while I dwelt in Nevada I wanted to be back in Tucson with friends and family; I wanted to have city comforts and city noise. But as soon as I was back in the midst of all that motion and jangled sound, no more than two days passed before I was ready to head out to the peace and beauty of the desert mountains.

Perhaps it was living in the open, the quiet, the solitude, and having relative individual freedom with little actual responsibility. Looking back it’s hard to say, but the frustration at the time was real—and dangerous.

...

During that stay in Tucson I turned 30. Some naive part of me anticipated the overnight arrival of an all-knowing maturity. I would suddenly become an upstanding citizen of my community, contributing to the ultimate welfare of our social structure and civilization as a whole. I found, instead, that I questioned more, and even dared to do what I had never done, finding life to be only as full as I was willing to fill it, and no more.

Looking back, I realize that at 30 I more fully understood the patterns, systems, and cycles overlying everything; cutting across time and space as if nothing existed but a concept, the belief

that something does exist. It reenforced what I believed at 20, that what we called existence was just a phase of an unknowingly self-determined reality influenced by parental indoctrination and complete control of our childhood environment. Our perceptions and understanding change with time, yet our moral and ethical outlook remain as originally established in our early years.

At 30 I thought society a figment of our imagination brought on by the delusion that the individual is less real than the group; our lives but casual moments arranged like a pack of cards randomly shuffled by a cosmic hand. But again, that hand, itself, might just be imagination working overtime.

^^^

I had business in Tucson, so I took a few extra days. I headed back to Nevada three days after Tank, Rob and Walt returned. While I was in Tucson the company hired two geologists to help fill the void left by Stu, Burt, and Dave's departure. They traveled back with me, eager to show their stuff.

Pat Hammer, if you can believe that name (I told him it sounded like some character from a cheap detective novel), had just graduated from the University of Arizona with Rob and Walt and Tank. Terry Sumner was my age, and had worked with several exploration companies in the southwest.

I met the two at the Tucson airport, where we caught a flight to Vegas, where we had rooms at the Holiday Inn on the strip. We entertained ourselves that evening by walking from one big name casino to another, checking out the gamblers, and keeping our eyes peeled for attractive women in groups of two or three. We had no luck with the women, but Pat got propositioned by a hooker on the sidewalk outside of the MGM Grand.

"How much?" Pat asked for the fun of it.

"Twenty-five dollars, Honey." She moved closer, sensing a taker.

"For how long?" Pat stood his ground, letting her brush up against him.

"For as long as it takes, sweety."

"You any good?"

"Am I any good?" She moved back in mock horror. "Honey, I'm the best squeeze box in this whole sparkly bright town. Ain't none better."

"Sounds intriguing." Pat brought his hand to his face in fake consideration. He looked at me, then Terry. Then scanning the hooker from head to foot, he said, "You know ... naw, you're just not my type." He turned and started off down the street.

I smiled at the woman and shrugged.

When Terry walked past her he said, "His girlfriend put out last night before he left. He's not jazzed yet."

She quickly turned her attention toward another pair of potential customers approaching from across the street.

Shortly after Pat's dalliance we called it a night. We had to catch an early bus to Tonopah.

• • •

The LTR ride was uneventful, Rob picked us up at the Mizpah, and as we threw our gear into the back of the truck, I noted, indicating the cab, “Gonna be a little tight.”

“I’ll ride in back,” Terry volunteered. “I like the wind blowin’ through my hair.” He had straw blond hair almost to his shoulders.

“Fine with us,” Rob climbed in behind the wheel. “Just don’t drool over the side like a dog.”

I could see Terry’s eyes tighten at Rob’s comment. “Just joking,” I assured him. “You’ll hafta get used to his sense of humor.” I slid into the cab between Pat and the door and we were off.

“So... we’re at Pablo Canyon?” I questioned Rob.

“Pablo Canyon Ranch,” Rob replied, shifting gears. “It’s in the Toiyabe Range ... along the western edge of the Big Smokey.”

“How far from here?” Pat asked.

“About sixty miles, north mostly ... and east.”

“What’s this ranch like?” I pressed for details.

“Used to be a dude ranch. Lots of cottonwood and elm up around the ranchers house. Tall enough to shade our trailers in the afternoon.” Rob paused while he squirmed in his seat. “They got three peacocks in the yard. Noisy creatures. Rancher says ... they keep the snakes away. Nice stone house ... surrounded by a fenced lawn. An ideal setting ... if you like isolation. Right at the mouth of Pablo Canyon.”

“Figures,” I interrupted. “Must be where it gets its name, huh?”

“Yup.” Rob ignored my silly attempt at humor while he applied the brakes and eased around a corner and headed out of town. “Sits across the valley from Round Mountain.”

“What’s Round Mountain?” Pat settled back for the long ride.

When Rob hesitated, I offered, “Small mining town on the shoulder of the Toquima Range.”

“Yeah,” Rob confirmed. “We look right across at it. But it’s a nice view and a good place for a camp.”

I leaned forward to look at Rob. “Any trouble bringing the trailers down?”

“Could’ve used your help ... but we managed.” Rob kept his eyes to the road. “We moved down ... day after we got back.” He down shifted as we approached a junction, turned left onto 376, and headed north through the Big Smokey Valley. Once he was back up to speed he added. “Everything’s a bit primitive ... we hafta use generators and batteries for power ... and fill our holding tanks from a garden hose ... but it’s livable.”

“Should be interesting,” I offered, “after all the comforts of those commercial camps.”

“Yeah. It’s interesting alright.” Rob wrinkled his nose. “We run our sewage into long irrigation pipes the rancher set up. Pipes empty into a dry creek about a hundred feet from our camp.”

“Yuk,” I pinched my nose for emphasis. “That’s gonna smell great once we’ve all shit a few times.”

“We’re up wind. It’s enough distance.”

“Geez, he can’t leave crap exposed like that, can he?” I wasn’t sure I should believe Spurrier or not. “Wouldn’t think he’d want that mess ‘round his ranch.”

“When we’re gone ... he’s gonna cover it with dirt.”

“Yeah, but what about runoff?” I looked at the sky, filled with dark gray rain clouds. “Loose dirt’s gonna wash away and expose our fine deposit.”

“Said the water’s captured ... in two small holding ponds ... above the ranch. That’s their drinking water. We’re way below that.”

Pat spoke with assurance. “With our small population the local ecosystem won’t be overloaded. It’ll be able to handle the relatively small amount of waste we deposit.”

“Wouldn’t feed me a bunch of crap, now, would you?” I nudged him with my elbow.

“No shit, man. It’s the straight poop.”

^^^

On our first Saturday back in Nevada, Walt asked me, “You going to the big ta’do up in Austin?”

“What’s going on?”

“Just some dance there at the International.”

“Naw. Not into dancing.”

“You ought to come. Should be fun. Shoot some pool. Check out the chicks.”

“Hell, we couldn’t find any chicks when we lived there. Seems like a long drive for a few beers and a game of pool.”

“Javee’s still in town.” Walt watched my reactions. “She asked about you when we got back. Told me to tell you to be there.”

“I’m supposed to be there, huh?”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “I think she’s hot for your weeny.”

I smiled at the thought, considered the possibility, let my ego rule, and agreed to go.

...

That evening Terry and I took the light blue Ford, while Walt, Rob and Pat drove up in The Gray Beast. I got the blue Ford moving first while the others chugged a last beer and tossed their cans into the bed of my moving truck.

Terry shouted, “STEP ON IT, man. They’ll try’n cut us off. Make ’em eat our dirt.”

We had only been there a few days, but quickly learned that the first truck down that five mile stretch of rutted road wouldn’t eat anyone’s dust. I managed to hold them off, so Rob hung back to avoid our gritty plume.

About half way down the road I checked my mirror. “Where’d they go? They’re not there.”

Terry looked back. “They’re headin’ north on another road. I can see their dust.”

“Toward Jet Canyon,” I guessed.

“Must be another road from there to the highway. They’re tryin’ to beat us to the pass.”

Terry whooped. “The *race* is on.”

I accelerated and we tore down the road as fast as the ruts allowed.

When we hit the highway I floored it and we passed the Jet Canyon road about a quarter mile ahead of The Gray Beast. With a pretty good lead I slowed for Carver’s Station. But the others came speeding up, riding our tail, where they stayed until we cleared Carver’s.

“The asshole’s tryin’ to pass,” Terry’s competitiveness was contagious.

They moved into the left lane. I gave it more gas.

“Come on, come on, goose this thing. Don’t let ’em by.” Terry was making gestures toward the others as they rode along side.

“SHE DOESN’T WANNA GIVE ANY MORE,” I yelled over the whine of the road.

“GOOSE IT, come on, they’re gainin’.”

“THE THING’S FLOORED. We’re doing eighty-five. Don’t think it’s got any more.”

“KEEP IT FLOORED. They can’t suck enough piss to pass.”

They hung there at our side, yelling and making obscene gestures and laughing their drunken heads off. This went on for miles of wide open highway. But eventually we came to a no passing zone and Rob wisely pulled back behind me. They gave up the attempt and drifted back.

About half-way to Austin Terry shouted, “Got ’em licked. We’re ‘bout a half-mile ahead.”

“Right on,” I smiled, content in our minor victory.

Darkness began to blanket the highway. I flipped on the headlights, noticing in my mirror that Rob had done the same. When a car passed going in the opposite direction I check the mirror again. “Their lights went out.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, back there, around the turnoff for Kingston Canyon.”

“What happened?” Terry turned in his seat to look back.

“Don’t know. But they went out just as that car passed.”

“They’re prob’ly messin’ around. Tryin’ to sneak up on us.”

“Don’t know.” I let up on the gas and applied the brake. “Let’s wait a minute and see what’s up.”

We waited on the side of the road.

Terry suggested, “They’re prob’ly takin’ a piss. With all that beer they drank.”

“Could be. But could be they were so drunk they hit that car. They could be lying back there bleeding or worse.”

We waited five minutes. Nothing.

“The only way they can catch us is if we go back.” Terry didn’t want to be tricked any more than I did. “Maybe they’re playin’ on our good nature.”

“Could be. Wouldn’t put it past the bastards.”

“They’d do it,” Terry confirmed.

“But what if they rolled, trying to miss that car?” I was getting nervous. “Winning a stupid race ain’t worth leaving them if they need us. We’re going back.”

Shortly after we turned around a set of parking lights came on.



“There they are,” I said.

“It’s a trick, man, a trick.”

I pulled up next to them, facing the opposite direction. Rob was still behind the wheel. He looked over and grinned with that shit-assing evil sinister grin of his and said, simply, “Bye.” The wheels spun, spitting gravel behind them.

I yelled, “YOU MOTHER FUCKING COCK SUCKING ASSHOLES,” and in one quick, thoughtless motion, I spun our truck around. I was pissed. “I hate being tricked when I’m trying to be a nice guy.”

Terry hung on for dear life. I’m sure he was as white as a sheet.

I took off down that road like I had never done before. “I’m gonna catch those sons-a-bitches.” I was Mario Andretti. I was A. J. Foytt. In the back of my mind I wasn’t sure I could do it, but soon we were gaining on them. I kept that thing floored and wound up and soon we were within striking distance. I swerved into the left lane.

Terry pointed to the speedometer. “You’re pegged out at a hundred.” His voice wobbled as we bounced along. “Shit! We could be doin’ one-twenty.”

“Who knows?” was all I could say.

As we came along side, Terry yelled through the open window, “EAT THIS, YOU MOTHER FUCKING BUDDY FUCKERS.” He gave them a double barreled flip off. He whooped, then shouted, “We left those assholes in our dust again. RIGHT ON, BROTHER.”

I turned and gave him a nervous smile. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel. Sweat dripped from my forehead. When we were far enough ahead that their lights were dim sparks in the desert gloom I slowed to normal speeds. It was right about then that I realized how foolish that whole episode had been. But it was too late. I had responded on a gut level and had let my instincts carry me through. With my adrenalin subsiding, I felt both exhilaration and remorse. I was frightened at what I had done, yet I felt proud that I actually pulled it off. But I knew, even then, that I would never do anything that rash again.

By the time we reached the International I cooled some. But I was still pissed. After Terry and I settled at the bar with a tall, cold beer, he nudged me and motioned toward the large front window. The Gray Beast slowly passed by, as if the trio were scoping things out. A short time later Pat walked in.

“Here to test the waters?” Terry taunted him.

“They wanted to make sure you guys weren’t gonna pound them into rock dust.”

“No,” I said magnanimously. “We beat them on the road. We don’t need to beat them again. Games over.”

Pat went out and signaled the others in. There was the usual garbage talk and light hearted cursing, but everything was cool. Although I played the gracious winner, I still withheld a burning anger in the pit of my stomach.

Rob stood next to me at the bar. “We were doing eighty-five when you passed.”

Terry heard him and added, “He had that thing pegged at one-zero-zero. We could’a been doin’ one-twenty easy.”

“You’re truck was whining as you went by. You’re lucky it didn’t blow apart.”

That’s when Javee walked in, accompanied by a young woman. My attention to the details

of the race faded into some nether world of past concerns. Javee walked directly to me and gave me a brief, friendly hug. That wasn't what I had expected from someone who, I had been lead to believe, wanted to sleep with me. But I brushed it off as being cautious in a crowd.

"Chris, I want you to meet Joyce. She's a friend of mine from San Francisco."

"Hi, Joyce," I gave her my best smile. "Any friend of Javee's is a friend of mine."

"She's visiting for a few days, then we're heading back to Taos."

Just then Walt moved up beside Javee and asked her to dance. "Sure," she turned and winked at me. "Take care of my friend here."

Javee stepped off with Walt, and Joyce and I moved into a conversation about San Francisco. She seemed intelligent, bright, and had a fresh sense of humor. I could see immediately why Javee had become attached to her.

When Javee and Walt finished their dance, Walt swept Joyce away onto the floor, where they danced to some up-tempo Country Western tune.

"Chris, I'm glad you came. I wanted to see you again before I left."

"Yeah," I looked at my glass of beer. "I was disappointed when you took off without saying goodbye."

"My head was somewhere else then. It's all clear now."

"Missed you a lot while I was in Tucson. You ...."

"Chris? Please understand. I'm a married woman. Think of me as only a friend. I can't be any more than that right now." She turned and stood beside me and put her hand on my butt, squeezing slightly. "Except maybe in my fantasies."

"I know," I tried to smile, "but I want more than fantasies."

"You should get to know Joyce."

"She's not you."

"She's a nice girl. I think she likes you."

"I just met her."

"Yes. But I watched her looking at you while I was dancing. She thinks you're pretty cool."

About then one of the locals asked Javee to dance, and Joyce came back from her turn with Walt. We continued our conversation on the history of the Bay Area and Joyce filled me in on the more interesting places to visit, should I ever get back that way. She did seem interested in me, and hinted several times that maybe we could go for a drive or a walk or slip out to someplace less noisy and crowded. But I ignored the possibilities because I foolishly held out hope that maybe Javee would change her mind and become more than just my friend.

In the interim, I did get to know Joyce pretty well; as much as a person can in one evening in a noisy bar in Austin, Nevada. She was about 22, with brown hair and milk chocolate eyes, a slender build, a pretty smile, and was attractive in an average, girl next door, sort of way. She was open and honest and tactful and we had a good time. But my mind kept drifting off to Javee, across the room, dancing and having a great time as the center of attention.

Then a heaviness filled the room. Floyd, Javee's husband, walked casually into the bar. My heart sank, as did the spirits of those awaiting their turn on the dance floor. I knew that I would never have another chance to really talk with her again. I whispered, "Oh well," accepted my fate, and invited Joyce to sit with me outside. There was a rustic wooden bench on the boardwalk

in front of the International.

We spoke quietly, enjoying the relative peace and the fresh night air, and our conversation became more and more intimate. I sensed that if I had wanted, I could have taken Joyce to bed. I was almost tempted. But Terry came out, drunk and staggering, and climbed into the cab of the blue Ford. He immediately fell over on the seat.

"I suppose I should drive him home," I motioned toward the truck.

Joyce frowned. "I was hoping you'd be staying in town tonight."

I looked into her eyes, trying to read any message that might be revealed there. I hesitated, feeling a sudden urge to see where a tryst might lead. But with Terry in tow, there was no way. "I can't leave him sleeping in the truck."

"Can't he go with the others?"

"There's no room. There's already three."

And as if by design, the other's stumbled out of the bar. Rob looked at me and said in a hushed, almost reverent voice, "We've decided to head home. You coming?"

I looked at Joyce. "I gotta go." To Rob I said, "Yeah, I'm coming. Give me a second."

"Where's Terry?"

"Crashed in the cab." I waved toward the truck.

"Okay. We'll give you five to ... say goodbye."

I turned back to Joyce. "Sorry. I hafta go. Was great meeting you. Wish we had more time."

"Me too." She seemed to want to say more. "You sure you can't stay?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." I stood and stretched. "We have an hour's drive ahead of us. I gotta git." Before I reached the truck, Javee and Floyd stepped through the door of the bar.

Javee said, a bit too loud, "You guys can't leave yet. You ain't said goodbye." She had her arm around Floyd's waist and directed him toward The Gray Beast. She stood by the window and said her goodbyes to the threesome. Then, as I was climbing into my cab beside stinking old Terry, she waved to me. "You have a good life, Chris. You deserve it."

"Yeah, I'll do my best."

"We'll see you around sometime," she sang.

"Yeah," I said sadly. "See yuh." I waved goodbye.

After I started the engine I waved at Joyce, who had moved over near Javee and Floyd. The Gray Beast made a U-turn and headed up Pony Canyon. I followed, and much more slowly than our trip up, I drove back to Pablo Canyon Ranch, following the red tail lights of a Gray Beast bound for The Edge of the World.

^^^

I slept-in Sunday morning. That was unusual for me, even after a late night. But I had things on my mind and just couldn't get myself to move. The morning disappeared and early in the afternoon I went with Tank to do a little rock hounding near the Northumberland mine. Tank had collected several dump samples in that area and had discovered a celestite vug.

“What the hell’s that?”

Tank smiled knowingly, taking on a superior air. “Celestite is a mineral. It forms orthorhombic crystals. It’s the principal ore of strontium.”

“Okay,” I shook my head, “so it doesn’t have anything to do with stars?”

Tank missed my attempt at humor. “A vug is a cavity with a mineral lining different from the surrounding rock.”

The guy was a walking dictionary, like Burt. His authoritarian approach made me wonder what his class of college grads was all about. Talk about extremes. Half of that group were off-the-wall gonzo and shit-faced most of the time, while the other half seemed to be walking automatons who memorized vast storehouses of information and who were capable of spewing out, verbatim, whatever was requested. I was fascinated by what modern drugs and micro-chips had done to the next generation.

Basically, what Tank found was a small opening in the ground coated on all sides by the mineral celestite in its crystalline form. The vug was exposed by blasting and road construction near the entrance to the mine.

“We’ve got to be careful,” Tank warned as we approached the site. “We’re really not supposed to be in this area.”

“Yeah, I’d guess not. A competitors mine.” I shrugged, “But what they gonna do if they catch us?”

“If they find us they’ll ask us to leave.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Mining companies don’t like the competition sniffing ‘round their locations. But we’re on public property out here. Worst they can do is ask us to leave.”

“We should be pretty safe on a Sunday,” Tank assured me, “but keep an eye peeled for approaching cars.”

“And trucks,” I taunted.

He let it slide.

We climbed along the exposed surface of the road cut.

Tank pointed to a thin crack. “We’re looking for these.” He knelt on the crumbling debris. “This might lead to a cavity where the crystals are attached to the walls.”

Using his pocket knife he carefully pried the crack open until he could see inside. There were a few crystals, but nothing worth collecting. We worked our way along the cut, opening every crack we discovered, until we both collected quite a few specimens of the amber colored crystals. Each time one of us would find something really special, we would whoop and yell as if we had found a gold nugget. In my collection I was especially proud of two really splendid chunks of gray rock with crystals on almost all faces. I also found several individual crystals, each one to two inches long.

On our way back to camp Tank and I chattered on about our finds and about life in general. I found myself pleased at how well we were getting along, and at how amiable Tank had become. I remember thinking that maybe there was a normal guy in that clunky body, just waiting to escape. Tank could be a nice guy, when he wasn’t acting like a jerk.

When we pulled into camp Rob and Pat strolled over to examine our take for the day.

“You know this stuff’s ... radioactive, don’t you?” Rob warned.

I looked at Tank.

“Only if it’s strontium ore,” he defended our find.

“I’d be careful with this stuff,” Rob cautioned. “You might end up ... sterile ... or ... with a brain tumor.”

I am sure my face showed concern. Tank turned to me, “I wouldn’t worry about these crystals. It’s only in its strontium form that celestite becomes radioactive. And strontium is rare. If these crystals contained radioactive material I’m sure they’d be mined.”

I felt a little better, until Rob added, “What do you think they’re mining at Northumberland?” He carefully set a crystal back on the pile and walked toward his trailer. Pat smiled, shrugged, and followed.

I looked at Tank. “What the hell? We all gotta die anyway.” I wrapped my crystals in toilet paper and placed them back into their bags. The possibility that they might be radioactive only added to their appeal. I didn’t care what they were called or how they were composed. They were jewels to me.

^^^

I finished preparing the samples. The paperwork sat on the stack of boxes next to the door. The late morning sun cut through my small windows and cast sharp shadows across the counters, along the floor, and up the wall. There was silence and peace and time to think. And I thought of Javee; the few, brief moments we shared that summer; the deep, intense feelings that had so suddenly engulfed me; and the disappointment of that last night in Austin, with Floyd’s untimely arrival.

I remember smiling at the fantasy of Javee taking me to her trailer, making love on cool sheets, and Floyd bursting in with my bare ass lodged conspicuously between his wife’s eager thighs. “That’d be a kick in the ass. My kind of timing.”

In my reverie I wrote Javee a long letter, looking back, and looking forward, attempting to express the rock slide of emotions tumbling within me. I signed my name, barely removing the pen from the page, when I heard that familiar Volkswagen whine bouncing over the last few yards of that rutted road. Feeling like a school boy caught peeking at his father’s girly magazines, I hurriedly closed my notebook and stepped outside. I had on jeans, but no shirt. Right away I became self-conscious, wishing I had taken a second to throw on something. But it was too late. The small car rolled to a stop.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” I stepped toward Javee as she climbed out of the Bug.

She was radiant, her face fresh and alive. “We came to say farewell. To see you one last time.” She moved up close, and without hesitation, gave me a big hug, holding on almost too long, as if she were trying to absorb my essence. Her hands stroked the bare skin of my back, sending tingles along my spine.

When she finally stepped back I noticed Joyce closing the passenger side door. Her smile was as vibrant as Javee’s. I wondered if they’d been sipping a little wine on their journey from

Austin.

“Geez, it’s great to see you two out here. Thought you were heading to Taos?”

“We are,” Javee pointed to the packed rear seat. “We’re on our way.”

“But we had to see you one more time.” Joyce opened her arms for a hug. She surprised me as she melted against my body, almost limp, but somehow sexually exciting. There was a warmth, and a tenderness, mingled with an element of animal sexuality; perhaps a vulnerability. I am sure that if we would have been alone we would have finished that hug on my bunk.

Meanwhile, Javee looked around our little camp. She said nonchalantly, “Floyd had to leave to get back to Reno ... for a meeting. We decided to head out a day early and spend some time in southern Utah. Like you suggested.”

“When was that?”

“The day we went to the cave, you idiot.” She gave me a reassuring smile.

“Oh, yeah ... we did talk about places we’ll never forget.”

“You got it. And you convinced me. And I convinced Joyce that our best interests would be served by taking a slightly longer route through your beloved southern Utah.”

“You won’t regret it,” I looked at Joyce.

“Got anything to drink,” Javee stepped into my trailer.

“Ice tea,” I took Joyce’s hand and lead her toward the door. “In the fridge. Help yourself.” Stepping in, I pointed to the cupboards. “Glasses are in there. Grab three.”

We sat around the small table, each fondling a sweaty glass of cold amber. I remembered my letter in the notebook and quickly moved it out of the way. Our conversation ranged from their planned trip through southern Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, to the reliability of her old Volkswagen. After they finished their drinks, Javee stood, “Well, my friend, we have to be off. We’ve gotta stop in Tonopah to pick up supplies and find some lunch.”

“Hey, I hafta drop off these samples,” I pointed to the stack by the door. “If you wait a second while I load up, I’ll follow you in and we can have lunch together.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Javee took the two steps to the door.

“Fantastic idea,” Joyce slid to the edge of the bench. She looked at Javee and smiled.

“Let’s do it,” I said, heading to my bedroom for a shirt.

...

Once in Tonopah they went about collecting their needed supplies while I deposited the samples with the LTR clerk. We met at Harry’s for lunch, and had a fun time.

I walked them to Javee’s car and she gave me another warm, tender hug. I wanted to kiss her. She sensed it, but didn’t encourage me. When I finally released her she gave me a quick peck on the cheek. In a whispered voice, she said, “Maybe someday. Maybe someday there will be more.” Her soft eyes locked onto mine. “Maybe. As things in our other lives do or don’t work out.”

“After maybe comes tomorrow,” I said softly.

“Yes, but every day is tomorrow.”

“Yeah ... yeah,” I smiled at our verbal jousting, “but some days have a way of never

arriving.”

She held my hands in hers as she faced me. “You know, I’m going to need a big strong guy like you to come to Taos and chop wood for my fire place this winter.”

“What about Floyd?”

She looked at my shoulder. “I doubt Floyd’ll be there to warm my bed once the cold sets in.” Her face showed sorrow, some sense of loss, but also relief.

“This project might end with the snow. If you’d like ... and if you ... have some place for me to stay ... I’d be glad to be your woodsman.”

She remained silent, obviously thinking. Then she said, “We’ll have to discuss the implications.” She looked long into my eyes. “We’ll write.” Then, with a turn of her head, she indicated that I should give Joyce a hug.

I took the few steps to her, gave her one of my best smiles, told her, “It’s too bad things didn’t work out better for us.” I slipped my arms around her. She once again melted against my body. She didn’t want to let go. The sensation overwhelmed me. I almost asked her to stay.

What a confusion of emotions and rampant hormones. What a strange circumstance. I wanted Javee, Javee wanted Floyd, Floyd wanted who knows who, and Joyce wanted me. And I’ll have to admit, if it had not been for my feelings for Javee, I would have asked Joyce to stay on in Nevada. I sensed that she would have. Once again, everything depended upon timing.

The two squeezed into their packed VW, slipped a Michael Murphy tape into the machine, and each blew me a kiss through the chords of Geronimo’s Cadillac. They were gone, down Highway 6; Jack Kerouac’s road; to Zion and Taos and my loneliness. Once again I stood near The Edge of the World.

^^^

The crest of the ridge; the view into two valleys, two basins floored by playa lakes and sage; dust devils dancing in their peculiar rhythm of swirl and dive, stretch and climb; the pinyon as sparse as the shade they cast upon the flanks of the range; the outcrops jutting like forgotten citadels remembering some ancient frontal assault; the browns and buffs, pale greens and grays of desiccated vegetation; the gentling quiet of a breeze through clusters of needles; the sharp call of a jay or the rasp of a raven or the scream of a red tailed hawk gliding out over her domain; the sudden, shocking buzz of a rattler too close for comfort; the rock faces, the beds and folds and silicified limestone; the occasional fossil or crystal worth keeping; the slick-n-sides and fault blocks; the saddles and ridges; canyons, washes, intermittent streams; the grabbens and anticlines; the shadows of clouds as they climb and cross the ranges, unheard, unnoticed except by the geologist standing in awe, watching his world move by in its magnificent adventure; from the crest of a ridge; the view into two valleys. There are few experiences like it, and only in the open spaces; the wilderness.

^^^

We had a mishmash for dinner, sort of a left-over fiesta. We added lots of beer and wine and our usual weird sense of humor and made a good time of it. Once the alcohol set in, Pat laughed, holding up a chunk of mutton. "Guess you could say we're living off the lamb."

"Ah, geez," was the typical response.

But, enjoying puns myself, I replied, "That's healthier than gorging ourselves on buffalo chips and sheep dip."

The same reaction.

But that type of humor is contagious. Terry added, "Or stuffin' ourselves with sun baked meadow muffins topped with a glop of toe jam."

"Gross," Pat moaned, but he continued chomping his meal.

Walt smiled. "What's it they say? A road apple a day keeps the doctor away."

We all made gagging sounds.

Terry came back first. "Yeah. An' we'c'n top all that off with warm cow pies made with dingle berries for dessert."

"And we always, always, wash it down with a large refreshing mug of chilled tiger piss." Walt held up his glass of beer as a salute to our crude discussion.

I held up mine and proclaimed, "Here's to The Lowest Common Denominator."

...

Later that evening I was completing my map work when Pat and Terry stormed in. They had been playing cards over in the Airstream: drinking beer, smoking pot, and who knows what else.

"Lock the door," Terry commanded Pat.

I looked up from my work.

"Pull those shades'n'curtains," Terry pointed to the window behind me. "We don't want'em peekin' in."

I blindly obeyed. "What's up, Colonel Klink? A raid by the Round Mountain Midnight Volunteers and Vigilante Narc Squad?"

"You got scissors, right?" Terry was hyped.

"Yeah."

"I want you to shave my head." He ran his right hand through his long hair.

"What?"

"I need to get rid of this hair."

"You've gotta be joking." I secured the blinds and curtains and turned to face the agitated duo.

"He's serious," Pat confirmed.

I sat there looking at them for a moment, suspecting some sort of setup. "I've got scissors, but," stroking my beard, "I don't own a blade. Never used one."



“I’ve got a blade,” Terry assured me.

“I can handle that part,” Pat volunteered. Looking at me, “You just gotta use your scissors to cut his hair as short as possible.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Sure. Why not? If you’re stupid enough to do this, then who am I to resist.” I rummaged through a box of office supplies. “This is just crazy enough to be fun.”

Pat pulled Terry’s trunk from the bedroom, while Terry collected his razor and shaving cream from the bathroom.

“What’s the deal?” I asked, as Terry positioned himself on the trunk.

“Wanna freak out Rob’n’Walt.” Terry’s face took on a sinister look. “Those two been talkin’ trash ‘bout doin’ weird shit.”

“Gonzo shit,” Pat inserted.

“Nothin’. They ain’t done nothin’ weird.” Terry forced a growl. “I’m gonna show ‘em weird. That petty crap they been talkin’ ain’t nothin’.”

I stood behind him with the scissors ready. “Sure you want me to do this?”

“This type of action,” he made scissor cutting motions with his right hand, “cuttin’ yer hair completely off in the middle of god damned Nevada, is pretty fuckin’ radical.”

Pat and I both agreed.

“Especially with winter coming on.” I gathered a long lock of hair in my left hand and prepared to cut. “This is it. You sure?”

“Do it. Just fuckin’ do it.” He worked himself into a lather.

I proceeded to cut off large chunks of his hair. To have some fun, we made him look like a punk rock star, with patches missing here and there. Then we gave him a Mohawk, and, finally, I lopped the top off and the rest was up to Pat.

He soaped up Terry’s head and picked up the Bic razor. Terry grabbed his arm, “Quiet.”

We could hear footsteps crunching gravel, coming around the end of my trailer. The door rattled as they tried to get in. We heard a muffled voice, then Rob spoke through the locked door, “Hey ... what’re you guys up to in there? Unlock this door.”

“Fuck no,” Terry shouted.

“What’re you fuckers doin’?” Walt insisted.

“We’re going through a metamorphosis,” I shouted. “A fundamental transcendental change.”

“Mind yer own damn business,” Terry laughed wickedly.

“What’re you guys doing in there?” Rob repeated in a sing-song voice. “Some sort of perverted ... homosexual type activity?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “We’ve got our hands all over each other.”

The two tried looking in the windows and listening for clues. Eventually they gave up and went back into their trailer.

Pat quickly finished the job, and I swept the floor. There were long locks of hair curled everywhere.

Terry went back into the bedroom and came out shortly, wearing a black tank top and a red scarf around his neck. He had kept his handlebar mustache, one of those jobs that droop at the ends. He pulled a Bowie knife from its sheath and stuck it between his teeth and growled.

“You look like one of those pirates from the old adventure movies,” I confirmed.

“You look mean.” Pat nodded approval.

Terry growled again. “Aye, matie. I be Terry the Pirate. The meanest, baddest badass this side of The Sea of Cortez.”

Pat and I both laughed.

I said, “You look like John Lennon, when his head was shaven.”

“I’m goin’ to the other trailer to stir up some craziness.” He threw open the door and jumped out into the darkness, like a buccaneer swinging from the rigging of a ship. He yelled and growled as he went. “Ahoy, ye maties! Prepare to be boarded.”

From the ensuing noise and laughter I assumed his appearance caused quite a stir. I finished sweeping the floor and went back to my maps, not in the mood to get involved any deeper in their gonzo horseshit.

• • •

After that night everyone in the crew had a nickname but me. Well, if I had one I didn’t know about it. But that would be unusual, because everyone was pretty open about nailing the other’s with their pseudonym.

Rob had been called everything from Wolfman to Ironman to B.F. (for Buddy Fucker) and so on. Walt Ellis was mostly just Walt, but Rob often called him Pinhead or Pinner. Walt Coffman was almost always called Tank, and I think he grew to like the name. Behind his back Rob and Walt called him Fuck-Wad-Face. I don’t think Tank ever heard that one. So, in keeping with tradition, Terry and Pat quickly gained special names.

While they were playing cards Rob asked Terry, “What’s your poison?”

“Testers Glue.”

Pat agreed, “Primo stuff, Testers. Just a tiny, clear dab on the septum of your nose,” he pointed with his little finger, “and you’re set. Get’s you through a long day of finals, for sure.”

“Couple of glue brothers, eh,” Walt noted, and The Glue Brothers sprang forth into the unsuspecting reaches of rural Nevada. From that night on they called Pat Glue Bro, or Bro.

But Terry gained yet another handle. In the short time he had been with us he and Rob had at least one go-round. Rob’s temporary status as Crew Chief, and his often pushy, bossy approach, set Terry’s anarchist tendencies on edge. When Rob would tell Terry to do something, Terry would hunch over in what we came to call his Black Southern Slave Act. Then he would mumble in a phony black southern drawl, “Toby do it, mas’sa. Toby do it,” all the while bent in that hunched, whipped dog position. Then he would shuffle off to do Rob’s bidding, knowing he was getting under Rob’s skin. From that little act we called him Toby. Once he became a Glue Brother it was an easy step to Toby Glue.

And later, as Terry and Tank got into their stubborn academic arguments over interpretations of geologic terminology or whatever, and they both took on a haughty air, neither one willing to back down, we called him Toby Juan Kanobee. In honor, of course, of the all knowing Star Wars character. He liked that name. And when I called him Toby Juan he would respond with an benevolent smile.

^^^

“You’re moving to Bridgeport,” Guy spoke with his usual calm, steady voice.

“That’s where Randy’s working, isn’t it?” I sat down on the tailgate of my truck, next to Guy.

“Sure is.”

“When we heading over?” Walt asked.

“You’ll be in California on Monday.”

“What’s the project?” Walt leaned back against The Gray Beast and took a swallow from his beer.

Guy pressed the side of his aluminum can, making it pop. “You’ll be doing a grid sampling project in the Sierras.”

“How long we gonna be there?” Rob dangled his feet over the tailgate of The Gray Beast. “That mean this project’s complete?”

“Hardly,” Guy chuckled. “This project’s got a ways to go. You’ll be in Bridgeport about four weeks.”

Tank had his elbows and forearms resting on the side of my truck, closest to Guy. He asked, “What’s it like over there?”

“It’s a nice area, Walter. Your camp will be along Bridgeport Lake, facing the mountains.” Guy indicated the range across the valley as an example. “Bridgeport is a pretty neat place.” He took a quick sip of his beer. “A resort town.”

“Anything of interest near-by?” I was always curious about potential weekend activities.

“Well, it’s about thirty minutes drive from Yosemite.” Guy looked at me and smiled. “But I understand you’ve been there.”

“Yeah,” my face reddened, “a couple times.”

He didn’t press the issue. “It’s one-and-a-half hours from Lake Tahoe...” (Suddenly the thought hit me, “Sunny! Oh my god, I forgot all about Sunny.”) “and only a three hour drive from San Francisco.”

“I suspect our weekends will be full,” Rob seemed eager.

“Sounds like a little bit of heaven,” Walt raised his can to Guy, “then back here to Pablo Canyon.”

...

We were discussing the move when the rancher walked up. “Evenin’ gents.”

“Good evening,” Guy stood up. “I’m Guy Bradshaw.”

“Armand Shutmeir.” They shook hands.

“I really appreciate your hospitality, letting my crew set up here on your land.”

“Aw, just bein’ neighborly,” the rancher moved his hat up a bit and scratched his forehead. “Puts this land to some good use.”

“What can we do for you this evening?” Guy turned toward the cooler. “Like a cold one?”

“Naw. But thanks. We’re just about to eat up to the house.” He threw his right thumb over his shoulder to indicate his homestead. “But I do have a message for you.”

“Uh oh,” I said under my breath.

“Seems a couple of your boys broke down a bit east of Manhattan. They just called me on my radio phone. They’re alright. Just tired and hungry. They’ll be waitin’ for you in the old bar there. ‘Bout the only place there anymore.”

“Terry and Pat,” Rob spoke as if he expected this. “That truck’s been giving them trouble all week.”

“‘Parently they lost the rear differential,” the rancher informed us. “They’ll need a tow.”

“Which truck did they have?” Guy turned to Rob.

“Light blue Ford.”

I am sure my neck reddened again. Walt and I made quick, passing, eye contact. Rob made sure that we didn’t. Neither volunteered a thing to Guy.

I hoped, for my own, selfish, reasons, that our little race to Austin didn’t cause the breakdown. I hated being responsible for Toby and Bro’s discomfort, and for damaging a company truck. And yet, scratching for excuses, wanting to believe it wasn’t my fault, I rationalized that if Spurrier hadn’t screwed me over, I never would have driven like that. Besides, the old truck had been through rough terrain and anticipated abuse all summer long.

It was about six when Guy sent Rob and Walt to retrieve The Glue Brothers. Tank eventually retreated to his trailer to read, while Guy and I sat on the back of my truck, watching night close in upon the Big Smoky Valley. From our vantage we could see a long distance down the valley, at least to where the road from Manhattan intersected the main highway. As it got darker we scanned for headlights coming over the range and down the pediment. There were occasional sets of lights, but nothing from Manhattan.

While we watched, Guy asked, “How’s Rob doing as Crew Chief?”

I hesitated.

“Speak freely. I’m just looking for input.”

“Well ... things are okay. But there’s been some occasional friction.”

“What kind of friction?”

I bit my lower lip, but went ahead. “He thinks he’s some kind of king.”

“What?”

“He’s bossy. Always ordering somebody around. Especially Tank and Toby.”

“He’s not the *boss*,” Guy said emphatically. “He’s only supposed to make sampling and mapping decisions. Geology related stuff. The crew can run the camp without supervision.”

“Well, he thinks he’s running the whole traveling show.”

“What about the others? What do they think?”

“I can’t speak for them, but I think ... it’s my impression ... Rob’s attitude has created a deep division in the crew. He has this way ... well, we all do it. We’re always ranking and cutting each other. Releases tension. We get a laugh out of it. But Rob cuts to the bone ... generally pushes people to the edge.”

Guy didn’t respond at first. “That’s pretty harsh. Maybe that’s just his personality. You

guys have to deal with that.”

“I understand.” I felt my position weakening. “But it’s hard. After a while. He always elaborates ... on everything ... to the point we’re no longer sure what he says is real or some fantasy he’s concocted to make him sound more important.”

Guy sat quietly.

I went on. “We’re never sure what Rob tells us is the straight scoop from you ... or a fabrication designed to give him some advantage. Since Rob’s been in charge, the crew just hasn’t been the same.”

“How’s that?”

“We used to be a unit ... a real team ... everyone looking out for the other guy. Now it seems we’re ... like I said ... divided into clicks. Me and Tank and Terry on one side ... Rob and Walt and Pat on the other. There’s a lot of antagonism. Mostly unnecessary.”

Guy remained calm. He looked at his hands. “It’s obvious you have some sort of animosity toward Rob.” He glanced over at me.

I shrugged, feeling hurt, and slightly betrayed, knowing that I would not have volunteered my thoughts on Rob without him asking.

“But thanks for the input. I’ll keep an eye on the situation.”

...

The truck from Manhattan bounced into camp about 11:00. “More problems?” I asked.

“No,” Toby yawned, “we were playin’ pool in the bar. Cool old table.”

“Where’s Guy?” Rob said nonchalantly.

“Got tired of waiting. Turned in about ten.”

“Guy?” Toby turned toward Rob. “You didn’t tell us Guy was here.”

Rob’s face formed a sheepish grin. He shrugged. “Forgot.”

“BULL FUCKIN’ SHIT,” Toby roared. “You’re a fuckin’ asshole.” Toby stormed off to the Empire.

Bro looked at Rob and said quietly, “I see why they call you Buddy Fucker. You could’ve warned us, man.” And Bro followed at Toby’s heels.

Rob turned toward me, but I waved him off. “Don’t look at me. I’m pissed too. Guy and I sat here waiting. He wanted to meet the new guys.” I followed after Bro.

Once in the trailer I warmed leftovers for The Glue Brothers, they gulped it down, and we all turned in for the night.

^^^

When Guy saw the morning sun gleaming from the smooth surface of Toby's head he was visibly shocked. Rob introduced our two new crew members and the first thing out of Guy's mouth was, "What happened to your hair?"

Toby was at a loss for words. "It's a long story."

"Hope it wasn't lice or some other parasite?"

The rest of us would have laughed if it weren't for Guy's serious demeanor.

"To be honest," Guy looked square into Toby's eyes, "I am quite concerned about your appearance."

Toby looked aside and scratched the back of his reddening neck.

"We always want to stay on the good side of the locals." Guy measured his words. "Just in case things develop and we need to establish a permanent presence."

"I understand," Toby replied. "It was just a spur of the moment thing. I'll wear a cap and no one will notice."

"That would be a good idea." And with that Guy let it drop and gave the crew some last minute instructions, bid us farewell, gave Toby one last look and a shake of his head, and headed on down the rutted road.

As soon as Guy's truck bounced out of sight Toby turned on Rob. "You son-of-a-bitch. If you would'a told us back in Manhattan I might'a been able to do somethin' about this." He ran his palm across the top of his head.

"He's right," Bro added. "You should've said something."

Rob stood there with a blank look on his face.

"We sat in that bar the whole fucking evening and you didn't mention one word about Guy." Toby's face wrinkled with anger. "Fine impression I made on my new boss."

"Yeah," Bro remained calm, "and what's this Guy said about us moving?"

Toby's voice almost boomed. "Yeah, WHAT IS THIS SHIT?"

Walt calmly said, "We're moving to Bridgeport tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. Just like that? We're movin'." Toby walked in a circle, kicking a dirt clod into an array of dust and pebbles. "I suppose you were gonna tell us tomorrow mornin' after breakfast?"

Rob smirked and stuck his hands deep into his pockets. "Must have forgotten."

Walt laughed.

Toby looked at me. "Why didn't *you* tell us?"

"I didn't know they hadn't," I shrugged. "Figured they told you on the way in last night."

Toby looked toward Rob and Walt again. "Mother *fuckers*. You set us up so we'd look bad in front of Guy."

"Bullshit," Walt defended himself. "Why the fuck would we do that?"

"We had nothing to gain," Rob added.

"You're on your little power trip," Toby directed his anger toward Rob. "You gotta make yourself look good for your boss."

“You didn’t hafta do it by making us look bad,” Bro chimed in.  
Needless to say, there was tension within the group all that day.

• • •

Rob stayed in camp preparing for the move, while the others went out collecting their usual quota of samples. He drove into Carver’s Station and called around and made arrangements for the light blue Ford to be towed into Tonopah. The repair shop told him it would take at least two weeks to get the parts and complete the work.

• • •

That evening Rob tried to make amends by inviting everyone to the Airstream for pot roast. He always seemed to sense when things were on the edge of breaking open. Maybe that’s the sign of a born leader: a person who can push people to their limit yet draw them back just before they collapse.

Of course Tank excused himself. He was in the middle of an exciting chapter in his book on Russian history. He felt compelled to finish it that night. That was probably a good thing. His arrogant behavior would only have added to the already tense atmosphere.

The rest of us sat around the confines of the Airstream as the wind swirled down Pablo Canyon, rattling whatever loose part of the aluminum hull it could catch. Fall was upon us, and winter was not far off. Another end was near. We sat back in the warmth of that Airstream and stuffed ourselves, avoiding touchy subjects. Instead, in the mood of the season, we contemplated our past, and drank another beer.

As usual, our conversation started with crude comments on women. That, somehow, led to rocks, and then on to the latest Tank story. Walt then reminisced about the early days in Gabbs and Hawthorne, which he and I and Rob agreed seemed so very long ago.

“The Joker in Tonopah,” Walt sighed.

“The Pin-E-Con-E trailer park in Austin,” Rob contributed.

“Stu and Burt and Dave’s departure,” I reminded them.

“God, you guys’ve been mobile,” Bro noted. “They moved you here and there like pawns on a chess board.”

“Exactly what we are,” Rob agreed. “Pawns for the Gold King and the Silver Queen.”

“Yeah, like in Tonopah,” Walt smiled, thinking of his favorite motel.

“Exactly.” Rob took a bite of potato.

“And you know,” I continued the nostalgic tone, “there’s always something going on. Always craziness.” I glanced at Toby’s head.

“You hafta be crazy to work out here.” He became more pliable with solid food and cold beer.

“Right on,” I nodded, “like Waylon says, ‘I’ve always been crazy but it keeps me from goin’ insane’.”

“Weird craziness,” Walt laughed. “Gonzo shit.”

“Thompson said it best,” Rob identified the quotes.

“They’d probably lock us in a cage,” I theorized, “if we pulled some of this crap in the city. They’d figure us for a bunch of animals.”

“We are, man. Homo sapiens.” Toby concentrated on his plate, arms around either side, like a dog guarding its bowl.

“Are we not Men?” Bro moved his arms like a robot. “No, we are Devo.”

“Devo?” I was puzzled.

“Devo’s a punk-rock group. Believe in devolution,” Bro explained. “Put us back in the cages where we belong.”

“We’re just big monkeys. Naked apes.” Toby said soberly.

“That’s for sure,” Walt laughed at his own thoughts. “Especially in Wolfman’s case.” He pointed toward Rob with his fork. “He fucks like a monkey. Bim-bam thank you ma’am.”

“Least I don’t breed like a rabbit.” Rob said, without looking at Walt, apparently touching on some exclusive information.

“I’m sure your women’re glad for that,” Toby took a verbal jab at Rob.

“What women?” Walt feigned puzzlement. “Wolfman only fucks teeny-boppers.” He raised a fork-load of juicy meat to his mouth. “I’d hardly call bubble-gummers women.”

“Hey,” Rob defended himself, “like I always say ... if they’re old enough to bleed ... they’re old enough to breed.”

I knew I’d heard that phrase before, somewhere, but couldn’t place it.

“Sheep too, Wolfman,” Walt smirked.

“Anything with a tail,” Rob replied.

I jumped in. “Where would you be without your high-top boots?”

“I’d probably ... hafta go back ... to fucking chickens.” Rob was being a good sport for a change. Probably in an attempt to avoid confrontation of any sort.

“Ah, man, fucking chickens’re for eating.” Toby was starting to get into the groove.

“You guys are sick,” Bro laughed. “You do belong in a zoo. Christ!”

“Hey, to each his own,” Walt countered. “Least we get off.” He pointed with his fork through the wall of the trailer. “Old Tank over there ... reading in his trailer ... probably never even does it to Rosie Palmer.” He took a small bite. “Probably afraid he’ll get her pregnant.”

“Oh, geez,” I laughed at the image.

“No, more like jizzim,” Rob corrected me.

“Jizzim cheese,” Walt broadened the description.

“I’ve heard you guys call Tank Cheese,” Bro questioned. “What’s with that?”

“Yeah, sometimes,” Walt explained. “We call him Cheese ‘cause of the Water Closet.”

“What?”

“He always waits ‘til just before we head out to take a dump. He’d be sitting in the shitter while we waited outside.” Walt picked up his beer. “Some people call a toilet a water closet.” He took a sip. “So we called him W.C.”

“He thought it was for his initials ... Walter Coffman. What a shit for brains.” Rob shook his head.

“Still don’t get the cheese part,” Bro urged Walt to finish.



“Oh, well ... a toilet’s also called a head, you know, like on a ship.” He made his point by stabbing another piece of beef on his plate. “Well ... we all know Tank isn’t a Head.”

“A narc, maybe.” Toby continued with his one liners.

“Yeah. But not a Head,” Walt said around a mouthful. “He thinks he’s some sort of authority ‘round here, always ready with the right answer, always arguing with everybody about everything. Thinks he’s a Big Cheese.”

“Head Cheese,” Rob added.

“Cheese,” Walt acknowledged. “Fomunda Cheese.”

“That’s the cheese I like,” Rob smiled.

“How’s that?” Toby asked. “Fomunda Cheese? Never heard of that.”

“Oh, you know,” Walt explained, “fomunda cheese. Fro-munda-my-balls.”

“From under my balls,” Rob clarified.

We all laughed.

“Oh, geez. Yuck,” Toby groaned. “Can you imagine Tank’s Fomunda?”

“Ripe, man.” Bro grimaced.

“This is getting sick,” I feigned puking.

“I know,” Walt admitted. “Getting tired of talking trash on Fuck-Wad-Face. He and Burt have been our main topic for most of the summer.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“Of course I am,” Walt said, mocking Tank’s voice. “Pass me another brew. Thanks.”

Our plates emptied and the meal wound down. Rob held up a green plastic bag. “Dump your trash in here. This place is starting to look like a pig sty.”

“That’s ‘cause it is a pig sty,” Walt admitted.

“Thought you liked it that way,” Rob scraped a plate into the bag.

“Fuck you, man!” Walt sat up in his seat. “I try to keep this place clean.”

“Not hardly,” Rob toyed with him. “You’re the one who trashes it out.”

“Bullshit,” Walt seemed to tense up. “I gotta live here. Why would I trash my own place?”

Bro tried to head off a confrontation. “Man, this whole country out here is trashed.”

We all looked at him.

“Yeah,” he explained. “All these old towns ... just piles of junk and old garbage dumps.”

Walt eased back in his seat. “Yeah. And what’ve we been sampling all summer? Dumps.”

“Every town out here’s a junk pile,” Toby agreed.

“Right,” Walt found new enthusiasm. “Look at all the trash and old mining crap piled ‘round the houses in Tonopah. And Austin.”

“Shit. That’s all Gabbs was.” I waved my arms to indicate a wide area. “Old mining shit piled everywhere.”

Bro finally finished his meal. He pushed his plate toward the middle of the table. “Man, this whole state’s a ghetto.”

“So why not our trailers?” Walt argued. “We’re just being patriotic.”

“When on the farm, do as the farmers do,” Toby added.

“Yeah, you got it,” Walt raised his beer to Toby. “Barf’n’puke everywhere.”

“Man,” I moaned.

“Hey, this is the way it is,” Walt looked at me. “The real world. We’re a microcosm of what the entire fucking planet is all about. The world’s a ghetto. Our trailers are a ghetto. Our trucks are a ghetto. Our lives are a fucking ghetto.”

“Our language sure sounds like the ghetto,” I confirmed.

“Well ... at least the sewer,” Rob clarified my statement.

“Piss on language. Who gives a fucking shit?” Walt seemed almost angry.

“Man, things’re just too crazy and weird.” Bro had a glazed-over look in his eyes, as if he had consumed more than alcohol. “Some gonzo weird shit, man.”

“And the bad part is you can’t even move away from it,” I complained. “No matter where they move us we’re trapped. It’s all the same everywhere. Traveling craziness.”

Bro said in a soft, even voice. “We’re just a mobile zoo ghetto.”

“A freakin’ freak show,” Toby inserted.

“A traveling zoo,” Bro suggested, “looking for an audience we’ll never find.”

“We’re our own audience,” Walt proclaimed. “Who’d want to see us perform? Rob Spurrier and His Amazing Fucking Sheep.”

“No novelty there,” I smiled at Rob.

“Amen,” Toby said under his breath.

Remembering Gabbs, I said, “Ra-a-a-ab. Ra-a-a-ab. The flocks shall follow.”

“But you see, they’re part of the zoo too.” Bro was getting philosophical. “‘Cause where they shit they leave behind the essence of a ghetto. They’re a mobile zoo ghetto too.”

“All the towns in Nevada are like a mobile zoo ghetto,” Walt declared, “but they can’t move.”

“The Mobile Zoo Ghetto. I like that,” I said, playing with the words as they sounded from my mouth. “The Mobile Zoo Ghetto. That’d be a good name for us.”

“We got a name,” Walt raised his can. “By god! So be it! The Mobile Zoo Ghetto!”

“Everyone grab a drink,” I said. “Quick. A salute to us.”

We all raised our cans of Bud and Coors.

I said in a solemn voice, “We christen ourselves The Brotherhood of the Mobile Zoo Ghetto.”

Toby stood. “Are there any as good as we? Nay! We are the Mobile Zoo Ghetto. I drink to us.”

And we did.

^^^

My memories of our move to Bridgeport are disjointed and tangled in a gray web of cold and gloom. There was a dampness that permeated our very essence; a chill that could not be warmed. The air seemed thick, dark, and immovable. It was difficult to breathe, but we didn't notice. We were in the dream, somewhere along the edge, unaware of other perspectives. We were actors in a play we didn't choose, but required to perform. We resisted without thinking, were compelled to continue, not knowing the outcome, unsure of the cause, yet fearing the effect.

I believe we were drugged. To this day it is my contention that Rob had seasoned his pot roast with something beyond parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme. Tank was the only one who escaped that mental haze, but it made little difference. He was usually thick anyway.

When I concentrate I can focus on lucid intervals and bits of conversation. Otherwise time was a slow motion blur sliding along the pre-set track of the day. The foremost image is rain. It was raining hard when Toby and Walt pulled into camp. A cold, penetrating rain, even for six in the morning. I was sitting on my bunk, contemplating the opposite wall, when Toby stumbled in. He looked beat.

"Gotta get some sleep," he moaned.

"Sleep, shit," I said, "we're outta here this morning. We're moving our butts to bright and sunny Cal-if-or-nia. Remember?"

"Gotta catch some z's."

I watched him undress in slow motion. He was almost asleep on his feet. "So ... you horn dogs get laid?"

"Eventually."

"Where'd you go?"

"Evenin' Star."

"The one outside Tonopah, on the east side, along Six?"

"Yeah." He struggled with his zipper. "But it was too crowded."

"So you didn't get laid."

"Not there. We drove down to Cottontail Ranch."

"Cottontail? Clear down by Beaty? That's at least a two hour drive."

He looked at me and forced a tired smile.

"How much you spend?"

"Hundred apiece."

"A hundred apiece!" The fog lifted temporarily. "Holy shit! What'd you get for that kind of money? Three at once?"

"Each got an hour's pleasure."

"Only an hour?"

Toby laughed. "Walt didn't have a hundred bucks. I didn't have extra. He used his father's credit card."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah, oh shit."

“How’d he have his dad’s card?”

“Gave him a copy in case of emergency.”

“D-S-B. Some emergency,” I laughed.

“Was so worked up to get laid he didn’t care last night. Gonna be interesting to see how he explains that little expense to his parents.” He crawled into his bunk and yanked a blanket over his shoulders. “Wake me when we absolutely hafta get goin’.”

“You got it.”

• • •

“THIS IS MISERABLE,” Tank shouted, as we struggled to force the Kawasakis through the mud. “I’m soaked through.”

“ME TOO,” I yelled back, water dripping from my face.

Suddenly Rob was there in his dark green poncho. “This is shit,” he proclaimed flatly.

“What’s your point?” I tried to inject some humor into an otherwise nasty situation.

“No use.” Rob held his palm out and let the rain collect there. “We’ll wait a couple hours. Give those two tom cats a chance to rest. Maybe it’ll let up.”

“Agreed,” I said without reservation. “Come on, Tank. Leave the bikes. Let’s get somewhere dry.”

Around eight the rain lightened a bit and we continued our chores. It completely let up about an hour later. Rob approached us again. “We’ll eat breakfast before we leave.”

“Just eat a granola bar or something,” I argued. “We should store away the stuff we’re leaving while we have a break in the weather.”

Bro agreed. “We can eat a late breakfast in Tonopah.”

“No,” Rob insisted. “Guy left me in charge. It’s my responsibility. We need our strength. We’ll eat breakfast here.”

By the time we finished eating, washed our dishes, and stowed everything away, it was raining again. Bro stepped into the Empire. “Hey, you ought to check this out. You can see snow in the higher elevations. Even through these gray clouds.”

I found myself outside. “Yeah, you’re right.” I waved my arm toward the sky. Water ran down my sleeve. “Those’re really neat cloud formations clinging to the sides of the ranges. They look like cotton candy.” I watched the wispy apparitions contour the range.

Bro turned to me. “Rob says we need to be ready to pull out by Noon.”

“Shit. I’ve been ready since nine. Wish he’d get his act together.”

• • •

I got Toby up and moving and somehow we were hitched and ready by 11:30. At the stroke of Noon I heard one of the trucks start up and head down the road. Bro opened the door to my Empire and announced, “Rob and Walt gotta get gas and close their account in Carver’s Station. Rob says to hang loose.”

“God damn it,” I shook my head. “Why the hell didn’t he think of this shit before? He’s had

all god damned morning to get gas and pay his stupid bills. Why the hell did Guy put him in charge of this circus? We'll be lucky if we make it to Hawthorne today."

Bro shrugged and disappeared.

I was on my bunk, irritated and frustrated. Toby was securing his trunk. I started in on him again. "So you really paid a hundred bucks for an hour of sex?"

He had his back to me as he tightened straps. "I look at it this way. If you break a leg, you go to a doctor, right? A professional. Right?"

"Yeah."

"If you need to sue someone, you go to a lawyer, right? A professional. Same applies. If you need to get laid, you go to a prostitute. A professional."

I laughed at his logic.

He went on, "Flaubert said it best. You know Gustave Flaubert?"

"Not personally. We don't run in the same circles."

"Idiot!" Toby wasn't in the mood for my usual lame humor.

"Course I've heard of him," I stretched out on my bunk, "but I couldn't tell you much about him."

"Well, Mr. Flaubert said that a man misses somethin' if he's never woken up in bed beside a face he'll never see again." His voice took on a rather literary tone. "He said, 'If a man's never left a brothel at dawn, feelin' like jumpin' off a bridge out of sheer disgust for life, he's never lived.'"

"Guess I'm one of those unfortunates."

"That you are, my friend, that you are."

"Asshole," I joked.

"Hey," Toby said cheerfully, "least I'm not a horny asshole."

"Okay, I'll grant you that." I yawned. "So ... fess up, was it worth a hundred bucks?"

He turned toward me, smiled, and flatly said "No." He sat on the edge of his bunk. "Was too damned drunk to feel much of anything. While it was happening I guess it felt good, but I don't remember." He paused for a moment. "Wouldn't pay that kind of money again."

Feeling victorious and superior, I tried to cheer him up. "Well, at least you had an interesting experience. Not everyone can say they've paid for sex."

"Not cash, anyway."

• • •

Rob and Walt finally returned about 2:00. As soon as they hitched up the Airstream we were off. Somewhere on our approach to Tonopah we were consumed by a really amazing storm. There were low hanging gray clouds, white clouds, and black clouds all bubbling and boiling together with heavy rain, large marble sized hail, and a violent wind. The hail piled up on the windshields, on the roads, and in the gutters of the houses in Tonopah. It was wild and exciting. The air was fresh and crisp, and full of the scent of damp sage. Even under the oppressive gloom of the storm, and the frustration of the morning, I felt a certain invigoration.

We stopped at Rich's Quick Shop to pick up snacks, then Rob decided that we should eat a

full meal. We devoured enchiladas at the El Matador, near the edge of town, then sat while Walt and Bro played a game of pin ball.

By the time we all tanked up with gas and left Tonopah it was 5:30. We just couldn't get moving; there was this incredible inertia, like walking against the current of a stream. But at least the rain had stopped.

• • •

Again we had to stop for gas at Coaldale Junction. The gauge on The Gray Beast wasn't working properly. While Walt pumped gas, Rob graciously loaned a few tools to a pair of guys from California who had car problems. We felt some obligation to help because of the two guys who had helped us so many weeks before when we were stuck a mile from Nothing. But we had to get moving, so we couldn't wait. The poor guys hadn't finished their work, so Rob and Walt stayed behind a few minutes to see if they could help finish up.

In spite of that, Rob caught us and passed my Empire before we reached Luning. When we stopped in Hawthorne he pointed out, "Your running lights ... on the trailer ... aren't functioning." He pointed to the set of lights on the back. "Highway Patrol in California will stop you for sure. They're real touchy over there."

"We'll just have to fix the then, won't we." Even though he was right I had a hard time accepting any sort of criticism from him that day.

Toby and I fiddled around with the switches, bulbs, and wiring until we found a loose connection and secured it.

"Okay," Toby yelled to Rob. "We're fixed and ready to roll."

"Gotta wait," he yelled back. "Walt and Bro are over making phone calls." He pointed across the street to a pay phone.

I shook my head and climbed in behind the wheel.

Once Walt and Bro strolled back to their vehicles, Rob gave us the signal to proceed. My truck didn't want to go. It sputtered and bucked and would barely roll.

"Probably got some condensation in the tank, or on the distributor," Toby assured me. "Keep it running if you can. It'll probably burn out."

We limped through the next light and turned onto the highway leading out of town, toward California. Moving onto the open road it continued to buck and sputter.

"It's gonna clear up," Toby kept up hope.

We made it two miles out. "We gotta stop," I growled. "There's something wrong. Don't wanna blow this engine." I pulled to the side of the road where there was an area large enough to turn around.

Walt and Rob, leading the way, drove on into the night, without care or concern for the rest of us.

"They ain't gonna stop," Toby yelled as he stepped from the truck. "Those assholes ain't gonna stop."

"Typical," I said with resignation. "But we've got bigger problems right now."

Tank and I and the Glue Brothers stood there in the darkness and reviewed our options. We

finally backed my rig against a fence line and left it. The four of us climbed into Tank's truck and we pulled his trailer back into town and parked it in the Frontier Trailer Park where Guy was staying.

After we explained the situation, Guy said, "This is all the farther you got today?"

Needless to say, I wasn't happy myself. "If we would've gotten out sooner, we'd be okay."

"What happened?"

"It's Spurrier," Toby volunteered. "He screwed around all mornin'. We didn't get out 'ntil two-thirty."

"We should've been set up in Bridgeport by now," I grumbled.

Guy shook his head. "You guys go back and pull in that Empire with Walter's truck. I've got map work to do to get ready for tomorrow. I can't fool around with these problems."

So we drove out and hitched my trailer to Tank's "car." He towed it back into town.

Without the weight of the trailer, my truck was able to limp along without assistance. But it died for good just after we passed the stop light at the main intersection. We pushed it to a spot in front of the El Cap, unloaded the loose valuables, and left it.

We spotted my trailer in the Frontier Trailer Park, a couple of slots down from Guy. I checked in and took up residence again. I called the Walker River Lodge, in Bridgeport, and left a message for Rob and Walt, in case they got concerned.

Meanwhile, The Glue Brothers and Tank checked in at the El Cap. Once we freshened up, we met in the coffee shop for a late meal, then everyone turned in. The first full day of the Mobile Zoo Ghetto sputtered, bucked, and wheezed to a frustrating end. And there remained a chill that could not be warmed.

^^^

After the others left for Bridgeport, I made an appointment with good old Slick to tow and then repair, my truck. Of course, in his usual way, he told me he wouldn't be able to look at it until the following day. There was not much I could do.

Before he left, Tank pointed out that the bathroom vent cover on my Empire was dangling by one screw, so I fixed that in the cool of the morning. The rest of the day I cleaned up the trailer and finished working on samples collected a few days before. Of course, when I shipped them at the El Cap, I ran into Becky. And, as might be expected, she was excited to see me. She informed me that she would stop by in the evening.

I updated Guy when he returned from the field around seven. As promised, Becky showed up about 8:30. As soon as she sat down at my table, she announced, "I've found another boy friend."

"Well great," I said, "I'm happy for you." Mentally I thanked whichever god was responsible for this welcome miracle.

"He's a bit older, 'bout forty."

I wondered if she expected me to become upset and show a jealous streak. I said, "Like

those older guys, huh?”

“I guess. He’s nice to me. But gone a lot.” She played with a finger on her left hand, where a wedding ring would normally be. She said, “We’re seriously contemplating cohabitation.”

“Cohabitation?” I thought to myself, “Must’ve picked up that word from her new old dude.” To her I said, “Taking that big step, huh?” Then I thought to myself, “Good luck, mister. She’s a good kid, but can be one hell of an angry woman.”

We chit-chatted after that, mostly about where I’d been, what I’d seen, and where we were headed. She left about 12:00, taking my denim jacket. I had torn it a few days earlier. She promised to sew it and bring it back the next morning.

^^^

Becky dropped by with my jacket at 8:00, wished me luck in California, waved goodbye, and was gone into the busy world of Hawthorne, Nevada.

Tank arrived from Bridgeport around 8:30. We checked the post office for Guy’s mail, bought a tank of propane for his trailer, and then ate breakfast at the El Cap. When Tank washed his hands in the rest room he noticed that his hair was almost touching his ears. “Better get this cut or I’ll start looking shaggy.” His eyes darted to my long hair and beard.

“Yeah,” I replied, “don’t wanna look like no mountain man. Especially now that we’re working in the Sierras.”

While he visited the barber I bounced around town taking care of a few chores. I walked over to the bank to pick up traveler’s checks and had a pleasant conversation with Gwyn. With all of the other women who haunted our time while we stayed in Hawthorne, Gwyn was a possibility that never got explored. Once we select a trail we have to stay with it, even if later the opposite ridge looks easier. Gwyn stood there behind that counter with a glowing smile, but I was too far along a different route.

Late in the afternoon Slick had my truck running, so Tank and I hitched up my Empire, left a note for Guy, and were on our way into the high peaks of the Sierras. We took the highway past Mono Lake, caught 395 north over a spectacular mountain pass, and glided down into the lush meadows around Bridgeport.

...

We found Bridgeport to be a fantastic little town. Apparently its claims to fame are one of the biggest Fourth of July celebrations in America and the fact that its picturesque courthouse has been featured in several Hollywood moves. The town definitely caters to tourists, and even looks like one of those perky resort towns you see on a vacation post card.

After Tank and I settled, we were introduced to two geologists who were working for NORMMEX on the California project. John Duarte was a bit older than the rest of us, probably in his mid-forties. Jed Bridger was about 28. Right off they seemed like nice enough fellows and



instantly changed the chemistry in our crazy group. Fresh blood and the re-institution of Randy as our Crew Chief promised to cool the growing conflict infecting the Mobile Zoo Ghetto.

^^^

We climbed out of our trucks near the top of Mount Patterson. “How high’re we here?” Toby asked.

“Depends on what you smoked last night,” Walt shot back.

Randy looked toward the low peak a few hundred yards farther to the north. “Map says that peak is eleven-thousand six-hundred and seventy-three feet.”

“From Patterson you can see all over,” Jed announced.

“This is great,” Walt declared.

“Spectacular,” Rob agreed.

“What can I say?” was all I could say.

Even Tank was awe struck, “It’s unbelievable.”

“Look there,” John pointed toward the east. “That’s Wheeler Peak. Eleven-thousand six-hundred and sixty-four feet. Highest in Nevada.”

“To the south you can see Sawtooth Ridge.” Jed let his arm sweep across the horizon.

“What’s that?” Toby held his right hand over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

“Northern stretches of Yosemite,” Jed said confidently.

“Sure is rugged.” Toby continued to scan the southern view.

“North of Patterson you can see the Tahoe Basin.” We all followed Randy’s gaze.

“You can see the lake from here?” Walt wondered aloud.

“No, no, not the lake itself.” John pointed with two fingers. “Just the approaches from Carson City.”

I stared in wonder. “What a spectacular view.”

...

Randy called all of us around his truck. “We’re issuing each of you a pair of safety sun glasses. It gets bright up here, and this rock is brittle. Shatters easy. Sends splinters in every direction. We want you to wear these at all times when you’re sampling.” He handed out the dark framed glasses.

Of course we each tried them on and had a good laugh. Walt nudged Bro, “You look like a Blues Glue Brother.”

Bro struck a pose, adjusting his glasses so they sat on the end of his nose.

“You too, Toby,” I pointed, “especially with that bald head.”

Rob said, “Check out Tank.”

We all turned to see Tank’s new image.

“You look like a stud, there, Tank.” Randy smiled at how small the glasses looked on

Tank's large head. "You ought to wear those around town."

When the excitement over the new spectacles wore off, Randy started handing out hammers. "The company is issuing each of you a new two pound sledge. They want them back when this project's done. So don't lose them."

"Gonna do some heavy hitting now," Walt hefted his hammer.

Of course we each tried out the new equipment, smashing rocks here and there. Once we tired of demolishing the mountain we set aside our hammers and gathered around Randy and John to hear about the ore model in that area. Of course that's when good old Tank decided to smash an interesting looking rock, right in the midst of the group. Sharp fragments sprayed everywhere.

"Jesus, Tank!" Randy turned his back to protect himself.

"Give us a WARNING, man!" Jed almost screamed.

"ASSHOLE!" Walt yelled.

Tank continued to pound away, as if oblivious to those around him.

A tiny sliver of rock zapped my right forearm. "Son of a bitch, TANK! QUIT FUCKIN' AROUND!"

He held up his next swing and looked up at me with his tiny sun glasses spread wide around his fat head. "What?"

"Man, you an idiot or somethin'?" Toby had been hit in the side. "You're gonna wipe us all out."

"That was really stupid." Randy stood over Tank.

"What? I was just busting this rock."

"You'll hurt someone, you idiot." Randy reached down and took Tank's hammer, like taking a harmful toy from a child. He looked around the group. "Anybody hurt?"

Several of us said, "No, just zinged."

He looked back at Tank, who was getting to his feet. "I would of really chewed your butt if somebody got hurt. Didn't I just tell you about the safety glasses."

"I had mine on."

"Butt head. Nobody else did." Toby spit to the side.

Tank stood up straight. "I have no control over what they do." He made a sweeping arc with his hand, encompassing several of us.

Randy looked like he was ready to club him with his own hammer.

...

After that little incident, we followed Randy, John, and Jed as they described the geology and explained the sampling techniques we would use.

Spurrier farted as he stepped over a low outcrop.

"What the hell was that?" Walt laughed.

"You heard that too?" Rob stopped in his tracks. "Quiet."

We all paused, waiting for Rob's explanation.

"I think ... it's a mating call ... from a rare family of tiny spiders ... that live above ten

thousand feet in elevation.” He paused for effect. “The infamous Barking Spider.”

“Heck,” Toby laughed, “I hear those spiders at lower elevations. They’re real prominent after dinner.”

The series of crude comments and sounds that followed worked to relieve the tension from Tank’s bashing episode. We spent the rest of the day exploring the mountain top.

“What’s this peak here?” Bro asked as we approached a gradual summit to the south of Patterson.

“Doesn’t have a name,” Jed replied.

“Which one is it on the map?” Rob unfolded a topo sheet.

Jed and Rob scanned the contours. “Think it’s this one,” Jed stabbed the sheet with a finger. “Marked eleven four-thirty-one.”

I walked up. “It hasn’t been named yet?”

“Least not on the topo sheets.” Jed stood back.

When we reached the top Rob and I drew up a make shift flag on a sheet of paper. “This is our flag,” Rob proclaimed. “We claim this mount.”

In a formal voice, I declared, “From this day forward ... this splendid peak ... shall be known throughout the land ... as Mount M.Z.G.”

Rob ceremoniously planted the flag among a small pile of weathered debris.

That evening, while I prepared the various topo sheets for the next day’s sampling, I carefully inked Mount M.Z.G. onto each map.

• • •

On our way back to the valley, we ran across a cluster of rustic hunting cabins stuck back in a wooded area. When we stopped to poke around, I saw a red tailed hawk and a golden eagle soaring peacefully over head. With the cool, brisk air, the quiet of the mountain, and the pleasant musty scent of those cabins, I felt like hunkering down and staying forever. But snow already hid in the shadows, and as evening approached, there was the promise of a cold wind. I left with the others.

I envied those guys that would be going up every day, but I knew their job would be dangerous. They would be sampling along shear cliffs and across steep scree slopes. Everything was barren, loose, and exposed; well above the tree line; the bare bones of the earth; all angles, edges, and points.

• • •

That evening the Glue Brothers, Randy, and I drove about five miles down 395 to the Creek Inn, a small Italian restaurant. We were the only patrons there. The homey atmosphere was accented by the young, long haired waiter wearing jeans. The stereo was playing *The Wall* by Pink Floyd.

“Great atmosphere,” Toby complimented the waiter.

“Thank you,” he smiled. “My name’s Al. Can I take your order?”

After checking the menu we each ordered lasagna. In our usual ravenous way we consumed the meal without really thinking about it. The food was alright, but not spectacular.

At various points during our meal Al would come over and ask if we needed anything, or if the meal was satisfactory. Then he would carry on a short conversation, asking about where we were from, what we were doing in that area, where we were staying, and so on. All the usual social chit-chat that waiters seem to employ in an attempt to increase their tip. But Al seemed overly friendly.

When we drank the last of the wine and were all feeling pretty good in general, Al positioned himself between Randy and Toby. "I imagine it's hard for you to score smoke in a town like Bridgeport."

"You got that right," Toby concurred.

Al looked around melodramatically, then pulled a small plastic bag of pot from inside his shirt. He handed it to Toby. Toby quickly passed it on to Bro, who stuck it under a napkin, as if someone might be peering through the darkened windows.

There were a few moments of confusion. Then Al explained. "It's on the house."

"But why?" Randy asked suspiciously.

"Simply a gift from me to you. For being my last customers of the season."

"Season's over, huh?" Randy didn't seem surprised.

"Yes. Tonight is it."

"Thanks," Randy smiled. "That's mighty generous of you."

Al nodded and walked back into the kitchen.

"Seems a bit fishy to me," I said in a low voice.

"Ah, he's an alright guy. Just keepin' the customer's satisfied." Toby smiled as he peeked under the napkin near Bro's plate.

"Seems a bit unusual," I argued, "outside of the sixties." I looked over my shoulder toward the kitchen door. "You know, for someone to just give a group of strangers a bag of pot."

"It's only a small bag," Toby assured me, "maybe enough for two joints. That's all. Leftovers."

"It's the gesture, man," Randy spoke with a wine thickened tongue.

"Yeah," Bro said, "it's only a twenty dollar bag, but it's still worth something."

The wine, and the general pleasantness permeating the atmosphere, worked to make me forget my concerns.

"Al," Randy yelled across the room, "we need more wine."

When Al brought the bottle, Randy commented, "With all this good food and drink and music, the only thing missing are some women."

"I've fixed that for you too," Al replied.

"How's that?" Randy grinned.

"You'll see," Al said smugly.

A few minutes later three college aged women walked through the door and sat down at a table on the other side of the room. All of them were fairly nice looking, in a natural, woodsy sort of way. I remember wondering to myself where Walt would have placed them on his floating scale. Actually fairly high, I think.

Al drifted by our table on his way to wait on them. He commented in a low voice. "I work with them in the Forest Service. My day job. They help put out small fires. That sort of thing. They're very nice, once you get to know them."

A trace of excitement circulated the table.

Then Bro said, "Get real. Nothing's gonna happen. There're four of us and only three of them."

"You're right," I said, "but you gotta remember, our buddy Randy here just got married. Sort of excludes him from the competition."

"Hey," Randy replied, "I still got what it takes. Married or not. They don't call me Hangin' Langan for nothing."

Bro urged him on, "Go get 'em, Bangin' Langan. Show us how it's done."

While my table companions discussed the finer points of seducing women, I got up to use the rest room. When I returned I found that Randy had moved on the women, pulling up a chair and positioning himself at their table.

"What's he trying to do," I shook my head, "make a fool of himself?"

"Naw, naw," Bro laughed, "he's going to show us single guys how it's done."

Sitting down, I said, "Guess he's got nothing to lose if he's shot down."

Randy spent about 15 minutes spewing out his best lines while the Glue Brothers and I sipped the last of the wine. When he finally retreated he spoke with a loud, bravado tinged voice. "They're friendly," pointing over his right shoulder with his thumb, "but they don't like geologists."

"Why's that?" Toby sat up straight, like someone had punched him in the stomach.

"Cause we rape the landscape."

"That isn't totally unexpected," Toby said loudly. "Comin' from Forest Service chicks."

Randy plopped down on his chair. Loud enough so the women across the room could hear, he said, "Mining and geology have lots of benefits."

"That's right," Toby almost bellowed, "where would our society be without minin'?"

"Practically everything we own has metal in it. Where do they think the metal for their car comes from?"

"Or their ten speed," Toby added. "And the zippers that hold their britches to their tight white asses."

"Mining's been around forever. In our society the only way to stop mining is to stop consuming the goods that mining provides."

"Supply and demand," Toby expanded Randy's idea. "As long as there's a demand ... someone's gonna fill it. As long as our society demands zippers ... there're gonna be geologists out here looking to meet that demand."

"You got it," Randy nodded his head in agreement.

"And where in hell's name do forest chicks get off pointin' their fine white fingers at us." Toby boomed, "The timber industry destroys more landscape than minin' any day."

From time to time the women would glance over with a disgusted stare. Toby caught them looking, and said, "Screw the bitches if they don't see the light. Let'em go back to their kitchens and laundry rooms where they belong."

The trio got up, paid Al at the cash register, then walked into the kitchen. Al followed. The three were talking to Al and the cook when we got up to leave.

Randy said, "I'll pick up the tab."

"Big generous gesture," Bro laughed. "Company expense."

Randy smiled, leaned over, and left a twenty dollar bill on the table for a tip. He looked at us. "To cover Al's generosity."

Toby and I left the building, while Randy and Bro headed toward the cash register to cover the check. When I felt the chilly night air, I said, "Toby Juan ... you mind driving? I'm feeling a bit tipsy from the wine."

"No problem. I'm a bit high myself, but I'm used to it."

"Thanks," I said, "I'm just not used to drinking that much."

"No problemo."

As Toby fiddled with the keys, Randy and Bro exited and were climbing into the other truck. Before Toby could get into gear, Randy pulled out and headed down the road. Toby finally got us moving, backed out to the right because of a car parked on that side, turned to the left, and made a u-turn to get onto the highway. We headed north, back to Bridgeport.

"Gonna stop by my room," Toby announced. "Gotta pick up my favorite pipe. Don't have any papers."

"What? You guys gonna do that dope tonight?"

"That's the plan," Toby grinned. "Randy'n'Bro're gonna meet us at the trailers."

We picked up his hash pipe from his room at the Walker River Lodge and headed out to the trailer park. But there was no sign of the other two, other than their truck parked near the entrance. We parked next to my trailer and took a quick look down by the lake. There was no one out there. By the time we returned and I dug my keys out of my pocket, Randy and Bro drove up.

"Hey, guys," Randy spoke as he opened the door, "we just got a call from Al the waiter. He called the trailer park office." Randy waved his left arm toward the entrance. "You guys hit that car parked next to you when you backed out."

"Bullshit," Toby shook his head. "That car was at least two car widths to our right. It was the only car in the lot. No way did I hit it."

I looked at Randy, "We would've heard something. We weren't even close."

"Well, we gotta go back," Randy concluded. "The car belonged to one of those Forest Service chicks. You got any O-J?"

"Yeah. What for?" I unlocked the door to my Empire.

"We've all had too much to drink. A big shot of orange juice might help sober us."

"You know," I suggested, as we climbed into the trailer, "maybe this is a set up."

"How you figure?" Randy was at the refrigerator door.

"That free pot. Wasn't that a bit too gracious?" I pulled four cups from above the sink.

"Shit," Randy retrieved the juice from the fridge. "What you do with that bag?"

Bro said calmly, "Hid it. It's safe and out of the way. Don't think that's the problem. Was only a twenty dollar bag."

"Well, let's act like we never saw it. You know, if something comes of this." Randy poured the juice evenly into all four cups. "Damn. I wish you had more."

“Sorry.”

“This isn’t enough.” He picked up one of the cups and poured its contents into one of the others. “Here, Toby. You drink this. You’re the one they’ll focus on, ‘cause you were driving.”

Toby took the glass and started drinking. “God I hate orange juice.” He chugged the last of it in one swallow.

Randy handed me the third cup, and Bro the fourth. We drank ours down as directed.

“Okay, let’s go face the music.” Randy stepped out into the night air. “And remember,” he turned to look straight at Toby, “stay calm. Especially if the cops show up.”

“We didn’t do anything, so they can’t nail us for anything.” I tried to be positive.

Randy stopped half way to his truck. He turned and looked at Toby. “Put your stocking cap on, and leave it. That bald head makes you look mean. Cops might side with them on looks alone.”

Toby pulled a black stocking cap from the pocket of his Navy pea coat. He slid it on.

“Now you look like a sailor instead of a pirate.” I pulled the front of his cap over his eyes.

He growled. “But I’m still a pirate inside. Let’s go swab some forest chick’s deck.”

He had me drive.

“Can’t afford another D-U-I,” he said nervously, as we pulled onto the highway. “Already got two in Arizona. They’ll shut me away if I mess up again.”

“You didn’t hit anything,” I tried to reassure him.

“Yeah, but I was drivin’. If they do an alcohol test they’ll nail me.”

“Maybe the orange juice will help.”

“Sorta doubt it. That kinda crap never does.”

“Didn’t Al tell us he worked for the Forest Service too?” I was trying to make sense out of all of this. “Maybe those chicks are pissed at Randy’s approach and how you two taunted them at the restaurant. Maybe they’re out to get geologists at whatever cost.”

“Sure as hell don’t remember hittin’ any fucking thing.” Toby’s voice took on an edge of anger.

We pulled into the parking lot as Al came out of the restaurant. The three women followed close behind.

Toby growled as he started to get out of the truck.

“Stay cool, Toby. Don’t do anything foolish.”

I grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment. All of us clustered around the damaged car. “Where did we supposedly hit it?” I asked.

Al stepped forward and indicated a line along the lower panel of the driver’s side door. “This scratch all along here.”

“You hit it with your bumper,” one of the women came forward, “when you were backing out. It never had a scratch there before.”

I flipped on the flashlight. “Toby and Randy moved in close beside me. I panned the length of the scratch. Randy, Toby, and I all looked at each other and smiled. We all looked at the truck parked a few feet away.

“There’s no way *that* truck made *these* marks,” I said officiously.

The woman said, “They weren’t there before.”

“No fucking way,” Toby said in a flat, controlled voice.

“You did it,” she sounded almost hysterical. “Your truck was the only one in the lot.” One of the other women came up behind her and placed her arms around her shoulders. She gave Toby an angry glare.

“I’m sorry,” I turned to Al, “but these scratch marks along this door are rusty. They’ve been here for a long time. There’s simply no way these scratches were made today. Or even this week.”

Bro chimed in. “It takes quite a while for this type of metal to oxidize.”

“Besides,” I continued, “this bumper,” I pointed to the front of the truck, “is clean and much too high off the ground to have caused those scratches.”

Everyone looked back and forth and could easily validate my point.

Al spoke to the woman who owned the car. “He’s right. That truck didn’t hit your car.”

The woman turned and started sobbing on the shoulder of her companion.

We stood there in silence for a few tense moments, then I said, “I assume there’s no reason to hang around. It looks like everything’s pretty much settled.”

Al nodded. “Thanks for coming back.”

“Sorry this all had to end this way.” I shook Al’s hand. “Could’ve been a pleasant evening.”

I climbed back into our truck. Randy and Bro were already backing away. Toby opened his door, but let it hang. He turned toward the women. “Next time you bitches better get your facts straight.”

The owner of the car practically screeched. “I’m calling the Highway Patrol!” She turned and went into the restaurant.

“Go ahead, you call the fuckin’ Highway Patrol, you cunt.” Toby flipped her off.

A second woman, the one who had been comforting the owner of the car, turned and followed her into the building. The third woman stared angrily at Toby.

“Shit,” I said under my breath, as I signaled to Randy. He pulled back into the lot.

“What’s the problem now?” He seemed frustrated.

“Toby can’t keep his mouth shut,” I shook my head.

Toby glared at me. “Not my fuckin’ fault she’s so god-damned sensitive.”

We got out of our trucks and waited, Bro and I leaning against my truck with our hands deep into our pockets. Toby and Randy were off by themselves discussing something.

When the two women returned from the building, the second one announced, “An officer will be here shortly.”

Toby and Randy were suddenly in the midst of us, voices raised in anger, rattling off a list of nonsense directed at the three women. They called them sluts and whores and bitches and almost anything else you can imagine. They yelled and screamed about the stupidity of blaming us for the scratches on the car, about the value of mining to our society, about their hypocrisy working for the Forest Service and cutting down geologists while they condoned cutting down trees.

Toby ripped the cap off his bald head, his face contorted and red with anger. He would start a non-stop spiel, the whole while moving closer to one of the women, until he was practically in her face. The women would try to argue, anger rising in their faces, but they couldn’t get a word



in edge-wise.

Toby would respond to any argument with bluster and curses, using his bull-headed nature and his size as a means to intimidate.

Randy, on the other hand, was just a scrapper. As Toby wound down, Randy would keep up the steady barrage. This was having its effect on the women and Al.

Fearing problems once the police arrived, Bro and I tried to insert ourselves between the two groups. We would try to calm Toby and Randy, pulling them away, back toward the trucks. But then one of the women would take a verbal shot, and the two would rush back toward the them, mouthing their obscenities.

Al and I stayed close the whole time. When Bro and I would pull Randy and Toby away, he would try to calm the women. It was like some absurd scene from an existentialist play.

Finally the local cop arrived. The two hot heads calmed quickly, as if a switch were thrown. The officer looked over the situation, got both sides of the story, then said that this was out of his jurisdiction, that we would have to wait for the State Highway Patrol. That officer came along about fifteen minutes later.

He also looked everything over closely, got both sides of the story, took down names and numbers, then declared what we had all discovered ourselves. "It is obvious from looking at the evidence here that this truck could not have possibly caused this damage to this vehicle."

When the officers were preparing to leave, Al and I shook hands again. "Sorry 'bout all this," I said.

"Aw, it's not your fault. This was just an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"It's too bad we had a couple of hot heads," I indicated Toby and Randy, who were already seated in their respective vehicles.

"Yeah, but it's a birthday I won't soon forget."

"Today's your birthday?"

"Yeah. I'm twenty-four."

"Ah, geez. What a way to celebrate."

He shrugged.

The three women moved near us. I turned to them. "I know it's a little late, but ... not all geologists are assholes."

One of them smiled. She said, "It was at least nice talking to two of you."

Another one said, maybe a bit too loud, "I've met four nice geologists," she glanced at one of her companions, "but one isn't here tonight."

Toby had the window rolled down, was within earshot, and I could see anger rise once again into his face. I was puzzled by the woman's numbers, but before I could question her, one of the others said to Bro, "That guy over there," she indicated Randy, "was really rude when he tried to come on to us while we were eating."

"Yeah," another agreed. "Was the old macho trip."

Toby growled, "Come on, Chris, let's get outta here 'fore I punch the bitch."

I said a quick goodbye, carefully backed out of the lot, and headed back toward Bridgeport.

Watching our headlights cut through the darkness, Toby snarled, "Bitches. That local cop told me two of those witches're lesbos."

“They did do a lot of hugging and holding,” I admitted, “but it didn’t strike me as especially sexual. It was mostly one woman comforting another.”

“He said they’re known locally.”

“Suppose whether it’s true or not they must have that reputation.”

“It was pretty obvious they hate men.” Toby slumped down in his seat, as if he were settling in for a long ride.

“At least macho men,” I said quietly.

• • •

The four of us gathered in Toby’s room where Randy and the Glue Brothers smoked a pipe full of Al’s stash. We rehashed the evenings events about three times, and around 2:00 a.m. I had enough and headed back to my trailer.

^^^

The sky was a vibrant blue; rich, and uniformly textured. There was a slight breeze, cooled by the mountains, carrying the fragrance of autumn through the quiet streets of Bridgeport. With the gentle warmth of the golden sunshine I was seduced into enjoying the comforts of an old wooden bench placed invitingly in front of the general store. I sat there in that special limbo that occasionally reveals itself during seasonal transitions. I was stuck and probably could have sat there all morning, just daydreaming, and watching the locals pass by while completing their daily chores.

I became aware of a young woman standing near me. When I looked up into her face she smiled. “Taking in the sun?”

“Yeah. It’s wonderful.” I returned her smile.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?”

I looked more closely. It was her Forest Service uniform that gave it away. I think my face turned slightly red. “From last night,” I said weakly, expecting to get another dose of hostility.

“Mind if I sit?” She indicated the open end of the bench.

“Not at all.”

She positioned herself to face me, sitting very straight and up-right, with her knees together and her hands placed upon them, and gave me a wide smile.

“Headed into the field?” I nodded toward her heavy soled high topped black leather boots.

She looked down. “No. Actually not. But this is standard apparel when I work. You never know when something will come up.”

“Suppose that’s true. You never know.”

We sat there in an awkward silence until she said, “Why aren’t you out collecting rocks?”

I looked at her carefully, trying to read between the lines, still looking for a potential trap. But the tone of her question and the smile on her face seemed friendly and sincere. “I’m not

doing field work right now.”

“Obviously,” she cut me off, but continued smiling and motioned toward the bench.

“Yeah ... yeah.” I had to smile back. “I know what it looks like.”

“Looks like you take your job seriously,” she teased.

“I do. Really. I’m just ... well ... I’ve been assigned to map work and sample prep. I get stuck inside while the others get to roam the ranges on beautiful days like this.” I held my hands, palms up, out into the splendid air.

“Oh, I know how that is,” she sighed. “I’ve got pretty much the same assignment. I’m mapping the locations of this year’s fires for next year’s revegetation projects.”

“Well, least we have our weekends,” I relaxed a bit, “you know, to go exploring.”

“That’s true. We have the weekends.”

“I’m kinda new ‘round here,” I made a squirrely face, “obviously.”

She laughed.

“What’re the best places to see? I mean ... I guess ... well, you know, where do you spend your free time?”

She sat back and smiled. “You wouldn’t believe.”

“Sure, try me.”

“I spend most of my weekends doing volunteer work at Mono Lake.”

“Mono Lake? Over the pass,” I pointed toward the highway to the south, “down toward the Nevada line?”

“Yup.”

“What do you do there? Tag birds. Monitor migration patterns or something?”

“You’re gonna laugh.” Her smile was lively and inviting. Her eyes twinkled in the sunlight. “I do field research for the BLM on the tufa formations and the Black Point fissures.”

“Rocks?” I said incredulously. “You study rocks on your free time?”

When she laughed she seemed to glow. “You’re not going to believe this either ... after last night ... but I’m a Forest Service geologist.”

“Ho-ly-cow,” I shook my head. “That sure puts a different spin on everything.”

She continued grinning. “I thought last night’s little fiasco was quite interesting. Hearing both sides of the issue.”

“Hearing? Geez! Practically had to put my hands over my ears.” I momentarily put my palms to the sides of my head.

“Well, if you remember, I was kind of standing back. Tried to stay out of most of it ... until your friend made it personal.”

“Please,” I held up my right hand, palm out, “don’t call them friends. Least not when they act like that. They’re guys I work with ... but that’s all. They’re usually not that bad, but I can’t excuse their behavior last night.” I paused for a moment. “Maybe drinks.”

“Let’s forget about it.” Her smile faded. “It was a rather unpleasant experience. I’m sure, for all of us. Water under the bridge, as they say.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay, then,” I said, “since we’re beginning fresh, we’ve never been introduced. My

name's Chris." I extended my hand.

"I'm Karen." She took my hand and we shook like we were agreeing to a life long contract.

"Pleased to meet you, Karen."

"Pleased to meet you, Chris."

"All right. So ... how'd you get involved with your project at Mono?"

She shrugged. "Heard they were having problems. The lake's in big time trouble. L-A's sucking all the water from the drainage for its own use. Very little makes it down to the lake. This year it's forty-two feet below its Nineteen-Forty-One level. The water's getting saltier, the brine shrimp are dying off, and the birds ... just the gulls alone ... have lost over twenty-five thousand chicks. Those engineers back in L-A don't realize they've muddled up the whole ecosystem. It's just a mess down there."

"I stopped by there earlier this summer and read some stuff about the lake. Didn't realize it was that bad."

"Most casual observers wouldn't."

"They doing anything about it?"

She looked thoughtful, then said, "BLM wants to designate the land adjacent to the lake as an area of critical environmental concern. That way they can put restrictions on camping, vehicles, grazing, and access to the islands during the nesting seasons."

"That's a start ... but doesn't put the water back." I shrugged. "Sounds like that's what's needed."

"There are other pushes as well. Several groups are proposing a bill that would go to Congress. They want to create a Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area. That would prevent logging, geothermal development ... and most mining. Would also fund construction of a visitor center ... so they can begin educating the public about what the lake needs to survive."

"And why it should survive," I inserted.

"Exactly right." Her eyes indicated a certain amount of surprise at my awareness and concern. "But the real money would go toward a study of the ecological impact of the lake's shrinkage. We have to have documented information to back up our claims as we try to get the water back where it belongs."

"Imagine that'll end up in court."

"Probably." She checked her watch. "But somehow we have to maintain the fresh water inflow."

"Sounds like the key issue."

"It's like this everywhere, though. Somehow we have to educate people to the fact that there must be a balance between human water needs and the need to protect recreational, aesthetic, and environmental interests."

"That's the difficult part. But like one of my companions said last night, as long as there's a demand, someone is gonna see dollar signs and figure a way to fill that need. Environment be damned."

She laughed.

Then it dawned on me what I'd said. "Sorry. Didn't mean the pun."

She laughed again. "Either way, it was very good. Very clever." She stood up. "It was nice

meeting you, Chris. Especially under brighter circumstances. Maybe I'll see you around town again."

I stood. "Yeah, I suppose. Better get back too. Was nice meeting you as well. I'm staying at the Falling Rock Trailer Park, along the highway. Ever get out that way, look me up."

"I'll do that." She moved away. "You enjoy the sunny day. I'll be seeing you."

• • •

Later I found myself sitting at the table in my trailer, looking through the small window, across Bridgeport Lake, toward Sawtooth Ridge. I was trying to recall the term for that rock structure. A series of cloud shadows crossed its face in a slow pattern of light and dark. An arete! That was it. A glacial feature known as an arete; a thin blade of stone carved from two sides over long periods of time by massive ice fields. That particular ridge marked the northern boundary of Yosemite National Park, and seemed like an impassable barrier protecting the park from human intrusion. But I realized that was an illusion. Man had conquered similar ridges and pushed pavement through widened cracks in the side of the mountain, just so tourists could drive to spectacular vistas. As massive as Nature often seems, its endurance is transitory when faced by Mankind's persistence.

I noticed a few small glaciers and several snow fields still clinging to cracks in the ledges, especially on the north face, even after a long, hot summer. The nights must get cold up there. That morning there looked to be a slight dusting of new snow across the shaded rocks.

On the east side of the lake the vegetation is scrubby, with sage and short grasses, much like the Great Basin where we had worked all summer. It is almost desert-like. The mountains and hills on the east side seem lower, although that may be an illusion, because Bridgeport sits at about 7,000 feet in elevation.

On the west side of the lake I observed a short plain that gradually, then rapidly, rises up to the front range, or lower mountains. Behind those stretched the majestic Sierras. The front range, at least along the lake, is covered with a short, weathered pine. Quite a contrast from the eastern shore.

As pretty as it is, Bridgeport Lake is man-made; a reservoir. And so, as is the case with many artificial lakes, it is slowly dying. Man can never recreate the natural ecosystem. Eutrophication has taken hold of the shallower southern extremities, closer to town. The dam is to the north.

The East and West Forks of the Walker River head in the Sierra Nevada mountains, then flow north to a confluence south of Yerington, Nevada. The joined rivers make a large bend to the north, then run south to empty into Walker Lake, just north of Hawthorne.

Off the southern shore of Bridgeport Lake is the local airport. Contemplating the scenery, I could watch the small planes take off right over the water. I found myself wondering if any of those small aircraft ever caught an unexpected down draft and ended up floating in the chilly waters.

• • •

Because of our proximity to the lake and the stream, Rob suddenly produced a rod and reel, bought a license, and took up trout fishing. Every evening after work he would head down to a point near the dam and cast his line into the darkening pools. And, sure enough, he would come back with two or three pan sized trout. He and Walt and Bro would feast on the evening's catch.

One evening I needed some information from Rob to complete his map. When I opened the door to the Airstream I encountered a rush of bad air that made me step back. The rancid smell was a combination of cooking oils, deep fried trout, rotting food, sweaty clothes, and stinky boots. Taking a deep breath I entered to find the trio devouring the flesh of Rob's latest catch.

"Missed one good meal," Walt spoke around a fork full of white trout flesh.

"Yeah, man," Bro agreed.

"Sure I did," I said with a conciliatory tone. Looking around the confines of the small trailer I noticed a new addition to their decor. "What's all this?"

"Fish heads," Walt shot back. "What do they look like, dildo brain?"

From his tone I knew I was in over my head, so I let it drop.

After a few moments of relative silence, with only Bob Marley and the Whalers playing rhythmically from Bro's ghettoblaster, Rob calmly explained. "These are my trophies." He pointed to the trout heads placed along several narrow shelves in the dining area. "They represent the sacrifice of their bodies for the sustenance of our own. We owe them a debt of gratitude ... for their unselfishness in giving. This is the Rainbow Trout Hall of Fame."

Apparently, after cooking and eating the better portion of each fish, the heads were removed and cleaned. Somehow they had mounted them so that they would stand upright with their mouths open.

Walt nodded toward Rob. "The Master Baiter here keeps us supplied with the best tasting trout this side of Watermelon Sugar."

"Trophies or not, it sure smells in here. Like rotting flesh."

"That's the smell of success," Rob assured me.

"It's the smell of something, that's for sure." I retreated toward the door. "Need to talk to you about your map. But it can wait. Catch you later."

"Chow," Walt spoke through a mouthful of fresh water fish.

I walked back to my trailer, relieved that I had avoided one of Rob's long lectures on the preservation of cranial shells in primitive ovens of the southwest.

• • •

I had to be in Reno the next Monday morning so that I could catch a bus to Tonopah. The rear end was finally repaired on the Light Blue Ford and the vehicle was once again ready for service. Rather than drive me up Sunday night, Walt, Toby, Bro, and I decided to drive up to Lake Tahoe. After their trout dinner we took The Gray Beast and headed north to the crystal blue lake. I drove, as usual, while the others crammed into the remaining space in the cab. I found that one advantage of driving was that the others have to give you room to steer. Besides, that night I was the only one not drinking. Between Bridgeport and Tahoe they must have downed two six-packs of Bud.

On the way up Highway 50 from Carson City, near the crest, before it drops down into the Tahoe Basin, Walt demanded, "Pull over. Gotta drain some tiger piss."

I brought the truck to a stop on the broad shoulder. The passenger door flew open, and Walt was gone into the trees.

Bro stepped out. "Watch for this ice here. Pretty slick."

Toby followed.

I turned off the engine and joined them in the bushes where Nature had its way. Then we all ran back through the frigid air. "Man it's cold," Bro shivered.

"Colder than a witches tit," Walt confirmed. "Turn on the damn heater."

I climbed in on the drivers side and closed my door. I reached for the keys.

"Wait," Bro cautioned, "Toby Juan isn't back."

We sat there shivering with the passenger side door wide open. When I heard Toby's footsteps crunching gravel I turned toward him. He was ambling along, zipping his fly, half-drunk, seemingly without a care in the world. I saw his face and bald head bobbing through the blackness of the night, then he was gone. Whoosh. Out of sight.

"What happened to Toby?" The three of us looked.

"Don't know," Walt said. "Was just here."

Nothing. He was gone. Just like that.

Walt stepped back into the darkness. "Toby! Where the hell are you, you asshole?"

We heard a muffled sound.

I saw Walt bend over and look under the truck. "What you doing under there? This ain't no time to change the oil." He knelt down and reached under.

Sure enough, Toby's bald head appeared near the running board. "Son-of-a-bitch mother fuck," he moaned.

"What happened, man?" Bro questioned. "You're head's bleeding."

We watched as Toby struggled to pull himself from under the vehicle. With Walt's assistance he made it to his feet. "God Damn It!" He touched the cut on his head with his right hand, then tried to look at the blood in the dim light of the cab. "That's real blood, man." Then he laughed. "Really gonna look like a mean son-of-a-bitch now."

"How'd you get under the truck?" I still hadn't figured that out.

"Slipped on this god-damned ice, slid under the truck, an' must'a caught my head on something on the way down."

“Man, that was so weird,” Bro reiterated, “one second you were there ... next you were outta sight.”

Toby climbed into the cab, a thin stream of blood trickling down his face.

“Better get him something to use as a bandage,” I pointed, “before he bleeds to death and gets that sticky shit all over.”

Bro pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Toby. After he applied it to his wound, we proceeded on our way. I think his pride was injured more than his head. Drunkards feel little pain.

Just as we entered the town of Crystal Bay, Toby said, “Fuck me. Lost my hash pipe.”

“Probably left it in Bridgeport,” Bro suggested.

“No, god-damn it. I brought it with me. It was here.” He touched his shirt pocket with his right hand. “Son-of-a-bitch musta fallen out when I took my dive.”

“Shit man, it’s gone then,” Walt said casually.

“Gotta go back. Right now. Look for it. Before some tourist or some cop finds it.”

“Ain’t nobody gonna find it this time of night. It’ll be safe ‘til morning.” Bro was trying to reassure him.

“Man,” Toby was relentless, “the pigs’ll find it an’ trace it to me. They’ve got methods of trackin’ shit like that.”

“I’m tired of riding in this truck,” Walt griped. “We can look in the morning.”

“I agree,” I said, “I’ve had enough driving for one night. That’s at least twenty minutes back.”

“It’s dark back there,” Bro tried once again to divert Toby’s paranoia. “Nobody’s gonna find your pipe tonight. Nobody’ll even stop there this late.”

“We did,” Toby argued.

“Give it a rest,” Walt said angrily. “We’ll go that way in the morning. It’ll be light. We’ll have a better shot at finding it in the light.”

“He’s right, Toby,” Bro continued to sooth. “We only have one flashlight and it probably doesn’t work.”

Walt told him, “Your pipe’s safe. Pigs never get out of their cars when it’s cold.”

“Fuck!” Toby reluctantly accepted the situation.

• • •

We found rooms across the highway from where Stu and I stayed on our earlier expedition to the lake. After we dumped our stuff we stopped by the Crystal Bay Club. The Sundowners were still playing and sounded just as good. I checked the dance floor to see if Sunny might be among the dudes and dudeens trotting along with the beat, but I didn’t spot her.

Bro and I walked over to the Cal-Neva Casino to see if she might be working. On the way over I gave Bro an abbreviated version of my first encounter with her, leaving out most of the really juicy parts.

Sure enough, she was working the Black Jack table. When I walked near she glanced at me. Her eyes got wide. I smiled sheepishly. She mouthed the words, “I get off at two.”



I nodded acknowledgment, waved a goodbye, then Bro and I went to the bar and had a beer. We watched the dancers moving to the sound of a club band, checked the room for any prospects for Bro, and relaxed with some easy conversation.

"I'm impressed with your taste in women," Bro looked toward Sunny as she dealt a new round. "She's a looker."

"Thanks. She is special. But I'm afraid I dropped the ball."

"How's that?"

"She kept writing me, asking me to come up for a weekend. But I never made it. I got interested in someone else. Let things slip away. Not sure she's still interested."

"Don't know what you were thinking, to let a babe like that slip through your fingers."

Glancing around the room I spotted a familiar face. "Shit! Think that's my old boss."

"Where?"

I pointed across the room. "Over there, at that Black Jack table along the main aisle."

"Which guy?"

"It is, I think. It's Ned Miles." I couldn't help but stare. "The guy in the black shirt. With the black hair and distinctive gray sideburns."

"Yeah, yeah. I see him."

"But I don't know. The more I look the more he looks different."

"How long since you saw him last?"

"Oh, three ... four years."

"Go over and talk to him."

"No way. I got him fired."

"Oo ... I guess not. Might wanna disappear before he sees you."

"Ah, I'll just lay low. Besides, it might not even be him. I'm always seeing people I think I know." Then I noticed a large ring on his right pinky. "Nope, that's him alright. I'd recognize his pinky ring anywhere."

"How'd you get him fired?"

"Caught him defrauding the company. Turned him in."

"Snitch." Bro laughed.

"Yeah, I guess. But I never did like him. Couldn't trust him. Was always playing people off against each other." I shrugged. "Two faced, you know?"

"Yeah. Known a few like that myself."

Just then Toby and Walt walked up.

"What's happening?" Walt spoke nonchalantly.

"We're avoiding Chris' old boss and checking out his chick." Bro pointed toward Sunny.

"Who?" Walt seemed confused.

"Chris knows that chick dealing Black Jack. They got a thing going." Bro moved to the side so that Toby could pull up a chair.

Walt stared for a long time, then he turned to me. "You mean that thin chick with the long brown hair?"

I nodded.

"How you know her?" Walt looked her way again. "She's a ten for sure. Tucson scale."

“Got good taste in women.” Toby gave me a little bit of an elbow.

“Met her when Stu and I came a couple months back. Showed us a real nice time.”

“I’m impressed, especially after that chubby chick in Hawthorne.” Walt reminded me that he hadn’t forgotten my work-day trip with Becky.

“So what you guys up to?” Bro questioned the new arrivals.

“Tired of looking and not finding,” Walt glanced at Toby. “We’re going down to the Mustang.”

“We need the keys, dude.” Toby held out his hand.

“*The Mustang Guest Ranch?*” Bro seemed surprised.

“One and only,” Walt beamed.

“Most famous whore house in Nevada,” Toby spoke proudly.

“You realize how far that is?” I tried to discourage them as I handed Toby the keys.

“Just down the mountain and on the other side of Reno,” Walt spoke as if the 50 mile trip through the middle of the night would be like driving to the corner Quick Mart for a six pack.

“Wish you guys luck, then.” I shook my head. “You got cash ... or you using daddy’s card again?”

Walt patted his left rear pants pocket. “Got all the cash I’ll need.” Then he grabbed his crotch. “And my purple reitnoid to boot.”

“We’re covered, man.” Toby slipped from his chair and headed toward the door.

“See you losers in the morning.” Walt started to follow, then turned toward Bro. “Wanna come?”

“No. Don’t think so. Not my scene.” Bro waved him off. “I’ll save my money for other things.”

As Walt walked away we heard him say “Testers” above the noise of the room.

...

Bro got tired of watching the crowd and headed back to the motel. I sat around the bar, stretching each drink out as long as I could. Finally Sunny’s shift ended and she walked up beside me. “It’s good to see you, Chris.”

“Hi”

“How you doing?” She gave me a brief, but warm hug.

“Pretty good.”

“Stu here too?” She looked around in a symbolic gesture.

“Naw. He left the crew a few weeks back.”

“That’s too bad.” She grabbed my arm. “Let’s sit in the coffee shop.”

“Sure.”

After we settled in a quiet corner, I said, “Sorry I haven’t gotten up here before. We just never know where we’re gonna be from week to week.”

“Hey, that’s okay.” She gave me a weak smile. “I understand. We can’t always plan our lives the way we’d like.”

“That’s for sure.”

She ordered a hot chocolate. I asked for a Coke. She seemed nervous, like she needed to be somewhere else, or that she was being watched. "It's really good to see you. Really. But you know," she reached out across the table and tenderly placed her hands on mine, "situations change."

"Of course," I said, suspecting right away what was coming.

"I ... you won't be able to stay at my place."

I gave her a nice smile. "Don't worry. I came with some of the guys from my crew. We've got a motel room down the street."

She seemed to relax some, pulling her hands back to take up her steaming cup. She took a tiny sip, then placed the cup back upon the table. "Chris, winter's coming on. It gets really cold up here. It's nice to have someone to be with when the wind blows across the lake."

"Sounds practical," I chuckled.

"Please understand ... I consider you a good friend. But you must know ... that, well, after all these weeks, I met someone ... you know how it is." She waited for a reaction. When I continued smiling, she went on. "Brad and I live together at my place." Again she watched for a reaction. "He's a really nice guy."

"That's great," I said, "you deserve someone who'll appreciate you."

"Thank's for understanding."

Inside, buried deep beneath a false exterior, I was crushed. I chastised myself. "That's what you get for neglecting her so long. It's your own damn fault."

"Yeah, I know, I know," I spoke internally. "But it still doesn't make it easy."

Sunny's voice was soft and warm. "So you're okay with this?"

"Oh, sure. Just stopped by to say hello. To see you again. To check up on how you're doing. I'm sure Stu's gonna want a full report." I took a swallow of Coke. "Nothing more."

"Thanks for thinking of me," she reached over and patted my hand.

"Maybe you don't realize it ... but you gave me one of my most memorable experiences ... sharing that day with me and Stu down on the beach." Her eyes locked onto mine. "Because of that day ... and night ... you'll always be a part of my life."

"It was special for me, too." She blushed a little. "I've dreamt of the three of us many times since then. It's always you I finish with."

"I'm flattered," I think I was blushing a bit myself. "It's too bad reality can't always follow our dreams."

^^^

When Toby and Walt stepped out of their room about ten in the morning they looked beat. "What time you guys get in?" I asked with a knowing smile.

"Don't know," Toby growled, "seven, seven-fifteen."

"Did you score?"

Walt shook his head. Toby looked at him for support, then turned to me, and said,

“Damned place was too crowded.”

“Packed,” Walt offered.

“Guys everywhere.” Toby shuffled toward the truck.

“Who wants sloppy seconds, even in a whore house.” Walt handed me the keys. “You’re gonna have to drive. Got a splitting headache.”

Bro put his arm across Walt’s shoulder. “Little too much to drink, my friend?”

Walt didn’t reply.

“No sweat,” I said, “Glad to drive.” We loaded our bags into the back. “And I’ll try really hard not to hit any bumps.”

Walt gave me a sideways glance as he crawled into the cab. “Yeah, right, asshole.”

Bro and I laughed wickedly.

Starting away from the motel, I said, “So, the two of you drove all the way down this mountain in the middle of the night, across the city of Reno, and all the way out into the desert only to find that the Mustang Ranch was too crowded. That’s some sex drive.”

“What’d you do, just turn around?” Bro adjusted his position by the door.

“Had a drink first, then headed back.” Walt slumped down in the seat so his head was barely visible to any passing car.

“Went back to the Crystal Bay Club for awhile.” Toby added.

“No action there,” Walt confirmed what Bro discovered earlier that night. “Shit, my relnoid’s ready to pop.”

• • •

We wanted to see South Tahoe, so we drove down the Nevada side.

“This looks more like Vegas than Reno,” Bro announced.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but a much nicer setting than either.”

“Hey, look at that,” Toby was more awake than I thought. “Those windows’re blown out.” He pointed to a tall building with black smudges staining its side about half way up. Ripped drapes hung limp through shattered glass.

“Yeah, that’s Harold’s Casino,” Bro informed us. “Was on the news. Some idiot decided to blow the place up. Couple days ago.”

We all took in the sight as we drove by. “Looks like the damage is restricted to those upper levels,” I noted.

“Yeah,” Walt was wide awake, “and only on the North side.”

“What a mess,” Bro shook his head.

“They catch the guy?” Toby quizzed Bro.

“Don’t know. They think a disgruntled employee planted the bomb in a laundry cart.”

“Anybody killed?” Walt asked.

“Nothing serious.” Bro continued examining the building as we left it behind. “Looks like quite a blast.”

• • •

After touring the southern communities along the lake, we headed down to Carson City. “Hey, stop here,” Toby demanded. “Gotta look for my pipe.”

“You sure this is the place?” I questioned.

“Yeah, see,” he pointed to a wide gravel area along the opposite side of the road. “That’s where we whizzed.”

I slowed and turned across the highway and parked in the turn out.

Bro laughed. “Better watch out. Some Highway Patrol pig probably found it and he’s sitting behind those trees waiting for you to come back.”

“Christ! Get outta my way.” Toby slid toward the door.

We spent 15 minutes combing the entire area for nothing. Toby was reluctant to give up the search. “Come on, let’s go,” I urged from the driver’s seat.

“He’s right,” Walt spoke directly to Toby. “You’re pipe’s history.”

Toby cursed and came along.

• • •

“Check this out,” Walt pointed through the windshield. We were on the highway between Carson City and Reno.

“What’s that guy doing?” I tried to look while guiding us through a sudden rush of oncoming traffic.

This good sized fellow was walking along the side of the road, heading south, waving at us as we zipped by.

“Looks like something left over from the Sixties,” Walt laughed.

I checked him out in the rear view mirror. He waved at every car that passed.

“Weirdo, man,” Bro commented.

From my quick glance I got the impression that he had long, coarse, unwashed hair, down past his shoulders, that splayed out in all directions. It appeared matted and tangled, like it hadn’t been washed or combed for months. He also had a thick, scraggly looking beard and a drooping mustache. He wore well-worn faded jeans with patches all over, a loose fitting pull-over white shirt that buttoned part-way up the front, and a suede belt that had dangly ends that bounced in front as he walked along. A leather pouch hung on a long strap from one shoulder. And he wore calf-high soft leather boots or moccasins.

“Looked like a friggin’ mountain man,” Toby pointed out.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “like he’s been lost in the mountains for a century and has finally made his way down into civilization.”

“Yeah, or some flower child that got lost in the desert fifteen years ago,” Bro painted the picture with his hands, “and has just emerged to discover this new and wondrous age.”

“A freak, man,” Toby mumbled. “A friggin’ freak.”

“Yeah, like, look who’s talking,” Walt laughed. “You’re just jealous ‘cause he’s out-freaked you.”

Three of us laughed while Toby growled.

• • •

When we hit Reno I checked into a motel close to the LTR depot and the others returned to Bridgeport. I spent the rest of the day watching football on the tube, ate some dinner at one of the casinos, walked around the strip, checked out the huge gun collection at Harold's, then settled in my room and watched more tube until I fell asleep.

^^^

That Monday morning I caught the early bus to Tonopah. When it made its routine stop in Hawthorne I stretched my legs and visited with Becky and Doris while they worked the cage at the El Cap. Once in Tonopah I picked up the Light Blue Ford, checked for mail at the post office, then stopped by Harry's for lunch.

Harry's is one of those franchise chain restaurants that is open 24 hours every day of the year, including Christmas. Our crew ate a lot of breakfasts there. No other place opened before seven.

The service was fast, if not spectacular, and the food was edible. The prices weren't too bad either. But most important, the waitresses were friendly. Of course, our generous tipping from company expense money probably helped guarantee a smile and the little extras we demanded. After our first visit the waitresses saw us coming and, I suspect, argued to some degree over who would have the privilege of serving us. I'm sure we got a little extra care than the usual one-stop customers.

Breakfast was more or less run of the mill. But lunch at Harry's was a special treat. Tonopah is located about equal distance between Las Vegas and Reno. There are a lot of tour buses that travel between the two cities. These buses generally transported elderly travelers or foreigners on organized tours. The foreigners tended to be Japanese or Chinese, with an occasional European group coming to find The American Wild West.

Tonopah, being the last town until Hawthorne, became the logical place to stop for lunch and to taste the flavor of the Old West. Almost every day, on schedule, at about 1:30, the buses would begin pulling up outside. The passengers would pour out and fill up the restaurant as fast as they could be seated. Literally. Especially if there were two or more buses. The local waitresses must have gone mad. And according to one waitress that I talked with, the tourists don't tip well. Yet, they are among the most demanding. Especially the older Americans.

The tourists, of whatever origin, were quite a contrast to the locals; and to our crew, in our jeans and T-shirts and dusty clothes and scruffy over-all appearance. The elderly American tourists were always in polyesters and pastels, plaid shorts with hard shoes and dark socks up to their knees, dangling purses, foo-foo hairdos, and crows feet in their eyes.

The Europeans tended to be younger, usually wearing designer jeans and mod t-shirts or

expensive looking blouses, new denim jackets, and black or dark brown shoes that looked soft and seemed molded to their feet. Their shoes definitely didn't look American made. Some of the women wore jump-suits or vivid colors and their hair styles varied from long and straight to foo-foo curls and tight buns.

The Oriental tourists, on the other hand, were more conservatively dressed. The men wore pleated pants and the women favored white or light yellow skirts. In fact, the women almost exclusively wore light cotton dresses that came down below the knee. They either wore sandals or some sort of hard shoe.

And all of the tourists had cameras, either hung around their necks, or dangling from short straps around their wrists. Almost every single one of them. And there was much to photograph. A lot of film was exposed in Harry's. There were always flashbulbs going off as clusters of tourists would gather around their waitress. In fact, the waitresses must have their faces framed in plastic album sleeves all around the world.

Watching that scene repeated over and over, I wondered if maybe, in some far away village, one of Harry's waitresses is esteemed as a sex goddess, with her photographic image pasted in a tacky shrine with holy crystals and coral and precious stones and other valued relics laid before her in homage and worship and prayer. All illuminated by various colors emanating from homemade votive candles. And at home this waitress might have wondered why her life has worked so well, why everything she touches turns out right, and why, when she and her husband touch in the night, their love making seems so vigorous and exciting, and why they have one healthy baby after another, even when she faithfully takes her tiny pill.

After their quick meal the tourists usually have a few minutes to stretch before departing. They spread out around the nearby parts of town, touching anything that looks old and used and part of the mining culture. In Tonopah that is just about everything but Harry's. I calculated that if an old prospector type were to happen by about Noon each day he could probably charge a photo fee and strike a bonanza mining the tourists.

When we were in town as a group we were always annoyed when we saw one or more buses lined up. We would usually head on up to the Copper Queen or down to the El Matador at the edge of town. But if one of us spotted any good looking women among the crowd, well, then we would play the macho-wilderness-American-geologist-woodsman-outdoors-type-male-cool-educated-sophisticated-sensitive-good-looking-rugged-western-type-hunk and go in and have a burger; rare. What the hell? The tourists wanted a show.

What sticks in my mind about that particular Monday's visit to Harry's is a conversation I couldn't help overhearing. I was getting ready to leave when an elderly American tourist in the next booth commented on the "... overrated West." His voice was loud and deep and betrayed a self-centered arrogance. I didn't hear everything that he said, but one of his comments has stayed with me. He said to his companions, "I have no respect whatsoever for these Indians out here; the way they allow themselves to be kept on reservations, feeding off the good will of the American taxpayer."

Walking near his table, I stopped and looked him square in the face. "Excuse me," I said politely, "but I couldn't help but overhear what you just said." Borrowing from something I had recently read, I asked him, "You really think Custer died for your sins?" I gave him a quick salute

and walked to the cash register. I couldn't hear anything he said after that, but I'm sure my ears should have been ringing.

I drove back to Bridgeport through Coaldale Junction and took Highway 120 from Benton to Lee Vining. The scenery was incredible, and I had a beautiful, spectacular drive. I don't care what a few Eastern tourists might think. In my opinion the American West is vastly underrated.

^^^

Darkness fell across Bridgeport Lake. Randy rolled up to my Empire. "You ain't seen any of the guys, have you?" He left the engine running.

"Haven't," I responded, "but they don't always stop here first."

"Something's up," Randy seemed fidgety. "They haven't shown in town either."

"They've got three vehicles up there," I pointed out. "They should be covered if something happened."

"Yeah, you'd think." Randy's voice revealed an edge of concern. "That's what makes it weird."

"Maybe we should drive out that way, see what's up."

"That's what I was thinking," Randy turned toward the rented Toyota Land Cruiser he had on lease. "Grab your stuff and let's go."

I grabbed my jacket, filled a jug with water, and pulled a box of granola bars from the cupboard. As a last thought I grabbed a flashlight from under the kitchen sink.

Randy guided the little Toyota down the highway faster than I would have liked. But he slowed once we hit the gravel road heading toward Patterson. When we moved onto the narrow jeep trail leading up the canyon he dropped into second. "Damn," he cursed, "this piss ass road is bad enough in broad sunlight. It's a real pain in the dark."

Our headlights illuminated the ruts immediately in front of us, but there were many switchbacks and curves that were lost in the darkness when the lights suddenly panned out into empty space. "This is nerve wracking," I spoke between held breaths.

"You're telling me." Randy's fingers gripped tight around the wheel. "They better be up here. That's all I've gotta say." He jerked the wheel to the right to miss a suddenly illuminated boulder. "They better not be fuckin' around."

By the time we reached the work area it was ten o'clock.

"There's a fire," I pointed toward a yellow glow slightly to our left.

"Campfire," Randy guessed.

We pulled to a stop in the small meadow surrounding Nugent Cabin, a rickety old structure used for hunting. We could see faces gathered around a fire in an old 55 gallon drum. In that glow they looked like transients in some urban back alley.

"About time you guys showed," Walt's voice carried through the chilled air.

"We were just about ready to start walkin'," Toby's voice pierced the night.

Entering the ring of light, Randy said, "What the fuck's up?"



“Weeny roast,” Walt laughed.

“This better be good,” Randy’s voice remained serious. “We just about drove off the edge about a dozen times on our way up. Better be more than a weeny roast.”

“Gray Beast ... expired on Patterson.” Rob’s words seemed to bring a hush to the group.

Randy didn’t say a thing for a moment. Then, “So just leave it. Take the other trucks down.”

“Can’t,” Walt laughed.

“They’re trapped,” Rob said flatly. “We hiked down here ... for shelter.”

Randy looked toward John. “The Light Blue and yours?”

He nodded. “That GMC was the last up. It died on that narrow saddle above Frying Pan. No way to get the others by.”

“Shit!” Randy kicked a small pile of twigs lying near his boot.

“We tried everything we could,” Rob assured us. “The thing is dead.”

“Can we get a tow truck up there?” Randy was still focused on John.

“Maybe,” he nodded.

“Yeah,” Rob offered. “We can get a truck up there easy. But it’ll be tricky pulling it down around those switchbacks below.”

“We can’t do anything tonight,” Toby suggested. “Why don’t we head down? I’m starvin’.”

“I got some granola in the Cruiser,” I offered.

“Shit! I want real food.” Toby faked spitting to the side.

“I’ll take one.” The darkness didn’t hide Tank’s late night grumpiness.

“They’re on the back seat. Help yourself.” I looked at the others. Most shook their heads.

“I brought some extra trail food,” Rob assured me, “just for this sort of situation. We been munching on that.”

“Great. Your Boy Scout training paid off. Let’s get this fire out,” Randy instructed. “And make sure it’s all the way out. Don’t want no fires keeping us off this mountain.”

“I brought water too, if anybody needs a drink.”

“Plenty of water,” Walt held up a plastic bottle. He unscrewed the lid and began pouring the silver droplets onto the sputtering coals. Billows of white steam and ash leapt toward our faces. Instinctively we all jumped back.

Tank was already seated in the back of the Toyota when the rest of us began to climb in. “Past yer bedtime, Tank?” Toby was forced to sit on Tank’s lap.

“I like to read before I sleep,” Tank’s usual arrogance carried a slightly ragged edge. “Been too dark to read here. A waste of time.”

All nine of us squeezed into that tiny Toyota. “Man, don’t nobody fart,” Walt warned, “or we’ll blow the sides outta this tin can.”

“We’re like sardines,” Toby moaned. “Somebody’s got fish breath.”

“And bad pits,” Rob laughed.

“All of you do,” I smiled at Randy. He shoved it into first gear and we headed down the road.

“Man,” Toby moaned, “if we roll this baby on one of these switchbacks the rescue crew’s gonna hafta use crowbars to pry our bodies apart.”

We crept and bumped our way down the mountain. “Just another adventure,” Bro noted, “for the Mobile Zoo Ghetto.”

“If we live,” Toby asserted.

“What’s this Mobile Zoo Ghetto you fellows always throw around?” John’s voice was right beside my ear. He was squeezed between the seat and Walt’s chest, more or less sitting on Walt’s lap.

“What we call ourselves,” Walt volunteered.

“Guess this ride makes you a member,” Bro noted.

“Oo, a dubious honor, I’m sure,” John chuckled.

“You know,” I said, speaking to John, “you’re quite a bit older than the rest of us.”

“And wiser,” Rob teased.

“Yeah, and wiser,” I agreed. “You’re more of a father figure, someone the rest of us can look up to and seek out when we need to be consoled.”

“Yeah, you’re kind of our mentor,” Bro assumed I was going somewhere with this.

“I think, if you’re gonna be a member of the Mobile Zoo Ghetto,” I paused for effect, “you ought to have a special name. An honorary title, so to speak.”

“Spare me the honor,” John laughed.

I spoke so the whole group could hear. “I think ... from now on ... we should call John ... Papa Zoo.”

“Yeah, Papa Zoo,” just about everyone agreed and laughed.

“What do you think, Papa Zoo?” I turned to look at him the best I could.

He smiled. “If I can’t keep my real name, then I guess ... Papa Zoo will do.”

More cheers.

...

By the time we reached the highway Tank and Jed had dozed off. Walt spoke to Randy. “You should’ve seen what Bridger did today.”

“Afraid to ask,” Randy didn’t turn from his driving.

Walt looked to make sure he was still asleep. “We were sampling Frying Pan. He lost his pencil over a cliff.”

“Oh my god,” Randy feigned shock. “Not his pencil?”

“Right. No big deal. But there was no way he could recover it.”

“So,” Randy was still waiting for a story to develop. “You just pull out another one.”

Rob laughed, “Like any geologist worth his pay ... he hadn’t come prepared.”

“He didn’t have a back-up,” Walt assured us. “No colored pencil, no pen, nothing.”

“Couldn’t he borrow one from you?” I asked innocently.

“I was on the other side of the canyon. We could see each other ... we could shout across ... but we were at least an hour apart ... by the time we would’ve worked our way around the scree and ledges.”

“So what did he do?” Randy seemed impatient.

“Well, here it was, only ten a.m. ... with our whole sampling day ahead ... and he had

nothing to write with. Wasn't about to stand around wasting a day."

"No way, 'cause he's a professional," I tossed in.

"No way," Walt grinned. "So he pulled out his old trusty three-fifty-seven magnum."

"He had a gun up there?" I couldn't imagine a need to carry that extra weight.

"Carries it with him every day," Bro assured me.

"Just in case a rock jumps out and bites him on the ass," Randy laughed.

"Or a bird shits on his head," Walt added.

"Or a rabbit crosses his path going the wrong direction," Bro contributed.

"So how did this gun solve his problem?" I couldn't figure a logical connection.

Walt glanced at Rob before he continued. "He slipped out one of the bullets."

"What?" Randy and I spoke together.

Walt explained. "Used the lead tip to write his notes."

"Geez," I laughed, "guess that would work."

Rob elaborated. "The soft tip worked like a pencil ... but the markings were much wider. He had to use an edge ... to make the words legible ... at all."

"What a man of the wilderness," Randy shook his head as he piloted our sardine can through the California night.

"Tell them about the anvil," Bro urged Walt.

"Oh yeah." Walt shifted his position under Papa Zoo's weight. "When he got farther down he ran across an old mining camp. Found a bunch of stuff left around."

"Like what?" I had developed an interest in mining artifacts.

"Ah ... an old shovel, some rusted tools, stuff like that." Walt yawned. "And an old anvil."

"Geez," Randy spoke over his shoulder, "how the hell did they get something that heavy up the mountain and down into that hole?"

"Don't know, but Jed here carried it out." Walt again tried to shift his position. "But he couldn't carry everything."

"So he left the light stuff," Rob jumped in, "and hauled the anvil up the canyon."

"When we got there to pick him up," Bro told us, "he was still struggling up the last hundred feet of soft scree."

"That's steep right in there," Randy added.

"Damn right," Walt said. "He had the anvil cradled between his arms, kinda resting inside his elbows."

"Anybody help him?" I asked.

"Shit," Toby said with his eyes closed. "No one was crazy enough to go down there."

"Not even you?" I suggested.

"Not even me." He held up his hand and flipped me off.

"So you all just stood along the edge and watched?" Randy was grinning, picturing the sight.

"He was yelling for us to help," Walt said, "but we weren't going down there. Not for a stupid anvil."

"When he finally struggled up we told him he was crazy." It was Bro's turn to yawn. "But the anvil was pretty neat."

“Where’s it now?” I asked.

“Back of my truck,” Papa Zoo frowned. “For ballast, I was told.”

We all were laughing as we approached the edge of town.

• • •

Once we reached the motel we stood around for a few minutes discussing the next day’s plan of action. When Jed opened the door to his room I noticed something sitting on his desk. “What’s that?”

Jed directed me in. “An Apple computer.”

“A computer?”

“Yeah. Brought it with me from Tucson. It’s got sixty-four kilobytes of RAM and a five-and-a-quarter floppy drive. All the latest stuff.”

“Whatever all that means,” I shrugged at the technical terms. “Yours?”

“Yup.” He pointed to a wire running from the back of the unit to the television in the corner. “Hooked it to the TV so I don’t hafta haul around the monitor.”

“What do you have it for? What do you do with it?” I had never seen a computer outside of an office or a college lab.

“Working on a program that’ll predict ore bodies ... using our gold model.”

I let my fingers rest on the keys for a moment. “So that’s why you’re never around in the evenings. You’re in here computing. Neat.”

“If you want I’ll show you how it works sometime. It’s a little late tonight.” Jed tossed his gear into a corner.

“You got that.” I suppressed a yawn myself. “But, yeah, I’d like to see how one of these works.”

“It’s kinda cool,” he said as he walked me to the door.

“I’ll bet. Don’t know much about them though.” When I stepped outside I turned and said, “Guess I didn’t realize they were mobile.”

“They’ve come a long way in these last couple of years,” Jed said knowingly.

“Guess so.”

“They’re making changes all the time.” Jed glanced back toward his machine. “They’re talking now about color monitors and maybe one day having a whole megabyte of RAM memory.”

“Yeah? Guess it’s all happening so fast.” I was snapping the buttons on my jacket to ward off the night’s chill. “Last time I was in Tucson I noticed a new store in one of those strip malls along Broadway. All it sells is computers.”

“Modern times. Science marches on.” Jed began to close the door.

“Yeah. And I’m marching back to my trailer to get some sleep.”



Randy was wrapping up some paperwork in preparation for a brief return to Tucson for a dog and pony show concerning funding for his project. He assigned various tasks to the others, while Bro, Rob, and I were given the chore of extracting the Gray Beast from the mountain. When we pulled up behind the disabled vehicle Rob and I climbed out. Immediately the crisp chill of the morning air embraced us, as if winter were just out of sight beyond the farthest ridge, waiting to blanket the mountain with its white breath. Even facing winter's edge, the scenery was spectacular, and any discomfort was soon forgotten.

Bro remained in the truck. "We're sitting on top of the world," he said enthusiastically. "Should be able to pick up something." He fiddled with the truck's radio until a distant California station crackled through. "Rock'n'Roll!" he shouted. "Work music."

"Turn it up," I demanded playfully.

"Crank it up," Rob chimed in.

Bro happily followed our instructions and left the doors and windows open. We moved rocks, shoveled gravel, and strained muscles in our effort to build a wider road, singing or humming along with the songs we knew, occasionally throwing in a little air guitar on spade or pick handle. Of course, some of the lyrics seemed out of place on top of the world, juxtaposed against barren rock and hundred mile views, but the notes helped get us through a tedious task.

After an hour of back-breaking work we took a break. We were stretched out in the sun with the cool air chilling the droplets of sweat as they beaded on our foreheads. The spectacular view captured our attention. Ridge after ridge moved off to the south. Out there were the peaks and domes of Yosemite. Out there were the trees and meadows and streams that attracted millions to these mountains every year; for renewal, for solitude, for peace of mind. An escape from the rat race. A temporary connection with our primal past.

Reclining there, quietly contemplating the massive scenery, I sensed the music's shift from the hard beat of rock'n'roll to something less abrasive. The simple acoustic strains of a lone guitar drifted out into the surrounding silence and almost became visible in front of us. The clear, sharp sounds muted slightly as the vocalist began his sad refrain, "It's Nature's way of telling you something's wrong." I'd heard the song many times before, and knew its simple lyrics by heart, but they had never really affected me before. On that mountain, on that morning, I felt that song as if it was directed at me. The thin chords of music entwining with the simplistic lyrics seemed so poignant at that moment. I thought, "Nature is simple, even in its complexity."

"It's Nature's way of receiving you," the voice sang across the mountainside.

I was seated upon cold, hard, sharp edged rock, yet I felt comfortable and secure, protected by some unseen goddess shrouding me in her sublime beauty.

The words poured on. "It's Nature's way of retrieving you."

"Retrieving you," I puzzled within myself. "From where? We're right here. I'm right here. How much closer can we get to Nature?" We were hunkered down upon the bare bones of the World, almost as intimate as a human could be with the Earth. "Why would Nature need to retrieve us?"

“It’s Nature’s way of telling you ... dying trees.”

I looked down the slope toward the tree line. There were many brown spires protruding from the dense green. “Why are those trees dead?” I contemplated. “Some beetle? Some fungus? Or is it Man?”

“Can’t be Man,” I argued with myself. “It’s too far from any city. We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Ah,” I thought, “but what about air pollution, acid rain, and our general disrespect for life?”

“It’s Nature’s way of telling you something’s wrong. Something’s wrong.” The song ended with a dramatic drum roll, resembling thunder, but reminiscent of a dirge. A long moment of silence followed as the last of the song faded off across the landscape.

There were no birds chirping. There was no breeze. There was just the calm chilled air and the sparkling view to the south.

The laid back DJ’s voice spilled from the tiny speakers, attempting to fill the void. “One for all you tree huggers out there ... *Nature’s Way*, by Spirit.”

I turned to Rob and Bro. “Why did you guys become geologists?”

“Don’t know,” Bro shrugged. “It’s a job.”

“Yeah, but why?” I wouldn’t let him off the hook. “Why this job ... as opposed to any other?”

“Well ... guess I like working outdoors.” Bro tossed a stone down the slope.

“Me too,” Rob reclined upon a relatively smooth stone face. “Love being out in the fresh air ... away from the pollution and noise of the city.”

“So you’d say you became geologists ‘cause you’re attracted to the spectacular landscapes and fresh air?”

They both nodded. Then Rob added, “Yeah, but I like rocks too. I’m good at it.”

“You have an aptitude for mineralogy,” Bro suggested.

“Yeah, I guess.” Rob had his arms crossed behind his head as he stared at the sky.

“Okay,” I was insistent, “but we all do enjoy Nature. And if that’s so, then why is there such a chasm between geologists and, say, the Forest Service and BLM?”

“They hate us,” Bro noted flatly.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “they seem to. But why?” I shoved a line of gravel with the sole of my boot. “We all love the outdoors, like they do.”

“Yeah,” Rob said sleepily, “but they think we rape their environment.”

“We cut roads up the sides of their mountains and dig mines in the middle of their forests.” Bro pointed toward the almost unbroken green to the west. “After all, a mine is our ultimate goal.”

“Our ultimate product,” Rob concurred.

That was when it hit me, the first time that it actually sank in, that our final purpose as exploration geologists was to locate a mine. A mine that would, by its very nature, diminish the aesthetic wealth of the surrounding landscape as the mine produced mineral wealth for its owners and material possessions for our society.

“We’re caught then, aren’t we?” I looked down at my boot and realized that as I moved it

back and fourth through the loose gravel it acted like a small bull dozer, scraping the surface, exposing the damp material underneath. “Trapped between being in the Nature we love and fulfilling our professional obligation to actually destroy that Nature. Our work destroys our life.”

“After a while we’ll get hardened to it,” Bro suggested.

“Yeah,” Rob said lazily, “after a while you just don’t give a shit.”

“Yeah, but the Forest Service people,” I looked at Bro, “like those women at the restaurant the other night ... their job is really to manage the forests for the logging industry. Their job isn’t really to preserve ... it’s to protect the timber until somebody comes along to log it. Their ultimate goal is the same as ours ... the destruction of what they say they love.”

“Might be right,” Bro scooped up a handful of gravel.

“A lot of the problem is cross-communication,” Rob suggested.

“That’s true too,” I said, “there’s always this adversary feeling between all these groups, instead of a more productive cooperation. They all act like they’re out to get each other ... like it’s some competition and only one team can win. We all can win.”

“If we don’t start working together we’re all gonna lose.” Bro tossed gravel down the slope.

I sighed. “Each group lives within its own circle of self approval and refuses to hear what the others are really saying.”

“Or thinking,” Bro added.

“You got it,” Rob said, sitting up. “We better get back to work.”

“Yeah,” I said as I stood. “Like Paul Simon says in *The Boxer*, ‘A man hears what he wants to hear, and disregards the rest.’”

“Amen,” Bro dusted off his jeans. “We better finish raping this hillside before those Forest Service chicks come along.”

...

Using jacks and chains and the vehicles above and below, we were finally able to get the Beast turned around. Just as we finished, as if on cue, Chuck Alcorn, from the Alcorn Garage in Bridgeport, drove up. Chuck had agreed to take a shot at dragging the vehicle down the mountain with a large four wheel drive tow truck that really looked out of place on the top of that mountain. As if he did that sort of rescue work every day, he hitched the Gray Beast to the back of his vehicle and chugged away like he was on a paved road. No problem. The three of us each piloted one of the other trucks down the mountain and rejoined the civilized world.

...

In contrast to the splendors of our morning, we spent the rest of the afternoon doing our laundry at the Bridgeport laundromat. It was located in its own building about a block behind the Sportsman restaurant. As we found out, that was where all of the Marines, from the nearby camp, seem to spend their off duty hours. Their proximity in those close quarters made us long hairs nervous, but we minded our manners and got by.

It was a typical facility, with plenty of washers and dryers; basically well kept; with open

windows on all sides to help ventilate the place and keep the usual humidity down. But it still felt stuffy in there after spending the morning breathing the crisp air on top of the world.

I began to fill a machine with my clothes when Rob stepped up. He placed one white cloth bag on top of three separate machines. I must have looked at him strangely, because he volunteered an explanation. "I pre-sort my laundry ... according to how my clothing should be washed ... and by color." He started pulling his whites from one bag and gently placing them in an open machine. "If I pre-sort them ... all I hafta do ... when we come to a laundromat ... is place the contents of each bag ... into its own wash machine ... and I'm all set."

"You sound like your mother." I chuckled as I poured soap powder over the clothes in my machine.

"Hey," he spoke softly, "it works."

"Sure," I replied, a bit defensively, "a lotta people pre-sort their clothes." But inside my head I said, "But they don't always hafta explain why they do it."

"You've gotta load these machines just right." He demonstrated with his whites. "Everything has to be evenly distributed."

I watched as he began to carefully add his soap powder to the rising water. He cautioned me, "It's important to apply only the correct amount of detergent ... in an even manner ... across the surface of your load ... and it should be added to the water and not on the fabric directly." Finishing with the powder, he added, "That way you avoid clumping and assure a thorough washing for all the garments."

"Oh ... okay," I tried to act like I cared.

Then he proceeded to elaborate on the various types of soap available and the specific chemicals they contained and just what those chemicals would do to help or harm the variety of fabrics we might find in a typical load of washing. "Some fabrics need special soap compounds and unusual handling to preserve the quality and integrity of the material."

"Guess you're right," I crossed my arms and had my butt propped against one of the machines. "I know my underwear needs special handling sometimes. And a nose clip might help too."

He didn't laugh.

My machine was already chugging away as Rob fiddled with the dials and knobs on each machine, like some mad scientist preparing an elaborate experiment. Clicking through the settings, he explained, "It's important to sensitize each machine to the variety of fabric it contains."

Standing back, scanning the knobs to make sure he had them set to his liking, he continued my education. "Now, the next thing ... is the application of the bleach." He checked his watch. "It has to go in at just the right time to be most effective."

Later, as his clothes tumbled in a dryer, he again tried to inform me. "You should use this new stuff ... to keep off static cling. It's great. You just tear off a sheet ... and throw it in with your clothes. Then toss it when you're done."

"Gee, even I could do that," I played the dummy for his benefit.

He peered through the glass at his clothes gently rolling with the movement of the machine. "You hafta remove some of these delicate fabrics before the others ... to avoid scorching." On



and on like some old woman whose entire life was spent caring for a bunch of kids.

...

That evening Toby and Randy and Bro and I went out to a bar and grill just south of town where they featured homemade pizza. We sat around a big round table in a side room with warming flames sparking and popping in a wonderfully huge fireplace. It was real homey.

As usual we drank lots of beer and once the pizza was devoured we decided to play a few rounds of shuffle-board. Randy and Toby were whipping up on Bro and me when two local women challenged the pair to a quick game. Enticed by the possibilities, the two macho men accepted the challenge with flourishes of bravado.

“You sure you wanna play us?” Toby glowed with confidence. “We’re pretty damn good.”

“Oh, we’ve been watching,” the red head confided. “We know how good you are.” She turned to her companion and said something under her breath.

The blond smiled as her reply. Then she turned to Toby and said, “You wanna put some money on this?”

“Sure,” Toby returned the smile, confident in his abilities, “how much?”

The women looked at each other, whispering between themselves. “Two bucks each.”

“You got it,” Randy said as he put down his beer. “Two bucks on the rail.” He pulled out his wallet and laid two singles in the trough about half way between the two ends of the table. The women and Toby followed suit.

They tossed a coin to see who would be sliding first, and the competition began. Randy brought his beer over to where Bro and I were sitting. “Watch this for me.” He took one last swig. “Think we’re gonna score some ass tonight.”

I shook my head. “No way, boss.” It was obvious to everyone in the bar except my two deluded companions. “They just wanna show you up on that table.”

“Naw, man,” Randy stood up straight, “Me and Toby are gonna get laid to-night.”

As the game played out the women whooped and clapped as their points accumulated. The local crowd supported them with cheers of encouragement. Toby and Randy became unnerved by the ease with which the women knocked their markers off the table. In the end the two macho men were whipped badly. There were cheers and applause from all around the bar, as if this were a usual occurrence. The women walked up to the center of the table to collect their winnings.

Toby’s ego was especially damaged. He spoke to the blond with a restrained growl in his voice. “You don’t work for the Forest Service, do you?”

The two women shook their heads. The blond replied, “No, we’re locals.”

The red head pocketed her share of the winnings. “We’re just typical girls ... who grew up in this bar with this shuffle board table as the only entertainment on long winter nights.”

“See you boys around.” The blond turned and rejoined her friends at the bar.

^^^

Toby entered my Empire with a frown on his face. “We’re gonna be here ‘til the snow flies.”

“What?” I was adding the last points to the Master Map.

“Spurrier told me that Randy told him this project won’t end ‘til there’s too much snow to see the ground.” Toby went to the refrigerator and helped himself to a Coors.

“From what I’m hearing around town,” I capped my Rapidograph, “that could be tomorrow or next month.”

“Don’t know if I can last.” He swallowed from the can. “Spurrier’s driving me nuts.”

“Just blow him off. Don’t let him get to you.”

“That’s easier said than done.” With his second swallow he emptied half the can. “He’s got a way of gettin’ under my skin. Like a rash. Just keeps itchin’ ‘til you gotta scratch.”

“Know what you mean. Rubs me the wrong way too.” I folded the field maps and moved them to the side of the table.

Toby watched as I blew across the fresh ink on the Master Map. When I was satisfied that it was dry, I folded that map and set it aside with the others.

“Bro tells me you’re goin’ environmental on us.”

I looked at him closely to see how he meant that. It seemed more conversational than accusatory. “A bit, maybe.”

“What bee got up your butt?”

I laughed at his colloquialism. “The assays are coming back showing high quantities of gold, silver, copper, and moly.”

“So? That’s why they sent us here. To get results.”

“Yeah.” I sat back against the foam cushions of the bench. “But we’re out here ‘cause we enjoy the outdoors.”

“Still don’t see a conflict.”

I looked him square in the eyes. “The mountain we climbed today could be an open pit tomorrow.”

“That’s our job.”

“Uh hu, it is. But that bothers me ... that we may be contributing to the rape of the environment.”

“This the first you figured that out?”

“Really hit home since we got here.” I waved my hand toward the lake and mountain.

“Like I said, that’s our job,” Toby rubbed the stubbly fuzz starting to cover the top of his head. “If we don’t do it someone else will.”

“I know you’re right.” I looked at my hands. “But I don’t know if what we’re doing is right. Least for me.”

“Maybe that’s why they pay us and treat us so well.” He took a small sip from his beer. “To buy our consciences,” he laughed wickedly, “to procure our soul for their evil purposes.” Like the rest of us on that crew, he had a flair for the melodramatic.

When I didn't respond, he went on. "Look, this is the way I figure it." He sat up straight and rested his arms on the table. "The demands of the population stimulate industry. Industry ... to provide for the demands of the population ... encourages the producers. The producers ... to be able to supply the needs of industry ... encourage exploration. Those that explore find new sources of raw materials to be utilized by the producers." He took another sip.

"I agree," I said, "and I understand all that. But sometimes it seems that industry creates demands ... artificial demands ... within the population. That also stimulates the producers and the explorers to find new sources of raw materials ... but for truly unnecessary products. If the population only consumed what's necessary, instead of what they want, industry would be forced to cut back ... the demands upon the producers would be lowered, and the destruction of our landscape and environment would be reduced to manageable levels."

"Okay. We're seein' the same picture. It's not minin' that's bad, it's those who demand what minin' produces."

"You got it. The wanton, unchecked demands upon the environment. Everything in moderation. What I'm against is overloading the system."

"I'll drink to that." And Toby chugged the last of his beer.

Watching him pour that liquid down his throat, I was hit by a stabbing pain above my eyes, and all across my forehead. When Toby placed the empty can on the table, I said, "Think I'm gonna chase you outta here. Not feeling too hot."

"What's up, Pard?"

"Suddenly got a terrible sinus headache." I rubbed my forehead with both hands. Tears formed in my eyes. "Starting to make me nauseous."

"Geez, man, don't puke."

"No no ... I just need to lie down."

"Take somethin' for it," Toby stood. "I'll see yuh in the mornin'."

"See yuh."

^^^

"We've gotta move our trailers into town." Rob stood at the door to my Empire.

"Huh?"

"Yeah," he grinned, "gotta make room for a dune buggy race."

"What?" I half way thought he was pulling my leg.

Rob went into his explanation mode. "Randy made an agreement with the manager here," he pointed off toward the building by the dock, "to move out ... when it came time for this little shindig."

"He never said anything about this." I was getting perturbed. "Where we gonna park?" My sinus headache flared. "Where we gonna stay?"

"We made arrangements ... at the Lodge." Rob moved his hands deep into his pockets. I hadn't seen him do that since Pablo Canyon. "You can park your trailer in that lot behind the

main building. Go remote. Just 'til Monday. Then we're moving back."

"That's bullshit," I whined, my headache throbbing, bringing tears to my eyes. "Unhook everything, stow it away ... pull this sucker three miles down the road for three crummy days ... then pull it back and set it all up again?" I backed away from the door. "What a pain in the ass."

Rob stepped in as I moved through the trailer. "There's nothing we can do about it. These people come here every year ... make reservations a year in advance. Guess there are hundreds of them. Some are already in town ... sand rails on trailers behind thirty foot RVs."

"What kind of a race is it?" I growled.

"From Bridgeport to Hawthorne."

"How they get there?"

"They take the old rutted roads ... out across the back country."

"Oh, great, I can just see it now." I sat on my bunk and placed my head in my hands. "A hundred roaring sand rails spewing air pollution and kicking up dust and generally ripping up the landscape trying to beat each other to the slots at the El Cap."

A truck pulled up outside. Rob glanced through the kitchen window. "Glue Brothers," he mumbled, shaking his head.

I sat up and looked through the small window above my bunk. The two were wearing the dark safety glasses that Randy had issued. They stepped from the truck and strolled to the trailer like a couple of cool cats.

"What you doing out here," Rob demanded. "Thought you were prepping for the field."

"Cool your jets, Robby Boy." Toby snapped back. "We're on our way."

"You get those sample bags marked?" Rob spoke calmly, but with a sharp edge to his tone.

"We took care of it, man. Don't drop a load." Toby brushed by him and stood at the end of my bunk. "How's your head this mornin'?"

"Pounding."

"Sorry to hear. Need anything?"

"Naw, got aspirin and Sudafed. Nothing else helps."

"Well ... get some rest while we're out climbin'." He pointed toward my pillow.

"He's got work to do," Spurrier blurted, assert his authority, "just like the rest of us."

Toby turned on Rob. "Fucker's got a migraine, you asshole. Cut'im some slack."

Rob stared at him.

"I'm tired of your bullshit." Toby pushed back past Rob.

"It's obvious you've got a problem with authority," Rob spoke softly.

"Authority, my ass," Toby turned to face Rob once he cleared the steps. "I've got a problem with you." He jabbed a finger toward Rob.

"Don't go pointing your finger at me." Anger rose in Rob's voice. "You just better get in line ... or you'll be hiking back to Tucson."

"Oh ... hey, threaten me, WILL YA." Toby's voice jumped in volume. "Don't you be goin' off on me, you asshole," his face was livid and mean, "or I'll be doin' a bit of talkin' to some comp'ny 'ministrators 'bout your little 'counting problems on your expense reports."

Rob's hands went down into his pockets. I could see that he fought to stay calm.

I hadn't heard the details, but talk was that Rob fudged the numbers on his reports,

pocketing the difference for his own use. The two stared at each other and finally Bro pulled Toby by the sleeve and said, "Come on, let's go. We got work to do."

Toby snarled, "And I'll just bet they'd be interested in the brand of dope yer smokin' too." He turned and walked to the truck. When he got in the cab he continued to stare at Rob through the windshield until Bro drove them away.

^^^

"Chris? How's yer head?" Toby's voice entered before he stepped into the trailer.

I was warming a can of chili. "Much better. Still nails me once or twice a day, but I'm surviving."

"Got enough of that for two?"

"Sure," I smiled. "Want me to open another can?"

"Hungry as hell," he patted his stomach. "Got chips'r somethin' to go with it?"

"Have yourself a seat." I moved to the cupboard next to the refrigerator. "Got Doritos and crackers. Take your pick." I placed the bag and the box on the table. "Want a beer?"

"Shit! Does Nevada have silver mines?"

I laughed as I opened the fridge. "Coors or Coors?"

"Ah, shit. One of each."

I tossed him a cold can and went back to heating our meal.

He leaned back on the bench and made himself comfortable. "Do anything interesting today?"

"Well ... I did, actually. By the time I shipped samples my headache disappeared pretty much so I thought maybe some clean mountain air might clear the rest."

"Did a little hikin', huh?"

"You got it. Went up Horse Canyon, just above Twin Lakes."

"Heard that's nice up that way."

"Yeah, the trail is just under the Matterhorn and Sawtooth Ridge. Really spectacular."

"Probably had it pretty much to yourself, huh?"

"Actually, being Saturday and all, there were a few others out there."

"Chicks?"

"Not alone. All with guys."

"Too bad."

"Yeah. Were some splendid legs along that trail."

He swigged his beer as I stirred the chili. "Did see a bunch of hunters though, carrying their rifles and other stuff."

"Yeah, deer season started two days ago. We've had'ta wear lots of orange flagging ... and Spurrier's even got himself duded out in an orange hunting vest. Says it lets the hunters see him against the gray rock. Says they won't shoot him then. I think he just makes a better target."

We both laughed.

Pulling bowls from the shelf, I commented, "It is weird to come upon a person with a loaded rifle while you're alone on the trail."

"You need to arm yourself."

"Naw," I shook my head. "Not a gun person. But it's a creepy feeling, knowing another has the power to snuff your life instantly."

"Like in that movie," Toby scratched his head. "Uhm ... uh...."

"Deliverance?"

"Yeah, you got it, that's it." He sat up, excited. "But you see, like I said, they were armed. They fought back."

"Yeah, but it's scary. Either way." I dished up our grub.

"We've seen lots of dead deer 'round town."

"Yeah, me too. On hoods of cars and in the back of pickups."

"Deer parts. Heads and antlers, mostly." Toby spooned his first mouthful and blew on it, driving away a thin wisp of steam. "But some must butcher their kill in the field. Seen some hind quarters sittin' in the back of a truck. Like big drumsticks at Thanksgiving."

"I saw one group that stuck the heads on top of their truck cab like they were trophies." I broke a few crackers over my chili. "Big deal. Real macho," I dusted the crumbs from my fingers, "to kill a defenseless animal from a hundred yards."

Toby dug into the Doritos and made intentionally loud crunching sounds as he stuffed one after the other into his mouth.

I went on. "I really get annoyed when they call hunting a sport."

"Why's that?"

"Well, shoot." We both laughed. "If a person is in it for the meat ... I guess I can accept that ... especially in those areas where Man's eliminated the natural predators ... and population control is a man-made necessity. But I wouldn't call it a sport."

"Still don't see your point."

I finished chewing my first mouthful. "A sport, by it's nature, implies that all participants have an equal chance at victory. In hunting ... a deer has no chance."

"He can run away."

"Not if a guy's standing downwind on a ridge a hundred yards away, zooming in with a high powered scope and a long range rifle. Besides, to make it fair, the deer would hafta have an equal chance to kill the man. Fair is fair."

"I like that," Toby laid down his spoon and reached for his Coors. "But how can you make hunting a sport?"

"Don't think you can." I lifted another spoonful of the red stew. "Maybe it'd be more challenging to use a bow and arrow? You'd hafta get closer to your target."

"Like the Indians, huh?"

"Sort of," I said with my mouth full, "but they hunted out of necessity." I thought as I finished chewing. "Maybe better," I said, "be a real he-man and face the animal on its own ground, hand to hoof."

"How you gonna kill it bare handed?"

“Good point.” I sat back in my seat to contemplate. “Okay, you can use a Bowie knife. Hoof against hand held steel. Then you could call it sport.”

“Dangerous sport,” Toby nodded approvingly.

“Yeah. The deer would have a chance to strike back by kicking or using its rack. And the man would definitely hafta be a good tracker and stalker to get that close.”

“Right. And alcohol would hafta be eliminated from his pre-hunt diet to assure peak performance from all senses.”

“And the hunter would hafta become an athlete ... physically fit and healthy in mind and body. It’s only a sport if there’s equal chance for victory or defeat.”

Toby grinned. “That’s an interesting concept, my friend. But I don’t think it’ll catch on.”

“Why’s that?”

“Most hunters just wanna kill somethin’. They don’t care if it’s sport or not. Long as they get to shoot their guns.” He pointed his finger at me, cocked his thumb. “BANG!”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

We ate on in silence. Then I said, “Well ... in spite of the hunters, the Twin Lakes area is nice. There’re several campgrounds up there. Would be nice in the summer.”

“I’ll bet.”

“And there’s a trailer park up there filled with oldsters. Like some sort of a senior citizen village. They’re all over.”

“Retired folks got nothin’ better to do. Why not camp where there’s great scenery?”

“Probably right.” I prepared another mouthful. “Oh, yeah ... and I saw some salmon in one of the streams. Look like huge gold fish.”

“Salmon? In the mountains?”

“Yeah, some guy there said it’s spawning season. Was pretty cool.”

“Salmon, huh?” He winked at me. “Don’t tell Spurrier ... or he’ll hafta go up there and do more master baiting.”

^^^

The next morning—Sunday—Tank, Toby, and I decided to spend the day in Yosemite. On the way over the pass toward Lee Vining the left front tire on my truck blew. Fortunately it was a four lane highway and with little traffic, but, we were on a long, sweeping curve descending into the valley. There were several tense moments as I regained control and brought the truck to a safe stop on the shoulder.

“Holy Shit! Thought we were gonna die,” Toby exhaled.

“Sorry,” I apologized, “but it took me a second to figure out what happened.”

“Remind me never to ride with you again,” Toby laughed. “You’re tryin’ to kill me.”

The three of us stood looking at the shredded tire.

“I think you killed that one.” Tank spoke without inflection.

“No doubt.” I knelt to examine the frayed fibers and steel belt now exposed through torn rubber.

“Nice job,” Toby said as he knelt beside me.

“Yeah ... blew the hell outta this one.”

“No,” he patted me on the shoulder as he stood up. “I meant getting us stopped without rollin’. The way this thing blew we could’a easily been hamburger right now.”

“Thanks. Natural instinct I guess.” I stood and went to the cab for the tools. “Least we’re not road kill.”

Tank pulled the spare from the back as I loosened the bolts. Toby set up the jack. “Oh ... this’ll be sweet ... jackin’ this baby on a hill.” Suddenly he jumped to the side, kicking out with his leg. The spare tire crashed into the guard rail. “Fuckin’eh, Tank?”

“Got away from me,” Tank walked up to the downed tire. “I set it down and it started to roll.”

“Gee, that’s what happens to round objects when they’re set free on a hill.” Toby shook his head.

Tank moved the spare closer to the left front. “Better get some rocks to brace those tires.” He pointed toward the back of the vehicle.

“Tell you what, Tank,” Toby moved up close. “You’re such a big lump, why don’t you go lay down in front of them tires? We shouldn’t hafta worry at all.”

Tank looked at Toby with a doubtful expression on his face. “I don’t think so.”

Toby shook his head as he walked to the side of the road. “Come on Tank, let’s get some big rocks. The ones in your head’re mostly gravel.”

After we nervously jacked the truck high enough to free the tire, replacing it was a breeze. We were soon back on our way down that long curving highway.

...

Driving along the western shore of Mono Lake, I commented on what I recently learned about the battle brewing over its water. Neither Toby nor Tank seemed concerned. They were impressed by Tioga Pass, and I thought Yosemite was as spectacular as ever, even though the streams were almost dry and most of the waterfalls were barely a trickle. The previous winter’s snows had melted and run off. The cliffs and domes were ready for a new blanket.

But the park has so much to offer it would be impossible to be disappointed. After taking in the major sights we drove down toward Fresno, intending to visit Sequoia National Park. But as we passed through Fish Camp we decided to stop and have an early lunch. The restaurant there was nice and homey, with several friendly, attentive waitresses. We decided to have the brunch special that included eggs benedict with golden hash browns, perfectly crisp toast, a variety of fruit, and as much champagne as we were willing to drink that early in the day. It was a real treat.

On the way out Toby bought \$20 worth of gold dust in a tiny vial. “Shit, we’re always lookin’ for this stuff for everybody else. With the price of gold at eight-hundred I’m gonna get me some ‘fore it’s all sucked up by the government.”

When we got to Oakhurst we decided we had better turn north on Highway 49 and head



back toward Bridgeport. Somewhere south of Sonora Toby pulled out his little vial and shook the sparkling flakes. "This stuff'll only get more valuable," he assured us in a dream-like voice.

"You could have gotten that for five dollars six months ago," Tank informed him, "when gold was at three-hundred."

Toby stuffed the vial in his shirt pocket and growled. "You're startin' to get on my nerves," he settled back in his seat, "like Spurrier."

"Oh ... I don't know," I said. "Our buddy Tank here has got his problems ... but he's certainly no Spurrier. Spurrier's a killer."

"That's for sure," Toby agreed. "The way he hauls in those trout."

"Didn't mean that." I had to keep my eyes on the narrow, twisting highway. "He kills a person's mind ... their spirit." The road straightened. I glanced over at my companions. "He sucks everything that's good right out of your Being."

"He is a negative person," Tank assured us.

"A toxic personality," I added, "of the worst kind."

"He's a butt head," Toby contributed.

"He wears a gentle, amiable veneer." I spoke as a string of cars passed in the opposite direction. There must have been a dozen of them stuck behind a slow moving RV. "He's not obvious."

"Oh, he's subtle, alright." We were now talking about one of Toby's favorite subjects. "He plays the game of bein' a good guy, a real buddy, but he's always got a hidden agenda."

"He always hides his true colors," Tank was getting into Rob bashing.

"When he hurts, he hurts people down deep," I said.

"He's a cruel, deceitful snake in the grass," Toby said, with anger rising in his tone. "A god-damned chameleon." Toby crossed his arms over his chest and sank down deeper into the seat, his head barely high enough to see over the dash. "He's a cold blooded lizard with a viper's tongue. The devil incarnate."

"One of the things that annoys me the most," I hadn't finished, "is his way of always explaining everything. Every little detail of why he does everything a certain way."

"He's full of bullshit," Toby said flatly.

"It's as if he's building the fantasy as he goes, thinking detail will convince us that what he's spewing is the truth." I slowed as we became the fifth vehicle behind an old camper heading north. "Damn." Down shifting, I went on. "No matter how fantastic or absurd his claim ... he pushes it off as truth."

"He's an eccentric bastard, for sure. Got some peculiar habits." Toby's eyes were closed as he spoke. In spite of our Rob bashing he drifted toward an afternoon nap.

"You're right," Tank reiterated. "He lies in detail. He thinks his lies gain legitimacy by creating intricate detail."

"He's a cock sucker," Toby said softly.

I laughed. "Tried to convince me he was surfing on scree slopes on Mount Patterson."

"He's full of himself." Toby seemed to be coming around again. "That was Jed."

"Probably." I noticed in the rear view mirror that two more cars had joined our train behind the camper. "Oh yeah ... and then this morning he tried to tell me about laying some high school

chick on three different beds last night. Said they did it on her bed, her mother's bed, and his bed back at the Lodge."

"I know for a fact," Tank said with authority, "he never left his room after dinner. And Walt was with him the whole time."

"You see," I pounded the steering wheel for emphasis, "this is a prime example. He laid out all the sordid details of this fantasy. How he coaxed her out of her jeans the first time ... how he gently tore her panties off her in his room ... everything in elaborate detail ... with full color highlights and appropriate facial expressions."

"What a bullshiter," Toby laughed. "He should become a god-damned novelist."

"He'd make a mint writing sex fantasies for sleez magazines." I shook my head.

"I've come to the end of my rope with him." Toby's voice grew soft again, as sleep slowly took him.

And his sleep kept him from seeing some really pretty country: twisting roads, drying lakes, as well as clusters of hang-gliders drifting across the highway with the sunlight catching the brilliant colors of their wings. There were lots of interesting little towns and stand after stand of trees. Along Highway 108 we saw a few redwoods, lots of interesting rock formations, several streams still splashing in the autumn air, and lots of campgrounds. We made it back to Bridgeport about seven.

^^^

Once the racers cleared the Falling Rock Trailer Park we moved our trailers back into position. The others parked theirs and headed into the field, while I took the time to get mine leveled, hooked up, and functioning. Even with the inherent hassles of setting up a trailer, the weather was so pleasant I didn't mind. Overnight the temperature had dropped below freezing, and the morning was brisk, but by ten it promised to be another beautiful autumn day: sunny with a slight breeze and a pleasant warmth. After my usual chores I pulled out a lawn chair and read in the golden sun.

...

"Boy you missed a treat." Toby was full of laughter as he carried his samples from his truck to my trailer.

"What I miss?"

"Our good buddies're gonna have a tough time toppin' this one." A huge smile remained plastered across his face.

I was all ears, waiting for his explanation.

"Told you how we've been tyin' flagging 'round our hats and maybe a band or two around each arm ... to make us visible during huntin' season."

“Yeah,” I shook my head. “You mentioned that.”

“Well ... Walt and Rob, and even our pal Bro, duded up their hats like they were in some god damned Marti Gras parade.”

I’m sure I looked puzzled.

“They wrapped the entire top of their straw cowboy hats with orange flagging. Then they hung streamers all around the sides, hangin’ over the brims. It was hangin’ down to their shoulders. Their hats looked like floats in some goddamned parade.”

I pictured the multi-colored bunting foo-foo plastered all over the floats in the New Years Day celebrations.

“They wore these get ups all day long, strutting around like some kind’a fancy roosters. Looked like freakin’ idiots.” Toby had a good laugh. “Freakin’ idiots.”

“At least they were outta sight.” I moved a couple of Toby’s samples into a corner while he retrieved several more from the back of the truck.

When he returned, he said, “Yeah ... but they didn’t stay outta sight. They wore their orange hula skirt hats into town.”

“Idiots. Good thing Guy isn’t around. The way he hates for us to screw up in front of locals.”

“That’s it,” he said as he placed the last bags on the trailer floor. “Only got nine today.” He brushed his hands together to remove the dust. “But that ain’t the end of my story.”

“Uh oh,” I said half under my breath.

“Our three companions decided they needed to pick up some chow at the local grocery.”

“The little one in town, or the new place out to the west?”

“On the edge of town, to the west. The modern place.”

I moved the last of his samples to the corner. “Bet that went over well.”

“Oh yeah. Customers moved away like oil on water. They looked absolutely freaky, and were giggling and laughing like they were retarded. They thought it was a pretty cool act.”

“They on glue or something?”

“Don’t think, not this time. Thought they were just bein’ weird.”

“So what happened?” I pulled his map from under his clip board. “They get kicked out?”

“Yup. ‘Ventually the manager came up to’em and asked’em to leave. Walt got really pissed and started raggin’ at the guy. He and a couple’a stockers ushered our friends to the door. Manager told’em never to come in there again.”

“Good for him,” I laughed. “But maybe they ruined it for all of us.”

“Don’t think so. Didn’t say anything to me. Just thought they were some freaks from L-A or San Fran. Was a gas. You should’a been there.”

“Wish I was.”

^^^

Randy phoned Papa Zoo from the airport in Reno. He wanted me to make a quick trip to pick up some assay standards that he had shipped up from Tucson. Apparently the secretary got confused and shipped them to our last address, in Tonopah.

While I was there I picked up a good sized bundle of mail for the crew. We moved around so much that we had suspected we might have mail waiting in every town we had visited.

I was excited. I received a card and a letter from Javee. She asked me to come to Taos and be her lumber jack for the winter. I knew I had to give that some serious thought. There were so many possibilities and potentials implied in her words or written between the lines that I could already feel the testosterone coursing through my veins. But I also hated to speculate too much for fear of being let down in a rather dramatic way.

In any case, it gave me something to contemplate and blunted the wicked sinus headache that suddenly stabbed my head. I just wanted to get back to my bunk and bury my face in the pillows.

On the return trip I drove through Coaldale Junction to Lee Vining again. I really liked that route, and the gorgeous scenery helped to soothe my pain. There are several small dormant volcanoes along that stretch of highway, and with the White Mountains and the Sierras as a backdrop, the whole setting is quite spectacular. Toward the west end the highway sweeps just south of Mono Lake and allows for some incredible views of that area as well. I found it a much nicer drive than the highway between Gabbs and Hawthorne.

...

That evening, as I pulled together the fixings for my dinner, Rob and Walt moseyed in. Rob tossed his map on the table while Walt piled his samples in the usual place near the door. "Here's my map," Rob spoke with a cocky tone in his voice.

"You guys are a little late," I said angrily, my headache still holding a firm grip on my senses. "I just finished plotting."

"Too bad ... it's your job." Rob licked his lips nervously.

"Yeah ... well ... that's right. But I'm finished for tonight. Should have gotten your maps here on time."

Walt stepped up to the table and tossed his map on top of Rob's. "We had rocks to count. You'll just hafta put in some overtime."

"Fuck that," I said, annoyed with their arrogant attitude. "Yours will just hafta wait 'til tomorrow night. I'm ready for dinner now."

Rob's hands went down into his pockets. "It's your job. You gotta record these locations ... in case something happens to our maps in the field."

"And you gotta get me the fuckin' maps at a decent time. You been back since six. It's fucking nine o'clock."

“We had things to do in town,” Walt glared back.

“Yeah, like eat at the fucking Sportsman. Well I haven’t eaten ‘cause I was waiting for you to bring me your god damned maps. So it’s too fuckin’ bad. I’m gonna eat now. You’ll just hafta take care of your maps so they don’t get damaged tomorrow.”

Walt continued to glare, then turned toward the door. “It’s your ass, man. It’s your ass.”

Rob stared at me, then took his hands from his pockets. Moving toward the exit, he pointed to the table. “Do the maps tonight.” He stepped through the door and was gone.

I picked up the maps and threw them gently onto the pile with the others. Then I stepped back to the stove to prepare my meal.

^^^

I was the first to arrive at Randy’s room the next morning. He had scheduled a crew meeting to bring us up to speed on the project. “How’s everything going?”

Still pissed about the night before, and suspecting that maybe Spurrier had mentioned the late map incident, I replied, “Everything’s fine, except for Rob.”

He looked at me, as if he had no idea there might be a problem. “What’s up with Rob?”

“Same crap as at Pablo Canyon. When you put him in charge it goes to his head. He becomes an asshole.”

“Whoa ... that’s pretty stiff.”

“Want an example,” I was starting to simmer. “Last night he and Walt waited ‘til nine to drop off their maps. I’d finished the others and was making dinner. Rob knows I do that work first thing ... to make sure it gets done. I think he pulls crap like that just to piss me off ... to aggravate me.”

“Maybe you just have a problem with Rob.”

“Jesus! That’s the same thing Guy said. But it’s not just me. He does the same thing to Toby and Tank. It’s really getting on our nerves.”

“I don’t know,” he said, as he rummaged through his field pack looking for something, “is it really that bad?”

“He has this superior attitude ... about everything he does. As if his way is the only way, and he can do no wrong.”

Randy continued searching through his pack.

I went on. “My gut feeling is he’s just a screw-up using this bullshit routine to cover his inadequacy.”

Just then Toby and Tank walked in, followed closely by Bro. A step or two behind came Rob and Walt. Papa Zoo and Jed soon followed. Once we all settled, Randy explained some of the changes coming out of his meeting in Tucson.

Trying to make light of what he knew would be a downer, Randy announced in a voice that was a weak attempt at comic melodrama, “The Great and Wonderful Powers that we’ve come to

know and love as the Project Committee has determined,” and that is where his voice faltered and he slipped back into a Crew Chief mode, “that we won’t be getting another break ‘til it snows.”

“Fuck,” Toby moaned.

“Who knows when that’ll be?” Walt spoke without resignation.

We all grumbled except Papa Zoo and Jed.

Having expected a negative response, Randy quickly slid into a defensive tone and went on the attack. “You’re not getting into the field early enough each day. All of you are gonna hafta get into the field a lot earlier.”

“Christ, it’s dark. We can’t collect fucking rocks if we can’t see them.” Walt was slipping into an especially nasty mood.

Randy countered. “‘Cause it stays dark longer, and the sun’s setting so much earlier, it’s imperative to be out into the field by daybreak.”

Tank moaned, “It’s cold up there that early.”

“What the fuck, Tank? Aren’t you mister Eskimo from Alaska?” Walt stared straight at him. “With all your blubber you should be able to go butt naked and never get a chill.”

“Walt, listen,” Randy shifted his attention, “we need to make sure we start into the field by seven. That ain’t that bad.” He turned toward Tank. “By then the sun should be hitting the peaks. Wear a coat.”

“I do,” Tank said sullenly.

Looking around the room, Randy said, “You guys spend way too much time dallying around before you leave.”

“We’ve gotta set up ... get our equipment ready.” Rob licked his lips. “Sometime’s there’re repairs.”

Randy countered. “Most of your set up should be done the night before.”

Rob mumbled something under his breath that only Walt could hear. Walt smiled and nodded his head.

With that Randy became obviously annoyed. He turned toward the two and said bluntly, “Bottom line is ... you hafta collect more samples. It’s as simple as that.”

Anger jumped into Walt’s face. “Christ!,” he blurted. “We can’t carry any more in our packs.”

Randy said calmly, “You might hafta make two trips to your pick up point.”

“That’ll cut into our sampling time,” Rob pointed out with a self righteous tone. “That’s counter productive.”

Anger crept into Randy’s face. “I don’t care how you do it ... start earlier in the morning ... come back later at night ... I don’t care. We just hafta bring back more samples.”

“Shit,” Walt practically spit, “if we come back any later we’ll have Chapik jumping down our throats ‘cause he won’t have time to do the god damned map work.”

Walt and Rob’s performance had set me on edge. I simply said, “Fuck you. Don’t blame me for your inadequacies.”

Randy stood silent, watching my face.

“You do our maps last night like I told you?” Rob demanded, maybe trying to gain some

position by intimidation.

“Nope,” I said without emotion. “You brought them too late.”

“You should have done them this morning then,” Walt’s voice jumped at me from across the room.

“Bull-shit!” I said with more emphasis. “You should have brought them to me before you went to dinner.”

“It’s your job ... doesn’t matter when we bring them.” Rob seemed so smug.

Suddenly Toby jumped to his feet. “Fuck your superior arrogant attitude.”

“Hey, stay outta this,” Walt pointed his finger at Toby. “This’s none of your concern.”

“Fuck’n’eh it is,” Toby’s voice filled the room. “We’re all in this together. The rest of us get our maps to’im on time.” He punctuated the next three words by jabbing his finger toward Walt. “Why ... can’t ... you?”

An uncontrollable tension electrified the air. Papa Zoo, Jed, Tank, and Bro seemed to melt back into the wall. The rest of us were red faced and focused, on the edge of physical confrontation.

Rage was obvious in Walt’s voice. “Maybe we can’t get our maps in when you do ‘cause we’re out collecting more samples than you. Maybe if you picked up a few more rocks we wouldn’t be getting our butts chewed right now.”

Randy tried to speak, but Toby cut him off. “Son-of-a-fucking-bitch.” He took a step toward Walt. “Ain’t nobody here sloughin’. We all do our job.”

“How come we bring in more samples than the rest? Every fucking day.” Walt indicated Rob and Bro as he prepared to stand.

Randy circled to the side, ready to separate the two if necessary. “Come on guys, no need to get pissed. We all hafta to work harder. That’s all.”

“Fuck man,” Walt threw himself back into his chair, “if these two would just pick up the pace.” He waved toward Tank and Toby.

Toby turned and stomped toward the bathroom, then moved back and forth, like a caged animal. He finally said, “Tank’s just slow, he’s got one speed. That’s his nature.” He tried to smile at Tank. It came out as more of a grimace. “And I don’t like working along those cliffs. I’m a flatlander from Kansas. Just can’t get used to these steep ledges.”

“Not much we can do about that, Toby. The work is in the mountains.” Randy was trying to be conciliatory.

Walt spoke just loud enough so we could recognize what he said. “Weeny.”

Toby spun toward him.

Toby had come to my aid. It was my turn to draw some of the fire from him. The entire time Walt and Toby had been arguing I noticed that Spurrier had sat back in his chair, almost relishing the vocal combat as it blazed around him. I couldn’t leave well enough alone. Looking him right in the eye, I said, “You know most of this is your fault?”

He feigned astonishment. “What?”

“You perpetrate this friction for your own entertainment.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You get conflicts started, then you sit back with that smug little grin on your face,

watching everyone else,” I pointed to Walt, “fight your battles. You like to see people squirm.”

“This doesn’t make any sense.” He looked toward Randy. “Where’d this come from?”

I wouldn’t let up. “Gives you a sense of superiority, doesn’t it? So you can look down your nose at those of us petty enough to get entangled in your plots.”

He refused to speak, sitting there with an aloof smile on his face. But I knew I had gotten to him. He was licking his lips.

“Oh, and don’t worry, Rob. I’m sure you’ll try to get even somehow. That’s just the kind of guy you are, right? I can hear the ‘eat shit and die’ rolling through your mind right now.”

Toby looked at me, astonished. He moved in close and whispered, “Well said, brother. Well said.”

Randy was totally flabbergasted. He looked toward Papa Zoo and Jed, seeking direction. I noticed Jed shrug. Randy looked at the floor and spoke in an even voice. “I ... I guess all we can do at this point is get on into the field. We all need to cool off. And we gotta get some samples today.” Looking up and around the room he tried to sound like a coach at half time. “Come on ... let’s go ... what happened to the Mobile Zoo Ghetto spirit?”

There was no response.

“Okay, then,” he sighed. “We’ll hafta sort the rest of this out later.”

Needless to say, everyone in that room began their work day in an agitated state of mind. And some of us went away from that meeting completely pissed.

...

That evening, as Randy placed the field maps on my table, he spoke without emotion. “Toby quit.”

“What?”

“Said he couldn’t handle the cliffs and ledges. Said he’s from Kansas and everything’s flat there. Says he loves the mountains but can’t get himself to work along those tight ledges and the tops of the cliffs.”

“I know he’s always afraid he’s gonna fall.”

“Yeah.” He sat on the bench across from me. He took a deep breath. Exhaling, it was as if words were forced out of his mouth. “Said he can’t handle Spurrier’s sarcasm and bullshit. He’s afraid he’ll punch him out.”

“After this morning ... I could see that as a possibility.”

“Said he’d rather quit with a clean record and save a good reference.”

I sat quietly for a few moments, contemplating the consequences of Toby’s departure. I said, “This situation has really put a rift between this crew. Guess the scales are tilting in Rob’s favor.”

“What do you mean?”

“With Toby leaving, Tank and I are on one side, and Rob, Walt, and Bro are on the other.”

“Come on, I don’t think it’s as bad as you think.”

“Hey, you saw what went on this morning. That’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“We gotta get you guys unified again ... somehow.” He tried to sound enthusiastic.



I pulled a map from the pile and began to unfold it. “That’d be nice, but I’m not sure it can happen. Once the gates are open you can never get the water back behind the dam.”

“We can sure try,” he stood, ready to leave.

“They gonna replace him?”

“Don’t know. I’d imagine they would.” He moved to the door. “That should help, huh? Get some new blood on the crew.”

“Might, but who knows what Rob will tell him? Who knows which side he’ll take?”

“Well ... we’ll just hafta see. Anyway, as a final gesture of solidarity on Toby’s behalf, we’re getting the Zoo Ghetto together for dinner.”

“Where?”

“Sportsman. At eight.”

“I’ll be there. For Toby. See you then.”

...

Papa Zoo and Jed joined us, helping to keep a civil veneer on the event. Toward the end of the meal Toby let it slip that the next day would not only be his last day working for NORMMEX, but it would be his 30th birthday. That seemed to lift the spirits of the group and gave us an additional reason to celebrate. After we paid our tabs we all ventured into the Sportsman’s bar. Even good old Tank, who, of course, didn’t drink, but hung around for a while, toasting with his watered-down coke.

The only local guys in the bar that night were the three guys who ran the Chevron Station on the west edge of town. We usually bought our gas there and had a good rapport with them. They had been a real help guiding us toward some of the things we needed. They were in their early thirties, were generally nice guys, and were glad to help us celebrate.

My memories of that night are tinged with cigarette smoke and alcohol, the semi-darkness of the bar, an endless stream of country music spewing from the juke, and Toby’s morose ramblings about whatever was on his mind. As the night progressed and the drinks took hold, Toby sank lower on his stool, with his head practically resting on the bar. I think everyone, except Tank, got snookered.

At 1:30 in the morning the barmaid chased us out. By then Toby had fallen asleep while lecturing the trio from the gas station about the various songs by Willie Nelson that had been playing throughout the night. Just before he passed out, he said, “I love that man, I love his style ... and on a night like this ... his songs are the most beautiful songs in the world.” Our mellowed mood pushed us to agree.

Once outside in the cooling air Toby was willing to walk. I supported him on one side while Papa Zoo dealt with the other. It was only a couple of blocks back to his room at the Walker River Lodge, but guiding him was like maneuvering a huge sack of potatoes. When we got him into his room he fell on his face on his bed and never moved.

Tucking him in a bit, Papa Zoo whispered, “Look at this.”

From under the pillow he slid a small handgun.

“Looks like a German Lugger,” I said.

Jed heard the magic words and moved closer. “It is.” He took the weapon from Papa Zoo, looked it over, then expertly emptied the bullet clip. He whispered, “In his condition and mood, this might be safer for all concerned.” He then placed the gun on the dresser and the shells in the top drawer.

^^^

I drove Toby to Reno where he caught a flight back to Tucson. He was in sad shape, with a horrible hangover from the previous night’s celebrating. He slept most of the way, without saying much. But when he did, it was mostly words of anger and frustration concerning Spurrier.

At one point he admitted, “I hate givin’ in to that piece’a crap. I’d rather stay’n beat’im at his own game. He’s such a jerk. But I can’t handle those cliffs and Spurrier at the same time. He’s too much of a distraction. Don’t wanna get killed. And I don’t wanna screw up a good reference by punchin’ his lights out.”

...

Between Reno and Carson City we saw The Walker; the strange fellow we saw on our drive down from Tahoe a couple of weeks earlier. He was still hiking along the road, this time heading north, waving at everyone that passed. And he was dressed exactly as he was before, in buckskins and long tangled hair. As Toby put it, “He’s just’a wavin’ and’a smilin’ like he shit his drawers an’ he don’t want nobody to know.” We still couldn’t come up with a viable reason for his performance. He was a couple miles farther north when I spotted him again on my way back to Bridgeport.

...

On that lonely ride I had the opportunity to contemplate how wonderful the weather had been. The morning’s were cold, the days were warm, and the nights were pleasantly cool. I have always loved autumn weather, and with the exception of the split within the Mobile Zoo Ghetto, it felt to me like we were living in Paradise.

Casually driving through the warm sun of that early afternoon, I was treated to a wonderful display of seasonal colors and abundant wildlife. There were at least a dozen varieties of waterfowl and cranes near Washoe Lake, several deer near Topaz Lake, and coyotes, rabbits, and squirrels closer to Bridgeport. It seems that no matter how many times I spot wild creatures I am always filled with a deep seated excitement; almost a wonder. Maybe I am envious that they are living naturally, and uncaged.

^^^

I heard Randy's truck pull up outside. I met him at the door. "Working today, huh?"

"Yeah. Some of us gotta earn a living. Don't all have Sunday off."

I let him in. "What's up?"

He sat down at the table. "You hear anything unusual last night. Lot of noise or anything?"

"Nothing that stands out. But Papa Zoo and I were at the Sportsman most of the evening. Why?"

"Well ... apparently Bro and Walt got it into their dim brains to do a bit of joy riding through the trailer park here." He looked out through the window. "The way I get it they were drunk outta their minds."

"Drunk or stoned ... pretty usual for a Saturday night."

"Well ... it appears they annoyed a major number of guests. The owner's pissed and won't let the blue and white truck onto his lot. He's threatening to tow the Air Stream out of his camp if anything else happens."

"I've told you, those guys are on the edge of pushing a lot of folks too far."

"Yeah ... well ... just watch yourself when you're in the park here. I'm sure that guy at the office is watching us."

"Got yuh."

^^^

After the trailer park incident, and the way Walt and Rob and Bro were acting out, I wanted to get away from them. The infamous blue and white Chevy, with its bad karma, needed to get to Reno for major repairs. I didn't hesitate when Randy asked me to make the delivery, but did express some anxiety about driving that wreck all that way without a backup.

Rob handed me the keys. "Anything special I need to know about this contraption?"

"Like what?" He frowned.

"Any trick to starting it? Do the brakes hang? Does the steering wheel come loose over fifty? Stuff like that."

"No."

"How's the gas and oil?"

"Oil is probably low ... but it'll get you there. Both tanks are topped off."

"Great," I gave him a short salute, "I'll be on my way then. See you guys this evening."

• • •

On that already tense drive I witnessed the results of two unfortunate accidents. The first, just north of Topaz Lake, involved several vehicles. The worst were a pick-up and an RV. The RV evidently swerved left, sideswiped the truck, then cut right across the other lane, bounced over a ditch, then plowed across about 30 feet of scrub, smashing a telephone pole dead center. The pole broke off and creased the roof smack down the middle. Somehow the right side of the huge vehicle got peeled off as it traveled another 200 feet before coming to rest in a field.

When I arrived, about two minutes after the event, there were vehicles parked all along the sides of the road and people were running in several directions. One group had a person stretched out on the shoulder. Another group was dashing through the field toward the RV. There was nothing I could contribute, so I continued on. Up the road I met a motorcycle cop, a police car, an ambulance, and a paramedic vehicle, all headed south at top speed, with sirens blaring and lights flashing. Later, on the radio, I heard that the elderly driver of the RV had experienced a heart attack, precipitating the series of events that ended, tragically, in that field.

The second accident was just south of Reno. A step van had smashed into another vehicle. The cab of the van was completely flattened. As I passed I could see the rescue personnel preparing The Jaws of Life to cut through to get at the passengers. I don't know how anyone could have survived.

Viewing scenes like that makes one realize how vulnerable we fleshy creatures are within our metallic transportation shells. There is so much power and energy involved when we propel ourselves at highway speeds, and everything happens so fast, that our soft tissue and brittle bone endoskeleton are the weak parts of the equation. I found myself easing up on the accelerator. I wanted to enjoy the autumn scenery just a little longer.

On a lighter note, I spotted The Walker just outside of Reno as he headed south toward Carson City. He was the same energetic waver as before.

I was contemplating The Walker's purpose, in light of the tragedies I just witnessed, when the truck started sputtering, like it was running out of gas. I was only about two miles short of my final destination. The gauge for the main tank still read three-quarters. That was obviously bogus. Rob had said both tanks were full, so I quickly flipped the switch to access the reserve. Nothing. The gauge for the second tank also read full, but it too was obviously empty. Another problem to add to the list.

When the engine finally stalled I found myself in the middle north bound lane of South Virginia Street, a major six lane thoroughfare, with workday traffic zipping by at the posted speed limit. I was just north of Virginia's intersection with Kitski Lane, perhaps the busiest intersection in the city. I flipped on the emergency lights, hoped they worked, and waited for the traffic lights to change so that I could push the damn truck to the side of the road. There wasn't much of a shoulder along there, so even though it was as far to the side as it would go it was basically blocking one full lane of traffic; on a short bridge. There was not much I could do. The bulky vehicle was just too heavy for one person to steer and push very far.

I quickly walked to a nearby Railey's department store, bought a two gallon gas can, walked to a Shell gas station, filled up the can, and carried my liquid treasure back to the truck.

Embarrassment set in as I walked along that busy street carrying a red container that has only one purpose. Everyone passing by knows how dumb you are for letting your vehicle run out of gas. I kept my eyes focused on the path in front of me, afraid to make eye contact with those wise souls in full control of their vehicles.

And of course that seemingly endless walk gave me time to rationalize a handful of excuses. “This isn’t my fault.”

“Well, of course not,” I said to myself sarcastically.

“But it isn’t. In this case it isn’t.”

“It isn’t?”

“Well ... no. Oh, maybe.” I kicked along the side of the road. “That’s what I get for believing Spurrier.”

“You don’t think he’d lie about the tanks being full ... do you?”

“Maybe he knew. Maybe this was a set up.”

“Ah ha,” I taunted myself. “It very well could be. You knew he’d try to get even for the other day’s confrontation.”

“Fucked-over again.”

Once I poured the gas into the tank the truck started fine. I drove the lame vehicle to the repair shop, got a ride in a courtesy car to the Hertz Truck Rental facility, picked up the Toyota Land Cruiser that Randy had rented before, stopped at a burger place to wash my hands and down some lunch, then, reluctantly, I headed back to Bridgeport.

• • •

Because I had some time to kill I took a slightly different route and detoured through Virginia City. I had fun steering that little Toyota through all the twisting mountain roads. It was a real blast. The Toyota was so much more responsive than our big, cumbersome trucks. I suspect that some of that sensation might have been the relatively narrow wheel base. But, for whatever reason, I enjoyed that drive.

Virginia City itself was quite interesting. I didn’t have a lot of time, but I did walk up and down the main street, peering through windows, and visiting a few of the more interesting shops.

Driving south from Virginia City, somewhere between Gold Hill and Carson, the gas gauge, oil gauge, and heat indicator on the Toyota all went wacko at the same time. The needles would drift over to the right, pause, then drift over to the left like stalks of wheat in a lazy summer breeze.

“Shit!”

“Now what?”

“How much gas do I have left?”

“Don’t know,” I tried not to panic, “it read full when I picked it up.”

“Don’t wanna repeat that little episode from this morning.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Maybe there’s something wrong with the engine.”

“Maybe it’s overheating, or burning oil.”

“Or maybe it’s ready to blow.”

“Yeah. Who knows with these foreign cars?”

I sweated through it until I came to a friendly Chevron station in Carson. The attendant seemed nice, and after I explained the situation, he went right for the fuse box under the dash, near the steering column. Sure enough, one of the fuses had blown. He searched through a plastic box and found a good fuse, snapped it in, and I was set. No charge. I topped off the gas to return his kindness, and headed on down the road toward Bridgeport, relieved that at least this time my panic was caused by a false alarm.

• • •

Passing through the fields south of Carson City I spotted several ranch hands repairing fences along the road. They were all wearing baseball caps. That started me to thinking that the modern working cowboy dresses differently than the usual stereotype. There was still the occasional wide brimmed hat, and they all seemed to wear their hats inside, even when eating in the more urban restaurants and cafes, but none of them had that gunslinger look that had developed on television. I recalled images of these modern, rugged workers, hunkered down at the tables and counters across the state like they were squatting around some forlorn campfire in the middle of the Ruby Marshes. In spite of their generally modern attitudes, the ubiquitous hat, of whatever type, must be part of their culture: not only protection from the sun, but the rejection of superficial rules imposed by outside civilization.

Yet that outside civilization has crept into their attire. The baseball caps that most seem to embrace are emblazoned with the logos of their favorite baseball or football team, or the caps declare their affiliation with some brand of fertilizer, co-op, or seed brand. Very seldom have I seen a rancher with just a plain old baseball cap.

Continuing along, I wondered if perhaps the caps designated farmers and farm hands and that, maybe, the cowboy hats were reserved for ranchers and ranch hands. But they do seem to mix together, so that theory doesn’t hold water. Then, of course, there are the urban cowboys, which, I think, would include almost every white hat we see in the cities. The real cowboys are out on the ranges mending fences, while these Coca-Cola Cowboys soak up the attention, much like Hollywood extras on location. Someone has to do the dirty work.

^^^

Once Toby left I spent more time in the field. Mostly with Randy, Papa Zoo, and Jed. We were surveying a road that would make a cut from Mount Patterson to the stream at the bottom of Ferris Canyon. NORMMEX planned to bring a drilling rig up the mountain to complete the next year’s assessment work on the claim group. The nature of drilling requires a steady supply of water to lubricate the bit as it grinds through solid rock.

Randy had already contracted a D-9 Caterpillar tractor which was busy widening and repairing the existing road across the face of Mount Patterson. Getting the proper permits had been a nightmare of bureaucratic paper shuffling between the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, and local county offices. Somehow Randy persevered and was relatively pleased once the D-9 had begun the slow process of ripping the road.

Just before lunch we drove over to visit with the Cat operator. Randy wanted to discuss the details of some tight switchbacks farther down the canyon. While I stood there gazing off into the distance, with the clank, rattle, and rumble of the idling D-9 disturbing the atmosphere, and the stench of diesel fuel drifting across the pristine landscape, I noticed two backpackers approaching along the narrow jeep trail ascending from the west.

As they drew near I could tell they were not pleased with what they found. Their pace seemed to quicken as they passed our location. I waved casually, trying to be friendly, but they both gave me an angry glare, obviously displeased to not only find civilization encroaching upon their tranquil world, but vandalizing it as well.

I wanted to speak to them, maybe apologize for disrupting their solitude, and for disturbing their environment. But I remained where I was, resting my butt on the side of the truck, watching them move off toward the south. I swear one of them flipped me off as they disappeared over a ridge. That was the first time I felt ashamed of what we were doing.

• • •

Later, as I waited for Randy and Papa Zoo to take a slope reading for a switchback, I stood in the quiet near the mountain's peak. Whenever I stood on top of Patterson I got the sensation of looking down on Yosemite, although, I believe, some of the peaks there were actually taller. It was such a spectacular region; so rugged looking; so wild and impassible. I always felt overpowered by its vastness, its enormity, and the latent energies encompassed by its domes and spires. I felt so small and insignificant next to those natural temples.

Out there, with that pale blue sky as a ceiling, with those monumental granite altars, and the holy waters of the flowing streams, I felt that I was truly surrounded by a cathedral. The view from that range was penetrating deep into my soul, manipulating my spirit, and toying with my psyche. I physically felt weak in the knees. It was a sensation I had not known in many years.

Randy walked up as I stood there daydreaming about hiking off with the backpackers. "Yuh see that?"

"Huh?" I looked to where he was pointing, south and west. I saw a messy looking corkscrew contrail drifting through an otherwise flawless blue sky. "That's weird."

"Must be a rocket or something."

"A rocket?"

"Edwards Air Base is off that way. They're always testing something out there."

"That's true," I said nonchalantly. "There's so much military activity out here you never know what you're gonna run across." As the last words spilled from my mouth, a buzzing sound filled the air.

Randy looked at me like I farted.

“Not me,” I said defensively, as I instinctively squatted, thinking dry atmosphere, positive and negative ions, static charges, and ball lightning.

The buzzing continued its steady, ubiquitous hum as we looked around the area for some strange insect or bird. But there was nothing. We couldn’t pinpoint the sound’s origin. It was as if it came from everywhere at once. Then Randy happened to look up. “Holy shit!”

I followed his gaze. No more than 100 feet above was a gleaming white glider. We could see the pilot as he waved. He was circling so tightly that he appeared to hover. The wind caught the tips of his long, slender wings, making the ends vibrate, creating the illusive buzzing sound. We stood there stretching our necks, trying to keep our balance, when the white bird leveled off and silently drifted away toward the north.

“Man, that’s something, huh?” Randy watched the glider cruise off like a ghost eagle scanning for ethereal prey.

“Scared the crap outta me,” I laughed. “Thought we were gonna get hit by lightning.”

“Lightning? Sky’s clear.”

“It’s a long story,” I shrugged, pointing toward the retreating glider. “But yeah, that’s pretty cool.”

“Love to fly like that.” Randy looked at the ground and rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand. “Pure freedom.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering my own long lost fantasies of self-propelled flight, “long as you don’t crash over the edge of some mountain.”

• • •

On the way down that evening we picked up a bit of a news broadcast. The announcer said that Amazon gold fever was luring thousands of explorers and adventurers to that area. He said that more than \$50 million worth of nuggets had already been air lifted to Brasilia.

Randy commented, “Shoot, with our luck, that’ll be the next place NORMMEX will send us.”

“Yes, that’d be quite a change,” Papa Zoo speculated. “From the deserts and mountains of Nevada to the rain forests of Brazil.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but I don’t think I could handle the bugs.”

“I could handle the bugs,” Jed said stoically. “I just wonder what the male to female ratio is down there.”

• • •

In that day’s mail I received a postcard from Denice King. That was definitely a surprise. Her note read:

*Talked Javee out of your address. Wanted to say hello. You’re so close now, if you get up to Reno, stop in and see me. Done traveling for the season and settling in for the winter. Need a snuggly bear to hibernate with.*



She had carefully printed her address next to a small hand drawn map showing the way. That note, and the memory of Denice on the beach at the Walker Lake 100, was enough to get my testosterone flowing at higher levels than were safe for straight thinking. Although I didn't know her well, she was a beauty, and, as she had noted, was so close. I thought perhaps I would test the waters on our next free weekend.

I also received two postcards from Javee. In the first she wrote:

*Gave Denice your address. Didn't think you'd mind. Go see her. She's just up the road near Reno. You'd like her place. You'd be good for her. She'd be wonderful to you.*

She also included the address, but no map. Her note made me wonder if she wasn't trying to discourage me from coming to Taos, and that maybe she was using Denice as a lure to draw me away.

In her second card Javee wrote:

*Received your letter. If you are really serious about spending the winter you would be more than welcome to stay here. But only as a "friend." Can't commit to more than that right now. Would be strict guidelines concerning our relationship. Probably hands off. Could use a woodsman. Let me know.*

There were beginning to be too many possibilities, entangled by roadblocks, assumed restrictions, and potential challenges. Things were becoming more complicated.

...

That night we all had dinner at the Sportsman. Near the end of the meal Randy announced that we would be allowed to go home in two days. He already had the tickets and handed them to each of us over dessert. That definitely raised the spirits of the crew.

^^^

"Slow down on the next switchback," I cautioned. "Think I saw something."

Jed brought the vehicle around the next tight curve and slowed to a crawl.

I peered out my window, over the freshly bladed berm, into the depths of Ferris Canyon. "Yup. It's Papa Zoo. Looks like he's stuck."

Reaching the bottom of the newly cut switchbacks, we found the rear tires of the small Toyota kicking plumes of gravel in shallow arcs across the rocky floor. The D-9's blade had disturbed the surface in all directions. It looked like a battleground of exposed boulders, orange

clay, and tangled debris. As soon as Papa Zoo saw us approach he killed the engine and got out.

“Stuck on a boulder.” Papa Zoo pointed to the large rock under his front axle. “I’m a little hung up.”

“How in hell did you do that?” Jed teased.

“Not really sure,” Papa Zoo replied. “But I got it stuck good.”

“Looks like we’re gonna hafta get you some leverage ... and some traction for those back wheels.” I returned to Jed’s truck. “Think I saw a two-by-four in here.”

“Yeah,” Jed confirmed. “But I think it’s only a five footer.”

“That’ll hafta do,” Papa Zoo shrugged.

And with that we set to work extracting the Toyota from the boulder. “Must’ve come on this thing just right to get your transfer case wedged on top like that.” I was trying to place the board so that the boulder would become a fulcrum. The front wheels of the small vehicle were completely off the ground.

Papa Zoo smiled. “Just talented, I guess.”

After an hour of prying and heaving and wheel splattered rocks we got the vehicle back on all fours. And in spite of that delay, we finished our scheduled surveying before lunch.

• • •

While we sat in the warm sun eating our baloney sandwiches, Papa Zoo commented, “Haven’t heard the drilling rig this morning.”

“You know, you’re right.” Jed looked off toward the north, as if he could see through the steep walls of the canyon.

“What rig is that?” I asked.

Papa Zoo replied, “Our competitor started drilling their claim block.”

“Kind of late in the season to start drilling, isn’t it?”

“Been at it for a while. Still trying to get a jump on us.” Papa Zoo hid the cellophane from his sandwich under a large rock. “Can usually hear the low hum of their rig.”

“Or at least their water truck ... chugging up their road over there.” Jed refocused on his meal. “Haven’t heard a thing all day.”

“That’s right,” I said, “I did hear Randy mention something about a claim war. What’s the deal?”

Papa Zoo opened a jar of peanuts. “Last summer, a year ago, NORMMEX and that bunch on the north side got into a claim staking war. Was chaos. Not a pretty sight. Both companies tried to out-claim the other. Helicopters hauled in bundles of claim posts and dropped them all over the mountain.”

“Yeah,” it was all starting to click into place. “I’ve seen a couple of those. Still strapped up. Wondered who hauled them up here.”

“It’s a waste.” Papa Zoo tossed a small handful of nuts into his mouth. “The two claim blocks cover the whole damn mountain.”

“And overlap,” Jed added.

I looked at Papa Zoo. He confirmed Jed’s statement with a nod. “In several places. That’s

why you guys will be back up here to reset posts and straighten out some of the conflicts.”

“In case there’s a court battle?” I guessed.

“In case it goes to court.” Papa Zoo took a second handful of nuts, and sealed the jar.

Jed then said, “That ... and in California you hafta check your posts every year to make sure they’re standing. It’s the law. If a post goes down, it can invalidate the claim.”

“Well ... I don’t think that’s ever been tested,” Papa Zoo countered. “They just don’t want a bunch of abandoned claims preventing new development.”

Jed didn’t reply.

We sat silently as we ate. Then Papa Zoo said, “I think ... beings we’re done with this little project, we should take a quick drive over toward that rig. See what’s up.”

Jed nodded.

When we finished our meal we drove our vehicles back out of that canyon and parked Jed’s truck on top. The three of us climbed into the Toyota and headed toward our competition’s side of the mountain.

When we pulled up to their vacant site, Jed speculated, “They must be off on a break. Doesn’t look like the rigs busted.”

“Yes,” Papa Zoo nodded, “but this is weird. They left their core.”

There, laid out in perfect rows, were the core samples for eight holes. Each set of core was in its individual box and labeled from zero to how many ever feet they had drilled.

“Somebody blundered,” Papa Zoo shook his head. “This is a rookie mistake.”

“Looks like we have an opportunity here, doesn’t it?” Jed smiled broadly. “We can’t pass this up. Let’s log it.”

“Why not? They were dumb enough to leave it here for the whole world to see.” Papa Zoo bent as he selected a short piece of core.

“We could take a few small samples too. If we’re careful they’ll never know.” Jed knelt near a run of core and pulled out his lens.

“True.”

“This seems so obvious. What if it’s a set-up?” I looked around the trees surrounding the clearing, searching for hidden cameras or someone watching from the bushes. “They left this here figuring we’d do just what you suggested.” I pulled up a dirty bucket and flipped it over to make a stool. I sat down near a third row of core. “Log and sample. And what if they’ve turned all this upside down, or done something to sabotage all this, to throw us off?”

“Possible,” Papa Zoo said nonchalantly as he scraped a sample with his pocket knife blade, “but not likely. Don’t think they’d have taken the time to do anything that elaborate. They just weren’t thinking.”

“They just screwed up,” Jed agreed.

“The geologist probably wasn’t here or he would’ve had them secure this core in some way.” Papa Zoo pulled his hand lens from his shirt pocket, but then let it hang by its cord around his neck, as he scratched at the sample again.

“Their blunder is our gain,” Jed almost laughed.

“This is exactly why Guy has his drilling crews dump all the excess sample back down the hole.” Papa Zoo carefully placed the sample into its slot and began walking the length of the

exposed core. “Not only does that fill the hole to prevent accidents, but it prevents our competitors from sampling what we’ve done.”

“Yeah, but how can a pile of rotary drill shavings do them much good?” I was puzzled. “They don’t know from how far down a sample came.”

Papa Zoo looked at me and smiled. “A geologist experienced with drilling can usually tell how deep the hole is by how big a dump is left behind.” He walked back toward me, scanning the core as he came. “Anyway, what you really want is to know what’s down there. That’s more important at this stage,” he pointed toward the core, “than knowing exactly how deep it is. If it’s your own property, then sure, you want to see exactly where the ore body lies. But on someone else’s claim, you just want to see what they’ve got.”

“That’s true,” Jed stood up. “I knew a geologist once that would actually look for fresh dumps near new holes. He’d cut away a vertical section. Then he’d carefully collect a sample, from the bottom of the pile, up, numbering each obvious change. That way he’d have a rough, relative idea where the good assays came from. NORMMEX always covers their holes. And especially its core. These guys are crazy to leave this lying around. Might as well be a pile of gold.”

After our quick survey of the site we drove back to the top where we met the rest of the crew. New plans for the afternoon were formulated, and Jed, Papa Zoo, and Randy headed back to the competition’s site to spend the rest of the day logging their core. For me, wondering about the ethics of what they were doing, it was another lesson on the Mount.

I had a couple of days of map work and samples to deal with, so Randy sent me back to town.

“Hey,” Rob spoke up, “if he’s going in ... have him take the dark blue Ford. We’re having problems with it ... and I don’t wanna get stranded again.” Rob opened a small jar of lip balm and applied the salve to his chapped lips.

“Didn’t know it was giving you trouble,” Randy questioned.

“Oh yeah ... we been fighting it all week. Might be the fuel pump.” Rob licked his lips.

“Wait a minute,” I argued. “Why should I drive your piece of junk?”

Rob looked toward me, but slightly to my left, over my shoulder, and said in his usual calm voice, “‘Cause we’re usually the last one’s out. If it breaks down we’ll be stuck here ‘til morning. You wouldn’t want to hafta rescue us again, would you?”

“He’s right,” Randy jumped in, probably trying to avoid another confrontation. “You take the dark blue. You’ve got water and food. If you break down we’ll be coming out behind you.”

“Yeah, great,” I said in a pissy tone, “just what I wanna do with the rest of my afternoon. Sit in a stalled truck on the side of this mountain.”

I was actually more angry at having lost a skirmish with Rob than having to drive the dark blue into town. It had the best radio of all of our vehicles, and, if I stalled, it would have given me an opportunity to sit and daydream while surrounded by autumn’s colors. But the truck worked fine and I got into town with no problems.

It struck me, though, as I pulled next to my Empire, that the whole truck swap was another one of Rob’s power games. It was possible that he just wanted to keep me stirred up, to see my reaction, to torment me, and to cause me anguish on the drive back into town.

^^^

On the drive to Reno, to catch our flight to Tucson, we saw The Walker again. “He’s a strange guy,” I said to Tank. “Every time I’ve seen him he’s smiling and waving like he’s got nothing else to do. Wonder what he’s up to?”

“Maybe he’s some eccentric that likes to make people smile?” Tank sat up straight and closed his paperback.

Falling back into a 60’s mode, I said, “You mean, like, he’s tryin’ to send a message of love and peace and human brotherhood?”

Tank looked at me with a face reminiscent of Burt. And like Burt, he was never readily willing to accept my strange little melodramatic changes of voice and character. He finally said, “It’s about twenty-five miles from Carson City to Reno, isn’t it?”

And Tank, asking for confirmation on a piece of information, threw me for a loss. “Yes,” was all I could reply.

“Does he really walk that entire distance every day?”

“Don’t know.”

“If so, then that’s all he does,” Tank settled back and reopened his book. “And he must be in excellent condition.”

“He’d hafta be. It’s not all flat.”

“Does he have two homes,” Tank wondered, “one in each city?”

I shook my head, shrugged, and said, “Don’t know. But he’s really a curiosity.”

...

We were scheduled for a short layover at Skyharbor, in Phoenix. But the aircraft needed special repairs and we sat at the airport for nearly four hours.

“Shit,” Walt grimaced when they announced another delay, “if we would’ve known it was gonna take this long we could’ve rented a car and driven to Tucson.”

“That’s right,” Bro said angrily, “it’s only ninety minutes away.”

I looked at Tank and said softly, “They miss their Mary Jane.”

By the look on his face I could tell he had little idea what I meant.

“Going through withdrawal,” I tried to explain, but he still looked puzzled. “Oh well,” I said more or less to myself, “as Randy would say, ‘That’s the way it is in exploration geology.’”



We were back in Bridgeport a week later. Rob and Bro and Tank and I, and Toby's replacement, Bill Reetz, flew from Tucson to Phoenix together. In Phoenix, once again, our flight had problems, but the delay was only about an hour.

Of course, when we finally deplaned in Vegas, we had to literally run through the airport to catch our connecting flight to Reno. I found that it doesn't matter how many others go through the same hassle every day, it is still embarrassing to run through a terminal. No one knows that your flight was delayed. They assume you are an idiot who can't get to the airport on time. Our bags were flailing in every direction as people yanked their children and grandma out of the way. My heart was pounding, and my head kept trying to communicate to the rest of my body the probability that this race was senseless; the plane would surely pull away just as we came into sight of the gate. And I remember hoping, beyond reason, that no one I knew had witnessed that fiasco.

We somehow made it. Moving down the boarding ramp, I tried to catch my breath. Sweat started dripping from my forehead and staining my underarms. I just knew that that would be the one flight I would get lucky and be seated next to some gorgeous blond in a mini skirt and a friendly smile. I was already starting to smell like a truck driver after a five day run. I hoped that my blond would be a former cheerleader with an uncontrollable attraction to the pungent smell of a men's locker room.

Fortunately for the other passengers, the airline had conveniently seated us all together. There was no blond. But of course, our trials didn't end there. Almost as soon as we reached cruising altitude the plane began bouncing, riding on rough wind currents sliding down from the northwest like a roller-coaster joy ride. And, as if that weren't enough, several times we dropped into air pockets. Each time that the plane let go of its hold upon the thin currents of air, there was a chilling flash across the receptors of my brain warning that we were approaching the edge and going down.

Then, on our final approach to Cannon International Airport in Reno, the plane made a sudden maneuver, tilting wildly as the right wing dropped, seemingly out of control. Startled cries cut through all sensibility. And I have to admit—I grabbed hold of the arm rests just knowing that that was IT.

But the plane leveled off, and as we each struggled to catch our breath, the pilot's voice came crackling over the PA system. "Uh ... sorry for that sudden maneuver ... ah ... we are in our final approach to Cannon ... we had a momentary situation ... ah ... a glider entered our flight path and ... uh ... we had to take necessary action ... ah ... to avoid a collision. We hope the rest of Flight 467 will be uneventful."

But not finished yet, the pilot made an extremely rough landing. It was almost as if he wanted to plant us at the end of the runway, to stop on a dime, so to speak. But we survived to make it to the terminal.

• • •

Randy was waiting at the baggage claim. When we collected our luggage, Rob reported that his was apparently delayed somewhere, again. I was standing off to the side with Bill and whispered, “It’s almost as if he plans it that way, to screw things up.”

Randy said, “Look. This’ll work out okay. Walt’s plane is delayed by fog in Lexington.”

“What’s he doing in Kentucky?” Bro wondered.

“Seems he flew east to pork one of his girlfriends.” Randy shrugged.

“He’d go to any expense to get laid,” I said without thinking.

Rob gave me one of his eat shit and die looks.

Looking at Rob, Randy continued. “Suppose to arrive around seven. You and Walt stay in Reno tonight, and tomorrow you can pick up the blue and white Chevy and get a storage shed for some equipment I brought up from Bridgeport.”

I whispered to Bill again, “Another free night on the town ... at company expense.”

• • •

Bill rode with me on the drive back to Bridgeport. We were about the same age and discovered, quickly, that we had some common interests. I filled him in on the history of the Zoo Ghetto, and he, in turn, provided a sounding board for my frustrations with Rob.

Of course, as we cruised south of Reno, we spotted The Walker doing his usual thing. I explained what I knew of the character.

“Looks like some lost hippie trying to find his way back to the Sixties.” Bill held up two fingers in the old peace sign of that era.

“That’s as good as any guess we’ve made so far.”

“Just trying to close a circle,” Bill proposed, “unsure of his place in the present.”

I had to look at him. “Uou into cycles?”

“Motorcycles, or natural cycles?” He replied playfully.

“Definitely wasn’t talking about menstrual cycles.” We both laughed. “I was speaking philosophically. Referring to the cyclical nature of all processes.”

“Likewise.”

I know a huge grin crossed my face, sensing a comrade in arms. “Although,” I said, “I’ve been moving away from a pure cycle theory.”

“How’s that?”

“Beginning to think of existence as a spiral ... rather than closed circles.”

“Everything moving up, advancing,” Bill proposed, twirling his finger in the air toward the roof of the cab.

“That’s what I was thinking at first,” I tried to watch the road as I described my concept. “But maybe it’s a horizontal spiral. Or, maybe, slanted slightly upward.” I motioned diagonally through the cab with my right arm. “The angle depending on how quickly we progress. We circle back, but never come to exactly the same place as before.”

“Hopefully we learn something in the passage. Right?”

“You got it,” I said excitedly. “We age, we gain knowledge, we look upon life from a new perspective ... based on all the experiences accumulated during the cycle.”

“A circle implies a complete starting over, doesn’t it?” Bill was obviously in tune to a similar philosophy.

“That’s right,” I nodded emphatically, “a reverting back, a forfeiture of all gains. I can’t buy that. That’s not the way I see it.”

“But where does all this spiraling lead? Where does the spiral go?”

“Not sure. Haven’t pushed it that far yet.”

“Heaven?”

“Don’t know. May not lead to any particular Nirvana. Not a big believer in a Heaven at the end of the rainbow. Maybe it just goes on and on, indefinitely.”

“Yeah, but we all die sometime. What happens to us then?”

“That’s right,” I agreed, “we die. But our essence goes on ... our soul, our spirit, our cosmic energy ... whatever you wanna call it ... as part of the cycle of Nature. As part of the material of existence. To be reformed and reshaped into something new.”

“Seems there should be more than that,” he suggested. “Maybe reincarnation?”

“Maybe. But that implies a continuation of consciousness. I think all aspects of our Being are absorbed back into the Universal Whole. Besides, isn’t reincarnation just another form of Heaven ... an afterlife?”

“Yeah ... but it represents a cycle ... or a spiral,” he said confidently, “depending on how you look at it.”

“That’s true ... maybe that would fit into my theory. From ashes to ashes and back again, each time advancing to a higher state of Being ... a more refined existence. But to what ... eventually?”

“Exactly,” Bill looked ahead at the curving road, “why are we here? What’s the purpose of all these spirals and whatever? There has to be something more.”

“That’s your ego talking,” I said, tapping him on the left arm with the back of my hand. “We all wanna believe everything exists ‘cause of us ... and for us. We each wanna be the center of the Universe.”

“God’s special child,” he added.

“Right. But there is no beginning ... no end. Only for us, for our ego ... our consciousness. We’re so self-centered we project our despair on the world around us. We’re so egotistical that we think the whole damn Universe is here for us. And that it began ... and it’ll end ... just like us. But I think that’s hogwash. The Universe always was and always will be. It’s our tiny, insignificant, selves that’ll pass away into nothingness.”

“So,” Bill wouldn’t let me off the hook, “why are we here?”

“We’re here ‘cause we’re part of the web of Nature. No more ... no less ... than the other creatures that inhabit this planet. We’re all in this mess together. Interlocking pieces. We need each other, depend on each other ... to fulfill the role that each organism plays within the overall ecosystem.”

“So we just live and die. That’s it?”

“I think so,” I said, unsure of my solution to that age old question. “This sounds banal and



simplistic, but I think Life is to Live. That's all there is. To not live now is Hell. To fully live Life is Heaven. We hafta face each possibility, each potential adventure, as it comes."

"So what do we do," he was looking at me, "take the path less traveled by?"

"Ah, Frost, yes." I nodded again. "Some paths are wide and smooth ... some are rocky and narrow ... others are dead ends. Life's full of all sorts of paths."

"We need a map," Bill laughed.

"That would be nice, wouldn't it."

"Yet," Bill held up his right hand like a college professor trying to make a point, "as they say, 'The map is not the territory.'"

"That's right," I chuckled. "And besides, even if we had a map, each time we approach a junction, we'd still hafta make a choice. And if we always choose the path to the right ... the old, well worn, straight and narrow path ... the smooth one, the easy one ... we pass through Life without experiencing its full richness. Someone else has already been there and is leading the way."

"But they haven't been all the way to the end either."

"Exactly," I said, "that's my point. How in hell do they know their path really leads anywhere?"

"The blind following the blind," Bill added.

"That's why the organized religions unwittingly call it Blind Faith. It's too easy. You don't hafta think. 'We'll do all that for you. Just do what we tell you. And give us your tithe.'"

"You can see why that would be appealing to a lot of people." He shifted his position on the seat. "Marx called religion 'The opiate of the masses.'"

"That's right. But there has to be some bumps so we know we're alive, and not some stone just sitting around waiting for time to polish our edges. It takes abrasives. The true Stream of Life carries sediments that abrade the stone of our Being and polishes us into a smooth pebble with an entirely unique character."

Bill sat quietly for a few moments, contemplating. Then he said, "We might not want the straight and narrow, but we definitely don't want to choose a dead end, do we?"

"We all do, though, eventually. You're luck can only hold out so long. But that's what keeps Life exciting ... not knowing. Those who wait for the promise of Heaven are missing the point. Heaven is within each of us ... we make it for ourselves, every day. That's why no one agrees on what Heaven is like. It's different for each of us. The world we project around us is either Heaven or Hell ... or something in between."

"You know," Bill stopped me, "you might have something there. There are some whose lives seem miserable all the time."

"Bad karma," I suggested.

"Yeah, bad karma. They've made for themselves a Hell on Earth. Nothing works. Everything ... their whole life ... is always going wrong. One thing after another."

"Maybe their coil is in a downward spiral."

"Maybe. But there're others who always seem happy and bright, even when things around them are going bad."

"They've found Heaven."

“Or they’re total idiots,” Bill laughed.

“That could be true too. But the point is ... if we sit our butts on church pews thinking that is God’s path to salvation ... we’ll be sorely disappointed when we finally come to that inevitable dead end. There are no Golden Gates or a bearded Supreme Being sitting on a diamond studded throne. That concept is so materialistic ... so Western.” I looked at Bill for a long moment, then back toward the oncoming traffic. “You know, most religions preach ‘You can’t take it with you when you go’, speaking, I think, about material possessions. But I think that should include spiritual wealth as well. When you die ... all that stored grace evaporates as your Being is reabsorbed into the Cosmic Whole.”

“Or is that Cosmic Hole?” Bill smiled as he made a circle with both of his hands.

“Either way, you’re history,” I laughed. “Spread the wealth while you can ... while you’re alive. Do unto others and be kind and be happy and be passionate ... and compassionate and loving and fair and honest and live Life fully.”

Bill didn’t respond, so I went on. “We hafta live Life as we find it, do the best we can to maintain a positive attitude, share our wealth ... whatever it is, and be kind to others. They’re all our brother’s and sisters. The wild animals, the plants, the streams and oceans ... even the rocks. It’s all part of us, and we’re part of it.”

And when Bill didn’t respond again, I added, “That’s our purpose. Make this stay here ... in this existence ... as comfortable and full as possible. That’s all there is.”

He sat there looking straight ahead, not commenting on my windy pronouncement. I wondered if he thought I was a total idiot. But I didn’t seem to scare him like I had Burt.

Then I had another thought. At the risk of putting him to sleep, I said, “Many religions suggest saving for tomorrow by borrowing from today.”

He looked at me.

“Their adherents are always looking ahead ... to something that’ll never come ... and once there ... at The Edge of the World ... there’s really no way of getting back what they saved. Their journey is over. Their time is up. It’s all gone over that edge into the void.”

Bill looked back toward the road, ahead. But somehow I knew he wasn’t visualizing The Edge of the World like Burt had done so many weeks earlier. Bill and I were more closely in tune.

I finally said, “Today is all we’ve got, all we can be sure of.”

“Sounds like a lyric from some record I’ve got.”

“Could be,” I laughed. “I’m not gonna take credit for all my thoughts.” Then I gently punched him on his left shoulder. “Aren’t the grooves on a record really a spiral?”

^^^

Walt and Rob made it back, so Randy treated the entire crew to dinner. During the meal Randy brought us up to date on the status of the project and what our assignments would be, since we were back to full force. Then Walt asked, “Where’s Papa Zoo and Jed? They take off?”

“That’s right,” I said, “I haven’t either of them since we’ve been back.”

Randy frowned at first, then a introspective smile crossed his face. “Papa Zoo is down in Bishop for a couple of days. And Jed’s not staying at the Lodge no more.”

“Uh oh,” Bro anticipated a story, “he get nailed for drugs?”

“Naw, nothing like that.” Randy put his napkin down on the table and picked up his glass of beer. “But he did cause a bit of excitement.”

I looked at Bill and said, “You haven’t met Jed yet. He’s quite a character. Spends his evenings with a computer...”

“Carries anvils up the sides of mountains,” Bro interrupted.

“And writes field notes with bullets.” Walt had to add his favorite Jed story.

“Sounds ... interesting.” Bill looked around the table. “Like Paul Bunyan.”

We all laughed. I said, “He is kind of a living legend. At least in his own mind.”

“If he had a mind,” Randy jumped in again. “He sure blundered while you were gone.”

“So what did he do?” Rob seemed anxious to hear the story.

“He was with There-You-Go,” Randy tried to begin.

Bill asked, “Who’s There-You-Go?”

“She’s a babe,” Bro offered.

“A waitress here at the Sportsman,” I indicated the room around us.

Walt proclaimed, “She’s at least an eight, even on the Tucson scale.”

“She’s a young local woman,” I explained, “with that blond California look ... honey blond hair ... small, but nicely built.”

“Oh yeah, she’s nicely built,” Walt jumped in again. “Everything in the right places. That’s for sure.”

“A bit on the conservative side,” Bro offered.

“She’s nice,” Rob spoke in his usual all-knowing tone, then he licked his lips in an attempt to look seductive.

“Athletic legs,” Randy noted, “and very perky.”

“Well,” Bill was puzzled, “why do you call her There-You-Go?”

We all laughed.

Tank answered this time. “When she serves our meals she always says, ‘There you go.’ So that’s what we call her: There-You-Go.”

“Whenever we speak of her,” I added, “that’s how we refer to her.”

Bro gave an example. “Boy, did you see There-You-Go today? She looked great in that short skirt.”

Walt laughed, “But it’s usually, ‘Spurrier’s out sniffin’ ‘round There-You-Go like some

hound in heat.”

Rob gave him his eat shit and die look.

“Don’t even think we know her real name.” I looked around the table. Everyone shook their head. Even Rob, who had previously claimed several late-night bouts of intimacy.

Walt looked across the table. “Most important thing to know, Bill, is she’s easy.”

“That’s for sure,” Randy agreed instantly. “She’s always coming on to one of us.”

“If she’s that good looking,” Bill pointed out, “you’d think she’d have a boy friend.”

“She does,” Rob replied. “But she doesn’t care. He’ll still be here when we’re gone.”

“She’s gotta get her kicks while she can,” Bro suggested.

“Maybe she has designs on one of you guys,” I proposed, “helping her escape this small town.”

“Naw,” Walt waved me off. “She’s into a good time ... enjoys extracurricular activity.”

“Well I enjoy her activity too,” Rob said smugly.

“Fuck you, Ironman,” Walt blurted. “I keep forgetting you’ve had every woman this side of the Rockies.”

Rob didn’t reply, put smiled contentedly.

“You guys wanna hear Jed’s story or not?” Randy pushed back from the table to get more comfortable.

We all nodded. “Sure.”

“Okay,” Randy began, “after you left for Tucson, Jed became There-You-Go’s new target. He couldn’t resist.”

“Isn’t he living with some woman when he’s back in Tucson?” I asked.

“Yeah, but being alone in a small town with an attractive young woman throwing herself at him ... he blew her off ... figured she’d never know.” Randy took a quick swallow of beer.

“Apparently he and There-You-Go found mutual interest under the sheets. The way he talked they got it on fairly often.”

“I’d believe that,” Walt laughed.

“Well,” Randy continued, “one evening Jed and There-You-Go were going at it in Jed’s room, enjoying each other’s company. You might say they were exploring the peaks and valleys of each other’s morphology.”

“Like your metaphor,” Bill smiled at Randy.

“Thanks. I think. Whatever the hell that is.” Randy tipped his glass toward Bill in a brief salute. “Anyway ... There-You-Go’s boyfriend got wind of her exploits. He decided to do something about it. What an idiot.” Randy shook his head in anticipation of our disbelief. “He threw a brick through the front window of the room.” He looked at our faces for a reaction. “But it was the wrong room.”

We laughed at his careless misfortune.

“Somebody gave him the wrong room number. He scared the shit out of an old couple from Oregon who were traveling south to Bakersfield.” Randy chuckled.

“Probably hoping to get a glimpse of either Buck Owens or Merle Haggard,” I suggested with a half laugh.

“Nobody was hurt, and the sheriff caught the bastard.” Randy took a deep breath. “That’s

when he told them he was pissed at his girlfriend, who was shackled up with some geologist staying at the Lodge. The sheriff hauled him away to await charges.”

“So what did Jed do?” Bro prodded.

“Wait,” Randy cautioned, “I’ll get to that.” He swallowed the last of his beer and set the glass on the table next to his plate. “Phyllis,” he looked at Bill, “the owner of the Lodge, decided she couldn’t afford to get a reputation as a house of sin. She marched right over to Jed’s room, knowing he was the only single geologist staying at the Lodge. She knocked ... no answer. Knocked again. Nothing. She suspected something might be up, that the brick through the other window might’ve been a cover. She used her master key to let herself into his room. When she opened the door she found Jed,” Randy paused for effect, “standing buck-naked by the bed, crouched in a two point police stance, with his magnum pointed at her face, and his privates dangling in silhouette.”

We all laughed at Randy’s imagery.

He went on. “Jed yelled ‘Don’t move! I’ve got a gun!’ Phyllis screamed. There-You-Go screamed. Jed said, ‘Oh shit!’”

By that point we couldn’t stop laughing, and some of us even had tears in our eyes.

Randy contained his own laughter and continued. “There-You-Go was sitting on the bed, clutching a sheet pulled tight to her neck. I guess she started screaming at Jed, ‘Don’t! Don’t shoot.’”

“Hell, she was probably yelling that before Phyllis ever knocked on the door.” Walt wiped tears from the corners of his eyes.

“We can assume he didn’t shoot,” Tank said, either ignoring or not understanding Walt’s joke.

“He was probably shooting blanks anyway,” Bro tossed out his jab.

“No, Tank,” Randy said condescendingly, “he didn’t shoot. Phyllis said he pointed the gun toward the floor, uncocked it, laid it on the bedside table, and reached for his shorts.”

“I wonder if he was erect,” Walt burst into laughter, “or limp?”

“He was definitely playing hardball,” Bro suggested. Again more laughter.

“So what’d Phyllis do while he was dressing?” Rob asked, with a tear or two running down his cheeks.

“Guess once she could speak she tore into him, told him, ‘I want you and this ... this girl ... out of here tonight. This has gone too far. Out of here. Tonight!’ She slammed the door and left.”

Randy seemed finished with his story. He sat back in his chair and signaled the waitress that he wanted another beer.

“So where’d Jed end up staying?” I asked.

“Well,” Randy replied, “at first he couldn’t figure out why Phyllis was so pissed. After all, from his side, she was the one who broke into his room. He figured he was just protecting himself.”

“She’s lucky she didn’t get shot.” Bro pushed himself back from the table to get more leg room.

“I’ll bet There-You-Go was in some deep shit,” Walt nodded.

“That’s right,” Rob added, “Jed can leave ... live and work somewhere else. This is her

hometown.”

“Not as if her reputation wasn’t ruined already,” I pointed out.

“If it wasn’t, it for sure is now,” Randy took the beer from the waitress and thanked her.

“Sounds like she got her excitement, alright,” Bill contributed, “but maybe too much.”

“Jed told me There-You-Go warned him that her boyfriend might come after him again.

That he should probably leave town. That went over really big with Jed. But he figured he had his gun. All he needed was a place to stay. He figured he’d try to reason with Phyllis. I was there when he walked into the office. Phyllis was screaming at me and her husband. When she saw Jed she about went through the roof.”

“What’re you doing here,” she screeched. “I thought I told you to clear out?”

“Look ... Phyllis ... what’s the problem? What did I do?” Jed oozed innocence.

“What did you do? You almost killed me. You were going to shoot me.”

“I thought you were trying to break in,” Jed tried to reason with her. “I was just protecting myself. We heard all the commotion with the broken window and figured he was coming back for us. I didn’t know it was you.” Jed pleaded, “Really.”

“I don’t want guns pointed at me. I don’t want loaded guns in my motel. I don’t want sluts like that little girl in my rooms. I want you out of here. You give my place a bad name.”

“Phyllis, I’m sorry.” He sounded sincere. “I was just protecting myself. How was I to know it was you?”

“I knocked. Several times. You should have answered.” Phyllis shook her head. “And I don’t care. I have to protect my interests. Innocent people have been hurt because you were messing around with that whore. She’s nothing but trouble in this town. I don’t want her around here. I don’t want your kind around here. Pack up your belongings and go.”

“Christ! Where am I supposed to go at this time of night?” Jed pleaded. “Let me stay tonight. I’ll be gone first thing in the morning. Please.”

Phyllis’ husband put his arm around her shoulders. She shrugged him off. “Phyllis, let him stay tonight. He’s already paid for his room. I’ll make sure he’s gone in the morning.”

Phyllis looked at him. He held firm. She looked at Jed. “Stay tonight, damn it. But I never want to see you around here again. You and your god-damned guns.”

“Thanks. I’ll be gone at first light.”

Randy told us, “He looked at me, turned, and walked calmly out of the office. He moved his stuff out the next morning.”

“Where’s he staying?” I asked again.

“Couldn’t find a room. Everything’s locked up for the season. The Lodge is the only place left open. So he’s been sleeping in the cab of his truck, behind the Chevron station on the edge of town. The guys there left him the key so he can use the restroom. Papa Zoo sneaks him into his room late at night so he can shower.”

“The nights hafta be a little cold out there,” Walt reasoned.

“Ah ... Jed’s tough. Thinks he’s a mountain man. If it wasn’t for the possibility of snow he’d stay up in Nugent Cabin. He’s trying to get a room at that touristy place down the highway. But they want an arm and a leg this time of year. They’re normally closed for the winter. He’ll manage somehow.”

“Maybe There-You-Go will cuddle up with him and keep him warm.” Walt stood up and stretched, ready to leave.

“Shoot,” Bro laughed, “why’s he need a woman when he’s got his gun.”

^^^

The mountains looked beautiful from the valley; fresh snow dusted the upper peaks. Our roads were clear, but as we approached the summit a deep gray winter storm loomed over the range. Watching that line of snow approach from the west we quickly made the decision to hightail it off of that mountain. The storm engulfed us, but little precipitation fell on the valley floor.

The next morning we awoke to two inches of snow in town and what looked like roughly two feet up above. Observing those fresh, white peaks, with the morning sun stroking the slopes, set Randy to cursing. He made the difficult decision to pack us back to Nevada.

We were nervous about pulling trailers over the high, snow packed summit to the south, toward Mono Lake, so we drove north through Yerington. From there we headed south to Hawthorne. Arriving late in the afternoon, Spurrier made the decision to spend the night at the Sand’N’Sage.

...

That evening Rob, Walt, and Bro, the New Glue Brothers, settled in at the El Capitan for drinks. After dinner Bill and I joined them for a quick one. Just after we got there Walt spotted Larney, the driller we had met months before in Gabbs. He waved him over and bought him a beer. After a bit of chit-chat Rob cleared his conscience by revealing the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Ginny’s pussy.

Larney just laughed. “Served the little beast right. Too many god-damned cats ‘round anyway. That’s what they get for playin’ ‘round trucks’n’such.”

He went on to tell us, “Me’n that wench split the sheets.”

“What happened?” Rob tried to sound sympathetic.

“Hell ... got drunk one night’n beat the living’ tar outta her ... for the fun of it. Then I kicked her skinny bony butt out ‘n’dumped her shit in the yard. Got tired of her ugly face ... you know? Next day I jacked up my place ‘n’hailed it down here to a spot in town.”

“Where’s Ginny now,” Walt questioned, probably hoping she was near so he could take a shot at her.

“Don’t know ... don’t give a shit what happened to her. Prob’bly a whore in some house down the road. Yeah.”

Walt commented, “Sure is a waste of good horse flesh, though.”

Larney said softly, “Yeah,” and took a long chug from his beer.

The New Glue Brothers laughed in unison.

^^^

We had agreed to leave at 8:00 the next morning, but the New Glue Brothers screwed around and didn't get back from breakfast until 9:00. Then their trailer was blocked by a car, so they couldn't move it. We didn't pull out until 9:45.

We met Guy on the road just north of Mina. He signaled us to pull over and he took some maps and literature from our files, then gave Rob some last minute instructions. Before he pulled away, he asked, "You fellows up on the news?"

"Not really," I volunteered.

"Mount Saint Helens has erupted three times in the last twenty-four hours. They're calculating another major eruption."

"Like the one this past spring?" Tank seemed excited.

"Sounds like it," Guy confirmed. "You guys remember to duck." And he waved as he headed off toward Gabbs.

...

We reached Tonopah about 12:30, just in time for the tourists at Harry's. After checking out a cluster of French girls, we picked up groceries and other supplies and headed out to Pablo Canyon.

The rancher had fixed up the area in our absence. He leveled the pads for each trailer, buried the sewage pipes, and set up more permanent water connections.

I told him, "This looks really nice. Looks permanent."

"Shucks ... once you fellers move on for good I'm gonna rent these spaces to someone else lookin' for a temp'rary spot."

"Why not?" I replied.

He removed his hat and scratched his forehead. "Make a few extra bucks on the side, an' gain a 'casional conversation."

^^^

Bill liked to take a shower as soon as he returned from the field. By the time he dried off and slipped into clean clothes I had dinner ready. "The New Glue Brothers left late again this morning," I blurted as Bill sat down.

He looked up at me as I handed him a plate. "That gets to you, huh?"



“Yeah. And it should piss you off too.” I turned to get the silverware. “They’re not keeping up their end of the work.”

“How many samples they bringing in?”

“Aw ... that’s the pisser. Somehow they’re bringing in the quota. And it’s more than you and Tank. But that’s not the point.”

“That’s all NORMMEX cares about.” Bill accepted the fork I handed him.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. And I know I shouldn’t let these guys get to me. But it’s just not right. They futz around and don’t get out until eight or later, and you and Tank are already out in your area.”

“Rob’s the field boss,” Bill shrugged. “There’s nothing you can do. Just live with it.”

“That’s true, Butthead’s the boss ... yet anarchy prevails. He expects you and Tank to do his bidding while they do their own thing, without regard for Guy’s directives.”

Bill scooped up a large spoonful of Hamburger Helper and dumped it on his plate. “Why were they so late this morning?”

“They decided they wanted breakfast at Carver’s Station,” I said, with an exaggerated snotty voice. “They’re getting too lazy to even cook.”

“They can sleep longer that way,” Bill suggested.

“Yeah ... sleep off the effects of their drugs.” I scooped out a large portion of the hamburger mess for myself. “This crew is falling apart.”

“Didn’t see it before ... so I don’t know how bad things are.” Bill sprinkled salt and pepper over his meal.

“Guess not,” I shrugged. “Sorry to be dumping on you. Guess I hoped that last break, and another new face,” I pointed toward him, “might’ve smoothed things a bit. But that hope blew away with the Sierra snows.”

“What’s the main issue? What’s underlying all this turmoil?”

“The conflict between Spurrier and me, I guess. It’s divided the crew. He just won’t stop egging me on, and I won’t let him get away with his bull shit any longer. Everything was fine until some of us started throwing the crap back into his face. He’s become a real snake.”

Digging into my meal, I added, “I’ll be glad when this crew finally breaks up ... just because of Spurrier.”

“Thought you said you really liked it out here.”

“I did. But it’s no longer a pleasant experience. Who knows what crap he’ll try next? He’s such a cocksucker.”

^^^

“Boy, fall’s definitely taken hold of the weather patterns,” I said to Bill as we unloaded his samples from the back of the truck. “There’s a nip in the air.”

“Yup ... the days are definitely getting shorter. Makes it hard to make quota.”

“Yeah ... especially when your work buddies take off so late.”

“I’m starting to see what you mean there. They left late again this morning, didn’t they?”

“‘Bout 7:45.”

“Thought so. They made it clear they were going to Carver’s for breakfast.”

“And who knows when they actually got out into the field,” I added.

“I’m starting to see what you mean about Spurrier, too. He made a big deal about announcing to the rest of us what their intentions were, like he’s looking for some sort of confrontation.”

“He’s thumbing his nose at us, daring us to say something.” I am sure I had an I-told-you-so look on my face. “Think he’s trying to see just how far he can push before we squeal.”

Unloading the last of the bags, I jumped to another subject. “Speaking of squealing ... I was outside working on samples this morning when two jet fighters blasted up the valley.” I made a motion with my arm, demonstrating their course below our camp. “It’s such a weird experience ... standing on solid ground ... looking down upon jets streaking by.”

“Maybe we could get the Navy to do a little target practice on the Glue Brothers. In the sake of National Security, of course.”

“That’s right,” I laughed, “we don’t want bunch of dope heads out polluting our atmosphere, or impregnating our women, do we?”

^^^

Bill shared my quarters, taking Burt and Toby’s bunk. With early sunsets and cold, drizzly rain almost every evening, we usually stayed snug in the trailer, listening to music on my ghetto-blasters while Bill slaughtered me in Gin Rummy. We often skipped a more traditional dinner in favor of Bill’s special chili con queso dip with Fritos, beer, and cards. At Pablo Canyon Ranch that was our normal evening activity until bedtime.

Bill dealt a new hand. The lights started flickering, and going dim.

“Ah shit!” I reaching up to shut off my tape player. “Damn generator is going again.”

“Too late to be the toaster. Maybe Rob’s using his electric skillet.”

“Better not be,” I responded angrily. “He knows that screws up the power.”

The lights dimmed even more. “Isn’t this romantic,” Bill said with annoyance seeping into his voice. “It’s outta gas. Who’s turn is it?” He jumped up and headed for his coat, trying to make it before the lights went out completely.

“Grab mine too,” I said as I picked up the flashlight and slid from the bench. “Tank’s ... I think ... it’s Tank’s turn.”

Simultaneously we yelled at the top of our voices, “TANK!”

By the time we slipped on our coats we could hear Tank’s name and various slanderous comments emanating from the New Glue Brothers next door. When I hit the ground and started for the generator I heard their door slam open. Through the evening drizzle and the otherwise

quiet darkness Walt sent expletives crashing between the aluminum sides of the trailers.

The generator stalled completely by the time we climbed down into the slippery gully. We had placed it there, under an old automobile hood, to help muffle its horrendous sound.

“Where the fuck’s Tank?” Walt demanded.

“Hell if I know,” I shouted back, rain dripping from my face.

“He’s in his trailer, like always,” Bill stated flatly, as he aimed the beam of his flashlight toward the generator.

“He better get his fuckin’ ass out here and keep this thing going,” Walt wiped water from the top of the gas cap. “It’s his fuckin’ turn.”

“He always lets it run dry,” Bro stammered like he was freezing. He hadn’t thrown on a coat. He also held a flashlight and tried to illuminate the general area.

Without a word Rob marched directly to Tank’s trailer and commenced pounding on the door. “COME OUT, YOU FUCK WAD!” he yelled.

“Damn-it,” Walt cursed. “Can’t believe this thing only holds a half-gallon. We shouldn’t hafta fill this more than once a night.”

“I know ... I’m tired of smelling like a gas station.” I unscrewed the cap from the five gallon gas can and attached the spout.

“This is bad enough anyway, but in this son-of-a-bitchin’ rain it’s a real pain in the ass.” Walt unscrewed the cap from the generator’s tank.

I stepped forward with the gasoline.

“Don’t get any on the god-damned generator,” Walt reminded me. “Fucker’s hot as hell. Hit the fucking hole.”

I inserted the nozzle into the tank’s opening and carefully filled it with the flammable liquid.

“We all take our turns,” Bro stammered. “Why can’t Tank ... ever do ... his part? He think he’s special? He’s always ... letting it run empty.”

We could hear Rob arguing with Tank through the open door.

Tank replied, “I’m too busy reading to pay much attention to these small details.”

“Try reading in the dark.” Rob made his best point.

Tank’s voice came back arrogant and abrasive. “I don’t need lights. I’ll use candles.”

“FUCK HIM!” Walt shouted toward Rob. “He’s got a shit-assing answer for everything.”

Rob returned to our group as Walt struggling to restart the generator. He yanked and yanked and yanked but couldn’t get the starter to turn over. “Son-of-a-fucking-bitch.” He turned toward Tank’s trailer. “YOU ASSHOLE!” He turned back to us. “Once this piece of shit shuts down it’s a god-damned pain to restart.”

Bill tried a couple of yanks, with no success. Then I gave it a shot. After four or five strokes I gave up as well.

Rob stepped up and said, “You gotta think it on.” He took a deep breath and gave it one swift crank. The generator sputtered, shook violently, then burst into its usual vicious roar.

Bill and Walt and I looked at each other and shook our heads. “Lucky fucker,” Walt snarled through the noise.

“Eat shit,” Rob laughed. “You gotta live right.”

Bill and I walked back to the Empire. “Hate to say this,” I said, “but sometimes I wish Tank was on their side ... instead of ours.”

“Why’s that?”

“He makes himself such an obvious and easy target.” I opened the door to the trailer. “I can’t defend him when he’s so obviously wrong.”

Bill smiled as he stepped in. “I’ve been here long enough to know that Tank’s never wrong.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “but that doesn’t make him right, either.”

^^^

The next evening we were well into our usual game of Gin when we heard the door to the Airstream creak open and then bang shut. I subconsciously assumed one of the Glue Brothers was headed to the ravine to gas up the generator. I glanced up from my cards to see a strange expression capture Bill’s face. In a quiet, calm voice, he said, “Look behind you.”

At first, when I turned, I saw our reflections staring back from the darkened glass of the window. But as I focused I caught the faint movement beyond. It was the New Glue Brothers, each with a flashlight held below their chin and shining up into their faces. They looked like ghoulish heads floating in the surrounding darkness.

Studying them more closely, I could see that Bro had a pair of fake Dracula teeth implanted in his mouth. He was making biting motions and growling for effect. Slightly in front of him, to his left, was Walt. He wore his straw cowboy hat with bright ribbons of flagging dangling from the band and a red bandanna around his neck. In addition, he had covered his face in white grease paint and had highlighted a sinister grin from the corners of his mouth with red lipstick. He had shoved the fingers of his left hand into a fish head so that he could make the mouth open and close like a puppet. He made bubble sounds like a scuba diver in deep water.

But their absurdities were nothing compared to Rob’s. He was standing to Bro’s right, also wearing his straw field hat with plastic flagging spilling off the brim and a red bandanna, but he hadn’t used grease paint. He had only an idiotic stare, like some backwoods hick farmer who was too closely related to his kin. Instead of a painted grin, he had shoved a trout head into his mouth in such a way that it looked as though the fish were trying to swim out. While we stared at his bizarre get-up, Rob stuck his tongue through the tiny open mouth, making it look as if the fish were taunting us. He also emitted some sort of burbly, watery noise.

Bill and I both groaned, then laughed nervously. I shouted through the glass, “FUCK OFF,” then closed the curtains. We went back to playing cards.

The Glue Brothers flashed their lights through the window, illuminating our curtains, continuing to make obscene noises and giggling until they eventually lost interest. We could hear them move off, most likely to spook poor Tank.

Once they were gone, I said, “Those fish heads are probably from the mess of trout Spurrier

caught back in Bridgeport. Don't know how he can put something like that in his mouth."

Sorting his hand, Bill quietly sang, "Fish heads, fish heads, roly-poly fish heads; fish heads, fish heads, eat'em up, yum."

"What the hell's that?"

"Huh? Oh! Just a piece of an old rhyme from Doctor Dimento. Heard it on the radio."

Laughing, I said, "Who knows what perverted things are going on out there in the dark. Maybe they're performing some semi-satanic ritual with the remains of those poor fishies."

"Maybe they're trying to predict the future by reading the entrails."

"They're probably chanting and dancing in a circle," I embellished our little story, "the fish heads mounted on tiny stakes and stuck in the ground."

"Like the natives in some old Tarzan movie," Bill suggested.

"Exactly. And thinking back ... with trout heads displayed on their shelves added to the lobster in the crotch incident in Tonopah, I suspect those pot heads have some pseudo-religious fish fetish going." Gazing blankly at my cards, I said, "Don't mean to carp on this ... but ... maybe they're ictheologists."

"Yeah, maybe," he smiled as he looked up from his hand. He fanned his cards and laid them on the table. "Gin."

A wasted double pun.

^^^

Eventually the weather broke and we moved into something of an Indian Summer. The days were very pleasant and the nights didn't quite get down to freezing. We had received word from Guy that if the weather held we would probably be sampling until Christmas. That didn't go over well with most of us. We were all getting anxious to end the project for the season and get back to the warm weather and beautiful women of Tucson. And I was getting tired of the childish antics that the Glue Brothers seemed so fond of performing almost every evening.

I did get a little break. I had to drive the blue and white truck to Reno to get it fitted with a new set of tires and pick up a new tire for Randy's truck in Bridgeport. I also had to get our small backup generator serviced. And on my way through Fallon I had to pick up a money order for \$2000. We ran through expense money very quickly out there, and it was time to replenish our funds.

I endured a terrible sinus headache throughout the five hour drive and once I completed my chores I just wanted to lie in one place without moving. Those damn headaches clouded everything. I found a quiet little motel on South Virginia and jumped right into bed. In the evening I tried calling Randy to discuss the delivery of his tire, but the line from Reno to Bridgeport was screwed up. I never got through.

^^^

I woke with a pounding, incessant, sinus headache. The pain was searing, deafening, inescapable. It made me nauseous. I didn't want to move. My daily bouts with those headaches pushed me toward The Edge.

Eventually I pulled myself out of bed, swallowed two Sudafed and a couple of aspirin, took a long, hot shower, and was able to function. I tried calling Randy, but the lines were still messed up. I called the operator, and she was able to patch me through somehow.

"Hey, buddy," Randy sounded full of piss and vinegar, "yer gonna love this."

"What's up?" I said, trying to subdue the pounding in my forehead.

"We're moving you back to Bridgeport."

"When?" was all I could muster.

"Drive down from Reno. The others are already on their way."

"How they gonna pull the trailers without this truck?"

"Not bringing the trailers. They're staying at Pablo for now."

"What about my stuff?"

"Rob's gonna bring it along."

"Ah shit," I said, not hiding my irritation. "He ain't gonna know what to bring. I don't want him going through my stuff."

"Hey, buddy, you ain't got much choice. If he forgets something important you can drive over and pick it up. You gotta be prepared ... flexible. That's the way it is in exploration geology."

...

I arrived in Bridgeport late in the morning and checked in at the Lodge. Phyllis set me up in a nice corner room with two bedrooms, a kitchenette, a fire place, a couch, a desk, a color television, and lots of windows with wonderful views of the surrounding scenery. The other guys hadn't arrived yet, so I took the opportunity to take a nap and rest my aching head.

Around 3:30 Bill and Tank came pounding at my door. I let them in and they situated themselves on the couch.

"I brought some of your things," Bill volunteered. "I put what I could in your duffle. Rob was in a hurry to get out ... for a change ... and I had to get my things ready too."

"Thanks. I'll probably be driving back there anyway to pick up some other stuff. Glad you did it, and not Rob."

"Wasn't sure what to bring. Just brought the essentials."

"That's okay. Was a rush job, I know."

"How was your drive?" Bill asked, to be polite.

"Not bad," I replied, "except for this headache."

"Still bothering you, huh?"

“Yeah ... gotta live with it, I guess.” I sat in the chair by the desk. “Hey ... remember that guy we saw that waves at everyone?”

“The Walker?” Bill smiled.

“Yeah. Guy’s a phony.”

“How’s that?” Bill settled down into the cushions.

“Well ... Randy had me pick up some stuff while I was in Reno. The first place I had to go this morning was on South Virginia, near the southern edge of town. Was about 8:15. I saw The Walker leaving town, heading south toward Carson City.” I raised my arm, “Waving happily as usual.”

Bill shook his head, “Must do that eight hours a day, huh?”

“That’s what it would seem,” I replied. “But after I picked up everything in town I headed down here. An hour after I saw him walking south, just outside of Reno, I spotted him heading north, outside of Carson City.”

“No way he could walk twenty-five miles in an hour.”

“Exactly,” I nodded emphatically. “He must’ve gotten a ride.”

“What’s his game, then?” Bill wondered.

“Don’t know. Some sort of publicity stunt, maybe. But thinking back, every time I’ve seen him he’s been either coming or going near the edge of one of the two towns. I’ve never seen him out in the flats between the two cities.”

“Sounds like a sham to me,” Bill said conclusively.

“Yeah. Here I’d thought, maybe, he was gonna walk that corridor every day ‘til there was World Peace, or ‘til hunger was stamped out, or something.”

“Probably never know,” Bill sighed, “and it really doesn’t matter now, does it? Whatever he’s doing, he’s a fake.”

The New Glue Brothers walked through the open door. Walt and Bro were wearing Halloween costumes. Walt was dressed much like he was the evening of the fish head incident. But this time his face was painted white with red rings around his eyes and lips and his nose was painted blue. He strolled in like his appearance should make us roll over with laughter.

Bro wore a full gorilla suit that he had shipped up from Tucson. When the two walked into my room they looked like a couple of freaks after an acid trip in the late 60s.

Watching them parade by, I said, “New field attire, I see.”

“What you talking about,” Walt tried to act perturbed. “This is the real me. Decided not to wear make-up today.”

Spurrier wore only his field clothes, but came stepping into the room all cocky and self-important. “We’ll take this room,” he said confidently.

“Sorry,” I snapped, “already claimed.”

“Too bad,” Rob responded arrogantly. “I’m the Field Boss and I get first choice.”

“You’re a bit too late this time,” I countered. “You guys get the room upstairs.”

“What if we want this one?” Walt spoke as he poked around the drawers in the kitchenette.

“The one upstairs is identical,” I pointed toward the ceiling.

“Don’t want to ... climb the stairs ... every day,” Rob pulled out a chair from the kitchen table.

“Especially after climbing Patterson all day,” Bro spoke as he pulled the gorilla mask from over his head.

“Too bad,” I argued. “I hafta have ground level because of all the samples I hafta box and prepare.”

There was one chair left at the table and Bro grabbed it. Walt had no place to sit. He was starting to get pissy about it when Randy walked in. “Hey guys,” he spoke light heartedly, “how’s it hangin’?”

We mumbled and waved without enthusiasm.

“Tired from the drive, huh?” Randy took up a position in the middle of the floor, where he could be the center of attention. When he didn’t get a response, he said, “Well ... since we’re all here ... it’ll be a good time to have a group meeting.”

Again, no response.

“Okay then, uhm ... before I bring you up to date ... Spurrier ... you got anything you need to pass on?”

“Yes ... I do.” He looked at me and licked his lips. “We didn’t bring Chris’ truck.”

He got his intended result. I exploded. “WHAT? Why not?”

He sat there, calmly, with a smug grin on his face. “You didn’t leave the keys.”

Randy looked toward me for an explanation.

I shrugged. “Guess I took them with me. Didn’t know I wasn’t going back.”

“You should’ve left them,” Randy tried to sound fatherly. “Besides,” he looked at Rob, “there’s a spare in the magnet box under the front bumper. I put it there myself.”

“Must’ve fallen off,” Rob said coolly. “Couldn’t find it.”

“Hey,” I pointed toward Spurrier, “why didn’t you jump it?”

“Not good on the engine ... and transmission,” he smirked.

“BULL SHIT,” I moved to the edge of my chair. “Just two fucking days ago you blew off the whole day to drive to Tonopah to buy gas for the bikes. I could’ve picked it up on my next run. But you couldn’t wait ... you hot wired my truck. You weren’t worried about damaging the tranny then. Why couldn’t you do it this time?”

He didn’t have a chance to respond. Walt jumped in, “Man, can’t you shut your trap. You’re always crabbing about something.”

“What’re you talking about?” I was puzzled.

“You’re always BITCHIN’ about what we do,” Walt’s voice rose in volume.

“So,” I countered, “... maybe it’s ‘cause you guys are always fuckin’ around.”

“Like what?” Bro jumped in momentarily.

“You really wanna get into this?” I questioned him.

“Yeah,” Walt said, “we ain’t got nothing to hide.”

I looked at Bill and Tank as they sat quietly on the couch, acting neutral. They were both looking at their hands, laid calmly in their laps. Occasionally one of them would look at me sheepishly, maybe wanting to give me support, but not saying a word.

“You don’t have anything on us,” Rob spoke with forced calm.

“Bullshit!” I blasted. “You guys are always laying around in the mornings and getting out late. Then eating breakfast down at Carvers. Crap like that.”



“That’s cold, man. Really cold.” Walt turned to Randy. “Check the records ... see who’s been bringing in the most samples. Then tell us we’ve been fuckin’ around.”

“Not just that,” I jumped in as he finished his sentence. “It’s Rob’s whole attitude. The way he bosses us around like he’s some emperor-god or something.”

“We did put him in charge,” Randy countered.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t hafta act like some god-damned Mussolini.”

“FUCK YOU!” Walt flipped me off.

“Fuck yourself,” and I flipped him back. “If your buddy there didn’t fuck people over so much we’d be a lot better off. He’s always conning someone.”

“YOU COCKSUCKER,” he moved toward me. “He hasn’t fucked anybody over.”

“Fuck that shit,” I laughed nervously. “You have an awful short memory.”

“Name something,” Walt challenged.

“Okay ... back in Austin. When he fucked you over and left you in the desert.”

“Miscommunication,” Rob said flatly.

“Yeah,” Walt moved a step closer, “miscommunication.”

“That’s not what you called it then.” I stood up as Walt moved to the middle of the room. “I distinctly remember you using the words ‘buddy fucker’.”

Walt turned and went back to his side of the room. But I wouldn’t let up. Looking at Rob I said, “And what about the way you treated Burt back in Hawthorne? Feeding him spiked brownies and making him think you nailed Shannon. And then that chick he liked in Austin. None of that was right.”

Walt whipped around and came back toward me. “Man, you’ve got no room to do any ranking. You fucked with his mind just like the rest of us.”

I took a step forward and pointed toward Rob, “I didn’t feed him drugs, that’s for sure.”

“Man, that’s a low blow. Ever since you collected that high grade at Grantsville you’ve acted like you’re special. YOU AIN’T NOTHING ... YOU’RE CRAP.” Walt practically shouted.

“What’re you talking about?” I yelled back.

“The beach,” Rob spoke in almost a whisper, like he was feeding Walt information on the side.

“That’s right,” Walt snapped. “The time you went to Walker Lake with that chick. In the middle of a working day. The rest of us were out sweating and you were fuckin’ around with some babe on the beach.”

“FUCK YOU!” I shouted. “She wasn’t a babe ... the beach sucked ... and I was done with my work for the day. What you want me to do ... stay home and beat my meat?”

“FUCK. When you’re not jerkin’ off you’re sitting around reading.”

“Hey, ASSHOLE ... when you guys get in at night I spend a good chunk of my evening fuckin’ around with your maps. While you guys are out chasing around town.”

“A lot of chasing around at Pablo Canyon,” Bro laughed.

“You know what the fuck I mean.”

“What about Yosemite?” Rob suggested to Walt.

“Yeah,” Walt responded by moving even closer to me. We were only three or four feet

apart, our arms waving in the air, pointing at each other. “What about the time you took that fat chick to Yosemite? The rest of us were working our butts off.”

“LOOK,” I shouted, “THE TWO OF YOU,” and I pointed to Walt and Rob, “SHOULD’VE BEEN OUT COLLECTING SAMPLES INSTEAD OF PLAYING AUTO MECHANIC WITH THAT TRUCK! AND I WAS DONE WITH MY GOD-DAMNED FUCKING WORK. GUY TOLD ME I COULD DO WHATEVER I WANT ON MY OWN TIME. It’s none of your fucking business.”

“WE’RE GETTING PAID TO WORK,” Walt moved close in, “NOT FUCK AROUND.”

We were standing face to face, yelling at the tops of our very loud voices. “YOU’D DO THE SAME IF YOU HAD MY ASSIGNMENT.”

I had made a good point, and it seemed as though he wanted to hit me. “AH BULL SHIT!” Walt blasted, spittle grazing my face.

I could see the fire in his eyes. I was ready. Walt was a good sized man, but he wasn’t as tall, nor as solidly built, as me. A part of me burned with hatred, and that scared me, because if the situation got physically violent my adrenaline might have pushed me to harm him. Yet, the whole time we argued, there was another part of me that wanted to burst out laughing. This whole scene was absurd. Walt’s appearance in his ridiculous costume, coupled with his screaming, yelling, white face with red lipstick, was something out of a clownish nightmare.

“LISTEN TO YOURSELF,” I shouted, our noses practically touching. I felt my fists clench in preparation to defend myself. “YOU’RE THE ONE’S THAT FUCK AROUND ... EVERY GOD-DAMNED MORNING! AND YOU’RE THE ONES THAT COME IN EARLY AT NIGHT. When you’re not stopping by some bar to get boozed up.”

He stared up into my eyes. Anger made his pupils wide. But I wouldn’t look away. Finally he stepped back and said, “Fuckin’ asshole.”

Sensing a momentary victory, and not knowing when to quit, I said, “And I haven’t forgotten about you fucking me over when you told me your truck had two full tanks.” I took a couple of steps forward and pointed toward Rob.

He gave me an innocent look.

“You know what I’m talkin’ about. When I ran outta gas in Reno. You did that on purpose.”

Walt spun around again and we were back face to face. “YOU COCK SUCKER! YOU’RE BLAMING HIM FOR YOU RUNNING OUT OF GAS?”

“HE’S A BUDDY FUCKER. HE’S ALWAYS TRYING TO GET EVEN FOR SOMETHING. HE SET ME UP. HE’S ALWAYS SETTING ONE OF US UP FOR A FALL.”

Walt broke it off again and moved back to his side of the room. “Fuck me to tears ... I’ll never smile again.”

I glared at Walt, stunned by his proclamation. It was out of context, but I had heard those exact words before, somewhere, long ago. “Rene!” I thought. “I haven’t thought of old Rene in years.” He was a field partner from a decade past. And just as suddenly I realized how similar he and Walt were. The constant talk of sex, the womanizing, the coarse language, the overstated bravado. The empty threats and hollow words.

Walt looked at Randy, then turned to face me. “Man, you’ve broken the dam. These are

cold shots, man, cold shots. All this shit was under the carpet. Forgotten. Now Randy knows it all.”

“Maybe you swept it under the carpet, but the rest of us haven’t.” I moved back toward my chair. “Look. I’ve just gotten tired of Rob’s bullshit stories and all the excuses he concocts. I don’t know why you’re getting mad. It’s Rob I’m pissed at. Can’t he defend himself? You his puppet? I’ve heard you say a lot of the same shit about him yourself.”

Walt stood where he was, seething.

“Maybe it’s *time* to spill the beans,” I said, stepping away from my chair momentarily. Pointing toward Rob, I said, “That slimy eel is getting off the hook again.”

“Man, you’ve got no room to point fingers.” Walt’s voice cracked a bit from the stress. “You gave Burt a line of crap Rob could never touch.”

Randy looked at Walt. He said, “Shut up!” Then he looked at me. “Shut up!” I sat on my chair and Walt moved back and leaned against the wall.

Randy said, “We’re not getting anywhere this way. Nothing’s getting resolved.” Looking around the room to make sure everyone had calmed, he went on. “I think you all should head to your rooms and cool off.”

Walt looked at me and said, “Yeah, cool the fuck off.”

Randy stared him down. As everyone got to their feet, two of Phyllis’ daughters poked their heads around an open window. Randy saw them and said, “Hi. What’s up?”

“Mom sent us over to make sure everything’s okay.”

“Everything’s fine,” Randy smiled. “Got it under control.”

The two girls raced off across the parking lot to report back to their mother.

Randy looked at me, then toward Walt. “If you two get us kicked outta here you’re in deep shit. Deep shit.”

Walt and I looked at each other across the room, then he headed toward the door. The stairs to the upstairs room were right outside the entrance. As the New Glue Brothers climbed up they intentionally pounded their feet. The racket was deafening. I looked toward Randy.

“Just trying to annoy you,” he shrugged.

“Pretty childish,” Bill spoke for the first time since the argument began.

Randy headed for the door.

I moved toward him. “Hey ... I’m sorry. I feel bad ... that we disturbed the whole motel.”

“We’re lucky,” Randy replied. “It’s still early. They don’t have many guests yet.”

“I know it shouldn’t have happened, but this is something that’s been building for a long time.”

Leaving the room, Randy turned back. “That’s the way it is in exploration geology.”

Closing the door behind him, I commented to Bill and Tank, “That’s his excuse for everything.”

Bill laughed nervously. Tank shrugged.

“Sorry, guys,” I pleaded. “My argument is with Spurrier. Didn’t mean to get everyone involved. This was all so stupid.”

“I know some of the story, but what’s got you so pissed at him?”

“Goes back to the beginning of summer. Spurrier told us all sorts of things, and I believed

him. No reason to doubt him. But I started catching him in little lies; stories that just didn't jive. I hated being duped."

"We all do," Tank finally spoke.

"Yeah, I guess." I plopped down on the couch. "One time he actually admitted he has a hard time separating fantasy from reality. When Bro came onto the crew he told me he knew Rob from school ... and eighty percent of what Rob tells people is crap."

"Walt did make a good point though," Bill spoke cautiously.

"What was that?" I frowned, not expecting one of my compatriots to side with the enemy.

"From what you've told me, you foisted a bunch of crap on that Burt fellow. Maybe what goes around comes around."

I thought about that for a minute. "You may have a point. I hated being the butt of Rob's jokes ... maybe Burt resented mine. But he was too good a Christian to say anything about it ... to confront me."

Tank said, "You used to hurt his feelings a lot."

I sat quietly, reviewing the various torments I'd dumped on Burt. "You're right, Tank. Maybe I can understand ... now ... what I did to Burt. And you. Guess, in my mind, that somehow seemed different ... 'cause you guys were so hard headed about what you knew and ... especially in Burt's case ... having found the right path. Burt was so self-assured, so righteous, so arrogant ... it seemed okay to mess with his mind. But why did Rob mess with me?"

"Rob messes with everyone's mind," Bill assured me. "You've been overly sensitive to it. Let it get to you. I don't think you were a target except when you fought back." Bill was silent for a few seconds. "Maybe you feel resentment ... 'cause you subconsciously want to be accepted as part of their group ... but know you never will be."

"Maybe," I said. "You may be right. I could never be as totally unrestrained as those guys. Maybe I envy their youth and all the time they have still ahead of them. And their confidence and carefree day-to-day view of life. Maybe I want to be like them ... but don't have the courage to truly break free. But when I do, I get nailed for it. They hold it against me. So I resent them even more in return. And Rob, being their ring leader, became my focus point. I started doing and saying things that would aggravate him. Tit for tat." I looked up at the two of them. "My one regret is that my resentment spilled over onto you guys. Got you involved in something you were no part of. I'm sorry."

"There must be something in this pure mountain air," Tank noted. "We've come here twice, and twice there have been shouting matches."

"Might have something there," I said. "But I put some of the blame on my stupid sinus headaches. Maybe if I weren't so irritable I would've let everything ride."

Bill had been looking around the room. He looked at me with a half-smile and said, "Hope this doesn't irritate you, but I get dibs on the bed by the window."

I smiled in return, and said, "You got it."

^^^

Tank and I drove back to Pablo Canyon Ranch to pick up my truck and belongings. There were also standards, Rapidograph pens, ink, sample cards, boxes, and most of my other supplies that needed to be in Bridgeport.

We stopped in Tonopah on the way back to check for mail and to pick up a shipment of supplies from Tucson that should have been waiting for us at the bus depot. The package hadn't arrived and the Post Office was closed. It was a Sunday. Sometimes we lost track of the days of the week.

When Tank was backing the blue and white Ford out of the parking lot at the Mizpah he ran over a glass tumbler someone had placed behind his wheel. It punctured the brand new tire. We knew that would go over big in Tucson. We replaced it with a brand new spare and headed out. Other than picking up my truck and supplies, the trip was an all around waste of time.

We took Highway 120 from Coaldale Junction to Lee Vining. I couldn't get enough of that route. It excited me every time I drove it. The startling relief of the canyons and washes; the vast grass topped plateaus; the mountainous backdrops; and, finally, Mono Lake reflecting the Sierras. After the spiritual uplift of that return drive, we pulled into Bridgeport about 5:30.

^^^

Bill sat in the middle, next to Randy. I was riding in the passenger seat for a change, staring out the window at the passing scenery. The weather was beautifully sunny, breezy, and cool. The streams were flowing with melt water from the early snows. The upper meadows were taking on their winter hues, and the scenery was as spectacular as ever.

Making our way up the switchbacks, Randy explained our goal for the next few days. "NORMMEX is expecting legal action on the overlapping claims we staked last year. The three of us are gonna check to make sure the posts are still standing."

Only half paying attention, I said, "Man, check out that jackrabbit. It's huge. As big as a small deer."

"Maybe it's a jackalope," Bill suggested.

The three of us laughed.

"Only in Spurrier's mind," I said.

We laughed again.

A short while later a fuzzy golden blob bounded across the rutted road. "You see that?" Bill pointed.

"Yup," I replied.

"Yeah ... it's a marmot," Randy said knowingly. "A Golden Mantled Marmot. Should be heading for winter quarters."

“Neat,” Bill nodded. “A wood chuck.”

“Yeah,” Randy went on, “and a pain in the ass.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Those boogers eat the aluminum tags off our downed posts. Makes it hard to know which post we’re resetting.”

“Oh boy,” I said with mock enthusiasm, “that’ll make the day a real pleasure.”

“Yeah, and you’re gonna find that most of the posts are down.” Randy maneuvered around a large rock in the road.

“The staking crew was in a big hurry, huh?” I knew they had been.

“Couldn’t take the time to sink them properly.”

“What a pain,” Bill moaned. “Now we get to clean up.”

“It’d be nice if things could be done right the first time,” Randy leaned forward and smiled at me. “But that’s the way it is in exploration geology.”

• • •

From where I was working I could see Bill and Randy for most of the day. Above the tree line it seems you can see forever. The three of us put in a long day hiking over the range checking and resetting posts. The work was at times hard, but invigorating. I was glad to be out in the fresh air, rather than sitting in a motel room boxing samples.

Several times throughout the day I was startled by that disconcerting hum that seems to emanate from everywhere. It would always come so suddenly that it took me by surprise. But a moment later it would register that there was a glider hovering over head. I always paused to watch those amazing powerless birds catching the currents passing over the range.

• • •

When I stopped for lunch I picked a spot that happened to face north. I could see the lines of the north-south trending ranges as they trailed off into the hazy distance. I focused on the highest, the range surrounding the Lake Tahoe Basin. And once again I could make out the light markings of the highway cut leading down the range to Carson City. And I was suddenly reminded of the news report from the evening before. I tried to imagine what must have happened.

Highway 50, from Lake Tahoe to Carson City, is a spectacular drive. The road twists and turns and curves through a wonderfully green pine forest with various colored outcrops adding depth and perspective. The road descends toward the valley, with spectacular views of the Great Basin and its series of ranges, one after the other, stepping off into the eastern distance. Several of the higher views along that road give the illusion of looking from an airplane window; houses and cars and fields just vague structures far below. To the south, the eastern shoulder of the Sierras is visible, with snowy peaks and rugged canyons. In every direction there is something wonderful to see.

On the previous day a tour bus from Carson City was making its way back from South

Tahoe and its gambling clubs. The bus had been chartered by a senior citizen group. At every curve the folks on the right side of the bus marveled at the sights moving past their windows. There were “oos” and “ahs” and many photos taken in haste through smudged glass. Those on the left side of the bus were envious, but they had their turn on the upward leg of the journey.

Someone near the front asks the driver, “Would you pull over so we can take photos?”

The driver hesitates. Without looking back he says, “Sorry, ma’am. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Ma’am, I don’t mean to scare you,” the driver’s voice is shaky, “but the brakes won’t respond.”

The festive mood disappears. Tension spills from row to row toward the back. “Something is wrong.”

“What’s wrong?” Nervous voices echo toward the front.

The driver briefly looks from the road into the mirror. In a strong, commanding voice he says, “COULD EVERYONE PLEASE STAY SEATED! And hold on.”

The bus picks up speed, whips around corners into the on-coming lane. On the straight-aways the driver cautiously drops the right tires off the pavement and onto the gravel shoulder, clipping snow poles and sign posts, all in an effort to slow the speeding tons of steel. With every thump there is a screech from a female passenger. But the grade is steep, and the bus continues to pick up speed.

The driver shuts off the engine, tries jamming the gears. Nothing seems to work. A couple in the back begin to panic. There are slight screams. Everyone is nervous; tense. There are tears of fright. Prayers are spoken out loud, mixed with curses. Couples huddle, hold hands. The bus rolls on; down.

The driver skillfully guides them through the curves, tires squealing. A passenger shouts “We’ve made it. There’s only straight road ahead.”

But they continue barreling down that slope. A slow moving car appears in front of them. The driver swerves into the on-coming lane with his horn blasting. The bus flashes past the Datsun, swerves back into its own lane, and charges on.

The road levels some as it approaches the intersection of State Highway 50 and U.S. 395. There is a traffic control light at the intersection. Highway 50 dead ends there. The bus will have to turn right or left or plow ahead across a ditch and into a meadow. The driver calculates the meadow as their only chance. He knows he won’t be able to turn at these speeds without rolling.

The traffic light becomes visible. It’s green. “STAY GREEN,” he shouts. “Don’t change.” He drags the tires in the gravel, dust billowing behind. He does his best to slow down. The light changes: red. The north-south traffic starts through. No one on the highway is aware that the bus is in trouble.

Gravel and dirt constantly spews from the buses right side. The driver leans on the horn, swears, yells “CLEAR OUT! CLEAR OUT!” The traffic keeps up its steady progression.

The bus seems to fly into the intersection, smashes broadside into a Pinto station wagon heading south. The force of the impact pushes the small car sideways across the highway, its own momentum negated by the mass of the bus. Across three lanes, over the shoulder, down into the ditch, where the car slides under the bus, the bus riding over the twisting metal. The larger

vehicle plows through a barbed wire fence and finally slows in the soft earth of the damp meadow. The rear of the bus rests atop the wreckage of the car.

The tour has ended. There are three dead in the Pinto Wagon. Fortunately it did not catch fire. There are seventeen injured on the bus, including the driver. It could have been worse; much worse. The driver is proclaimed a hero. There wasn't much more he could have done.

It will be years before the rubber marks are gone from that intersection. It will be a lifetime before the emotional scars will heal. The scar on the side of the mountain remains an open wound.

• • •

It was a long hike back to our rendezvous with Randy. Bill and I were both 45 minutes late. But I didn't care. I was high from a good day's work, and exhilarated by the view from the top. In every way it was simply spectacular. The Sierras to the south and west, the White Mountains to the east, the pines, rocks, cliffs, streams, canyons; something different from every ridge and every angle. And it was quiet, so very quiet. That was an unusual treat. It made me feel so alone, and at peace. I found myself excited and alive. And my sinus headache was gone.

^^^

The next day I worked south of Wheeler Peak, again setting up claim posts above 11,000 feet. I was working my way down to Boulder Flat and found myself facing a long, steep scree slope, verging dangerously on the angle of repose. The scree was composed of thin, smooth plates of silicified rock. When I placed my weight on a slab it would slide like a skate board on asphalt.

I tried one course, crossing the face diagonally, but had to back-track. The slope was simply too steep and too loose. I visualized surfing to the bottom and breaking my legs in three places. I would lie there in agony hoping for rescue and eventually die from exposure. It was then that I admitted to myself that I had a similar problem to Toby's fear of heights; a fear of scree.

I accepted my fate and hiked along the ridge until I found a more manageable slope. But even there the loose material was composed of the same thin plates of silicified rock. I moved cautiously down the tumbled debris, approaching a small snow field. Below, in the tangle of eroded material, I could hear the sweet sound of melt water following gravity's course. If the weather had been hot, or my own supply low, I might have made an attempt to reach it. It sounded deep, so I let it go. I went on to cross the snow, finding it an easier route.

Stepping into the flat, I spooked up a marmot. The ball of fur was fat and healthy and ready for winter. Just as quickly, I caught a glimpse of a shrew or vole, some sort of tiny, gray rodent, as it darted into hiding beneath the scree. I am always amazed by the instant impact we humans have on our surroundings.



I located a flat rock big enough for my butt and sat down to rest my aching knees and throbbing feet. When I removed my boots I discovered several torn blisters, and a bruise or two. Because of the unusual action and movement of the scree, my feet had found new ways to move within my boots. I was not looking forward to the afternoon's hike. I applied mole skin, put on a fresh pair of socks, snugged my boots up tight, and hoped for the best.

While I sat there contemplating my fate, a jackrabbit dashed from behind a small clump of trees. As he bounded from side to side in front of me, I yelled "STOP!" The rabbit froze in its tracks. Rob had said that always worked for him when he was out hunting as a kid. I hate to admit it, but that rabbit sat there stone still, nervously eyeing me, while I talked to him from about 30 feet away. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, yet he didn't seem to mind my pointless monologue.

"Hey, Mister Rabbit," I spoke calmly, not wanting to spook him, "how's it going? Getting ready for winter?"

His left ear turned my way. His nose twitched. But he didn't respond.

"How's life treating you up here?" I looked around the secluded area. "You got a pretty nice place going for you. Best accommodations on the mountain."

Still no reply.

"First rate, high quality."

He actually seemed to relax and settle in, enjoying the small talk. Other thoughts passed through my mind. "But what do you know about quality? You hafta live to the best of your fuzzy eared ability each day, or life's over. Chomp chomp, just like that. Survival is your reward for doing things right. Ain't that the truth."

I thought about that for a second, my mind cranked up from fresh air and physical exertion. "Ah ... but does *The Truth* really matter? Does it even exist?... Isn't it relative?... Doesn't it have a lot to do with where you're standing at any one time? How you look at things?... Don't know if it has any place in reality."

Mister Rabbit's ears twitched and turned, listening for greater dangers than I presented. I was only messing with his pea brain. There were other predators with sharper teeth and faster reflexes.

Suspecting I might be losing my audience I ventured on. "But you're right," I put words into his mouth, "reality doesn't exist either. Not in Nature. It's just a concept invented by Man. Simply an idea we've attempted to translate into material form.... quality is not a thing ... so it must be what? A perception ... an action ... an act? But how can we obtain quality or reach perfection ... we can't control an action? It's always moving just out of our reach ... always one step ahead. It has to be mind, or of the mind. As in Eastern philosophy ... it's Maya, illusion. It is but is not."

Realizing I was talking in circles, I shouted, "I'm tired of your hare brained point of view!" He leapt forward, then bounded off into the undergrowth. As he dashed from sight I heard the unmistakable sound of a sheep bleating, but I couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. I doubted there would be domesticated sheep up this high, where there was little forage. Besides, it would be too late in the season for them to be this high up. So I guessed it was some sort of mountain goat. But even when I stood I couldn't spot it. I was sure it was camouflaged right in

front of my untrained eyes. Then, from my right, I heard a distinct clacking sound, followed by what sounded like a horse exhaling. But again, looking around, there was nothing. I was getting spooked, so I quickly move on myself.

• • •

That evening, as I collected field maps from the New Glue Brothers, Walt said, “We got the latest assay results. Some interesting reading.” The three of them chuckled.

“What’s up?” I said, trying not to sound suspicious.

“It’s mighty interesting,” Rob pointed out, “that almost all of Tank’s assays have exactly the same results.”

“He’s either been collecting in some pretty homogeneous deposits, or he’s been taking witness samples.” Bro sounded convinced of the later.

“Witness samples?” I questioned him.

“Yeah,” Walt responded, “like witness posts when we’re claim staking. He sits in one place and fills his sample bags with the same material.”

“Then marks his map as if he’d actually collected the samples where he should have.” Rob spoke calmly, confidently.

“Why would he do that?”

“Lazy ass,” Walt remarked.

“Likes to read,” Bro added.

“Haven’t you noticed how the marker in his book ... seems to move an awful lot each day ... more than he could possibly read ... during his lunch break?” Rob licked his lips.

“Unless he’s a god-damned speed reader,” Walt chuckled.

“Tank ain’t fast at anything,” Bro assured us.

I found it hard to defend him. The assay results were conclusive and almost identical. That was not likely in the stratigraphy we sampled. And I had noticed that the marker in Tank’s book, which he carried everywhere with him, moved rather rapidly toward the back cover. My only comment was, “I’m sure he’s got some explanation.”

“Always does,” Walt smirked.

^^^

I worked my way down from Mount Patterson, following an old, rutted jeep trail that sliced into a narrow, V-shaped valley cut by the East Fork of Desert Creek. To my left, to the west, just barely visible from that ridge, was Lobdell Lake. The waters reflected the pure blue of the alpine sky, creating the image of a sparkling jewel among the drying greens and yellows of the surrounding meadow and its border of black-green conifers that moved off in an uneven blanket along the ridges and down the valley into the densely vegetated lower elevations.

“Boy! Quite a contrast from this moon-scape up here,” I spoke to myself mentally.

“For sure,” my other half replied. “This alpine tundra doesn’t offer much vegetation.”

I scanned the gray weathered rock near my feet, then knelt in amazement. “Hey, check out these flowers.”

Scattered randomly across the gray surface were tiny plants displaying minute purple and red flowers. “There are blue ones over there.”

“So tiny,” I thought, “so close to the ground. I hadn’t noticed before.”

“Too busy being seduced by the grand view.” I glanced up at the play of shadow and sunlight that revealed the rugged topography.

I turned back to the minute plants. “This is it,” I looked over the barren surface, “this is their whole existence.”

“Oo ... can you smell that?”

“Yeah, it’s from these flowers.”

“Pretty nice ... delicate.”

“How can a tiny blossom produce such a strong fragrance?”

“Don’t know.” I examined one with my hand lens, careful not to damage its gentle hold on the thin soil. “Leaves look a little like marigolds. But the blossom looks like a daisy.”

“How can it survive this harsh climate?”

“Nature’s pretty amazing, huh?”

“Sure is.” My knees began to ache, so I stood. Just then I heard the sound of a lamb bleating. Looking toward the sound, toward the north, I didn’t see a thing but the Carson Range forming its massive ridge along the west side of the Carson Valley. Once again I was taken by its dark, shadowy, mysterious presence; its color consistent and unbroken, shrouded by a dense blanket of pine.

Scanning the length of that ridge, I noticed, again, far off to the north, almost beyond my sight, the naked scar formed by the super highway climbing from the city to the lake. A huge, man-made gash in my fantasy of natural beauty. “Damn it,” I thought. “They’ve ruined everything. That bastard of a road really disrupts the natural flow to the horizon.”

“I hate it ... I hate it ... I hate it. It’s always there to remind me that men are around somewhere. You can’t get away. We’re never really alone. Whenever you look up there is always something man-made inserting itself into our lives. Gliders, rocket contrails, D-9s ... there’s no escape, even out here in the middle of nowhere.”

I took a few more steps along the narrow jeep trail, then stopped again. “Damn! This trail is just as bad.”

“That’s right,” I replied to myself. “It scars this ridge and cuts across that otherwise pristine valley.” I looked down at that beautiful meadow. The old Montague Mine caught my eye, just a few feet from where I stood. “Think of the hideous tailings dumps on the other side of Patterson, near Belfort and Boulder Flats.”

“You’re right, they’re probably visible from all the ranges east of here. You can probably see this trail from across the valley.”

“We’re doing the same thing to this range as that road from Carson.”

I visualized the cut up Ferris Canyon where I helped to build the road for next summer’s

drilling. I replayed how the D-9 knocked down trees like matches, and pushed tons of naturally lying rock and soil into the configuration of a road. I sat down and took a deep, shaky breath.

"If our work proves out ... if our assays come back with high enough values ... if the drilling project brings good results ... there is every likelihood that ... within five to ten years ... Mount Patterson will be a hole. An open pit mine. The Patterson Pit ... or the Bridgeport Mine ... or something equally banal."

"Maybe they'll call it The Mobile Zoo Ghetto Mine."

"Huh? Yeah ... that's my luck. There would be roads and trucks and tractors crawling over the range."

"The lakes will be drained ... the streams will be dammed and sucked dry ... to provide water for the excavation."

"Most of these trees will be cut down ... to make roads and pads for buildings."

"And millions of tons of rock will be blasted and hauled away."

"That's right ... most of it waste rock ... heaped in tremendous dumps on the sides of whatever slopes remain."

I sat and stared at the beautiful little valley, my mind numbing from the possibilities of what we sought. "Not only would the mountain itself be defaced, but the whole range. Looking from Yosemite it would appear scarred and desecrated."

"Much worse than that cut to Tahoe."

"Much, much worse."

"And who knows what effect a mine will have on the wild life?"

"And the more delicate vegetation."

"Like those tiny tundra flowers."

"Shit ... they'd be gone." I looked down at the old jeep trail and followed its course across meadows and into the pines. "All gone." I stared blankly. "I hate being part of this mountain's destruction."

"Look ... I quit. I'm gonna follow this trail. Must lead out somewhere. Those hikers came up this way. Must connect to something. Just walk out ... catch Three-Ninety-Five north ... and disappear into the wilderness of Nevada."

I stood and walked to The Edge. It did look like the road connected with Highway 395. There was plenty of daylight left. I could make it before sundown. "Life will be easy and pure once I step off The Edge of the World ... leave this screwed up existence behind."

"Yeah ... disappear into the faceless void on the other side."

"I could take up with Denise ... she offered ... and spend my days with The Walker ... waving idiotically at the tourists as they drive between Reno and Carson. I could walk and wave and smile like a happy idiot until our Society desists from raping the environment."

"Walk until Patterson is secure from desecration."

"Or would it be better to stay ... try to change things?"

"What could I really do? Who would listen? They'd say, 'If you don't like it, get out.' Or, 'That's the way it is in exploration geology.'"

Again my mind went silent, blank. Consciousness returned with the huffing of a horse exhaling. I turned. Nothing. My imagination playing tricks on me or my brain attempting to make

sense out of the few random sounds penetrating this quiet. I found myself a hundred yards down the trail. “This is no good. They’ll just send out search and rescue teams. When they don’t find me they’ll notify the police. A Missing Persons Bulletin will go out. Somebody will spot me in Reno or wherever and I’ll be in deep shit.”

“Worse shit.”

“Yeah. They’d eventually find me. Like they found that Airstream geologist who stepped off The Edge and shacked up with that Indian woman. I can’t escape.”

“I’ve gotta go back ... see if I can ... somehow ... fight this thing.”

I looked down at that wonderfully inviting valley one last time, then turned and climbed back up the trail.

...

“This has been a bummer of a week,” I said, as we bounced down the road from the mountain.

“It’s been trying,” Bill spoke, guiding the front tires across a narrow stream cutting our road.

“Things have really started breaking down with the crew.” I peeked through the window to watch the splash. Noted how the clear water turned suddenly muddy. “Personality conflicts are surfacing.”

“Surfacing!” Bill laughed. “I think they’ve done exploded.”

I smiled. “Maybe it’s the long hours. Or the long weeks and months starting to take a toll.” I braced myself as we bounced over a rut. “And I’m not innocent when it comes to the reasons.”

Bill glanced at me, probably puzzled by my confession.

“When I get around these younger guys I find myself slipping back. Doing things I thought I grew out of.”

“Ahh ... we’re all chameleons.” Bill waved with his right hand. “We take on the characteristics of whoever we’re around.”

“Yeah, but I’m starting to pay the price of my temporary lack of reason. I’ve gotta get some discipline back into my life. I let myself slip down to their level. Gotta work on becoming a better person again.”

“That’s right,” Bill tried encouragement. “Let Rob’s Karma take care of itself.”

“I know ... I’m letting him drag me down with him.”

“We’re all pilots of our own ship. Take control.” He patted the steering wheel lightly.

...

When we reached the highway, I said, “Man, you know, it hit me again today ... what we’re all about.”

“What?”

“Christ! The ultimate goal of what we’re doing is a fucking mine. An open-pit mine!”

“Right,” Bill looked at me. “You still hung up on that?”

“Yeah. Well, no ... actually, you know, it’s just that today I got tangled in what that means. It’s getting to me ... how deeply what we’re doing is gonna affect the local environment.”

He didn’t reply.

“You know,” I went on, “if they eventually dig a pit up there ... the whole mountain will be gone. Just a gaping scar. Like Morenci, in Arizona.”

“Well ... yeah. That’s how they extract the ore.” His tone said, “Get a clue.”

“And a lot ... a lot of trees will hafta come down ... and all those small lakes up there’ll be sucked dry. The marmots and deer and the others will hafta move off into new territories ... if they can. And we’ll build roads all over the place and...”

“Hold on. Jesus! You sound like some tree hugger. Maybe you’re in the wrong business.”

“It just bothers me, that’s all. Don’t know what to do about it.”

“What can I tell you? Our society needs it.” He clicked the metal door frame with the wedding ring on his left hand to emphasize his point. “Progress is progress. And like our buddy Randy is fond of saying, that’s the way it is in exploration geology. You love it or you leave it.”

“God, you’re digging pretty deep with that old red neck cliché.”

“Not much any of us can do differently. It’s our job. Find a good deposit of ore. Move on. Someone else will dig the mine. Not us.”

“True,” I agreed. “But if we didn’t locate the ore body in the first place...”

“Then someone else will.” He seemed irritated. “When there is a job to be done they’ll always find someone willing to do it.”

“You’re probably right,” I tried to placate him. “Just too bad we can’t get them to be more careful, you know, a bit more concerned about the environment around the mine.”

“Like what?”

“Oh ... where the dump and waste rock are placed, where they build the access roads. They can re-seed and re-plant when they abandon the tailings ... and in the pits. I don’t know. Haven’t given that much thought. But christ ... once we knock it down it’s impossible to build it back up. We’re not gods, we can’t duplicate Mother Nature.”

“Why did you get into this business if it bother’s you so much?” Bill didn’t look at me, but his voice sounded puzzled and concerned.

“Didn’t start bothering me ‘til recently, when I saw what was left of the old mines in Nevada. Just never thought about it much. Then I saw that scar Fifty makes from Carson up to Tahoe. You can see it all the way down here, from up on Patterson. What’s that? A hundred miles?”

“Yeah ... about that. Maybe sixty as the crow flies.”

“God! And ... I guess, I got into this business partly because I was good in science and liked rocks and fossils and that kind of stuff. Partly because I’ve always loved to camp. I like being outdoors, the adventure of hiking through the woods or a wilderness area, exploring new ravines and canyons, standing on top of a high ridge after half a day’s walk, looking down on a quiet valley ... everything looks like toys, like from an airplane. I like seeing wildlife and plants. Gives me ... I don’t know ... a feeling, I guess, of well being. I feel new, renewed, refreshed. Anyway, I like being out in Nature. Geology seemed the place for me. You know, let some big company pay for my pleasure trips. Why not have a job you can enjoy?” I watched his face as he

watched the road. “Travel, beautiful scenery, peace, quiet, and all your expenses paid by someone else. Guess that’s why I got into this business. How about you?”

“About the same. Liked the outdoors. Geology. All that.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. And I needed a job.”

^^^

Randy had me drive to Tonopah to retrieve a package shipped there from our Tucson office. Apparently they couldn’t keep it straight just where we were from week to week.

On the drive over, near Coaldale Junction, I saw this old geezer disassembling a small, brightly colored nylon tent about 20 yards off the side of the road. Other than the modern tent, he looked like an old time prospector, with the scruffy beard and greasy old hat. I glanced around, expecting to see a burro, but there was neither a four legged nor a four wheeled mode of transport in sight. I chuckled to myself at the thought of the juxtaposition of present and past presented in that brief scene.

For a change the package was waiting, as well as a Western Union expense check for a thousand dollars. I cashed the check at the cage in the Mizpah, stashed the money in an envelope under the front seat of the truck, and headed back to Bridgeport.

Once again at Coaldale Junction I saw the old geezer. This time he was sitting along the road with his thumb out. I’m not one to pick up hitch-hikers, but this old guy seemed pretty harmless, and I was curious and in the mood for an interesting conversation.

The old prospector loaded his duffel and a smaller bag into the back, but brought one piece of luggage up front with him. “Thank you for stoppin’, sir. I’m ever obliged.”

“Your welcome.” I reached over and extended my hand. “Chris Chapik.”

He accepted my gesture and we shook. He had a surprisingly firm grip. “Merl Suede’s the name.”

“Make yourself comfortable. Where you headed, Merl?”

“Bishop.”

“I can give you a ride to Benton. I’m heading off to Lee Vining from there.”

“Much obliged. A journey starts with a single step. I’ll take what I kin git.”

He looked about half my size, maybe weighing 145 pounds. He was at least 60 years old, and not as smelly as I had thought he might be, but the windows were down, and perhaps that helped. Across his lap he held a long vinyl bag, resembling a rifle case. I didn’t give it much thought, assuming that was his meal ticket—popping off a few rabbits or poaching an occasional deer along the ranges. Survival knows few laws.

He was quiet at first, almost reluctant to talk. But I finally got him to loosen up.

“You been out prospecting?” I asked.

“Jus’ gittin’ started. Been tied up, ain’t been able ta git out for a while.” He had a scratchy

voice; partly age, partly years of cigarette smoke. I could see a pack in his shirt pocket.

“You just retire?”

“No sir. Been set free.”

I laughed. “Must’ve been chained to a desk or assembly line, huh? What kind of work were you in?”

I sensed that he was looking at me. I turned a little to see his expression. “Don’t think you un’er stan’.” He paused. “I was detained. Got outta prison six weeks back.”

I tried not to react, just nodded my head.

“Been up to the Nevada State C’rectional Institution ... for twen’y-fi year.”

“That’s a chunk of a man’s life.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see him stroking the case in his lap. “Shot a man o’er a woman. Self-d’fense.”

I looked at him briefly, then returned my eyes to the road.

“Other feller had a knife ... would’a slit my throat.” A bit of anger crept into his voice.

“Can’t blame a man for defending himself.” I wanted him to know I was on his side.

“Judge’n’jury didn’t see it thet way. Sent me up fer life.”

“Let you out early, huh?”

“Paroled ‘cause’a my age.”

I suddenly grew concerned about what might be in the case. He handled it a lot, almost fondling it. I thought of the money under the seat. Of course there was no way he would have known about that, but I was suddenly paranoid. I had visions of this guy blasting me, stealing the truck, and speeding off to begin his vengeful, murderous rampage across four western states, ending with a shootout at a road block somewhere in central Wyoming.

I played through various scenarios, ranging from overpowering and disarming him, to jumping from the truck while it was still moving. By the time he got the vehicle under control I would be hidden in the brush. I thought maybe it would be better for me to initiate whatever was going to happen, rather than let him pick an opportune moment.

Trying not to sound shaky, I asked, “What’s in the case?” I looked at him squarely, watching his reaction.

He didn’t say anything at first, but his fingers seemed to mold to whatever was inside. “All them years in prison there was a one thing I’s anxious ‘bout. The loss of time.”

Trying to delay a bit, hoping something would prevent the inevitable, I said, “I can imagine. All the things you wanted to do, places you wanted to see, women you wanted to be with.”

“No, no ... none of thet useless crap. Ev’one’s out here lookin’ fer gold ‘n’ I wasn’t gettin’ any of it.” Again he moved his hands along the length of the case. “One day I read this magazine story, ‘bout medal detectors. Saw’n add fer one in the same magazine. Saved ev’ry penny I made in the joint ... an’ when they released me ... I sent off and got this baby.” He patted the case and looked at me suspiciously, as if I would suddenly lunge over and grab it from him.

I wasn’t convinced the case contained a metal detector. The shape wasn’t right. In my mind it had to be a long barreled rifle. Besides, I wasn’t sure a metal detector would work on gold, at least in the minute quantities that were generally exposed on the surface. I tried to remember my physics, but was drawing a nerve induced blank.



“You sure that thing will pick up gold?”

“S’pose to. Haven’t found any yet.” He moved the case as far away from me as he could in the cramped space of the cab. I was sure he tightened his grip. “But I’m sure gold nuggets’ll make this baby sing. ‘Fore long I’ll be rich.” Again he seemed to be getting agitated.

I figured I had better leave him to his own thoughts before I crossed some unknown line. Either way, I wanted him out of my truck. I didn’t want to take him all the way to Benton. I suddenly remembered the large truck stop at Montgomery Pass in the White Mountains. An opportunity presented itself.

Because I was nervous I had been driving a bit on the fast side. When we entered a series of sharp curves and tight canyons I instinctively slowed. But just as quickly I accelerated again, taking the curves dangerously wide, with a bit too much speed. If my driving scared him enough Merl would want out. We zipped through those curves with the truck creeping across the center line. I hoped there would be no oncoming traffic. And I was lucky, there wasn’t, and my plan worked. I could sense Merl clinging to the door. After one especially tight curve he mumbled, “You drive awful fast.”

“Naw,” I replied. “We gotta keep up momentum to make this climb. There’s hardly any traffic on this road to worry about. Besides, in a head-on, this big old truck would beat up on a regular car any day.”

When we finally climbed to the truck stop, he said, nervously, “You can let me off here. I need a cup of coffee.”

“Sure, wherever you want. Maybe you can find a trucker going all the way to Bishop.” I pulled over into the lot, let him off, allowed him time to remove his gear from the back, then waved goodbye. Merging back onto the highway, I wished whatever trucker picked up old Merl a shit pile of luck. And I made a mental note to watch the papers for an article on a trucker being killed and a mass murderer running rampant in a Peterbuilt or Freightliner.

^^^

Bill and I spent a weekend in San Francisco doing all the touristy things: China Town, City Lights Book Store, Fisherman’s Wharf, Ghirardelli Square, and all of that. On Sunday we visited Golden Gate Park, and drove through the Haight-Ashbury district, just to pay our respects to a lost era.

We spent several hours at the San Francisco Zoo, then drove north across the Golden Gate Bridge through Sausalito and Vallejo and then on to Sacramento. We selected a route over the Sierras that went just south of Tahoe. By the time darkness shrouded the forest we were both tired. The narrow, twisty, windy road was a bit nerve wracking, and we were surprised by the amount of traffic. The on-coming lights made it difficult to see through our bug splattered windshield and our weary eyes.

When Bill took his turn at the wheel, I commented, “Not sure I could ever get used to the

smell of the ocean.”

“Why’s that?”

“That dead fish smell permeates everything.”

“You don’t like the smell of the sea breeze?”

“Nope,” I laughed. “I prefer the smell of damp sage ... or a fresh wisp of juniper wind drifting over the range.”

Bill piloted the truck through a series of tight curves and on-coming traffic.

“You know, I been thinking,” I went on, “about what you said the other day. You may be right.”

“What were we talking about?” He tried to stifle a yawn.

“Exploration geologists are not the ones who develop a mine.”

“Yeah. Guess I remember saying that.”

“But even though I agree, I think we hafta become more aware of what we’re doing, and how that affects the overall environment. We may not be able to influence change directly, but maybe we can influence someone who can.”

“That’s true, but shouldn’t we start by educating ourselves.”

“Good point. We hafta know the real scoop, don’t we, before we can go off preaching to others.” I waited for Bill to avoid a wide truck, then went on. “I think most of us are out here ‘cause we enjoy being part of nature. We camp and hike, some hunt, but mostly we like exploring. We’re like the old prospectors.”

“Yeah, but we’re not the loners they were.” Bill said thoughtfully.

“Hmm ... you may be right. We do seem more gregarious. But we still enjoy the challenge of the search, looking for the Mother Lode, like they were. And we’re energized by the thrill of adventure and dangers of the profession: cliffs and canyons, scree slopes and boulder flows, even the snakes and ticks and mosquitoes.”

“You can keep the snakes and ticks and mosquitoes. Please.”

“Don’t you think there’s a subliminal attraction to the plain, simple beauty of the wilderness: the deserts, basins, mountain ranges, and forests? The spectacular views from the crest of a range; the baked barrens of a playa lake, or the swirl of a dust devil through parched sage? I know I’m always awed when I enter a canyon for the first time. The steep cliffs, varicolored formations, the vegetation, and the possibility of seeing wildlife.”

Bill nodded in recognition.

“I mean ... I get a special thrill and an unconscious sense of attachment when I come across a fresh spring burbling from under a big rock, or even when it’s just seeping from a wet spot in the loam on the side of a hill. There’s no purer pleasure than dipping your fingers into naturally chilled water and tasting the fullness of Nature’s refreshment.”

“I’d agree with you there. There’s nothing better on a hot afternoon.”

“Nature holds so much for everyone, especially those attuned to its simple beauties. Like the orange and gray lichen on dry rock; the patterns of shadow across a basin as a scattering of clouds race overhead; or the call of a jay, or a raven rising on an up-current. There are so many simple things we miss. And yet, it all melds together to form what we love, and cherish.”

“We don’t want that destroyed any more than the most dogmatic environmentalist.” Bill

and I were seeing things the same.

“And yet,” I added, “the very nature of our job leads to its destruction.”

Bill turned toward me. “You keep coming back to that. Precious metals and base metals are where we find them. Nothing we can do about that.”

“Yes,” I said emphatically, “but on the other hand, our society, our civilization, has created the demand for those metals. Like you said the other day, mining companies are in the supply business. The only way to stop the cycle is for every geologist to run off into the wilderness and become a hermit.”

“Fat chance. Besides, I keep telling you, that’s no good. There’ll be others to take our place.”

“So what do we do?”

“Maybe it’s part of our job to educate people ... society ... to make everyone aware of what their demands are doing to our planet.”

“And ultimately to themselves.”

“Exactly.” Bill sat as far back as he could and stretched his arms while holding the wheel. “And there are those that say science will figure it out; science will save us. But when all the wilderness is mined and logged and grazed into barren piles of dust, we’ll have little freedom. Natural freedom. We’ll be locked into our cities like caged monkeys.”

“We’d hafta hike in artificial wilderness domed over to protect the remaining vegetation from acid rain and marauding bands from neighboring communities.”

Bill laughed, “You read too much science fiction.”

I smiled, but went on. “And what of farming and livestock production? Doesn’t that change the natural environment? Isn’t agriculture a form of strip mining? Taking millions of acres of top soil and natural grasses and vegetation and placing them under artificial cultivation.”

“It’s a complicated question. A true dilemma. A Catch-22.” Bill yawned again. “A workable solution will be hard to find, if we can find one at all. I don’t have as much faith in science as I used to. And I definitely don’t have trust in the general populace doing anything creative or original to reverse this trend. We’re all too greedy. I don’t know ... maybe there’s no hope.”

“We keep coming back to education, then, don’t we,” I said. “Geologists hafta advocate conservation of our natural resources. That’s the only thing we can do. Constantly and consistently act as reminders. Perhaps that’s the only way we can justify working in this field.”

Bill seemed to be in deep thought.

I continued. “Our environment, and our landscapes, are too precious to lose. Moderation and thoughtful use are the only viable solutions. But we need the metals and the coal and the petroleum. How do we convince people we also need an environmentally sound world to live in? Without that there’ll be no more use for metals; there’ll be no one to use them.”

“That would solve the problem,” Bill spoke emphatically.

“Huh?”

“People!”

“People?”

“People. There are too many people. The more people the greater the demands for products

from our environment.”

“Population! Why didn’t I think of that?” I shook my head. “That’s true. The real problem stems from too god-damned many people.”

“And everyone wants what everyone else has.”

“We all want everything. We all gotta have more ... always more.”

“There’s never enough.”

“So we suck up everything Nature has to give ... ‘til there ain’t no more. How do you stop that?”

Bill thought for a moment, then said, “Birth control, obviously, and education. And...”

“And pestilence,” I interrupted him. “And war ... homosexuality ... social ostracism ... stop rewarding parents for having kids....”

“How’s that?”

“Rewarding parents?”

“Yeah.”

“Stop giving parents a tax break for anything over two kids. Make them pay for their selfishness and for using up our natural resources and stretching our social system to its limit. Give the tax breaks to people who choose not to have kids. They’re the socially responsible ones.”

“Hmm ... that’s worth thinking about.”

We rode through the darkness with only the rattle of the truck and the steady rumble of the engine. A full ten minutes passed without a word spoken, each of us wrapped in our own thoughts.

Then Bill said in a sober voice, “We can’t avoid the fact that everything’s related to everything else.”

“Yes, exactly,” I replied, suddenly shaken from my reverie, “and there comes a time when we, as geologists, must realize that and seriously consider what we’re doing. Do we really want to find a mine?” I paused as a long string of cars passed in the opposite direction. Bill had a tendency to drive very close to the right side of the road, to avoid the possibility of a head-on, yet there was no shoulder. I was nervous about dropping a tire into the shallow drainage ditch along the side. But he steered clear. “These days we’re talking open pit mine. The ore isn’t usually concentrated enough for an underground operation. So we get the destruction of thousands of acres of once viable wilderness.”

“But the argument for strip mining,” Bill acted the Devil’s advocate, “is the land involved generally has no economic value. Maybe a little timber, but certainly not agriculture.”

I countered, “It may not be productive in the agricultural sense, but every inch of natural surface that we destroy diminishes Nature’s ability to cope with the pollution in the atmosphere and the waste that our massive population dumps into its system on a daily basis. The apparently barren lands are as vital to Nature’s processes as the forests and streams. Each ecosystem, each ecological niche, has its function and purpose in the greater puzzle of Life. Otherwise it wouldn’t exist.”

“You’re not the first geologist to despise raping a mountain,” Bill pointed out. “I think that at some point in the career of most geologists that question arises. I’m sure it stops them in their

tracks. One day we each climb that ridge and see a crystal-blue mountain lake resting in a lush green meadow. We know what will happen to that lake if we build a mine. And from that moment on we're caught in a perpetual, internal struggle to rationalize our livelihood."

"Yeah, and we usually find some rationale that allows us to continue." I shook my head.

"Geologists are specialists," Bill explained. "We have a narrow view of the world. We, like almost everyone else, fail to see the big picture, the overall view."

"Besides," I laughed, "we like getting paid so we can have nice houses and shiny cars and all the middle class stuff that everyone else wants."

"That's usually the case," Bill smiled.

"But occasionally," I said, "once in a great while, some geologist will suddenly go bananas and take off, leaving everything behind: his Airstream, his truck, food, clothing, his wife and kids, everything. Like that U.S.G.S. guy."

"But didn't you tell me they eventually found him?"

"Yeah ... holed up with a raven haired squaw on a remote piece of land with a natural spring and a view."

^^^

Randy decided to screw with my mind, assigning me to check posts in the same area where Rob and Walt were sampling. That meant I had to ride with them. Tell me that wasn't a thrill. The cab of the truck was filled with benevolent tension, the three of us too nicey-nicey, and overly polite. But we did agree on one topic.

Walt turned to me as he drove down the highway. "You're not a Republican, are you?"

"Look at me," I tried not to sound sarcastic. "Do I look Republican?"

"No. Sorry. Just wanted to make sure. Ray-gun winning yesterday pisses me off."

"Yeah," I nodded, "that sucks."

"Big time," Rob added. "Probably be in a nuclear war ... within three years. The old bastard's got nothing to lose."

Walt laughed. "Shit! He'll probably nuke Iran tomorrow."

Rob leaned forward and looked around me. "Fuckin' Pinhead. He won't even be inaugurated ... 'til January."

I wanted to laugh, but restrained myself. The two of them bickered back and forth until we reached our work area. I kept my mouth shut and survived the ordeal.

...

The weather was pleasant, autumnal, with clear skies and slight, occasional breezes. It was comfortable during the mid part of the day, but as the sun started its early decline the air cooled quickly.

We agreed to finish working around four, wanting to get off the mountain before nightfall. After checking my final post I headed toward the Gray Beast, parked on an old jeep trail just below. On my way down I caught up with the guys and, in a gesture of camaraderie, volunteered to help carry their samples to the truck. Lugging 50 to 100 pounds of rock down a steep slope at the end of the day, when one is weary from the day's hike, was probably the worst part of our job.

After we secured the samples and grabbed a beer from the ever present cooler, we headed down the canyon. Walt drove, I sat in the middle, and Rob rode shotgun. When we reached the flats Walt pulled to a stop. "Free the hubs, Ironman."

Rob snapped back, "Gotcha ... boss." He didn't like being told what to do, even if it was in jest.

Once he climbed out, I noticed a small cottontail rabbit sitting nervously under a juniper, about 30 feet away. It was obvious, from its stance, that it was aware of our presence and was not sure what to do, other than hope we would not see its soft gray form nestled against the dark green of the background.

I pointed.

Walt said, in hushed tones. "Spurrier. Here's your chance."

Rob turned back to the cab. "What?"

Walt smiled. "Prove yourself, once and for all."

"What do you mean?" He looked at us with his innocent doe-eyed expression, in imitation of Burt.

"All that crap you keep dumping on us ... about how hot a shot you are with a rock. Here's your chance to prove it."

Rob still wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"Remember, you told us about that time you survived in the desert 'cause you killed a jack with a rock to its head." Walt pointed through the windshield. "If you can hit that cottontail I'll believe everything you tell me from now on."

I sat there astonished. Walt, Rob's friend and defender, was admitting, in front of me, his adversary, that he didn't believe all of Rob's crap. So why had he defended Rob so vehemently?

Spurrier looked away, toward the bunny. He shook his head slowly up and down, in a bobbing motion, a soft grin spreading across his face. I could almost hear his mind calculating, figuring he had nothing to lose. If he missed, it was just bad luck or the wrong stone or that this rabbit was smaller or his arm was fatigued from swinging his rock hammer all day and lugging those bags of rocks down the mountain. On the other hand, if he hit the poor critter, we would have no recourse but to believe his line of bull.

Watching this scene unfold, I hoped he would ignore the challenge, assuming that he would not want to demonstrate his ineptitude. Besides, I didn't think there was any way he could actually hit the rabbit. I convinced myself a professional pitcher would have a tough time hitting that small of a target from this distance. But I did remember the snake incident back at Grantsville, where he insisted on killing that harmless diamondback. He just couldn't pass up a challenge to his character.

Rob carefully, and slowly, bent to unlock the right front hub. Then stood up deliberately

and carefully walked around the front of the truck and bent to unlock the left front hub. Every step was calculated, cautious, slow, soundless. He was a performer, giving us a demonstration of his wilderness skills. He loved an audience.

Walt said to me, quietly, “He’s stalling, hoping the rabbit will run.”

Rob acted as if he were contemplating the situation, looking for the right approach.

“Doesn’t wanna be too obvious about scaring it off,” I ventured, then checked for Walt’s reaction. He seemed to agree.

Rob walked back toward the passenger side and I thought he was going to get in. But he stopped, bent, and picked up a small pebble. He hefted it in his right hand, letting it roll into his fingers to a natural, balanced position.

“No ... don’t do it,” I pleaded. “Leave the damn thing alone.” I may have actually pushed him toward his decision.

He spun around. In one quick motion his arm flew back. In a swooping arc it came forward. The rock sliced through the air and zapped the poor bunny right between the eyes. It must have died instantly. It laid over on its side and didn’t move again.

Rob stood up straight and grinned from ear to ear.

“Fuck me,” Walt yelped.

At first I just sat there. Then I said, “Man, that wasn’t necessary. You killed a damn rabbit just to show off.”

“Dinner,” was all he said, starting toward it.

“Christ. That rabbit ain’t big enough to eat.” Walt climbed out of the cab and followed.

Feeling the tension momentarily rising, and not wanting another argument, and, finally comprehending that Rob had actually done what he had claimed, I figured I had better ease up.

I crawled out the passenger side. “Jesus! You realize what you’ve done?”

They both turned and looked at me, as if I were starting something.

Walking toward them, pointing, I said, “You just killed the fucking Easter Bunny!”

They both laughed nervously.

“Must be where he hibernates in the winter.” I caught up with them as they bent to examine the carcass. “Who’s gonna deliver all those eggs next year?”

That did the trick, and the mood lightened. Although, in actuality, I was still ticked-off that Rob had gone through with it.

“You’re right, Pinner, it’s too small for dinner.” Rob grinned. “But it might be about right ... for breakfast. With hash browns ... and a couple of eggs and toast.”

Walt seemed pleased. “Easter eggs and Easter bunny. Yum.”

It didn’t sound appetizing. “Know how to skin and clean the thing?” I realized the stupidity of my question as soon as it poured from my mouth.

“Yep.” Rob gave me an of course look. “Remember the jack I survived on in the desert?” He looked at me as if I were dim-witted. “Used to hunt them with my twenty-two near Jerome. My father ... would make me clean them myself.”

“Hope it doesn’t have parasites.” I couldn’t resist a poke at his heroic bubble.

“Maybe ... but I doubt it. It’s a late summer bunny. You can tell by it’s size and fur. Fresh meat. Just hatched a few weeks ago. Hasn’t had a chance to get into much of anything.” Rob

picked it up by its ears. “Fresh meat.”

“Yeah,” Walt chimed in, “fresh meat. Virgin meat. Warm and moist and juicy.”

Rob carried the rabbit to a flat rock not far away. He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and began cutting the flesh. Within 15 minutes he had the thing skinned, gutted, and beheaded. The two of them wrapped the clean carcass in a plastic sandwich bag and placed it in the cooler with the beer. They buried the remains under loose rocks near the side of the road. We climbed back in and headed for Bridgeport.

Rob and Walt assumed the rolls of victors, as if they single handedly defeated the entire Shoshone tribe at Last Stand Pass.

• • •

Back to the motel we were surprised to find Guy looking over maps and field cards. Still proud of their kill, the two warriors displayed the pink flesh in its clear, soggy bag.

His face reddened. “Why do a stupid thing like that?”

Rob’s pride melted away.

Walt stepped in, ever ready to defend his buddy, and told Guy the story.

By then Rob recovered his composure. “Breakfast,” he said, “we’re gonna eat it for breakfast.”

“I hope so,” Guy didn’t hide the anger in his voice. “It’s really dumb to kill some innocent animal just to prove yourself. You had *better* eat that thing.”

I secretly gloated, sensing Rob’s displeasure, glad that I wasn’t the only one who thought his action was dumb.

^^^

The next morning, when I walked into their room to drop off their field maps, Rob and Walt were in the process of eating the Easter Bunny. After they fried it there wasn’t much left. Just a few shriveled strips.

“Like a piece?” Walt offered.

I waved off his generosity.

“Tastes a lot like chicken,” Bro encouraged me.

“If so many of these wild animals taste so much like chicken,” I questioned them, “why not just eat chicken?”

Walt licked his fingers as he shrugged. “‘Cause Spurrier’s got rocks to throw.”

Rob grinned.

I shook my head and turned for the door. “That’s why we’ve mechanized the chicken industry. So we don’t hafta kill wild animals.” When I reached the door I turned back. “That’s why we have chicken mining.”



...

The day the Glue Brothers ate the Easter Bunny I almost stepped over The Edge.

"This is the little valley I was telling you about," I pointed through the glass on the passenger side of the truck.

Bill leaned across to look. "The one that tempted you to ... uh ...."

"Yeah. This is the one." I signaled with my eyes to be aware of Randy's presence. When he acknowledged with a wink I turned back to the window. "See how this trail cuts down through there? It has to go to Three-ninety-five." I pointed off into the distance.

"What're you guys talking about?" Randy asked.

"Oh ... just an interesting trail," I replied. "Was thinking about hiking it someday."

"Shit! Just drive it." Randy was never one for excess walking.

Driving down the jeep trail Randy cursed every switchback. Backing for about the fifth time on one tight turn, he shouted, "GOD-DAMNED-MOTHER-FUCKING ROAD! Why the hell couldn't they build the fucker straight?"

Bill and I both laughed. The sharp switchbacks on some of Patterson's roads required a lot of maneuvering, moving a little forward, more backing, then moving forward again. It was annoying and time consuming, especially at the end of the day when we were hungry, tired, and just wanted to get out of there.

Bill reminded Randy, "Hey ... it's better than walking."

"Fuck," Randy blurted. "Not much."

Eventually we reached a flat bench and Randy drove me to the edge of the next descent. "You don't mind walking from here, do you? This road is in bad shape, and I don't know if I can handle another switchback." He pointed down into the canyon. "Your first post should be about where the trail crosses that stream."

"Gotcha ... no problem. My knees have been a little sore lately. This will give me a chance to stretch them before I hafta climb."

"You'll be starting about timber line, around nine thousand. Patterson's eleven-six-seventy-three. You won't be climbing that high, but pretty close. It's a long line ... pretty rugged. So keep moving and be careful. It's up hill all the way." Randy returned to the truck.

I unloaded my pack, canteen belt, and handpick from the back.

Randy spoke through the window. "It's about two miles due south. There's a road cut through there. I'll pick you up along there at five."

"Gotcha ... see ya then."

The two yelled goodbyes as they drove back across the flat to Bill's line.

I hauled my equipment to the point where the trail began its descent into the canyon. I pulled out my claim sheet and a topographic map and compared them to the topography below. I made mental notes of potential obstacles and possible routes, folded away the maps, slipped on my pack, strapped on my canteen belt, secured my rock hammer, and was underway.

I remember thinking to myself, as I took my first steps, "There's no way we're gonna get all four-hundred posts checked before winter snow." And as if in response, a cold wind gusted up out of the canyon. I accepted that as an omen that I was right.

The road was deeply rutted, and there were more tight switchbacks, but on foot it was like a superhighway. The steady motion of walking, coupled with the fresh mountain air and the wonderful scenery, worked its usual magic. Before long thoughts of the Zoo Ghetto faded as I became attuned to my natural surroundings.

A large hawk circled a well fed pheasant. “Well, mister Hawk,” I said out loud, “that would be a hefty breakfast. If, indeed, he’s the object of your desire.” Just then I saw three plump, juicy marmots dash across a clearing, shoulder to shoulder, and duck under cover in a line of tall brush. “Tempting, huh?” I spoke to the sky. “But a bit much for you, I’m afraid.” The hawk circled without replying.

Continuing down the trail, watching that enticing meadow rise up to greet me, those old thoughts of escape seeped back into my consciousness. “Yes, yes, I know ... it would be an easy walk from here to the highway. But...”

“But what,” I interrupted myself. “Think of it.” I spoke inside my head. “Take this trail ... keep on going ... soak up pine scent ... toss stones into that stream ... take your time. The rest of your life would be yours. Eventually you’d come to the highway ... catch a ride back to town ... and never hafta do this demon work again.”

“Yeah,” I replied to myself. “My irresponsible actions would assure that. They’d fire me.”

“Or,” my mind continued its game, “like we were thinking ... as an alternative ... you could catch a ride north to Reno ... and go on from there to wherever you’d want.”

“Yeah, but nothing’s changed. They’d still hafta come searching for me. If I was ever found I’d be up-the-creek, so to speak.” I laughed at my little rhyme.

“I guess ... it’s better to gut it out ... work through to the end of the project ... then see about a different job.”

“Yup. But you’re right ... this fantasy does have its draw.”

...

I was almost to the stream when I froze in my tracks. I thought I saw a Mule Deer. But she wouldn’t move. Her rear was toward me, with her head turned back to watch. But there was not as much as a twitch from her tail. I stood, locked in position, for five full minutes; nothing. “My eyes are deceiving me,” I thought. “There’s no deer. Just a weathered stump with a branch protruding from its side.” I went on to locate my post.

After a few steps I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. “There she is!” She was standing broadside, watching me. And she wasn’t alone. There was a fawn, maybe several months old, nearby. Once again I was puzzled. It seemed late in the year for a young one, and so high in the range for so late in the season. They were both nervous and as I watched they suddenly dashed away into the brush down stream. I always enjoyed catching a glimpse of a Mulie, especially a young one.

I couldn’t find my first post. It wasn’t where it should have been. It was nowhere in sight. I walked along the road, which, at that point was still above the level of the stream, but couldn’t spot the white PVC. I pulled out my binoculars and gave the area a quick scan. Nothing. Then, working my way south, across the soft debris of a slump area, I finally found it lying along the

stream. I set it up in its recorded location, placing stones from the streambed around its base for support. One down.

I stood in the stream bed, checking my map against my compass, trying to locate the approximate position of the next post. It was down as well; I couldn't see it from where I stood. Moving south along my line I crossed the stream which ran through a tumble of small rocks and pebbles spread out across the narrow V-shaped valley, maybe 30 to 40 feet from side to side. The water was maybe two feet across and shallow, disappearing beneath stones and gravel, to resurface farther down slope. I bent and tasted the water. It was cold, and refreshing. The water in my canteen could wait until I needed it.

Approaching the area of the second post, I discovered the stakers had used a branch from a tree instead of the usual white PVC. Looking around, the closest trees were down stream quite a ways. "Who would go that far for a claim post?" I wondered.

The branch had tumbled down a slip-off slope and was lying in the water, its weathered pink flagging trailing in the slight current. I pulled it up slope and re-established it the best I could. It was on hard washed rock and there were only a few stones large enough to give it support. I did the best I could and climbed up the bank to look for the next post. Two down.

Post three was on an upward slope. It was also down. With my binoculars I sighted up the long incline and found the fourth and fifth posts. One was down in a wash to the right of a series of steep cliffs, about half-way up. The other was down in a wash to the left of the cliffs, obviously having slid down from its position closer to the top. I wasn't looking forward to setting either of those.

I crossed more loose gravel and set up the third post. Then, to check my work, I used my Brunton to sight back along my line. As I focused on the second post it fell over. "Now what're the chances of that?" I spoke out loud. "There's not even a breeze."

"Good job," I chastised myself.

"Damn! To hell with it for now," I put the Brunton away. Procrastinating, I said, "I'm not going back now. I'll catch it later." I knew I was lying to myself, but I wasn't in the mood to go back and do it right.

I started the steep climb to reach post four.

• • •

Bill was astonished to find me huddled against a pitifully small pile of rocks. "What you doing here?"

"Trying to keep warm. Fuckin' wind cuts right through this jacket."

He sat down next to me. "But what you doing here? We were suppose to meet at the end of our lines."

"Couldn't make it. Ran into trouble."

"Yeah, me too. Figured I'd catch Randy as he drove by here."

"Same."

"What's up?" Bill shifted around so his back faced the wind.

"Right knee's busted," I pointed to my painful limb.

“You broke it?”

“No, don’t think so. Hyper-extended it. It’s swelled pretty bad.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, I had to set up two post on the side of a steep scree flow. Footing was loose, you know, the usual. Combination of various sized rocks, dried clay, and small vegetation.”

“You slipped, huh?”

“Not that simple. It’s a long story.”

“Hey,” he said, “what else we gonna do while we wait? Randy won’t be by for at least a half-hour.”

“Alright,” I shrugged. “I was climbing this face and had to switch to the other side of a wash, across loose scree, to a steeper slope on the other side. All that loose crap made climbing difficult, you know, especially where the solid rock is right underneath.”

“That’s the worst.”

“Had to edge sideways and gradually work upwards using the soles of my boots to make little ledges.”

“Yeah, I’ve had to do that too. Makes for slow going.” He pulled his stocking cap down around his ears.

“Worked my way across the cliff face, about three-hundred feet above the floor and five-hundred feet below the top.”

“You were up there a bit.”

I nodded. “Right in there was a hard substrata covered with dried clay and pea gravel. A scattering of larger chunks, too ... some two or three feet across.”

“That’s bad stuff. Easy to lose your footing.”

“Besides, coming from the flatlands I’m not a climber by nature. Was a bit hesitant at times to move forward.” I shifted around, trying to find a comfortable way to rest my leg. “With the angle of slope I had to use my feet and my hands. My legs for thrust and foot holds ... my hands for balance and digging. Was a constant struggle. And my stupid pack wanted to pull me back all the time.”

“Screwed up your center of gravity.”

“Exactly. Was a real pain. Had to use my rock pick like an anchor, digging in as I scooted sideways and up.”

“Was that the only route you could take?” Bill started blowing on his fingers to keep them warm. The Sun was sliding down fast and the wind was really starting to bite.

“Well, from below it looked like I could cross the face and use that shallow wash as an easy route to the top. But as I got closer I knew I was wrong. The degree of slope was shallow for a ways, but then jumped sharply as it came over a protruding outcrop. Besides, the bottom of the wash was covered in deep scree. There were jagged outcrops jutting out all over.”

“So what did you do?”

“The incline was so steep I couldn’t stop. I had to keep going, or slide back. And if I slid there was no telling how far I’d go before the drag of my body could overtake momentum and the loose rocks that would’ve been sliding with me.”

“Scary, huh?”

“You bet. By then my arms and legs were beginning to ache from the strain. And I was high enough that looking down scared me. There were some mighty steep spots and some wicked looking outcrops between me and the bottom.”

Bill chuckled. “My dad always told me, you know, when he’d hear of someone jumping from a building or something, that ‘It’s not the fall that’ll kill ya. It’s that sudden stop at the bottom.’”

We both groaned.

Rubbing my swollen knee, I went on. “So ... the only way was up. And each move forward was a process of continual motion. Arms grabbing, legs pushing, on and on, slipping and sliding, ‘til it seemed I couldn’t stop. Everything was aching, my lungs ached, my body was tense and strained.” The wind whipped up a cloud of dust and we had to close our eyes. When the dust settled, I continued. “When I did find places to stop I had to keep a low profile, hugging the slope. My legs were usually tucked underneath, jammed between me and the rock. Not much of a rest. Same for my arms. I’d dig my pick into the soft surface as far as it would go, hold on with one hand, then find some sort of precarious grip with the other. I could usually hang on just long enough to catch my breath, then everything would start to give and I’d hafta move on.”

Bill shook his head sympathetically.

“Like I said, after I struggled to that wash I knew it wasn’t gonna be easy.”

“You should’ve blew off those posts.”

“By then I had. I just wanted to reach the top so I could finish my line. Figured I had to find another route. The rubble in that vertical wash was too loose and too large. Looked ready to flow. Looking around I spotted a small outcrop in the middle of the rock stream. I moved to there and held on ‘til I could figure out what to do.”

“Sounds like you were in a tight spot.” Bill continued to blow on his bare fingers.

“Yeah. About then I looked up the canyon ... thought I saw you sitting next to a downed post on the southern slope ... along your line.”

“Don’t remember sitting along there anywhere.”

“Well ... looked like you were uncertain how to find your way across.”

“Don’t think I was that far west today.”

“Evidently not. I signaled with the mirror on my Brunton. Directed the beam right at you. For several minutes. Would’ve blinded you. Must’ve been debris, or a small bush.”

“I’m sure I would’ve seen the light.” He smiled.

“I’m sure too. I knew then I was on my own. And it’s weird. I had a sudden sense of loneliness, and a slight chill, like I was lost ... coupled with a feeling of panic.”

“Yeah ... there would be no one to help you if you fell.”

“Exactly. So I sat there and calculated my chances ‘til I noticed another wash over the next ridge. Didn’t have a thing to lose ... so I checked it out.”

“Never know what’s around the next bend, huh?”

“That’s for sure.” Another gust of dust laden wind blew by. “By then the muscles in my arms and legs were fatigued. Somehow I pushed on and edged up to the crest of that ridge. As I clung there I could see that route wasn’t any better. Wasted energy, for nothing.”

“Nothing ventured....”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I interrupted him. “I had to make my way back to the other wash. That was a real treat. Had to turn my body the other direction, so my right side could lead. Just a bit hairy.”

“Would’ve liked to seen that.” Bill chuckled.

“Oh yeah, that’s all I would’ve needed ... an audience. If somebody would’ve seen me they would’ve got quite a chuckle.”

“I would’ve clapped,” Bill teased.

“Right, people love clowns.”

We smiled at each other through the increasing cold of the wind.

“I was afraid I was just being a wimp. Figured Rob and Walt would climb right up that slope.”

“If it’s as steep as you say they couldn’t do any better.”

“Don’t know,” I argued. “Somebody climbed there to set those posts.”

“Yeah. Or maybe they threw them down from the top and figured that was good enough.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey, it happens. Maybe nobody in their right mind would try that climb. Maybe you were stupid for trying.”

“More likely I’m gonna get egged for not making it.”

“That’s true too. Ridicule from the Glue Brothers could be as severe as a fall.”

Again the wind whipped between us, carrying our words away. When it died down I tried to speak again. “Once I managed the turn, I worked my way back to the outcrop in the wash.” I thought about that. “Maybe wash is a misnomer. It was more like a flume.”

“Like they used for moving water around mines in the old days.”

“Right. A really steep V-shaped trough.”

“Miners would ride logs down them for entertainment.”

“Yeah ... but not this one. I started thinking of giving up and looking for another way ... a shallower wash further up the canyon ... maybe.”

“Randy and I made it across the head of that canyon yesterday.”

“Yeah ... that’s what I figured. And you were only fifteen-hundred feet further up.”

“Fifteen-hundred feet, and a lot of elevation.”

“But criminy ... I wanted to think I was as good a climber as you two. If you could make it, I figured I could. So ... up I went,” and in a melodramatic, Rob Spurrier voice, I said, “carefully scaling the treacherous debris of the wash ... constantly fighting the downward movement of the scree.” I tried to laugh. Bill smiled at my good humor. “I’d select an outcrop a few feet ahead and climb like hell ‘til I reached it. Then I’d cling to it, catching my breath.”

“One step at a time. Two steps forward, one step back. Gotta keep moving, but you get there eventually.”

I nodded. “Was above one of those outcrops ... found myself in the middle of a delicately balanced pile. When I placed my weight it gave, carrying me with it.”

“Ooops.”

“Instinctively ... and very quickly ... I rolled to my side and then onto my back. I pushed my legs out in front of me ... to brake. My arms were flailing like a kid on a roller coaster.

Thought I was a goner. My boots wouldn't dig in ... they just rattled over the surface ... pellet sized rocks plowing before them, increasing the volume of the crap flowing with me. Nothing would hold." I paused for a moment, thinking I'd heard Randy's truck. I looked off down the road, but didn't see him. "I wasn't sliding fast, but at that time, with nothing to grab on to, and a steep drop coming up fast, I about shit my pants."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing I could do ... 'til my right boot caught on something. Came to a sudden, jarring stop ... jamming the weight of my body, my pack, and all that scree, against this knee." I reached forward to test the swelling. It felt puffy. I went on. "Shot of pain burnt up my leg. Knew I was in trouble."

"Your knees bother you anyway."

"True ... and they were already stiff and sore from the climb. But that's something I live with. This was a different kind of pain. I'd hyper-extended it."

Again I thought I heard the low whine of a truck in four-wheel drive. But the wind was too strong and I couldn't pinpoint the sound. "There I was, clinging to the side of that slope ... with no easy way up or down. I'd only slid maybe fifteen or twenty feet, but it could've been more. I had little choice but to ease my way down. Somehow."

Bill again tugged at his stocking cap, then blew on his fingers. He was feeling the cold of that wind worse than I was. Maybe the hot pain in my leg kept me warm.

"As I laid there in that pile of broken debris, feeling pitifully alone, I suspected I'd found good old Burt's Edge of the World."

Bill looked puzzled.

I tried to explain. "I thought, 'Maybe this is my chasm, my fall from grace.' But I argued with myself, 'There's no time for that crap.' I told myself, 'This is some serious shit.' I attempted to focus by telling myself, 'The Edge is just a metaphor for no hope. Least I can see the bottom ... and a possibility for escape. At the Edge of the World there would be no chance.'"

I don't think Bill quite knew what I was talking about. I had only mentioned The Edge of the World to him once before, when I told him of Burt. I got the impression he had forgotten. I let it ride, and went on. "The decent was as nasty as the climb. I moved slowly ... cautiously ... trying not to disturb the scree. My back was to the rock. I scooted on my butt ... using my legs and pack as a brake. Sometimes I'd allow myself to slide a few feet, pulled by gravity and the downward motion of the debris. I edged from side to side, from one edge of the wash to the other ... in diagonal traverses ... always aiming for small outcrops of solid rock where I could grab hold and catch my breath. And relax my tired arms and legs."

"Too bad it wasn't soft clay. You could've sledged to the bottom."

"I wish. That would've been great. But eventually I got to where the wash leveled off and I could stand."

"You start back right away?"

"No. I practically collapsed. My legs were wobbly. I sat down on a rock and rested. My arms were shaking, my legs were stiff, and my knee was pounding. I checked the time ... I'd been on that slope for two-and-a-half hours."

"Sounds like two-and-a-half hours of misery."

“For nothing.”

We sat there silently cursing the wind. Then I said, “After about ten minutes I limped up the canyon, to see if I could see you. I did spot you ... moving up a large scree slope. I yelled, but that was hopeless. I tried signaling with my Brunton, but it was the wrong angle ... and you obviously didn’t see it. You climbed over a snow field, reached the ridge, and were gone.”

“I didn’t see a thing. Probably out of breath and concentrating on getting outta there myself. That’s rough in there.”

“Realizing I’d either hafta wait for you guys to miss me and come looking, or hike out on the road, I figured hiking would be better than sitting and waiting. I came up the jeep trail. Was easier than climbing that wash. With this leg it was no cake walk. Then this damn wind picked up. Got stronger and colder as I climbed. My legs wobbled, my knees stiffened, my right knee throbbed and swelled, and my lungs ached. I was in real good shape. Even with this coat this blasted wind is cold.”

“Don’t hafta tell me.” Bill tugged his collar tighter around his neck.

“Figured Randy wouldn’t pass here ‘til around five ... so I laid down behind these rocks ... tried making a low profile ... took a nap.”

“Yeah, I had problems too. Nothing like yours. Everything just took longer than I figured. Knew I wouldn’t make the end of my line. So I figured like you. Catch Randy as he drives by here. I was pretty astonished to see you lying here. You looked dead from back that way.” He pointed toward his claim line.

After that we sat there rehashing the trials of the day. When Randy drove up I had a hard time even standing, let alone getting into the truck. I couldn’t bend my right knee. It had stiffened into a throbbing lump of bone and tissue. “Think my field days are over ... least for this season.”

Randy started to reply, “Hey, that’s....”

But Bill took the words right out of his mouth. “That’s the way it is in exploration geology.”

...

Randy gave us more bad news on our way down the mountain. “The brown rental blew its front universal joint. It’s stuck.”

“Another tow job, huh?” I tried to make light of our situation.

“Yeah. We’re single handedly keeping that town alive.” Randy shook his head.

“How are the others getting off the mountain?” Bill asked.

“Squeezed in with Papa Zoo,” Randy replied. “This has been one hell of a day.”

...

About the time we hit the highway Randy told us, “If you gotta hurt your knee, guess this is as good a time as any.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“End of this week you’re all outta here for the season.”



“Back to Tucson?” I guessed.

“Shit no! We’re sending you back to Pablo.” Randy laughed sadistically. “You guys gotta pay for your sins.”

Bill and I both remained silent, contemplating more chilly nights of cards and gas powered generators.

“But ... if you’re good,” Randy tried to encourage us, “on the Twenty-first we’ll fly you back to Tucson for turkey day.”

“That’ll be it, then?” I anticipated. “End of the season?”

“Nope. Then it’s back to good ol’ Pablo Canyon ‘til just before Christmas. Then that’ll be it.” Randy seemed pleased that he could finally give us good news. “It’ll be fold-up, close-up, seal-up, drain everything, and drive back to Tucson.”

“The end of good ol’ Project 667,” I sighed. “Finally.”

• • •

“Think I’m gonna miss Bridgeport,” I told Bill later that evening.

“Me too,” he said soberly. “It’s a hell of a lot better than Pablo Canyon.”

“That’s for sure,” I laid back on the couch, placing a baggie full of ice on my swollen knee. “Maybe it’s the scenery I’ll miss the most.”

“Yeah, the scenery.”

“I like the autumn atmosphere,” I went on. “Always liked the fall. It’s a good time for reflection.”

“It’s a romantic time of year,” Bill agreed. “A good time of year.”

“The calming sound of dry leaves blowing up the streets, like the whisper of words from an old friend.” I thought about that for a few moments. “We travel different roads, crossing east and west, each in our own kind of hurry.”

“We’re children of the Sixties,” Bill said as he poured hot water for a cup of tea. “We seek change through constant movement. We’re allowed only brief moments to linger in our favorite moods.”

“Guess that’s the price we pay for having goals and dreams, for being of the few ... for looking out the back window while we’re traveling seventy miles an hour.”

“Where we look, we see,” Bill added.

“Only temporarily,” I countered. “There’s no time to stop, to really look. There’s no time to truly become part of Life.”

Bill gently dipped his tea bag in and out of the hot water.

Focusing on his delicate motion, I said, “Cause ... we are Life. We are living. We’re change and growth and understanding. We’re the journey: the past, the present, and the future. We’re the light and the darkness, the always good and the sometimes bad. We’re innocent...”

“And guilty as hell.” Bill didn’t take his eyes away from the cup.

“We are,” I replied. “And that’s all that matters.”

^^^

“How’s your knee this morning?” Randy asked as soon as he entered our room.

“Killing me.” I tried to smile.

“Maybe you ought to see a doctor.”

“Naw. Had this problem before ... from football. Just hyper-extended. Just need to stay off it for a while.”

“He put ice on it last night,” Bill offered. “Tried to keep the swelling down.”

Randy approached me on the couch. “Let’s see.” He indicated he wanted me to pull up the leg of my sweat pants. Once I exposed the knee he grimaced. “It’s purple. You’ve done a job on that baby.”

“Seen it before,” I assured him. “Part of the deal.”

“Well ... shoot. Looks like you’ll hafta stay in town and do map work and ship samples.”

“That’s what I figured. Back to where I started.”

“Take care of this thing. If it gets worse you see a doctor.”

“You got it. It’ll be okay though.” I pulled my pants leg down.

“I’m heading back to Tucson. Walt and Bro are driving me to Reno. I’m giving the rest of you guys the day off ... get caught up on your chores ... relax.”

...

“Tank ... Bill and I are driving to Yosemite. Wanna come?”

“No. I’m going to stay here and read.”

“Your call.”

“Should we ask Spurrier?” Bill suggested.

I gave him a hard stare. “I don’t think so.”

“Wonder what he’s up to today?” Bill said. “Haven’t seen him at all.”

“Who knows what ... or who ... he’s got into,” I commented.

Tank shocked me with, “Who really cares?”

...

Bill had never been to Yosemite. It was my fourth visit that year. I couldn’t get enough of its rugged topography.

Bill drove because of my leg. In fact, at first, I wasn’t sure I would be able to go. It was tough to find a comfortable position for my knee in the cab of Randy’s dark-blue Ford. But I lodged it at an angle and accepted the discomfort.

On the way up Tioga Pass we discovered a large number of rocks splattered across the road; some of good sized proportions.

“Wonder if there was a quake last night?” Bill began maneuvering through the scattered

debris like an expert.

“Don’t know,” I said, looking up the shear sides of that road cut. “But let’s not dawdle, okay. Don’t wanna get clunked.”

“Me neither,” Bill spoke as he piloted the truck toward the last rock. He misjudged its size and made a last second decision to drive over it instead of around. BLAMM!

“Ouch,” he said as he looked under the truck. “Hit the front differential case square on. Cracked the sucker good.”

I wasn’t able to get out and look. I said, “Damn it! Won’t be able to use it in four-wheel without repairs. Shit! Another one down.”

“I’m sorry,” Bill apologized as he got back in. “Maybe we’d better head back.”

I thought about that for a second, then said, “We won’t need four-by-four today. Long as we don’t set the hubs or shift into that gear we should be okay.”

“Yeah, but it kinda ruins things.”

“Come on, what can we do back in Bridgeport? Let’s go ahead. You’ll have a good time. Enjoy the day. The damage is already done.”

Bill agreed and we went on. He explained, “I thought the rock was smaller ... aimed to the side. Forgot the transfer case was on that side ... not in the center.”

“Front one is set off to the side a bit. Back one’s in the center.”

“I know now.”

In spite of the rocky start, the rest of the day went fine. We drove into Yosemite Valley, discovered that the falls pretty much dry up in the late fall; drove up to Glacier Point, caught some wonderful views; then drove back to Bridgeport up the western slope, through Sonora. We didn’t get back until about ten that night.

^^^

I hobbled back into the room. “Looks like you and Tank are going up by yourself.”

Bill gave me a puzzled look.

I explained, “Bro and Walt didn’t make it back last night.”

“They call?”

“Apparently not. Spurrier didn’t give an explanation.”

“Is he riding with us?”

“Shit no. He’s faking illness.”

Tank stepped out of the bathroom. “He just doesn’t want to spend a day up there without his buddies.”

“Besides,” Bill said sarcastically, “he’d hafta ride with us. Two of his best friends in the whole wide world.”

We laughed nervously.

• • •

When Tank and Bill returned that night, the first thing Bill said was, “Brown rental is still on the mountain.”

“What? I thought Papa Zoo took Chuck up there with his four-by-four wrecker.”

“He did,” Bill shrugged, “but they couldn’t get it hitched where it was. They needed to move it to a safer spot.”

“Didn’t succeed?” Tank added.

“Couldn’t find the key,” Bill explained. “Rob hid it under a rock, for safe keeping, and now it’s lost.”

“They kicked up a lot of rocks when they were trying to hitch the wrecker.” Tank seemed pleased that Rob had screwed up. “Chuck says the right front universal joint, and some bushings, need to be replaced.”

“Of course he’s gotta order the bushings,” Bill forced a smile, “and that’ll take a few days.”

“Don’t we have a spare key?” I asked.

“We stopped by Rob’s room when we got back,” Bill said. “Apparently not.”

“Great,” I moaned, “now we hafta order a new ignition switch as well.”

“Yeah,” Bill shook his head. “And it looks like you’ll hafta drive back over here next week to take Chuck up to fix it.”

“Shit,” I huffed. “If it doesn’t snow first.”

^^^

“We’re back at Pablo Canyon,” Rob told Guy over the phone.

Walt and I stood there listening to his side of the conversation.

“Yes ... no. Umm hmm ... yeah. It took a few days to set things up. We had to clean out the trailers, get the water and sewage systems flushed ... stuff like that.”

Walt said to me, half under his breath, “And try to adjust to this stinking trailer life again.”

“It’s been tough,” I agreed, “after living in a clean, warm motel ... that’s for sure.”

“Tiny, stinky trailers,” he mumbled, as I tried to listen to Rob’s conversation.

“Of course,” Rob replied to some question. “Everyone’s kind of getting pissy. We’re cramped and shut in.”

“Tell him we didn’t get much field work done,” Walt encouraged.

“No. But we’ve had four inches of snow. Everyone stayed in most of the week.” Rob’s voice was formal and polite. But he looked at us and rolled his eyes. “That’s true,” he replied to Guy’s comment, “but we can’t collect samples when we can’t see the ground.”

“But it is beautiful to look at,” I thought to myself, “the way the mountains and valleys are blanketed by soft white.”

“We’ll try. Some of it did melt late in the week ... especially on the west side of the

valley.” Rob was looking at the floor.

“Tell him we’re freezing our nuts off,” Walt suggested.

“Uh huh ... yeah, but ... okay. But then it got cold,” Rob tried to explain, “down to twenty over night.”

“Tell him we have to keep our faucets dripping all night so our pipes won’t freeze.” Walt was frustrated by hearing only one side of the conversation.

“Yes, but only ‘cause we kept the generator running all night.” Rob put his hand over his exposed ear, to block Walt’s chatter. “What? Oh ... to provide power for the fans on the heaters.”

“Tell him the generator runs out of gas in the middle of the night,” Walt insisted. “Tell him that. Tell him when we wake up it’s so fucking cold our butt cracks freeze together when we take a dump.”

“No ... I’m sorry. It’s just one thing after another.” Rob looked at Walt and motioned for him to shut up. “We’ll get out when we can.”

“Tell him to bring us home,” Walt said loud enough so that Guy could hear.

“Okay ... I’ll tell them. Yeah ... we will. Thanks. See you then. Bye.”

After Rob hung up the phone we watched his face, looking for clues to Guy’s decision.

Rob screwed up his face. “Said to hold on as long as we can.”

“Fuck me,” Walt blurted, then remembered we were standing in the rancher’s livingroom. The three of us looked around. The rancher and his wife were in the kitchen and didn’t hear Walt’s comment.

“He said we should collect as many samples as we can ... squeeze out what we can ... then head home on the Twenty-first.”

“Man,” Walt spun around, frustrated. “I gotta get outta here sooner than that.” Then he looked right at Rob. “Did he say we won’t hafta come back ... after Thanksgiving?”

“Nope. Just said he’d see us in Tucson for the holiday.”

After we thanked the rancher for the use of his phone, we walked quietly back to the trailers to give the others the bad news. “Looks like snow again today,” I observed.

“Clouded over like it could,” Rob agreed with my assessment.

“Fuck,” Walt moaned. “I hate this gray, overcast, dismal, unfriendly, cold fuckin’ weather. I was meant to be warm.”

^^^

“What you guys do this weekend?” Bro asked me Monday morning as he collected field maps for the Glue Brothers.

“Nothing exciting,” I replied. “The three of us drove to Tonopah after you left Saturday afternoon.”

“Spend the night?”

“Yeah. Golden Hills. We needed someplace warm and clean where we could relax. Ate

Mexican and sat in our room and stared at the tube. Spent Sunday morning at the Joker doing laundry. Came back here. Exciting.”

“We tried to stay away as long as we could,” Bro remarked.

“Awe ... it wasn’t too bad. We spent the afternoon riding the bikes into Wall Canyon. There’s a deserted mine back in there.”

“You got Tank on a bike?”

I laughed. “No. Bill and I rode the bikes. Tank followed in the truck.”

“I didn’t think he liked bikes.”

“Especially in the snow.”

“Wasn’t it cold?”

“Mmm, yeah. But it was fun ... riding in the snow.”

“Least you got your laundry done. We’ll be wearing stinky clothes for another week.” He didn’t sound too pleased.

“So what did you and Walt do?”

He chuckled. “You know Spurrier headed off pretty early.”

“Yeah ... took my truck. Said he was heading to Bridgeport to get laid.”

“That’s what he said. So Walt and I taped a sign to the back of the truck.”

“What it say?”

“Well, you know how he’s always bragging about his female conquests?”

“Yeah. Walt calls him Ironman ‘cause of it.”

“Right. So Walt made this big cardboard sign that read IRONMAN IS ALWAYS HARD. Rob didn’t know it was there. Drove all the way to Bridgeport with it.”

I smiled. “Serves him right. He ever see it?”

“Says no. He’s either bull shitting, or it blew off.”

“Long as somebody saw it when he drove through Tonopah.” I tried to imagine him casually driving down the highway while people laughed and pointed. “So where did you two go?”

“Drove up to Austin, first, to have a little night on the town. You know, see if there were chicks around. See where things lead.” Bro closed his eyes and shook his head. “Didn’t turn out that way. Ran into some fat assed Indian chick at the International. Guess Walt had some run in with her before.”

I laughed and made a “woo-woo” sound with my mouth and hand, like the stereotyped Indian on the warpath.

“You know about her?”

“Yeah. But it’s a long story. What did Walt do?”

“Well, I guess she’s still angry about Walt dumping her. She sicked her braves on us ... forced us to leave town. I mean, they literally followed us ‘til we were well past the city limits. We thought they were gonna jump us in the desert ... beat the crap out of us. But we out ran them.”

“Sounds exciting,” I chuckled.

“Walt swears he’ll never set foot in Austin again.”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s got much choice.”

Bro smiled. "Told him that's what happens when you can't keep it in your pants."

"So where did you end up?"

"We were heading west, so we drove to Fallon."

"Quite a drive late at night."

"We picked up some radio, so it wasn't too bad. Had some beers with us too."

I shook my head. "Drinking and driving. Drinking and driving."

He shrugged. "We got hassled in Fallon, by the Police. So we didn't stick around."

"They find the beer?"

"Naw ... we'd dumped the cans in the desert. They let us go. They were looking for a couple other guys. We went through Reno and Virginia City to Tahoe."

"Kind of the long way around."

"Didn't know where to go. Just looking for some action. Nothing."

"You find a place to stay?"

"Yeah. Spent Sunday sleeping in, then Walt lost a bundle in the casino. He's pretty pissed."

"I know you guys got back late."

"Eh ... one, one-thirty."

"Gonna be rough in the field today."

"Hey, like Walt says, 'Joke 'em if they can't take a fuck.'"

^^^

There were no memorable events that last week before Thanksgiving. We were worn down, lacked energy, and our spirits were shriveled and drained by the cold darkness. Everything seemed dark and gray. A dusky boredom sent us into a placid hibernation. Very little real work got done until the morning of the day we drove to Vegas. Suddenly we were energized. We cleaned the trailers, cleared the water lines, added antifreeze, sealed everything, packed our belongings, and left. We were on our way to someplace bright and shiny, and warm. The farther south we drove the more invigorated we became.

But as we drove through town on the way to McCarran we passed near the MGM Grand. Over eighty people had died in a horrible fire the day before. Seeing that huge blackened building, so prominent along the strip, placed a pall over our festive mood.

...

Waiting for our flight became a bore, so I bought a newspaper. "Says here," I told Bill, "that Mae West just died."

"Thought she was already dead."

"Me too."

Then he pointed to something in the section he held. "Look at this."

“What’s it say?”

“Over three thousand people were killed in Italy. One of Europe’s biggest earthquakes since Nineteen-fifteen.”

“Man ... that’s hard to imagine. Three thousand people dying at the same time.”

“Can you imagine the relief and medical efforts after a catastrophe like that?”

I shook my head.

Later, on the Sports Page, I saw that Sugar Ray Leonard had knocked out Roberto Duran, avenging his earlier loss. “Check this out,” I interrupted Bill’s reading. “This is weird. Leonard beat Duran with a T-K-O. Duran refused to fight. Can you believe that?”

“You mean he just quit?”

“Yeah ... that’s what it sounds like. According to this he kept sayin’ ‘No Mas! No Mas!’.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Guess it means ‘no more’. He just quit. I never thought he’d be the one to throw in the towel.”

Bill looked me square in the eyes. “Maybe he stepped over ‘The Edge.’”

“I’ll be damned,” I said with amazement, “you understand.”

“Hey ... we all give up sometime,” he turned back to his paper, “when things look hopeless.” When I didn’t respond he added, “When things really are hopeless.” He paused again. “I don’t think it was your knee that kept you from walking down that trail.”

^^^

On the drive back to Pablo Canyon, after our Thanksgiving break, we heard a news report concerning the increasing violence in San Salvador. Bill asked, “Did you hear about those twenty people killed in the fighting down there?”

“Yeah, in retaliation for the murder of some leftist leaders.”

“That part of the world just keeps fighting along.”

“Almost as bad as Ireland and Palestine and Lebanon.”

“Kind of makes our squabbles out here seem trivial.”

“Yeah. After a break they don’t seem so important.”

“Our project, our daily hassles, even our lives ... just don’t compare with the life and death struggles going on around the world.”

“That’s right ... I guess ... when I really think about it. We’re so smug in our own importance ... and our trivial female conquests ... that we forget what’s really important.”

“And even though their plight seems hopeless ... they keep on fighting.” Bill looked out the passenger side window. “Because they believe they can make a difference. They have to believe. That’s all they’ve got.”



^^^

Bill and I prepared dinner. “You know,” I said, “we’re still not collecting many samples.”

“It’s cold ... and the snow.” Bill gave me a half shrug.

“Guy is not gonna like that. It’s gotta be expensive, keeping the six of us out here ... for such a measly return.”

Bill smiled. “Maybe you should say something ... get us motivated.”

“Yeah, right. Rah rah, go team go.”

“Hey ... in case you hadn’t noticed ... these guys are coming around to you. You got a lot more control than you think.”

“You know, I have kinda noticed that. Ever since we got back from Tucson. It’s like Rob doesn’t give a shit anymore.”

“Maybe ‘cause you’re the oldest.”

“Come on, do you really think those young punks give a damn about age and experience?”

He shrugged.

“I think Rob’s just tired of playing King, especially now that unpopular decisions hafta be made. I noticed once the weather turned bad and things weren’t going smoothly he tried to avoid the pressure ... and the criticism.”

“You may have something there. He did start deferring to you when the tough calls had to be made.”

“Especially when they involved the whole group.” I opened a cupboard and pulled out two plates.

“But you know,” Bill noted, “he still makes the geological decisions.”

“That’s fine. He knows his mineralogy better than I do. But I am better at organizing. That’s why they made me Expediter for this crew. It’s a simple trade off.”

“That’s true,” Bill tossed me the bag of corn chips. “And, amazingly, you’re getting pretty good cooperation from everyone.”

“And that surprises me.” I pulled open the bag. “But hey ... I’m not gonna fight it. Not now. I don’t want any more battles before we get outta here.”

^^^

Then one day Guy showed up to evaluate our situation. Of course, on the day he arrived, the weather warmed, and most of the snow melted except on the higher peaks. The crew was in the field, for a change, so I was the only one in camp.

“This weather’s great,” he teased. “I’m sure you young bucks can hold out a while longer.”

“That won’t go over well,” I warned, “but I suppose you’re right.”

“You guys can tough it out.”

Later, as he sat in my trailer examining the recent field notes, he asked, “Been to Prescott lately?”

“Prescott ... Arizona?”

“Yes.”

“Never been to Prescott.”

“Interesting. You sure?”

“Positive. Closest I’ve been is Flagstaff.”

“Well, you know, your truck must drive itself.” His tone was sarcastic. “It got a parking ticket there.”

I was dumbfounded.

“NORMMEX was contacted by the pleasant folks at the Prescott Sheriff’s Department. Your truck was ticketed on the night of November Fifteenth. The fine was never paid.”

“But I’ve never been to Prescott. I’ve never even driven that truck in Arizona.”

“Look ... I don’t really care where you drive the truck. That’s one of the privileges you get for being out here. But at least pay your own traffic fines.”

I didn’t know what to say. My mind raced, searching for an explanation. I found my calendar in a stack of papers and flipped to the 15th of November. I sighed, relieved. “I was in Tonopah that night ... with Tank and Bill. Walt and Bro were up in Austin. Rob had my truck that night.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Drove to Bridgeport to see some woman.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Sure. Well ... I can’t prove where Rob was. But ask Bill ... or Tank, or Walt or Bro. They all know Rob had my truck that weekend. They put a sign on the back to embarrass him.”

Guy pondered that. “He does give Jerome as his permanent address. That’s only ... what ... twenty miles from Prescott? Maybe he was visiting mom and dad.” Guy’s expression softened.

...

At dinner that night Guy questioned Rob about the ticket.

“Wasn’t anywhere near Prescott on the Fifteenth,” he said firmly. But his face reddened. “I spent the night ... and the next day ... at Hilda’s place in Bridgeport.”

I knew he was lying when he slowly licked his lips.

“Come on, Rob,” Guy prodded. “Like I told Chris ... I don’t care where you guys take these vehicles, as long as you pay your fines.”

“I wasn’t there.”

Guy grew visibly perturbed. “Rob, face it. All your buddies here confirm you had the truck that night. I don’t think a Sheriff is going to make up something like this. Just pull a license number out of the blue to make a few stinking bucks.”

Rob looked at each of us with his ‘eat shit and die’ squint, then shook his head. “I wasn’t there.”

Guy’s eyes were glued to Rob’s. “Rob, this is senseless ... everything indicates you were in

Prescott. Don't your parents live in Jerome?"

"Yes."

"Isn't Jerome just a stone's toss from Prescott?"

"Yes. But ... isn't that an awful long way ... from here ... to drive for one night?" Rob returned Guy's steady look. "Just to see my parents?"

Guy countered, "Perhaps there's a woman. That might make one night worth while. Prescott's not that far if you have motivation."

Rob insisted on his innocence.

Guy watched Rob's face in frustration. "It's no big deal, really. The company paid the fine. They just want to know who's responsible."

Again Rob stuck to his story. But those of us who knew him well could tell by his body language and facial expression that, for whatever his reason, he was lying through his teeth.

Guy pushed himself away from the table. "In spite of what you say," he said to Rob, "I am holding you responsible. You obviously had control of that vehicle on that night, and no matter where you say you were, that truck was ticketed in Prescott."

"Do what you hafta do," Rob said angrily, as he stood and left my trailer.

Guy looked at the rest of us, holding up his hands in frustration.

Watching that little scenario unfold, I felt vindicated. Guy finally experienced, first hand, how Rob fabricated stories to cover his screw-ups. And his outright lies. This time he didn't get away with it.

Guy was in a confrontational mood. "Walter, I guess it's your turn."

Tank set down his glass of milk.

"You've collected samples with some awfully suspicious looking assay results."

Tank blushed slightly around his neck, but didn't say a word.

"About a week's worth of samples, from Mount Patterson." Guy looked at him dead on. "The results were almost identical."

"That's possible," Tank said weakly, in his own defense.

"But not likely." Guy sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "The situation is under advisement. But, to be honest, it doesn't look like we'll be using you after this field season."

Tank looked from Guy to his glass, then asked to be excused.

After he was gone, Walt said, "I knew it. I knew he was taking witness samples."

"How's that?" Guy tried not to act too interested.

"We've suspected for a while," Walt offered eagerly. "He hikes to a secluded spot and collects his quota, all from the same location, then marks his tags, makes his notes, and numbers his map like he collected them along his line. Then he sits on his big butt in the sun and reads his book."

Guy looked to me for confirmation.

This had been a sore spot with everyone. There was no way I could defend Tank's actions. No matter what the rest of us had done, this act was a breach of scientific method. That was almost the worst thing a scientist could do. "We did notice his marker moving through his book faster than he could read during lunch." I glanced at Bill. He gave me a sad smile.

It was like an exchange of pawns in a chess game. They gave up one of theirs, and we gave

up one of ours. At first it seemed a draw, until I realized we gave up a pawn for a king.

^^^

The rest of the season was uneventful. The crew collected very few samples. Tank was more sullen than ever, staying to himself in the Nomad. When he was forced to be with the rest of us he whined a lot. His Holier Than Thou arrogance had become a shambles.

Bill and I continued to play a lot of Gin Rummy, listened to lots of taped music, ate lots of Mexican food with beans, and generally farted a lot. Like Tank, we pretty much stayed to ourselves. Only seldom did the other's come to visit, and when they did they tended to stand outside. I guess I can't blame them.

The New Glue Brothers stayed behind closed doors as well, playing their music extremely loud, and probably doing drugs and brew from morning until they passed out at night. The inside of the Airstream was not a pleasant scene.

Then one evening the rancher came knocking. "News just came over the radio. There's a humongous winter storm headed this way. We're smack in the middle."

"Thanks," I said.

"I mean this is big," He demonstrated by stretching out his long arms. "This is the type'a storm can dump a bunch of snow, bring in lots of cold, wet weather, an' likely stay on for weeks."

"Can we use your phone again?" I asked.

"Sure can. Just thought you'd wanna know."

I called Guy. He checked with the weather service in Tucson. Sure enough, even they were aware of the huge front moving our way.

"Store the bikes and generators, clean out the trailers, winterize everything, and pull them to Vegas. We've got a place to store them down there."

"So this is it?" I wanted to be certain.

"This is it. Be sure to get out of there before that storm hits."

And we did. We had been waiting for that message for a long time. We moved faster than if we had been chasing women. And just like that, it was over. The Mobile Zoo Ghetto disbanded.

^^^\*\*\*

I volunteered to drive the light-blue Ford back to Tucson. Surprisingly, Rob offered to ride along, if I would drop him off in Jerome. I figured I could handle his crap one last time, and, I thought, perhaps I could snatch up a bit of revenge. The others were flying from Las Vegas to Tucson.

At first Rob and I didn't say much. We were both afraid of what might be said. I know I toyed with several scenarios, each involving an eloquent string of righteous put downs coated in pseudo-philosophy and gonzo psychology, leaving him quite speechless and totally conquered. But I wasn't sure I was actually capable of that sort of verbal revenge, especially against an expert manipulator like Rob.

When we drove through Kingman I remembered being on the same highway with Burt, so many months before. We were traveling, now, in the opposite direction. Closing circles, or advancing spirals. Who knows? I looked at Rob and said, "You know ... I'm thankful that we got to know each other out here."

"Why's that?" he asked cautiously.

"Cause you showed me ... unintentionally, I think ... that I wasn't as open or as free ... nor as flexible ... as I wanted to believe."

He glanced at me, then focused on the road ahead.

I held the wheel with both hands. "You made me realize that being well read, and understanding behavioral patterns ... and having a basic understanding of Life ... doesn't mean one is actually alive. You helped me discover that the majority of what I know at thirty is only a vicarious absorption of other's actual experiences."

I don't think he had the slightest idea of what I was talking about.

"You've shown me," I went on, "in your absurd way, some real glimpses of the world. An absurd world, to be sure. A world requiring flexibility and an open mind."

"Being open is good," he said in a puzzled tone.

"I think that's why I got upset with you."

"You mean in Bridgeport?"

"Yes," I glanced at him. "I was actually fighting myself, afraid to admit I just wasn't as worldly and broad minded as I thought. I found I could be suckered by your devious plots ... just as quickly as someone as dense as Tank."

I could tell he didn't like the word 'devious.'

I went on. "I failed myself ... or the image I had of myself. I reacted to you the way Burt reacted to me."

"You pissed him off pretty bad."

"I know ... and I feel bad about that. I really did like him. I should've handled that whole situation differently."

I thought about that as I drove on. After a few miles, I said, "Maybe not. Maybe that's exactly what we need to shake us from our lethargy. Maybe the only way to effect change is to be

blasted from reality and forced to deal with apparently unreal situations.”

I sensed Rob was looking at me. “Maybe those gonzo situations are more real than conventional reality.”

“You might have a point.” I turned and smiled. “Awareness ... understanding ... comprehension ... an open mind. It’s all why I’m so thankful you were around for me. You showed me the light I’d been missing so long. You helped me understand that we’re individuals ... and we hafta stand alone ... ‘cause we’re all we got.”

We both turned to look at the road ahead.

“We can look at things differently,” I said, “yet still love each other ... and live with another ... and be happy and supportive and gain support ... and still be free. “Cause, you see ... freedom is within. It’s a state of mind ... like everything around us. Positive or negative, we each create our own universe, our own environment, our own existence. We see things as we think they are ... and if we’re open and giving and flexible enough ... they may actually take on those characteristics. But if we’re closed and blind and actually try to fight our imagined enemies ... well, then, we not only waste energy and time ... but we never really live ... never really understand.”

We rode again for several miles. Rob slid his small jar of lip balm out of his shirt pocket and applied a dab to his lips. He carefully screwed on the lid and put the jar away.

Out of the blue, I said, “I’ve always vacillated between the value of experience and the relative safety of social voyeurism. We hafta learn, through experience, what we are ... what we really want ... and what we can accomplish. Our character unfolds gradually through the circumstances of our lives ... from the various forces moving within our environment.”

I swear he moved slightly closer to the door. I knew I was starting to freak him out, fully enjoying his discomfort. I went on. “Until we gain a certain amount of experience, we have no real character. We’re ignorant of ourselves. Only after exposing our personal way ... by accepting the hard blows from the outside ... can we fully develop character. And this character ... what is it?”

Rob shook his head, hesitant to speak.

“Our character is really the fullest possible knowledge of our own individuality. You should know that. But you don’t. You’re blind. Just like the rest of us. To fulfill our destiny ... to reveal our true character ... we must first become individuals.”

“You’re talking in circles,” he ventured.

“Spirals, my friend. Spirals.” I smiled. “We must first learn to stand on our own.”

I wanted to drive him crazy with nonsense, but I was running out of steam. “Sometimes the simple life still affords some enticement. There’s a certain appeal to protection against the dangers of an individual life ... a solitary life. From birth to employment, marriage and children, responsibility ... then the gradual incapacitating passage to the end. It’s all neat and tidy and seemingly secure. I find I’m attracted to both paths ... and never able to get off the fence. I’ve never really enjoyed the full benefits of either side.”

I let him think about all that nonsense for quite a while. When we turned east, toward Jerome, I asked him, “You know what’s the last thing to pass through a bug’s tiny brain when it hits the windshield?” I pointed to the bug spatter covering the glass.

He thought about it a second. “Don’t know.”

I paused for a long moment. “The last thing to go through a bug’s brain when it hits the windshield is ... its ass hole.”

...

Pulling to a stop in front of Rob’s parents’ home in Jerome, I said, “Thanks again for a great season.”

He was speechless. He wasn’t sure how to take my statement.

“You made the project entertaining. It’s been fun and intriguing ... watching you respond to various situations and stimuli. Your behavior has been enlightening.” I said, “You have confirmed for me, through your absurd behavior, that the soul’s release from the matrix of inherited social bondage can actually be attained.”

He simply said “Thanks ... I guess.”

After we unloaded his gear from the back of the truck we shook hands. I got in and started the engine. Watching him as he stood along the curb, hooking his day-pack over his right shoulder, I rolled down the window and waved him closer. He came cautiously to the side of the cab.

“Rob ... the main lesson I learned from observing you this past summer ... something I hadn’t fully realized before ... is that the illusion of life encompasses so many meaningless moments.”

He stared, blank faced, uncomprehending.

I said, “Watch out for windshields, grasshopper.” And looking right at him, speaking softly in my best Rob Spurrier imitation, I said, “Eat shit and die.” I did my best impression of his shit-assing grin, pressed the accelerator, said “Bye,” and took off for Tucson, still watching for The Edge of the World.

...

And that, my friend, is the way it is ... in exploration geology.

—The End—

[224,984]