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The Road Home (Original writing)

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The Road Home. [Original writing]

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1992

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THE ROAD HOME

by

James Snape

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

in

English

**English Department
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories was written and revised over an eighteen month period beginning in the Fall of 1991. Most of the work was done in conjunction with Richard Wiley's creative writing workshops. The stories are all fictional, though each one has some part of its genesis in my experience.

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MUDHEADS

Three rafts maneuvered down the San Juan River between canyon walls so high that the daylight was never more than twilight. The only sounds were the outboard motors, an occasional murmur of voices, and water lapping against the sides of the rafts. A snake swam beneath one of the boats, and was sliced into four pieces by the propeller. Each piece continued to swim independently for a few moments. The motor never missed a stroke and the men in the rafts didn't take their eyes off the canyon walls long enough to notice. They were looking for Anasazi cliff-dwellings and had spent several days exploring every side-canyon and backwater on the South Fork of the river. Finally, they found something.

It was a narrow cleft in the red sandstone, hidden so well by the shadows that the rafts passed without stopping. But the lead boat turned back upriver to take a closer look. The two men in the raft were the only non-archaeologists in the party. One was the guide, a local outfitter

from Moab. Despite the hot, still air in the bottom of the canyon, he wore a long-sleeved western shirt and blue jeans. Strands of silver hair were combed strategically over the bare spots on his head. He sat at the rear of the boat and operated the tiller.

The other was a large man in his fifties. His long hair and full beard were black, streaked with gray. He was naked, standing up in the boat and gesturing wildly. The boat rocked dangerously, and his penis moved in counterpoint to his waving hands as he exhorted the guide to turn back.

"Goddamn, Lamar, just where do you think you're going? This is no pleasure cruise. It for damn sure isn't the Love Boat, I can tell you that. Now, let's check out this one too, for Christ's sake. Do the job right. This is why you're raking in the big money. Lord knows how many wives and kids you got to feed back at home..."

Lamar smiled and took the raft closer to the small opening. He'd been listening to Ed's chatter for over a week and had grown accustomed to the sound, like a familiar disc jockey. Lamar didn't pay too much attention.

The raft was wider than the split in the rock. Ed slipped over the side of the raft and prepared to swim into the opening but was surprised to find the water came just above his waist. He waded into the cleft and out of sight of the others.

Ed walked the passage for fifty yards. It became so narrow that he had to turn sideways to get through, but then it emerged into a large cove with red sand beaches all around. High up in the cliffs above the cove was what they'd been searching for, the adobe cliff dwellings of the ancient Anasazi. Ed noticed a difference immediately between them and others he'd seen. Many of the buildings were remarkably well preserved, as if the Indians had just left yesterday.

That night they celebrated. The beer and whiskey flowed. They sat around a small campfire and swapped stories, sang songs and enjoyed themselves. As usual, Ed dominated the conversation, but no one objected. They enjoyed his stories nearly as much as he loved an audience.

"You know, I only believe in a few things, but those are hard facts that brook no judgement from others: all men and women are equal, except maybe for Davis over there. When he's dead drunk like that and

snoring and the spit starts to run out the side of his mouth, he may just be a bit less than equal, but otherwise we is all the same and the same is all of us.

"Number two is...the earth has got too damn many equal people on it. The time will come when we have to go to a museum just to see some dirt. There will be a pile of apartment houses and parking lots stretching from Seattle to Bangor and San Diego to Charlotte. All of your excavations will be next to shopping malls and 7-11 stores.

"Number three--now I want you to listen to this one--the old ways and old things are worth hanging on to. I'm sure you agree with me because you archaeologists dig around in the past all the time and old Lamar over there lives with those aged Mormon wives of his. But there's another angle to consider here. If we didn't value the past and all the archaeologists were out of work, I'm not sure the fast food industry could handle ten thousand manager trainees with beards and big vocabularies.

"Finally, I believe that dark, Mexican beer gives you a terrific hangover and historic flatulence, but it's worth it and I believe I'll have another.

"Now there are people that don't hold with these tenets, and of course they're wrong. I'm liberal in most other things, but these few are simple, incontrovertible facts, and I live my life accordingly."

Ed held forth on all matters great and small. He became more garrulous as he continued to drink. Unfortunately the size of his audience dwindled from weariness or wobbliness until only he and Lamar were left.

"Well, Lamar, I guess it's just us old war horses, now. How about I buy you another drink and you tell me about your life as a famous riverboat captain and rich Jack-Mormon entrepreneur? Just what is it that makes you so successful in such a limited way?"

Lamar owned the boats that the archaeologists rented. He had spent much of his life in and around what is now Canyonlands National Park, and he believed he had the right to use what he needed from the land to make a living. When he wasn't guiding people through the canyons, he stole artifacts from Indian sites and sold them to collectors. Lamar could make enough from this undisturbed cliff-dwelling to live handsomely for the rest of his life.

"I'd sure like to tell you all about it," Lamar said, "but I think you about used up all the air in this canyon. I never met a man who liked to talk as much as you. Though I suspect most people never get a chance to meet more than one cause they can't never get away from the first."

"If you keep up that kind of talk, you might hurt my feelings, though I doubt it. You are looking at a man whose heart has been stepped on by man, woman, child, and beast; a man who has survived adversity of biblical proportions; a man whose soul has been burnished by the slings and arrows of...some goddamn thing or other...look what you did Lamar, you made me forget what I was talking about."

"I think you got a lot of company, Ed. Most of us have forgotten what you was talking about on a regular basis. What do you think of this place you found? Is it as special as all them professors say?"

"What do you mean 'Is it special?'," Ed said, "Is the Taj Mahal special? How about those pyramids in Egypt? Are they special? Hell yes it's special. It's big, and the treasure hunters haven't hunted this one down yet. Do you have any idea how rare that is? Well I don't, but it's pretty rare, I'm sure. Just look how happy it made all these dead Indian doctors, and they're a pretty somber lot, in general. By the way, Lamar,

you get to meet more than your share of archaeologists. Tell me, have you ever met one that didn't have a beard? Now, I'm including women too. Gives you something to think about doesn't it? "

"The only thing I know about archaeologists is that they always pay their bill. But what do you suppose they're gonna do with this place now? There's not much time for digging. We gotta be back in Moab tomorrow."

"Lamar, you talk like a babe in the woods, or in your case, in the cactus. They can't do jack-shit here but take pictures until they get something signed by the bureaucrat in charge of old adobe houses and clay pots. I imagine that's going to take a while, though, because those Park Service folks are mudheads from first to last. But I plan on staying here to keep an eye on things until they get back."

Lamar suddenly saw Ed as a potential adversary. He made a quick evaluation and decided there was more to him than just words. His thoughts shifted to ways he might deal with a security guard. "Somebody told me they thought you lived in a canyon close to here anyways. I suppose you'll be going back there first. I might could give you a ride, if you like."

"Now you're talking like a mudhead yourself, Lamar. You know as well as I do that nobody can live in a national park. It just isn't done; it's against the sacred law of the United Snakes of America. Let's just say I live and leave it at that. And thanks for the offer, but there's no reason for me to go anywhere else. I have everything a man could possibly need right here, except one, a good woman. I guess in your case that would be several things."

"Ed, I just think you're jealous. Deep down I believe you wish you could join the Mormon church yourself. I probably shouldn't ask, but what in the world is a mudhead? I've met redheads, and I seen a copperhead once, and I'm talking to a peckerhead, but I come up short on mudheads."

"You don't know about mudheads? A man of the world like yourself? I am surprised."

"Remember, I'm just a simple old country boy trying to get along, and my world maybe ain't so big as yours."

"Well, that's perfect, you see, because mudheads are simple country boys themselves, and they've been around the Southwest for a long time. Longer than Mormons even. The people who built these

cliff-dwellings probably knew about them. Hell, they probably started the stories. I used to date a Zuni woman and she told me this one because she thought it had a message for me somewhere. Those Zuni women are born vicious and get meaner as they grow older, Lamar. If you ever get a chance to marry one, don't do it. Just shoot yourself in the foot instead, you'll be better off in the long run.

"You see, a long time ago, the mudheads walked like men, but they weren't too sharp, not aware, couldn't do much of anything. So a human decides he's going to try to teach the mudheads about the world. He tries to show them how to climb a ladder, but one climbs up backward with his head pointed toward the ground, and the other gets all tangled up in the rungs, and a third tries to climb the back of the ladder. They just couldn't figure it out.

"Next, he teaches them to build a house. He showed them the right way but it didn't sink in. One built the roof first and had the others hold it up while he built downwards. Another built from the inside and couldn't get out when he was finished. One made his adobe bricks out of sand, and his house washed away in the rain.

"Then he tries something very simple--sitting in a chair. The mudhead who climbed the ladder upside down also sat in the chair that way with his head where his ass should have been and his feet sticking up in the air. One sat under the chair. Another sat on top of the chair's back so it fell over. A fourth sat on the chair with his back to the front.

"Finally, he showed them how to copulate with a woman. You recall how that's done, don't you Lamar? Good. So this guy found a large, old woman who was willing and he decided to show them the simplest way--from the rear like a dog. The mudheads tried to imitate, but couldn't find the right opening. One tried the anus. The second found a fold behind the woman's knee, another the arm bend, another the navel, and another the ear. The human gave up in disgust. The old woman looked back at the mudheads and laughed."

Lamar was lulled into a half-sleep by Ed's story but looked up when the voice stopped.

"Is that it?"

"That's the whole thing. Now I could have embroidered it a little, but I wanted to stick to the facts for your benefit."

"Don't think I'm not grateful for that. But what the hell is that story supposed to prove?"

"It could explain why Mudheads don't reproduce as well as they could, and it could explain why that Zuni woman and I didn't get along very well, but it doesn't explain why we don't have another drink. What do you say? All that edifying and illuminating and shit has made me so dry that I'm farting dust."

Later, after all the others had stumbled off to bed, Ed doused the campfire and unrolled his sleeping bag. The night was clear and moonless. He saw a ribbon of star clouds in the Milky Way shimmering straight overhead. Nearby, the San Juan River passed quietly through winding canyons, and the sound merged with an occasional sigh of the breeze.

Ed loved these nights. He leaned against a smooth rock. He was half out of the sleeping bag. All his senses were alive. He smelled pungent sage and rich, moist clay from the river. In the bushes, a kangaroo rat scurried back and forth. Ed's eyes looked into the blackness. He could see nothing but imagine everything--what the red Southwest had been before the bulldozers and tourists, before the miners

and Mormons, even the old times when the Anasazi lived in the canyons, how they carved a simple, violent life from the sandstone.

He was content, and felt lucky to be in one of the few places where man had left little mark. Waiting there, alone, was not a trial for him. It was a pleasure.

He spent most of his time alone in an old cabin near the junction of the Green River and the San Juan where he had time to think about things. He discussed those things with himself, sometimes silently, sometimes aloud. The raft trip gave him a chance to be with people again, but Ed thought 10 days was enough.

There was much activity on the following day. The scientists had more pictures to take and measurements to make before presenting their case to the Park Service in Moab. Everyone except Ed was anxious to finish this last leg of the trip. The archaeologists wanted to get permission to excavate. Lamar was making plans for his economic future.

Henry stroked the neck of the beer bottle lovingly with a calloused thumb and forefinger. In the other hand, he held a small stack of photographs.

"How'd you get these pictures, Lamar?"

"You might say I was lucky. Some university types, professors and such, hired me to float 'em down the San Juan. They was out there with their topo maps and compasses like a bunch of junior engineers. This spot they found is a little backwater, side canyon. There's just this tiny little slit in the wall of the main channel, barely big enough to walk through, but it opens out into a big round cove, and I'll be damned if there ain't ruins tucked away all along under the edge of the cliffs. You never seen such a happy bunch of scientists in your life, dancin around, high-fivin each other and jabberin like you'd expect college boys to do. They took pictures of every square inch of the place. I took a few too,...for my scrapbook, ya know."

"Well I'm real happy you had such a good time on your summer vacation, Lamar. Now can I go back to my table and get shit-faced or is there a point to all this?"

"That's a good question, Henry; you was always one to get right to the heart of the matter. They left a guy there. Some crazy son-of-a-bitch desert rat. He lives in the canyons somewhere. Right now he's camped down by the river beneath the cliff-dwellings and says he'll stay there till the archaeologists come back to dig. See, a boat's no good for this. That fella'd see you for sure, and it's a half-mile uphill from the river to the cliff. You gotta come down on it from the top. I'm too old and tired for this kind of trouble, Henry. You're good at handling trouble; that's why I'm talking to you. Besides, they know me."

Henry leaned back in his chair, feeling slightly pleased, and looked across the table at the other man. For a few seconds, neither spoke.

"How much?" Henry said.

"You know the answer to that. Depends on what you bring back. I got a buyer already. He's rich and interested. This is the real thing, Henry, not just arrowheads and busted pots--there's probably 20 unopened graves and one of the kivas looked bigger than this damn bar...I'll just take a little slice off the top for setting up the deal; the rest is yours."

"Give you a dime on the dollar."

"Done--but you buy the next drink."

Lamar was satisfied and knew he would take ninety percent up front before Henry saw a penny. They'd worked together before.

Henry walked slowly across the broken linoleum floor of the bar toward another table. He thought Lamar was a weak, old fool to give away his money like that, but Henry was happy to take it. He sat down next to a large man who drank tequila from a bottle, chased with beer.

"You and Lamar talking together like regular butt-buddies, Henry. What's up?"

Henry didn't answer right away. He was thinking about the advantages of having a man like Gene with him--big, mean, broke, and dumb.

"Tomorrow morning is what's up. That's when you're coming with me to Canyonlands. Gonna make you a little money." Henry didn't give any details. Gene didn't ask; he just showed agreement with a long drink of beer and a deep, sincere belch.

Henry drove his truck across the plateau. The large, knobby tires chewed through the fragile crust of sand and raised a wall of dust

behind them. Gene bounced in the passenger's seat, sometimes hitting his head on the roof of the cab. They stopped at the rim of a mesa--three thousand feet straight down to the San Juan river.

Muffled country music came through the doors of the vehicle--thumping bass, a whining pedal-steel guitar, the gravelly complaint of Waylon Jennings, "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be...". When they opened the doors, the sound roared out, empty beer cans fell to the ground, and both men moved in unison like a well rehearsed dance. They took two steps forward, unzipped their pants, and urinated in a golden arch. Satisfied, they walked to the front of the four-wheel drive Chevy and looked out at an endless table land cut into fantastic pieces by the winding river canyons.

"Shit, Henry, that felt mighty fine...best thing I've done with my pecker since the last time your wife came over."

"Well, I know you're lying. First off, if she fucked you I expect her pussy woulda turned green and fell out, and second, if it was any good, you had to be with some other woman."

The two men laughed uncontrollably in falsetto--Budweiser sopranos. Henry leaned inside the cab of the truck to kill the ignition

while Gene raised the lid of an ice chest in the back. The loud music died suddenly with the motor, and the desert silence rushed in to fill the void. For a moment, the men were startled, but the spell was broken by the hiss of beer cans being opened.

"Goddamn, wouldn't this be the way to live?" said Gene, "bring a little trailer up here, maybe build a cabin...live off the land, nobody fuck with ya...have a garden, grow some shit. Yep, that's what I want to do. Get myself a little piece of land...". His speech ended in a slurp as he brought the can to his lips.

"I can just see it," Henry said, "you up here in a raggedy little shack with some ignorant woman, 'cause she'd have to be ignorant to be with you--and probably blind. Starving to death because you can't grow nothin' but creosote and rocks and there ain't nothin' to shoot but snakes and rabbits and you're scared of snakes--and rabbits move too fast and are smaller than the side of a barn. Yes sir, I think you're right Gene. Get your ass up in the hills as soon as possible."

"Well, I tell ya what. I'll get out Mr. Smith and Wesson and we'll see who can shoot."

Gene reached under the seat, pushed aside the license plates, and took the .357 out of its worn holster. The midnight blue barrel absorbed the sunlight; nothing reflected. Parts of the walnut grip were stained black from use. The weight felt good in his hand and he smiled from the simple pleasure.

Looking to his right, Gene noticed a sign with "No Vehicles" painted on the front.

"See that little sign way over there, Henry?" he slurred, "I'm gonna put a bullet right through that line going across the middle. That's why the government puts the fuckers up anyway. They want us to shoot the signs instead of those little Japanese shits that's crawling all over the visitor's center..." He stopped talking and focussed his remaining concentration on the sign. Henry grabbed Gene's shoulder.

"Don't be an asshole! If I wanted everybody to know we're here, I'd of sent the Park Service a letter."

Gene wavered for a moment and said, "Will you shut up! By the time anybody figured out where in this fuckin' maze the shot come from, we'd have your damned dead Indian shit and be back in Moab...be sniffin' around the pee hole." He grinned, exposing two gold front teeth.

At the edge of his vision, Gene saw a quick, brown movement. A jack rabbit sprang from the cover of a mesquite bush and ran along the mesa's rim. Gene pivoted his large body to the left, got the rabbit in his sights, and followed its movement with the barrel. As he squeezed the trigger, Gene lost his balance and fell further left as the pistol fired. The metal of the truck's front fender screeched; a stream of brown water gushed onto the engine and the ground. For a few seconds, they were both too stunned to move or speak. Then they began to scream at once.

"Damn, Henry, it was a accident! I slipped!"

"You stupid shit! What do you think you're doing?"

Henry ran to the front of the truck and lifted the hood.

"Son-of-a-bitch! Look at this! You blew a hole right through the radiator." Henry's unshaven face twisted with anger. He turned quickly on Gene as if to strike, but remembered the gun. He backed off slightly and said, "This don't change nothin'. I didn't come all this way just to go home with a busted truck. You stay here and see if you can fix the damn thing, and I'll go find those ruins. But when we sell the shit, remember--the truck gets fixed before you get a dime--asshole."

Henry got the topographical map and stalked off to locate the spot on the mesa. If Lamar was right, they would have company soon. Several times, lying on his stomach, he looked down past the rim for a sign of the cliff-dwelling. The front of his denim shirt was coated with red sand. Finding it at last, Henry piled a small cairn of stones near the edge and walked back to the truck.

I should never have brought a crazy son-of-a-bitch like that, Henry thought, I ought to shove that .357 between his fat fuckin' lips--maybe pull the trigger--maybe just watch him squirm. He was lost in this fantasy until he heard Gene yell, "Somebody's coming!". He quickened his pace.

They watched for several minutes as the lone figure approached. It wasn't a ranger--they always used horses in the backcountry, and it wasn't just a wandering tourist--the nearest campground was over twenty miles away. Henry was fairly sure who it was but didn't know what to expect.

"Jesus," Henry said, "ain't this lovely? First you blow a hole in my truck and then we get a member of the Bum-fuck Egypt welcoming

committee...look Gene, put your gun back and don't bother this guy...yet. We want him away from here quick. Got it?"

As the figure walked closer, they could see a full beard on a deeply tanned face. His vigorous stride belied the streaks of gray in his beard and hair. Ed smiled broadly and shouted, "Open season on hikers doesn't start until next week--hold your fire. I saw the dust and heard that shot. Everything all right?"

Henry and Gene leaned casually against the damaged front fender. They exchanged glances, Henry nodded, and both backed away to expose the bullet hole.

"We seem to have a little problem with the truck," Henry said, pointing to the hole.

Ed whistled in appreciation. He noticed the large puddle beneath the vehicle.

"Looks like you bagged yourself a beauty. Gonna be great mounted on the wall next to a tin can, a No Hunting sign, and your big toe. I'll be damned if you didn't kill it clean too, and a good thing...I've heard those things are vicious. Seen one smash a dog once--flatter than hell." He decided from their blank expressions that his humor wasn't

appreciated. He didn't know that the bovine look was their standard. "I know a little about engines," he offered, changing his tone, "Let me take a look under the hood and see where all the water came from. You guys hang around here too long and you'll catch Parkrangeritis for sure. I bet the fine's \$500 at least."

Henry said, "We know where it's coming from, but since you seem so amused by the whole thing, I'll let you look."

Ed inspected the radiator and paused to think.

"If you've got a couple of casings from those shells and something to use for a hammer, just pound one in each side of the hole. Should stop most of the water from pouring out. Wait until dark if you think you can risk it, and drive out. Should be good enough to get you off this plateau. When you hit the highway, it's downhill most of the way to town. Just coast with the motor off and let the air cool your engine.

"Of course you'll have to take off some hardware to get at that radiator, but it beats sitting here until a ranger finds you with your gun and your truck full of shovels and picks."

Ed didn't want the Park Rangers either. His living arrangements weren't quite up to government standards. He decided to press harder. He wondered if the subtle approach would have any effect.

"Planning on doing a little mining? Maybe some gardening? Or maybe...no I don't suppose so, but that reminds me, I met a few archaeologists from Utah State around here last week. They were pretty excited about something. Said they'd be back after they got their red tape untangled..."

"I appreciate your concern, mister, but we just came out here to drink a little beer and enjoy the scenery, and there ain't no law against that," Henry said.

"I guess that depends on who you ask. If you ask a ranger, he might wonder why you're driving a truck in a wilderness area and shooting a gun where firearms are prohibited. And if you ask me, you plowed a twenty-mile long path across the plateau on your way to steal what you can out of some cliff dwellings.

"I'm not looking for trouble. If you want to leave, I'll help you get this truck running. If you don't, I've got enough friends back at camp to make damn sure you don't touch the ruins. It's your choice."

Henry saw through the lie, but he needed some time to put his facts in order. "We gotta go pee," he said, and walked off with Gene.

They went through the motions and discussed the situation.

"Gene, this whole mess is your fuck-up. You gotta make it right."

"I'll kick his ass, bad, then he won't be no trouble."

"That's good. We gotta get him out of the way if we're gonna make money here. But we also need water and he knows where to find it. You can bet on that. Little bit of ice we got won't fill the radiator. And I'll be damned if I want to walk back to the highway. You're gonna get us some water."

"Shit, Henry, I don't want to go anywhere with that old fucker. Who knows what he might do? And what about them friends? Expect me to kick their asses too?"

"There ain't no friends. He's blowing smoke. We can still make this thing work. You take him and the ice-chest far enough away so I can drop over the edge and get the shit. I don't care what you do with him after you find the water. That's your business. Fuck him up then if you want to. Just don't bring him back. Take your .357 and make sure he sees you take it."

They walked back to the truck.

"Well, what's it gonna be?" Ed asked. He stood between the men and the gun he'd noticed on the front seat.

Henry said, "I can't help what you think we're doing here. And I don't know what the fuck you're talking about--these cliff-dwellings. But we do need to fix this truck and get outta here. Any water around here closer than the river?"

Ed decided his prospects were improving. "There's a spring about an hour's walk away from here. You'd never find it on your own, though. It's pretty well hidden."

"We'd appreciate it if you'd take Gene over there to fill up the ice-chest. I'll work on that radiator while you're gone."

The trail wound steeply down the face of the mesa. Gene fell several times. They followed it in silence for more than a mile--Ed set a rapid pace and Gene struggled vainly to keep up. Ed stopped at the entrance to a small side canyon. Soon, Gene arrived carrying the empty ice chest. His face was red, and his breath came in gasps.

"Tsa a bitch...carrying this damn ice chest...n that trail. Much further...?"

"Nah, we about got it licked. If we wander down these canyons for half a mile I think we'll find what I'm looking for. In fact, I'm sure of it." Ed wanted Gene lost. They took the long way to the spring. He wound Gene in and out of every side canyon he could find trying to distort the big man's sense of direction. Ed thought of another distraction, an appropriate one.

"You like stories?"

"Good ones," Gene panted.

"Well, I've got one for you. You probably know it though. It's about mudheads."

When Ed finished his story, he looked at Gene for a reaction.

Gene said, "Ya? So what happened?"

"That's it. Nada mas."

"What a piss-poor story that is. There's no ending--no point to it."

"If you need a point, maybe it explains why you don't see a lot of mudheads anymore, although I run across some now and then."

"I'll just bet you do. Teach em how to fuck, too?"

"No, they all think they've got that under control. But that's probably the only thing."

As they continued down the canyon, it gradually narrowed. Soon they were forced to walk single file. Ed said, "Watch for rattlers in here. I've seen 'em a time or two over the years."

"You don't have to tell me about snakes. There's nothin I hate worse than snakes--worse than Navajos or niggers." Ed knew exactly what to do.

"You ever been bit?"

Gene shook his head no.

"Well I have. I don't even count the times any more. I don't like it, naturally, but now it's no worse than food poisoning or a bad hangover--probably better than the black plague or botulism. Of course the first time is different. The first time you feel like you're dying, and sometimes you're right."

"Well that's just fuckin' great. If I see a rattler, I'll ask it to bite you instead of me."

Gene decided Ed had been walking in the sun way too long and pushed ahead to avoid another story. He noticed a trace of moisture in the sand ahead of them.

"Must be gettin' close--the dirt's wet," Gene said.

"You wait here a second. Let me look up around that bend. I believe that's the place...Give me the ice chest. I'll fill it up for you. There are usually a few snakes hanging around the spring, just waiting for a big boy like you to show up." Gene was too tired to protest. He sat down in the shade and waited nervously. The warning about the snakes echoed in his mind. He didn't notice Ed pass by him on the plateau above, taking the direct route back.

Henry drove the wounded truck to a spot above the cliff-dwelling. He filled his large knapsack with foam rubber and lashed digging tools to the outside. He tied one end of the climbing rope to the brush guard on the truck, the other end to the straps on the pack and lowered it slowly. Then, it was Henry's turn.

He descended over the edge, letting the rope slide through his hands as his feet searched for new, lower resting places. The alcohol took its toll. One foot came down heavily on a thin sandstone ledge--it snapped and Henry's knees smashed against the face of the cliff. In agony, he released the rope for a split second and dropped. Henry grabbed the line desperately and pulled his body to the rock, scraping his

face on the stone and nearly losing consciousness from the impact. He painfully climbed the last thirty feet down to the ruins. Still dazed, but greatly sobered, he found solid footing next to the walls of a crumbling, adobe room.

He looked around him with satisfaction. The site was untouched. Beneath the overhanging cliff he saw three adobe towers, and between them was a series of shorter, connected rooms. Many were intact. Some were little more than a pile of regular shaped bricks. At the center of the ruin the large openings of two kivas descended to a lower level. These were Henry's first objectives. He limped toward them.

Sitting next to the kiva's entrance, he removed his jeans to examine the damage to his knees. The flesh was gone down to the bone, but nothing was broken--nothing dangerous. Then Henry heard a sound that made him forget his pain: the sound, above him, of a motor. It started, but stayed in place. He thought Gene had returned with the water. For a moment Henry had a comforting feeling that the whole thing would work out after all. He bathed in his satisfaction--until the other end of the rope went sailing past.

Ed shouldered his knapsack and started the long walk down the plateau to the river. As he walked, he whistled the foreboding, opening measures of Mozart's Requiem. He wondered if Gene had found the Bull snake he'd left in the ice chest.

Two days later, Henry and Gene made it back to Moab. The bar was their first stop. Lamar was waiting. They exchanged no greetings or smiles.

"I hear you boys had yourselves quite a walk, and you got nothing to show for it but sad faces and sore feet. I'm real disappointed, Henry. You embarrass me. There won't be a second chance for this thing."

Henry didn't answer, just looked straight ahead. His hands were torn in a dozen places from his painful climb back to the top of the plateau. By the time he'd reached the truck, the overheated crankshaft bearings had seized. The only sound had been a radio announcer advertising "Color Country Condominiums--It's Just Like Taking a Piece of the West Home With You."

He held the beer bottle tightly. It felt wet and awkward in his bandaged fingers. It tasted bitter.

"The least you two could do is change your clothes and wash up a little. You look like hell. Look like a couple goddamn drunk Indians. And what's that shit in your hair and on your face?"

Henry ran his fingers through his hair and looked vacantly at the pieces of mud that fell on the table.

THE MISSION

Paracho had some paved streets because Americans lived there. Many of the old buildings had settled at odd angles making cracks in the adobe walls. The Americans carefully patched the cracks in their walls from the inside to avoid changing the authentic Mexican look of the town. The authentic Mexicans couldn't afford the cement and depended on bougainvillea vines that grew outside the walls and up, into the cracks to fill them. The purple blossoms looked brilliant against the yellow and brown.

The plaza was the center of Paracho. It contained the Catholic Church and the marketplace. There were two restaurants and each had a mariachi band. They played loud and out of tune. At the edges of the plaza, campesinos with shoes tied around their necks sipped pulque and waited for buses. Wild-looking Indians in long, white shifts sold stone-age bow & arrows to the tourists. At a small meat stall, a weathered plywood table bowed from the weight of a pig's head. One open eye scrutinized the customers and its fat, fly-covered tongue stuck from the

side of its mouth. Next to the stall a dead dog laid on its back like an overturned coffee table.

Two people in the plaza looked different from the others--Mexican, American, or tourist. They rode their bicycles past the pig's head, parked near the dog, and bought tacos at the meat stand. They were both young and healthy looking with short, blond hair. Their white shirts and light-yellow ties seemed out of place. Most people didn't pay attention to them because these two were well known. But some people did notice.

The young women in the plaza were very interested, an interest they'd never shown before. They looked in the direction of the two young men and laughed loudly, scornfully. One of the women seemed to be telling a story to the others. She was very animated, acting, posing, reciting in both Spanish and English. Streaks of white were bleached into her shiny, black hair. She had red lipstick on her full, sensuous lips. Her dark eyes were open wide with excitement and tears formed in the corners from laughter. Jason and Jeremy both pretended it was not happening.

"So, where were you last night? I heard you get up then you walked out and didn't say a word," Jason said.

"I had to take a leak. I don't usually wake you up to tell you about it."

"Bull. You were gone too long for that. Come on, what's up?"

Jeremy wanted to tell him the whole story or at least most of it.

"Well you know Linda and how she's been ignoring us for so long? I think she's stopped. We had a little talk yesterday and I spent some time with her last night, in her room."

"Bull!"

"Truth."

"I know it's bull because she was with me after you left. She came to our room to see me!"

For a moment they watched each other, waiting for a smile to show the lie. There was none. Jeremy turned away and looked at the people walking through the plaza, but his eyes were glazed. His attention was turned inward to his own thoughts. Jason examined his taco with an interest he didn't really feel. It was Jeremy's words he was digesting. The night before had been an active one for Jeremy and Jason, and especially for Linda.

JEREMY

Paracho is your typical Ain't Got Shit Mexican town. For most of the people, running water is a fast kid with a bucket. A few rich Mexicans and some rich Americans own about everything that's for sale. Some of the American families are Mormon. Jason and I lived with one of them, the Tyrebyters--Stanley and Gladys. They bought a whole block of the town and connected all the buildings together. They live inside with their 8 children and Linda, their cook and housekeeper. They call it their Fortress of Faith. Really. And they don't smile when they say it.

I remember Stanley telling us, "Boys, when you finish this mission and you go back to get a wife, I want you to think about my family and think about our Fortress, and then I want you to come back here and live. You can live like God intended you to. I'm not talking down Salt Lake, now, but you've got admit that it's getting to be just like other cities--full of dope and foreigners. Come to Paracho and live like kings."

Stan wanted to be a king, that's for sure, and I believe he was looking for wife number two. The Fortress was certainly big enough for it. Even though they had nine children, Jason and I shared a room larger than most houses in town. We were right across the courtyard from a

much smaller room that belonged to Linda, their Mexican housekeeper.

If I forget everything else about Paracho, I'll remember her.

We spent almost two years there. I got to like it after awhile. The program was for us to knock on doors and let all the morally deprived Mexican folks know the secrets of life a la Joseph Smith. I bought that story back in Salt Lake--everybody I knew bought it--but it didn't travel very well. By the time we left, I was about ready to join the Catholic Church.

You can knock on a lot of doors in two years, and we did. The funny thing was that our conversion score was about 0, or -1 if you count me. We got a few people to go to church, but when they found out how dull it was--they were right back with Father Obligado. Catholics had much better parties, and that confession thing is more than a little appealing.

Jason and I grew up in Salt Lake. His folks were 100% prime grade-A Mormon--my family a little less so. We did the same things with the same people at the same church. We were taught the same values by the same old men. What's strange is we turned out so different. It's like we both went into a cocoon, he came out a butterfly

and I became something totally off the wall, a microwave oven or a pair of panties or...I don't know.

We used to do everything together. People that didn't know us just assumed that we were brothers. We even got laid for the first time together, or almost together. Not at the same time or in the same room or anything, but probably just a few minutes apart and by the same girl. The funny thing is that we didn't know it. I mean, we knew we'd got laid, of course, not even Mormons are that naive, but until the next day, we didn't put all the pieces together.

Linda didn't talk much--to me at least. At first I tried to get her interested in the Church, but it seemed to annoy her even more than most people, so I quit. Then I just tried a little small talk, but she didn't like that any better.

"Hi Linda. I like your new hairdo. The white streaks look good."

"Hello," was about all I could get out of her and then she tried to concentrate harder on making the bed or cooking.

"There's a movie playing tonight that looks like fun, 'Blanca Nieve y los Siete Enenos,' Jason and I could really use an interpreter." She

stopped and stared hard at me--here face didn't soften at all--then shook her head no.

She always seemed to be uptight in the Fortress. Not that she acted crazy or yelled at people or anything. She'd never get away with it even if she wanted to. But you could see the muscles in her jaw bunch up like she was clenching her teeth hard and the chords on her neck stood out like she was screaming, only there was no sound.

When I saw Linda with her friends, she seemed completely different, so alive and always the center of attention. She talked loud and laughed louder. But in the Fortress she seemed smaller in every way.

The old women in Paracho looked like Mother Teresa and the young ones tried to look like Madonna, but Linda came a little closer than the others. She looked alright. Not what you'd call beautiful, but alright. She was short and thin. Her skin was kind of light, probably more Spanish in her than Indian. But she was sexy. She had these full lips, I'll never forget those lips. Nice ass too. As far as I know, she was alone, no husband, no boyfriend, no family. I heard that her parents had gone to the U.S. to find work and nobody'd heard from them since.

I eventually just wrote her off as unapproachable and she became like an appliance to me, kind of faded into the background until the day before I left. Suddenly we got together. Girls seem attracted to me so I wasn't too surprised, but Linda was the first I slept with. In Salt Lake the Church encourages us to socialize, but they play the game real careful. Tough place to get a piece when you're a good Mormon boy.

JASON

Jeremy and I came to Paracho full of energy and enthusiasm, determined to spread the gospel in a place that had great need. I remember Elder Smith's words just before we left Salt Lake.

"Jason Evans and Jeremy Bradford--I'm proud to see you both here today. You're about to take an important step on the path to manhood and to serving Jesus Christ. You leave us, now, as boys with a boy's perception of the world. You will return as young men with your eyes open and ready to take on the responsibilities of husband and father. On behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, we thank you for your dedication in taking on this sacred duty."

By the end of our two years we'd brought light to many who had lived without the true word of Jesus Christ and who worshipped him through false ritual, but it wasn't easy. The people here are impoverished and largely ignorant. Though they have so little, they cling tightly to the Catholic Church. Stan says the Pope likes it that way because "poor, dumb peasants are easier to control." I guess this is part of the education process that Elder Smith was talking about.

I see that my time in Paracho was a time of testing and a time of growth. The greatest test was Linda. She had obviously been attracted to me for a long time. When it finally came time for us to leave she came to me. Linda was a woman without shame and without respect for the sanctity of her body. She tried her best to seduce me, but the Lord came to my rescue at the last moment.

Jeremy thinks I share his shame, and I let him believe it. I hope that he will find comfort in having a companion. It's difficult for me because deception is not in my nature.

LINDA

Do you know how it feels to be without power, to be the last person considered or not considered at all? I do. In Paracho, Mexicans are nothing. In Mexico, women are nothing. To be a woman here is to be doubly cursed. But I do not sit in a dirty shack with children on my hip and complain only to a wooden cross, I curse back. Men are shit. Americans are shit. American men are doubly shit and the Mormon boys are doubly shit and they dress funny.

Those two were not much younger than me in years, but when it came to life, they were babies. At first I tried to talk, like I talk to other men. But always they would come back to the same thing. "Come to church with us. Let us pray together. We will show you the truth about Jesus Christ." Soon, I quit talking to them. Then I quit smiling at them. Then I paid them no attention at all. Just fed them, cleaned after them and washed their clothes.

But Jeremy and Jason had one thing that I could take and I could make them remember Linda forever.

My cunt burned with disease. But before I took the pills, I wanted to make the burning a present. Something extra to remember Linda--the quiet little servant. I was not worried that they would refuse. At 19, the

balls are full and the head not so much. I washed their underwear. I knew they had dreams--sometimes of me I think. Jason tried to wash his or even throw them away. Jeremy was not so particular.

I chose my time carefully and made a beautiful plan. Then I bet my friends that I could do it and many of them didn't think I could.

"Jeremy, why do you never speak to me? You don't even look at me when we are in the house together or when we pass in the plaza. Are you afraid of me or do you think I am too ugly? To you I'm not even here and it makes me sad to think this." I tried to make a tear, but it would not come. Then I leaned close so that my breast touched his arm. I put my hand over his and stroked the middle finger.

"Please, let's be friends before you have to leave."

It's a wonderful thing to see a man or even a boy begin to shake and melt when very much he wants to be strong. Jeremy's voice creaked like a rusty door.

"I'd like that...to be your friend I mean. A friend is something we all need and I'm sure that you would be a real good one and..."

I touched his lips with my finger to quiet the babbling, then put the finger to my lips and flicked it with the tip of my tongue. He just stared at me with his mouth open. His face and neck and ears were red.

I said, "I have a lot of work to do today and tonight, but later...you come to my room at 2:00AM...but quietly...and we will talk about this new friendship."

I walked away and didn't wait for an answer because I didn't need one. I walked--and he watched because I walked very well.

"Jason, I am sorry that I have treated you so badly in the time you've spent here. But I have thought much about the things you've said and I have prayed to God to show me which way is best. I believe the answer to my prayer is you. I want you to help me."

"Please let me come to you tonight. We can be together," I looked at the floor and tried to be shy, "and you can show me all the things I need to know about your church."

"Great. Let's get together after dinner. How about the plaza..."

"No. It must be later and I want us to be alone. I'll come to your room." Jason was confused, a natural way for a man to be, I believe.

"We won't be very alone with Jeremy there."

"Jeremy is nothing. You are the one. Don't worry about Jeremy, I will take care of him."

Jeremy kissed me and squeezed me and tried to love me like he sees in the movies, but I was not there to make love. His body was hot, but his hands were cool and wet. I told him to be quick so we wouldn't be caught. He took off his pants. There was no underwear and his thing caught on his zipper. Inside, I screamed laughter.

I sat down on him and moved for a few seconds. Then I stopped and stood up and put on my robe. I told Jeremy to wait for me while I went to the bathroom. Moonlight came in through my window and his stiff little thing was shiny. My friends were outside watching--for the bet and for fun.

I walked to Jason's room and knocked softly. He opened it and he was dressed in his white shirt and yellow tie. Maybe he thought I really wanted to pray. I opened my robe. Jason stepped back and tried to look at my face.

"Is this how you pray?"

"Jason, I said you were the answer to my prayers. I think it is your duty to do this with me. It will make us both feel much better. Who knows, maybe it will make me a Mormon."

I finally got his pants off but must have rubbed too much. I got close to him and he exploded on my legs and little hairs. I laughed at him and he got too soft to put inside, and when I tried to grab it he backed away. He was afraid, I think.

"Why Jason, what a cruel thing to do. You could not wait for me? Am I so macha that your little prick spits just to see my cunt? Poor little Jason. Maybe you are not ready yet for a woman. Maybe your hand should still be your lover. But you must learn to do better if you want to make little Mormons. Goodnight, chica."

Jeremy had moved in only one place. He was soft when I opened the door but stiff by the time I reached the bed. His hands reached up for me when I sat on him. One minute later he was finished.

"Jeremy, you wear a woman out with your stamina. I am exhausted." I laughed. "If all men were like you, I would need 30--one after another--to have any pleasure. Leave me and go find a girl who doesn't know what pleasure is. She won't be as disappointed. And if

you take my advice you'll find a very small girl." The sad look on Jeremy's face reminded me of the old paintings of the saints at the mission when they were tortured by devils or Indians. I believe that Jeremy and Jason will remember me for many years.

I am almost sorry now that they are leaving. It's hard to find fun like this in a small village, and it makes me feel so good inside. But, after they are gone, maybe the Mormons will send two more. I hope so.

Linda walked slowly toward the table where Jason and Jeremy sat. Her hands were in the back-pockets of her tight jeans. She accentuated the sway in her hips. Linda stalked them like a panther.

"Good morning, Jeremy! Good morning, Jason! You both look so sad today. What is the matter? Maybe you had trouble sleeping? Or maybe you are sad to be leaving Paracho now that you've found a girlfriend?" She touched Jason on the neck and held Jeremy's hand.

Neither of the boys wanted Linda to explore the details of the previous night, but they didn't know how to stop her.

Jason said, "Sure, we're sorry to have to go, but we're anxious to get back home too, you know how it is when..."

Jeremy cut him off. "Ya, we've got to catch a bus to Guadalajara pretty soon, Linda, so I guess we'd better get back to the Fortress and make sure everything's packed and..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry you don't have time for me today. But I'm certain it wouldn't take very long." She laughed. "Before you go, I got you a little present from the farmacia." She put a small bottle of white pills on the table. "Take these when you piss and it feels like acid. Goodbye."

She walked away and, in spite of themselves, the boys watched. She walked past the dead dog on its back like an overturned coffee table. Some children were poking its bloated stomach with knives to make the gas escape. Linda stuck her tongue out at the pig's head on the weathered plywood table at the meat stand. She waved at the campesinos drinking, waiting for the bus. They shouted a greeting and waved back. Jeremy put the bottle of sugar pills in his pocket and the two missionaries rode their bicycles across the plaza.

PLATTE RIVER

My parents were tired of living in a two-wheel house trailer and moving from one oil field to another. They settled in Casper, Wyoming, where they could stay and let the oil come to them. Casper was the biggest city in Wyoming, almost 50,000 people. It was an oil-boom town that boasted more millionaires per capita than any city in the country. The millionaires lived in mansions on the south side of town, as far from the refineries as they could get. We lived in North-Casper.

I grew up a block away from the Platte River in a small, pre-fabricated, government-issue house that my father loaded on a truck and moved from where it had been to where it still is today. My neighborhood was once part of a farm, but when the refineries came, the farmer decided to separate the farm into lots and sell the lots to the new people that were moving in. My father unloaded our house onto a lot that had an empty chicken-coop and big cottonwood trees and a good view of the oil refineries, upriver.

Almost everyone worked for the oil company. My grandmother taught third grade in the company school at Midwest. My father welded the pipeline that brought the crude oil from the Powder River wells to Casper and built the truck trailers that carried pipe, cables and diamond-tipped bits back to them. My mother typed their correspondence and filed the records of their enormous profits. My uncle moved 42-gallon barrels of oil from one side of a large Standard Oil warehouse to the other. My cousin was a roughneck in the Salt Creek fields. He hugged sections of oil-covered pipe to keep it straight as it slid into the earth and disconnected them when they came out. If the pressure blew the cap off a well, he worked in the hot, black rain until it was repaired.

The only person I knew who didn't work for the oil company was Mr. Moe. As far as I could tell, his job was to keep me company and show me fascinating things.

Mr. Moe had known me for several years before my first memories of him. He wore bib overalls and looked like the kindly old farmer in my Dick and Jane reader at school, although he was older and had a larger vocabulary. In fact, he talked funny. For him, things didn't get closer, they got "furrder togedder." His thinks were "tinks." And any

time the conversation faded, he filled the dead space with "Ya, Ya, U betcha, U betcha." My mother told me that he used to own all the property that our houses were on. Mr. Moe never mentioned it.

He was a water witch. At first my father laughed at the idea, but after sinking two bad wells, he quit laughing. Mr. Moe brought out his dowsing rod, two pieces of wire twisted together at one end to form a "v" shape. He held one leg of the "v" in each hand while he walked around the yard. He whistled as he walked. Once, the end of the rod shot downward like it was pulled by a rope. Mr. Moe stood there for a moment, shook his head and kept walking. The second time the rod bent, he smiled and marked a cross in the dirt. "This is the place," he said. My father drilled the well and we had water, but we only used it for the lawn and plants. It was river water.

Our chicken-coop was empty because we didn't have any chickens, and we didn't want any. But we did want worms for weekend fishing trips. Behind the coop, my father made worm beds. The good soil and the chicken manure was a perfect combination for the small, red wiggly variety and also for the larger nightcrawlers.

One night I was outside with a flashlight, catching nightcrawlers, an art that requires some practice. I was bent over close to the ground, shining the light on the worm bed with one hand and grabbing at nightcrawlers with the other. The worms were attracted by the light and came up to the surface for a moment, before slithering back underground. When I was quick and lucky, I got one, but it was a struggle. Mr. Moe watched me from his back door. He came out with a long extension cord, an old lamp-cord with bare wires on one end and an electrical plug on the other, and two metal stakes. Without saying a word, he pushed the stakes into the ground and attached a bare wire from the lamp-cord to each one.

"Watch this," he said, and plugged the wires into the extension cord. The nightcrawlers came dancing up out of the soil like snakes to a fakir's flute.

I told him I was going fishing in the river the next day.

"Ya? Well you won't need a lot of worms for that, I can tell you. All the fish are dead. Too much oil in the river, U betcha."

He was right, I never did catch anything, but it was fun to try.

Once, I saw a fish float downriver. It was a sucker and its white belly

was facing up. A hawk circled it for a few moments then glided down and plucked it out of the river with its sharp talons. The hawk held it briefly then dropped it back in the water.

Mr. Moe used to take me for long walks along the river and told me about the things he used to do there as a boy. We always went downriver, away from the refineries. He taught me the names of the trees and plants, how to tell a cottonwood from a poplar, the difference between maples and oaks. I learned about sagebrush, buffalo grass, and chokecherries. He warned me about poison ivy, cactus, and jimson weed.

Once, he took me to a cove that was hidden from the road. The mouth of the cove was bridged by a beaver lodge. He said there used to be a lot of beaver in the Platte, but that was the last family and the last lodge.

Sometimes we walked down to the city dump. It was on both sides of the river, and the two halves were connected by a wooden bridge. We threw rocks at the big rats who scurried among the trash heaps and watched the ravens that swooped down on them and grabbed them with their beaks.

Past the dump was a spot where the covered wagons crossed the Platte River on the way to Oregon and California. Three hundred thousand wagons crossed there between 1850 and 1880. We used to look for old, rusty nails and pieces of metal or glass and try to imagine what the pioneers had used them for.

Mr. Moe had a pet duck. In the Fall, ducks and geese flew over the Platte River on their way South. Sometimes they stopped to rest and float downriver. The oil killed most of that Fall's ducks, but Mr. Moe rescued one. It was laying on its side where the current had pushed it up against the riverbank. Its feathers were plastered to its frame and it was drowning. Mr. Moe pulled it out of the water, grabbed it by the feet and shook it several times. Drops of brown liquid dripped from its beak. He took it home and washed it in the bathtub with shampoo and nursed it back to health. The duck liked it there, so it stayed.

The duck was a female mallard. He called her "mydamn duck." Her feathers were light brown, white, and black, and her wings had a shiny blue band around them. She spent much of her time waddling up and down the rows of Mr. Moe's vegetable garden eating bugs or floating in a galvanized steel tank he filled up with water.

In the Spring we were walking by the river, Mr. Moe, the duck and I, when we heard a sound like a castrati bullfrog coming from the bushes. It was a male sage-hen, in love. The sage-hen strutted proudly back and forth in front of us with its neck feathers standing straight out like a spiked collar and its chest stuck out like a bantam rooster. It screeched and croaked a sage-hen love song for the duck, but she was not impressed.

"Watch this," Mr. Moe said.

He walked toward the sage-hen. Instead of running or flying away, it stood completely still like it was frozen.

"This fool prairie chicken thinks that I can't see him if he doesn't move. He won't fluff a feather until I touch him."

Mr. Moe placed his hand gently on the bird's back and it hopped away indignantly.

"Catching a sage-hen is just about as easy as going down to the store to buy a chicken," he said. "Course they taste like hell."

The river was my playground, and my favorite places were the two that I'd been warned to stay away from: the quicksand and the abandoned cars. The quicksand formed in small pools on a sand bar near the river

bank. It was easy to spot the pools because there was a thin layer of water on top of the quicksand and they smelled worse than the river. I liked to wade over there and throw large rocks into the quicksand and poke the rocks with a stick to make them sink faster. They went under the surface with a delightful sucking sound, and sometimes the quicksand would belch a black bubble up to the surface after the rock sank.

There were three old cars by the side of the river. Two were standing upright with their noses stuck in the mud and the third was balanced horizontally on top, bridging the rear bumpers of the others. It looked like a capital "T" but with two legs. The top car was the best fort, airplane, or spaceship a child could ask for. Kneeling on the front seat, I looked out through the empty frame where the windshield had been and saw nothing but the river, its mysterious far shore, and the blue sky. It gave the illusion of being suspended in space. Best of all, the steering wheel still worked.

One day the river caught on fire. I was playing in the old car, and I was on my way to Mars when it happened. One of the big storage tanks exploded. I saw three of the towers crumple and fall like pieces of an Erector Set. It shook the car and made it teeter on its hazardous

perch. My ears were ringing. I saw the leaves and branches on the Poplar trees move like a wind had just passed through.

The hot gasoline in the tanks poured out through a jagged hole the size of a semi-truck. It ignited as it touched the air and spread, burning, onto the river and back into the tank. Then there was a second explosion and the river was on fire from bank to bank.

I tried to get out of the car, but it moved and threatened to fall each time I shifted my weight. The flames drifted steadily toward me, floating on the surface of the river. I was paralyzed with fear.

Finally, I couldn't wait any longer and climbed carefully through the windshield frame. Black smoke obscured the refineries, and I felt the heat. I saw bushes and trees burst into flame on the shore. I was still afraid to climb down from the car, more fearful of the danger beneath my feet than the one coming down the river. But the decision was made for me. I was standing on the hood of the car when it toppled down into the water. I jumped toward the river bank and splashed through the shallow water and mud. The sound of sirens competed with the ringing in my ears. I pulled myself up with the willow bushes and sagebrush that grew over the water's edge. Someone grabbed my hand as I neared the top of

the river bank and pulled me roughly up onto the road and carried me away from the fire. I saw a line of firetrucks parked along the river road. They showered water on the trees and underbrush and shot streams of white foam at the fire, but it didn't help. The fire moved on past the beaver lodge, past the city dump where the rats grew so large and it burned piles of discarded tires that smoldered for days after. It floated down to the place where thousands of wagons had crossed the Platte River, and there it died.

I was frightened by the fire but also amazed. I'd never seen anything so terrible and wonderful. When Mr. Moe walked me home, I could see tears streaming down his face and he didn't say a word. Then I cried too.

After the fire, most things went back to normal but some changed. Everybody still worked for the oil company, the refineries still operated day and night, the millionaires collected their insurance money for the explosion, but the banks of the river were black and naked. Trees that were old in 1850 and bore the marks of the pioneer's ropes at the river crossing were burned and swept away. The beaver lodge was gone; the sage-hens were gone. Mydamn duck got scared and flew away.

After the fire, Mr. Moe drifted slowly out of my life. We still talked sometimes, but there were no more long walks, no more fascinating things for him to show and for me to discover. I gradually found other playgrounds, other friends, and new mysteries.

The river meant much more to Mr. Moe than it did to me as a child. It was the last piece left of the world that had been his, the last spot that hadn't been paved or sub-divided or covered with tanks and towers, the only place that still reminded him of his own childhood. The fire burned his spirit as thoroughly as it did the old oak trees on the river bank. I believe that I got a little too old for him, and he got a little too old for me.

MEDICINE WHEEL

Joseph Yellowtail poured seven cupfuls of water on the heated stones. Drops of liquid separated into thousands of tiny balls that danced crazily on the surface of the rocks before turning into vapor. From the shallow pit in the center of the small sweat-lodge, steam rose quickly and surrounded him and his friend, A.B. Edwards, until they could no longer see each other, though only inches apart. Despite the stifling atmosphere, Joseph sat cross-legged and sang his four songs. His voice enveloped them like the mist and, for a moment, Edwards drifted into the sound and lost himself there. He glimpsed the power of the ceremony, but the moment passed quickly.

The heat was relaxing, and the steam lubricated Edwards' muscles, strained and stiffened from two weeks with a backpack.

"Joe, this feels wonderful. I believe that even my aches have aches."

"You old white-men should be careful what you do. Stay at home and watch TV or violate someone's civil rights. It's your heritage, A.B.. Leave the rough stuff to rugged Native Americans like myself."

"I'd say you're about twenty-five pounds on the fat side of rugged. I don't remember your gut being quite so prominent last time."

"Yes, but it's been too many years, my friend, too many years."

Yellowtail had constructed the sweat-lodge in honor of Edwards' visit and locating the Medicine Wheel. Sweating is a ceremony used for many things, celebrating a successful journey or preparing for the next one. He made it the old way from willow branches, bent them over to form a small dome and covered the whole thing with thick wool blankets to keep in the heat and the steam.

They talked mostly about old times, the only ones they'd had together and about Edwards' wife, Joseph's cousin. Joseph said life on the reservation was better, now, in some ways. They'd learned how to irrigate and incorporate and how to litigate when it became necessary. But he felt they'd lost much in the process.

"When I was younger, my mother told me stories about a great medicine man called Many Crow. He was the best singer in her clan and

important in the Tobacco Society. Last year I found out that he was still alive and went to see him. He lives in a double-wide trailer just south of Dubois with a new 4 wheel drive GMC pickup parked in front and a satellite dish out in back. When I got there, I caught him in the middle of dinner. He was eating some kind of microwave thing and he was watching the Brady Bunch. I decided we didn't have much to discuss after all."

"I'm afraid he sounds a lot like me, Joe."

"Yes, but you don't know any better, probably can't help it. It's in your genes. That's not the case with Many Crow. If we're going to live like that, we might as well sell the reservation and move to town."

They talked about the Medicine Wheel Edwards had found on Flattop Mountain in the Wind River Range. Edwards was pleased to see how interested Joseph was and offered to take him there the following Spring before the excavation.

"I've got another idea, A.B., how about now? If we head up there now we'll probably beat the first snow. You got one more climb left in those skinny old bones? I hear it's a pretty easy trail."

But Edwards had obligations. Joseph was disappointed. He was quiet for too long. When the steam would allow Edwards looked at Joseph's eyes. They were focussed on a place outside of the sweat-lodge.

They completed the ritual. The next pouring was ten cups and the last, as many as they could stand. Edwards ran out long before Joseph did and plunged into the icy Little Big Horn River in a valiant attempt to stop his heart. When Yellowtail finally emerged, he was crimson from the heat and steaming in the cold air. He walked slowly to the river and stoically dived in. The shock seemed to restore his good mood and for a few minutes they played like children, something too long missing from both of their lives.

They met in college. Joseph studied range management, Edwards was doing a thesis on archaeoastronomy, partly because it sounded impressive and partly because it allowed him to visit remote, mysterious places. They often went to a Medicine Wheel in the Bighorns Mountains.

It was a large circle of stones, 50 yards in diameter. All of the stones in the circle were roughly the size of a basketball. At the center

was a smaller ring. The inner and outer rings were connected by straight lines of rocks like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Joseph always insisted that they walk up the mountain from the visitor's center. To him, driving a car to an ancient ceremonial place, what he considered a place of power, was unthinkable. Many of his ancestors had gone there for a vision quest. Now, it was fenced off and it closed on national holidays.

Edwards took his measurements of the stones and observed how they lined up to the sunrise on each solstice and equinox. The unknown Indians who originally built the wheel had used it to mark the passing of the seasons. Later tribes used it for the vision quest.

Joseph always felt incomplete because he'd traded the time for his quest for a Government Issue haircut, an M-16, and a guided tour of Southeast Asia. After the war there was the GI Bill education, the wife, the kids, the place on the tribal council.

Edwards knew this and came to Joseph first after he found the Wheel on Flattop Mountain. He wanted Joseph to have a chance before the brigade of archaeologists and graduate students got there to dissect it and catalogue its pieces.

If you stand on the dusty alkali flats outside Rock Springs, Wyoming and look north to the horizon, you'll see a jagged, dark-blue line separating the white plains from the sky. That's the Wind River Mountains. They divide "the middle of nowhere" on the West from "never heard of it" on the East. Water that flows down the West slope feeds the Green River which becomes the Colorado which finds its way to Southern California farms. Water from the East slope passes through the Wind River Indian Reservation, home of the Shoshone, and continues on to the Missouri, the Mississippi, and the Gulf of Mexico. The rest stays on top of the 13,000 foot peaks to feed the glaciers.

October in the Wind River Mountains is a quiet time. It's a good time to travel the mountain trails for those lucky enough to avoid early storms. The tourists and mosquitoes are dormant until spring. The frantic growth of summer is finished and the plants and animals prepare for another Rocky Mountain winter. They seem to shrink slightly into themselves, looking for that hard, iron place inside that gets them through the next six months.

Like the other residents of the Rocky Mountains, Cody Peters prepared carefully for winter. He put snowtires on his truck and made sure it had enough anti-freeze. Hanging in a meat locker in Big Piney he had a bull Elk, a deer, and two antelope. Most importantly, though, autumn was time to poach a grizzly. It wasn't for him; it was for the rich, lucky hunter who won that year's bid of \$15,000 plus expenses. He had a long waiting list of people. In fact, his list had more hunters on it than the amount of grizzlies left in the mountains. Cody had a good count of how many bears were left.

Peters was the only guide that promised a bear and always delivered. And every time he delivered, the population of bears got a little smaller, the grizzly became a little harder to find, and the price went up. It was a businessman's dream. But he was cautious, too. He took only one bear a year.

He had an important edge over other guides. Park Service biologists put radio collars on all the grizzlies they could find. They studied the bear's natural habitat, where they found food, and where they hibernated. Cody was a seasonal worker for the Park Service. Autumn was the end of his season. Each fall, he checked their large electronic

map of Northwest Wyoming. It showed mountain ranges, streams, rivers, and scattered towns. But he had a key to a special panel that covered a radio receiver. When the receiver was turned on, over 100 small yellow lights lit up on the map. Each light was a grizzly. Cody simply took his pick and called his client. The rest was easy.

His destination was Flattop Mountain at the headwaters of the Green River, inside the Bridger Wilderness Area, deep in the Wind River mountains. He chose this spot for several reasons: there was a good trail to the top, it was isolated, and he had a good horse who could get back from there alone.

Cody rode first trailing two other horses. One was a tall, proud stallion. The muscles rippled beneath his shiny coat as he walked, an empty pack saddle sat on his back. The second horse was a sad-looking animal, plodding listlessly along with his head bowed. The sparse flesh hung loosely on tired bones. It's sway-back was unburdened. It was the cheapest horse Cody could find that was capable of making one more trip.

The hunter was next. He was an advertising man from New Jersey who was fascinated with the American West. He wanted to own some of

it. The hunter rode poorly. His legs had become tired of gripping the horse. He rocked in the saddle with each step the horse took. His clothes were new and expensive, Gore-Tex and rip-stop nylon, and all in military camouflage. His watch told the time in any part of the world with the push of a button, another button activated the altimeter, still another displayed the phone numbers of his stock broker or his mistress.

His mind carried a picture of a grizzly, ten feet tall, raised up on its hind legs about to attack Cody Peters. The next picture was of him coming to Peter's rescue with his professionally sharpened, L.L. Bean, limited edition, 10" Bowie Knife and cutting the animal's heart out despite serious, but not disfiguring injury to himself. Peters would be so grateful that he would refund the \$15,000 and promise to guide him free forever after that.

Cody Peters looked like the Marlboro man. He was tall and had a deeply tanned, handsome face. His blond hair and blond mustache were touched with gray. The mustache came around the corners of his mouth and extended to his jawline. The tips close to his mouth were stained brown from chewing tobacco.

His clothes and equipment looked used. He wore longjohns and denim, wool and sheepskin. On his legs were leather chaps. They were badly frayed on the bottom edges and worn through completely over the thighs. He never wore a watch on the trail. There was nothing worth knowing that a watch could tell you.

Cody had no illusions about hunting the grizzly. As far as he was concerned, the hunt was nearly over. They simply go to the right place, set the trap, and wait for the bear to arrive. Peters' only concern was that the hunter believed his own shot made the kill. Sometimes they did make a good hit, but Cody didn't get his reputation by taking chances. Besides, his way kept the time spent tracking a wounded bear down to a minimum.

Joseph Yellowtail surprised Cody and his client when he walked into their camp at the base of Flattop Mountain. Cody was sitting on fallen log cleaning an enormous .50 caliber rifle. It made a large hole in the hide so he used it only if he had to, if the bear go too close. The hunter was stropping his knife and admiring the gleam of the metal as he did. For the hundredth time, he read the authentic reproduction of James

Bowie's signature etched into the blade, and below it, in elegant script, his own.

Yellowtail walked quietly. He carried only a small knapsack containing a blanket and some dried food. The horses were tethered in an improvised corral and they sensed him first. Their noise alerted Peters, the client looked up at the sound of voices.

"Howdy. You fellas headed up the mountain?"

"We might be," Peters said, "haven't decided yet for sure. I hear the trail's bad up there, though, washed out down low and snowed under at the top. I hope you're not planning on trying it."

"You're probably right. In fact, I know you are. A friend of mine just came down from there. Says he barely made it back. But I'm going to try it anyway. I'd be surprised if you could get those horses up there. I hear there's a rockslide about the size of Connecticut when you get half-way.....You folks expecting a war? Shit, that's a mighty big gun. You'll be having a war with the rangers if they see that cannon. This is a Wilderness Area you know."

"I know all about that, but I'll be damned if I'll ride through bear country without a gun. I don't care what the god damn law says."

"It's your life, but it's pretty rare to see a bear around here anymore, or anywhere for that matter."

"Well, I heard there's a grizzly on that mountain. You'd be a fool to go up there. Hell, this time of the year those bears eat anything they can find. He'll be after whatever you got in your pack there and if you happen to be attached to it...just say goodbye. I tell you what. If you want, I'll rent you one of these horses. You can ride all the way to Elkhart Park in the time it'd take you to walk up the mountain. Be warmer too. Hell, I'll even let you use one for free, just leave it in the corral at the trailhead when you get back. What about it?"

"That's real generous, but the only reason I'm here is to get to the top of that mountain, and that's where I'm headed now. If I hurry, I'll be there before dark. So you boys take it easy, now."

"Hold on there, Sitting Bull. I fuckin' tried to be nice about this, but you still don't seem to fuckin' get it. Now, my friend and I want that damn mountain to ourselves. We came out here to get away from people...and that's you. If you don't want to find out what this fuckin' gun can do, head back down the trail, get in your fuckin' car and drive on back to the fuckin' reservation and consider yourself lucky that I

didn't stick that rifle up your big red ass and blow your balls to Nebraska."

Joseph judged the look in Peters' eyes. "If that's the way it is then I'll just find another mountain. It's a big place." He walked away from the camp until he was out of their sight and continued up the trail to Flattop Mountain.

Joseph found the Medicine Wheel. It was so large that the pattern of the rocks was difficult to see. All the stones were overgrown with grass. Frost heaves had pushed some out of alignment, but Joseph could still detect the wagon wheel form. Each spoke of the wheel was a line of stones 100 feet long. They ended at a central hub, the place of the ceremonial.

As he walked closer, Yellowtail stretched his senses to feel whatever there was to feel at this holy spot. He stopped at the center of the hub and looked around. In back of him, the way he had come, was heavy forest, but the rest of the plateau was completely open. He saw as far as his eyes could reach. Yellowtail wanted to see what the old ones had seen. He faced the eastern horizon and sat down to begin his 4 day fast, his vision quest.

The bear hibernated every year in a cave on Flattop mountain. Each fall he made his way there, up the Green River Valley where the fish were plentiful. He had only two thoughts at this time of the year: eat enough food to last the winter and sleep. His hunger was overpowering and insatiable.

This year there was a man-scent as reached the mountain. But as he got closer there was something else too, the smell of blood. He tracked both to the top of the mountain. The man-scent was weaker, the blood stronger.

He found the old horse laying on its side. Its throat was cut and a large pool of blood had spread out underneath. The hide was peeled back from the neck to the flanks. The red flesh was exposed. The bear stood up on its hind legs and smelled again. There was something else there with the blood and the horse, something that he didn't know. His hunger and curiosity overcame his caution.

The grizzly dropped down to all fours and lumbered toward the horse, growling a warning to any man or beast in the area. He buried his teeth in the carcass and ripped large pieces of meat with a violent

shake of his head. When he'd eaten all he could, the bear walked away to sleep until he could eat again.

He woke to another man-scent but slightly different. This one was fresh and close. There was a terrible pain in his stomach and bowels. The pain made him furious. He thought the man was responsible for the pain and was a competitor for the meat. He tracked the new scent to kill.

The bear soon found his prey, a lone man sitting inside a circle of stones and making soft sounds. The grizzly stayed out of sight in the trees and underbrush until he was at the closest point to the man. The bear's pains had increased until his simple thoughts were confused and entirely replace by a fury so strong it was red to his eyes. Even walking was difficult, but his anger supplanted the pain, and he charged the man.

Cody and the client rode slowly, carefully up the trail to Flattop Mountain. Cody knew the bear would be near and wanted no surprises or mistakes. They stopped at the horse carcass, and he noted with satisfaction the gaping holes where the flesh had been torn away. They began to track the bear. They went across the plateau that gave the

mountain its name to a large meadow. The bear had turned left into the underbrush. Cody didn't follow. Instead, he stepped up to the top of a boulder and looked out over the meadow. What he saw made him angry, but before he could act, the bear came charging into the meadow toward Joseph Yellowtail.

"Get up here! It's time to kill a bear! Looks like the grizzly's found himself a playmate."

Yellowtail turned quickly when he heard the rustling in the willows behind him. He expected Cody Peters. There was no time to get to his feet, because the bear was almost on him, but for a terrible, magical instant Joseph Yellowtail saw. It was as though time had stopped and a veil was lifted and he could see with absolute clarity. He saw the animal stand up to its full eight feet and take its fighting stance. He saw the beautiful colors in the bear's fur, golden tipped with silver, turning to gray and white over the belly. He saw the translucent, crescent-shaped claws with shades of milk-white like pearls and the cracked, black pads on the bottoms of the front paws. He could smell the animal, the musty odor of the fur, the heavy sweet smell of urine and feces and a fetid,

chemical smell that came from its mouth. Yellowtail knew the bear was sick.

He viewed the scene from a different perspective, as if he watched two actors in a familiar play. He knew the bear's pain and fury as certainly as he knew his own fright. None of it seemed quite real until the first stroke of the claws.

The instant ended as clarity turned to pain. The bear grasped Joseph's head between its jaws and shook him like a dog playing with a toy. Yellowtail could feel bones snapping in his neck. He thought he heard gun shots. Then he was sure because pieces of flesh and fur shot past his eyes. Then there was a burning in his lower back and that was all.

Cody put his fingers to Yellowtail's neck and felt a strong pulse.

"This poor son-of-a-bitch is deader than shit. God damn it! I told him to stay away from here. Told him about the bear. You heard me didn't you?"

"Oh yeah. No doubt about it. Heard every word. But...what do we do with him now?"

"We don't do anything. You made your kill--got yourself a beauty here too. But as far as you're concerned this hunt never happened. You don't know me and you don't know anything about any Indian. I'll take care of everything from here on. Let's get what you want off this bear and take off. People can hear those guns for miles."

"Fine. Fine. But I want to skin the grizzly myself. Want to get my money's worth from this knife."

"You go right ahead on then. It's your 15 grand, but if you screw up the hide, remember that's yours too. Just make it fast."

Peters got out a meat cutter's saw and removed all four paws and the bear's head. The heart still beat feebly and blood pumped from the neck. The rest of the animal was paralyzed from coyote poison, illegal but available. They put the hide, head, paws and guns in plastic bags and lashed them to the strong, young horse. Peters hit its flanks with his rope and the horse galloped down the trail. It wouldn't stop for anyone until it got home, a final bit of insurance for a careful poacher. Cody and his client split up. The advertising man took the long way back. Cody was in a hurry.

Cody reasoned that there was nothing that could connect him with the dying Indian or the bear. The only witness had been the client who was not likely to talk. The Indian probably wouldn't be found until Spring. By then the body would be decomposed and the coyotes would be working on the bones. He felt sure that this would be an unsolved case in the Park Service files and laughed to himself that he might even find a way to misplace this particular file. Cody didn't realize that there was knife on the ground by the bear. It was a large, Bowie knife, signed by James himself, an L.L. Bean limited edition #121.

THE MOTORCYCLE, THE MORMONS, AND THE MAN WITH THE CAN

A lot of things ain't quite what they seem. A good example is riding a motorcycle, looks easy but it can be real tricky . I bought this used Harley a couple of weeks ago and was learning how to ride it. I guess I had what you'd call a culturally depraved childhood because I not only couldn't ride a motorcycle, I didn't have a bicycle until I quit high school and got that paper route.

Well I decided that a long trip would be a good way get in some riding practice and have some fun too, so off I went. I got to this little town on the Utah-Arizona border, just had one paved street and that was the main highway that went through the middle. About the center of town was a turnoff South to the Grand Canyon where I was going. Now just before the turn there was a patch of sand on the road. I didn't pay any attention until my wheels kind of skidded out from under me and that big old bike drug my leg a few feet. I got up and tried to lift the Harley, but I couldn't do it. Damn thing was too heavy. I needed some help,

but the only people in sight was some old guys sitting in front of a hardware store and probably wondering why I decided to fall down in the middle of the road like that. It was no time to be particular so I limped over there to talk to them.

They looked like quintuplets--each about 102 years old, skinny, dried up and wrinkled, like somebody'd left them out in the desert sun too long. They all wore white straw cowboy hats, blue jeans, and those long-sleeve cowboy shirts with the little plastic-pearl buttons.

"You alright?" one of them said. Then he spit a brown stream of tobacco juice into a can he was holding.

"Just scraped-up some and bruised, ripped my pants though."

"Yep...shore did. You know, if you don't move that motorbike out of the middle of the highway, there, the next car comes around that blind corner just might..."

I didn't hear the rest because of the semi-truck that turned the corner. He stood on his brakes--tried to stop--but he was still going fast enough to run over my Harley with nine of those eighteen wheels. The first few was quite a bump for him, I seen the driver's head hit the roof

of his cab, but the last two went over easier since the bike was somewhat flatter by then.

The truck stopped and it was deep quiet for a second. Then the tobacco spitter grinned a little brown and yellow grin and said, "Told ya."

That must have been the funniest thing they'd heard in a long time because they was all cackling and laughing and coughing at the same time--doubled over like. Well I knew it was a dumb thing to do. I knew it when I did it and I was watching my fist heading for the old man on the end of the bench. I meant to send him clear to New Mexico. But he was rocking back and forth laughing, so I missed his head by a couple inches and just grazed the brim of his Stetson hat and knocked it off on the sidewalk. It threw me off balance too and the next thing I know there's five vicious old men crawling all over me, punching and kicking, trying their best to beat me and doing a fair job. Who would have guessed they'd be so mean?

They got me to the ground, two guys were holding each of my arms and the last one was looking for open places that he could kick with those pointy-toe cowboy boots, hateful things those boots. Got me once

in the nuts and then in the stomach, knocked the wind out of me. I don't know exactly what happened between then and the time the sheriff got there, but when he did, I had a set of false teeth stuck on my earring. Somebody'd tried to bite my damn ear off. So who winds up in jail? Yep, that's right.

It's not the first jail I been to, but it's the first time I been a resident. Used to visit Uncle Merle in the State Pen once in a while and sometimes I bailed out a friend and there was that one time with Mom and Dad, but that was just a misunderstanding. Shit, that guy's dogs was asking for it, mean and noisy as they were, they had to die. The folks was just the first ones to see the need and take the initiative. What they shouldn't of done was cooked 'em and invited the guy to the barbecue. The folks was always great ones for practical jokes.

This place the sheriff put me--well I suppose it qualifies as a jail because I want to leave and they won't let me--it's a little room in the basement of the sheriff's house. The house is about the size of a barn, and needs to be to hold all the women and kids he's got running around. But all I got here is a bed, a toilet, a sink, and a Book of Mormon.

At first I was bitching and complaining and hollering and beating on the walls about everything I could think of. They must have got tired of it because the door opened and two real irritated-looking women stood there. One of them had a shotgun and the other had a pair of long-handled pliers with wide, sharp blades where the jaws should be. The one with the gun told me to shut up or drop my pants. I don't think she meant it, but I quieted down, sat on the bed and started thumbing through that Book of Mormon.

They got a angel in that book called Moroni. I think it might have something to do with Bony Moroni in that old rock and roll song. Anyway, this angel gives some guy a bunch of gold tablets. And instead of selling them and buying a mansion or a Rolls Royce, he copies them into a book! The kicker is that he couldn't read or write. Well, if these people would believe a story like that, I didn't expect to have any trouble B.S.ing my way out of jail.

After a while the sheriff took me over to see the judge. We just walked because it was right next door in another big house. Turns out that the judge was related to the sheriff, was his father-in-law. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad news. I thought that having my bike

smashed and my butt kicked by a gang of senior citizens would look to the judge like all the punishment a man needs for a minor offense like mine so I wasn't too worried. I expected a small fine and a big lecture.

We went downstairs in this other house to another basement. Apparently the basement is where these folks do all their legal business, and in this basement room behind a particle board, picture of wood desk sat a little old man with a white straw, Stetson hat, no teeth, a black eye, and he was holding a can to spit tobacco into. He looked at me and grinned his pink and brown smile and charged me with more shit than I knew existed. I found out that three of those five guys were the sheriff's father-in-law and the other two were uncles.

So they got me on a one-man chain gang. There's no roads for me to work on and no rocks to bust up, but I washed about a thousand dirty diapers so far and two tons of dishes. I wear a red-checked apron and a baseball cap to keep the hair out of my eyes or sometimes for fun they make me put on my motorcycle helmet and all the wives can smack me on the head with the broom when they get the urge. I spend my day going from one barnsize house to another. The sheriff's meanest wife-- and there's some stiff competition for that title--escorts me around with a

rifle in one hand and those nasty long-handled cutters in the other.

Anytime I don't work fast enough to suit her she brings those cutters out and clacks the jaws together loud. I think she's bluffing but this is no place to take a chance.

VRUUM

On the road to enlightenment, I ran the hot dog stand. I was the least likely person in San Francisco to show up at a New Age church meeting. The strongest spiritual ideas I'd ever had were contained in a bottle of 151 rum. My idea of soul travel was James Brown going from Detroit to Chicago. But my idea of a beautiful woman was Karen. She was there, so I was there.

Karen was a dancer at the Jazz 'n Jugs and five nights a week I got to see quite a bit of her, everything not covered by a G-string and two pasties the size of a quarter. Most of the girls there looked good, but Karen was special. She danced with a wild sexiness that ignited the imaginations of every straight man in the club. We all had her body memorized--the long, tanned legs with lines of muscle on the thighs and calves, the soft curve between the top of her ass and the small of her back, the high breasts, the long, slender neck, and a face that would have brought the Greeks back from Troy. She had auburn hair down to the

middle of her back. Sometimes she bent forward until it touched the stage, and sometimes she buried her hands in it and fixed you with those sparkling blue eyes while everything below was shaking.

But when the dance ended and Karen walked back to the dressing room, she shed her stage personality like she had the skirt and blouse in her act. She seldom talked to anyone and never flirted with the customers. Most of her time between shows was spent alone, meditating. Once I stood outside the dressing room and could hear her faint chant, "vruum...vruum," like a holy man playing with a toy race car. Tonight, I was about to discover Vruum for myself.

Unfortunately, my presence at the meeting didn't go unnoticed.

"We have a visitor this evening, I'm happy to say. A friend of Karen's and, hopefully, a companion to us on our path. Karen informs me that he is creative, a musician, and I can see from his lovely aura that he is sincere in his quest for enlightenment. Mark, stand up please and introduce yourself."

She gestured with an open palm toward me. Karen nudged my arm, and I stood, but felt uncomfortable talking to a group of people with my aura hanging out. Made me wish I'd washed it before I left home.

"My name is Mark. I guess you know that already. Like she said, I'm a musician. I play guitar at the Jazz 'n Juggs in North Beach. In fact, I won't be able to stay for the whole meeting. At 6:30 I have to go fi...pick up one the guys in our band. Karen was nice enough to invite me...and I was curious about soul travel...so...here I am...and...uh...thanks." Smooth.

I think my aura got a little funky around the edges when I said I was curious. It's not that I wasn't curious, but it was Karen I hoped to learn about and not soul travel. Karen became a challenge. I wanted to be the one who could get inside her shell. I asked her about the chanting one night and she opened up a little.

"Mark, it's such a beautiful thing, I can hardly describe it. You really have to experience the joy and the freedom for yourself to know what it's like."

"You think it would work for me? Last time I checked I was about a quart low on joy and freedom. Maybe you could show me how it's done."

"I'm not qualified yet, but I know someone who is, if you're really interested..."

Ms. Matthias looked at me silently for a few seconds like she expected me to say more. I didn't.

"Thank you, Mark, for that very short autobiography. Perhaps we will have an opportunity to get better acquainted with you in the future. I'm sure Karen has told you much of what we do, but let me take a moment to explain what Vruum is...and what it isn't."

Ms. Matthias was the leader of the group. When she talked, she used large gestures with outstretched arms and dramatic facial expressions. She wore a loose, white robe that exposed only her fleshy hands, thick neck, and bulbous head. Judging from those parts, I believe that the rest of that big robe was full of woman. Her age was hard to pin down, maybe a well-preserved 50 or possibly a 35 year old who did her soul traveling in rough neighborhoods.

Behind Ms. Matthias, sitting on a stool, was her sidekick, Mr. Ray. He was a small, wiry guy and reminded me of an organ grinder's monkey connected to Ms. Matthias by an invisible chain. His head and hands made quick movements as he looked back and forth from her to the audience. His tight little gestures mimicked hers like he was interpreting

for the deaf or, in this case, for the spiritually impaired. Watching him made me nervous.

The podium was remarkable. It was constructed of clear plastic except for a black band around the bottom. In the center of the base, near the floor, a light shined upward through a blue filter. The effect was to encircle the speaker's head and shoulders in a soft, blue glow. Inside the glow, Ms. Matthias spoke.

"Vruum is not a religion. A religion is a suit of clothes you put on your existence to dress it up, make it look nicer than it really is. It's a Pierre Cardin suit or a Christian Dior dress. It's a \$200 shirt and a \$500 pair of shoes. But...you can't hide the fact that the suit is actually empty--empty of real existence."

The group chanted, "VRUUM."

"It's a tasteful, natural fabric that illuminates the underlying body of knowledge."

"VRUUM"

"We have answers to questions that most religions are afraid to ask. Where do animals go when they die? We have the answer. Why do so many famous people, who are supposedly dead, re-appear in

unusual places under strange circumstances? We can tell you. We will show you that the world's many social and political problems are nothing more than the physical manifestation of negative spiritual energy, a sort of cosmic indigestion. Mark, you will discover how to help others find the true path just as Karen is helping you."

Of course there was more. I learned the truth about flying saucers and the political process, that the earth is flat, that Indians aren't really dead, they are just hanging out in another dimension for awhile. Almost everything I thought I knew was wrong. Luckily, I had to leave early, but not before Karen, Ms. Matthias, and Mr. Ray cornered me for a private conference. It was the hard-sell.

"Mark, I want you to be with us," said Ms. Matthias, "I'm so sure that you are destined to be a member, I'm going to hold a special cleansing session just for you next Wednesday. All I need is your signature on the form and a small donation. We take cash, checks or major credit cards, and remember that it's completely tax deductible. But most important, think of it as an investment in your everlasting soul."

Normally, this would have been a very easy offer to refuse. In fact, I would have enjoyed letting her know the true state of my aura.

But Karen was standing close and held my hand while Ms. Matthias began her pitch. Then she pressed even closer and I could feel the side of her breast on my arm. I'm surprised that my shirt didn't catch on fire.

It was my turn to find Bob, the leader of our band, and get him to the club on time. He wasn't the leader because he organized jobs or any of the things a leader would normally do. He was the leader because he was one of the best jazz musicians in the world. He had the talent and the name.

Bob lived in an old residential hotel. It was about two winos shy of being a flophouse. 100 years ago it had been a fine, Victorian hotel in the center of San Francisco. Now, thick layers of paint were chipping off, the stonework was dirty and broken, many of the windows were covered with plywood. The inside was like the outside except it didn't rain as much.

Sometimes we found Bob wandering the streets, lost. It wasn't unusual to find him sleeping an alley or up against a building. Last Saturday night we couldn't locate him anywhere--he was passed out in a stall of the men's room at the club.

But that night I was lucky. Bob answered my knock.

His room was smaller than many people's closets. There was enough space for a single bed, a nightstand, a chair, and Bob's two suitcases. The top of the nightstand held most of his possessions: a trumpet, a small cassette player, a bottle of gin, a hot plate, and a used syringe. Bob was a junkie and was high that night like most nights.

He talked softly, in a hoarse whisper, and his words came out slow and tired like they travelled a long way to get to his mouth.

"Hey...Mark...what's happening? What time it is?"

"We're OK, Bob--couple of hours to spare."

Bob stared through me for a few seconds. Then he turned and looked at the wall. Finally he spoke.

"We on tonight? We playing?"

Sometimes talking to Bob was like talking to a small child. "Of course we're playing, man, you're the star. This is Friday night, big crowd. So we got two hours to get you right. Let's go get something to eat. You eat anything today?"

"Yes I did...I ate something. Ate your mama one time."

He managed a weak grin. His gray mustache turned up a little at the corners and I could see the deep marks on his upper lip, left by the trumpet. But as he lost the thread of the conversation, the smile faded and he licked his lips nervously.

"Man, I am too high to be anywhere but right here. But right here ain't so bad. Let's just lay back and dig that new Sonny Rollins thing." He paused. His mouth was open and his jaw quivered, trying to form words. "You know, he was a junkie. Long time. Long motherfuckin' time...kicked though--kicked that monkey in his ass. Just like Miles. Played with him many times in New York--played with both of them--gonna take you there too--show you the real world. Besides, we got a little taste here and some food too."

He reached under the bed and pulled out an open package of Polish sausages.

"Put a couple of these on the hot plate, take a little sip of gin--be alright...alright."

He stretched out on the bed. Bob was in his underwear. Even in the dim light I could see scars on his thighs, ankles, and feet. In 30 years, he'd used the needle just about everywhere.

While the sausage heated and the tape played, Bob nodded off, but part of him was playing along with Sonny. His lips kissed the air. The long, black fingers of his right hand twitched rhythmically at his side. I took a drink of gin and felt the familiar heat in my mouth, felt the warmth spread downwards. Then I lit a joint and sat back against the wall listening to Sonny Rollins' alto--black and blue and sharp like a razor.

I let Bob sleep until an hour before our first set. That gave us time to walk to the club and clear his head a little more. Bob dressed, grabbed his horn, and we hit the street.

There were only two things in Bob's life: music and dope. They were always fighting each other for the number one spot. His favorite subject besides music was being loaded.

"It's different at different times, you know? When I'm really flying, just after I pop, I can't tell what's real and what's the dream. Everything's fine and I don't really give a fuck which is which. It's all warm and that warm stays with me, takes away my pains. I blow and my teeth don't hurt. The hotel don't smell so bad. You not half so ugly.

"When I dream, I'm in Bob Gordzinski land. It don't have so many white folks. The ones that there are just smile and act happy all the time. Sometimes I give 'em a quarter and rub their heads for good luck. There's no bad rhythm sections, all play like a motherfucker, and no out of tune pianos either. The mean women can't talk. They just flapping their arms around. Nobody pays no attention. I ship all the ugly ones to North Dakota and the fine bitches that's left is fighting each other to get next to me: Robert Gordzinski, the greatest Afro-Pollack jazz musician in history.

"And speaking of fine bitches, wasn't you with Karen tonight? Man, she's so fine I want to kiss her daddy. Give him tongue too."

I told him about the meeting.

"Shit, I think your pecker taking your brain for a ride, boy. Karen's out hunting for fresh meat for that organization she's into and that meat is you."

"So what are you saying, I should stay away?"

"Mark, you ain't listening. I said your pecker taking your brain for a ride. Now with a brain like yours, I believe the pecker may be an improvement. You watched her dance just like I have. You tell me--you

gonna walk away from that? What I'm saying is to keep your eye on the goal. You looking for pussy, not salvation. But it's a sad day when you taking love advice from a junkie."

"You've got a point, Bob, but maybe you should drop by the place next Wednesday and see what it's like. You just might be able to relate to that crowd."

"Man, you know me. I don't never make plans more than five minutes ahead."

When we got to the club, Bob said he needed a few more minutes to pull himself together. I hated to leave him alone backstage, but somebody had to play. Midway through the set, Bob shuffled out. We could tell from his walk and his eyes that he'd hit again. Dog, our bass player gave me a murderous look. I should have checked his trumpet case before we left Bob's room. We were in the second chorus of a ballad, "When Sonny Gets Blue." Bob lifted the horn to his lips. I was beginning a solo but backed off to give him room. He raised his head, closed his eyes, flexed his fingers, but made no sound. Bob stood that way, posed, for a long moment, then lowered his head and stared at the stage, the horn still at his lips. I resumed my solo. As we played the

final notes of the tune, Bob came to life. Still staring at the stage, the chords in his neck stiffened, and he played the opening four bars of Clifford Brown's classic "Cherokee," faster than I'd ever heard before. Dog came in on the next four, the rest of us at the chorus. The jazz crowd was excited, this was what they'd come for. Even the juggs folks stopped talking and looked up. For a few incredible minutes, we were right. We accompanied Bob into Robert Gordzinski land.

Bob was a junkie and a genius. When he could play, he could stand next to the greatest: Dizzy, Miles, even Louis Armstrong. Other times he couldn't stand at all.

At the beginning of the second set, Karen walked in and sat down close to the front. Her act started soon on the little stage behind the bar. She made more in one night than I did for the whole week. Bob was straight enough to talk to the audience and we had a short conference, then he announced,

"For our next tune, we'd like to play a beautiful little ballad that our guitar player, Mark, just wrote, and he wrote it for this beautiful little lady right here. Both the tune and the lady are called 'Karen'."

Bob turned to me and said, "I never get tired of playing this song you just wrote, but if we ever record it, what are we gonna call the damn thing? Gayle, Sherri, Patricia, or Karen?"

The band found this amusing. I hoped Karen couldn't hear. But no matter what it's called, it's a beautiful song and we played it right. Soon, I forgot all about Karen, soul travel, and drug addict trumpet players. There was only the music, and the music was better than any drug or religion that man ever invented.

Wednesday night was pot-luck dinner and aura cleansing. Some pretty unfortunate pots showed up, like a tofu and goat cheese casserole prepared and served in an earthenware pot, handmade by Mr. Ray. It leaked from two or three long cracks that he tried unsuccessfully to fix with epoxy, so he had to carry it in a plastic sack. When he lifted the pot out, it dripped goat and soybean juice on the table top. Karen brought something called a protein log. According to her, it was made from black beans, brown rice, wheat germ, and seaweed all thrown into a food processor. It got whipped in there with a protein powder that made the whole thing taste and smell like Ken L Ration.

It wasn't easy for me to find spiritually correct food. Karen suggested a new age health food store in Sausalito--a spooky place. I saw almost nothing that I could personally verify as edible. I settled on wine, something a little closer to my own experience, a bottle of red and one of off-white. They were from the Ghost Dance Vineyards of Sedona, Arizona, made from organic grapes, never touched by metal or Republicans and fermented in pyramid-shaped casks at secret Indian places of power. All planting, harvesting, and squeezing was done under the supervision of certified Hopi and Zuni shamans. The vintage was not listed. I suppose it was irrelevant because those grapes were timeless and at one with the universe. What's more, the bottles were cosmically tuned and, when empty, could be used for meditation and healing. Sounded perfect.

The wine was a hit. I guess offerings from newcomers were looked at carefully because the bottles were passed from hand to hand before anyone would drink. They read the labels and nodded in approval. Karen was pleased. I was pleased.

After dinner there was short prayer, possibly for digestion. It ended with a resounding VRUUM. I followed the group into another,

smaller room. The perimeter was lined with folding chairs and a few large pillows. In the center was heavy wooden table with three elaborate chairs. An ominous black box sat in the middle of the table. It had a small TV screen surrounded by several meters, dials, switches and buttons. Three wires lead to the back of the box, two with plastic suction cups on the end and the third with a small metal disk. Above the table, several clear plastic boxes hung from the ceiling. Ms. Matthias selected a crystal to place in each and sat at the table.

When everyone was seated, the lights were turned out until only one was left, right above the table. It played through the crystals and made colors wander around the room as the plastic boxes slowly rotated on their strings. Someone turned on the space music--new age Montovani. It occurred to me that a child with a \$100,000 synthesizer and some barbiturates would do well in this genre. It started with a large, wonderful chord, but the chord just sat there in my ear for a long time like a protein long in a stomach. No good for dancing.

First on that evening's agenda was the cleansing of my aura. I paid \$275 for this privilege so I expected them to do a good job, maybe

vacuum my karma while they're at it. I took a place at the table with Ms. Matthias and Mr. Ray, the technician.

"Let me explain the procedure to you Mark," she said, "we're going to monitor changes in your spiritual body. We will do it in two ways. First, electronically with the help of this...and second, I will visually note the changes in the color of your aura. Through deep, directed meditation we will purify the aura and unblock the pathways of spiritual and physical energy."

Nothing she said made any sense to me so I just nodded my head.

"Good. We'll proceed. Mr. Ray, will you place Mark in the proper position and attach the electrodes?"

Mr. Ray removed my right shoe and sock. He placed that foot on my left leg in a half-lotus position and told me to touch the center of the foot with my left forefinger. He put clear gel on the two suction cups, placed one in the middle of my forehead and the other inside my shirt, over my navel. Then he hesitated.

"Ms. Matthias, please."

"Of course. We are making connection with the four principle points of power on the body. The bottom of the foot, the pathway of

earth power; the third eye, the pathway of spiritual power; the navel, your connection to dimensional travel; and finally, the penis, your connection to the physical universe."

Now I hesitated, but felt encouraged by the dim light and placed my right hand tenderly over the crotch of my jeans.

"I'm afraid this requires skin to skin contact," he said.

I looked at Ms. Matthias for verification. She nodded.

"Don't feel self conscious. We've all been through it."

I was reasonably sure that she had no penis to hold, but silenced my doubts and decided to continue. I slipped my hand down the front of my pants and touched my little soul traveler. Since he was the main reason for my being in that position; it seemed fair.

The last step was to put the thin metal slice between my lips. I was to place the tip of my tongue on it while Mr. Ray calibrated the machine.

"OK, we're just about ready to begin. Are you comfortable?...Good."

He pressed a button and the machine came to life. It began to hum loudly, the needles inside the meters danced back and forth, and the TV

screen was full of unusual shapes and patterns. I could feel beads of sweat forming.

"We have just one more test to perform."

He carefully examined the wire attached to my mouth, seemed satisfied, bent toward me and said in a stage whisper, "Have you ever been electrocuted?"

I hadn't--but was pretty sure I didn't want to be. I spit the disk out and pushed the chair violently away from the table. The electrodes popped loose. I tried to pull my hand out of my pants and accidentally grabbed my nuts. I felt like screaming, so I did. Loud. As my hand came free, the chair toppled over backwards and landed with a crash. Strangely, no one laughed or made any noise at all, except Mr. Ray.

"Matthias, did you see that? He pegged both meters and overloaded the screen display. Strongest reaction I've ever seen."

I was lying there contemplating my immediate future when I heard a new sound, a trumpet playing high and clear over the protein log chord, Bob's trumpet. I looked behind me and there he was, silhouetted in the doorway to the meeting room, his black form surrounded by light. I had a fleeting thought that maybe I, too, was in some kind of new

dimension, until Bob stepped close, into the circle of light. I could see him and smell him. Out of habit, I looked first at his eyes. He was loaded.

Mr. Ray got out of his seat to intercept Bob. A shabby looking, disoriented black man didn't fit their membership profile.

"Excuse me sir, but this is a private meeting and we're in the middle of something quite important, here. Please let me show you the door. Perhaps you could return when we have our next membership drive...uh...maybe next summer."

"Mark, who this skinny little motherfucker? Does he know who he's talking to? I ought to kick his rat's ass. And what are you doing on the floor?"

I got up in a hurry to get between the two. I don't think Bob ever kicked anything in his life, but he was unpredictable.

"Hold on, Mr. Ray. It's alright. This is Bob Gordzinski. He's my...my boss. I play in his band."

Karen backed me up. "It's true, Ray. He's a wonderful musician."

Mr. Ray hesitated and said, "We can't just open the doors to anyone who wanders in off the street. I don't know--I just don't know...Ms. Matthias?"

"Why of course your friend is welcome, Mark. But you must understand that tonight's session requires the most intense concentration from all of us. We can't allow disturbances. If Bob would care to wait in the meeting room until we're finished, I would love to tell him about our organization. I can sense from his aura that he's a unique and special man."

Bob had lost the thread of the conversation. "This is a spooky place, man. How about I just go in this other room and lay back 'til they done doing whatever they doing to you here." He turned to Mr. Ray. "That keep you happy Mr. Rat?"

Bob walked away and Mr. Ray shut the door a little harder than necessary. Then he set my chair upright and joined back the table. I remained standing.

"Listen. I didn't pay you \$275 to electrocute me. Why don't you give me the money back and I'll take my chances on living with an uncleansed aura."

They suddenly looked very serious. "The money is non-refundable," Ms. Matthias said and motioned to Karen.

"Dear, I'm afraid Mark is having second thoughts. He's disturbed by Mr. Ray's unorthodox techniques."

Karen took my hand and looked into my eyes. At that moment, electrocution seemed a small price to pay. They convinced me that the metal disk was just a way of getting a reaction from me to see if the machine was working correctly. It wasn't even connected to anything. They showed me. Karen told me how great it would be to have me to meditate with between shows. So I resumed the position and we continued.

I'd never thought of meditation as a spectator sport. Here I was touching my foot and holding my cock in front of two dozen people who drove BMW's and thought George Washington and Moses were visiting aliens. They also thought deodorant was unhealthy, a fact that became more evident each minute. Actually, everybody except Ms. Matthias and Mr. Ray was supposed to be meditating too, but I'm sure there were some cheaters. Me, for instance.

She began to lead us down through the twelve levels of consciousness. I was with her for a couple of levels. I managed to get relaxed and focussed. It was not much different than playing a long solo and concentrating on the music. The rest of the group, apparently, continued down, and at one point, Ms. Matthias told them to call on their spirit guides. That's when things got strange.

All around me, I could hear people talking, not to each other, but not to themselves either. I suppose they were catching up on the latest news from the spirit world. Pretty soon, all of the voices merged with the space music and I quit paying attention. Every few minutes, Ms. Matthias or Mr. Ray gave me an update on the aura cleansing. I ignored them, too, because I knew nothing was changing except their bank accounts. It gave me a good chance to think about things that needed consideration. My leg was getting cramped, I had a boner, and I didn't really care what happened to animals when they died.

I heard Bob playing the melody to "Karen." Then he started to improvise, soft and muted from the other room. The synthesizer chord just hung in the air, sickly sweet. I'd had enough.

I told Matthias and Ray that I had to pee. Reluctantly, they unhooked me. I put my shoe on, walked into the meeting room, and there he was, playing with his hand over the end of the trumpet. He was standing in the doorway with the street behind him. The light outside the covered him like a soft, white cocoon, the closest thing to a vision I was likely to find. He looked up as I approached.

"Man, I'm glad you finished. It smells like a barnyard in here. You eat this stuff? Bet I could feed a lot of normal people with just a little bit of the shit in that busted pot...."

I grabbed the half-filled bottle of Ghost Dance off-white wine from the table. We drank it as we walked down the street.

"Mark, you gotta hear that new Sonny Rollins tape. He's a monster. Was a junkie, too...for a long time...a long time.

THE ROAD HOME

Chris drove his old pickup onto the gravel driveway and honked the horn. Like usual, the dogs lined up by the front fender, wagging their tails, barking, vying for the first chance to piss on the tires--otherwise, it was too quiet. The doors and windows in the small house were closed. Chickens that always roamed the yard during the day roosted in the coop. The two lambs strained at their tethers inside a corral. Most importantly, Jana and Kirk hadn't run from the back door to greet him. A dozen explanations surged through his mind as he grabbed the duffel bag from the truck. But one thought stuck and burned deep like a brand: something was very wrong.

Chris ran to the front door and unlocked it. Inside, the house smelled musty. The cats had been there for some time. An envelope was taped to the front of the refrigerator.

He was afraid that Kirk was sick again or hurt. The nearest doctor was more than 40 miles away, the closest neighbor almost five, no phone

for over twenty. Three months ago Kirk had the measles. They'd kept him in bed for days treating a fever that reached 103 but wouldn't go down. They rushed Kirk into town as fast as an old truck and a bad dirt road allowed. It was early Spring. Snow was melting in the mountains. Cold water ran deep and fast across low spots on the road. Twice they'd been stuck and worked frantically, mud-covered and frozen, to release the truck from its slippery prison. When they finally arrived, Kirk was worse. His lips were dry and cracked, upper body and face crimson from the heat of the fever. Ice baths and aureomycin in the hospital had saved his life, but barely. They'd never been so scared.

Chris fumbled with the envelope. His eyes struggled to focus in the dim light.

Darling,
I'm sorry to do this in a letter, but I couldn't do it face to face. I've taken Kirk with me back to Mom's. Chris, I can't stand it any more. I'm frightened all the time and when you are gone, it's unbearable. So many things could happen; so many things have happened. Please understand that I still love you. This isn't a problem between you and me. It's between me and this place. I'm just not strong enough. This land is so unforgiving--I hope you won't be. Call us at Mom's.

Love you,
Jana and Kirk

P.S. There is a plane ticket to Los Angeles waiting for you at the United ticket counter in Salt Lake. Your plane leaves Thursday at 2:00PM.

He re-read the letter as though it might change. Part of him was relieved that his wife and child were unhurt, but he was crushed from the realization that they were gone.

Chris walked aimlessly between the four rooms. In a few seconds time he'd become dislocated. Home suddenly was no longer a comfort but a mockery. What had seemed quiet before, deepened into emptiness. He looked at a photograph of them taken last year, Jana and Kirk were dressed in Western formal, a young Dale Evans and a miniature, gap-toothed Roy. Chris was in his standard denim shirt and pants, woodworker chic. Jana smiled. She appeared happy. They held the reins of the horse he'd later had to kill. Kirk sat on the saddle, his legs sticking straight out.

Chris placed the picture on the bed and buried his head in Jana's pillow. Her scent brought tears to his eyes and a warm tingling to his groin. He allowed himself the luxury of self-pity for several minutes before he grabbed his bag and rushed out, locking the heavy door.

It was dusk as he came over the hill into Pinedale. Lights were beginning to blink on around town. As the stores, tourist traps, and government offices closed, the bars filled. The setting sun reflected from pastel clouds and spread a faint glow on the mountains and the houses and the buildings. It played a trick on the eye. He saw old houses grow naturally out of the soil--no different than Douglas Fir or Lodgepole Pine. The stone courthouse was as right and proper as a ledge of shale that shoved its way through a glacier on Gannett Peak. At the same time, Chris thought, it was temporary. *A few bad winters where the cattle freeze in place on the range and men lose fingers and toes, when the wind screams down from the rockies at 120 mph breaking every north-facing window in town, when the Spring runoff washes away fences, homes and animals...the valley would become Crow country again.*

To Chris, his former home, Los Angeles, had none of this harmony and impermanence. Southern California was forced onto the landscape by millions of people and billions of dollars, and it was sustained only by constant transfusions of the same.

He stopped at the Black Angus Bar. Chris was pretty close to being a celebrity in Pinedale. They would let him use the phone.

"Trudy, I need to make a call--long distance," he said to the bartender, "it's important." He handed her a \$10 bill.

"Keep your money, honey," she spoke quietly, but there was no room for argument. "Use the phone in the office. It's a little more private."

On his way to the office, he ran his hand along the top rail of the bar, enjoying its smoothness, the perfect fit of the mahogany sections. Making this bar had been his first job in Pinedale.

He greeted half a dozen men sitting at a table, old timers wearing Stetson hats, plaid western shirts with mother of pearl buttons, who lived with an untroubled competence in their ability to survive the isolation, cold, and poverty--trademarks of Northwest Wyoming. And the younger ones, dressed in T-shirts and jeans, still too young to feel winter's razor cut through their joints but old enough to have the shrillness tempered. Chris didn't stop to talk. They all understood.

The phone rang only once.

"Hi, Arlee--is Jana there yet?"

"Chris! I've been expecting your call. I hope your trip was a profitable one. Yes, Jana certainly is here, and I don't mind telling you how glad I am that she came. She and Kirk look so brown and skinny. You would have killed my daughter and grandson out there. You know that Chris?"

She was like a politician warming to her favorite subject. As her voice raised in pitch and volume, he could picture her puffy face turning pink from anger and excitement, the mass of loose flesh that hung from her upper arm, wobbling in counterpoint to her wild gestures. Soon the hips and legs would join--pacing, nearly dancing--back and forth in front of the phone on a worn track in the carpet.

"Good god, what can you be thinking about? Never, NEVER does a week pass without some rich person's "secretary" calling, looking for you. After all this time, they're still looking for YOU. And YOU walked away from it. \$30,000 to build a conference table, \$5,000 for a rocking chair--are you listening? They'd pay \$5,000 for a goddamn rocking chair!"

"Please Arlee, we can argue about this later. I'm coming down there tomorrow. Just put Jana on the phone?"

She continued as though he'd never spoken.

"A couple of months ago Michael Jackson's assistant came to the door, not called but came to my door. She needed another chair for the dining table you built him. She had \$1,000 cash right there and another \$100 for me just to help find you, but naturally you can't be found except by forest rangers or a moose or some goddamn thing and you can't bother with things like money..."

"ARLEE!"

She paused and said quietly--conspiratorially, "Chris, have you been drinking again?" There was no chance to answer. Arlee put down the phone and he could hear her shout, "Jana, it's Chris. I think he's drunk."

Jana grabbed the phone, "Chris, honey, are you...?"

"No", he said firmly, then softening, "It's great to hear your voice. Jana, I was worried about you and Kirk. I'm leaving tonight for Salt Lake so I'll get to the airport in plenty of time."

"Honey, I'm so glad. And I'm so sorry I didn't wait for you, but I wasn't sure when you'd get back to that house and it was just too much for me to handle. Now don't worry about anything. I made all the

arrangements before we left. If you don't make the plane, just go to the United ticket counter and they'll get you on the next one. The Spauldings said they'd feed the animals and check on the house. In exchange, I promised you'd build them a cabinet or something--I hope you don't mind..."

"How'd you pay for the tickets?"

"I sold the car to Odie. Then he and his wife took us to Salt Lake. I hope you don't mind..."

Chris was suddenly angry.

"Sold the car? How do you expect us to get ba...?"

As soon as he said it; he knew the answer.

"God, Jana why didn't you talk to me about this first? I had no idea it was that bad for you here. Maybe we could move closer to town, but not LA. You know I can't live there."

"Maybe you can now, honey, it's been 3 years and you've done so well. You've made me so proud. In LA you could make \$100,000 a year easy, maybe more. I could do the bookkeeping and schedule the work, and when Kirk gets a little older..."

"Let me talk to Kirk."

"He's out playing with some new friends he made. Kirk seems so much happier now, Chris, he's got kids to play with and Mom had a room all ready for him just filled with toys."

"Ready for him! So you two have been planning this for quite a while--how long?--a month, a year? Jesus! You did it all behind my back."

"Well there is some good news. I found somebody who is interested in buying the place up there. \$85,000 Chris."

"WHAT? What the hell are you doing? Selling our home...? My grandfather bought that land 90 years ago, for god's sake!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind. Chris you have been drinking haven't you?"

He was too angry to argue.

"Goodbye. I'll be there tomorrow."

"We'll be waiting at the airport, honey. I love you."

As he hung up, Chris had a lingering image of Jana walking back and forth on the worn spot in the carpet.

Chris left the office and sat at the table. A hard-muscled man of about 35 was speaking.

"We're gonna go up to Jackson tonight and become boogified.

And we just might get us some tourist womens and worship at the altar of their pubification. I want these Easterners to know that the six shooter is still alive and swell in Wyoming." Besides his unique relationship with the English language, Louis had a doctorate in animal husbandry. He claimed to have given up the field when he finally discovered that husbandry didn't involve him having sex with heifers and sheep.

Trudy said, "I've heard about that six shooter of yours, Louis, 5 misfires and a blank. I also hear you spend a lot of time cleaning your own barrel."

"Ease up a little Trudy. You know I'm just a poor, lonesome cowboy who would never defile himself if there was any bipedal or quadriplegic help to be found. Hey, you want to come Chris? Now I know that you're a marinated man, but you could provide some immoral support--plus, I'll let you keep the sheets when we're finished. Sound good?"

Chris smiled weakly and shook his head. They all knew that Jana and Kirk had gone. Axel saw that Louis had struck a nerve and quickly changed the subject. He claimed the senior citizen right of non-sequitur.

"This land is hard, Chris. I asked J.B. Locke the other day, 'J.B.', I says, 'how can you afford to raise these here cattle when you lose \$30 on every damn steer you take to market?'"

Chris had a comfortable feeling as Axel told the story they'd all heard at least once a week.

" 'Well, Axel,' J.B. says in that kind of half-ass Texas drawl he puts on when he's pulling your peter--he says, 'I expect I'm gonna have to make it on volume.' " They all laughed too loud, and old Mr. McConohay took his cue.

"Yes, yes, yes--you're right. This is a mighty hard land. It breeds tough creatures, both the two-legged and four-legged variety. Was a bobcat up at my place once. Meanest cat that ever breathed. Smart too. Why, we'd see his tracks and his scat every day, but never seen the bobcat hisself. When he felt hungry, he'd take a chicken or two. One night, though, I'd had enough so I killed a chicken and soaked it in poison and left it out for him. That made the bobcat so mad he ate one of my kids instead, and as you all know, tax deductions ain't that easy to come by. He eventually finished off the rest of the chickens and the kids, course he wouldn't touch Edna, never did get that mad."

"Guess he takes after you Joe," Louis said.

"I don't remember Edna ever complaining about it though," Trudy said.

"Yes, yes, yes--well anyway, it wasn't long before all that was left was me and this mongrel dog. He was every bit as mean as the cat and smelled even worse and...and I'll be damned if I didn't forget how the story ends..."

This brought more laughter than any ending he might have remembered. Mr. McConohay just shook his head, took a drink of beer, and leaned back in his chair.

Chris felt more accepted, more at home at the Black Angus bar in Pinedale than he ever did in Los Angeles. Chris knew he should leave, but he remained at the table. The easy conversation was soothing after his confrontation on the telephone. This was the one place where he was comfortable, and it might be his last chance.

"You know what?" Chris said, "I'm going to have a drink." All conversation stopped. "I'm serious. I deserve it; I can handle it; and I think it's just what I need."

Axel said, "Now I ain't your momma and you're a big boy, but if you ask me, I think you oughta stick with club soda. You worked hard to stay dry."

"I worked hard, but see where it got me. 100 acres of heaven and nobody to share it with. Trudy! Get me a Miller and a double shot of tequila."

Chris drained the smaller glass in one long swallow and followed it with half a bottle of beer. Instantly he felt the warm glow like an old friend too long absent.

"Hit me again Trudy."

At closing time he was still coherent. He hadn't continued to drink. It surprised everyone--mostly himself, but he was struggling. Reluctantly, Trudy sold him a bottle of tequila, Cuervo Gold, on the condition that he get a room in the motel next door.

"Trudy, do you know what I carry in my bag with me when I go somewhere?"

"Yes I do. You keep an empty bottle of booze, and you keep it to remind you that you're an alcoholic."

Chris was surprised. He thought it was his secret. "How'd you find that out?"

"Read it in the New York Times, honey. That--and Jana made the rounds to every bar in town just after you folks moved here. That's one willful woman. Now get out of here so I can go home."

Outside, he put the tequila in his bag and left them both in the truck.

Chris left the Whispering Pines Motel at mid-morning. He was refreshed from the sleep except for some fuzziness and a small headache. He thought of the tequila. *Slam down a couple of swallows and the fuzz would go away so nice. Wouldn't take much, just a few sips.* But he kept the bag zipped.

Little time remained before his flight. Salt Lake was four hours away, but Chris knew a backroad that would cut 50 miles from the trip. He turned off the pavement onto the gravel, and smelled the dust and petroleum odor from the pickup mixed bittersweet with morning sagebrush. Meadowlarks trilled a complex melody. Above the mountains to the East, the sky was blue crystal. A wall of clouds moved

in from the West. His left arm steered while the fingers of his right hand toyed with the duffel's zipper. He dreaded the inevitable scene with Jana and Arlee, the good cop and the bad cop.

Ahead on the left, something hung on the fence. Driving closer, he saw that it was a young deer, a buck just out of velvet. It had tried to jump the barbed-wire fence but fell short and was head-down on the far side. The legs were tangled in the wire--broken and twisted at odd angles to its body. The hawks had wasted no time. Six birds quarreled for possession of the animal. One sat squarely atop the anus, tearing away fur and chewing pieces of skin, trying to get at the prized intestines inside. Another pecked savagely at the eyes.

The deer was still alive. It tried to kick with broken legs and shift its body to dislocate the birds, but a small twitch was all it could manage. Ravens circled, waiting for the hawks to finish. A coyote crept forward, just a few feet from the struggling animal.

Chris stopped the truck and watched. The hawks were annoyed but too intent on their feast to leave. The coyote disappeared. Chris could offer the deer only one thing: a swift death. He took the .22 rifle from the back of the seat and walked to the fence. The hawks remained until

he was almost within touching distance. Chris put the barrel into an empty eye socket and squeezed the trigger. The deer twitched once more.

That picture filled his mind for the next few miles. He stopped again at the old South Pass junction. His road crossed part of the Oregon Trail. He could see the deep ruts made in the prairie by the thousands of wagons that went West and the handful that returned. They'd passed by the Wind River country for an easier life in Oregon or California. Straight ahead was the way to Salt Lake; to the right, the Soda mountains and on to Oregon; left went back toward the Wind River's and the house he'd built and another that they'd dreamed of building.

Chris felt the old longing take hold and opened the duffle. The empty bottle was as familiar as his favorite work shirt. The label had worn away. The other was new, inviting, and full. He took it outside and walked to the center of the crossroads. Chris could see for miles in every direction; the clarity was startling. He looked down and saw a beautiful light dancing golden on the jagged stones and over his worn boots, but it was only the sun and the tequila. Chris poured it slowly onto the dusty ruts, took the empty bottle back to the truck--then he

turned left, back to the Wind River Mountains.