Jumping-Off Place

Stories by
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Jumping-Off Place
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For
Cindy
and for
Robert P. Moore
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1. Trees

Anyone driving between California and the Rockies for the first time will realize he has been lied to all his life: the country has not been settled, the West not won. An unvanquished heartland called the Great Basin remains, a huge broken bowl claiming parts of seven states. At its center, and entirely within it, is the wilderness known as the state of Nevada. It is a place like nothing else in the world. There, water—and thus the flow of valley, mountain, plain; the configuration of life—does not drain to the sea, but inward upon itself, toward some imagined, unattainable midpoint.

One seems to be driving across an emptied ocean, bereft of both the tidal patterns of seas, and those of land, where rivers organize geography toward an oceanic destination. Ghosts of glaciers and wide water haunt the great heat and aridity. Epochs intermingle. Limestone shoulders granite. Causal principles are left to the absolute rhythm of sun and night and the recklessness of wind. Wind facets everything, from pebbles to mountain faces. Dunes swell from nothing and advance in crescent ranks directionless across the desert. There is rarely a blue day in the Basin unconvulsed somewhere by the isolated rage of a thunderstorm—a spasm of entropy trapped in the limitless of the place.

The land turns and subsides, changes in all its aspects except the greatest heights, the severe and lovely block-fault mountains serried above the sagebrush steppe. Instead of composing an uplifted continental ridge, as the Rockies or the Sierra Nevada, the Basin ranges follow the sinuous confusions of fault lines, angle crookedly for one, two hundred miles, stop suddenly in the desert again.
Most beautiful of the central Basin mountains is thirteen-thousand-foot Wheeler Peak in the Snake Range of eastern Nevada. Wheeler intervenes between two utterly barren, thirty-mile flats as an enormous block of blue rock and ice above the boneless, panting desert. The deception, the bewitching deformation of shapes and attitudes there are the ideata of the Basin: Pliocene volcanic stone that seems still to melt and move, rampike trees, the mass of the mountain venting through clouds and, above all, the sheer northeast face, a ragged semicircle of two-thousand-foot cliffs gnawed by glaciers, called Wheeler's cirque.

In prehistory, Frémont Indians hammered petroglyphs into the mountain's lower boulders, invoking its spirit. Centuries later Shoshone, Goshute, and Paiute survived on the piñon nuts of its foothills. John Muir wandered there in 1878, stunned by the tectonics of the cirque. And there, wondering at the savagery of rock and ice, and at the past, he never suspected the extraordinary secret the cirque held.

Above ancient Lehman Caves, hidden within a boulder field and a grove of Englemann spruce, is the one entrance to the glacial flats at the foot of the cirque's walls. From the flats, climb to timberline, just before the still-breathing ice field that seals the base of the streaked cliffs, and you might have found the oldest thing alive on this planet. The hills surrounding Wheeler Peak are forested with Great Basin bristlecone pine, strange dwarf trees unmatched even by giant sequoia in longevity. And somehow above timberline on the mountain, at 11,400 feet, a small bristlecone, the oldest of its ancient kind, had been growing five thousand years within a ruck of quartzite boulders, enclosed by the towering broken cup of the cirque. The pine's twisted body was almost entirely deadwood, fretted by wind and ice, polished by Arctic weather to a gloss that shined silver, ivory, yellow, and a bleeding red—dead but for one curling strip of bark feeding the one still-green branch.

The Forest Service came across this tree in the 1950s and named it Prometheus. In 1964 a young geologist, a Ph.D.
candidate doing fieldwork near the glacier, attempted to measure its age. His coring tool sheared in two inside the incredibly dense wood of the tree, and, whether only frustrated and stupid, or suddenly—alone within the cirque—berserk, he sawed it down, cut it into chunks, and removed it from the mountain.

2. Kevin

There are two ways to travel. Like hummingbirds who zing five hundred miles without touching ground, fasting in flight. Or like geese who investigate lakes, fields, city parks, everything en route, and gorge themselves constantly. On this migration from San Francisco to Colorado, Kevin was the hummingbird, I the goose. Finally arranging a breakfast stop at Frenchman's Café in Nevada had been the first victory for goose travel since we left the afternoon before.

This first leg—the 240 miles from the city and the sea, through full spring in the Sacramento valley, up into winter on the Sierra Nevada, down past Reno's lights through the vacant black desert to Frenchman's Café—had been marked by a quietly festering discord, the grudging coexistence of rival species. It was my car, my trip to Colorado. He came as a rider, to share driving and gas, on his way to Cleveland. We'd never met before and, from the first, our differences showed little promise of moderating with the comradeship of the road.

For one thing, that Kevin didn't like to stop and eat along the way began to irritate me beyond reason. Originally it had irritated me within reason, I think, as I've always needed to pause periodically for coffee and trash food while traveling. Kevin scorns all stimulants and foods prepared in public kitchens; also, he's a compulsive believer in "making good time." He had carried aboard a supermarket bag brimming with what he considered ample staples for the journey—cheeses, apples, crumbly
home-baked wheat bread, pounds of dried fruit—expensive apricots, muscatels, Chinese salted plums—and nuts of every variety. I can’t tolerate dried fruit or nuts. Even raisins. Even peanut butter.

At first he was generous, offering to divvy the health bag half-and-half, but generosity soon turned to condescension. I’d need coffee and he’d suggest cashews. I’d be driving, eyes fixed on the road’s white lines in the Sierra midnight, and perceive, near the rearview mirror, Kevin’s thumb and forefinger proffering a withered fig like some semiprecious gem, saying softly, “Try this. It’s good for you.”

In San Francisco I’d picked him up at Burns’s house, Burns being the mutual friend who arranged the ride. Unfolding the map I explained our initial, crucial decision. Two routes proceed from San Francisco east eventually to Denver, my destination. I-80, a little faster, but oppressively dull and beset with two hugely enervating obstacles: Salt Lake City and five hundred miles of Wyoming. U.S. 50, slower, riskier regarding availability of gas, but a scenic delight following the old, storied route of the Wells Fargo line. Either way would advance Kevin toward Cleveland, his goal. But, as this trip was in effect my valedictory to California, I’d prefer taking 50. After Reno, it goes through the heart of the Great Basin, through the silver mining and hot-spring country of Nevada, by the Utah canyon lands, over the Colorado Rockies. Besides, outside of Ely, Nevada, the magnificent valley beneath Wheeler Peak alone justifies taking the road less traveled by.

Kevin had nodded.

We boarded my brand new Pontiac Ventura, buckled up, and soon were tugging the basketball-orange U-Haul beast up the first of a hundred mountain inclines—like two lawmen bringing in a caged brute for bounty. The trailer did hold outlaw booty of a sort: detritus salvaged from a disastrous decade-long encounter with the State of California. Things hadn’t gone well there; not quite ruin, but all the rack I could handle—divorce, disintegration,
teeterings on the edge of madness—a history of conceits and failures somehow bound to the city itself. I now brought to a close the years of my twenties not with a bang, but with a shudder. San Francisco in March of 1974 had gotten a little edgy, to say the least. The Symbionese Liberation Army had just shanghaied Hearst's daughter, and the random murders called Zebra killings had everyone horrified and bewildered. The city's buoyance had caved in, as it regularly does, to a kind of manic gloom. One thinks of the earthquake at times like those, and of leaving town.

As Kevin and I and my U-Hauled past set out, my mind teemed, conflicted with thoughts of transit. There were two preoccupations: making this last trip a memorable exodus, lousy with symbols and deeper meanings, with resolution and revelation, the stuff of literature, that is, so I could come away from the Golden State with something to show for it; and getting there, to Colorado and presumably a new life. A wonderful change of fortune I still couldn't quite believe had saved me, that winter in San Francisco, from 'drowning in my accumulated fecklessness. Chris, with whom I'd lived two years after divorcing my first wife, had become pregnant, we'd decided to marry, and I'd gotten a great offer in Denver. Denver: landlocked, as safe as you could be from the earthquake. I flew Chris there the week before the trip, to begin house hunting, and she'd called that morning to describe the little gingerbread Victorian she'd found. When I got to Denver we would get married, in Pagosa Springs, just the two of us. This trip with Kevin was the last transcontinental step, the thread between a bootless past and a solid future. Much more than a good job, a new wife, a first birth waited at its conclusion. Across the Great Basin, just over the Continental Divide, a pellucid wholeness beckoned: concentric glowing rings—Colorado, the house there, the woman, Chris, inside, the child inside her—an aurora 1,300 miles to the east, "an orbed drop of light, and this is love." I couldn't begin to talk to Kevin of these things as I drove—of love and the urgency of what to do with it.
like fire when first discovered: Shall we boil beans and dry socks with it? Or put it to kindling forests and ravaging worlds? Or simply sit wonderingly, rapt with its beauty?). I did try to tell him about Wheeler Peak.

I babbled, in fact, of that mountain, its breathtaking cirque, its ancient trees, the grotesque forest of bristlecone pine that populates that place where other spirits must also reside. I babbled, while driving, to the point of obsession with this subject, until late in the night when, straining in the underpowered, overloaded car up Donner summit, I stopped midsentence, having gained audible evidence that Kevin was asleep. I was tired myself, set on stopping in Reno for slots and coffee. But some hours later Kevin awoke and produced the dispiriting desiccated fig. I was undone. We left Reno behind, sparkling in the cold crystal night. Dawn rose near Fallon and with it my mighty resolve to pause at Frenchman’s Café, after which Kevin would take the wheel.

I shook him awake. “Time for breakfast, Kevin. A mug of coffee and ham and eggs. Nothing improves scenery like ham and eggs, as Mark Twain, a Nevada patriot, once put it.”

About Kevin. Burns had called asking if I wanted a rider and of course I did. I didn’t much fancy pulling that trailer alone across the mountains; the trip promised to be slow, tortuous, expensive. A rider would cut costs, enable us to drive straight through, and perhaps make the journey more a pleasure than a chore. Burns seemed anxious, for some reason, that Kevin be delivered into good hands on his way to Cleveland, and I owed Burns a sizable favor for a sizable loan several years back. Burns did not know Kevin very well—the younger brother of a good friend of his, a shy kid, twenty-one, twenty-two years old, worked odd jobs in the city. And I learned little more about him than that, in the forty hours we were almost constantly together. There’s nothing objectionable about his appearance. Long blond hair in a ponytail, clean shaven, glasses,
about six feet tall. A well kempt hippie. In addition to gobbling dried fruits he smoked dope, joint after joint—a practice that began to bother me once he started driving.

Most striking about Kevin was his silence. I don’t hear very well and at most he barely whispered. At first I was afraid he couldn’t talk at all. We’d conduct rather difficult conversations. For example:

“So you’re going to Cleveland?”
Nod.

“Your folks there?”
Nod.

“So you’re headed back for a visit with your folks?”
Nod.

“What’s Cleveland like?”
Shrug.

It wasn’t that he seemed especially bashful; I don’t know what it was. San Francisco then had gotten, as they said, “heavy into ego-loss,” a matter of large metaphysical consequence I never understood. (I imagine it was an effort to dissociate from L.A., which has always been, as we know, heavy into ego-projection.) I figured that Kevin, being younger, was probably on top of this currently hippest phenomenon of San Francisco hipness. He was certainly beyond far out; he’d gotten down to the mellow mumble and, as it first appeared, seemed to have lost his ego irretrievably. Ego-loss, as I’ve indicated, did not interest me at the time. What interested me was more like ego-salvage: Chris, family, house, job, and so on.

Near Auburn, about three hours into the trip, as the sun lowered behind us into the gauzy green March of the Central Valley, we did have a two-way conversation of sorts, but it didn’t go much better; what Kevin said was so unsatisfactory.

We talked about San Francisco. I mentioned the Zebra killings (a group of black men had been corking off whites at random—housewives, delivery boys, pigeon feeders in the park), which I’d found fairly unsettling. Downright terrifying in fact. I asked Kevin if he felt any relief now that the Mother Lode hills lay between us and the violence of the Bay Area.
“I love San Francisco,” he mumbled. Well, yes, no doubt. And a great city it is. Very European, as they say. But, my God, there was weirdness rolling through that fog of late. Wasn’t there? “Just the goddam pigs,” he murmured.

Hmmm. The reference here was to police, not the murderers. The possibility of a very fundamental rift yawned between us. And I wanted this trip, my valedictory, to be a success.

“Have you traveled much cross-country before?” I shifted the subject.

“Once.”

“When?”

“Two years ago.”

“That was when you and your brother came out from Cleveland.” I filled in his information for him. He nodded.

“Which way did you come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you come through Wyoming and Salt Lake?”

“I don’t remember,” Kevin said, turning to me. “I don’t remember anything between Cleveland and the coast.”

He leaned into the back seat to delve in his health bag, coming up like a diver with a handful of macadamia nuts. Meantime I pondered what had been Kevin’s longest spoken sentence. Nothing, nothing in all that magnificence between Ohio and California impressed him; that unspeakable magnitude of geography, which ought to reduce a born and bred American to humble study of his land, failed to nick Kevin’s memory. This struck me as very bizarre. I, on the trip, would illuminate the Great West for this deprived soul.

I turned on the radio, twirled the tuner, landing fortuitously on a C&W station. Within a half-minute Kevin had jerked out his arm and snapped the radio off. “God I hate that shit,” he muttered.

“You do?” I stared, amazed at his incivility.

He nodded, grinding his molars on macadamia nuts. "Well, you’re going to have to put up with it.” I clicked
the radio back on. And I was going to have to put up with him. Besides needing his help driving and splitting expenses, I was obliged to Burns. No matter. We reeled along into the numinous twilight of the Sierras, banked like hooded giants before us, and I began to babble of Wheeler Peak. Kevin smoked a joint, graciously regularly passing it my way though I continued to refuse. I lit a cigarette; a look of mild horror crossed Kevin's face and he rolled down the window. The importunate little beggar. No matter. I turned up the heater and kept talking. Kevin rolled and smoked, rolled and smoked, and, by all appearances, listened throughout the evening.

I felt great. We were a hundred miles into Nevada with three hundred more to go—one good full fine day of Great Basin. The sky was as immaculate as my daughter's eye is now. There were likely to be few if any cars on U.S. 50 all day long. I could sleep as I wished, but I had no wish to sleep.

At Frenchman's Café, which we'd just left, we'd seen one of those strikingly peculiar sights that occur nowhere but in the maverick state of Nevada. I was sopping up the last of my over-easys (while Kevin nursed a glass of undrinkably sulfurous water), when a van, lettered TRANS-NEVADA BUS LINE, pulled up outside and the uniformed driver plus four ladies, three black, one white, wearing diminutive amounts of leather and lace, got out. They yawned and stretched, silhouetted against the cracked bed of a dry saline lake across the highway, and, behind that, shimmering, featureless, monochromatic distances of desert. They stood there as desultory as if passing time in some gilt and scarlet lobby on the Vegas strip. Inside, a rancher, looking up from the pool table, announced, "Here's Sammy with a load of whores." Evidently, the sole service of the Trans-Nevada Bus Line was to shuttle hookers cross state from Reno to Ely and back, and the driver always stopped for coffee at Frenchman's Café.
“How about that?” I remarked to Kevin. Kevin looked both puzzled and uncaring to be unpuzzled. “Whores!” I said. “Right dead in the middle of nowhere.” Kevin nodded and suggested that we better get moving.

He drove and I tried to sleep and couldn’t. I couldn’t sleep, I realized after we’d ventured twenty miles beyond Frenchman’s, because I’d contracted a case of Traveler’s Lust, a low-grade but pervasive horniness resulting from being up all night driving and thinking, triggered no doubt by the whores at the café. But the same complaint had struck other times when I was strung out from driving in that part of Nevada and was connected with the exhilaration of travel there, where speed and solitude, unbroken horizons and brilliant light, dispute thoughts of destination and confuse a linear imagination. Somehow passion haunts the sparse wastes; the dry wind excites and visions form. It is as though the car has reached the velocity of liberation, has escaped the old known earth. I wondered if Kevin could possibly sense it.

He drove, I thought, very poorly. He’d mentioned, when we switched places, that he hated American cars but that he could handle them alright as he’d driven a cab for a while in San Francisco. I found that hard to believe. Kevin of the mellow mumble as a garrulous cabby? But I knew it was true as soon as he began manhandling my car—taking first gear to 45 mph, steering, stopping, careening downhill without the least regard for the two-thousand-pound buffalo hitched to the rear bumper and fighting us all the way. A radical change came over Kevin as soon as he took the wheel. Even as a passenger he’d never made peace with the infamous seat belt interlock system that encumbers my Pontiac, mumbling with increasing ill humor when each time after stopping he forgot to latch himself in place. But now the mumble became a decided mutter with an aggressive edge quite uncharacteristic of ego-loss. At every pothole he cursed my car’s suspension; at every incline he damned its miserable six-cylinder engine. He began rolling and smoking again. That calmed him down but not me.
As we topped the crest of Railroad Pass between Fallon and Austin, engine pulling under its burden, rods, I was sure, about to be hurled through the hood straight up into the bright eye of the sun, we were abruptly confronted with an enormous black hole in the sky. Immediately it was upon us—the classic Basin banzai squall. The blue sky shuttered to an inky gloom, reticulated with lightening. Gusts nudged us from side to side like a cat with a mouse, and as Kevin roared down the tail of the pass, the trailer began to whip. Hailstones the size of dried figs polka-dotted the enveloping darkness then turned to a heavy muddy rain. Sheetflooding coursed down the Toiyabes and a river formed before us, in rapids across the highway.

"SLOW DOWN!" I hollered, hastily adding, "SLOWLY! Slow down slowly!"

Kevin looked terrified; I was terrified, but we splashed safely through the sheetwater at the foot of the pass and soon cruised slowly forth. I suggested that Kevin turn on the headlights. He did. Take it easy, he said, and I tried.

We were passing through hot-spring country, I informed Kevin, thinking a little conversation might ease the tension. A few seconds later, through the mists to the front right a pale elongation of steam gathered shape—Antelope Hot Springs—expending its heat from the center of the earth into an ice-bitten lunar world smoking with fog in mid-Nevada. It was almost as a vision called forth by my suggestion of it, and by my memory of stopping in the next valley south a year ago with Chris.

It had been June 1973, one of the first of our trips investigating possibilities east of California. Traveler's Lust smote us both outside Austin; fortunately we were together and near a hot spring. Veering with abandon from the straight and narrow macadam we toiled through billows of alkaline dust for twelve miles to Emigrant Spring. It bubbles merrily at the exact midpoint of an enormous cratered playa, a ruthlessly barren concavity zoned entirely by eleven-thousand-foot mountains. Someone had built a small rectangular concrete pool to
catch the hot turquoise water; someone had left a picnic table, with benches bolted to it, oddly floating in the pool. We arrived wrapped in dust, stripped, swam, and made love in those amniotic waters. We chased each other naked across stretches of tufa and sand, screamed into the echoless immensity, and returned to the benediction of the anabaptismal pool. We sat face to face on the benches, drinking beer on the floating table, spinning slowly counterclockwise, half in hot water, half in alpine air, beneath the noon sun and cobalt sky, rotating slowly eye to eye in the primal torque of the girdling ring of snow-topped peaks. We left transformed in the Basin’s spell.

This time, of course, things went much differently, with tongue-tied Kevin, not Chris, my companion. He drove with two-fisted fixation; I closed my eyes and drifted into a waking dream of oily, black-skinned hooers sprawled on hot white sand. I hadn’t really slept, but I had to.

Not far from Austin in mid-Nevada the storm rose, literally rose a couple of miles into the air, and we could watch its unabated fury, its long curls of rain evaporating before they reached the earth, stray steadily to the south in an otherwise empty sky. I suggested to Kevin that we stop for beer in Austin. He didn’t respond and I felt obliged to explain. I’d be driving next and I’d gotten too wired up to get any sleep. Beer would relax me.

Kevin frowned. He was silent for fifteen or twenty minutes. He appeared to be deep in thought.

“It wouldn’t be cool,” he finally said quietly.

“What?”

“Juicing.”

“What!”

“It’s not right,” Kevin said. “Drinking and driving.”

I couldn’t believe it. This doper who’d been risking my life and ruining my car all morning suddenly a moralist over a can of beer.

“I’d rather hitch,” he said.

“Go ahead. Of course we haven’t even seen a car for the last 150 miles. And if you saw one they wouldn’t stop.” The bitch of it was that I needed him now, after no sleep for nearly thirty hours; I needed someone to drive.
Kevin grumbled and within a few minutes we ascended the curving approach into the crumbling little silver town of Austin. At my direction he pulled in front of the Austin Hotel's palely glowing Oly sign. He got out to prepare and selfishly consume a gouda and wheat-bread sandwich. I sidled into the hotel—one of Nevada’s oldest whorehouses—and returned untempted with a six-pack.

I could see it coming as we prepared to press on. Kevin, absorbed in his teetotalism, outraged at my abuse of privilege—a six-pack—forgot what one must not forget in a 1974 Pontiac. He turned the key, the damnable buzzer rang, red lights flashed. He grabbed the loose seat belt, ripped it toward him, flung it away, jamming his elbow against the door and evidently injuring his funny bone.

"GODDAM this fucking piece of tin," he yelled.

"SHUT UP," I yelled back.

I circled the car, opened his door, and told him to get out. Either stick out your thumb, I said, or move over and keep your bullshit to yourself, because I was going to drive. He moved over; I drove. From Austin to Eureka, to Ely, where the sun set in lurid flames behind the vapors of Kennecott Copper, throughout the afternoon, I drank beer upon beer, Kevin smoked joint upon joint, both of us in silence, neither thinking about the land we passed, both thinking very separate thoughts.

There are few contiguities more dissimilar than the states of Nevada and Utah. They share nothing but an overlapping Basin geography. Utah is sanctimonious, shrill, and suspicious. Strangers are treated not merely as curiosities but as contaminants. Nevada is open, free, the most lawless place in the land—sublimely profane. Nevada is, consequently somehow, the more vital and beautiful place. Strangers there are everyone.

Wheeler Peak stands thirty miles east of Ely; thirty more miles past the mountain is the Utah line. On the outskirts of Ely I balked at the prospect of contending with the long and treacherous Mormon night. I knew Kevin would be
hard to convince. Since Mormons, I said, putting it as rationally as I could, go to bed at nine o’clock, gasoline is hard to come by afterward in Utah. With that in mind, and considering my own fatigue, and considering that, should we proceed we’d miss seeing Wheeler by day—something we both, I trusted, looked forward to—prudence remained in laying over this evening in Ely and breaking camp early enough to catch dawn behind the mountain.

Kevin, as usual, said nothing, which I chose to regard as compliance. With a beery, weary purposefulness I negotiated the town and parked behind the Eldorado Hotel and Casino. I walked inside and booked a room for two. Above the desk hung a short, crook-backed branch, like a piece of driftwood, pranked out with a sequined inscription: “Ely, Nevada Home of Bristlecone Pine WORLD’S OLDEST LIVING THING!” The lobby opened on a casino, deserted but for four or five old-timers in bolo ties playing cards.

Undismayed, I returned outside for my dop kit and Kevin, his health bag and backpack, were gone. On the dash I found a twenty-dollar bill and note: Hitching on. Can’t afford the time and money for room. Here’s my share for gas. Good luck, Kev.

Kev?? The fool. I locked the car, went inside, arranged for a room, and brooded at the bar. An hour passed and still I sat glumly, lacking even the energy to pull on any of the hundred glittering slots. I considered, as thoughtfully as I could, calling Chris in Colorado, but couldn’t muster the will for that. I didn’t want to talk to her just then. I didn’t want to talk to the bartender or anybody; I’d talked myself out.

I couldn’t call Chris, I realized, because, alone now in this bright little town, I had to resolve things myself. A beer-soaked thought occurred that even here, beached in Ely, six hundred miles from the city, halfway home, I still hadn’t been able to shake loose of California.

There were two alternatives: sleep long and deep and face Wheeler and Utah fresh in the morning—follow the
vision of Emigrant Spring back to Chris, pregnant in Colorado—keep it whole; or cave in to entropy in Ely, indulge my last chance in one of several casino-whorehouses before our private wedding next week in Pagosa. The choices thus were clear: recklessness or responsibility. Keep it, or lose it.

Desire began to well up once more, almost as a pent-up response to Kevin’s purities. Now that he had left it was as though he had been, oddly, a restraining, responsible influence. Yet there seemed a kind of crude intent in his twenty-dollar bill, the standard price of an Ely trick. I wandered undecided through the now vacant casino to the front door, like a cat drawn to a fish market. But outside, incredibly, enchantingly in the arcs of neon aureoles, snow dropped densely and gently and a good two inches already quilted the highway. The way it was sticking it had to be cold. The next town was 140 miles and no one would be out tonight. The fool.

I scraped the windshield, unlocked the door, latched in, and turned the car into town, leaving curlicue tracks in the parking lot, sluie smoothly back onto U.S. 50. I passed through the dazzling, silent place east toward the wilderness. I couldn’t leave him alone in a snowstorm in the dead center of the Great Basin. He might, he actually might die. But he might by then already be in Utah, happily headed for Cleveland in someone’s VW bus, or in a semi, offering a bewildered trucker a toke. Still I kept driving stupidly, ever more slowly, inexorably toward Wheeler Peak. I had to find him; I needed to find him.

After no more than a few hundred yards the lights of Ely vanished, as though the town, and all humanity, had suddenly disappeared. The highway dissolved with the desert into one white surface. It was coldly quiet except for the purling of the car’s slow tread, tires grinding at the icy crust like rowels. I began to lose sight of the object of the quest, though the sense of quest grew more and more
intense. I was fully aware of the almost laughably bizarre situation I dragged myself toward: driving alone, obsessively, at no more than ten miles per hour, sedulously combing the roadside for Kevin, though there was nothing, nothing to see in the whirling chaos outside, and surely no one, not even an empty ranch house for God knew how far. Still I kept tracking into no-man’s-land with an increasingly strange image of myself: a car towing an orange steel box stuffed with my past, struggling across the white lifeless face of the earth, across a planet drowning in unceasing tides of snow—an image of the absurd and saving will of the solitary family man, searching for something, a purpose to keep his life of a piece.

The odds were against us. I wouldn’t find him, would have to turn back—a disturbing thought: trying to wheel the car and trailer around the other way on an invisible road. Then I’d have to report him lost. Missing person—an apt identity for Kevin, with his fogged brain, his wholesome snacks, his uncomprehending remove from everything, mumbling out alone into the swarming brutality of the night. They might not find the body for days, if ever. If they never found him, what then? He might have somehow made it through; he might have vanished, just vanished, subsumed into the wanton desert. I would have to call Cleveland: your son may have frozen to death in the Great Basin.

And if they did find him, it would be like . . . like the Face in the Glacier? Tyndal Glacier in Colorado, where decades ago a woman, climbing at its rim, had fallen. Rangers didn’t locate the body, for good reason. The glacier had swallowed it up. But every seven years, the story goes, she appears, four or five feet down in transparent ice, as the glacier’s slow heave lifts her for a few days near the surface, clearly visible from the rim above. No one could reach her now, so she will stay there, rising and sinking in the ponderous, aching flow of ice. The face, they say, looks puzzled. The lips are parted, brow intent, eyes wide, ice brightened, staring in perpetual mystification. The fingers stretch taut, the arms twist up at the sky.
I shuddered. It might happen to both of us, the Family Man and the Missing Person, the two lone fools in the storm. It might happen just to me, piled in a drift, or skidding and tumbling, car and trailer, down to some raw death. And no one was looking for me.

It seemed like I’d driven for hours, though I couldn’t have covered more than five miles. I was ready to quit, if only I could turn around. But there he was. Stock-still, an apparition behind the flowing curtain of snow—stiff and caked white, awkwardly holding his bag of cheeses, nuts, and fruits, arm and thumb extended rigid as bone toward the car’s two cones of light.

I rolled to a stop alongside him. He fumbled furiously at the door, set down the health bag, and went at it with both hands—obviously numb and useless. He finally pried open the door, dumped his bag and pack in the back, and sat down on the unbuckled seat belt. The buzzer rang like a siren in the hush of the night, and Kevin raised up, startled. I helped him strap on the belt. He sighed and let out a lugubrious snuffle, clearly frozen half through.

“Thanks,” he said. “For stopping.”

“You better believe it. What in hell did you think you were doing? Walking out into a blizzard in the middle of the night in the desert! Did you actually think anyone would be driving tonight? Why didn’t you go back to town? What’s wrong with you?”

He snuffled again, rubbed his hands in front of the heater fan.

“Are you suicidal?”

“No.”

“Then you’re hopeless,” I said, and he appeared to nod his head. “You’re inhuman. Do you realize that I saved your life?”

Kevin looked puzzled—the pure, solitary bewilderment of the face trapped in ice. Unreachable helplessness.

“Forget it,” I said. “You’ll thaw out.”

“I left you some money for gas,” he stuttered from the cold.

“Yes. Thanks.” So we’d settled accounts. We sat quiet in
the warm idling car for a few minutes. The snow was thinning and the indistinct glow of the moon began showing through to the east. "Well," I said, and Kevin looked up expectantly. He seemed adequately abashed—nothing like a little exposure to the elements for that. He was probably chastened enough to be a competent driver now, if not companion. "Well, we might as well keep going. I'll drive us over the pass. You'll warm up by then and we can stop for coffee in Delta."

He nodded.

Once the night cleared and the three-quarter moon marked out terrain, the boundaries of the road, it wasn't too bad. Fairly soon the bristlecone forest began—two trees on the right, one further up on the left, then, around a curve, thick ranks of the stubby, man-sized, convoluted, primeval pines, lining the roadside, interpreting the highway's turns, depth, and grade, like guides with arms and fingers pointing the way over the pass.

As we climbed a hill Wheeler Peak rose, gigantic and luminous, from behind a gray ridge. The bleak, formless night had resolved into an exquisite mountain, caparisoned with new snow, glowing under a gem-clear moon. Above its clean, white shanks the cirque gaping, a deep black rictus fringed with light. Desolation had reared up into menace. It seemed to consolidate . . . what? This trip, this passage, bulked up in one indomitable form?

I'd stupidly strayed onto a glistening patch of ice, and more stupidly braked; the car and trailer began to fishtail out of control. It was exhilarating, the danger, the loose, gliding grace of the skid, the anarchy of ice. The mountain oscillated in the windshield. If it swung clear off to the side, that would be it: we'd be spinning off the road. But it stayed, steadied to the front. Tires hit pavement and I could steer again, dead on toward Wheeler Peak, like a huge lodestone, attracting, ordering the wayward energies of the night.

Behind it lay black Utah, through which I'd sleep, and above Utah in the east the flat-sided orb of the moon. I would dream that night of cities, subside into the world of
women and men, where life resides, where in a few months my daughter would be born. And the first human gesture would not be a scream, but the unfolding of a tiny red hand, inch-long fingers touching at the unfamiliar air. We passed around and away from the mountain, behind us, in the west now. It lowered slowly, some ancient, living glacial creature, keeper of secrets I'd rather not know. Or, only a mammoth, austere, indifferent fist of rock. Just past the border we switched places. Kevin drove, and we made good time.
Jumping-Off Place

Mack Brown was early. The airport bars at San Antonio International were not yet open. He wandered to the mezzanine and, sitting alone, passed the time before the flight in reflection. He freed his mind of small concerns. He compared himself with other men and to the way he used to be. Gazing out the plate window at the huge blue sky, he concentrated on the image he knew he struck: A man hitting his stride. A man for whom each moment could break open bright new worlds of adventure and delight. Confident, and resolute, he rose to obey the voice instructing him to board at Gate 16.

“Dallas or Denver?” the Braniff attendant asked him, hand extended for the ticket, fingers snapping silently, impatiently.

“I’m not particular,” he smiled.

The attendant took the ticket, scanned it. “You’re checked through to Denver, layover in Dallas twenty minutes. Smoking or non?”

“Smoking.”

“Aisle or window?”

“Aisle, definitely the aisle;” Mack Brown said, giving the attendant a confidential wink and a grin, his characteristic gesture, his trademark.

“Pleasant flight.”

Mack Brown joined the ten or twelve other passengers in the waiting area—elegant Mexicans who would shop in Dallas, stetsoned Texans, a vaguely nervous looking group of airmen, a mother and child. Home and family were on their minds, he observed. Home would not absorb his life and purpose again, and he marked his distance from them. Thirtyish (thirty-two in fact); styled, longish hair; neat mustache; engaging smile. This great suit; three piece but a bright wide plaid. The Burberry raincoat over his arm. And these new shoes. Divorce would not cripple
Jumping-Off Place

him as it had so many men he knew, and so few women. Divorce would free him, and he would take advantage of his freedom.

His ambition was to do well and also to live well. The week in San Antonio had been exhilarating, but incomplete. He’d worked hard to win over the Lone Star Beer people and had secured the Denver distributorship for their imported wine division. It would increase his market 15, maybe 20 percent, and was his first big break. It had required technique, the skillful execution of the first principle of sales—to sell the product you must sell yourself—and it was an exacting and worthy challenge. Trust, confidence, respect, these, like love and grace, one had to earn. The rest was mere ingratiation and anyone could do it.

It remained to turn his abilities to personal as well as business advantage, and he was eager to do so. He was eager for departure, for the trip itself. He had his book, Fear of Flying, an old book of his ex-wife’s, debris of the divorce, but in this situation the perfect touch. And he had his aisle seat.

Little stood in the way of his ambition. He was his own boss, mastering his own destiny. He lived by himself in the best condominium in Lakewood, with the best stocked private bar in Colorado. Life and work blended like a well-mixed drink, as they had never, with Betty, been able to before. He would roll back the walnut panels for the Lone Star man, or the Brown-Foreman distillery people, and even for the Hennessy rep when he came to Denver, revealing the hundreds of neatly ranged, dusted, glistening bottles, lit from behind. The liquor spoke for itself, spoke for him: Barbancourt rum, Dickel bourbon, Dimple Haig, Remy Martin “Louis XIII,” a complete decade of Vosne-Romanee wines, the 1946 Chateau Lafite he was saving—not for another wedding night; for the last supper, a toast to a life lived to the hilt, to possibilities seized and subjected to his fancy. “Occupational hazard,” he would say, with a wink and a grin, letting his liquor, the finest blend of work and life, speak for him to his business
guests. "Occupational hazard," he would think also sometimes to himself, alone in his Mission Viejo condominium, listening to the Jazz Crusaders on Chrisman speakers, alone sipping thoughtfully his fourth Bombay gin martini, feeling finally a little sleepy.

Little stood in the way of his ambition but the fact that, at five six, he was a short man, and self-conscious about it. Yet many great men were also short—Caesar, Napoleon, Alexander the Great—and all men were equals sitting down. And these beautiful new shoes, tan patent leather, buckled, platform shoes, purchased yesterday in San Antonio, these shoes would be the first big step (he smiled) toward his success. They meant more than fashion. They meant personality.

The flight was boarding and its dozen passengers lined up at the security gate, some a bit irritated at the intrusion of X rays on handbags, others glumly filing through. But Mack Brown kept his humor. He walked with a wink and a grin under the metal doorway; back again at the lady guard's request; removed penknife, change, keys, full money clip; stepped through again, joking and confident—the high bouncing businessman, his own boss—and down the ramp toward the waiting entrance of the gaudy aquamarine Braniff jet. He had nothing to hide, nothing to fear. Mack Brown, with platform shoes, had reached the jumping-off place.

* * *

The plane ripped past runway, blurred weeds and wildflowers, a puzzled jackrabbit, nosed up and lost the earth. As it banked in a wide arc toward Dallas, the spare luxury of San Antonio spring lost features, tilted and leveled, telescoped into only a piece of a map. Old Texas was gone: cedar brakes, then blue-stem prairie, then the mesquite and acacia savanna—far away out the window a wide cambered land, annealed by sun and history, a region of missions and ranchos grandes from which long ago great adventures were launched. It was not a place
Mack Brown knew except that it had been flowered and green, luminous, full of music, birds, and dark-eyed women, while Denver would be snowbound by yesterday's April storm. At the first bing and signal from the panel he lit a cigarette. At the second bing he unlatched his seat belt and turned from the window. The window did not interest him; the aisle did.

He opened his book. Only two stewardesses on this 727 ministered to the scattered passengers. One was quite pretty: blond, nicely built, almost glamorous; she'd smiled coolly at her charges, pointed to exits, and donned an oxygen mask with mannered gestures that Mack Brown found provocative. Of the other stewardess he wondered why they hired homely girls and he felt sorry for her.

Elbow propped on seat arm he held Fear of Flying at eye level, conspicuously angled to the aisle, as the pretty one made her way toward him. She interrupted his reading, asked if he cared for coffee and a roll. Mack Brown decided to begin by ordering a Bloody Mary.

"No cocktails on the morning flight."

He motioned with the book toward the forward cabin. A fat man in a western suit hunched over a tiny Smirnoff bottle on his tray table, unscrewing its tiny cap. "I guess I'm like that fellow," he said, winked and grinned. "Can't wake up without a Bloody Mary. Occupational hazard."

Next Mack Brown would explain. The occupation: independent wine and liquor distributor. Takes you all over the country. Might be going to France next year in fact, then the German wineries. Was just down with the Lone Star people, Texas importers, and locked up the Rocky Mountain region for their labels. It does mean a lot of traveling, of course, but he was learning to enjoy flying. She must too. By the way, he would then ask, had she seen this book? It doesn't have much to do with flying, he would smile.

But her professional courtesy had hardened into sullen resolve. "No cocktails," she said, "on the morning flight in coach."

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, so Mack Brown
began explaining how to compose the perfect Bloody Mary (dill weed, stick of celery, Ro-tel tomato juice, Stolichnaya vodka).

"Excuse me, sir," she said, tight-lipped. "This is a forty-minute run to Dallas and I've got a planeload of people to see to. Can I get you coffee or a roll?"

He shook his head and she was gone, mincing down the aisle, offering the same to those who weren't dozing. Stuck up, he concluded moodily; he returned to the book. The book was getting good.

But reading didn't distract him from his preoccupation, his ambition. He considered how far he'd come. It seemed a lifetime, though not yet two years, since he had quit working for Fuelco, and the bitterness was not completely gone. He was bitter for having swallowed Fuelco's pitch: that the driver-salesman position was a stepping-stone to management, where the president himself had begun. Seven years he'd waited to get on the fast track, and at the end he was still bucking fifty-five-gallon drums, chasing orders, stacking quarts of oil on K-Mart shelves. A glorified truck driver, someone said near the end, and he'd wondered what that meant, glorified.

Their priorities had been dead wrong—home, security, their sacrifices for the company, the three-bedroom house they'd bought anticipating promotions and children that were never to exist. That was the root of their problems; it wasn't his fault and it wasn't her fault, though he'd turned away from her, then she from him, until he could hardly stand to be around her, and she could hardly stand his touch. It wasn't as though she didn't fit into his plans, his new life, though that was true. It was as though she'd conspired in his failure, by preferring him in the company to him alone. Now his priorities had changed. Now he knew what he needed. Once he'd heard a girl say, "I'm a people person." It was nothing he'd ever say, but it was what he wanted to be.

He reflected on his reading, on Isadora Wing's dreams and adventures. What the world needs, he thought, is more women like her. And the world must be full of them:
Jumping-Off Place

Dallas, Denver, and for sure Paris, France. The pretty one returned balancing a tray of cups and paper plates, the top two buttons of her Paisley Braniff blouse undone. She passed him, hips turning, the blue skirt tight across the tangent where her thighs met and the nylon crisped.

The homely one followed up the aisle and stopped at his seat behind him. "Fun book," she said.

"What?" He was startled at being addressed. "Have you read it?"

" Couldn't put it down."

"It is interesting," Mack Brown was disarmed: a spar­rowy little woman, clerical in glasses, black hair balled and pinned like a cook. "I find it interesting because it's written from a female point of view."

"That's not the only reason," she smiled. A pleasant smile. "We're about to land, and..."

"Well..." Mack Brown hesitated—the same hesitation (he was at once aware and chagrined) of stopping at the Safeway counter to deliberate whether a fifty-cents-off bone-in round steak would do for dinner alone that night. "Well," he winked and grinned. He suggested she sit across the aisle for the landing and continue the conversation.

"The seat belt sign is on," she said. He hadn't noticed the first bing. "Return your tray table to the back of your seat. Put your briefcase under your seat and,"—bing—"please put out your cigarette." She smiled again, not unpleasantly. "Friend," she said. "Forget it." She staggered off, bracing herself in the choppy descent, and disappeared.

The view from the window was dismal: loops of clover­leaves and straight tapes of highway, endless unoccupied runways putted over the drab prairie, the diagrammatic linked circles of the terminals. The Dallas—Ft. Worth Inter­regional, the world's largest airport, as the pilot announced. The airport of the future.

* * *

The boarding in Dallas had nothing of San Antonio's
insouciance. Seats were quickly located and suit jackets stowed above; *Dallas Morning Newses* fluttered open up and down the aisle like egrets taking wing. This was a conscientious, almost grim party of men. Home was not on their minds. Work was. Work had subsumed life, as is Dallas's nature. Mack Brown was glad he hadn't de-boarded, hadn't had to hassle with security—his keys, knife, money clip—twice in a morning. Mack Brown no longer felt himself a debonair.

The plane was nearly full when a girl, tall, ungainly, bewildered, came stumbling into the aisle, stepping one direction then the other, swatting newspapers and shirt sleeves with the huge brimming-over laundry bag she hugged with great difficulty. After a half-dozen inquiries she was directed to Mack Brown. She struggled across his knees, squirmed securely into the window seat beside him.

"Is this *my* seat?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he said. She handed him her boarding pass. It was.

"Oh thank you," she said. She thrust furiously at the laundry bag, Mack helped, and they managed to fit it partially under the seat, mostly between her legs.

"Thank you so much," she said, her bony knee-cap jabbing at his. "This is my first plane ride and I'm *so* excited. My name's Melanie Jones. What's yours?"

"Mack Brown." Just his luck that day, he thought. Melanie Jones—a big, skinny, unhealthy-looking kid (a good five nine; taller than he even in new shoes), no older than sixteen, seventeen tops—Melanie Jones was excited, and Mack Brown only wanted his book.

"Have you been in Denver before?" she asked urgently, suddenly looking absolutely anguished.

"Oh yes."

"I've got to get a bus in Denver and I just know I'll get lost. I'll *never* find it by myself. Will you help me when we get there?"

"Where are you going?"

The worry vanished, her eyes widened, she whispered
close to him, Vail. She pronounced it Vayul and she squealed happily.

“No problem.” Mack said. The bus, he knew, left directly from the airport. He prepared to resume Fear of Flying, but the plane had taxied to the runway and Melanie Jones required his help with her seat belt.

Melanie Jones had done a lot of exciting things in her life but nothing quite like taking off in an airplane. She couldn’t believe it: the power pulling at her cheeks, the whole world surging past. Then she pressed her face to the cold double window and saw the vast prairie sink and turn and the scattered shocks of cloud falling beneath them. She wheeled to Mack Brown and grabbed his arm.

“Scared?” he asked.

“Oh no! It’s so fun.”

She beamed. Texas was gone. She was sick of Texas and when she’d seen the story on Vail she knew that was the place. “Do you go to Colorado a lot?”

He closed the book. “I live there.”

“You live there? I’d die to live in Colorado. Where do you live, in Denver?”

“Lakewood.”

“Is that in the mountains?”

“No. It’s near Denver.”

“Denver’s not in the mountains?”

“No.”

She was crestfallen. The poor unattractive kid, Mack thought. A lurid excess of makeup, a wild bush of bleached hair. A massive dose of Clearasil masoned in pink lumps about her face, like the first phase of giant hives. “It’s only two hours to Vail, though,” he said.

Melanie Jones proceeded to tell him about her plans. She came into a lot of money, $850, and just up and left. Left her aunt’s house in Abilene—her parents were dead, had been dead awhile. Car wreck. She’d already quit running orders at the Dairy Queen a couple weeks now. And when you think, if she’d been working she’d never been driving that morning west of town—Abilene got so dull; nothing to do but drive—when she spun off the road.
But if she hadn’t spun off the road she’d never have got the $850 (about twice what the durn Dodge Dad left was worth), the $850 settlement from insurance and still be down, right down there in the flatlands. Not up here, headed to Vayul, and the mountains, and the parties.

The jet passed through a brilliant sky across the panhandle south of Amarillo, directly over the Palo Duro canyon. The patchwork of perfectly level irrigated plains reached abruptly the ragged rim of the canyon, graven into the view below in fine layers of purple and gold. Beyond lay the red beds of the Comancheria, where the great herds, the longhorn and bison, had been chivied and driven and finally destroyed. This, the Palo Duro, was the jumping-off place to the West, and from her new height Melanie Jones turned against it, a dark scar, turned from the window toward Mack Brown. Melanie Jones had taken off. She was flying to Colorado to ski.

• • •

“How does it work?” she asked Mack Brown. She strained, pulling at the bottom of her tray table.

“Howmm?” He’d been reading again, half-absorbed in his book, half-fantasizing. The stewardesses were marching back and forth serving lunch, and the pretty one had stooped two seats ahead to retrieve a fumbled cup and napkin. He’d watched rapt, agape, and she had caught him. She had drilled him with a look of unequivocal unpitying annoyance and contempt, and he had gone back to reading.

“They said,” Melanie Jones continued, referring to the intercom, “to put your tray table down if you want lunch and I can’t get it to work.” Mack Brown reached over to twist the catch at the top and lower the tray for her. It rested precariously on her laundry bag.

“Oh thank you,” she smiled. “Aren’t you having any?”

“No. Dieting.”

“Dieting? What do you mean?” she said. “You have a wonderful physique for a man.”
“Well thank you.” He winked and grinned.

The homely one handed him Melanie’s lunch—Salisbury steak, limas, mashed potatoes, roll and butter, an agglutinated cherry cobbler—and he handed it on. The homely one looked from Melanie to Mack, shook her head. Mack ordered a martini.

“I’m a vegetarian,” Melanie confided to him. “I’ve only been one a month but it’s working wonders. Of course it is hard.” She scraped her Salisbury steak onto a coffee saucer. “But you really feel healthy, you really do.” She reached across, awkwardly holding the saucer with its little patty—smothered, as they say, in gluey gravy—in front of Mack.

“Oh no,” he said.

“You should eat something,” Melanie said, poking it at him.

“No. No thanks.”

“O.K.” She sighed and began spooning in the cherry cobbler. “Know what my biggest problem is?” she asked.

“No idea.”

“These.” She fetched a pack of Parliaments from her purse. “What’s the good of giving up meat if you can’t quit smoking?”

“Absolutely right.” Mack Brown was amused, enjoying her.

“But I’ve smoked for years,” she said. “I smoke like a fish.”

“A fish?”

“Oh no. . .” She covered her mouth, dropped a spoonload of cobbler. “I mean chimney.”

Mack Brown guffawed.

The homely one appeared with two tiny bottles, glass and ice. He chided her about the price, the lack of olive or Gibson onion. He emptied the little test tube of Gordon’s gin over the ice and expressed a dollop of vermouth on top. He sipped and smiled, reached across and held it unsteadily for Melanie Jones.

“Oooh!” She wrinkled her nose. “How can you stand it?”

“Occupational hazard,” Mack Brown said. He pro-
ceeded to tell her what he did. His work, his travel, his private bar, his stereo, the important people he knew. How well he was doing; how well he lived. That he was his own boss and wouldn't have it any other way. Melanie Jones was impressed and urged him on. He talked, enjoying himself, and watched her, stroking the cool beaded plastic glass, and watched her legs, blue jeans spread so artlessly, and felt her kneecap against his.

She shrieked.
“What is it?”
“LOOK!”

The plane had banked slightly and out the window they could see immediately below two small round cones, spattered with snow—odd incipient Rockies at the northern corner of Texas, like lighthouses designating land's end. Behind these, still distant against the pale afternoon, the horizon was frothed with snowcaps, and Melanie Jones could not speak. The plane bore on in an empty sky, on a north northwest azimuth tracking the Goodnight Loving Trail, and the mountains gathered definition. The great weaving cordillera of the Sangre de Cristos, then the glistening ranks of the Colorado Rockies—the terrible, the wonderful, the unknown places that meant to Melanie adventure and delight—the frozen fastnesses where no one dwelled, not a soul.

“Oh Lord save me;” she almost whispered; she chewed her lip. “Just look.”

• • •

He’d have nothing to do when they arrived, 2 P.M., Mountain Time (“Their time?” Melanie had said when she asked him. “Our time,” he’d corrected her). No boss to report to at work, and no one at home. That’s how he wanted it, of course, but the days could get empty, living alone. He decided that after they landed he would drive her downtown toward the main Greyhound station. He’d caution her about Vail Pass, that Eisenhower Tunnel was
probably snowpacked, convince her to catch a morning bus. Then he’d show her around downtown, maybe stop at the Mint. Or they might go straight to Mission Viejo. Tonight he’d take her out, to the Quorum, no, to the Magic Pan: crepes—less expensive, and she’d surely never had them. The poor kid, he thought, watching her stare at the window. Skinny, scatterbrained, friendless, absolutely alone. She’d stay with him in Lakewood (No, he’d say, it’s not in the mountains, but it’s toward them). Then go to Vail, go home, whatever.

The jet droned north, skirting the mountains up a corridor just east of the Front Range, then almost squarely over the beautifully riven hulk of Pikes Peak, he informed her to her amazement.

“What are the dark parts?” she asked.

“Trees.”

Soon the plane veered sharply away from the mountains, dipped a wing, and began a precipitous downward spiral. “Mack,” she said, upset, “I’ll just be lost. I just know it. You will find the right bus for me?”

He nodded, smiled and winked. “Don’t worry.” He explained that she would have to leave from the downtown station; said he had nothing better to do, he’d drive her over in his car. Maybe see a little of Denver before she had to go.

“You angel. I’m so glad I sat by you.”

“Here,” he said. “Let’s get that seat belt fastened.” She watched as the ailerons lowered, the wing seeming to break in half. Sun struck the window and blanched the view with glare. She turned to Mack Brown and smiled, trembled her lip a bit, raised an arm on the support next to his. The landing gear clanked loudly down beneath her feet, as though the floor were giving way. “Mack,” she said. “I think I’m scared.” He took her hand and held it firmly through the landing and until the plane had stopped at the terminal gate.

Mack Brown shouldered Melanie Jones’s laundry bag, led her by the elbow to baggage claim, retrieved his hanging bag and her tiny overnight case. He told her to wait
there with the bags, he'd be back in a minute in the car.

She watched him go, stepping jauntily in his funny high-heeled shoes, in his bright plaid suit in the bright sun. Snow sparkled on roofs and in troughs along curbs. A veil of water dripped like rain from the eave above the glass door he'd pushed through. Inside, next to the door, a line had formed at the Colorado Bus Company counter. The marquee above the counter announced an immediate departure for Idaho Springs—Frisco—Vail—Glenwood Springs—Aspen. "Vayul," she murmured, and looked again through the door as Mack Brown disappeared among vast glittering levels of parked cars. "The little guy lied to me."

He turned the car in between two cabs near the bus and found her waiting to board in a noisy crowd of kids in cowboy hats and orange or blue down parkas, bearing skis, with poles and shiny plastic-cased ski boots swinging from hands. She mounted the steps behind a Robert Redford type, his sunburned face white around the eyes. She noticed Mack Brown and waved, pointed to his luggage on the sidewalk, pointed to herself, then pointed to the bus, mouthed something—see y'all later—waved again and vanished.

Mack Brown walked with his briefcase and hanging bag through the baggage area, milling with impatient Denverites anxious to pluck up their suitcases from the metal carousels and clap spurs for home. He entered a room marked cocktails; he ordered a martini. No point in going home yet, not yet. There would be nothing to do there, no one there at all. He opened his book, held it close to his face in the dim light at the little table. He read, absorbed, not noticing the two Braniff stewardesses at the bar (the pretty one with a steward, the homely one with a captain), not noticing the fat-thighed, hot-pantsed waitress, not noticing a soul.
The Canaries of Lisbon,
the Giant Carp of Japan

1. Freak Accident

In 1961, as you perhaps recall, a private airplane, a Cessna 150, sailed through a snowstorm to land on the main street of Amble, South Dakota, hitting and killing a pedestrian, and coasting to a gentle stop in front of the Amble County Courthouse. The courthouse, a plain, yellow sandstone cube, ringed twice by plate windows, is the biggest building in that part of the state. The Cessna’s propeller twirled in the falling snow like a majorette’s baton, then slowed and jerked and stopped with a shudder. You may have seen the picture in the papers, the plane before the courthouse steps like a float in a parade. The snowflakes were big, wet, and widely spaced, distinctly visible in the Wirephoto. They looked like confetti.

I was fifteen and had been watching the snow, the first of the fall, from the window of our trailer. It was Halloween afternoon. On the table next to the window was a round, glowing electric heater. My father had just gone out, to buy Halloween candy, he said. I believe this was an excuse to go drinking, though I can’t say for sure.

I watched to see where he went. He huddled along down to the main street, Highway 220, and halfway across it. The trailer was parked on a small, treeless rise and I could see the whole town from the window. At first the airplane sounded like a snowplow.

It had lost its way in the unexpected snowstorm. The radio was out and fuel was low. The pilot came in on a wing and a prayer. Apparently he mistook Highway 220 for a runway, thinking the courthouse was the terminal.

My father was killed on impact, dragged by the landing
gear a block, and left lying in the snow as the Cessna taxied on down the divider line. The editor of the *Amble Weekly Beacon* got two photographs of the plane. One showed it neatly parked by the courthouse steps with the big flakes floating down like tiny parachutes. The other was of the pilot stepping out the door, smiling like Lindbergh, happy to have landed safely, still unaware that he’d struck a man and that Amble was not an airport.

When I think about my father, it is that photograph, not an image of him, that first comes to mind.

2. Natural Disasters

The Nacogdoches, Texas, *Piney Woods Express* carried the Wirephoto on page one, next to a picture of me (age ten). They were captioned: “Sammy Winchester, orphaned Halloween Day in freak South Dakota airplane mishap.”

In the picture I’m wearing the baggy uniform of my Pee Wee League team, the Eagles. (The jersey, however, reads *agle*, with the first *e* tucked in my belt, the s rumpled under my armpit.) My mouth is a small, slack, glum, possibly dumbfounded oval. My cap is pulled low and the brim completely shadows out my eyes.

The most conspicuous feature is the cap’s emblem, a dazzling white *E* in the center of the black crown.

Beneath the caption, and headlined WINCHESTER, is my father’s obituary: “James ‘Jimmy’ Winchester died Thursday, October 31, in Humble, S.D., at the age of 42 . . . From 1946 to 1951 he operated the Texas Handyman Shop on Angelina Avenue, previous to which he served in the United States Marine Corps, receiving a Purple Heart in the battle of Saipan. He was a standby member of the Cherokee County Volunteer Fire Brigade. From 1951 until his untimely death, Mr. Winchester traveled broadly throughout the United States as a self-employed tradesman. He was the son of the late Eliot Winchester, the
prominent oysterman in Orange and respected civic leader, who formerly worked for the Bank of Commerce here.”

Several paragraphs follow discussing my grandfather’s career and good works. The article concludes: “The Winchesters are one of the oldest and best-known Nacogdoches families, first coming to East Texas in 1830. James Winchester is survived by one son, Sam (pictured above, right), fifteen, who attended Deaf Smith Elementary through the fifth grade.”

I can imagine my father reacting to his obituary. Don’t ever live in Texas, he would say, as he often did. Texans never tell the truth.

I can imagine his response to the paragraphs about the late and respected Eliot Winchester. Civic leader, he would mutter. Your granddaddy was a common bank sneak, Sam, and never forget it.

And what would he have said of me, the last of a long line, of an old and well-known family, the sole surviving son, above right, wearing E? If he could have addressed me once more before his death, would he have offered certainty or comfort, anything other than his quirky, morbid despair? That missing last conversation, that silence, is what I must continue to try to reckon with.

The real James Winchester was a widower (Emilie, my mother, died before I knew her) and an alcoholic (after her death), given to peculiar speculations about civilization and the human soul, which turned increasingly grim as he became increasingly drunk. He was short, wiry, rheumatic but energetic, nearsighted but wore no glasses, and gray-haired since his twenties. His left gold tooth would shine in the lamplight when he smiled. He was an expert carpenter and mechanic, and he was honest—honest above all things, honest, as they say, to a fault. He despised his own father, who wasn’t.

His ambitions went no further than running the Texas Handyman, a cabinetwork and repair shop, for the rest of his life. But in 1951 my grandfather’s dishonesty came to light. The Winchester name was disgraced. The Texas
Handyman was driven out of business and my father left town, vowing not to return except "in a box," and keeping his vow, even though my grandfather had carefully restored his own reputation within a few years. My father became an itinerant Mr. Fix-It, living out of a truck and trailer, traveling wherever there was work.

I stayed in Nacogdoches with a maiden aunt, a piano teacher, until my grandfather died when I was ten. A few days after the death my father sent for me from Oklahoma and we began our curious life together.

The trailer was fitted with bunk beds and a kitchen up front, and, in the back, my father's bench and drill press, table saw, welding tanks, grindstone, generator, vice and anvil, and the shortwave receiver. Exquisitely arranged on the walls and in cabinets were his tools—saws (hand, band, jig, hack, rip, scroll, chain, and circular); hammers (from sledge to tack); torches, Sanders, planes, squares, bars, and levels; wrenches and pipe sleeves—everything to plumb, wire, and piece together the dwellings of human beings. While my father drove, my job, and soon my passion, was to stay back and monitor weather conditions all over the country. Disaster areas, my father had found, provided his best paid and most abundant work. He also found that he liked disaster work, was, in fact, obsessed by it.

He spent ten years (1, five) moving on every several months, dogging the heels of great natural calamities: hurricanes, earthquakes, blizzards, floods, and tornadoes. He cleared rubble, reconstructed buildings, helped families salvage their belongings and repair their homes, did anything to make ruined things and lives work again.

My first year, 1956, we zigzagged from job to job up and down the Atlantic seaboard, in the wake of Diane, the worst hurricane in history—184 killed, 5 billion dollars damage. To my father it was a gold mine, a whole region wrecked and needing restoration. To me it was sheer, incomprehensible catastrophe, perdition itself. It was as though I'd wandered from piano lessons and Little League
straight into Chaos and Old Night. I brooded in the trailer and resented the work. Later I began to walk about, rubberneck, confront death and destruction for the sake of being confounded by them. Of being awed. Then, watching a woman in Norfolk, Virginia, I abruptly started to understand. The random loss, the fragility, the loveless fluxion of life, my father's need to attend to these injustices, my connection to him and to the woman crying in the wreckage of her home—these things then took on the shape of sense and compassion.

The next five years served as a singular education: seeing each part of America desolated; knowing all types of people in different stages of despair, strength, greed, or helplessness; being constant witness to violent deaths and valiant heroics, and to the phenomena of natural violence. I came to assume that continually moving about from place to place was common, even proper, that nothing in this world was of permanence, and that ruin was the normal condition of humanity.

We drove from the East Coast to the Dakotas for ranch work after the blizzards of the winter of '57, then south to Kansas and Missouri, stricken by cyclones. That fall and most of the next year we worked in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, all recovering from hurricane Audrey. We traveled, in '59, from New Orleans to Hebgen Lake, Montana (earthquake), to Jalisco, Mexico (hurricane, mudslides, floods, thousands dead: a disaster so irremediable we retreated to the border after a week). The following year we cleaned up after tornadoes in Oklahoma and Arkansas, then wintered in Florida. We came to Amble in '61 after the spring's killer floods. The previous stop had been an earthquake site in California at (significantly?) Terminal Island.

Often during the empty hours while my father drove, I, alone (with the dumb, able tools and the blathering shortwave), would wonder, fascinated, whether disasters could be sensed before they occurred. The chance of such foreknowledge, like Noah's certainty of the deluge, intrigued me, somehow got me through the disorder of
those years. I became convinced, if one could only lock gears with the workings of the elements, the ability to presage great upheavals in nature could be summoned and achieved.

Consider, for example, the canaries of Lisbon, in the eighteenth century, suddenly, simultaneously in every villa, going berserk, battering themselves to death against the mesh of their cages in a frenzy to escape one hour before an earthquake leveled the city.

Or giant carp, canaries' opposites, mammoth, prehistoric relicts, thirty-foot creatures that have never been seen by man except a few days prior to major earthquakes. Ordinarily they inhabit the gloom of a certain Pacific abasement three miles deep, entombed like huge scarabs, sealed, since the ocean primeval, from the world and the pass of time. There they live for up to two hundred years, lolling in that black depth, dreaming the dreams of gentle monsters, almost immobile until some signal triggers them conscious. En masse the enormous fish migrate: rising and drifting west to Japan, wallowing in the shallows just offshore, waiting out the quake, the beached hysteria, sinking again to the bottom of the sea.

Something in that dead reckoning, that instinct locked in a giant carp's ancient, inert brain is common to the restless animus of canaries. Both are gifted, not with prophecy, but with prescience. They share an intelligence sensitive to the profound force expressed by natural disasters: the rage of matter against life—the rage of water, wind, and rock, of heat and cold—the violence of the earth itself.

My father could regularly anticipate disasters, though he only admitted to "a nose for trouble," and focused his interest instead on human beings, the victims. He developed a curious sense of mission. Although he led a manifestly uprooted existence, obliged to no one and no place, his actions were governed by the needs of others. He recognized his calling as that of a wandering Good Samaritan, stumbling on strangers in distress. He approached our journeys with grim resolution, driven by the idea of service.
He was impelled, moreover, by a sense of history. He wished he'd been around, with his tool truck, through the ages, rescuing volcano victims at Pompeii or Martinique, rebuilding Chicago after the fire, San Francisco after the quake, Galveston after the storm. He read books on ancient catastrophes. He had a critical admiration for old structures, a mortise and tenon barn, a stone chimney standing alone, and a deep appreciation for the impermanence of Babylon. Disaster and its aftermath represented a compressed vision of civilization itself. In violence and recovery he saw the process of history: the rise and fall of the fortunes of mankind. My father, as I learned, was moved by the simple, futile will to bring order out of chaos.

This will was most fully realized and heartfelt in his sense of personal history, a structured perception of our family revealed to me in Norfolk, Virginia, after I'd been with him only several months, and never mentioned again.

We were, he regretted, star-crossed. An ancestor's crime tainted our blood. Bad seed passed from firstborn son to son, and every other Winchester bore wicked fruit. Like a pendulum, he said. Winchesters swing from good to bad, back and forth, from generation to generation.

Late into a February night he told this to me, to an eleven-year-old whose idea of growing up was limited to playing left field for the Yankees and batting fifth. He sat on the workbench drinking single shots in single swallows and whittling at a block of wood, staring at his knife hand working, and not looking up. His gold tooth caught the light of a lamp's flame, bobbing and flashing as he formed words. It was hypnotic: the slow, earnest East Texas cadence, the bright gold tooth, the big splinters curling away from his knife and toward me.

He instructed on the lives of every Winchester, from the first colonel down the line to me. I don't know whether he realized he was burdening my imagination, for the first time, with the consciousness of evil, of isolation, and of an unfathomable future. With his own death, my father explained, I would be the last one left, the sole surviving
son. I was responsible to six generations, to the past. But, if our lineage ran true, my blood harbored bad seed. I was fated to be evil (the dazzling E on the crown of the cap?). My duty, he said, was to disrupt destiny and redeem my blood.

3. Genealogy

The forest of Texas and Louisiana was once the domain of the Caddo, united under one family for centuries until an aging chief, the father of twin sons, after pondering his succession, decided to split the nation down the middle. He commanded that the sons stand back to back on opposite banks of the Sabine River, and walk—one due east, one due west—three days and nights and no further. He told them to found separate tribes at the spots where they stopped walking, regardless of where they were. The brothers each covered about ninety miles. The places they came to are now towns bearing their names: Natchitoches, Louisiana, and Nacogdoches, Texas. My great-great-grandfather likewise abandoned brother and family and journeyed west of the Sabine to Nacogdoches, and there sought new ground for his seed to prosper.

Winchester, the name he went by, was an alias; the original was McClung. James McClung, his father, our progenitor, a Scotch-Irishman from Aberdeen and later Limerick, made the crossing in 1779, landing with his bride in Philadelphia and traveling west. After meeting the wall of the Alleghenies, they followed the Shenandoah Valley south, settling in Bath County, Virginia, on Bratton's Run. He became a successful sheep farmer and miller, sired two sons, James and Alan, and was survived by his wife by a week and a day.

James, as eldest son, claimed the birthright—farm and mill—and employed Alan as foreman, apparently under circumstances the disowned brother thought unfair. His
resentment turned to rancor, and one August evening in 1824 the passion that smoldered took flame, and possessed him fully. The second son plunged a long-handled pitchfork through his brother’s heart, took his brother’s money, saddled his brother’s horse, and left the valley of Virginia forever. After wandering six years in the South, presenting himself as Jonathon Winchester, scion of Charlottesville gentry, he managed to dupe New Orleans society, married a merchant’s daughter—a belle—and brought her and her money to east Texas.

My father conjectured that, since Winchester was a disguise for a crime (fratricide, no less), the name itself became a vessel for seminal evil. There could have been no safer place to hide behind an alias than in Nacogdoches: under the jurisdiction of Mexico; surrounded by an impenetrable wilderness of red oak, loblolly pine, viny sawbrier thickets—a dense, uneven land scored by slow gray waterways and, at its edges, bedeviled by Comanches when the moon was full. Here my great-great-grandfather established a home, settled into an idle existence, not participating in the Texas Revolution, and squandered his wife’s money over a long and unproductive life. His only son, Charles, a man of scrupulous integrity, rode as a Confederate captain, served six terms in the State Senate when Texas joined the Union, and ended his days a circuit judge. Charles’s son Eliot returned the Winchesters to a generation of disgrace. And my father, as noted, was decent, honest, good.

Eliot, my grandfather, was a bank teller in Nacogdoches. Handling thousands of dollars daily nurtured in him dreams of great wealth, something no Winchester, good or bad, had achieved. Toward that end he embezzled small amounts, eventually amassing a proper grubstake (fifty thousand dollars over fifteen years), and moved from Nacogdoches to Orange, on the Gulf coast. He invested in three oyster dredgers, made some money, built up a fleet, a respectable fortune, finally a minor oyster empire. In the meantime, my father, who had remained in Nacogdoches, was discreetly informed one
day by Judge Bilderback that the Bank of Commerce had run across some problems with funds in Eliot Winchester's old department, positive evidence, in fact, of defalcation. Judge Bilderback, formerly the senior judge of Cherokee County, recently the president of the bank, directed all affairs of any importance in Nacogdoches. He told my father that he was also communicating with his father, Eliot, that charges would not be pressed if certain restitutions were made, but that, in the interim, and to secure such payment, the Bank of Commerce was required to call its loan to the Texas Handyman. My father's small world imploded and he departed Cherokee County bitterly and for good. Within two years my grandfather had repaid the forgiving bankers twice over and had gilded his tarnished reputation by granting favors to local businessmen and bestowing gifts on the community (a bowling alley for the VFW Hall, the Eliot M. Winchester Bookmobile).

There my father's story ended. "You see," he said, "what you got to live up to. Or live down, that is. You got to make up for what your granddaddy did, Sam. But I'm afraid you'll be like him."

And that was it. The geneology paid out with that fear. I couldn't say anything; I shook my head, and my father only shrugged. All he had told me hung there, unfinished, it seemed, pending in the quiet—more than quiet: a mingling of the sweet reek of bourbon, amber light from kerosene lamps, machines' shadows, smells of oil and sawdust; the past like a miasma filling the trailer.

I was bound by blood to Eliot Winchester, someone I'd only seen two or three times, and the only connection I could make, the only connection I can make even now, is the one clear memory I have of him, the one time we were alone together. I was eight or nine, and had been sent for to visit, for some reason, in Orange. He'd taken me out on one of his boats. We were beyond the bay, well into the Gulf, with night nearly on us. It was stormy, not raining but very rough, and the dredger plowed away from port, groaning and gasping, as the swells fell and rose, toward
The Canaries of Lisbon

the darkest portion of the skies. Nauseous, not wanting to be there, not liking the sallow old man who’d compelled me to be there, I left the railing and sat in a corner of the creaking, windowless cabin. A lantern hung from the ceiling, swinging freely, flinging yellow shapes at random about the otherwise dark room. On a bare table a gin bottle wavered from vague form to bright transparency in the reckless light.

My grandfather sat directly under the lantern, and a glare shone steadily on him however much the lantern danced. He was lit ghoulishly from his bald head down. He looked pop-eyed, with a big gibbous nose; his mouth was small and indistinct and the fat below his chin hung like dewlaps in great creased shadows. He advanced a hand from the dimness at his side into the moving light. With his fingertips he held a horn-ribbed, soot-colored shell, and I remember a slow, hoarse chuckle against the surging wash of the sea. The oyster, he said, has no brain. All he can do is drink and piss. Suck up brine, and spit it out. The water is cleaner after it passes through him. His flesh is filth.

The oyster has no brain.

I lurched to the door then across the deck to the dredger’s side. I hung there, dizzy, white-knuckled hands welded to the railing as the boat nosed and pitched—light-headed, strapped by my grip in place, but feeling about to float free.

I was overcome by an immense disgust—oysters were eaten—and also by what I now recognize as an immense, inarticulate, pleading hope that I cast across the ocean and into the storm . . .

No brain

But, somewhere among the clouds and shadows, the turbulence, or above, drifting in the black spaces between stars, somewhere must be the voice to the thunder—an intelligence—in the storm, or, like giant carp, beneath the spumous Gulf, submerged in the dead-water heart of that whole shifting ocean, somewhere was knowledge, the meaning of mysteries.
4. Sole Surviving Son

Prescience, foreknowledge of disaster, did not matter to my father. He was concerned with devastation itself, with aftermath. The interval between destruction and construction—that strange, stunned, timeless time when the past is desolate and the future unimaginable—that was the vital episode, the mortar of history.

He understood disaster victims. Their tragedies, he knew, were meaningless, with no purpose served, no sin avenged: pure tragedies of absolute loss. For that reason, I think, he believed disaster victims were innocent, and beyond good and evil.

It was this that obsessed and sustained him: the fragile miracle of survival, the fortuity of what remains, the almost wondrous, almost holy quality of what is spared.

The first time I watched survivors founder in brimming mud, digging for their dead kin, I was repulsed. I didn’t like those people, I told him.

“They’re blessed,” he answered.

A few months later, in Norfolk, watching the woman and her wrecked mobile home, the morning after my father’s tales of sin and redemption, I think I learned what he meant.

Once it was clear that night that his story was finished, that he had no solutions, nothing to add, silence overcame the trailer (tools lost the appearance of utility, seemed only pieces of dead metal). A ponderous, narcotic woe swam over me; I sank into stupid sleep and woke late and alone the next day. February’s low noon hung over gutted Norfolk, but the day—clear, dry, warm, breezeless, and serene—was wrong for the season and for the ravaged Virginia coast. I dressed and ventured into the nearby woods, wandering from clump to clump of evergreens—longleaf pine and live oak, like oases on the winter-bare landscape. The night’s mysteries gradually regrouped and
were fully and relentlessly recalled, prodding like throbs of a headache. I passed out of the woods and muddled on.

A barbed-wire fence, clotted by vegetable debris left by high water, hid me as I stared at, on the other side, a field littered with the shards of destroyed objects: ripped pieces of plywood and broken sheetrock, splintered paneling, fractured plastic and glass, twisted strips of metal. A midden that had been someone's house, a mobile home, absurdly insubstantial, yet, at one time, shelter. Watching from behind the fence I was exhilarated by a tableau of absolute disorder. It was beautiful, an infinity of jagged shapes glinting like colored glass, like a jewel-filled treasure chest, in the benign, the ironic light of that warm winter afternoon.

I heard her first, then turned, startled, to see her standing by a sedan next to the wreckage. A dark-haired woman in a pale green dress. Undoubtedly the housewife, probably a navy wife (now a navy widow?) who had returned to see what she could salvage from her home. Her arms were pressed against her sides, fists tight, bunching the green material, as she sobbed—a low, loud, moaning sob—and wept, never wiping her eyes or covering her flushed, contorted face, never knowing she was observed in her private, total grief.

Shamed, I looked away, feeling like a fool, somehow at fault, somehow the unwitting agent of her tragedy, like the fool pilot who would kill my father five years from then.

I concentrated on the shattered fragments of the mobile home, piecing together broken parts, trying to identify what each had been. A refrigerator on its side. Doors, lengths of pipe, a Christmas tree stand. A stove grill. The scattered drawers of a red cabinet. Stained yellow drapes. A leather armchair. The headboard and springs of a double bed. The gleaming handlebars of a tricycle. A doll. A weeping lady and the wanton ruins of her life. The survivor—blessed, as my sin-obsessed, inconsolable father had told me. I watched, drifting from object to object, and the colors and shapes blurred and merged.
She turned quickly, bent to the car door, and climbed inside. Her window rose in jerks. As it met the frame the weeping was muffled, the place quiet.

I left, bolted through a field, back to the woods through which I’d come, and stopped beside two huge live oaks. Their thick lobate trunks heeled the ground like giant legs in some arrested dance. Their evergreen billowed overhead opaque against the blue.

It was late in the winter afternoon and the barest trees cast shade. Oblique brightness careened off the horizons. The day remained clear, warm, and utterly still—promising—and only a careful intelligence would have detected that anything was wrong, that a false spring was fascinating the Tidewater of Virginia, or that those oaks’ leaves abhorred the light.
Rapture

1.

He emerged, with his dog, from a stand of ponderosas on the dark east slope of the hillside. The girl below waited for something, walked absently on the lawn with her child on her hip. The housing project lawn was still caught in February sunlight that broke from the canyon mouth east across the city, fading onto the plains of eastern Colorado. On the plains it remained late afternoon; by the mountains it was evening, except in the bright wedge cast out of the canyon. The girl stopped. Behind her, a gigantic shadow figured the lawn: Woman and child.

He leashed the dog, a shepherd, stepped quickly down the trail toward the lawn, into the light. “Excuse me.”

“Yes?”

“I was walking my dog.” He reined the shepherd back.

“Sit,” he said. The shepherd complied with much ceremony, affecting disinterest.

“Yes?”

“I was walking my dog and I see that you have a child.”

She nodded, smiling, and looked to her baby, then squinted back up at him. Her baby cocked his head at precisely the same angle and squinted at him also. Same eyes, he observed: a very pale blue he found quite attractive. He’d seen her before. Walking his dog on the hillside abutting the entrance to the canyon, he’d heard the scrambled shouts of kids and had seen her—long legs in blue jeans, a wash of bobbed blond hair—among other mothers supervising in the project playground below. Now he could admire her prettiness, and the changeable eyes—the same soft blue, the same delicacy as chicory blossoms that close to the scrutiny of noon. The eyes, he decided, expressed concern.
A scarlet Volkswagen stopped along the curb a bit past them, and a long-haired boy leaned smiling out the window. A bumper sticker read: Official Notice: When Rapture Comes I Will Depart the Earth. She smiled at the car then squinted again at him. Her teeth were perfect. She would explain later that she'd grown up in Colorado Springs, where the water was fluoridated naturally.

“What do you want to know?” she said.

“I saw your boy, is it? I have a daughter. She’s one and a half...”

“Same as Matthew.”

“I’m going to have to engage a baby-sitter. I thought you might be aware of someone here”—he gestured at the apartments ranged in the flat sun like Monopoly houses.

“Somebody who did baby-sitting.”

She nodded, put her finger to her cheek, thought. The sun went down. He pointed out his house, a hundred yards east, dark brown with gabled dormers, tassled with icicles. His daughter could be cared for there, he explained. Or here. Monday through Friday, all day. The sky cooled from lime green to lilac; a flicker pumped vigorously across it toward the black ponderosas. Eight dollars a day. She nodded. She could... do it herself. It was settled. Her name was Karen Campbell. This was Matthew.

His name was Peter Moss. He wasn’t picking up his daughter, Meredith, for a few days; he would bring her over then. Sandra, his ex-wife, was dropping her off on her way to Oregon for three months. From Oklahoma. She lived in Oklahoma now. He lived alone. He’d never even seen his daughter; just a picture. He was a little nervous... He stopped, realizing she was staring at him, with disbelief, he thought at first. Then he recognized in Karen Campbell the stirring depths of sympathy and, yes, of concern.

He asked if the driver of the Volkswagen was her husband. That was Bob, she said. Corby is her husband and he's in Idaho, working in the mines. We're separated, she confided. Peter Moss asked what Bob's bumper sticker
meant. "It's what happens when you accept Jesus as your savior." She had to leave now, for their Bible study group. "See you," she said and vanished with her son into the red car.

"Heel," he remarked to his dog, and they padded thoughtfully off together.

That evening he grilled a steak, did the last few days' dishes, brooded at the sink. Peter Moss was given to reveries of self-analysis, brooding at the sink. He had money (generous grandfather, long dead), his own house, a job, a dog. An excellent education and, just over the hill, a spectacular mountain canyon. Everything he needed, and he didn't need a daughter. Outside, in front of him, slick in the kitchen light, an astonishing set of icicles picketed the window. He admired them, their bloodless beauty, their mute threat. He thought: "to reside in thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice . . ."

Later he fell asleep on the couch with the tv on and dreamed. He did not dream of his daughter, of his ex-wife, of the past, or of the future. He closed his eyes and appealed to a vision of a blue-eyed angel enfoldling him. He dreamed of rapture.

2.

Peter Moss had been a war hero, of a peculiar but genuine type. He reflected, half-gravely, half-fondly, on this, as though for mental ballast, the morning his daughter was to arrive. He felt extremely uneasy. He was to be solely responsible for a very short female human being named Meredith Moss. From the snapshot, a funny-looking goggle-eyed kid with no hair. Would she be toilet trained? Could she talk? Understand simple English? A spasm of panic rippled through him. His daughter, somehow an incarnation of him. A Mossling. He decided he would have to have as little to do with her as possible.
Some father. Some hero.

Peter Moss's heroic assertion had occurred eight years before. It had lasted twenty months. It receded daily into insignificance, as it should, he realized. He realized he ought to discard his old self, or reinhabit it, but he couldn't do either.

Vietnam: Unlike his friends he had approached it perplexed and unprepared. None of his friends had served. One went to jail and regretted it. One went to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and lived happily ever after. One deserted from Fort Ord and surfaced years later in an Andy Warhol film. The rest were reservists or were called but not chosen, afflicted with unacceptable knees, arches, allergies. Peter Moss was chosen, swallowed up with other hundreds of thousands like plankton by the whale of the U.S. Army. Who would have thought that Peter Moss, who couldn't make up his mind, would catch in the craw?

He no longer thought of it the way it had happened, but as he had said it had happened. He'd said he did not object to the first two weeks of basic, but that when they went to the firing range—with the pop-up targets, human shaped, mechanically coming to life up and down that blasted patch of Fort Benning—that when he found himself making the desired leap of imagination—think of them as the enemy—he'd balked. Buck fever. He'd sat up, set the M-14 across his knees, pulled out the ear plugs, and swooned in the din.

But something he couldn't explain had already gone askew. The night before the firing range, Baggitt had been raped. Baggitt: seventeen years old, fat boy, crybaby, utterly inept, the company fuck-up. The army's greatest challenge: making a soldier out of Baggitt. The night before the firing range six soul brothers from upstairs swaggered down, pulled Baggitt from his bunk, dragged him feet first into the latrine. Peter Moss, rising on his elbow, saw it begin in the glare of the latrine light. A confusion of legs, skin, clothes; an intent black face there, then gone. He lay frozen, like everyone on his floor, helpless in the shock of those first two weeks, hearing Baggitt sobbing, then hysterical. That morning at reveille, in the
Rapture

pitchblende dark just before a sunless dawn, in the silence
and intense damp chill (his drill sergeant hugging him-
self: *a cold day in Georgia*), he watched Baggitt. Baggitt
trembled, jowls quivering, head bobbling at attention—
not out of fear. Out of determination. Out of his new,
perverse resolution to shape up and be a soldier. (You play
pussy and you get fucked.)

Peter Moss imagined that the army did make a soldier
out of Baggitt and that Baggitt died, as he had been told he
would, soon after assignment in Vietnam. Hopeless case;
a victim.

Peter Moss was never assigned to Vietnam, never, in
fact, left Sand Hill, Fort Benning, Georgia. That morning
watching Baggitt—his abject eagerness, volunteering all
morning long, lurching over his own boots into the gravel
and scrambling off red-faced, not with shame but with
desire—something happened. At the firing range he
stopped. He never touched a weapon, not even a bayonet,
again. He would neither victimize nor be victim. He
would withdraw, and endure. That night on fire watch he
indulged a reverie. He opened the door of the huge coal
furnace and lowered his face as close as he could. In the
rush of incineration around him, his sweat suppurating
and evaporating, he felt purified, transfigured by a
strength so otherworldly it had to be divine.

Peter Moss had no idea what they’d do; he assumed the
stockade, some incarceration. Instead he was, as the
phrase went, recycled. He was removed from the next
reveille formation by two MPs and positioned in front of
the company. He stood at ease, the subject of a sermonet
by the top sergeant, the gist of which was to imply that the
fate of a self-confessed pussy was to be plunged into agony
so black that words couldn’t frame it. Peter Moss observed
the dark block of soldiers closely and sensed only blank-
ness, a faint suggestion of bewilderment, and, rising to his
nostrils, the breathless transpiration of a wilderness of
pines. The MPs walked him to the road, into a jeep, and his
blood beat with joy.

The following day he was reprocessed, given a new
clothing issue, assigned a company, a barrack, a floor, a
locker, a bunk. A drill sergeant: a tiny black ex-pimp from Miami, four times wounded, charged with the responsibility of bringing Moss back into the fold. Of reforming him.

He started over from Zero Week, working through an identical agenda of physical training, propaganda films (The Thirteen Thousand Dollar Pencil, Why Vietnam?), memorization of the chain of command (Nixon, Laird... on down to Staff Sergeant Brannon), programmatic abasement. Only this time Peter Moss was designated the example, the Baggitt, the bottom rung all were instructed to step on. "Every time I see you, muhfuh [mother-fucker]," said the little man in civvies—bright double-breasted suit, snap-brim hat, pimp clothes—in the half-light like a kestrel hovering, "you just fucked up or you just about to. Down!" Lowcrawling on belly at top speed on sharp gravel with lit cigarette (the offense) in mouth. "Now eat that cigarette."

At the end of two weeks they trucked him to the firing range. He sat alone among the deuce-and-a-halves, listened to the din, breathed in the styptic smells of gunpowder, carbon, dust, and admired geese negotiating the ponderous southern sky.

The essence of hope in the U.S. Army in 1969 had boiled down to the simple wish to advance in time, to move on to something else. Peter Moss, in 1969, was recycled, sent back after the firing range to slog through weeks one and two again, to quit again, start again, quit. To fend with new antagonists each fortnight, each more ambitious than the last to hammer back the rigid will of Private Moss. As he denied their world, the army denied his. They simply sent him back, through the initial indoctrination and physical rigor, through ever more elaborate multiplications of harassment and humiliation, over and over, month after month. A repetition of the first two weeks of basic training thirty-six times consecutively. Peter Moss's war: Recycled. Caught in the craw.

But the otherworldly strength had not fled him. His shoulders muscled out; he could run forever. He was
alone, and in isolation his intelligence grew agile, inaccessible to intimidation. Each wave of new recruits soon learned to honor him: he knew: whom to fear, what to avoid and how, the content of the future. Most of the drill sergeants of the largest military installation in the country ("I am Infantry, Queen of Battle," Fort Benning sings) got to know Peter Moss, developed a curious fellowship with him, composed of respect, contempt, mystification. The systematic harassment grew uneven. He was wearing them down. Peter Moss felt his powers in flood, knew it was time to move.

He entered upon an investigation of Christianity. He studied the New Testament, pondered it with monastic patience, but proceeded from doubt, not conviction. He tested contradictions. He faced Jesus's doctrines with what he'd read in the past. (At one point interviewed by an MP lieutenant: "You didn't come up with these ideas all by yourself, did you?" "Oh, no." "Who'd you hear them from?" "Well, Leo Tolstoy, among others." "I see." Hesitates. "And how can I get in touch with this Tolstoy?") He'd spend weeks worrying through one phrase—"Resist not evil." He'd think, think, think through a thought—"Be ye therefore perfect"—till it caught flame in his heart.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This Peter Moss determined to do, severely and alone. Evil begets evil, good begets good; the crucifixation is exemplary. Once he proved this to himself he could prove it anywhere. An indwelling belief, hard and honestly won, underpinned his renunciation. His apprehension of the spirit was complete, and in that, in his certitude, he was later to learn, was his corrosive sin. Ceasing to doubt, his faith would consolidate around this position, would bind up and rust apart. And his misfortunes would also grow from the scrupulous purity of these efforts, as he was not at heart an ascetic. He wanted other things—affection, fraternity, weakness itself. He wanted to relent.

But he didn't relent, and glory, briefly, was to descend around him. He composed on paper the conclusions of his
studies, began importuning the command to recognize his refusal. He submitted his application to his command­
ing officer, Captain Peltier, a Nebraska Baptist who had been shaken badly enough in Vietnam to request transfer to a training company. Peter Moss was assigned to the orderly room as company clerk, permanent party. The application slowly spiraled up the chain of command, vanished into the maw of Washington. In the orderly room Peter Moss discussed theology. “I am persuaded,” Captain Peltier wrote, “that he is sincere.” The decision at length was positive and separation orders were received: honorable discharge for conscientious objection.

In August of 1970 Peter Moss stood in his final forma­tion after twenty months at Sand Hill. On command he moved forward, saluted—formal, resolute to the last—shook each superior's hand, in ascending order. Nodded solemnly to the company of trainees who stood at parade rest, earnestly observing this affair, the farewell of a soldier. They blurred in the heat and sweat: an olive drab quadrangle backed by emerald regiments of longleaf pine. He swung away on heel and toe, marched to the road through the sprays of green needles. Glory.

Catastrophes piled up thickly through the next five years. First, the alternative service as a hospital orderly in Española, New Mexico. Reassuring dying Chicanos about bubbles in their IV tubes; an overburden of night shifts; the impotence of marking time. One of those bearded, pale-skinned figures in white with distracted stares, resigned frowns, who used to lounge near nurses’ stations in the early seventies, whom you never see anymore. Then graduate school (GI bill, to be sure) as a student of literature. A nonconscientious scholar given to gloominess and solitary drunks. Now teaching—Canyon Junior High School, French and English; he refuses to coach; he dislikes his subjects, his charges, and his fellow teachers. He is an almost completely friendless man who believes he was a Vietnam War casualty, his disability apparently permanent.

He did drive one wedge of hope into the wreckage of
those years. He married Sandra, a fellow graduate student who held for him a respect that puzzled but heartened him. They enjoyed a kind of ecstasy for a few months until he turned against it. Her family (Oklahomans) despised him (a draft dodger, in their view). His own parents, even his brother (a National Guardsman, no less), had abandoned him years before for the same reason. He drove Sandra up the wall, she said, talking about it—the war, their families. So he closed himself to Sandra and shrank back into solitude, except for emitting small hostilities now and then at her, who returned them in kind and then some, and at the general crush of events. She left, three months pregnant, for Oklahoma, and things were easier, with fewer human beings cluttering up his life. Only himself to worry over, and the lost, hot day in Georgia to remember. The rapture of exultation, pride, freedom he’d never, he knew, be able to match.

3.

On this occasion—picnic up the canyon, by the trail to Ouzel Falls; Saturday afternoon, early May—their argument was probing toward the source of their problem. The subject was Sudden Conversion. Peter Moss, of course, inflexibly against it, insisting in favor of the Dark Night of the Soul. The pain of unstinting toil toward the truth. Merciless honesty with oneself. Requiring, for faith, the crucible of doubt, the calvary of study and self-denial. The test of faith as a moral force against the great evils of the day.

In this manner he preached to her. To himself, so many years after the war, he would phrase it differently: Church is a fatal obstruction to faith. Christ did not die that we might live, but that we might follow him to our separate crucifixions. Grace is achieved by art and art is achieved with great difficulty and rare luck. There are not only no easy answers, there are no answers at all.
“Belief,” she countered, “is an affair of the heart. To truly believe is to truly feel your love for Jesus. Say ‘I love Jesus!’ from the heart and you’ll know you’re saved. You’ll feel it: ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory.’"

“But nothing is worth a goddamn unless you damn well earn it.”

“Peter,” she said in deadly earnest, her soft eyes murky with reproach. “How often do you think of Jesus?”

“As little as possible,” he said, not meaning quite that, meaning that it was too hard when one’s faith had rusted apart.

“There!” Karen Campbell beamed with triumph. She was beautiful, beaming. In the nearly three months since he’d met her, since she’d begun baby-sitting and they’d been often together, he’d come to admire her tremendously. Such loving-kindness in the face of such unceasing hardship. In some giddy delusion she had married a bar-fighting miner (he too had been a war hero). They rattled around the West, following the energy industry from Rock Springs, Wyoming, to Gillette, winding up in Kellogg, Idaho, in a trailer, where Karen got pregnant, and her husband got drunk, and beat her up, until, two weeks before she was due, she left, afraid for her baby. She came here, to Colorado, wrote him for money, got nothing. She went on welfare and moved into her closet-sized but clean apartment. She bore a son and brought him up completely by herself, with no family, no car, nothing day in or out to relieve squalor but the Bible and a fine, rugged canyon nearby. Amazingly she bore no grudge, not even toward her husband, still feeling that he had been her partner in a sacrament. She maintained sunny spirits, hopefulness, courage, and concern for others. Everything Peter Moss didn’t have, but needed. She claimed no credit, attributing it all to Christ.

She smiled at him across the picnic blanket; she had, in her view, won the argument. He leaned to her and kissed her wetly, holding her firm and working one hand down her back, inside the lip of her blue jeans. She pushed him
Rapture

off, looked around. "Stop," she whispered. Meaning it. "Where are the kids?"

"I'll watch the kids."

She sat up and considered him almost somberly. Her eyes clouded over again. He knew what was coming.

"Go just once," she said, referring to her Bible study group. "That's all it'd take."

"Never," he said. Meaning it.

"Please. I won't ask again, Peter." Then firmly: "This is your last chance."

"Never," he repeated, smiling, and she frowned, more than usually frustrated by his intransigence.

Their arguments often proceeded much as this one had. Their debate, for example, over the Doctrine of the Just War. Or the interpretation of Matthew—"I came not to send peace but a sword" (the sword, he explained, a metaphor for division, not a call to violence; but Karen remained an incorrigible literalist). Or their feud over Pauline strictures. "Paul," Peter had said, "had a pole up his ass." "Peter," Karen said. "You're vulgar and profane." He'd agreed, pointed out that she was backsliding a bit herself, pulled her protesting to his bed, and provoked her to joys unspeakable and full of glory, while their children, cribbed downstairs, dreamt of marvels—dogs, dirt, shoes, noses—or of terrors—grasshoppers, mailmen, being left alone.

Their children this cloudless afternoon remained wide awake, playing at the edge of the meadow. Or, rather, his child played (climbing on the patient dog), and hers brooded blankly, as usual. The first time they'd met, Meredith had bolted straight for Matthew, as was her wont. Stolid Matthew had watched the wildly grinning creature's ecstatic advance with a look of immense dismay. Irresistible force encountered immovable object. Meredith spun full tilt around him, circling the sullen child again and again, humming and ohing. Matthew Campbell cautiously turned his head, keeping her in sight. She came to a stop face to face with him, her eyes full of
pinwheels and skyrockets. “Hiee!” she squealed. He stared in dull surmise. He showed her his wrist, pointed to a small scratch. “Hurt,” he said and shambled over to his mother.

Peter Moss never had liked kids and still didn’t like Matthew, a crybaby, a Mama’s boy. What can you expect when you name a kid after a Gospel, he thought. Karen had a weakness for imputing large, uplifting values to names. Peter, you are my rock. Peter, reject your trade and follow me. Peter, be a fisher of men. “Thanks anyway,” he had said, “but I’d just as soon stick to fish.” Or, pausing dramatically, averting her face: “Peter, before the cock crows thrice you will deny me.” “Never,” he had said. Meaning it.

His own kid, Meredith, she surprised him. After nearly three months he loved her with the inextinguishable fondness of a Narcissus. He was helpless before her experimental whines, her slaphappy chortle. Her bandy-legged trot, her beach-ball belly. Her toothy grin, nose like a plug of putty, her one helix of spun blond hair that intimidated auburn. Her huge Keane eyes, blue as mountains. Her way of falling to his feet, latching both arms around an ankle, resting her head on the top of his shoe, to signify she was ready to go to sleep.

Meredith Moss liked people. She liked Karen Campbell. She even liked Matthew Campbell, who didn’t like her. Most of all and more than anyone, she liked her daddy.

She undid Peter Moss. She ruined the castle of his despair. This thirty-inch-long unfeathered biped, who shit in her pants twice a day and yanked on the shepherd’s tail; this Mexican hairless, as he put it—this was the soul who was shaping anew the entire emotional focus of dour Peter Moss. Reforming him.

She was being taken back the very next day. Sandra returned then from Oregon, where she’d gone with her country club cowboy from Waco, Texas, with his red truck and camper (he came from Waco but had attended Oklahoma University), his flap-jawed drawl and Aggie jokes, his western-cut leisure suit. With the Tulsa branch of his auditorium chair manufacturing company. The main
plant was still in Waco, along with Sandra’s boyfriend’s wife, kids, and Church of Christ congregation, while Sandra lived in style in Tulsa, thanks to Jimmy. She said. She said this to Peter Moss the one afternoon she spent in Colorado on the way to Oregon, dropping off her daughter, while Jimmy Templeton was out, selling the nearby Church of Christ a boxcarload of folding chairs.

Sandra’s regressed, Peter Moss thought. No, not regressed; she just hadn’t progressed very far. She admitted that in Jimmy Templeton she had not found her ideal. But he was nice enough, she said, and friendly. He asked for nothing, and whatever she asked for, he gave. He was a good deal more generous, she reminded Peter Moss, than you ever were.

Karen Campbell had already begun to fascinate Peter Moss when Sandra and Jimmy came through. Within a few weeks she decided to respond to Peter’s attentions, to bestow her sympathies upon him, deeply dispiriting Bob (of the Volkswagen and bumper sticker), her Bible study consort. Bob, though, was already saved, and Peter Moss remained an unregenerate sinner (who exploited his sins shamelessly). But, during this spring season, he had begun to feel, swelling within him, the power to change. To seize affairs by the collar and cow them to his will, as he had once before. Meredith and Karen together had undermined his remove, exposed his loneliness. He felt liberated, and ready and able for something new. He had money, some solidity Karen had never known. And he had been musing—a new job, joint custody, sharing his life with others—only musing, but it felt good all the same.

With these things rousing dreamily in his mind he organized a going-away picnic. To Ouzel Falls, home of the water ouzel, *Cinclus mexicanus*, a.k.a. the dipper.

Karen still sat on the blanket, looking off, back up the trail toward the highway. A trace of worry, curiously, in her eyes. Still miffed, evidently, by the sudden-conversion disagreement. Peter suggested they amble down to the falls; she shook her head. He gathered up his daughter, her son, one in each arm, and toted them down the terraced path. The old shepherd followed, pensive but alert, ready
to protect his humans from any garbagemen or schnauzers that might be lurking in ambush in the pines. The purpose of this picnic, Peter Moss informed his passengers, was to learn about the nesting habits of the dipper, a most extraordinary bird.

At the bottom of a dropoff to the right of the trail a stream cascaded soundlessly over a washboard of river rock, down an abbreviated gorge to a culvert trussed in riprap, spanned by the road. The stream couldn’t be heard because of the bellow and blast of falls ahead. Peter Moss turned a corner in the narrowing neck of the gorge and abruptly they faced the source of the noise. Matthew flinched, yelped—“Ow!”—and started to cry, equating the sight and sound, the clouds of mist suddenly around them, with pain. Meredith nestled more snugly into the crook of her father’s elbow. She squinted, distancing the scene. “Water,” she observed.

They had entered an amphitheater formed by hundreds of humped boulders as big as trucks and airplanes wrecked at the head of the gorge. Dark, ancient, igneous things, conceived in fire when the plains were ocean, split and corraded, speckled by black and silver grit. Two hundred feet above, the full flood of spring melt erupted out of the rim, squalled down the rocks to a tossing pool. Above the rim, on top of bare castellations of stone, two big ponderosas stood black against the sky, like guard towers over a place of violence as old as the earth.

Nondescript dippers—gray, chubby, and bobtailed—had been ferrying back and forth between the highway and the falls. Quick smooth flights, beaks empty, headed downstream, gripping scraps of moss or grass on the way back. Once in the clamoring stadium of the falls they rose in speed and . . . careened headlong into the freezing torrent of crashing May melt, disappeared into the water, beyond which, on some secluded granite shelf curtained round by the falls, they were pasting together their little wads of debris. Nests. Reasonably secure from your average egg-sucking coon.

Peter Moss, with the awestruck children, stood marvel-
ing at dippers penetrating into a perfection of chaos—the fitful strength, the lunatic will, the brainless courage of bird and spouse, diving into the bursting heart of the falls to deliver some ridiculous wisp of weed. Homemakers.

Karen, he realized, was standing next to him. He pointed out the little gray parcels zipping in and out of the turbulence. She didn’t notice, looked instead at him. Still worried. Said something he couldn’t hear over the din: the noise of hundreds of rifles firing. Said louder: “Corby’s back.”

He stared stupidly.

“Corby’s here. Not here, in town. I told him about you. He wanted to kill you.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Peter Moss said. “I’ll get rid of him.”

“No. He wouldn’t talk. It won’t work.”

“I’m sure I can get him to understand.”

“It won’t work with us, Peter. You didn’t try. I’m going to go with Corby. We’ll give it another chance, Corby and me.” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

He felt, standing before the falls and the valiant birds, holding a baby in each arm, suddenly intensely awkward, embarrassed to the root of his being. His daughter touched his cheek. “Water,” she observed.

4.

Coincidentally, they all departed at the same time the following afternoon, a Sunday. Two trucks waited in the street: one red, with camper, a trail bike strapped on top (Jimmy’s Christmas gift to Sandra); one a Forest Service pale green, belonging to Corby Campbell. Karen had persuaded her husband to pull over on their way out of town, so she could say good-bye. Jimmy Templeton and Sandra and Meredith Moss stood with Peter on the porch. “Well, Sandy,” Jimmy Templeton was saying. “Guess we better bottle her up and go.” Just then Karen came running up the walk. She was introduced around, and gave both Peter
and Meredith a courageous peck on the cheek. Corby Campbell and son glowered at her from the cab of their truck, turned simultaneously, and glared eastward toward endless prairies.

"God bless you," Karen said, gazing with deep sympathy into Peter Moss's eyes, squeezing his hand. She had failed to reform him; Peter had remained a fisher of fish. Just as well. The Church of Christ carillon began to clang and, as if on cue, Karen walked away to her husband and son, her dismal future. She did live in another world, Peter reflected. Sandra was immensely more practical; Sandra respected access to goods, like trail bikes and camping in Oregon. Karen valued prayer, reading the Bible, saving foundering souls. She was going with Corby because of a vow, of all things. Maybe she would reform Corby.

Jimmy and Sandra followed Karen down the walk, and Peter came behind them carrying Meredith. He handed her to Sandra. Sandra looked at him with compassion; she understood what he was relinquishing. Peter Moss felt fleetingly that now he might finally be able to get to know Sandra, love her even, now that it was too late. But he stepped away, and wished them all good journeys from this lovely canyon to Kellogg, Tulsa, Waco. On an impulse he decided to shake everyone's hand—Jimmy, Sandra, Karen, even Corby, even Matthew, even Meredith—as he had his superiors' at Sand Hill.

Good-bye, good-bye. Two truckloads of human beings, all he had, departing in one exodus. Forgiving Sandra, dauntless Karen, Meredith Moss. Good people—"the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"—his new faith. The vehicles grumbled to life. The Campbells puttered off, around a corner, slipped from view forever. Meredith Moss, before she was gone, whispered out the window. "Bye," she said to her father. Then to his dog at the gate. Then to his house. To the street, the canyon, the sky. "Bye, bye, bye, bye . . . ."

Later, at the sink, doing the weekend's dishes, he succumbed to a thought he'd felt before, felt habitually: In the beauty of the gleam of steel, the big carving knife
flashing silver in the runnels of the tap, there was the promise of deliverance, of rapture—to draw the edge across each wax-white wrist, push hands into the hot soapy basin, wait while the water clouded red.

No. Fuck it. Peter Moss rinsed the knife, laid it in the tray. He renounced renunciation; he had, he thought to himself, outgrown that. Outgrown the self-seriousness that aspired to glory, the self-pity that longed for joy or death. He finished the dishes and retired to the front porch of the empty house. Once from that porch he’d witnessed a remarkable event. An enormous bird had descended from out of the mists of the canyon, gliding flat-winged, wheeling dark with a span of gold behind the head, a great piked beak nodding this way and that. Unmistakably a golden eagle. The wings reared and folded back; it lit gently in the top of a dead willow not a hundred feet off. In the middle of Peter Moss’s neighborhood, in some unknowing, soap-opera-watching housewife’s backyard. A golden eagle. Peter Moss had chilled with excitement, seeing what probably no others saw. He wanted for a moment to run up and down the block, rousing neighbors from petty chores, a town crier: “Houston, the Eagle has landed.” But he didn’t; he watched and wondered.

Six or seven city pigeons were bunched along a lower branch of the big dead willow. They seemed to be contemplating the magnificent bird, who contemplated them in turn. Then the plump pigeons appeared to deliberate among themselves. Then they got the hell out of that tree. Soon the eagle left too, rising on stupendous wingbeats in a wide arc over the city and finally back up between the high canyon walls.

Probably the pigeons had lured the eagle out of his solitude, Peter Moss decided. But, but . . . maybe not. Maybe it was a function of loneliness. All that majesty over the wilderness must get oppressive. Even an eagle must need to abandon the canyon every once in a while, cruise the neighborhood, strut his stuff. No. Birds can’t feel that—no cerebellum. Birds can’t be lonely.

Peter Moss, his friends and family gone, sat looking out
toward the dead and empty willow. I’ll just have to work on it, he thought. Shouldn’t take it too seriously. Ought to just kind of settle down into a placid, crusty middle age here by myself. Teach junior high (coach field hockey), seduce colleagues, stay away from church. Walk the dog. Spend weekends rocking on the porch, sipping tequila, jeering at joggers. Watching for eagles.