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William Cobb

Passin' Side/Suicide

Glory Sanders is a friend of mine. She's a drunk like me, only she calls herself a "grateful recovering alcoholic." She hauls me to the AA meeting in the basement of the Episcopal church over in Talladega every Thursday night, and when she gets up to talk that's what she calls herself. Glory runs the Waters Edge Bait Shop on county road 20. Glory has been around the bases a few times. She's been there and back, as they say.

I'm sittin in the little back room cafe at the Water's Edge that looks out over the lake. I'm drinking coffee and she's behind the counter, leaning on it, smoking a cigarette. Glory's always telling me to get a job. That's what everybody says to me, get a job. "You need to get a job," she says, "you need to go to a meetin every day, ninety meetins in ninety days." I tell her I ain't the meeting type. They made me swear when I was leaving the treatment center that I'd go to at least three meetings a week. I raised my right hand up and swore to God, knowing right then I wasn't going to do it. No way. But I figured they wouldn't let me out if I didn't say it.

"When you going to-" Glory begins. She's leaning on the counter.

"Don't start," I say.

"Jesus, Robert," she says, "I'm just tryin to..."

She don't finish. She calls me Robert. She knows I don't like for people to call me Bob, but she always used to call me Bob before I went to treatment. Now she calls me Robert. Glory was there the night the cops took me in, after that fight at the Silver Moon Cafe. She goes around with the cops on Saturday nights, looking for drunks she can save.

"I'm a honorary deputy," she says, "on a mission of mercy." They put me in the county jail and then took me to a psycho ward on the top floor of Brookwood Hospital in the city. The windows had bars on them. After a few days they gave me a choice: thirty days in jail or thirty days at a treatment center out in Warrior. I thought it was a no-brainer.

Glory was waiting for me when I got out. "I'm your sponsor," she said. "Like hell you are," I said.

There's a television in the cafe. Me and Glory are watching "So You Want to be a Millionaire." Halfway through the program she says, "These people are dumb."

"Dumb as a post," I say.

Glory is looking at me funny. "What are you, forty-four? Forty-five? What?"

"You got it right," I say.

"What?"

"Both."

She looks at me like that explains something to her. She turns back to the tv set. I have two birth certificates. I guess I'm two different people. One of them says I was born on April 9, 1956. On that one my mother's name is Annabelle Pleasants, and the father is listed as "unknown." I am Robert Pleasants. On the other one, dated April 6, 1955, my mother's name is Anabelle P. Fosque, and the father is Ralph Fosque. On that one my name is listed as Robert Fosque. "We was never married," my mother told me. "It was the fifties, you had to do that." "Do what?" I asked. I was about ten years old at the time she talked to me about it. "You know," she said. I didn't know. But I didn't say anything. "He was a real bastard," she said, "you're better off not ever knowing him."

"I don't give a shit," I said, and lit up a Camel. I kept them rolled in the sleeve of my white T shirt.

I have always gone by the name of Robert Pleasants. It has never made two hoots in hell to me that I've got two birth certificates, two names.

"Shit," Glory says, her eyes on the screen, "the next time I see forty-five it'll be a *hunnert* and forty-five!"

If you ain't a drunk, you don't know what the Big Book is. Unless you're married to a drunk, I guess, or living with one. It tells you all you need to know about recovery. It's the AA Bible. It lays out the twelve steps for you, right there. Glory keeps after me, and I'm on step nine. Sometimes I do them half-ass, but I try to do them. "Seek out those people you've hurt with your drinking and make amends to em," Glory says. "Just one'll do. It'd take you the rest of your life to find em all. Just one. Find em and..."

"...and what?"

"Say you're sorry. Ask em to forgive you," she says. "It ain't easy."

"Shit," I say.

I think about Jolene. She would have to be the one, I guess. She was too young for me from the start, but she was something wonderful I just couldn't let alone. I could tell her mother thought I was trash. She didn't like me from go. They lived in a little white-washed farm house over on the other side of Pachuta, near Bay Springs. Jolene worked at the Ritz Twin Theater in Pachuta, selling tickets. I thought I might like to spend the rest of my life with Jolene, and when I thought that it scared the hell out of me. She would

get off at eleven, and we'd drive out to the quarry in my pickup and make love under the moon. She was sweet as the inside of a ripe pineapple. Salty and juicy as a plum in June. She was not even yet twenty, but she was wise. She knew what she was doing.

"Why you come sniffin round me, old man?" she would say, running her fingers over my bald head, giggling. I'd root like an old hog, and she'd squeal like a piglet. Lordy. I get horny just thinking about it.

"We thought you was in jail," Jolene's mother says, when she finally gets to the door. The front yard has old tires painted white half buried in the dirt on both sides of the front walkway. There's one of these old bottle trees in the front yard. I knock and knock. When she opens the door she just stands there looking at me. Her name is Sheila. Her expression don't change at all. Her eyes droop like wilted blossoms. She's got on a pair of red shorts and a T shirt that says SHUT UP AND PITCH. She props herself against the door jamb with one arm. She's got her other hand on her hip, the fingers of that hand holding a long, thin cigarette with a little string of smoke rising straight up like the thing is hanging from the ceiling. Just stands there, like that, until all she says is, "We thought you was in jail."

"Nope," I say. "Jolene here?"

She don't say anything, but her lip curls down. She looks tired enough to have been digging ditches. She's skinny as a preacher bug, but she's got this little belly, like half a soccer ball. It looks like it don't belong on her, like she borrowed it from some fat person. She's a lot closer to my age than Jolene is.

The living room smells like cigarette smoke and used up butane. It smells like cooking grease and dust. One great big old vinyl recliner. One of those console televisions that you don't ever see anymore, that sits on the floor. There used to be a sofa with an old blanket thrown over it, but it's gone. I could smell coffee. These folks drink a lot of coffee, I remember.

"She ain't here, she says, after she's already motioned me in.

"Where's she at?"

"She's gone."

I look out of the side window. There are two lawn chairs out there, with the yellow and white webbing faded and broke and hanging down. There is a Snapper lawn mower and a charcoal grill, both gathering rust. I see clumps of crabgrass in the yard. I remember then how the grass smells when the

sun's been on it awhile. How the sun makes you smell the dirt, the earth. Ever since I got out of treatment I think about things like that.

"I ain't got no significant other," I told my counselor, when I was in the treatment center. His name is John Berry. He's a drunk, too, sixteen years sober. They want me to invite somebody to come for family week. They tell me I need to.

"You must have somebody," John says.

"No. You got the information right there." I point to this clipboard he's drumming his fingers in his desk. It's the long form I filled out when they first admitted me. He holds a ball point pen in the fingers of his other hand. They are delicate and slim, like a woman's. He's all man, though, a wiry son-of-a-bitch. He don't let you get away with nothing. You can't shit him. I have tried, the whole time I've been here. "Mother dead. No sisters and brothers," I say.

"What about your father?"

I laugh. I have told them every story in the book about my father. I told them he was a black man, working in my mother's yard. I told them he was a Gypsy, passing through. That he was this rich doctor in Mountain Brook. That he played ball for the Yankees. I passed the time thinking up shit to tell them about my father. I told my therapy group my father was George Wallace. Half of them believed me. They had burned up so many brain cells they'd believe anything.

"Okay," he says. "But there must be somebody." I think of Jolene. It's been about a year then since I've seen her. I sit there seeing her in my mind's eye. She ain't what you'd call a knockout, but she's a pretty thing. Her mouth is too big. Her eyes are too close together. But she's got great hair, and legs. She's got legs so great they're prettier than eight miles of new road. You never saw better legs that Jolene's got. What got me, though, was how she always knew what I was thinking, and it made her laugh. She would look at me-she has these really black eyes, like marbles-and I would be thinking of something funny to say and she'd be already laughing. Like that.

"No," I say, "there ain't nobody. Period."

"Okay," he says.

"You got yourself a loner here, John-boy," I say. "I can take care of myself."

"Yeah," he says, "right."

Me and Jolene were easy together. We could just sit for a long time without even talking. "You're old enough to be her father," her mother said to me. "So?" I said, and Sheila cut her eyes at me. Her droop-tired eyes. Jolene's daddy is a welder, works at TCI in Birmingham. Him and me used to drink beer together. We'd smoke some weed, visit the craps game down at Zorba's corner. Named Sid, and he's restless as I am. He works all the time, ain't hardly ever at home. "I ain't never thought of myself as old." I said to her, "as old enough to be anything."

"Jolene wants a life, a family," she said.

"I ain't standing in her way, am I?" I said.

She told Jolene I'm a sorry one. Jolene laughs about it. She puts her hand on my arm and holds it there, leaves it there. She just looks at me. Her eyes smile at me.

I am at the Silver Moon Café, a few months before the night of the fight that got me sent up to treatment. They call it a café because you can get a hamburger or a platter of greasy fried catfish and hush puppies, but it's mostly a night club and dance hall. It's got big plate glass windows overlooking the lake. It's got a long bar against one wall and a bandstand and a dance floor. Country bands play here, nobody you ever heard of, and it's always packed to the gills, specially on Friday and Saturday nights. These cowboys and their women come out from Birmingham, and good old boys from out in the country wearing their Caterpillar hats and great big silver BAMA belt buckles. College kids come out here sometimes, looking for trouble. Or for women. Same thing.

I'm flying high. Soaked to the ears. This woman, Jesse, is here. She's got eyes so green it sets your teeth on edge just to look at them, married to a mechanic at one of the shops over in Talladega. Her jeans been painted on and she wears cowboy boots and a little frilly white blouse. You can see her nipples from here. I've danced with her before. It seems like the whole world is loud and drunk and high and happy. The band tonight is called Naked as a Jaybird, and they play all these great old Eagles songs.

I sit and drink my beer and stare at Jesse, until she starts to stare back. I can see those green eyes glowing through the smoke. I don't see her husband. She's with these two women I've seen here before, both about forty, at least ten years older than she is. The three of them get up and dance together, and Jesse keeps looking over at me. I'm breathing smoke and beer vapor,

and the band is whacking out on "Take it Easy." Overhead lights spin. Beer signs make these melting drops of colors on the wall across the room. It feels and looks good. Just right.

I'm glad I'm here. This is the one place I'm supposed to be, right now, in the whole world. I'm just about to go over when somebody grabs my arm from behind. I turn around and it's Jolene. She's smiling, happy. Laughing. She's got a long-neck Rolling Rock in her hand, waving it in time to the music.

I think: *What are you doin? Checkin up on me!* I say, "What in the hell are you doin here?!" I'm thinking, *She thinks she owns me. Just let a woman... Just let a woman...*

I say it real ugly like. "Well? You don't own me, woman," I say.

The grin just disappears from her face, falls away like a light bulb blowing out.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I don't know you." I say it hard and nasty. "I was just fixin to dance with somebody," and I walk off and leave her standing there. As I walk over to Jesse, I can still see Jolene's eyes, the way they looked. They are like a little child's that you've disappointed, let down. Jesse sees me coming and stands up. Her body looks fluid, like I would drown in it. I look back and Jolene is gone.

That was the last time I saw her. I think about them eyes now, full of all that hurt, standing here in the living room with her mother. "Well," I say, "you gone tell me where she is, or what?"

"She don't want to see you," she says.

"Now how do you know that?"

"I just do," she says. She's tapping a filter tip cigarette against her thumbnail. "You want some coffee or somethin'?"

"Black," I say. When she goes to get it I stand there smelling her cigarette smoke. I can taste it in my throat, scalding and spicy, the warm way it swells out your chest. I gave them up. When I got out I just threw my pack in the Coosa River. I figured without booze, I didn't want cigarettes. I want one now, but I won't ask her for one. I'm tense, tight like the skin of a drum. Shelia brings me my coffee in a blue mug. There is a picture of Jolene on the table on the corner, in her high school cap and gown, that tassel thing hanging down beside her face. She is smiling her easy smile. It's as natural as a breeze, that smile. I realize I ain't seen Sid in months. The house has a feel like he ain't in it anymore. I don't ask.

"I want to tell her I'm sorry," I say. I blow on my coffee, sip it.

"Ha!" she says, "I already told her that." She don't look at me. She sits down n the vinyl recliner. When she brings her cigarette up to her lips, I can see her hand trembling. She shakes her head. I can see where her hair is parted on top, ragged, like when she combed it she was in a hurry. "Sorry is as sorry does," she says.

"I'm serious," I say.

"You think I ain't?" She looks up at me. She's got tears standing in her eyes, and I can see she's really pissed at me. She's really upset. She looks at me like she hates me. "You come in here...you come in here..."she mumbles. Her shoulders slump, just collapse and fall. "I have made my peace, and then you..." She drags in the cigarette and sucks the smoke deep, then blows it out like spitting.

"She's *dead*," she says then. I don't hear her for a moment. The word goes right by me. Then it comes back around and hits me in the back of the head. My knees go weak.

"What?" I say.

"You heard me," she says, her voice rising to a shriek, "she's dead! Dead! You want me to spell the word for you?" She stands up and turns her back on me. I can't move. I just stand there holding the mug, and I have forgot how to move my arms. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to feel. I think she must be lying to me. I can see the bones in her shoulders, under the thin cloth of the T shirt. I know she ain't lying to me. My mouth goes dry.

"What...what...?" I manage to say. She don't answer. I find my voice, but it sounds hollow in my ears, like an echo. "A car wreck, or what?" I say. "No," she says. "She was pregnant." She turns back around to face me. "She was pregnant, with *your* child, and she-"

"Wait a minute," I say, "wait a minute now-"

"With *your* goddam baby, and she wouldn't...She wouldn't..." It feels like the floor moves under my feet, like I'm gone fall, right there. "I tried to get her to have an abortion. I tried to talk to her, make her get rid of it, but no. No! She wouldn't listen to me. 'I'm gonna have it,' she says. 'I want this baby,' she says." She is just looking at me now, her eyes narrow slits. I can see tear tracks down her cheeks. She breathes real deep. I'm just hanging there, like in midair. I can't take it in. She looks like she wants to say something else. I can see her brain working behind her eyes. It's like I'm watching a television show or a movie. A long ash falls off her cigarette, and she notices it and grinds the butt out in a glass ashtray that's already full. She starts tapping another on her thumbnail.

She takes another deep breath, then another. When she starts talking, her voice sounds calmer, but still tight and dry. "She was staying with my sister out in Center Point," she says. "She got a better job working at Rich's in Century Plaza Mall. Everything was fine, she said. She would come out here and I never saw her so happy. I kept telling her she didn't know what she was getting into. She didn't care. 'Don't worry Mama,' she'd say, 'I'm happy.' She said she wanted to be a single mother, was looking forward to it. Then something happened. One day she started bleedin. She was eight months along, and they figured the baby was coming early, so they took her to the hospital. Took her to Medical Center East. Somethin was bad wrong. The doctors said the baby was dead. The had to operate on her to get it out."

She stops. I can feel my heart beating in my ears. "What happened?" I ask. My mouth has gone completely dry.

"Somethin went wrong with the anesthetic," she says. She opens her eyes wide. She looks at me like I'm pond scum. "She had a reaction to it. She had these convulsions...She...went into a coma. She never woke up," she says. "And then she died. And I never got to say goodbye to my baby. You son-of-a-bitch. I didn't get to even say goodbye to her, and she was all I had, all I ever had."

I don't say anything. I don't think there is anything to say. There is nothing I can dredge up from inside me that would matter at all. She starts to cry, then, just stands there sobbing, and I can see her pale eyes go all opaque, like she's not seeing me anymore at all, like she's totally all alone in the room, in the world.

I drive around. There is a lump of cold in my chest. I get on the expressway and drive all the way to the Georgia line, to Tallapoosa, then turn around and come back. Something is burning and smoldering in the back of my brain. I see five thousand billboards advertising whiskey and beer. Every one is like a mouth full that I can taste, and I swallow, and it's only air. I play the radio, but I don't hear it. It's like I keep dozing off from time to time, and I worry that I'll drive off a bridge.

Like I jerk back awake and I'm surprised that I'm driving down the road because I've been dreaming. I've been with Jolene, smelling her skin, smelling the soap she used to use. Shampoo that made her hair smell like fresh berries. Then I just feel her there next to me in the truck, sliding over, fitting herself around the gear shift lever, getting close. She's warm. Comfortable and quiet. I miss her now, something terrible.

It gets dark and I'm on the back roads, all the way up in St. Clair County, and I just keep driving. I can't think of anywhere I want to go. And I can't think of any reason to go home. Then I'm on County Road 20, and I can see lightning bugs twinkling like stars between me and the lake. I have shut the radio off long ago, and I pull off and shut the engine, and all I can hear are the crickets and the tree frogs, and off in the distance the deeper burping of bullfrogs at the edge of the water. There's no moon, and the night is dark as pitch.

I try to cry. Grief for Jolene burns the back of my eyes like acid. But the tears won't come. I feel dry as sand. Grief for that child. *Our* child. I remember the look in her eyes that night at the Silver Moon. That look is burned into my mind. I know I can't ever forget it. If I have Jolene in my memory, I have to have that look, too. Those eyes. And Sheila, too. I see the shiny tear paths on her face. I see the hatred in *her* eyes.

I don't know how long I sit there alongside the road. I start the truck and drive on. I feel drained of strength, like coming off a ten day binge. I see the neon sign for the Silver Moon up ahead. The clock on the dash says it's a little after midnight and the parking lot is full. I park half in the ditch and get out. I can hear the music, distant, the stomping of feet and laughter, and the bullfrogs, coming from somewhere a long way away from where I am. I'm walking toward the front door. The crowded parking lot is dank-hot, smelling like sweat and tar and motor oil. Then I see them, these motorcycles, seven of them, pulled up in a row, gleaming black and silver in the dim neon light from the sign. There are four Harleys, two BMWs and a Triumph. It's a motorcycle gang from Woodlawn, in Birmingham. I've seen them before. They've been out here before with their tough-mouth women and their tattoos and their leather pants. They wear curly beards. They're mean, real bad-asses. They carry knives.

In the pale light I'm looking at the first hog in the line. It must be the leader's. It's an expensive BMW that gleams like a freshly dug lump of coal. It's got silver side mirrors and rhinestone studs lining the seat. It's got these two little signs hanging on each side of the back fender, so anybody coming up from behind could read them. The one on the left says, "PASSIN' SIDE." The one on the right says, "SUICIDE." Cute. I stand there looking at the little signs.

I go back to my truck in the dark and find my sawed-off pool cue under the seat. Three feet of heavy, slick polished wood. A carved handle so you can grip it. I go back to where the hogs are parked. I swing my stick and knock the little signs off into the weeds. Then I start in on the first windshield. I swing as hard as I can and the glass is like iron. Then it smudges.

Then it shatters some. I keep flailing away. I lose my breath, but I'm banging and chopping. My pool cue splinters in my hand, comes apart, and I fling it into the ditch and go back and get a tire iron from the toolbox behind the cab.

Then I really go to work on them bikes. Glass and metal flies. I move from windshield to windshield, knocking off mirrors, too. I hear someone say, "Hey," from the doorway of the café. "Hey, what the...?"

I'm like a maniac. I'm blind with my own sweat. I'm swinging away like crazy and the sound of the tire iron on glass and metal is like explosions in my ears. I can see the glass from the windshields spraying like bits of ice, and for some reason this strikes me as funny, and I start into laughing. I can't help it, but I'm laughing fit to kill, and all of a sudden I'm crying, too, and I don't know if these sounds I'm making, these gulps and sobs and carrying on, are laughing or crying or both or what. I'm flailing away and I must be making one hell of a racket, what with the tire iron on the bikes and these sounds coming out of me, and I can't catch my breath and I have to stop from time to time to heave and struggle and try to inhale. I keep on, my whole body getting numb and cramped.

And all the time I'm laughing and carrying on, howling like a crazy hyena. My arms are heavy under the numbness, but they keep moving, gripping the tire iron with both hands, and I'm ruining the hogs, really trashing them, and I see but never hear the old boys come boiling out of the door, all of them, all on me at the same time.

Marlin Barton

Domestic Relations

The morning was cool, particularly for April, but the sun burned down through the bright new screen wire and onto the narrow floorboards of the back porch. It warmed Conrad more than enough. His mother, May, kept coming out and asking him if he wasn't too cold. He said "no ma'am" each time, and she disappeared inside the large, old house. He hardly paid attention to her; he was much too preoccupied with the electric train that ran in hypnotic rhythm on the oval-shaped tracks before him. He had to be careful when it took the curves. If the train was going too fast the red engine would jump the tracks, and the cars would crash across the floor and end up turned on their sides in a jumble. Even though he hadn't had the train for very long, he'd learned to keep it running just slow enough so that it would stay on the tracks. His father had taught him this, and it was his father who had promised him so many months ago that as soon as Riverfield got electricity, and as soon as their house was wired, he would get Conrad an electric train. He'd ordered it from one of the salesmen who called at the store, and it had arrived in three weeks' time.

Conrad heard the back door open and was getting ready to say "no ma'am" yet again, but after hearing how quietly and gently the door was pushed to, he knew it wasn't his mother at all, or even his grandmother. It could only be Grandpa Wilkie, who had come to live with them a few months ago and who he knew was actually his great grandpa—that had been explained. And he also knew that there would be no mention made of how cold it might be. Grandpa Wilkie didn't talk about such silly things. It hadn't taken Conrad long to learn that about him.

The old man sat down beside him in a ladder-back chair, and Conrad stopped the train and waited respectfully. Grandpa Wilkie leaned over, disconnected the engine, picked it up, and blew smoke from his pipe into the back of it. Smoke came pouring out of the small smokestack. He did this twice more, and Conrad marveled at the sight of it. Then, with spotted hands, the old man put the engine back on the track and reconnected it. Conrad pushed the transformer switch, and the train lurched and picked up speed.

This had become their ritual. Conrad turned and smiled up at his great grandfather, and it was then that he saw the unmistakable wet shine in the old man's gray eyes. He'd seen it there before, often when the old man came out onto the porch. His mother had told him that very old people cried some-

times, especially if they were sick. But Conrad knew that Grandpa Wilkie wasn't crying because he was old; he knew that his grandmother had been mean to Grandpa again. She always made him cry it seemed like. Her own father. Conrad suddenly pushed the transformer switch as far as it would go, and the train shot down the track. When it reached the most dangerous section of the curve, the farthest, it jumped the tracks and crashed and careened across the porch floor, scratching it.

"It jumped again," the old man said. His words surprised Conrad because he didn't usually speak when he first came out onto the porch. "Seems like it jumps almost every time I come out here to our little get-away spot. You reckon it's the smoke I put in?"

"No, sir. It's not the smoke," Conrad said.

"Well, that wouldn't make much sense, would it?"

"No, sir." He glanced up again at his great grandfather and then reached over the tracks and set the train on them, pushing the cars back and forth to make sure each wheel was in line. He pushed the transformer switch again and watched the train pick up speed until it circled the tracks in its usual rhythm.

"She shouldn't talk to you like she does," he said.

"Don't be disrespectful. She's your grandmother." And then, more to himself than to Conrad, "Maybe she has a right."

At lunch all of them, including his grandmother and his father home from the store for an hour, sat at the dining room table and ate the meal the cook, Leathy Ann, had prepared. His father talked about the morning's business and asked Conrad what he'd been doing. Conrad was more quiet than usual; he barely answered his father, and he would not look toward his grandmother at all.

After the meal he went outside to march the geese. It was something he did on slow afternoons. He took his B.B. gun with him. It didn't shoot with much force. In fact, Conrad could even see the B.B. when it came out of the barrel, see it curve slightly to the left so that he always had to adjust his aim. He chased the geese from their resting spot in back of the house, and each of them moved quickly into single file, like soldiers given a command. He walked behind them then, popping one occasionally with a B.B. when it began to stray. He didn't have to shoot very often. They knew to stay in line, and he could march them anywhere he wanted. He loved to see the long and

perfect straight line they made, not one of them out of order.

After half an hour or so of marching his troops, he grew tired and sat down on the edge of the long front porch. Within a minute his grandmother came out, as if she'd been waiting on him, and sat beside him, right down on the porch itself, not in the rocking chair as usual. "You didn't have much to say during lunch, especially to me," she said. "You feeling all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm fixing to walk up to the store. You want to go along?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think so." He turned from her.

"I'll buy you some cookies."

He didn't answer.

She put her arm around him then and pulled him close. "You know I think you're the finest grandson anyone could have? You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"If you don't want to go to the store, how about we do something else. You want me to tell you a story maybe? Would you like that?"

He felt himself begin to give way now. Her arm tightened around him and she pulled him closer. "How about a story?"

"Could you tell me about the Mexican again?" His words had come out almost against his will.

"The Mexican? Your mama doesn't like me to tell you that one. If I tell it will you walk up to the store with me when I'm done?"

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

"All right. It was a long time ago, when I was just a little girl and lived in Texas. I had long, dark hair and was such a little bit of a thing that a hard wind would almost knock me down. Those Texas winds are strong. Early one morning Aunt Jane came into the kitchen where I was sitting. I hadn't been living with her for long. I'd just come from living with cousin Anne and her husband, where I'd been left right after Mama died. Anyway, Aunt Jane told me to go out to the barn, that she thought some chickens had started nesting out there again, and she wanted me to find them and bring the eggs. She was always giving me chores to do. Seemed like every time I turned around she had a job for me. She kept me running hard."

"So then you went to the barn," Conrad said, picturing it all: his grandmother as a little girl, her long hair, the open Texas countryside—big and lonely.

"That's right. I knew it was going to take me awhile to look in all those

stalls, but I started right in, going from one empty stall to the next. When I came out of about the fifth one, I had an egg in my hand, a brown one, and I was studying it. When I looked up, I saw a strange man, a Mexican, standing right in front of me. He was dressed in what looked like rags."

"And he wore a big old hat, didn't he?" Conrad said.

"That's right. And before I could run or yell, he grabbed me and put one hand over my mouth and put a knife up to my neck. 'If you scream, I'll kill you,' he said. I didn't move. I was too scared. Finally, he let go of me, but I still didn't move. He saddled one of the horses and kept watching me the whole time. His eyes looked so mean. I didn't doubt he'd kill me like he said, so I just watched him get on the horse and ride out the back door of the barn. After he was gone, I ran to the house as fast as I could, shaking. I missed my mama then. I surely did. It was her I wanted to run to."

Her voice sounded far away now. It always did, Conrad noticed, when she got to the part about her mama.

"I want you to remember, this was a long time ago and a long ways away, Conrad. You don't have to worry about anything like that happening to you. I'm not going to let it. I'll always take care of you."

"Yes, ma'am. What about Grandpa Wilkie?"

"What, child?"

"Grandpa Wilkie? Where was he when it happened? He's your daddy. How come you didn't run to him?"

She looked down at him then. "You never asked me that before. I don't know where he was, just gone. Like always."

"Why was he gone?"

"He just was."

She stood, and Conrad looked up at her as she walked inside the house.

"We going to the store?" he asked.

"Not now," she called back. "In a little while." Her voice sounded far away to him again.

When he entered the kitchen his mother was reaching up to turn on the light that hung from the middle of the high ceiling. It was almost dark out now. He put the bacon and corn meal that he'd carried from the store for his grandmother on the small white table. His mother took them and began getting out the food that Leathy Ann had left. Conrad sat down.

"Daddy said he'd be home for supper."

"Good," his mother said. "Go tell Grandpa Wilkie we'll eat soon."

"He said he didn't feel good when I went by his room, that he wasn't going to eat."

"I do wish he wouldn't miss meals. It's not good for him, and besides, I'll just have to take him something out there later." Conrad could hear the slight irritation in her voice.

He began to fiddle with one of the napkins on the table as he sat, and his mother started singing a hymn. She sang so softly he couldn't hear the words or recognize the tune. Still, he knew it was a hymn. She often sang them to herself while working. He listened, but he had something he had been wanting to ask her and as much as he didn't want to interrupt, they were alone and this was his chance. But he was afraid. He didn't know why, he just was. He'd never been afraid to ask her anything before, but now that Grandpa Wilkie had come, things seemed different around the house.

"Mama," he said finally, "why don't Grandmama and Grandpa Wilkie love each other?"

She kept singing for a moment, then turned to him "They love each other. They just argue sometimes."

"Grandpa acts like he loves her, but she doesn't act like she loves him."

She didn't respond, only reached down some plates.

"You and Daddy never argue."

"Take these plates on into the dining room, Conrad," she said, handing them to him. She then turned away, silent.

Conrad walked into the dining room and set the plates out. After a while he heard his mother begin to sing again. This time he recognized the tune. It was "Church in the Wildwood."

Voices awakened him that night. They seemed to come from a long way off, as if they'd traveled from a place he'd been dreaming of, from some room far away in a house that he'd never seen, but could imagine, some house that maybe stood in the lonely Texas countryside with a little girl running toward it, frightened. He listened there in the dark of his room, feeling as if he were somehow dreaming while he was awake.

"You can't keep on walking out here. Not every night."

It was his father's voice, and his father didn't sound the way he usually did. It took Conrad awhile to understand, but then he realized, as he lay there huddled beneath the covers, that his father was angry.

Then, another voice: "I heard something, so I came out." This one was his grandmother's. It was always a deeper pitch than his mother's. "We can't

have people sneaking around out here at night looking to steal things. I'm going to see to it that they don't. I've got a family to protect. I'll shoot anybody who needs shooting."

In Conrad's mind flashed suddenly the image of the Mexican in his grandmother's story. He saw him standing ragged and mean-looking before the small, scared girl his grandmother had once been.

"Well, you came close to killing somebody tonight." His father's voice again. Still angry. He'd never heard his father angry at his grandmother before. There was something frightening in this. Then he thought, *Kill who? Some thief! Like the Mexican? Who?*

"If you hear something, you come wake me, you hear?" It was his father. "I'll see to it."

He heard another voice after a moment, one he couldn't quite make out. It was a whisper and seemed somehow removed from the voices of his father and grandmother. It spoke from a farther place. Again he imagined a lone house, silent and dark in the Texas countryside. Then sleep took him.

In the morning there were more voices, one angry, angrier than the night before, the other quiet. He lay in bed and listened. They were in the front hall. His grandmother's voice rang out clear.

"Were you just wandering around like some fool? I could have shot you. Do you know that? I almost did. I kept saying for whoever it was to speak up or I'd shoot."

"I was restless," came the reply, "so I went outside." Conrad had to strain to hear. It was Grandpa. He didn't say anything more.

Conrad didn't want to see the wet shine in the old man's eyes again. He imagined going and yelling at his grandmother himself, even imagined hitting her with his fists as her voice grew louder. *It isn't supposed to be like this*, he thought. *Mama and Daddy don't yell at each other.*

"Were you going to just wander off?" he heard his grandmother say.

"No, I wasn't."

"You're getting to be too much for me to take care of. You never took care of me when I was young, why should I take care of you now? You were always gone."

"I had to make a living," he said in a whisper, the same sort of whisper that Conrad had heard the night before, only this time, still straining; he could make out the words. "I couldn't take you just anywhere. Not back in those days. I'm sorry," he said. His grandmother didn't respond, and in their

silence Conrad felt a heaviness in the house. It pushed against him and slowly took his breath.

His father came home for lunch, but his grandmother and Grandpa Wilkie were absent, so the three of them, Conrad, his mother, and his father, ate at the small table in the kitchen. The meal was quiet. He felt the heaviness in the house still, even there in the kitchen. After lunch his father sat down on the back porch with him and showed him how to make the train run in reverse. By pushing the transformer switch on and off in one quick motion, then pushing it on again, the wheels on the engine would begin to turn backwards, and finally the whole train would pick up momentum. Here was something new to do, and his father even rolled up the sleeves on his white shirt, exposing the single rubber bands on each wrist that he kept there to wrap stacks of ones and fives with. He knew that when his father rolled up his sleeves he was going to stay awhile. "You run the train now," his father said, and the two of them kept taking turns.

The train ran smooth and only jumped the tracks once. Conrad even began to forget about the things he'd heard his grandmother say that morning. He felt good inside. His body felt light. But finally his father put on his hat and rolled his sleeves down. "I've got to get on back now. You keep playing," he said. Then Conrad was alone.

The train seemed to run even faster backwards, and he began pushing the switch a little farther and farther until the caboose would jump and all the cars and then the engine would crash and tumble across the porch in a racket. It seemed now that without his father he couldn't keep the train running slow enough. His hand kept pushing the transformer switch farther. And then the crash would come.

After the third or fourth crash he heard another sound. Loud voices. He seemed to be always hearing voices now, angry ones, and the things they said sounded like crashes to his ears, metal scraping against metal. This time they came from the kitchen. As he listened he realized that it was really only one voice: his grandmother's, of course, sounding just as it had early that morning.

"And all those aunts and cousins treated me like I was some darkey! Do you hear? Made me work hard. Told me I had to. Did you ever stay long enough to even see how they might treat me? No. And now you want me to take care of you? Want me to wait on you?"

There was a sudden quiet, a lull, and Conrad heard only the sound of the

train as it ran the tracks in reverse. Then a crash: a voice again. Her voice. Louder now even.

"I want you out of this house!"

Conrad, without bothering to stop the circling train, jumped up and ran to the half-open kitchen door. His breath caught in his throat. He opened the door wide and just as he saw his grandmother and Grandpa Wilkie standing there beside the table, his mother pushed past him and walked up between the two.

"Let me tell you something," she said, pointing a finger into his grandmother's face. "As long as I'm alive Mr. Wilkie can stay here. And if that doesn't suit you, *you'll* have to leave." She turned to the old man then. "You don't have to worry about anything, Mr. Wilkie. It's going to be all right."

Conrad stared at the three of them and watched as his grandmother, her shoulders thrown back straight, suddenly turned and marched past him as if he weren't there. The floor shook beneath her steps. His mother took Mr. Wilkie by the arm then and led him past Conrad and toward the old man's room. "Go outside and play for now. I've got to see to Grandpa," she called back to him.

He stood for a moment without knowing what to do. In the distance he heard his grandmother slam shut the doors to her room; then he heard Grandpa Wilkie's door close quietly. He walked back up the porch and knelt down over his train. It lay on its side, wrecked, the cars broken apart at the couplings. The transformer hummed with a low and dangerous sound.



The chill in the morning air began to disappear over the next few weeks, but somehow the big house with its high ceilings and thin pine floorboards held what little cold remained. Grandpa Wilkie stayed in his room mostly and wouldn't come out for meals. Conrad's mother complained, but she carried his tray to him, and when she walked back into the kitchen, she'd say how weak he looked.

His mother and father didn't talk to each other like usual now. He noticed it especially at night in the living room. The radio would be on, only they wouldn't really be listening. Each would sit in a chair across the room from the other, staring toward one of the doors. There would be no quiet talk about what they heard, no talk about what had happened during the day. He'd never cared about what they'd said to each other at these times; he'd only been aware of the quiet sound of their voices as it grew dark at each of the windows. Now he missed their voices.

His father would sometimes get up from his chair and go check on his grandmother in her room. She'd no longer come and sit with them at night. When his father came back into the living room and sat down, he'd stare at Conrad's mother and shake his head. "She still won't come out," he'd say in an ugly voice. "You didn't have to talk to her like you did."

During the days he often picked up his B.B. gun and went outside to march the geese; only now he began to shoot them before they had a chance to form their line. They would squawk and flap their wings. And after they were in their ranks, he might take a couple of extra shots, even if they didn't stray.

Sometimes at night he'd awaken to the sound of a voice. He'd raise up in bed and listen. "Who's out there?" he'd hear. "Who is it? I'll shoot." He'd hear the words and recognize his grandmother's voice. As he'd finally drift back into sleep he would sometimes see that same frightened girl who had been his grandmother running again toward the house he imagined in a dark and open countryside. And for some reason the house would always be dark too, no light in a window, no smoke coming from the chimney and spreading out across whatever piece of moon there might be—just dark and alone, like his room. He would burrow far down into his covers then. In the morning he might hear his grandmother again, only now she would be in the hall, or maybe the living room, and like as not, she'd be saying something about Grandpa Wilkie. "I don't see why he can't come out of that room. It's not like he's all that sick."

One afternoon his mother called him into the house from the steps off the back porch. He was playing by the well with his tin soldiers, and he told her in a loud voice, too loud a voice, that he wasn't ready to come inside. In a moment so quick he hardly realized what was happening, his mother came down from the steps, grabbed his arm, and jerked him up off the ground in a fury, knocking his soldiers down. "I don't know what's gotten into you lately, young man," she said.

He seemed to get into trouble often after this. He was slow to answer when spoken to, and he kept wandering off too far down into the pasture, even after his father had whipped him for it. He didn't let his grandmother take him to the store at all anymore or tell him stories, and she gave him hurt looks when she passed.

On a Saturday afternoon in late May he was sitting in the living room drawing when his grandmother walked in, sat down, and looked at him for a

brief moment. "If you're not going to talk to me anymore, maybe I *will* leave this house." With that she walked out. It was as if she'd struck him. At supper he hardly ate. When his mother asked him what was wrong, he didn't answer her.

In the morning, he woke early and without knowing exactly why, suddenly got out of bed. The wood floors were cold to his bare feet, but he didn't stop to put on socks. He walked out of his room and into the hall, then quietly opened the back door and stepped onto the porch. He walked past his train which he hardly played with at all now. The sight of it no longer made him want to run it around the tracks over and over again. He walked on slowly toward Grandpa Wilkie's room, then hesitated at the door. It was partially closed, and he couldn't see inside. His mother had told him not to go into Grandpa Wilkie's room and disturb him, not under any circumstances. But now he slipped into the room and saw with a start that the old man was awake. His head was propped up on his pillow. He didn't speak or motion in any way, but Conrad could tell that it was all right for him to come in by the way the old man looked at him. Conrad climbed onto the foot of the bed, leaned against the wall, and pulled a blanket around him. The old man's eyes were as large and clear as the sky had been the day before. His white hair, which was usually so perfectly combed, was unkempt. Neither he nor Conrad spoke. They sat for what seemed like a long time, without even looking at each other. There was a silence between them like before a prayer. Finally Conrad turned to him. "Which one of you is going to leave?" he said. The pressure behind his eyes broke then and the tears came. He couldn't stop them. The old man leaned forward, took his hand, and held it, tightly.

When he awoke he didn't know where he was at first but soon realized that he was back in his bed. He didn't know how he'd gotten there. For a moment he wondered if he'd dreamed about going into Grandpa Wilkie's room but knew that it hadn't been a dream. He could still feel the old man's grip around his hand. He decided that someone must have carried him back to his bed. He wondered who. Then he saw his grandmother sitting in a chair across the room from him. Her long gray hair was loose and hung past her shoulders. Somehow there in the dim light of the room with her hair down, she looked young, like the child he imagined running across the Texas countryside. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

Soon the old man stopped coming out of his room altogether. "He's very sick," his mother told him. "You can't be going in to visit him." Now it was almost as if he'd left them, and Conrad wondered from time to time if he was really in there or not. Maybe his grandmother had gotten rid of Grandpa Wilkie, and they didn't want him to know it. But Dr. Hannah, who lived in the house next to them, would come and duck into the little room from time to time, and he watched as his mother carried trays of food in and out. Sometimes he would see his grandmother walk out onto the back porch and look down toward the room. She would then frown and turn away.

Occasionally his father would step in there at night after he came home from the store. The two men would talk quietly, and Conrad always wondered what they said. His mother would finally call his father, and one night she whispered as he came out of the room, "He needs rest."

"What difference could that make now?" his father had said, then walked away.

One afternoon near the end of June, Conrad came up the back steps after playing outside and let the screen door slam behind him. He saw right away that Grandpa Wilkie's door was open and that his father stood inside. Before he could take another step his mother came out of the room and knelt beside him. Something was wrong. "Grandpa has passed on," she said. And then she added, "He died. You understand?" He nodded his head. He didn't cry, but his own breath seemed to choke him.

He'd seen animals that had been killed, and he'd had a dog that died. He knew what death was, and he knew that he would miss Grandpa Wilkie, just as he had been missing him so much already when the old man wouldn't come out of his room. He knew just as clearly that his grandmother had now gotten her wish. Grandpa Wilkie was gone, and she wouldn't have to fuss at him anymore and tell him that she didn't want him.

He heard his grandmother crying then from inside the house. She came out onto the porch and stopped where he was and knelt down. Her tears surprised him. They caught and hung on the gold rims of her glasses before falling. She reached for him with both arms, but he quickly turned and put his head on his mother's shoulder. He wouldn't let his grandmother touch him. He still didn't cry. He wanted to, but no tears came. Not now. Finally he saw his grandmother walk toward the little room. *You can't go in there*, he tried to say, but the words wouldn't come.

His father called to his mother, and she slowly let go of him. He stood alone, not sure what to do. Then he heard the honks of the geese as they walked across the yard near the well. They stopped and huddled together for a moment, their white backs shining brightly in the hot sun. They stretched

Marlin Barton

their wings and turned their heads and bumped into one another as if they had never once learned to march in a straight line. And he found himself wanting to walk away from everyone on the porch and go down and sit quietly among them.

David Musgrove

From *Burning Bright*

I was in Tuscaloosa. In Anna's apartment. She was sitting on the couch, drinking red wine. I was at the door. I was leaving.

"I'm leaving."

"OK."

"That's all you've got to say, OK?"

She laughed. "Marshall it's OK, don't you understand? Everything is OK."

I walked out closing the door behind me, just in time to see Gator, in an old Buick, pulling away from the curve.

"Wait Gator, wait up!"

"Fuck it, you take too long," he shouted out the window, as the car accelerated down the street. Through the back windshield I thought I saw a reptilian snout, poking above the backseat, leering at me. I put my duffle bag on the ground. I was wearing my funeral suit. There was a handkerchief in the breast pocket and I took it out, wiped the sweat from my forehead. I turned and tried to go back inside Anna's apartment. The door was locked.

I sat up. I was sweating. I was in my tent, in Kashmir. I could hear the mindless sounds of sheep, and men's voices, and the faint trickle sounds of a bell tied around an ewe's neck as she ripped up grass inches away from my tent. And last night, oh yes...what happened last night? Where were my shoes? I had to pee. I looked around. No shoes. "Goddamnit." I crawled out of my tent. The ewe shook her head at me, tinkling her bell, and bleated.

"Yeah? Ya don't say?"

I walked off behind a boulder to piss, my bare feet twitching against the cold ground. Steam rose from the puddle I made. My head throbbed. I looked around, sheep everywhere, among the tents, grazing on the hillsides, watching me urinate with black, empty eyes. Two shepherds stood down near the spring, talking and smoking. I waved. One of them raised an arm.

Larry, Curly, and Moe stood near Viv and Max's tent. They stared at the milling sheep as if insulted to be sharing the same grazing ground with them. I walked over and patted Moe on the hindquarter, or maybe it was Curly. "Did you eat my shoes Moe?" No answer. The sun had not yet shown above the mountain tops and my feet were growing numb. I could hear Viv and Max talking inside their tent.

"Hey. What are you fags doin in there, playin grabass? Come out."

The flap was pulled back and Viv stuck his head out. "Whatever you're sellin mate, we're not buyin."

"Have you seen my shoes?"

Viv turned and addressed the interior of his tent. "Marshall can't find his shoes, I think he's still drunk." He crawled out of the tent and stretched. "Since you've got a tent all to yourself, you should have invited one of those pretty little sheep inside to keep you warm."

"Maybe I did."

"I thought I saw one walking sort of funny." He looked down at my feet. "You're barefoot."

"No shit. I can't find my shoes."

We walked over to the big tent Usef and Rafga shared. Rafga was behind the tent, swabbing out the curry pot with a dirty rag. "Hey Rafga."

"Oh yes, good morning gentlemen. Ready for a little breakfast curry?"

"Have you seen my shoes?"

"Yes, they are there, by the fire ring. I found them by some boulders, and put them by the cook fire, to dry the dew. You got a little sick, last night?"

"Just a tad."

"Breakfast make you better."

"Mmm." I wandered over to where the cooking fire flared weakly and got my shoes.

After breakfast, we decided that Rafga's curry should be supplemented with a chicken. Rafga stayed behind to guard the camp against wayward sheep and other ne'er do wells, while the rest of us took the stooges and set out for Machoi. We rode and walked back down to Sonamarg, the day gradually growing warmer. We shed our moth eaten coats and as the sun cleared the mountains it lit the snow clad peaks with a dazzling light and produced a little sweat on our brow.

Sonamarg seemed more deserted than the day before. We didn't see any of the old people scurrying about and the small soldier's camp was gone. This made Usef uneasy as we plodded down the main street, looking into the empty shacks and huts whose doors hung open on leather hinges, or had fallen or been ripped off and lay in the drying mud. Near the end of the street a raven sat on the skeleton of a dog. It pecked forlornly on a vertebrae, tap, tap, tap. Tap. It gave a hoarse squawk as we passed but did not fly.

"I do not understand why the jawans have gone away," said Usef, rubbing his chin and looking around apprehensively. "They have always kept a permanent camp here, since the fighting stopped. I do not know why they have gone."

"Maybe they're up in the mountains, picking flowers," I said.

Usef didn't seem to be in a mood for joking. "Something is not right."

The road rose up and twisted around a mountain, leaving the wreck of Sonamarg behind and following the tortured contours of a frothy stream. We crossed a wooden bridge made of new timbers, the planks and logs still giving off the smell of sap and sawdust. The burnt pilings of a former bridge stood like dark sentinels in the rushing grey stream beneath the handiwork of the new. Army trucks had rutted the road and here and there were the tracks of horse and sheep and men. For two hours we travelled through a pastoral country of gentle green slopes, a few crowned by stone houses with tin roofs that brightly reflected the high altitude sun. A few sheep usually congregated around these dwellings, but no one seemed at home. In every direction mountains rose to a height that seemed unreal. The eye followed their trajectory upward, and where it seemed they should end in the pale blue sky they only rose higher still. Once the faint chop chop of a helicopter was heard on the far side of a peak, but the warbird never materialized.

Traffic was minimal. Twice we passed men on horses who trotted briskly towards Sonamarg, nodding grimly as they passed but neither speaking nor slowing. Three young boys walking along the road stopped to gawk at the pale horsemen and their guide. We stuck out our tongues and grinned. They laughed and shouted in Kashmiri.

The plodding pace set by the stooges finally brought us into the village of Machoi. The place was small but bustling. It was laid out in the same pattern as all the small villages we'd seen. A wide central street flanked by clapboard shacks, mud huts and a few more substantial structures of plaster and timber, some rising two stories. Trucks and busses were parked here and there, none seemed operable, many had been stripped of tires, doors and hood. Narrow streets and alleys led away from the main thoroughfare and were crowded with sheep, goats, ponies and children milling about. Spoon wallahs and shoe wallahs and horse bridle wallahs all hawked their wares, holding up samples of their product for our inspection as we passed. A man tottering on homemade crutches, an empty pant leg flapping in the breeze, approached and told us that, seeing as we were short one horse, we were lucky to have found him, as he had one for sale. We moved on. Usef stopped in front of a dilapidated structure of dried mud and cedar branches in front of which a large mesh cage rested on a raised platform. Inside the cage a dozen or more white chickens scratched and squawked and shat. A man with a hook affixed by leather straps to the stump of his left forearm emerged from the dwelling and smiled when he saw us.

“Chicken? Hey. Chicken.” “I’ll have the chicken finger snack with french fries,” I said, patting Curly on the neck, on whom I sat, “and a bucket of oats for my steed.”

“Argh. Chicken. Hey.” The amputee walked over to the cage and inserted his hook through the mesh and began rattling the affair with depraved delight. The chickens squawked and hopped about in terror. “Hey, chicken, grhhhh,” he gibbered.

“This motherfucker’s nuts,” I said.

Usef winked at us and then spoke to the chicken monger in Kashmiri. The man hopped up and down and performed some sort of dance step. Then he spoke in Urdu. Usef answered. The chicken monger replied. Then he reinserted his hook in the cage and gave it a good rattle. “Chicken. Ge, gegege.”

Usef pulled a crumpled rupee note from a pocket and handed it to the strange poultry wallah, who smelled it and then stuffed it into a pocket. He then lifted the top off the chicken cage with his unmaimed appendage and Usef expertly snatched one of the chickens up by its feet and bound them with a piece of twine the chicken man handed him. Usef walked over to me and tied the chicken to Curly’s reins.

“Hold the reins back, or the chicken will get in Curly’s face.”

“Don’t let that fucker get away,” said Viv.

“Shit. He ain’t goin nowhere but the stewpot.”

“Chicken finger french fry, coming right up,” said Usef, grinning.

The chicken monger hopped up and down and beat on the cage with his hook. “Chicken, chicken, chicken, garhhhhhhhh.”

We waved goodbye and led the horses back down the street as the halfwit continued pounding the cage with his hook and the chickens squawked in despair. Our dinner hung upside down from the reins and bounced against Curly’s neck. “Don’t you bite me,” I told it.

“What was wrong with that fellow?” asked Max.

“He has a bullet in his skull,” said Usef.

“No shit?”

“None. He was shot in the hand and head during the troubles. He got the gangrene in his hand and arm so the doctor must cut it off. Another bullet stuck in the skull. It did not go in the brain, but it made him crazy.”

“What did he do before the war?” asked Viv.

“Sold chickens.”

We stopped in a small dhaba and had chai. Usef had a lengthy conversation with two old men in Urdu. When we stepped back into the glaring sun-

light Usef lit a chiroot and stared up at the surrounding peaks. "Something is happening."

We were all digging out cigarettes and lighting them. "What's that?" asked Max.

"The old men say, all during the night the jawans passing through, in trucks. Not just the ones from Sonamarg. They say a great many pass through, all during the night. But none in the daylight."

"What's that mean? They going somewhere to fight rebels?" asked Viv.

"No, the rebels are doing nothing. They are tending their sheep or working in their shops in the villages and in Srinigar, but they are not gathering. Something else. Maybe nothing." Usef shrugged and said nothing more.

"I'll walk for a while Usef, you ride Curly and watch the chicken."

"OK."

As everyone mounted up a man wearing what looked to be old, yellowed pajamas walked up and stood before us. "Namaste gentlemen. Enjoying the Kashmir?"

"You bet your ass," said Viv.

"Yes. OK."

Usef spoke to the man in Urdu. They talked back and forth and then Usef turned in the saddle and faced us. "He wants to know if you would like to see a cave where a Djinn lives."

"Djinn? One of those evil spirits?"

"Yes."

We looked at each other. "Fuuuuck yea." Usef spoke to the man again.

"We don't really have anything else planned for today do we?" asked Max.

Usef thought about this for a second. "No."

"How far's the cave?" asked Viv.

"He say one, maybe two kilometer."

"How much money will he want?" asked Viv.

"A few rupees will be enough."

"You think there's really a Djinn in the cave?"

Usef looked at the pajama clad cave guide who smiled encouragingly.

"A Djinn is not seen. You cannot see a Djinn unless you see it in the eye of a beast or man of which the Djinn has taken hold. But I know of this cave, as does everyone. It is said that it was once a lair of the thuggee, until the British did away with them. Then a sadhu made his home in the cave for many years. One day some pilgrims from Delhi came to see him, and they found him dead, his head missing. People say that a Djinn murdered him and ate his head to gain the wisdom inside, and then retreated deep into the cave

and is still there. Everyone knows of this place, but no one goes there, since the death of the sadhu.”

“You’ve never been?”

“No, I have never seen it.”

“Hell yeah man, let’s go,” I said, “we’ll catch it and I can take it back to the States in a bottle, let that fucker go and watch him wreak havoc.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t take the chicken,” said Viv. “The Djinn might creep inside it, and then when we eat the chicken, the Djinn will be in us. Then, when we take a shit, the Djinn will leap out of our asses and kill us.”

“You’ve got a point there,” said Max.

Usef smiled. “You gentlemen are very silly. Do you really wish to see the cave?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“OK.”

The pajama man grinned. “OK, yes. This Djinn, very nasty.”



The pajama man’s name was Amarnath, and he led us out of Machoi along a path that crossed over the green slopes like a faint pencil mark on a map and gradually rose into higher, grassless terrain. We were quiet, studying the scenery which seemed to discourage talk. Even the chicken ceased its mournful clucking. We were approaching a narrow, high-walled pass through the cliffs ahead when Usef called a halt.

“What is problem?” asked Amarnath.

Usef spoke in Urdu. Amarnath’s face darkened and he spoke back, gesturing at Usef as if telling him to go away. Usef dismounted and walked towards Amarnath, pulling a revolver from under his shirt as he did so.

“Usef, what the fuck’s goin on?” I said.

Amarnath raised his hands over his head and Usef patted him down thoroughly. Amarnath looked at us fearfully. “Gentlemen, why is this?”

“Usef, what’s going on,” said Viv.

Usef stuck the Colt in his waistband. “This man I do not know. The pass ahead is a good place for the ambush. Maybe he is a kidnapper? Who can say? We are close to the LOC. Maybe men are waiting ahead, they could have you in Pakistan by nightfall. And they would kill me. I must make sure he is not armed. And he must know I will shoot him in the back of the head if there is any trouble.”

“You are afraid to go in the cave,” said Amarnath.

“Shutup.”

"I am to shut up? You are the accusing. You accuse me."

"The safety of these men is my job. I am responsible for them."

"You are thinking I am going to capture three large white men, and yourself with a gun, when I myself am unarmed? You are crazy."

"Maybe you have men ahead watching the pass."

"You are crazy. Go and see."

Usef looked at us. "What do you want to do?" We looked at one another and at Amarnath.

"You're in charge," said Max

"I am not. You are paying the money. I am working for you."

"You think there's men waiting for us in the pass?" asked Viv.

"I am not saying there are or there are not. I am saying it is my job to stop this man, check him, let him see that I am armed and tell you what I think."

"Have you had that gun since we first met you?" I asked.

"I always carry it."

"Let me see it."

"No, I show you later. What do you want to do?" We looked towards the pass. The high walls cut off the sun and obliterated the trail in shadows.

"There's no one there," said Viv. "Let's go, this bloke seems alright."

"Viv, if we get kidnapped, your family's paying my ransom," said Max.

"Shit, we got a gun," I said.

It was cooler in the shadow-filled pass. Snow melt seeped down the walls, feeding a kaleidoscope of colored mosses. The dull cllop of the unshod ponies echoed eerily. Amarnath led, with Usef behind astride Curly, the Colt in one hand and the chicken heavy reins in the other. Viv and Max followed on Moe and Larry, and I brought up the rear, continuously glancing over my shoulder, waiting for the echoing horsesteps to metamorph into a rush of bare feet, swinging scimitars and flailing robes, but there was nothing but the gloom, and the steady drip of water and the echo of our own steps. Suddenly we were out, emerging into bright sunlight again.

Before us yawned another gorge, this one as wide as the one that held the Kolahoi Glacier. We stood on the edge of a precipice and stared down at its rock strewn floor several hundred feet below. The path led off to our left. On one side of the path a sheer wall of rock rose hundreds of feet. On the other side lay empty space.

"You see, I am not a bad man," said Amarnath, "You dishonor me. The cave is not far. This path goes along, between the cliff and the gorge, maybe two, three hundred meters there, around the curve, and there is the Djinn's cave, in the cliff wall. You must leave the horses here."

Usef pulled Curly's reins over his head and weighed them down with a rock. The chicken lay on the ground beside the rock, still tied to the reins and squawked indignantly and then shat on the reins, the rock and itself. Usef stuck the Colt into his waistband. "Since Curly cannot walk away, the other two will stay as well," he gestured at Amarnath, "Lead the way."

Amarnath set out on the narrow path and we followed, everyone feeling the left wall with their hand and looking down into the empty space inches from their right foot. My hands began to sweat. I kicked a large stone and watched it fall. It bounced when it hit bottom, and then, a full second after I saw it hit, I heard it. Click.

The trail curved from sight ahead, following the contours of the cliff. After we groped our way around the curve we came to a stairwell cut into the sheer rockface. It rose straight up fifty or more feet and then ended at a ledge, beyond which a dark hole opened in the rock like a jagged wound. "Thank God we're not drunk," I said.

We climbed up the stairs, each step big enough to hold half of a normal sized foot, so that we climbed up on tiptoe. When we reached the ledge we all sat down to catch our breath. There was barely enough room for all of us and we sat shoulder to shoulder, breathing hard, looking over the edge.

"Who's got a dart?" said Viv. We all dug for cigarettes and I gave Amarnath one. He smiled thinly.

"So Amarnath, what's really inside?" asked Max.

"I have been to the bottom of the stairs, but this is the first time I have climbed up. And I have never been inside."

"So how did you come to know of this place?" asked Viv.

"Everyone knows of it. When the sadhu was here, many Hindu would come. But there are now very few Hindu in Kashmir, and the sadhu is dead."

"A sadhu is like a hermit, right?" asked Max.

"He is a Hindu holy man. Like a guru. Some of them seek wisdom in solitude and go to caves and such places, but I am thinking that they do it so people will bring them food, and when a woman comes, I think they are having the sex."

"Really?"

"Most likely. They are Hindu. Infidels."

"So what was the thuggee?" asked Viv.

"I know that one," I said.

"Well.....what?"

"They worshipped Kali, the black goddess of death, and there used to be thousands of them all over India. They would waylay travellers and such on the roads and trails, and strangle them with silk scarves as a sacrifice. Not

every once in a while, I'm talkin hundreds of people a year getting strangled. And the British, naturally, put a stop to it, hung a bunch of the priests or ringleaders or whatever. The British, Jesus, 'just like Americans, always trying to turn the world into a fucking kindergarten. Shoot all the maneaters, hang the evil priests..."

"Well, I can understand them wanting to clear out those bastards," said Max.

"I know, I'm halfway joking."

"How do you know all about those blokes?" asked Viv.

"I collect old hunting books, and one of the best ones I've got is by this old British colonial dude, Sleeman. Book's called *Rifle to Camera*. He eventually gave up the gun and hunted only with the camera. But he went everywhere, Asia and Africa, all before they got raped over by game hogs, and then later by overpopulation. I mean, back then panthers were practically dropping out of the trees and landing on the verandah while you were having tea. Anyhow, this guy's grandfather was some big deal in the colony and he got on the thuggee's ass and strung up all the leaders. So old Sleeman talked about his grandpa a bit, and how he'd saved India from the thuggee. Anyway, thuggee, that's where the word *thug* comes from."

"What'd they do with the bodies, after they strangled em?" asked Viv.

"I dunno. I think they just left em there."

"Maybe ole Sleeman's grandpappy didn't quite get them all; maybe there's still a few hiding out here," said Max.

"There was probably never anything in this cave but stored grain or something," I said.

"No, it's true about the sadhu here," said Usef. "He lived here in the time of my grandparents. And the thuggee, I have heard that they once used this cave, but if that is true, I do not know. It would seem that a sadhu would not want to use a cave with such an evil history. But, Kali is a Hindu god after all."

"What about the Djinn?" said Viv.

"Some say the sadhu was murdered by Muslims," said Usef quietly.

"No, no," said Amarnath, "a Djinn, he ate the sadhu's head."

We finished our cigarettes, one by one, and then looked behind us at the diagonal slit in the rock that was the cave's entrance. Viv stood up carefully. "Well, let's go."

The fissure in the rock was narrow. We entered one at a time, single file, Viv leading the way. Viv and I held our cigarette lighters aloft, and the weak light revealed our shadows, silently matching our steps behind us, like ghost spelunkers. Twenty feet into the cliff, the fissure opened up into a room with

unknown dimensions. Our whispers returned in echoes and the air was cold. A draft kept Viv and me restriking our lighters. There was a faint chittering noise, as if thousands of shoes were scuffing a linoleum floor in a classroom far away. The air was musty.

"We should have brought some string or something, so we can find our way back out," Viv whispered.

"Well, we can't really go any farther without anything besides cigarette lighters to see with," said Max.

I stepped on something that felt like a stick and bent and picked it up. It was an old bone with a thick rag wrapped around the end. "Hey, I got a torch." I lit the rag with my lighter and the room around us took shape as the torch flared. It was maybe ten yards wide and twenty deep and there was junk scattered everywhere. Torches made from leg bones and sticks, broken clay pots, rotten baskets. The chittering grew louder.

"That's not a human bone is it," asked Max.

"Naw, looks like a goat or a deer leg, or something."

"How can you tell?"

"Cause it's still got a fucking hoof attached to one end. I think there's bats in here."

"What's that sound, it's getting louder," said Viv.

"Yeah, I think it's—"

The ceiling suddenly exploded into a thousand furred pieces, and I was hit in the face and back of the head as the room suddenly filled with bats flying in all directions. I dropped the torch and got down on the floor. Everyone was cursing and shouting.

"Allah, Allah help us," screamed Amarnath, running in circles. A bat hit him directly in the mouth and he fell to the floor, sputtering and choking.

The torch still burned where it lay in the dust and I could see Viv and Max crawling towards me. Usef lay curled in a ball, the revolver in one hand, the other covering his face.

"Jesus Christ," said Viv spitting, "one of those bastards went in my fucking mouth. I almost spewed."

"Fucking Christ," said Max, rubbing his head, "you don't think they've got rabies do you?"

"Nah, they're just scared, the light made em confused, they'll probably fly out of here in a second, or get back on the ceiling. I don't think they dig this torch and the smoke and all."

"I'm not digging them. There's bat shit all over this floor. It's all over me," said Viv.

"I don't give a shit about bats really, but I wanna get off this floor; there might be spiders in here."

"Spiders?"

"Yeah, I've kinda got a phobia of spiders."

"There's ten thousand bats flyin over our head and you're lookin around for spiders?"

"Those bats are just tryin to get away from us. A goddamned spider'll bite your ass though. You never see em until it's too late."

Usef crawled over to us with the Colt still in his hand. His eyes looked crazed. "I do not like the bats."

"They won't bite, I think they're just flyin out of here cause of the light and smoke."

"I do not like them."

"What kind of spiders live around here?"

"What?"

The bats swirled through the air, chittering and flapping, swooping in all directions. Amarnath lay on the floor near the outer edge of the circle of light, a shadow writhing in the dust and calling on Allah. And then suddenly they were gone. There was silence in the room except for Amarnath's thin mewling cries. I reached for the torch just as its flame sputtered out and plunged the room back into darkness. "Goddamnit."

"Did they leave?" whispered Viv.

"I think so," said Max.

"Get another torch lit. I dropped my lighter," said Viv.

"Relight that torch, Marshall," said Max.

"I can't, the rag burned away. Feel around for another one, they're layin all over."

"Here's one. Throw me that lighter," said Viv.

The room reappeared as Viv's torch sputtered to life. We stood up slowly, brushing dust and dried bat shit off our clothes. Usef stuck the gun back into his waistband. "I do not like the bat."

"Allah...Allah..." moaned Amarnath.

"Get up you crazy fucker, they flew out," said Max.

"A bat touched my eye," said Usef, rubbing his knuckles into his eye sockets.

A solitary bat circled our torch once, zigzagging around the light like an enormous moth and then flew out the fissure after the others. Amarnath stood up slowly and looked around in terror. "I was thinking the Djinn had come."

"Look at all this shit," I said.

There were heaps of rotting rags and cloths, a few torn baskets. Clay shards of pottery littered the floor. Torches fashioned from bones and sticks with rags wrapped around the end lay here and there, and we each gathered up a few.

"Maybe there's something valuable in here," said Viv, "some artifacts or something."

"OK, here's the deal, finder's keepers, if you see it, it's yours," I said.

"Unless we find a whole room of treasure, then we'll divide it up," said Max.

"I'll murder the rest of you and keep it all for myself," said Viv.

"I have the pistol," said Usef. Our laughter echoed through the room and seemed to come back at a higher pitch. We spread out, looking around.

"Let us go now, OK," said Amarnath.

"We're gonna look around," I said, "shit, we just got here."

"Please let us leave."

Usef stood beside me. "We can give him his rupees and let him go, I do not think he has men anywhere. He is no kidnapper."

"How many rupees do you need?"

"No, no, nothing from you. You have already paid for everything. Ramzan gave me rupees, from your money, to pay for such things."

"Oh. So how much you gonna give him?"

"I am thinking ten."

"Sounds good."

Usef went to Amarnath and gave him the money, but Amarnath didn't want to leave. "I am not going alone. You are not coming?"

"We are staying. They want to look. So do I."

"Ah, Allah protect these fools. I am not going alone."

"Then stay. We are going to look."

"Hey, come look at this," Max shouted, off in a far dark corner of the room, waving his torch. He'd found a passageway. It was larger than the fissure in the cliff wall we'd first entered through.

"Let's see where it goes," I said.

"We need something to mark our way, so we don't get lost," said Max.

"We can't get lost," said Viv. "There's no other way out of this room except the way we came in, I walked all the way around the walls. There's nothing but trash in here anyhow, rags and sticks and bones. If we go down this passageway, all we've got to do is turn around to get back out."

"Yeah, if we find another passageway branching off then we'll leave a torch there to mark it," I said.

"Let us leave now," said Amarnath.

"You brought us here, you crazy bloke," said Max.

"Yes, now we can go please."

The passageway twisted and turned at crazy angles and we moved down it silently. The air was cold. Somewhere ahead water was dripping and the sound grew louder as we made our way deeper into the cave. The floor of the passageway was covered with a fine dust that rose into the air as we shuffled along and made us sneeze. We each carried two or three legbone and stick torches. After twenty-five or thirty yards of twisting along, we found ourselves in another room, much smaller than the first. The floor was littered with more rags and broken pots. We wandered about, poking at heaps of refuse with our feet.

"There's nothing but shit in here as well," said Viv.

I poked around among a pile of rags in a corner, lifting them up with a stick I'd found. The rags were rotted and fell apart as I pulled them from the pile. There was nothing underneath. Suddenly Amarnath screamed. "Ahhhhh."

"What the fuck are you wailin about now?" said Viv.

"The sadhu, oh, Allah protect us, here is the sadhu as was told."

"No shit, really?" I walked over to where Amarnath and Usef stood looking down at their feet. Amarnath clung to Usef like a frightened child. Usef slapped at him.

"Let me go you fool."

"Jesus, he looks like a mummy," said Viv.

A shrivelled corpse lay against the wall. The flesh had blackened and dried on the frame of the skeleton and looked hard as stone. The hands were curled into rigid fists and the man's genitalia had shrivelled into a thin petrified worm. There was not a stitch of clothing on the mummified cadaver and there was no head.

"Touch it."

"You touch it."

"It looks hard as a rock."

"The Djinn ate his head," said Amarnath quietly.

"Shit, I bet some Muslims came up here and cut his head off with a sword and then stole whatever he had stored away, and then spread that rumor themselves." I said.

"Touch him," said Max. Viv kneeled down and thumped one of the thin blackened arms.

"Hard as a rock."

"Where's his head I wonder," said Max.

"Are you hearing this water," asked Usef quietly.

"Yeah, that dripping?" asked Viv

"Yes.

"I hear it, there's water dripping in here somewhere," said Max.

"No, I have looked. There is no water."

"There's water somewhere in here, you can hear it dripping plain as day," I said.

"Listen," said Usef. The sound was steady and distinct. Drip. Drip. Drip. Water falling into a pool. Drop by drop. We could all hear it.

"There's water in here somewhere," said Viv.

"No," said Usef quietly, "there is no water."

We spread out and looked around. The room was only twenty feet long and thirty or forty wide. There was no water anywhere. Only rags and the shrivelled corpse of the sadhu.

"Where the hell is that noise coming from," I said.

"It is here. All around us," said Usef.

"But there's no water here," said Max.

"Yes. But the sound is here. It is right here."

We crouched on the floor by the sadhu and listened. Drip. Drip. The sound was steady and distinct. "It is the Djinn," said Amarnath.

"The Djinn is a leaky faucet?" asked Viv.

"That's crazy though, listen, you can hear it right here, right fucking here," said Max.

"It's the sadhu," I said.

"What?"

"Put your ear close to the sadhu, the sound's coming from him."

Everyone leaned in. The sound seemed louder. I felt a drop of sweat roll down onto my forehead and I wiped it away. I suddenly felt dizzy. I stood up and just as I did a dull booming thud seemed to roll up from the floor, a sound that I felt in my feet and legs. Dust sifted down from the ceiling.

"What the fucking hell was that," said Max.

Everyone stood and looked around wildly. Amarnath whimpered. There was a faint rattling like firecrackers, but barely audible, and then another thud, and then another. The air of the cave was filled with dust. Usef had his head cocked like a dog's, and he was listening intently, the revolver in his hand. There was another thud, a sound that seemed to come from above and below at once and pass through us, vibrating our bones.

"We must get out of here now," he said.

"What the fuck is it," said Viv, his face pale in the torchlight.

Usef was already making for the passageway. "We must go now, I think it is guns."

When we made it back onto the ledge we paused, our eyes adjusting to the sunlight. We were covered in dust and coughing and sneezing. On the far side of the gorge a ridge of granite rose thousands of feet, and beyond it a thick column of smoke billowed up into the pale sky. "We must get to the horses now, come on," said Usef, starting down the steep stairs at a frightening pace.

We followed, not quite sure what was going on, but in a sudden fear for our lives. The smoke, rising beyond the ridge, was evidence enough that the thuds originated not from any Djinn or ghost but from creatures far more deadly. We hustled down the stairs at reckless speed and then scampered across the length of narrow trail that led to the horses. But they were gone. Where the stooges had stood there was now only the rock that had weighed down Curly's reins and a tiny vortex of chicken feathers, whirling round and round, caught in some circuitous air current.

Usef looked down into the gorge, and then, without a word, started into the pass. We followed. Midway through we found the horses, huddled together on the shadowy trail, eyes rolling about in alarm. The chicken lay tangled in Curly's reins, dusty and minus a few feathers. It clucked mournfully as we approached.

We led the horses out of the pass at a jog and then stopped on the faint trail that led through the pastoral hills back to Machoi. Breathless, we all fumbled for cigarettes.

"It is the Pakistanis," said Amarnath, "now there will be war again."

"Who's shooting at who?" I asked, "It's not jawans fighting rebels?"

Amarnath shook his head. "All winter, in Machoi, there are rumors that the Pakistanis are moving onto the mountains along the LOC. The Pakistani and Taliban fighters from Afghanistan. All winter, they are gathering up there, waiting for the snows to melt in the passes and then they will come down and attack and take Kashmir. That has been the talk. Some men here, they have connections with the Pakistanis and the Taliban, they cross the LOC, they work for them, and they are talking, talking, and older men like myself, we do not think much of it, but—."

"But that was artillery," said Usef.

"Yes, not landmines, not bombs, the jawans are firing artillery, but you could tell by the noise, so loud, they are not shooting over the LOC, they are shooting very close."

"They were attacked."

"You heard the machine gun."

"The fifty caliber," said Usef. "But they were moving all last night. That is what some men in the dhaba in Machoi told me. They must have known they were going to be attacked. They were moving up the artillery and the heavy machine guns."

"Yes, they moved all during the night. I tell you what has happened, the snow melt was early this year, and the helicopter, I think it has seen the men in the lower passes. When the snow is gone, you cannot hide from the plane and the helicopter. The jawans must have seen yesterday that the line of control had been crossed."

"They would have ordered artillery to be moved up during the night," said Usef.

"And the Pakistanis, knowing they have been seen, would go ahead and attack," said Amarnath, "now there will be war."

"So what do we do," asked Max.

"We stay off the road for now, and away from Machoi. Ramzan is coming tomorrow; when he is here, we will go back south and should be OK. The Pakistanis cannot take all of Kashmir, and they know this. Even if they were going to try, they would attack with planes first, and they would attack Srinigar where the most Indian troops are. If the Pakistanis have attacked here, it can only be a minor thing. They are trying to grab the road to Laddak, and push the LOC forward, and kill a few jawans. It is all done to stir up the Muslim in Kashmir. If the Pakistanis kill jawans, the jawans become angry and take it out on the Kashmiri. Then the Kashmiri become angry and set off bombs and shoot jawans. This, the Pakistani thinks, will cause India to lose her grip on Kashmir, and when that happens, Pakistan will seize it. That is what they are thinking, but it will not work. We are still weak from the fighting before, and there are so many Indians. The Pakistanis will one day push them too far, and the Hindu will move into Pakistan like locusts."

"Hah! you are saying this," said Amarnath, his eyes bright; "you are sounding like an Indian yourself. Why are the jawans not firing off their big guns now? We hear a few shells fired, nothing more. I tell you what has happened. They have been overrun, praise Allah; our Muslim brothers have killed the infidels and taken their artillery, even now they are coming down the road to Machoi. You talk of planes and bombing Srinigar. How do you know Srinigar is not burning this instant? How do you know Pakistani tanks are not this very minute rolling down its streets?"

"You are foolish to think that. The Pakistanis are too weak for India."

"You talk like a Hindu."

"I am a Muslim. That does not make me a fool."

"We shall see. Are you coming?"

"Go your way, we will go ours."

Amarnath bowed. Then he looked at me. "Do not worry friend, the Pakistanis love Americans. Over the years you have paid for most of their weapons."

"Yes I know."

"But the Taliban. Well." He turned and headed down the trail towards Machoi. Usef watched him go.

"I do not think it is serious. If the Pakistanis have Afghans with them, then maybe. But the jawans are like insects; you kill one, suddenly there are two more. Men like him," he pointed to the receding figure of Amarnath, "they see the Pakistani as the Kashmiri's liberator; they think they will chase away the Indians, and then leave us be. But if the Indians left, then the Pakistanis would stay, and we would be no better off than before. I wish Kashmir could be ruled by Kashmiris, but this has never been."

"So why did the shooting stop so soon?" I asked.

"Either the jawans were overrun, or the Pakistanis were all killed. We will find out soon enough what has happened. Better now to stay off the road until we know. We can get back to camp through the hills; it will take us longer, but be safer."

"Are we still going to eat this chicken?" asked Viv.

Usef smiled. "I hope so; I am very hungry."

It was after dark when we made it back to camp. Rafga emerged from his tent as we plodded up to the small fire burning in the ring of stones. He grinned when he saw it was us. "Ah, gentlemen, I have been most worried," he looked at Usef anxiously, "I thought I heard artillery to the east."

"Yes," said Usef, "we were close by. Something is happening."

Rafga took the chicken Usef handed him and looked it over. "Maybe it was nothing. These jawans you know, sometimes they are bored and shoot at the cliffs, trying to make the avalanche."

"No, it was not just artillery. A fifty caliber was firing as well. And the jawans in Sonamarg are gone. This morning we rode through, and no one was there. Then in Machoi, an old man tells me jawans were moving through all during the night, with trucks and artillery. And another man told us there has been rumor that the Pakistani have been sneaking across the LOC all winter, planning to attack. And not only that, but Arabs and Taliban as well. This is all rumor. But the artillery is not rumor."

Rafga frowned. "If there is to be any real fighting, they will stop all traffic on the road coming up. Ramzan will not get through."

"We will go down into Sonamarg in the morning and wait for him, like we planned. If he does not come, we will head south on the road."

"On foot?"

"I think we can catch a ride, since we have firingars with us."

"You mean catch a ride on an army truck?"

"If we must. We will see."

"Are we still going fishing?" I asked.

Usef smiled. "Ah, most likely. These things happen you know."

Rafga was holding the chicken in front of his face, swinging it by the feet like a pendulum while the bird clucked angrily. "This chicken is not so big."

"We got the biggest one," said Max.

"Well, I have the tomatoes and the rice, and I shall make a good chicken curry, just not so much chicken." Rafga put the bird between his knees and pulled an old clasp knife from a pocket.

"You gonna kill him now?" asked Max.

Rafga grinned and grabbed the chicken's head, holding the beak shut and pulling the neck taut. With a quick jerk he cut off the head. A bright gout of blood shot out onto the ground, and Rafga flung the headless bird from him. It landed near two pots, knocking them over, then regained its feet and ran about in a haphazard circle, spraying blood everywhere until it slowed and then toppled over, kicked once and was still. Rafga wiped the blade on his leg and folded it and put it back in his pocket.

"Yes I kill him now."

After dinner Viv took out his book and got to work on a couple of hash cigarettes. Rafga and Usef had already crawled into their tent to sleep. Usef had seemed distracted while he wolfed down the rice and curry and the few stringy pieces of chicken flesh we each got on our plate. He'd said little during dinner. We sat on our blankets by the fire, listening to sheep bleat in the darkness.

"We should have saved some of that beer," said Viv.

"You think we'll get caught up in any kind of shit here," asked Max.

"I think we're alright," said Viv, "we're heading back towards Srinigar tomorrow, one way or the other. Even if serious shit starts happening here, we'll be out of Kashmir by the time it gets cooking, you know."

"Usef is acting worried."

"Well, Usef has to live here. If I lived here, I'd be a worried fucker too."

"What I want to know is, what was that noise in the cave," I said.

"It had to be an echo or something," said Max.

"An echo."

"Yeah, some trick you know, like the acoustics of the rock or something."

"But there's no water in there."

"That's what I mean, there was probably water somewhere, and because of the acoustics of the rock, it sounded like it was right there in the room with us."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"That cave is fucking haunted," said Viv, lighting one of the cigarettes and taking a drag.

"You guys are too mystic," said Max.

"Mystic?"

"Yeah, looking for spiritual and supernatural shit, tigers and yetis and ghosts."

"You hear that?" said Viv.

"What?"

"Those sheep. They're getting closer."

"Yeah? So?"

"I'm going to catch one."

"You going to fuck him?" asked Max.

"I'm going to fuck *her*." We sat quietly, looking at the stars and passing around the hash. Meeeeeaaah. "Here they come."

"I can see one, no two."

The sheep floated up out of the darkness. Two. Then three. Then four. We were sitting on the blanket beside the fire which had died down to a few glowing coals. The sheep ambled closer, moving their wooly heads from side to side, looking at everything, seeing nothing.

"Hold out a chicken bone, they'll come up to sniff it," I whispered.

"Sheep don't eat chickens, they eat grass," whispered Max.

"Yeah, but they're like goats, they'll eat garbage and shit."

Viv plucked a greasy chicken bone from the cooling ashes and held it out to the ghostly figures, hovering ten yards away, staring at us uncertainly. Viv clucked his tongue. The leader of the entourage, a young ram with stubby horns, cocked his head and took a step forward. Meeeeeaaah. "That's right precious, come to daddy," Viv waved the bone in the air and clucked. The young ram took a few steps towards us and then ripped up a mouthful of grass. "You don't want that nasty old grass mate," crooned Viv softly, "come get you some of this Machoi chicken."

The ram ambled forward a few more steps. Viv clucked. The ram took a step. Viv clucked again. The ram took another step. And then Viv leaped off

the blanket like a panther and landed howling on the poor beast's back. The ram's legs buckled under Viv's weight and he straddled the beast, pinning it down on its back. The ram struggled feebly and then stopped, suddenly resigned to its fate. Meeeeeaaah. The other sheep had disappeared into the night.

"Come pet him, he's soft," said Viv.

Rafga and Usef clambered out of their tent, Usef had the revolver in his hand.

"What has happened?"

"We have captured a Taliban," I said.

"What is wrong?" Usef looked around wildly until he saw Viv on top of the sheep, which had turned its head and was trying to pull up more grass with its teeth. "What is this?"

"Come pet him Usef."

"No no, you must let him go."

"Not until every one pets him, they're very soft." We all took turns stroking the thick, dirty fur. "I just wanted to grab one and see what they feel like," said Viv; "you know, kinda like a cloud, how you always wish you could grab one and see if it's wet or like cotton or what."

Usef smiled uneasily. "Now we let him go?"

"Yeah. He's a bit stinky," Viv stood up. The sheep rested on its back, blinking and chewing grass.

"Jesus, they really are stupid," said Max.

Viv poked the sheep with his foot. "Run along now, little fellow." The ram rolled over onto his side and then stood up uncertainly. Meeeeeaaah. "OK you little buggerer, go find your mates," said Viv, swatting the sheep on its downy flank. The beast ambled a few steps and then stopped again.

"I think he's in love," said Max.

"I just wanted to see what that fur feels like," said Viv.

"Don't worry," said Max, "I won't tell anyone when we get back to Sydney."

"I am going to sleep now," said Usef, grinning, "if you are attacked again, shout for me and I will come help." Usef ducked back into his tent. Rafga bowed, grinning ear to ear, and followed him.

"I think they think we're crazy" I said.

Viv took out a cigarette and lit it. "Do those fuckers really eat chickens and such?"



I was sitting at the kitchen table in Anna's apartment. She was sitting to my right, pouring merlot into a glass. Directly across from me sat Gator. He wore a yellowed bib and was drinking a Bud Lite. He winked at me. On my left was the mummified, headless sadhu. He held a glass of wine above his severed neck and tilted red drops down into his exposed gullet. Drop. Drop. Drop. Anna cleared her throat. I turned and looked at her. She gave me a weary look. Marshall, this is not going to work.

I sat up suddenly. Awake. Listening. There was something outside my tent. I cupped my ears, straining to hear. It was still dark. Someone was whispering, in Urdu or Hindi. I listened carefully. It was not Rafga and Usef. I tried to look at my watch, but it was too dark to see it. The whispering continued. Quietly, I slipped on my boots and then groped about for the lock-blade. I found it. The blade opened with a dull snick. The whispering voices were at the back of my tent. If I crept out the front, very carefully, they might not see me. Once I saw them, I could decide what to do.

I untied the string that held the tent flap in place and then gently pulled it back. Two horses with saddles and bridles stood not five yards away. I crawled out of the tent, slowly, slowly, the open knife in my hand, looking around...

"Hello my friend," a voice shouted.

I leaped up in a panic, caught my foot in one of the tent ropes, and pitched face first onto the ground, almost impaling myself on my own knife. "Oh, please be careful my friend, do not cause yourself injury." I looked up, spitting dirt from my mouth, and saw four jawans behind me in full camouflage, rifles in their hands. One wore a helmet. Behind them stood two more saddled horses. One of the men approached and knelt beside me, resting the butt of his rifle on the ground beside my head.

"We were about to wake you. How are you this morning? Enjoying the Kashmir?" It was Assadi, the yokelesque jawan who had come to our camp the day before yesterday.

"Uh, yeah. What time is it?"

"Four o'clock amen. One hour till dawn. My brother is here, Harijin, you remember?"

"Sure," I said, standing up.

Rafga and Usef had emerged from their tent, and Viv's head appeared from the other tent. "Tell them we don't want any girl scout cookies, we only eat sheep and chickens."

The helmeted jawan strode forward. "Good morning, may I inquire who is in charge?" he asked in a clipped British tone.

I pointed at Usef. "He's our parole officer."

The jawan raised an eyebrow and then smiled. "My name is Captain Dasgupta. I am afraid a disturbance has occurred and the northern sector of Kashmir has been temporarily placed off limits to tourists."

Viv and Max had wandered over and stood regarding the Captain sleepily.

"Christ," said Viv, "all the tourists, all three of us? The economy of Sonamarg will collapse Captain Disgusta."

"Dasgupta," said the Captain, frowning. "Please gather your things. We will escort you to Sonamarg, and from there you can ride back to Srinigar in one of the trucks."

Usef now stood beside me and he cleared his throat. "Sir, my boss Ramzan, he is the owner of The Hollywood, a houseboat on Dal Lake, where these men are staying. He is supposed to meet us today in Sonamarg, in a van, and drive us back to Srinigar. Can we not go back with him as planned?"

"The road has been closed past Sumbal, he will get no further than that today. As for right now, you must go to Sonamarg immediately. We cannot have people, especially firingars, wandering around out here in the open."

"What has happened?" asked Usef.

"That is not your concern," the captain snapped. "Break this camp up now and be ready to move out in five minutes."

When we plodded into Sonamarg behind the jawans on their more robust mounts, it was daylight. The wrecked village had been transformed since the morning before. Army trucks clattered up and down the narrow main street. Piles of sandbags had formed every twenty-five yards along the road and were being transformed into miniature forts by shirtless jawans. Trucks hauled artillery pieces down the street and out onto the road that led twisting upwards towards Machoi. A massive armored vehicle, its loaded rocket launchers bristling with small missiles, sat parked on the street, the tiny warheads pointing up at the Himalayan peaks. A shirtless boy soldier was cleaning mud from the giant tires with a stick. "Hello gentlemen," he called as we passed.

Captain Dasgupta led us to a stone house with a rusted tin roof. A goat walked out the door and ambled into the muddy street as we came to a halt.

"You will stay here, but not long, maybe a couple of hours, then I will have you on a truck south. I will radio Sumbal and have them hold this man Ramzan when he shows. So he will be there waiting for you when you arrive, if, as you say, he is coming today. You two," said the Captain, look-

ing at Assadi and Harajin, "stay here with these gentlemen until I send someone to take them to a truck. Understand?"

"Yes Captain."

"For your safety, of course," said Captain Dasgupta, bowing slightly as he wheeled his mount in the muddy street. He trotted off down the truck rutted thoroughfare, the other jawan following close behind.

"These horses must be returned," said Rafga, untying the bundles of tents and cooking pans and dropping them into the muddy street.

Assadi scratched his head and looked off in the direction of his captain. "Go, and take Harajin with you, then come back here."

Rafga looked at Usef who nodded. Then he took Curly by the reins and pointed up the street. "It is this way," he said, and began walking, pulling Curly along. Moe and Larry followed, with Harajin meekly bringing up the rear. I took a last look at the crowbait horses, trudging forlornly up the mud street, and then followed the others into the stone house.

The floor of this place was sloped slightly toward the door, and the dark interior smelled of the leavings of goat. There was no furniture. We squatted or sat on the tent bundles we'd hauled inside and lit cigarettes and stared though the doorway out at the pale day beyond.

"What's goin on?" I said to Assadi.

He frowned and scratched his head. "There has been an occurrence, we should not be talking of it."

"You can tell us," said Max, "we're foreigners, firingar."

"Yes, but we should not talk of it."

"Is it the Pakistanis?" I asked. Assadi frowned and prodded a dry goat turd with his boot. "And Afghans? The Taliban? Arabs?"

He looked up. "How are you knowing this?"

I smiled and tapped the side of my head with a finger. Assadi rubbed his chin and looked at us, from one to the next, and smiled weakly. "I do not think I should talk about these things."

"We already know what's going on," said Viv, "we're just curious about the details."

"You must not tell anyone that you talked to me, about this," said Assadi nervously.

I held a finger to my lips. "Mum's the word."

Assadi looked out the door. I handed him a cigarette and a lighter. He smiled, lit the cigarette and gave the lighter back. He rocked back on his heels and rolled his eyes back in his head like an epileptic about to embark on a seizure and then expelled a billowing cloud of smoke and began talking.

"Yesterday morning, there is a plane flying over, patrolling the LOC, and they see men on the cliffs and in the passes along the LOC, and on this side of it, and they spot an artillery gun as well, and they radio down to the base camp in Drass, and they say, what are we doing? But we are doing nothing, it is not any of the army. So in Drass, they send out a helicopter to look and see, very close, what is going on, and the helicopter is shot down. Pakistanis. This is all happening near Drass. So all night, we are moving up the artillery to shell the line, everything in the area. But this morning, before we begin shelling, we are attacked, in Drass, in Kargil, Kashar, all the villages."

"What about Machoi?"

"No, but beyond Machoi, in Matayan, there was a brief fight, they hit quick and ran back into the mountains."

Usef nodded. "That was what we heard."

Assadi looked at him. "You heard?"

"We were near Machoi yesterday. We heard shooting."

"Yes. It was nothing really, they say. Harijin and I were at the glacier camp with our squad. But we have been recalled. Everyone is going up the road to fight." Assadi rubbed his chin and looked out the doorway, "I have not seen action yet."

"The Pakistanis did not go back across the line?" asked Usef.

Assadi looked at him and shook his head. "There were maybe a dozen Pakistani killed, wearing uniforms, but they are only leading them."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard someone talking on a truck radio, they say they killed ninety-six men; none were Pakistani. They were Afghans and Arabs. Several men were taken prisoner that could not speak Kashmiri or Urdu. They think they are Saudis, Egyptians."

"Where was this?"

"All along the line. They are coming through. They have taken Kargil and Kharal. They have the road there and now no one can get through to Leh. They shelled Drass but we still have men there. All this," Assadi waved his hand out the door to indicate the activity outside, "is going to Matayan, beyond Machoi. We are forming a line there. We lost more than fifty men yesterday in the attacks, I think." He stood up and walked to the doorway. "I don't think I should talk about this, especially with you," he nodded at Usef, "but it is no matter. Between the artillery and the airplanes that will come in, by tomorrow night there will be nothing in Kargil and Kharal but dead men."

"Are the jawans going to cross the line?" asked Usef.

Assadi stood in the doorway and flicked the butt of the cigarette out into the road. "I could not talk about that even if I knew. You are going to get me shot."

When Harajin and Rafga returned, Assadi sat with his brother outside the doorway and would not speak with us anymore. Rafga and Usef talked in Urdu, and Viv, Max and I sat uneasily among the goat filth, sweating and smoking cigarettes. After half an hour or so an army truck rumbled to a halt in front of the house, and Assadi and Harajin jumped to their feet. We walked outside and the driver of the truck, a tall man with a sagging mustache, told us to throw our things in the back and get in. Down the street a truck had backed up to a large, two-story mud and concrete structure. A man with his arm hanging in a sling hopped out and went inside. Then several jawans came out and two of them climbed into the canvas covered truck bed. A man lying on a stretcher was carefully handed down out of the truck and carried inside the building. The stretcher bearers returned to receive a second man being handed down. The driver of our truck suddenly barked at us, "Let's go now please."

We piled into the back with our bags and tents. Assadi and Harajin gave a half-hearted wave as the truck lurched into motion and got under way. Then they turned and began walking towards the makeshift hospital down the street. The truck was filled with empty ammunition crates, and I suddenly noticed a short bald man, dressed in khakis and a brown shirt, perched on one of the crates like an owl. He nodded and blinked at us as we climbed around and found places to sit in the rattling, swaying truck.

"Hello gentlemen."

"Howdy."

"Where are you from and what are your names?"

"We're Canadians," I said, offering a cigarette.

Usef rubbed his head and smiled. We all told him our names.

"Canada is a good country."

"Oh yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"We're just wandering around," said Viv. "Where are you from?"

"Delhi. My name is Mr. Galbraith. I work for the Hindustan Times. I am a reporter. Myself and another man, we have been up here with the troops for two weeks. We were supposed to stay one month, and write the feature article on the daily life of a jawan here in Kashmir, but now, I am being sent to Srinigar, only one can stay here. Mr. Hiamas is staying; he has seniority over me."

"Is the fighting serious?" asked Max.

"I am thinking maybe yes, if they will let only one of us stay."

"They don't want folks to know what's goin on?" I asked.

"They are not so bad about that." He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and smiled. "Everything that happens, we call Delhi and tell them right away, and then it is in the paper. But, I think they want only one reporter near the fighting, so they can watch him. I don't think they care if everyone knows something is happening here, that they are being attacked, but you see, maybe they will say, we killed one hundred of the enemy today, when maybe they killed fifty. And they say, we lost twenty brave men today, when they charged enemy positions. But maybe, they lost thirty men, and these were killed by an artillery shell while they were eating their lunch. That sort of thing goes on, of course, but because of the cellular telephones, they are having to watch the reporters more and more. And also, I think they are a little nervous about the local people," he smiled at Rafga and Usef nervously, "because of the rebels, you see. But, I think they want people in Delhi and elsewhere in India to know exactly what is happening here because they will need the support of the people if they must fight. That is the way it has been every time we have fought the Pakistanis. They are very open about it, except for these small exaggerations. But that is expected in any war, with any army."

"Do you think the fighting will get worse?" asked Max.

Mr. Galbraith shrugged his small shoulders. "Who can say? I think the Pakistanis only want to stir things up. They cannot possibly take Kashmir. This has happened many times before. Only now, it is different because both sides are having the nuclear bomb. May I have a cigarette?" Viv gave him one.

"Thank you. How did you find Delhi?"

"Find it?" asked Viv.

"Yes, how did you find it to be, that is, what did you think of the place?"

Viv smiled. "Rather dirty and crowded, I'd have to say."

Mr. Galbraith nodded solemnly. "You must understand that India is this way, she is like a wounded patient, dying on the operating table. And to save her, the politicians, acting as doctors, must treat the most serious wounds first, or she will die, you understand. So, the government of India is focused on problems like Kashmir, dealing with the Pakistanis, keeping the peace between Hindu and Muslim and all the other many peoples and religions, and feeding and housing the poor, dealing with corruption, and trying to make the economy grow, all of these problems for India are like mortal wounds. If they are not given constant attention, the country will die. So other problems, like the pollution, the environment, these problems are ne-

glected. And as you see, India suffers as a result. She may survive as a nation, but I begin to wonder, what kind of nation, and who would want to live here?

"India was once the most beautiful place in the world. Now, when I see foreigners in Delhi, I feel ashamed of the city. There is too much filth, too many people. But these other problems, this," he indicated the empty crates of ammo we were sitting on, "this demands the immediate attention."

"I came here to try to see a tiger, before they're all gone," I said.

Mr. Galbraith leaned back against the crates and expelled twin plumes of smoke through his nostrils. His bald head glistened with sweat. "I hope that you see one. I never have."

The journey to Sumbal took several hours, the truck lumbering slowly down the road as a steady stream of jawan, laden trucks passed us heading in the other direction to Sonamarg and beyond. When we reached the village, the truck stopped at a bustling army camp that had formed on the outskirts. Gas was being hand-pumped from barrels into several trucks and one armored personnel carrier. More gas barrels were being unloaded from more trucks, jawans with smoking bidis hanging from their mouths rolling the petrol heavy barrels down makeshift ramps consisting of boards leaned against the truck beds. Everywhere trucks were rumbling, men shouting; gasoline and ammunition were being loaded and unloaded. The driver of our truck pointed us to a house-sized bunker made entirely of sandbags. "Your friend should be there."

He turned and wandered off into the melee. We dragged our things out of the truck. Mr. Galbraith had leaped out as soon as we'd stopped and disappeared somewhere. Usef and Rafga walked straight to the bunker, eyes on the ground, obviously uncomfortable among so many soldiers. We followed. No one spoke to us.

Near the entrance of the bunker a pot-bellied jawan slept in a folding metal chair. We stood before him and waited for him to sense our presence. He did not.

"Ten Hut!" I said.

His eyes opened blearily. "Firingars," he muttered sleepily.

"We have come for our man Ramzan," said Viv, "we have many glass beads to trade for him, pretty cloth for your wives, and handmirrors, in which you can capture the spirit of your enemy."

The jawan's blood-shot pig-eyes looked us up and down. Rafga and Usef stood off to the side as if they were not really with us. The jawan's face

broke into a yellow smile. "This man Ramzan is inside, go in, go in," he belched and closed his eyes again.

Inside the bunker the air was grey with smoke. Viv bumped his head on the low ceiling as we stepped down into what looked like a seedy bar. Two smoking hookahs sat on a table in the center of the room. All along the sandbag walls men lounged, smoking cigarettes. Ramzan sat in one corner, talking to a jawan with a black rag wrapped around his naked brown skull. Ramzan leaped up when he saw us.

"Oh my friends, how are you? I was beginning to worry. How was your trek, how were the mountains, did you see the glacier?"

"Viv captured a yeti," said Max.

"No you are joking."

"He made love to him," I said.

"It was a chick yeti," said Viv

"You gentlemen are always amusing. I told the guard outside to please be on the lookout for three silly firingars." He patted Usef and Rafga on the shoulders. "And how are you men?"

"We are well," said Usef, looking around uneasily. Several of the jawans in the room were staring at him. One of the largest, a dark chiseled man wearing a revolver in a leather holster, winked at Usef and then gritted his teeth audibly.

"OK, let's go outside and put your things in the van," said Ramzan. He turned to the man he'd been sitting beside. "OK thank you, we go now."

"Yes, sure," said the jawan, nodding.

We walked out and past the guard sleeping soundly in his chair, picked up our small pile of gear and headed down the main street into the village where I could see the VW van parked in front of the same chai stall we'd stopped at on the way up. Fly rods protruded from one of the sliding rear windows.

"Well gentlemen," said Ramzan grinning, "these things happen, but don't worry, we are still going fishing tomorrow. To the west, we go to Sumbal, very good trout."

"Aren't we in Sumbal?" I asked.

"There are two. Two Sumbals. This one and that one. We are going to that one. It is not far."

We stopped in the chai stall for the obligatory cup of chai, and then we got in the van and took off, heading south towards Gumba, where another road went west towards the other Sumbal. Ramzan, Usef and Rafga discussed the new outbreak of fighting with the Pakistanis, talking back and forth in Urdu and English, Ramzan gesturing and swerving on the narrow,

rock-littered road as he became excited, "Fools! Fools! They will ruin business! Just when things could have gotten back to normal." Viv made another hash cigarette, and we passed it around the backseat, staring out the dirty van windows with glazed eyes at the army trucks rattling by.

Late in the afternoon we reached the other Sumbal, a mountain village like all the others with muddy streets and shacks that looked like they would collapse if you leaned against them. We stopped in front of one of these where two skeletal cows stood knee deep in a pile of refuse. One of the cows chewed a wet cardboard box and stared at us sullenly. The other licked a bone that still held a faint stain of meat. Ramzan pounded on the thin door, waking two dozen flies that had been sleeping on its surface and sending them whirling about our heads angrily.

"The fishing guide lives here."

"Looks like he's really done well for himself," I said.

"The man I used to use, years ago, for taking people fishing, he was killed in the troubles. So I go to the tourist office in Srinigar to find a new guide for you. They give me this address and say he is a trout expert, certified."

"You know, Ramzan," said Viv, "I don't see any street numbers above his door or on the mailbox, you sure you got the right place?" Ramzan grinned.

"There's a tourist office in Srinigar?" asked Max.

"Yes, brand new, they built a very nice one after the old one was blown up."

The door swung open and there stood the fishing guide. He looked like a tan, razor-thin Santa Claus, dressed in a blue robe and barefoot. His full white beard hung below his waist and his white hair fell to his shoulders. He beckoned for us to enter.

In a few hours we were all drunk. The fishing guide, named Barawat, had gone out and returned with whiskey at Ramzan's request. A devout Muslim who spoke no English, he would drink none himself but sat cross-legged on a blanket on the dirt floor of his hovel and watched eagerly as we passed it around, his hidden grin raising the white beard an inch. He gave us a meal of cold, greasy mutton and some goat cheese, washed down with warm, slightly rancid goat milk. While we ate, Ramzan outlined our plan.

We would finish off the bottle of whiskey and pass the night on Barawat's floor. The following day we would split up and go fishing. Ramzan and a local boy, another government recommended trout expert, would take one of us to a spot far downstream where they would begin fishing, working their way upstream to a bridge. The other party, consisting of

Barawat and whoever went with him, would start off just below the village and work their way down to this same bridge. After meeting at the bridge, at four o'clock, we would find a ride back downstream to where Ramzan had left the VW van and drive back to Srinigar.

"And we must all be at this bridge at four, so we have plenty of time to get back to the van and drive to Srinigar. Only army trucks are allowed on the roads after dark now, because of these new problems, and of course, firingars are not supposed to be out in Srinigar after dark."

"I'm fishing with Ramzan," said Max.

"Alright," said Viv, "the Sheriff and I will go with Barawat, and I bet one hundred rupees we catch more fish."

"Ah, gambling, excellent," said Ramzan, patting Max on the back. "We will take their money, yes?"

"Shit," I said, "ole Barawat here is a fish catchin motherfucker, just look at him, ya'll are gonna be out, what's a hundred rupees, two dollars?"

Barawat looked from one to the other of us, raising and lowering his beard.

"What about Usef and Rafga? Are you guys going to fish?" asked Viv.

"We must go back to Srinigar in the morning."

"Yes, they must catch a bus back early in the morning; I have a business to run you know; I have more tourists coming."

"Shit. Really?"

"I am not shitting you. Three English girls are arriving in Srinigar tomorrow. They will be coming to the houseboat. Usef and Rafga must go back." We all sat up.

"Fuck fishing, let's all go back tomorrow," said Max.

"Wait a minute Max," said Viv, "they might have hairy legs or something. What do they look like, Ramzan?"

"Ah ha ha, now I am shitting."

"Shit, man."

"But there is really a tourist coming; Javed has managed to send me one more. But now, with more fighting breaking out, he will be the last. These damn Pakistanis are going to kill what is left of my business, which is not much anyway."

"So who's the tourist?" I asked.

"Some young Japanese man, by himself. He speaks no English. I doubt if he has any idea where Javed has sent him. Javed told me he came into the office to change money. Now, he is arriving here tomorrow. My brother, he is some business man. So anyway, Usef and Rafga must go back early. We will fish tomorrow, and then get back to Srinigar before dark. This is important because the jawans will be acting very angry and crazy now that fight-

ing with the Pakistanis has started again. I will make sure Barawat understands to have you at the bridge by four o'clock. And there, Max and I will be receiving the one hundred rupees for the ridiculous amount of trout we have captured."

"Not likely, Paccino," said Viv, emitting a loud whiskey burp.



When I woke in the morning my head pulsed with a whiskey hangover. My mouth was dry and sour. I had to spit and piss. I stumbled over the snoring figures of Viv and Max lying sprawled on blankets on the floor. Everyone else was gone. I walked out the door of the shack. The day was just beginning. The VW van was gone. Far down the street an old woman limped along, an enormous bundle of sticks balanced on her head. The two skeletal cows were sprawled out in the refuse heap between Barawat's shack and the next. I urinated into the odorous pile of bones, rotting vegetables, rags, cardboard, broken bricks, mud, feathers, human turds and something that looked like the raw, bloody hide of a goat or dog. One of the emaciated bovines woke to the sound of my splattering. It rose groaning to its feet and began eagerly licking at the dark stains of piss as I turned and went back into the shack and lay down again on the floor.

Ramzan and Barawat returned with a teenage boy, the other trout expert. Usef and Rafga had already caught the derelict bus running back to the main road and were gone. Rafga had left us packed lunches again. I kicked Viv and Max awake. They moaned and stirred and soon we were underway.

We drove out of the second Sumbal and down a rutted road that looked as if it rarely saw mechanized traffic. The Sindh River frothed and twisted along beside it. Here and there a shack squatted along the bank, dirty children streaming out as we rattled past and staring after us in amazement. Ramzan stopped near one of these. A large Chinar tree hung over the bank and underneath it three black goats stared at the van in terror. Children ran out of the shack and immediately began beating on the parked van with their fists. "Hello firingar gentlemen, come out."

"Namaste."

"What are you doing, what are you doing?"

We all got out of the van and the children grabbed our hands and pulled on them. "Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello."

"Hey kids," I said, "why aintcha in school today, ya playin hooky? I bet you little rascals have been diggin around in the old man's liquor cabinet, smokin cigarettes and tryin to find your mom's car keys, instead of sittin in

the classroom learnin your figures and such, huh? Ain't that what you're up to?"

"Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello."

Ramzan handed Viv and me two fly rods. Then he stuck two more flies to the front of our shirts. "OK, you each have three flies, try not to loose them. Take your lunches, here is a net, go with Barawat. Just fish your way downstream. Remember be at the bridge at four pm. It is now eight am. Barawat knows this bridge and will see that you get there. And be ready to pay the one hundred rupees."

"Fat chance," said Viv, "we're going to catch the hell out of these trout, right Barawat?" Barawat had wandered over by the goats and appeared to be whispering to them.

"OK, off we go," said Ramzan, leaping back into the van.

"See you suckers at the finish line," said Max, jumping in after.

The van rattled off down the road. Barawat crouched over near the goats, petting one on the head. The children were tugging on our wrists. "Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello."

"Lets catch some motherfuckin trout," I said.

By noon we had caught no fish. We sat on the bank of the Sindh, leaning against a boulder, and unwrapped our lunches. We had each hooked a trout but lost it in the rocks. We had also each lost a fly in the rocks. Barawat sat hungrily watching us unwrap our food. He had brought nothing to eat. The lunch was the same Rafga had concocted for us on our chicken expedition. One boiled egg. One rotten tomato. One hunk of goat cheese. I held my rotten tomato out to Barawat. "You want this? You hungry? This tomato is rotten. Eat it." Barawat raised his beard and nodded thanks. He took the tomato and ate it in two bites. I held out the egg. He smiled again and took it. It disappeared into his beard after the tomato.

In fulfilling his guide duties, Barawat had spent the morning walking ahead of us, saying, "trouts, trouts" over and over again and pointing into the river. Twice he had stopped to face Mecca and pray, getting down on his knees and bowing three times, his forehead touching the smooth river washed stones. Viv and I had proved inept at best at working the fly rods. When we asked Barawat to try casting a few times, so we could watch him, he said "trouts, trouts" and pointed into the swirling water.

"I thought you knew how to fish, Marshall," said Viv, chewing his goat cheese.

"No, I said I had fished. We fish a good bit back home but not with fly rods. We use spinning reels for bass and stuff. We don't have trout in

Alabama because the water's too warm, so there isn't much fly fishing done. I've played around with these things once or twice, but, I ain't too good with em as you can see."

"Max and Ramzan have probably caught a dozen by now. This fucker Barawat, he doesn't seem to know his ass from his elbow." Barawat raised his beard when he heard his name.

"Yeah, he ain't much of a fishing guide."

"Hello English!" We turned around. Two boys, about twelve years old, stood behind us. They wore white shirts and white pants and no shoes. Their black hair was neatly combed. "How many fish you catching?"

"We're not catching anything," said Viv, "what are you blokes up to?"

"We are watching you English."

"We're Africans," I said.

"No no."

"We're from Cameroon."

"You are lying. How many fish you catching?"

"Nada."

"Let me try," said the taller of the two.

I pointed at one of the rods. "Go show us how it's done."

The boy grabbed one of the rods and ran over the stones down to the rushing water. He worked the rod expertly, tossing the fly out into the current, snatching it back and then tossing it into a pool of still water behind a boulder.

"He knows how to work that thing," I said.

"Hey kid, what's your name?" Viv asked the other boy, who stood beside us watching his friend.

"My name is Gedra."

"What's your mate's name?"

"John."

"John?" I said, "what the hell kinda name is that?"

Gedra shrugged. "May I fish too?"

"Sure thing, go pull one out."

"Thank you sir!" He rushed off after John.

"We'll let them play with em for a while," said Viv, "I'm a little tired of fishing anyway. We haven't caught a fucking thing in four hours."

"Yeah, whatta ya say there, ole Barawat, you mind takin a break from all this heavy duty guiding you been doin'?" I said.

"Trouts, trouts," said Barawat, pointing at the river.

In five minutes, John had caught a glistening brown trout. He brought it to us. A few minutes later Gedra brought us one.

"These are some fish catchin fools."

"I've got an idea," said Viv.

"Yea?"

"Listen, we take these blokes with us, all the way down, until just before we hit the bridge, then, we send em back. Meanwhile, they'll probably catch twenty fuckin fish. So we show up at the bridge with all these fish. Max and Ramzan will think we caught them. We'll explain to Barawat not to tell on us."

"He doesn't speak English."

"We'll get the point across."

John came running up and dumped another trout on top of the two lying in the net. "Hey John," I said, "you wanna keep fishin for a while?"

"Oh yessir!"

"Go get your buddy." Barawat raised his beard.

Just around the corner of the river from where we'd stopped to eat lunch we came to a bridge. John and Gedra were already thirty yards past it, scampering back and forth over the rocks like lizards, tossing the flies and snatching them back.

"Hey Barawat, is this the bridge where we're supposed to meet Ramzan?"

"Trouts trouts."

"This can't be it," said Viv, "it's only 12:30. And this is a foot bridge, I'm sure he meant a bigger bridge that cars can go across."

"Yeah. Hey, look at that." Gedra was pulling a large trout up onto the rocks. He held it up and waved to us.

"We should have bet more than a hundred rupees," said Viv.

We followed Gedra and John downstream. Whenever they caught a fish they would shout and wave, and then brain the creature on one of the rocks and leave it there. When we caught up to where they had been, we would pick up the fish and drop it in the net and keep going after them, watching them leap from rock to rock, forty or fifty yards ahead of us, laughing and jerking fish out of the water. Barawat would stroke his beard and peer into the net Viv carried and say "trouts."

At one-third we came to two bridges. One was actually the ruins of an old stone bridge that had long ago been carried away in a flood. Between the two old stone arches that loomed on either bank, a footbridge of rope and rotten planks stretched over the foaming Sindh. Twenty yards beyond this, a

new bridge had been constructed of wood and concrete. It was big enough to support a tank, but the only traffic passing over it were old men on bicycles going to and fro between the halves of a small village that straddled the river at this point. On the far bank the village spilled down the slope from the main road that led to Srinigar. We could see a steady convoy of army trucks groaning uphill and around a curve towards Sonamarg. A rickety multicolored bus jostled along southwards to Srinigar, people sitting on the roof and ducking the occasional electricity wire that looped from pole to pole along the main road, sometimes crossing it.

"What bridge is this Barawat?" I asked, "Is this the one?" Barawat shook his head vigorously and pointed downstream.

"It's got to be further," said Viv, "it's only one thirty. We'll probably pass ten more bridges. Barawat will know where we're supposed to stop." Barawat nodded and pointed downstream.

Further downstream the river flowed into a small valley planted in some kind of crop. Crude dwellings rose from the rocky soil here and there among the struggling green stalks. Gedra and John sat resting on an enormous boulder. We sat beside them and laid down the net. It had nine trout in it.

"Gentlemen, this here's Barawat."

"Yes, we know Barawat." Barawat raised his beard. Then he spoke to the boys in Kashmiri. They smiled. "Barawat wants to pray."

"Go ahead," said Viv to Barawat.

"He is wanting to go pray there," said John, pointing off towards the meager fields.

"What's over there?" I asked.

"There is a special praying place, and he is wanting to pray there."

"Sure, tell him to go pray his ass off," I said. The boys spoke to him in Urdu and he rose, bowed, and clambered over the stones and up into the fields and moved off through the stalks.

"What are you going to do with these trouts?" asked Gedra.

"Eat them. You boys can have a couple. I reckon we'll have enough to win the bet even if they take a couple," I said to Viv.

"Sure. You boys like fish?"

"No. Thank you. We like to catch, but not eat. Can we fish some more?"

"Go ahead. Hey, is there another bridge downstream?"

Gedra nodded. "There are many bridges." He and John took the rods and went running downstream. Viv pulled Orwell out of his pocket.

"Feel like a smoke?"

"Yeah."



Someone was kicking me. I opened my eyes and saw Viv standing over me. "Wake up you fucker."

"What?"

"Wake up. We've got to find Barawat."

"Huh? Where's he at?"

"It's three o'clock, that bloke's been gone an hour and a half."

"Did we fall asleep?"

"You did, I've been reading my book."

I looked at my watch. Three o'clock. I stood up and stretched and looked around. There was no one in sight. I'd been having some weird dream about trout with beards, talking to me. I tried to remember the rest of it, but it slipped away. "Where are those kids?"

"They're probably waiting downstream. But we've got to find Barawat, he should have been back by now. We've got to be at that bridge in an hour."

We walked up out of the rocks and into the fields. There was nothing around but scraggly plants pushing up out of the dirt, and beyond the fields, the mountains. A lone chinar tree cast its paltry shade nearby.

"Barawat!" we shouted.

"Where the fuck has he gone off to? There's no praying place here; there's not even a shack around."

"Maybe there's a shrine or grave or something somewhere," I said.

"Where?"

I looked around. "Maybe he just took off."

"Probably. That crazy fucker."

"Maybe this is some kind of scam."

"How so?"

"Well, where are those fucking kids? They got the fly rods. Those were nice rods. Fly rods can cost serious money."

"Shit."

We walked back down to the river. "Now what," I said.

"It's ten after three."

"Fuck him, let's just head for that bridge, it's probably the next one, and maybe those kids will be there with the rods."

We looked around. A cool breeze rustled the stalks in the nearby field and a vulture passed high overhead, its shadow skipping from rock to rock

and into the river. Barawat had vanished. I picked up the fish heavy net and we set out.

At four thirty we stopped. We had found no bridge. No Gedra and John. No fly rods. Nothing but the fields clinging to the river and the mountains beyond. The fish had stiffened in the sun. We sat on a rock and lit cigarettes.

"So what the hell do we do now? We're already thirty minutes late," said Viv.

"Man, I don't know. Those rods are gone though. Those fucking kids. They probably work for Barawat. He probably speaks English too."

"He probably speaks English better than Margaret Fucking Thatcher."

"Well, either the bridge is somewhere further downstream or it's that big one way back there."

Viv climbed on top of a boulder and shaded his eyes and looked downstream and then upstream and then jumped down. "I dunno Marshall, there could be a bridge just around the next corner, but there might not be another for a mile or two. I don't think they would have come down this far you know?"

"Wait a minute, we can't have passed the bridge or we would have passed them too. They're heading upstream, we're heading down."

"Jesus, I'm not thinking straight. I may be slightly stoned."

"You know that water, rushing over the rocks, it sounds like voices, like you can hear people talking somewhere and almost make out what they're saying but not quite."

"Yeah, and dogs barking, I keep thinking I hear dogs barking, but it's the river."

"Maybe you are stoned. We gotta get going; it's got to be downstream or we would have passed em."

"Alright, let me prepare another one of these magic darts, and we'll smoke it on the way."

"Aye aye, Cap'n."

At five twenty-five we came to the remnants of another bridge. Arches made of large, smooth river stones fitted together almost seamlessly rose from either bank like mammoth tombstones. Another stone arch formed a small island in the foaming torrent, giving evidence of the structure's original design. Massive tree trunks had been sunk into the river bed to serve as pilings for a new bridge, a rickety wooden affair spanning the rushing water. As we approached an orange and yellow bus appeared out of its own cloud of smoke and groaned its way across the bridge, the loose planks sagging

visibly under the vehicle's weight and then jumping back into place with an audible pop as the bus passed over.

"Christ, look at that bridge sagging."

"Barawat's probably the local bridge safety inspector."

"There's no one here."

There wasn't. The bus had lumbered over the river and now chugged along the road that disappeared into the green stalks on the far bank. On our side the road headed west through the fields, toward the mountains. There were no shacks around. No VW van.

"They may have been here and left, maybe drove upstream to look for us, to see if we were at one of those other bridges."

"Yeah, it can't be further downstream."

"Let's go back to where those two bridges were and where we could see the main road. If they ain't there, we'll have to hop a bus or hitch a ride back to Srinigar I guess."

"Alright, Christ it's a long way back to those other bridges."

"Here, your turn to carry the fish again."

"Where'd that bus go, does that road head upstream you think?"

"It probably goes back to that village and connects with the main road. Or maybe goes straight to the main road from here."

"Well, let's see what it does, it'd be better than walking around all these rocks and boulders, and we may run into those fuckers on the road."

The road curved through the fields and then veered north, heading in the direction of upstream, although we were now too far from the river to see it. We trudged along in the dirt, the stiff trout swinging back and forth in the net Viv carried over his shoulder. The road meandered through the fields and past an occasional shack where an old man or two would raise a thin arm in the air. After a while a wagon loaded with empty cloth sacks came clattering up behind us and stopped. Two diseased looking ponies stood in the traces, and a bearded man with a blue rag wound about his head, and wearing a faded KISS t-shirt, sat on the bucket seat. He told us to get in. We jumped up on the seat with him and he cracked a whip across the scabbed backs of the ponies and the wagon lurched into motion. "Where are you going?"

"To the village upstream," said Viv.

"I am going there. You are going with me."

"Alright, thanks," I said. "Where'd you get that shirt?"

"What are these fish, why are you having them?"

"You want one?"

"No no. How did you get these fish?"

"We caught them with our hands," said Viv.

"My goodness you are joking."

"Well, you don't see any rods do ya?" I said.

"Oh my goodness."

"Where'd you get a KISS t-shirt?"

"Oh my goodness, yes?"

"You know what KISS is?"

"Oh goodness. You should not be without a guard, in Kashmir. Where is your escort?"

"We traded him for these fish," said Viv.

"You are doing what?"

"It was a good trade, he was a one legged man," I said.

"With an eye patch."

"And false teeth."

"My God you are crazy men. Are you Americans?"

"We're from Haiti."

"And where is this place?"

"You a big KISS fan?"

"Oh goodness, I am married no."



When the wagon clattered over the bridge into the village, we hopped out and thanked the farmer. The van was nowhere in sight. We wandered the streets, smiling and nodding to passerby who stared at us in amazement. We hadn't bathed or shaved in days. We were Caucasians, without escort, carrying a net full of dead fish but no rods, grinning and saying silly things.

"Please sirs," said a young man with an eye patch, smiling and taking Viv and me gently by the arm and walking between us as we made our way down a narrow street, "I am not understanding these fish."

"We don't understand them either," said Viv, "they don't speak English."

"Nor Hindi or Urdu," I said, "we've tried everything, even Spanish, see," I picked up the largest of the trout and held it before my face, looking into the dead eyes. "Habla Espanol? Hey! Habla Espanol? Donde es mi cerveza?" I shook the trout vigorously. "Hey cabellero, habla espanol? You see, they are determined to remain silent. They're very naughty."

"We're going to spank them until they talk," said Viv. The man let go of our arms and fell behind, smiling uncertainly.

We circled through the half of the village on our side of the river and saw no sign of Ramzan or Max. We asked numerous people if they had seen a VW van or a white man wandering around with a Muslim. No one had.

Back near the bridge we ducked into a chai stall and sat down on a bench with our small cups of tea steaming in our hands.

"Well, what do you want to do; we're never going to find them just walking around," sighed Viv.

"I don't know. Shit man, I'm tired."

"Me too." We sipped our chai and stared out the doorway. A thin old man in a blue robe, with a long beard, stepped inside and ordered a cup of chai.

"Well goddamn. Hey Barawat!" Barawat turned and saw us, his eyes wide.

"Oh shit," he said, dropping his chai and leaping out the door.

"Hey, you come back and pay for this," yelled the man serving up the chai behind the counter.

Viv and I jumped up and ran out the door after him. Barawat was astride an old bicycle, the two fly rods lashed across the handlebars, pedalling for all he was worth towards the bridge. We took off after him.

"Motherfucker you better give us those rods!"

"You bastard, we're gonna thump your head in!"

Barawat pedalled onto the bridge and raced across it, people dodging left and right. A boy carrying a basket of rice dove out of the way, dropping his basket and scattering rice in all directions. He jumped up, shouting and shaking his fist at Barawat and was knocked aside again as Viv and I barreled after the old man, Viv clutching the net and shaking it fiercely over his head like a spear, the dead trout bouncing wildly in the mesh.

On the other side of the river Barawat led us into a warren of crowded narrow streets. At first we gained on him as he slowed down, weaving through the mass of people, but we were tired from walking all day and began to slow ourselves. Eventually we lost him at an intersection. We stopped, panting, and looked around.

"Did he go left or right?"

"Maybe he went straight."

"Which way did that old man go, on the bicycle?" I gasped to an old woman who stood nearby.

"You big men should be ashamed, chasing that poor old man."

"What? He stole shit from us." A crowd of people was surrounding us.

"Why are you bothering that old woman?"

"What do you want here, this is no place for a firingar."

"Why were you chasing that old man?"

"What are you doing with these trout? Did you steal them from the old man?"

Several young men had gathered at the edge of the crowd, like vultures around a kill. They said nothing, but stared at us with open hostility.

"We better get out of here," I said.

We turned around and headed back the way we'd come, the small crowd parting and letting us through. A few of the young men followed us for a block or two but fell back after Viv gave them menacing looks. We wandered. Two and one story structures of plaster and timber lined the narrow streets. Here and there a balcony draped with wash hung over the street. We came to a vacant lot where a group of boys were playing cricket. Viv immediately jumped into the game when they beckoned for us to join. I sat on a low stone wall and watched, the fish in their net beside me. Viv pitched the ball, running and swinging his arm and then bouncing it off the ground in a way alien to someone more accustomed to baseball. A small boy whacked the ball with the flat cricket bat, sending it bouncing along the ground as the other boys cheered.

"Hello sir, may I sit beside you?" said a young man wearing glasses with no lens in the wire frame.

"Sure thing."

He smiled and sat. "That is your friend there?"

"Uh huh."

"He is a good cricket player."

"Yep. He's Australian."

"And why are you not playing?"

"I don't know how. And someone has to guard the fish."

"They are nice fish."

"Want one?"

"No thank you."

"How come there is no escort?"

"We're meeting him shortly."

"He should not have left you alone. It is very dangerous. The Pakistanis have attacked India again."

"I heard that."

"And this will stir up the local militants. Have you heard of the Hizbul Mujahedin?"

"Nah."

"It means Fighters for the Party of God. They want azadi, independence. Not India, not Pakistan, they want Kashmir, azad Kashmir, free. They will start bombing and shooting again. And maybe kidnapping."

Some of the boys from the cricket game had discovered there was a second white man, this one accompanied by dead fish, and they had come over

to check me out. I looked at the man beside me. He smiled. He was slender, almost bookish in appearance with the remnants of the spectacles resting on his nose. He seemed harmless. But I could imagine him in a dimly lit back room, tinkering with a bomb, connecting the red wire with the yellow wire. In the front room the other terrorists cleaned their rifles, read from the Koran, discussed their favorite ways of dismembering infidels. But not this one. He was the quiet one. The brains of the group. The bombmaker. Djinn of the Detonators.

"Well, I ain't too worried about it. Our escort's a big, mean motherfucker. Ugly too. I think he had to go beat someone, he's probably done by now. We should actually get going."

"You should come to my house for tea."

"Well, we should really get goin."

There was a crowd of boys and young men around me now, ranging from my own age down to ten or eleven.

"May I have this," said the young man, plucking at the fly hooked into my shirt.

"It's not mine to give."

"You should give it to me."

"It ain't mine, it belongs to Ramzan, our guide."

"Why won't you come have tea?"

"We gotta get goin."

"Let me have this," he said, pulling the fly from my shirt.

I grabbed his wrist and squeezed it. "I said no." Someone in the crowd hissed.

"Why are you holding me?"

"Give me the fly."

"Release my arm."

I squeezed his wrist hard. I could feel the thin bones in it. His eyes widened and then he opened his hand, the little fly resting on his brown palm. I let go of his wrist and snatched the fly and stuck it back on my shirt. He rubbed his wrist and looked around at the crowd of boys and young men as if waiting for them to pounce on me, his eyes smoldering behind the empty wire frames. And then the crowd suddenly parted as Viv came wading through the thin, sallow men. He held a cricket bat in his big fist and was slapping it against the thick palm of the other hand.

"We better get a move on, don't you think Marshall?" He handed the bat to the bespectacled man in front of me. "Here ya go bloke, knock yourself out."

We wandered uphill to the main road and sat on a bench outside of a chai stall. The army trucks were no longer rattling up the road in long lines. There was no traffic now.

"We're going to have to find a ride back to Srinigar," I said.

"Yeah. Jesus, where do you suppose Max and Ramzan are? You think they've gone back to Srinigar?"

"They're probably somewhere lookin for us, or maybe they've given up and gone back by now, figurin that's what we've done. Whatever the case, we don't need to be hangin around here after dark, people are actin hostile."

"There's no traffic though, even the army trucks are gone."

"Well, Captain Dasgupta said the road closes after dark now."

"Shit. There may not be any more traffic."

I looked at my watch. "Maybe there'll be one more bus, or something."

"You think we should try to hitch a ride on an army truck if we see one heading south?"

"Man, I don't know."

An old man wearing a white skull cap and a brown tunic came out of the chai stall and bowed before us. "Salaam aleikum."

"Howdy."

"Would the gentlemens care for tea?"

"Sure, say, are there anymore buses heading to Srinigar today?"

"Srinigar is that way," said the old man, pointing.

"Yeah, will any more buses go that way today, or is it too late?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

He smiled and walked back into the chai stall.

"Christ almighty."

Another man walked out. This man was large for a Kashmiri, almost as big as Viv. He had a heavy black beard and wore a white skullcap and he sat before us on the opposite bench and folded his hands, one of which was missing a pinky finger, and smiled a yellow smile.

"You are Americans."

"Australian," I said.

"Ah, they have a good cricket team."

"Will there be anymore buses to Srinigar today?" asked Viv.

"I am doubting that. There is a curfew on the road now, no travel after dark. The Pakistanis have attacked north of here, do you not know this?"

"We heard."

"There may be one more bus coming down the road, but it will not stop here. They will be in a hurry to make Srinagar before dark. You will be staying here tonight. What do you think of Pakistan?"

"They have a good cricket team," said Viv.

"You are a diplomat. Very good. My name is Faraq. And your names?"

We told him. He smiled. "Where is your escort?"

"He's meeting us here."

"You are poor liars. This is very dangerous. Do not be afraid of me. I am a mujahedin, yes, you see the jawans have taken a finger as payment, during the troubles," he held his hand before us, the stump of his pinky a purplish brown. "You think they cut it off, with a knife, you think that is cruel, no, let me tell you friend, this jawan, he put my little finger in his mouth, and he bite, like this, and he twist my hand, and he bite, and chew, and in a minute the finger is come off. This is supposed to make a man afraid, but they do not understand, it makes a man beyond fear, to treat him this way, it makes a man carry a great anger inside him, like a cancer, always. Better to kill a man, than to torture him and let him go, your enemy."

"Are you with the Hizbul Mujahedin?"

Faraq raised an eyebrow. "How are you knowing these?"

"I talked to one of em."

"They are fools. I am with the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. We are another group. There are maybe two dozen. That is one problem. There are too many different groups; we cannot get organized and work together. And, the Liberation Front is not in favor of the kidnapping; that does not help us. You do not have to be afraid of me. But this is very dangerous for you here."

While Faraq was talking, several men walked up to the chai stall. Two went inside, three others sat near us. One of the men smiled and nodded.

"Hello my friends."

"Howdy."

The other two men stared at us, their eyes unblinking in the brown masks of their faces. Faraq began a conversation in Kashmiri, the men all nodding and gesturing and looking us up and down. Two more men came out of the chai stall and sat on the outside benches, joining in the conversation. Then the old man came out with a tray on which two tiny mugs of chai steamed. He stood before us and Viv and I each took a mug.

"How many rupees?"

"Oh no. For you," said Faraq, "he is giving."

"It's pink," said Viv. I looked down. The chai was indeed pink. All the chai I had seen so far was brown.

"You're not having any," I said to Faraq.

"Oh no," Faraq looked at the other men and grinned.

I looked at Viv. He was gulping down his chai. I leaned in close to him and said quietly, "I hope they didn't poison that shit, you know, put something in there to knock us out." Viv's eyes widened and he stopped drinking. I put my mug down on the tray.

"You don't like tea?" asked Faraq.

"I've been sick."

"Oh, you have Delhi Belly."

"Maybe."

"Kashmiri tea will fix the Delhi Belly for you."

Several more men walked up to the chai stall, one went in and the rest crowded around us. "Hello friends, where is your guard?"

Faraq stood suddenly and leaned over us, frowning as he picked up the tray and whispered, "You should go my friends, these are not good men."

He straightened up with the tray and walked through the group of men crowded onto the front porch of the chai stall. A few of the men nodded to him, no one spoke. Faraq handed the tray to the old man in the brown tunic who stood in the door, and then he turned, stepped off the porch and wandered off up the street, not looking back.

A man in a tattered grey robe sat in Faraq's place. His black beard was neatly trimmed. "My friends let me tell you, it is not safe to be here, without an escort. Do you not know the Pakistanis have crossed the LOC in the north? There is fighting. And what will you do here, when it is dark? There are no more buses, this late, no way to get to Srinigar. And in the darkness, someone may kidnap you, for the ransom you see." He smiled. "But you come to my house, you will be safe there. You should come with me now."

"We're meeting someone here," said Viv.

"And who is this?"

"Our guard, Usef,"

"And where is he now? He has abandoned you here? I am not thinking much of this guard. At my house, there you will be safe."

I stood up. "We've got to get going."

"Friends, do you not understand," said the man, rising also, "there is nowhere for you to go."

Just then I heard the wheezing snarl of a dilapidated bus engine up the road. Everyone turned and looked. An orange, yellow, red and green bus bore down on us like a rusty dragon, smoke bellowing out behind it, engine growling. It was moving fast and didn't look like anything short of a land-

mine would give it pause between here and Srinigar. I leaped off the porch and out into the road, waving my arms.

"My friend," said the grey-robed man, "that bus is not stopping for anyone; it has to be in Srinigar by dark and off this road." There was a slight sound, a change, a lowering of the pitch of the engines wail. It was slowing. Viv stepped down off the porch. Grey Robe and his minions followed. "My friend, you want to step back, this bus will run you down. It will not stop for anything, not this late."

I smiled. "It may not stop, but it'll slow down. For money." The dragon growl of the bus dropped another octave, the gears downshifted agonizingly and the bus was on us. And then past us.

"You see my friends—"

I ran, calling to Viv over my shoulder, my feet pounding the road, the bus just in front of me, already picking up speed. I leaped for the rusty ladder clinging to the back, caught it, my sweaty hand slipping on the rung and for half a second I was falling, but then my foot found a rung, and then my other foot was on, my other hand, I turned, just as Viv jumped onto the ladder beside me, latching on with one hand, nearly dropping the net full of fish and as we both grabbed for it one of the dead trout slipped through a tear in the mesh and torpedoed down into the dusty road, bouncing and tumbling along in the dusty wake of the bus like a bowling pin until Grey Robe, panting, slowing down, his face and beard caked with the kicked up road grime, picked it up and shook it at the rapidly departing bus like a sword.



Clouds had been piling up all afternoon, advance scouts of the monsoon army, and a few miles down the road rain began falling. We sat on the flat roof of the bus with the rain pelting our faces, fast hard drops that stung a bit, and watched the countryside roll by as the bus galloped over the crumbling road, pushing to get off it before night. We shared the rooftop with a large spare tire, a rust gnawed bicycle, a half full propane tank that rolled and bounced each time the bus lurched over a hole or rock in the road, and a goat with his legs tied together who regarded the bouncing propane tank, the white men and the dead fish all with a look of utter resignation.

As we rattled along at a good sixty miles per hour a small hand suddenly appeared on the rooftop, followed by another, and then a teenage boy, pulling himself over the tiny railing and onto the roof, about midway down the length of the bus. I looked at Viv. Viv raised an eyebrow. The boy made

his way on his hands and knees towards us, his grin bright in the rain filled air.

"Hello gentlemen."

"Hey."

"Enjoying the Kashmir?"

"Does the Pope wear a funny hat?" said Viv.

The boy scratched his head and then grinned sheepishly. "I am guessing yes. You are riding all the way to Srinigar?"

"Yep."

"That will be twenty rupees."

"Each?"

"No. For both, for two."

"Let me ask you something," I said, wiping rain from my face.

"Yes please."

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"I am riding inside the bus."

"Did you just climb out the window?"

"Yes, I am collecting the bus fare, that is my duties, you see, you must pay when you get on, of course, today there is no stopping because of the army, we have to get off the road before night. There is fighting again."

Viv and I each dug out a ten rupee note and handed it to the boy who stuffed them into a pocket of his ragged shorts. Then he looked at the dead trout lying in the net beside the goat. He looked around for fishing poles and saw none.

"How are you catching these?"

"They are falling from the sky, with the rain," said Viv, looking upward.

The boy laughed. "You are crazy men. Where is your guard?"

"We're looking for one. What about you? We pay five rupees a day and a ten rupee bonus for every thief and kidnapper you kill."

"I do not have a gun and I am very small," he said smiling.

"You don't need a gun," said Viv, "it's possible to kill a man with a trout, that's why we carry these with us. Here, I'll show you." Viv reached for the fish.

"Oh no," said the boy, giggling and backing away, "you are from newyork california I am guessing."

"That's right," said Viv, "how did you know?"

"There is a television on my street, and I have seen this place, newyork california, everyone shooting guns, and having lots of sex with girls."

"That about sums it up," I said.

"I would like to go there."

“They kicked us out.”

The boy laughed and crawled back to the middle of the bus, lifted himself over the small rail as the bus rounded a curve at a slower fifty-five miles per hour, and dropped through a window and out of sight.

The rain fell in sheets as we passed through the tiny roadside villages, ducking the occasional thick electric wire slung between poles and avoiding the leafy branches of chinar trees scraping along the bus top and nearly sweeping it clean of goat, fish and men. From time to time the bus would slow and then be forced to halt as herds of dripping sheep passed over the road. The shepherds prodded the dull animals out of the way with sticks and boots and grinned and waved when they saw the two white men perched high atop the bus, wringing the rainwater out of their shirts and looking down on the world below and laughing and shouting and pointing and making faces at every villager and child and soldier who spied them riding on top of the bus in the rain and laughed and shouted and pointed at them.

Just before darkness fell we passed the last army checkpoint, the soldier waving us through, off the road north and on our way to the outskirts of Srinigar. By the time we made it into the city proper it was night. Electric lights burned here and there in some of the plaster and timber houses, mostly the larger two story ones, some set behind walls, shutters thrown open to the rain-cooled night, shadowy figures of Srinigar's meager middle class moving to and fro in front of the large square windows empty of glass.

Here and there a fire burned in the street, small and well-tended by a tight circle of men, cooking a piece of meat, spitting, smoking, a large cloth stretched between poles set high over the flames to keep the rain off the fire and the men around it and causing the smoke to twist out from beneath its edges in bizarre shapes like the spirits of creatures alien to this world, twisting away through the rain-lashed night in search of some way home again.

The bus groaned its way deeper into the city, turning here and there until we were quite unsure of where we were, the larger houses on the outskirts giving way to more and more chai stalls and butcher shops and lean-tos and shed displaying ware and handiwork of soap wallahs, flower wallahs, shoe wallahs, vegetable wallahs, spice wallahs and two competing bathroom sink wallahs, which we noted. These salesman had set up shop side by side, displaying their wares in even rows, the polished porcelain sinks resting on makeshift tables. Naked bulbs hanging from frayed wires illuminated the gleaming pipes that jutted a foot or so from the basin of each sink. There were no faucets or knobs, just the porcelain bowls and the jutting pipes. As the bus rolled past, each salesman called out to the night with hoarse cries, asking all to witness the quality of his sinks, the shoddy workmanship of his

neighbors sinks and the outrageous prices suggested by his competitor, whose product, each doubted, could even retain water.

People hunched in doorways and under awnings, taking shelter from the rain. No one noticed the two white men crouched atop the bus in the rain-swirling darkness like pale gargoyles, showing their teeth and nodding and speaking to one another in their strange tongue, the goat lying between them like something they had captured and were about to devour.

The bus labored on through the dark and sodden streets. Here and there a soldier leaned in a doorway, his rifle barrel pointed down to keep out the rain. An occasional bedraggled horse plodded through the puddles, pulling a cart behind it laden with knick knacks and wares, an old man and a crone or two. The bus stopped and disgorged passengers. Then it moved on again, splashing its way into more derelict quarters of the city. The streets were mud. Men lay huddled against walls, rain falling on their naked heads and streaming like tears down their faces. Refuse lay heaped in piles, steaming in the rain, and ribbed curs padded from doorway to doorway, seeking scraps their noses had detected from afar in the labyrinthine maze of rot and decay but finding the inhabitants of each hovel in no mood to share their dinner with other carnivores however so lean and pleading of eye.

Once more the bus stopped and men and women stepped out and hurried off this way and that into the darkness. Nearby a vacant lot served as a garbage dump. The ruins of what looked to have been a large building lay scattered about; victim of a bomb or poor architectural craftsmanship, it had cleared out a sizeable area in its collapse which had been refilled with all manner of refuse. A girl child squatted in the muck, pulling rags of soiled and torn cloth from a heap and adding them to a growing pile at her feet. Nearby the carcass of a large bovine sprawled, belly taunt with the gasses trapped inside. A living bull stood beside it and watched two dogs tugging at the dead cows udder until it peeled away from the underside. Each dog snapped up one end of the pinkish, fatty organ and tried to rip it away from the other, until, enraged, they dropped the prize and went for each others throats, snarling and tumbling about in the garbage. The brown bull stepped forward, leaned its thin neck down and snatched up the udder in his mouth, gulping it down like some gargantuan, horn bedecked, starving wolf.

A man suddenly appeared at the top of the ladder, grinning in the dark. "Hello, yes."

"Hey man, does this boat go by Dal Lake?"

The man picked up the rusty bicycle and hurled it out into the darkness where it landed somewhere with a crash. "You are going?"

"To Dal Lake, yes."

He picked up the propane tank and dropped it over the side. It rang like a bell as it landed on some cobblestones sunk in the mud in front of a shop of some sort. The man grabbed the goat and began dragging it toward him.

"Is this bus going by Dal Lake?"

"This bus is parking now." As he said this the engine shuddered and died. The man slung the bleating goat over his shoulder and descended the ladder.

Viv and I climbed down after him with our trout. The rain began falling faster and gusts of wind drove it into our faces and sent the few people on the street ducking into doorways and out of sight. The man with the goat rounded a corner and was gone. The bus driver, all the passengers, the boy who collected our fare, had all taken off.

We wandered through dark alleys where no soldiers stood guard. Cows and dogs vied for scraps among heaps of rubble and rot and occasionally a dark face loomed out of the nether recesses of a doorway, marked our passage through the dripping night and disappeared inward again. After a while the twisting alleys gave way to straighter, broader thoroughfares and by and by we came upon a ricksha parked in the deluge, its driver sprawled across the seat as though stricken by lightning, one arm flung back over his face as if to ward off a second bolt. I tapped on the side of his vessel.

"Hey hey."

He muttered and shifted position but did not open his eyes. Viv took a trout from the net and held it under the man's nose. One eye opened. Then another. They focused on the dead fish. Then on the two white men leaning towards him out of the rain-shot darkness. The man smiled and closed his eyes again.

"Wake up you bloke; it's no dream, you're about to make a few rupees."

The man opened his eyes again. This time he frowned. Then he sat up as Viv and I climbed into the ricksha with him.

"You know the way to Dal Lake, don't you mate?"

"What is this?"

"How much to Dal Lake," I said.

"There is a curfew in Srinigar. Firingars are not to be out after dark. There is fighting in the north. And it is raining. What are these fish?"

I patted him on the shoulder. "How much to Dal Lake?"

"You are putting these fish in my ricksha?"

"We must take them to Dal Lake and set them free."

"Are they not dead fish?"

"Don't be so easily fooled. They are asleep."

"Fish do not sleep."

I held up one of the stiff trout for the man's inspection. "Does this fish look awake to you?"

"He is looking dead."

"As does everyone when they sleep. As did you when we found you."

"But I am breathing when I am sleeping, my chest is rising and falling."

Viv leaned forward and poked the dead trout with an enormous finger.

"Does a fish have a chest?"

"Ah. I am thinking he does not."

"Exactly."

"But why not eat them?"

"In my country," said Viv, "we don't eat fish. When we find them asleep, we go and put them back in the water."

The man narrowed his eyes. "And what country is this?"

"Alabama."

When we made it back to the houseboat, Rafga was spread out on the benchseat on the porch, snoring. Pink slouched in a chair, smoking one of my Marlboro's.

"Goddamnit Pink, give me that." I took the cigarette from him, took a deep drag and flicked it into the water.

"I only took them because I thought you were dead and would not need them anymore."

"Pinky you shouldn't smoke. If you smoke at your age, your penis will never grow."

"You are joking."

"Oh well, it's your dick."

Pinky looked down at his lap and scratched his head.

"Where's your father? Where's Max?" asked Viv.

"They are chasing you."

"Chasing?"

"Father call on the cell phone and say you have disappeared; he thinks you are kidnapped. He tells Usef to come help find you, so Usef leaves. Then later, father call back, wants to talk to Usef, but Usef is already gone. Father say many people tell him they have seen two white men riding on a roof of a bus, in the rain, making faces and shouting. So father and Mr. Max, they are going chasing after this bus and Usef should stay and not get on the road so late, but Usef is already gone. And there was a Japan man here and he left too."

"Where the hell did he go?"

"I think all the jawans and the guns make him scared. He could not speak the English, no one knows what he is talking about, but he make Usef understand to take him back to the airport. So he did. But the jawans have closed the airport, so he hired a man to drive him all the way to Jammu. Then Usef comes back. Then father calls and Usef leaves. Then father calls back and Usef is gone. How many fish you got?"

"We got a lot."

"I like fish OK."

"Let's wake up Rafga and see if he feels like cooking."

"Why don't you call your old man on the cell phone Pink," said Viv, "and tell him where we are."

"But father say it is only for agencies"

"Emergencies?"

"Yes, because it costs so many rupees."

"Well, I think they'll want to know where we are."

Just then a shikara shot out of the dark and sidled up to the Hollywood. Max and Ramzan jumped out. Max walked up from the floating dock to the porch and grinned when he saw Viv and me smoking in the dark. No one spoke for a second or two; everyone just grinned. Then Max sat down. He took out a cigarette and lit it. He leaned back.

"How many?"

"Nine."

"Christ, we caught seven. Where are they?"

"We put them in the kitchen."

"Nine. You fucking liars."

"We cut off the heads, want to see one?"

"You fuckers, you probably found the heads in the garbage somewhere. Where the fuck did you two clowns run off two?"

"Barawat left us and stole the rods."

"No shit."

"Yep."

"Ramzan thought you were kidnapped for certain. He was sweating bullets. And then about ten different people tell us they saw two white blokes riding on top of a bus, yelling and waving in the rain. So off we go down the road, but we never even caught sight of your bus."

Ramzan came and sat down between Viv and me and put an arm around each of us. "My friends, I want you to feel my heart. I am not joking, put your hand over my heart. Do you feel it beating?"

I could feel it. So did Viv. "Aww, were you guys worried?" I said.

"Am thinking you are kidnapped, someone will be finding your heads in a few days, and then, my business is completely ruined."

"I wasn't worried until we got stopped by the fucking army," said Max.

"Yes, we chase after you, people tell us they have seen you on this bus, but we never see the bus, then it is dark, we are almost back in Srinigar, but a jeep stop us. Praise Allah I am having a tourist with me, so he let us go."

"After shaking you by the fucking collar."

"Yes, the jawans are bastards. And I am afraid they have Usef somewhere. We will find out tomorrow."

"You think they stopped him?"

"Most probably."

"What will they do to him?"

"Hold him for one night and then let him go. Maybe beat him if he is the smartass or they are bored."

"Shit."

Ramzan patted Viv and me on the back. "But you are not murdered, praise Allah."

"Yes, and Allah helped us catch many trout."

"How many?"

"Nine."

"Oh goddamn."

"Yes. You can pay us tomorrow."

"Oh you are generous."

"Pink said your Japan man left."

"Yes, damnit. This fucking war is not good for business. So tell me, what in hell happened to you crazy bastards?"



Viv and Max shook me awake as dawnlight crept through the windows and illuminated the dust motes whirling above me like minute fairies where I lay on the floor beside the bed. The Australians held a cold beer against my sweating brow and commanded me to drink, but I moaned and pushed them away and sank back into a dreamworld where cows feasted on stinking piles of trout and watched me with glowing eyes as they chewed.

Around noon I stumbled out of the room. Viv and Max lay sprawled in the narrow hallway like dead men, a crumpled beer can resting on Max's forehead and a cigarette smashed into the intricate patterns of the carpet between them. I stepped over their snoring bodies and went out to the porch. No one seemed to be about. The sun flashed off the lake, and shikaras cut

this way and that. A young boy hunched in a dugout not far from the Hollywood, filling his slim, rocking vessel with the kelp like weeds that choked the lake. Many of the lake dwelling Kashmiris spent their day hauling the masses of floating weeds out of the fetid water and piling and mashing them together until they formed floating islands. Then they heaped dirt on top and planted gardens on them. The boy scooped the weeds into the boat with a square paddle, his thin arms wiry and muscled like a man's.

I went back inside, grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator in the dining room and wrote TIN down beside my name and the other TINS stretching across the sheet of paper that lay on the dining room table. I took a cigarette from a pack lying on the table and lit it with a match. Then I walked into the tiny kitchen. Rafga sat on a stool, his head leaned back against the wall, snoring softly. I walked back to the porch with my beer.

A shikara sidled up to the boat as I stood looking out over the lake. A man called out. "Sir, the photos they are ready for you."

"Huh?"

"Please come." I walked down to the floating dock.

"I have the photos."

"Whatnhell are you talkin about?"

"Oh my goodness. You are a different man. I have the photos that are belonging to the great big white man with blonde hair."

"What, he gave you film to develop?"

"Yes, four days ago. Now is ready. You have film you want developed?" He pointed to a crudely lettered wooden sign that hung from the boat's yellow awning. It read

PHOTO DEVELOP WHILE YOU WATE

Mr Singh

"Nah."

"You are certain of this?"

"Yeah."

"Where is the big man?"

"He's sleepin. I'll give him the pictures. How much does he owe you?"

"He has already paid. I am good man to be trusted. I know Ramzan and Ramzan is knowing me. Here you are." He handed me a packet of photos and gave me an elaborate wink and then dug his square paddle into the water.

I walked back up to the porch, sat down with my beer and took out the photos and began looking at them. Max and Viv in Thailand. Beers held

aloft. Palm trees. Beaches. Then a room with a bed, a naked white girl stretched out on it. Blonde, tweaking her nipples.

"Oh my."

Then a different girl lying on the same bed in the same room. A dresser behind the bed held a small trophy upon which a little gold man swung a tiny gold cricket bat. The girl had black hair and leered at the camera, her middle finger inserted in her vagina.

"Viv, Viv, such debauchery."

I put the photos down, lit another cigarette and took a swig of beer. One of the shikaras scooting across the water suddenly veered and pulled up to the Hollywood.

"Hello my friend."

"And a good day to you sir."

"You are wanting gemstones."

"Yep, I've been waiting here all day for someone to come by selling gemstones. Where have you been? Off lolligagging in some unscrupulous manner no doubt."

"You want lollipop?"

"No."

"But you are wanting gemstones?"

"No. I was joking. Would you like to purchase some pornography?"

"What is this?"

"Nevermind."

"You do not want a ruby? An emerald? Maybe for you wife, she want a Kashmiri emerald."

"A real one too, no doubt."

"Of course."

"You know I used to be a jeweler, I can tell."

"You are Jewish?"

"Yes."

"You will make you wife happy with the emerald."

"All she'd do with an emerald is lose it. Drop it down the well while she's drawing water, lose it in the woodpile while she's hewing wood. And then I would have to beat her."

"Yes."

"You got any swords or knives?"

The man's face brightened. "I am knowing such a place."

"They got good shit there?"

"Oh yes. Good steel. And walnut sheath. Very nice."

"OK. Let me get another beer. Wait here."

"Of course."

I took the photos and went inside. Viv and Max still snored in the hallway. I placed the blonde on Viv's chest and the brunette on Max's chest. Then I put the rest of the packet in Viv's hand. I got another beer out of the fridge, wrote TIN at the end of the column beside my name and went out.

Ahmal guided his shikara down a narrow canal that was covered with a four inch pie crust of scum that broke apart before the bow of our craft like ice giving way before some arctic ship. The smell of human waste and filth burned my nostrils. An ancient stone bridge arched over this open sewer and we pulled underneath it. Ahmal hopped out onto some rocks and pulled the prow of the vessel up between two large stones and wedged it there. "OK, follow me." I stepped out of the boat and together we clambered up the eroded bank to the narrow road that ran over the stone bridge.

I followed Ahmal through a twisting maze of alleys and streets. Goats stood here and there, pondering the dust between their hooves. Passerby stared and dogs whined and sniffed my boots as they passed on errands of their own.

We entered a two-storied stone and timber house through a narrow door and into a room in which several children played. They stared wide-eyed and unspeaking as we walked through the room, passed through another doorway and into a much larger room filled with all manner of cutlery. Three old men sat cross-legged on frayed carpets. Two were carving patterns into walnut sheaths, using a tiny chisel and hammer. The third was sharpening a sword on a rock. Daggers and swords leaned against the walls and lay in piles on the floor next to heaps of raw smelling walnut and short and long blades naked of wood. The back of the room opened out onto a kind of courtyard surrounded by high stone walls. Here a blacksmith pounded a glowing length of steel against an anvil with an enormous hammer. A small raised tub of molten ore smoked beside him over a bed of glowing coals. Another man hunched over a sawhorse, sawing lengths of walnut. Chickens wandered here and there, pecking at wood shavings in the dust.

The man sharpening the sword put it down and smiled, indicating with a gesture that we should sit down on the floor beside him. We did so.

"I am Balgiran. You are wanting to buy many swords. What is your family's name and where are you from?" I told him. I asked him how much for a sword.

"Walnut sheath with brass fitting, as you see."

"Very nice. How much?"

He leaned over and pulled a sword from a pile nearby. He drew the blade from its sheath and held the weapon out towards me, handle first. I took it.

"With one swipe, the jawan's head will come off, like this," said Balgiran, chopping the air with his hand. Ahmal smiled and nodded.

"They look very expensive."

"Of course not. How many do you want. Three. Maybe six, to take home and give to you friends. And maybe a nice little dagger for the wife?"

"I don't want to give her any ideas." They smiled.

"You must not tell anyone where you got this," said Balgiran. "You are leaving Srinigar in an airplane."

"No. The airport is closed. By car."

"To Jammu."

"Yes."

"You must be careful on the road."

"Oh?"

"It will be mined."

"Shit. Really?"

"Oh yes friend. Bad times are coming again. More for the jawan than the mujahedin. But the road to Jammu is often mined. They are switch mines. You hide in the rocks above the road, wait for the army truck to come. When it rolls over you bomb, you press the switch. No more army truck. They are like traps. You know a trap set out to catch the fox?"

"Yeah."

"While the Pakistani is attacking in the north, many jawans will be coming up the road, and the mujahedin will set a trap or two, I am thinking. But the switch mine, you see, can only be set off by the switch, so sometimes many vehicles may pass over the bomb before the switch is hit. They are watching from the rocks you see, and they decide who they want to explode and who they will let go on. They will be wanting army trucks heading north. So if you are in a civilian car, heading south, they will not bother you I am thinking. But you should be careful no matter. Very careful when the army trucks are passing."

"I reckon so."

"And so you are not flying, no one will know you have these swords."

"I only want one."

"Yes. But if a jawan should see them, you must say you bought them from a man on the street, and not tell them of this place. It is against the law to sell the swords, since the troubles before."

"They are very foolish," said Ahmal, "as if we had been running around killing men with swords. No more swords they say. And all the time we are shooting them, not stabbing."

"Yes, it is foolish and has ruined business," said Balgiran. "You see how much we have here, too many. We keep making them but there is no one to buy. One day the tourists will come back and then I will be a rich man, selling all these. So. How many you wanting?"

"I only want one."

"What will you do my friend, when you return home, and you friends say, ah, this is a thing of beauty, this sword, did you not bring me one as well? And then, what will you tell them?"

"I will tell them to come to Kashmir and get their own."

"Yes, very good joking. Now please, how many you like?"

When I got back to the Hollywood it was late afternoon. I jumped out of Ahmal's shikara onto the floating dock and walked up to the porch, sword in hand. Everyone was sitting there, passing around a hash cigarette. Usef sat beside Ramzan in a chair, and he smiled painfully when he saw me. His face was swollen and bruised.

"Goddamn Usef. The soldiers?" He nodded.

"Mr. Marshall," said Ramzan, "once more you have wandered away and I am thinking you are in trouble. Where have you been?"

"I got a sword. This dude came by and said he knew where some were. Where you been?"

"In town, getting more beer for this evening, and trying to file a complaint about this Barawat bastard."

"Didn't you tell me you're an English major?" asked Viv.

"Yeah?"

"Then you've got to write the complaint."

"Me?"

"Yes," said Ramzan, "after Usef returned we went to the tourist office to tell them about their bastard fishman who has stolen two fly rods from me, gotten one of my men beaten and you and Mr. Viv lost, and they say the tourists will have to file a complaint, and then maybe I can get compensation for the rods if they cannot find them. They are not cheap, these rods."

"I know."

"So we have the form here, and Mr. Viv tells me that you are a student of English at university, like literature? Like writing?"

"Mmmmm."

"Yes, so it will be your job to write this complaint."

"What do you want me to write?"

"Exactly what I tell you."

"OK."

"First smoke some of this."

"OK."

I sat down, took the hash cigarette and sucked in a big lungful of smoke, then passed it to Max. "What happened Usef?" He shook his head slowly and took a pull from his beer.

"When Ramzan call here and say you and Mr. Viv are missing, I leave right away. In town I get a motorcycle from my cousin and drive up the road out of town. They stop me at the first checkpoint. It is not even close to dark. The Captain say, 'and where are you going?' I tell him it is an emergency, that I work for Ramzan and we have two firingars missing, maybe kidnapped. 'So you are going to rescue them,' says the Captain. I say I am looking for you. The Captain he say I must be a very brave man to go looking for kidnappers unarmed. I say nothing. Then they search me, find the gun. They take me inside and they beat me, ask me where I am going, what I am doing, saying I am mujahedin, what group am I with, these things. I say nothing. What can I say? They have my identity card and my papers; these papers say where I am working, they say who I am. But the jawans say, maybe these are false papers, and they will have to find this out, and that will take until tomorrow. So they tie me up and leave me in the corner all night. Then this morning they say OK, you can go back to Sringar. But they keep my fucking gun."

"Goddamn."

"Yes."

"Man, I'm sorry, I feel like it's our fault somewhat."

"No, not your fault. And even the jawans, I am not angry with them. They are doing what a jawan does. You should not be angry with a cobra if he bites you. That is what a cobra does. It does not make sense to get angry. It only makes sense to kill the cobra. And then die. And the jawans are the enemy, so of course, they will always do these things, and we must always fight them until one day they leave. But this man Barawat, he is at fault. He is nothing but a common thief. If I find him I will make him pay."

Rafga came out and handed me a cold beer.

"Thank you sir."

"Yes my friend."

"And don't forget to write down TIN."

"Ahhh." He grinned and sat down.

"So where'd you get the sword?" asked Max.

"I can't tell you, it's illegal."

"You probably bought a gun too."

"And a few grenades."

"Silly Americans."

"Silly Australians." We clanked our beers together.

While Rafga was cooking mutton for dinner, we sat around the table in the dining room drinking beer, and Ramzan went and got the complaint form and set it down in front of me with a pen. In English at the top of the page it read COMPLAINT FORM and beneath that in small letters - Srinagar Bureau of Tourism, Kashmir, India. Beneath this heading the paper was blank.

"What should I say?"

"First write this, write I, Mr. Marshall, put your full name, and then your passport number." I wrote down my full name and passport number.

"Then you write, and I, Mr. Viv, full name and passport number, and I Mr. Max, full name and passport number, wish to lodge a complaint." I wrote these things down.

"Now you say what happened, that this bastard left you with no escort and stole the fishing rods." I wrote something to that effect.

"Now let me see." Ramzan looked over it, frowning. "It does not look like much."

"Well, there's plenty more blank space to fill."

"There is indeed. Put down that this bastard Barawat had no fishing permits and no guide license." I wrote down those exact words. Usef took the sheet of paper from me and looked at it.

"What is lodge?"

"It means like, to file a complaint, to place a complaint. Also a hotel."

"Hotel?"

"Yes. Sort of."

"Hmm. They will not do much with this. They will lodge it somewhere and forget about it." He handed the sheet back to me.

I looked at his swollen eye, the skin a shining purple in contrast to the rest of his brown face. "You know, we shouldn't fuck around here."

"What do you have in mind?" asked Viv.

"Well, this guy fucked us in the ass, basically. Look at Usef, he got his ass kicked over this shit." I put the pen to the paper and wrote some things down, then handed it to Ramzan. He read it and grinned, then handed it to Usef.

"What'd you write?" asked Max.

"I put that he was using dynamite and electric cables to kill trout."

Usef handed the paper to me. "Write that you saw many fish killed this way."

I wrote down that I had seen at least a hundred trout killed with dynamite and electric cables and that Barawat had thrown them up onto the bank to rot, laughing as he did so.

"Put something else," said Viv.

"Yes more, write more," said Ramzan grinning.

"How about I say he was drunk and tried to sell us heroin?"

"Yes yes, put it down."

I wrote it down. "While we're at it, we may as well write down some more shit, I mean, no use being shy about it now," I said.

"Write anything you can think of."

I wrote down that Barawat had been unconcerned about the legality of his fishtaking methods when I questioned them and had scoffed at the possibility of the local authorities apprehending him, saying that 'those stupid bastards could not catch a two-legged goat tied to a post.' Then he had beaten a young crippled girl that came to beg for some of the dead fish to feed her starving grandmother. Just before he took off with our rods, he excused himself from our company, retiring to a field where he said he needed to pray in seclusion. After a while we went looking for him and discovered him among the rows of plants violating a squirming young lad with one of the dead fish. I handed the paper to Ramzan. He read it, laughing.

"Yes, good, oh my, they will kill him, excellent."

The complaint was passed around, everyone read it, laughed, and signed their names to it.



After dinner Pinky and Rafga went off to their tiny rooms to sleep while the rest of us retired to the very back of the houseboat where Ramzan kept quarters. Through the sandalwood walls we could hear the hum of the generator fastened to the stern of the vessel. A large TV sat on wooden blocks in a corner. We all sat on the floor to watch a cricket match, Britain versus South Africa, part of the World Cup. Everyone picked sides and watched the game intently, cheering and booing, calling out players by name. I had no idea what was going on. It resembled baseball, but seemed to be even slower and more boring. Halfway through the tedium the generator gave out with a thump, the lights sputtered off and the blue eye of the TV closed.

"Well thank God that's over," I said.

I was booed and hissed. Ramzan lit a candle and we followed him up to the bow and out onto the porch. Windchimes clinked near and far, and there was the usual faint murmur of voices floating across the water. Lanterns winked in and out of sight and floated through the darkness in people's hands as they walked the planks that connected many of the houseboats or stepped in and out of shikaras. Ramzan set the candle on the coffee table, and its small flame swayed in the breeze while we drank beer and smoked cigarettes and looked out into the dark.

"In the morning we will settle the accounts," said Ramzan, "pay for the beer, and then we will take you to shore; there is a man driving to Jammu in the morning and I have arranged for you to go with him. He will drop you at the bus plaza. From there you can buy your ticket to anywhere in India. And gentlemen, I have enjoyed having you here and hope you come again one day."

"We've had a hell of a time, no doubt," I said.

"Next time we'd like to be supplied with some girls," said Max.

"Yeah, these boys are runnin some kind of porno business."

"They are doing what?"

"Where's them pictures, get em out."

Viv laughed. "I forgot that roll still had a few shots from home on it. I wake up on the floor, and here's a photo on my stomach. I pick it up and here's this girl I know. Couldn't figure what was going on for a second there. It took me a minute to even realize where I was, and then I remembered, and I realized the Sheriff must have been out on the porch when Mr. Singh came back. Incidentally, thanks for picking up the photos Sheriff."

"My pleasure."

"I want to see these pictures," said Ramzan.

Viv stood up and picked up the candle. Ramzan stood up too.

"We will get my photos as well."

"You got naked pictures too?" said Max.

"Of course."

"Well goddamn, everybody's got em but me." I said.

Ramzan and Viv disappeared into the boat. Usef cracked open another beer. He held the cool can to his swollen eye and then he took a drink.

"Where are you going to go from Jammu Marshall?" asked Max.

I lit another cigarette and dropped the match into an empty beer can on the coffee table.

"Well, Corbett, that was my plan before I met Javed and you guys. There's supposed to be some tigers there and a fifty-fifty chance of seeing one, so I've read. So I'll get a bus to Chandigarh, and from there I should be

able to catch a bus to Nainital, and from there a bus to Ramnagar, which is a little town outside of the park. This is all according to the Lonely Planet guide. Ya'll headin to Rajasthan from Jammu?"

"Yea, there's five or six blokes from home we're supposed to meet there. I think they're already there."

Viv and Ramzan reemerged from the dark recesses of the boat, the candle flame wavering between them, photos of nude women in their hands. Viv put the candle down on the table and the photos beside them, and we all leaned in to look.

"This girl here," said Ramzan, "she is Czech, from East Europe, Czechoslovakia, you know?"

We nodded. The photo he held was of a thirtyish dark-haired girl lying naked on the dining room table upon which we had eaten so many of Rafga's concoctions. The girl had a mournful look in her eyes and her hands were folded together on her flat stomach. She wasn't bad looking.

Ramzan put this picture down and picked up another. Same girl, naked, sitting in a chair. Then another, this time on her hands and knees on the floor, looking back over her shoulder at the camera, the same sad look in her eyes.

"When was this?" I said.

"In 1989, right as the troubles were beginning. This woman was here with her husband, they were some of the last people to come before the fighting got really bad and no more tourists came and not too long after it was that Javed and I left too, for a time.

"These people, this woman and her husband, were very strange. They had been here a week, and they had been up in the mountains with Javed, and come back here. The last night they are staying here, they want to smoke a lot of hash. So I get some in town and bring it back. My wife, she has gone to bed. So, this couple and myself, we are out here smoking, it is late at night, and we hear some shooting in town, some rifle shots, back and forth, and then quiet. Right after this the generator goes dead. They are very afraid. This is not to worry about, I say. It is nothing. They are very afraid. Someone will come out here and kidnap us or kill us they are saying. This will not happen I tell them. Finally, they go back to their room. I am sitting out here, where I am now, and I fall asleep. I don't know how long, maybe an hour. Then I wake up; this girl is standing over me. What are you doing I ask. She looks crazy, her eyes, her eyes have this crazy look and she is naked as you see in the picture; she has nothing on. You must take us to the airport she says, take us now or they will kill us. What are you talking about I say, there is no one after you. Then she slap me, very hard. I grab her arm

and she slap me again with the other hand. You bitch, you are crazy I tell her; what is wrong with you? I want you to fuck me she says. I tell her she is crazy; my wife and her husband are on this boat. She says they will not know; and she wants me to get my camera and take pictures of her and then to have sex with her and if I do not do these things she will begin to scream."

"Jesus Christ," I said.

"Yes, I am telling you, this woman was crazy. So I go and get the camera out of my room; my wife she is sound asleep. I listen at the door where her husband is. I can hear him snoring in there. So, in the dining room, I take these photos and then we have sex, and then she goes to her room and in the morning she is acting as if nothing has happened. I would have thought that it was all a dream, but there are the photos for all to see. I would not normally do a thing like that, when I am married you know; I am not like Javed, always trying to fuck the tourists, but, she was crazy. I don't know, probably I would have fucked her anyway, but, it was very strange."

"That's a fairly kinky story Ramzan," said Viv.

"Yes."

Usef leaned forward and got the matches off the table and lit a cigarette. "Tell us about these girls," he said, blowing a plume of smoke into the candlelight and onto the other set of photos.

Viv leaned in to the candle to light a cigarette off the small flame. "The blonde is my sister," Max chuckled.

"Shitfire," I said.

Ramzan and Usef looked at me as if I might offer some explanation for the strange ways of whites. I had none.

"She's not really his sister," said Max, "not by blood."

Viv blew a smoke ring. It hung in the candlelight briefly, like the misplaced halo of an angel, and then dissipated.

"My parents are divorced, have been for years. About two years ago my father starts seeing this woman, a real beauty. She has a daughter, same age as me. Well, while I'm in Japan, things start getting hot and heavy between this lady and my father, they start getting real serious, you understand. So naturally, when I get home from teaching in Japan, I eventually meet the daughter. And wouldn't you know it."

"They started fucking," said Max.

"We didn't date or anything like that; we were both dating other people in fact, but one night we were drunk, hanging out together, and we wind up in the bed. Then it starts happening all the time. Sneaking off, humping like rabbits. The whole time, my dad's bangin her mum, and they think we're

just good friends, because we hang out all the time, but we're each still dating other folks. Isn't it great how well the kids get along, they keep sayin to each other. Well, one day, out of nowhere, my father says, son, I'm gettin married again. I had been thinkin about tellin him what was going on you know, just in case this sort of thing happened. I went and found Belinda, that's her name. What do we do I say, do we tell em? Hell no she says. Well, I guess we can't fuck anymore, I say. Hell no she says, and fucks me right there. That was the day this picture was taken, although we'd taken pictures before.

"So we kept on like nothing was different, although we were more discreet now. And then dad says, Belinda and her mother are going to move into the house after the wedding. Well Christ, I didn't know what to do or think then. So after the wedding, they move into the house. And every night, what do you think is happening? That's right, Belinda is coming down to my room and fucking me. She even breaks it off with that other fellow and starts saying she's in love with me. And the thing is, I'm starting to feel the same way; I really like her. So what do I do now, I'm thinking, and my real sister, Shannon, she's fifteen, and no fool, she figures out what's going on and tells me I'm to either fess up to dad or knock it off entirely. But I can't do either; I really like Belinda, maybe I'm in love with her, but can you imagine what my father and her mother would say, sure, it's not real incest, we're not biologically related, but legally and socially, it's an awkward situation. So, that's partly why I'm on this trip.

"You see, I'd been in Japan a year, teachin English, and when I came home I moved back in with my father, on a temporary basis, until I found a good job in Sydney and could get an apartment. Well, I'd been working, and saved up money and was about to get an apartment when my father and Belinda's mother get married and Belinda and I start really getting serious. I just didn't know what to do about the situation, and so I says to myself, fuck getting an apartment and fuck this job, I've got to go walkabout for a time and straighten all this out in my head. So I get Max one day and I says come along Max, we're goin on walkabout. And I told Belinda goodbye and that when I came back I'd have everything figured out. So here we are. And there she is. Isn't she beautiful?"

She was.

"Goddamn man, what are you gonna do?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Ramzan whistled. "I have no advice for you in such a situation as this my friend."

Usef shook his head in amazement and asked, "So who is the other girl?"

"That's Karen. Max fucked her on my bed and then takes a photo of her with my camera. Breaks into my own house while no one's home, the day before we leave. And lucky for him Shannon didn't catch him. Karen's part of Max's harem."

"Harem?" I asked.

"Max's got a harem of seven girls that he fucks, but he swears that he's giving them all up for this one girl when we get home."

"And who's she?"

"My little sister Shannon."

"Shitfire."

"You are letting him fuck your little sister?" asked Ramzan.

"Not yet. He has to give up the harem. I don't believe he can."

"Viv doesn't take me seriously, but I'm in love with Shannon and she's in love with me."

"Have you messed around?" I asked.

"We've kissed each other, that's all. She told Viv and we got into a fist-fight over it. I tried to explain to the bloke that I really liked her while he's pounding away on my head, so he says if I really like her, I've got to prove it by giving up the harem. So, I say, I've got to consider this, and then, a week later he tells me we're goin on walkabout. I had to give Karen a good-bye shag on Viv's bed. She was my favorite. But while we've been wandering, I've made up my mind, I'm in love with Shannon. So no more harem for me when I get home."

Ramzan whistled.

"I think we should smoke some hash," I said.

When I woke on the floor beside the bed in the morning, Pinky stood three feet away at the opposite end of an enormous peacock feather with which he was tickling my face. I sneezed.

"Time to wake up Mr. Marshall."

We ate mutton head cheese for breakfast washed down with chai and then paid Ramzan for all the beer we had consumed. I owed eighty-seven US dollars. The Australians each owed more. We settled up, gathered our things and stuffed them in our bags and went out to the porch. A shikara waited at the floating dock. Usef and Ramzan climbed in. Rafga stuck out his hand.

"Goodbye my friends, I hope you come again one day. And truly, is my mutton head cheese not the best you have ever tasted?"

We all shook hands and assured him it was. Then we each shook hands with Pink.

"Mr. Marshall, I have given up the smoking," he whispered to me.

"Well, I have done some future ladies of Srinigar a service, no doubt."

"You are doing what?"

"Nevermind. Take care of your old man and his crew."

"Of course."

I climbed into the shikara after Viv and Max, and the paddler swung the bow towards shore and dug in with his paddle.

The usual mob of shikara paddlers, trinket salesmen, thieves and cripples inhabited the shore landing. Usef led the way ashore, snarling and pushing men aside. We made our way towards a white landrover parked on the side of the road that followed the shore of Dal Lake. A curly haired man slumped over the steering wheel, asleep or dead. Ramzan banged on the driver door with the flat of his palm. The driver jerked up, looked out the window and grinned when he saw us. He cranked down the window.

"Yes please."

"Are you drunk Hattar?" asked Ramzan.

"No please. The Koran does not encourage drinking."

"And yet sometimes it is that the amber gleam of the bottle may blind the eye of those who seek to follow in the ways of the Prophet, yes?"

"I have heard such tales."

"Hattar, you will be responsible for these men."

"I have not been drinking Ramzan, I was only asleep."

"You are ready to go?"

"Yes, I have been waiting. I am to be in Jammu by six o'clock."

Usef was throwing our bags into the back of the landrover. Ramzan turned to us.

"This is Hattar, he will take you all the way to Jammu and drop you at the bus plaza where you can buy a ticket. You have all of your things? OK. Now I know you have a little hash left; you may want to smoke it now because there will be army checkpoints along the way and you must go through the Jawahar Tunnel and they will search you there and search the vehicle for bombs so get rid of it before then. Everything OK? You are ready? Are you enjoying the Kashmir?"

"You bet your ass."

"I am betting it."

We all shook hands. Usef smiled sadly. "I am sorry you did not get to look at my gun, Mr. Marshall."

"That's alright. I hope you can get another."

"Yes, I will do so."

"OK gentlemen, you tell your friends in Australia and America, they come to Kashmir, the Hollywood is the place to stay. Yes? Yes? OK, be careful on the road and goodbye my friends."

"Goodbye gentlemen," said Usef. They turned and disappeared into the crowd.

"Good morning gentlemen," said Hattar, "do not let Ramzan worry you, today I am as sober as the Prophet. Are you ready to hit the road? OK, we are hitting."

◆◆◆Final Chapter◆◆◆

The morning sun emerged from behind the stone hills as the jeep wound its way up and through a saddle in a rocky ridge and then descended, groaning down into a forest of sal. In the still, dark depths of the woods we stopped at a heap of rubble half swallowed in vines. Saleem jumped out of the jeep, his curly mop of hair flopping about, and approached the rubble. He knelt and made motions across his breast like a Catholic crossing himself. I leaned back in my seat, smoking, watching Saleem and taking a strange sense of pleasure in the comfort that Saleem derived from his communication with whatever god still resided among these fallen pillars and creeping vines.



I had met him the day before. He was nineteen years old, a driver for Tiger Tours, the company in town that owned the six jeeps which plied the park in search of tigers and other fauna. The white man grapevine in a rural area like Tala, which saw few foreign visitors despite its proximity to Bandhavgar, worked lightning quick. Saleem had intercepted me before I even made it to the dhaba for a beer. After half an hour with him, I agreed to let him be my driver and guide for the duration of my stay.

We'd gone out that afternoon in his jeep. A young couple from Calcutta, with their squawling child, rode in the back. Whenever we spotted a peacock, or a group of spotted Chital deer standing in high grass, sometimes only their antlers visible, my fellow passengers would loudly express their delight, which invariably sent the creatures into flight, often before they could be captured on film.

Before dark, Saleem stationed us alongside a large meadow where four of the other jeeps were parked. A large male tiger had been seen here by one

of the jeeps the afternoon before. The jeeps were full of tourists, all Indians, most with children and everyone talked, not in whispers but in normal, even loud voices, chattering away and smoking and laughing as if they were all at a picnic and not in one of the few islands of wilderness left on the entire subcontinent, waiting for one of the few remaining tigers to show himself.

I was reminded of Yellowstone National Park. Years ago I had driven through it on my way further west and encountered a traffic jam. A mass of people were gathered on the side of the road, jostling, talking, even shouting, cars were pulling in and out, backing up, spinning out in the grass on the side of the road. I stopped and rolled down my window and asked a red-faced man, who was excitedly stuffing a roll of film into his camera as he stood in the middle of the road, what was going on.

"A bear, there's a black bear over there on the side of that hill, or there was anyway," he looked down at his feet, "I don't want to get off this pavement though, my shoes, my shoes won't do well in that muck," he smiled and then pointed out a bare spot on the road's shoulder where I might could wedge my car. I thanked him and drove off.

After dark(everyone had to be outside the boundaries of Bandhavgarh by nightfall) Saleem dropped the young Calcutta family off at the Tiger Lodge, where they were also staying, and then he and I adjourned to the dhaba for a beer. Saleem was acutely aware of my disappointment.

"Mr. Marshall is not happy."

"I just want to see a tiger."

"You will see one. Bandhavgarh is full of tiger. Every day it is possible to see one. I can guarantee that you will see a tiger."

"That's fine. But not like today you know? It's too much like a zoo. You know a zoo?" He nodded. "I don't want to see one like that, lots of people, everyone talking, it makes it seem like you're in a movie theatre full of people, just waiting for a tiger to appear on the goddamn screen. I don't just want to see a tiger, I want to see something more. I want to see it moving through the trees and I don't want to hear any people talking, only birds and monkeys. I want to feel like I'm in India, not a movie theatre and that it's 1899 and not 1999. I know that's a lot to ask but it's all I came here for. Just five minutes of it would be enough."

Saleem pulled out some rupees to pay for his next beer, but I stopped him and pulled out my own fistful of soiled notes and laid them on the bar and nodded at the barkeep.

"Saleem, I'm willing to pay for this, for what I'm talking about. For a real experience. For no more passengers besides me. And I don't mind see-

ing fewer tigers if the tigers we see are away from people, deeper in the woods. It's not just about seeing a tiger and checking it off a list."

The barkeep placed two Golden Eagles before us, and Saleem took a long pull from his, the amber bubbles sliding toward the bottom of the upturned bottle. The 32 ounce beer was more than half empty when he put it down.

"I know what you want, and I will do the best I can to get it for you." He closed his hand over the pile of rupees I'd left on the bar. "With enough rupees, Mr. Marshall, anything is possible, even turning back the hands of time." He suddenly climbed over the bar and stuck a finger into the glassless face of a large clock that perched among the bottles on a shelf and turned the minutehand back. The barkeep turned around. "Saleem, stop that!" I smiled.



When Saleem finished praying, he climbed back into the jeep, and we drove on, across a ford in a shallow rocky stream and on through the forest of sal. He'd told me about the small temple the night before, really a single room built around an alter devoted to a forest god so old Saleem's grandfather hadn't even known its name. But his grandfather had once taken him there as a boy to pray; even then the one room temple was only a vine shrouded mound, and Saleem had told me how the tiger must have watched them the entire time and did not move until they were leaving and Saleem's grandfather had picked him up and placed him on the back of the bullock they'd ridden into the forest. The tiger was old and gaunt and he'd hissed rather than roared and then leaped down from the rubble and disappeared like a panther in the dappled shadows of the forest floor. Saleem was terrified and thrilled and he'd never forgotten it.

The tigers often used the rubble of the temple as a temporary lair, and Saleem occasionally drove a client deep into the forest to see if one was about, and if not, it was worth the drive anyway to say a prayer to an old forest god who would surely be pleased to see himself remembered.

The morning sun had filled the forest with orange light and the dirt track meandered through the vine wrapped trunks and then dipped down to cross the stream again, and Saleem suddenly stopped the jeep.

In the middle of the stream crossing, a sambar stag stood in the rushing water that reached its knees, his head down and drinking. When he became aware of the jeep he flung his head up, eyes wild, the water sluicing off his mahogany antlers and dripping from his black nose. He sloshed up out of the stream and up the bank and away.

For half an hour we continued through the forest and it gradually thinned out until the trail was taking us along the edge of a meadow of knee high grass. Saleem parked the jeep along the edge of the meadow under the shade of some trees and cut the engine. We sat silently as the morning sun climbed and the air grew warmer. My eyelids grew heavy. I fought it as long as I could and then I dozed off.

I woke with a jerk. I was sweating. I had been having a nightmare. Its subject matter had already receded just beyond the grip of my memory but was near enough still to make me shudder in trying to recollect it. I looked at Saleem. he was asleep, mouth agape. I looked at my watch. Only half an hour had passed. Then I looked out across the meadow and saw a chital floating through the yellow grass, its rack always visible but the rest of it disappearing in the grass and then reappearing as it bounded along at full speed and then another behind and then another, a dozen, moving in a wave across the meadow, and then I saw him.

He reared up out of the yellow sea of grass across which the chital moved like boats blown by a fierce wind, his massive head turning this way and that, marking their flight of path as he stood on his hind legs like a bear, taller than any man, and then suddenly he dropped back down and was gone, the stark orange and black hide vanishing into the grass.

And then I saw the top of his head and back as he moved, not chasing the deer but simply following them, like a dog herding sheep. Twice more he reared up to see over the grass and the last time he did so his honey colored eyes fell upon the jeep and instantly he vanished. I scanned the meadow but could no longer see him. The deer had all made it into the forest and I could hear their sharp alarm cries echoing back and forth in the trees. I turned to Saleem to wake him and as I did I saw the tiger not ten yards behind us, standing in the trail the jeep had left in the tall grass.

Some old taste rose out of my throat to touch the back of my tongue, and I suddenly saw everything more clearly, the sun on the tiger's gaudy hide, a swollen tick hanging from his neck like a loose button, and I felt the sunlight on my skin like warm water, heard birds deep in the forest I hadn't heard before. I was afraid. But as the tiger's yellow eyes continued to stare I began to feel almost ashamed, rather than afraid, as if I found myself at the bedside of a dying man not because I was interested in the man but because I was interested in death and he knew it. The tiger's eyes were impersonal and held nothing, gave back nothing save the dazzling sunlight and he looked not at me but at the fragile machinery of which I was composed. I felt his gaze rove quickly over the organs and meat of me, follow the path of my blood around one time and then his eyes were off me and onto the trees, and

David Musgrove

in a second he followed his gaze and was gone. I heard him groan once, a sad rumbling oooooah far back in the trees and in answer a langur monkey gave a fearful squawl and then everything was silent and the sun beat down hotter than before. I nudged Saleem awake.

Katharine B. Ferguson

To Mother from a Daughter Leaving Home

I hated you
for taking the training wheels
from my pink and white bike.
I was already too old
(eight can be ancient)
to not be versed in the exact balance
of wheels on pavement
or the way my body should know
just how far to lean in
during the smooth swoop of a curve
like some graceful hawk
circling down to perch
and other children always laughing
sun-speckled
and pumping through tree-lined streets
pungent with summer
while I fell in the crusty slip of loose gravel
until, disgusted, you left me to it
which was better anyhow.
Later, bumping through the springy
downhill pastures of my backyard,
I would teach myself
the secret ways of bicycles
and limbs sprawling and sprawling
in wet grass.
You weren't even there
when, finally, I pushed myself
free.

Peter Huggins

Bella Figura

I sit on the bride's side, the left,
At the Bellhaven Methodist Church.
Dressed in navy poplin, I watch
My girl friend, a bridesmaid, walk down

The aisle and wink as she passes,
Cool as ice mint in her pale blue dress
This hot cloudless June evening.
The groom waits beside his bodyguard.

Black suit, black shirt, white tie,
With his hands in his pockets and a bulge
Under the left shoulder of his jacket,
The sinister obverse of desire.

After the wedding I drive my girl friend
To the reception at the Buena Vista Club,
Lake Pontchartrain darkening around us.
I kiss the bride, smiling, perfectly

Made-up, smelling of gardenias,
Shake hands with the groom, dark, intense,
Local, and pass the bodyguard, a hood
I remember from high school.

White orchids flap like moths
On the wrists of women, on glasses of champagne,
In the ceiling and the polished floor.
The bride and groom leave. We eat

Lemon ice as the bodyguard,
Relieved of duty, relaxes, dances:
His black patent leather shoes barely
Touch the floor like feeding skimmers.

Perfect, smooth, he makes a beautiful sight.

Christopher White

The Falang (The Man from the West)

The Falang coasted into Noke's village on his giant blue bicycle, weaving slowly, peering into yards and houses. A Saturday morning, Noke was still in her nightclothes, hanging the laundry out to dry while Yai Pui, her grandmother, swept the dirt yard. The Falang stopped and leaned on their fence, still sitting on his bicycle, more like a movie star than a teacher in his sunglasses, striped t-shirt, and slicked-back, receding hair. Noke crouched and pulled a long, navy skirt, dripping, from the wash basin. She held it up to veil herself, her sheer pink top and shorts, exposed thighs and knees. The Falang smiled but didn't seem to recognize her—and why should he? She wasn't even his student, just one of thirteen hundred at Tong Fa. He'd been teaching English and living at school for a semester already, but Noke had never seen him in the village, and no one in her family had ever really talked to him.

He addressed Yai Pui. "Excuse me, Ma'am," he said in Thai. "Do you know of any houses for rent?"

Yai Pui threw her head back in laughter, turned to Noke and said, "A Falang speaks Thai? Sounds like he bites the words from his nose!"

Noke giggled, and the Falang laughed nervously.

"I speak a little bit," he said, "but you have to talk slowly."

"Don't worry about my grandmother," said Noke.

He turned and smiled at her, relieved. She felt silly hiding behind her skirt, but it was better than the alternative.

"No, don't worry about me," said Yai Pui. "It's your lucky day."

She shuffled across the yard, and, leaning her broom on the fence, took the Falang by the arm.

"My son rents his farmhouse," she said. "You'll like it—it's new."

She winked at Noke and led the Falang to the path through the cracked dirt of the unplanted fields. As Noke watched them—her scrawny little grandmother and the tall, sturdy American, blue bicycle between them—she wished that she was wearing something more presentable or at least had something to change into so she could go along and show him the grounds. Their shapes got smaller and smaller, blurred by waves of heat. Noke wrung out the skirt and pinned it to the line.

After that morning, the Falang was all that Yai Pui could talk about. How he'd clapped his hands when he saw all the trees, the fruit hanging from branches. Like a little boy, she said. She kept telling Noke how lucky they were that he was renting from them, how people would look at them with more respect once he became associated with their family.

The farmhouse rose like an island of green to meet the Bua Loy road. Throughout the year, Noke's Uncle Woot pumped water from the bordering pond for his flock of fighting cocks and the fruit trees—coconut, papaya, mango, banana, and lime. From the center of the yard, a tamarind tree shaded the house, a cement box with sparkling bars over tinted windows. At the insistence of school officials, Uncle Woot had spent an afternoon screwing the welded metal into frames in preparation for his new tenant.

On the evening that the Falang moved in, Noke set a pot of water to boil on the farmhouse stove. Boxes in various stages of unpacking cluttered the kitchen area, and *maw lum* blared from the portable cassette player set up on a bench. Noke laughed at the traditional music and wondered if the teacher could understand the words. As she adjusted the gas flame, she watched him talk with her grandmother on the cement patio. She wished she could hear what they were saying, but by the time she stepped outside, their conversation had lulled. The Falang nodded pleasantly to greet her, and she bowed slightly in return. Yai Pui's dentures clenched in a death's head grin as she squeezed his upper arm.

"You're going to be like my son," she said, tightening her grip. With a smile, he looked across the yard, where Uncle Woot was parking his motorcycle near the gate. They waved to each other.

Hours after a rare downpour, the air smelled of mud and chickens. It was hot season, and the trees had needed the rain. Uncle Woot passed under the low-hanging branches of the tamarind and paused before the patio in a pink checkered sarong, flip-flops, and his red beret. His beard hung nearly to his belly. Noke withheld a laugh and glanced at the Falang. She saw her uncle every day and he still looked funny to her. She wondered what the Falang thought, but his smile told her nothing.

"Aha! Falang ma laow!" Uncle Woot said, commenting on the American's arrival. "Dome gai!" he exclaimed and pointed at a rooster, over by itself near the back corner of the house. He dashed off, flip-flops slapping mud up his calves, his arms poised like pincers.

The Falang laughed heartily, as if he already felt at home. Noke watched his belly jiggle, smiled at the crows' feet by his lapis eyes. As his laughter subsided, she wanted to make a joke, but she wasn't sure that he'd understand her if she did. If only she spoke English, she could keep him laughing.

Across the yard, Uncle Woot's arms grabbed, pinning the bird's wings to its sides. He lifted and shook it triumphantly over his head, then started back towards the house. Noke ducked into the kitchen, poured the hot water into a metal wash basin, and carried it back to the patio just as he returned, the bird squawking in his hands. Since he'd taken Buddhist vows, he couldn't kill animals himself, so Yai Pui took the rooster and held it against her side.

With a grimace and a turn of her head, she twisted the life from its neck and handed Noke the body. It continued to twitch, and the feathers felt both soft and prickly as she sat on the edge of the flower box and began plucking them in the warm water. The men relaxed on a straw mat, cross-legged, and her grandmother poured short glasses of pink *Eleven Tiger* whiskey.

"It's medicine. Makes you strong!" her uncle said, flexing his muscles. The Falang's cheeks dimpled as he laughed, and the setting sun reflected off the bald spot near the back of his head.

Before long the rest of the party arrived—Uncle Woot's wife, Ba Neng, and three village women, mothers of the Falang's students. Noke's mother did not come; she was living with another in a long string of boyfriends a few villages away. Usually Noke accepted her parents' absence as part of life, but in times of festivity the pain of loss returned. She forgot the party and focused on the bird, pulling quills from reluctant skin.

She hardly remembered her father. A respected tailor in Bua Loy, he had died in a bus crash when Noke was three. Unable to find work, her mother had moved back to Yai Pui's house, to the dependent life of a mistress, first for a local rice baron, then for other relatively wealthy men. Noke remembered her as an elegant woman, dressed in purple or red silk, dancing and laughing with her sharply dressed dates, kissing her dolled-up girl. As the years passed there were always new lovers, and no longer rich sophisticates. Her current man drove a motorcycle taxi from bus stops to remote villages. The last time Noke had seen them, in the Bua Loy market, they were eating noodles, an empty pint of Maekhong whiskey on the table. Her mother had looked right at her with no recognition.

Noke was fifteen years old when the Falang came to teach at Tong Fa Wittaya School, one semester before he moved into her uncle's rental house. She had passed through puberty earlier than some of her classmates, and she frequently walked with a self-conscious slouch so boys wouldn't tease her about her breasts. Other times, though, like on the few occasions when she had met the Falang, she stood up straight, wishing for her mother's height, wanting to look as womanly as possible. She'd seen the way men looked at her mother's breasts and knew they could be an asset as well as a burden. As for her round, soft face, Noke didn't like it. Her nose was too flat and wide,

her nostrils too large, and it made her look Lao, like her mother. If she ever got rich, she'd get it fixed, she'd decided. Get it cut sharp and button-like, like a miniature of the Falang's.

When Noke finished plucking the bird, she took it into the kitchen. As she chopped the meat for *dome yam* soup and minced its innards for *larb* salad, she thought of the first time she'd met the Falang.

He liked to wander the school grounds, trying to speak with students, and he had sat down at the table where she was reading comic books with a friend during a free period. It was morning, in cold season, and the wind whipped dust across the playground, blew flowering leaves from the *feung fa* bushes in a rain of purple and red. Noke could feel her breasts pressing against her blouse as she sat up and bowed her head in respect.

"Are you girls cold?" the Falang asked in his choppy Thai.

"Freezing," said her friend, shivering for effect. "Is it cold in America?"

With a chuckle, he said, "At my home it's so cold that horse pussies fall from the sky!"

The girls howled and blushed. Noke looked through tears of giddiness at the confused expression on his face.

"*Hemaht doke*," her friend corrected. *Snow falls*. "Not *Hee maah doke*."

They couldn't stop laughing. Horse pussies fall! The Falang was laughing too, but he reddened and mumbled something about having to prepare lessons. Noke watched him push himself up from the table and walk slowly across the playground, waving to students and swinging his bag, trying his best to appear nonchalant. When she caught her breath she looked at her friends and wished that they hadn't laughed, that they'd tried to be more understanding. He must be lonely, all by himself in the countryside.

As she cooked dinner, she still knew very little about him. Only that he spoke funny Thai, that he was thirty-two years old, from America (therefore, rich), and single. All the village women talked about him, even the older ones.

"They like young girls, Falangs do," Yai Pui had said. She said she remembered from Vietnam, when there were soldiers everywhere. "Short girls with big breasts and dark skin. Like Noke."

By the time Noke had ladled the food into serving dishes, the sun had set. Gnats and green fleas swarmed beneath the fluorescent bulb on the patio, so the party moved inside to mats spread over the living room floor, away from the light. Noke sat between her grandmother and the Falang and served each guest a plate of rice. The dishes were arranged in the center of the mats, and everyone took turns reaching over, taking a spoonful at a time. Steam rose from the food, scents of chicken broth and lemon grass, corian-

der and lime leaves. The sounds of spoons scraping against metal plates kept time with the conversation. The Falang ate with avid concentration, and the village women chuckled approvingly to each other, commenting that he could eat spicy food better than some Thai people. Yai Pui turned and asked if he liked the food. "Ah-roy, ru-plau?"

"Ah-roy, ching," he said, rubbing his belly. "I wish I could have Noke cook for me every night."

"You should come to our house for dinner," said Yai Pui. "Whenever you're free. Noke will be happy to fix you anything you like."

Noke looked down at the half-finished plates of food and replenished his rice, letting her hair conceal her smile.

After dinner, after the women had washed the dishes and piled them up to dry, Uncle Woot shouted for dancing. He waddled over to the tape player and put on Siliporn.

"This song is Lao," said Yai Pui. "The woman wears a black ribbon in her hair to show the world that her love has gone bad."

The Falang nodded, but Noke couldn't be sure whether he had understood or not. They danced a circle around the living room, the village women with each other, Woot with his wife, the Falang with Noke and Yai Pui. Nobody touched, but they swirled their arms and twisted their wrists, mirroring their partners' movements, retractions and extensions of arms, hands flicking from hips. When Noke and the Falang danced, her skin tingled, and the tiny hairs on her arms stood up. His white face seemed suspended above hers, like the moon.

Later that night, when she lay in bed, Noke remembered that radiance and wrapped her arms tightly around her breasts. She smiled in the darkness.



Over the following months, the Falang became like one of the family. He hired Noke to do his laundry and came over most nights for dinner. Sometimes he'd linger in the evenings to watch TV upstairs or help Noke with her homework. Yai Pui was giddy around him and clung to his elbow; she told everyone who stopped by that she'd adopted him, and she talked to Noke about marriage.

At first Noke thought the idea was crazy—why would an American teacher more than twice her age want to marry her, a poor village girl? But Yai Pui told her that Falangs liked Thai women, and really it wasn't uncommon for there to be a difference in age.

Sometimes in the afternoons Noke would stop by his house on her way

to fill water jugs for the dishes and wash. Usually he sat in a canvas sling chair, reading or writing letters home. She liked to tease him that he wrote to his girlfriend, but he had denied it so many times that she guessed he must be telling the truth. She liked the way he talked, even if his pronunciation was usually funny—his subdued voice, the corners of his mouth always verging on smiling. His laughter seemed reserved, not the brash animal guffaws of her uncle or the high-pitched whinnies of her classmates. There was a calmness about him that reminded her of the monks at the temple, and he always seemed eager to listen to her stories about school, especially gossip about the other teachers. She couldn't believe he hadn't heard about some of their love affairs, but he said they never told him anything. It excited her to think that she might be his most intimate Thai friend, and she began bragging about their relationship to the girls at school and around the village.

Yai Pui encouraged Noke's visits to the farmhouse, advising her to make every excuse to spend time alone with the Falang. He never brought girls home, and word had it that he'd never gone to the brothels with the male teachers or villagers, so it would only be a matter of time before he gave in to temptation.

"Maybe he's a *toot*," Noke argued.

Yai Pui shook her head no and said, "He showed me pictures of himself with old girlfriends. Pretty girls with long brown hair. The look of love was in his eyes, that same look that he gets when he eats your cooking."

The Falang must like her, her grandmother would insist, otherwise he'd return to his former habit of eating at school.

So confident was Yai Pui that when they visited the village shops or went to market in Bua Loy, she'd tell the merchants and cooks that the Falang was going to marry her granddaughter. If the people laughed, she'd explain how he came for dinner every night and how he'd sit upstairs and watch TV, sometimes alone with Noke. If that didn't convince them, she'd tell how Noke visited him in the afternoons. Noke could only nod when they looked at her with questioning eyes. Though misleading, her grandmother spoke the truth.

More and more, dinnertime conversations became opportunities for joking about marriage. Yai Pui would tell the Falang that he needed to bring Noke home with him or he'd waste away. All of her good cooking was making him look healthy. Sometimes Noke would chime in with her own flirtations, claiming that he'd promised to take her skiing or sailing, ideas she'd gleaned from his photo albums.

"Your parents want to meet me," she'd say. "Remember?"

She knew she quoted him out of context, but he did refer to Noke and

Yai Pui as his Thai family, and he had said he would like to introduce them to his parents when they came to visit.

He laughed at their joking and countered with lines of his own like, "Noke would freeze in America. I'd have to send her back in a refrigerator," or "Americans are black-hearted. They don't have time for girls who can't speak clear English." He smiled as he spoke, but his eyes always looked hard, and nobody found him funny.

Sometime late in the school term, the Falang stopped coming for dinner as often, and he never stayed afterward anymore. He would stop by in the evenings with some excuse, usually his vast amounts of lesson planning, but Noke guessed it was the joking that kept him away. Maybe some of the market gossip had filtered back to him, she wasn't sure. She wished they could talk about it, that he really was direct the way Americans were supposed to be, but he was too Thai. His face a smiling mask, she could never tell how he felt or what he really meant.

Now that he was drifting away, Yai Pui hit upon a new, desperate plan.

"You have to seduce him," she said. "He can't say no if you're pregnant."

What did her grandmother expect? That Noke would just waltz into his house and take her clothes off? It sounded simple enough, and part of her wanted nothing less, but she had never slept with anyone before. She dreamed of losing her virginity to the Falang, his big, gentle hands, free of callouses, but even if she could figure out what to do, it was hard to get any time alone with him now that he claimed to be so busy. Then there was her reputation to consider. People were already talking, playfully for the most part, but she knew it would get nasty if they really thought she was a loose girl.



On Noke's sixteenth birthday, the Falang passed by in the afternoon to drop off his laundry and give her a present—a key chain from his home state of Vermont. It was heavy and pretty, an enameled scene of cows grazing under mountains, next to a red barn. After she smiled and thanked him, he apologized that he'd have to miss her party—he had to write his final exams. As he turned to go, Noke gave him a hard look, hoping he felt guilty.

But secretly she was relieved. Uncle Woot's daughter, Joi, was home for a few days, and Noke was afraid he might like her. Yai Pui, too, was worried. "She's dangerous, that one. Don't let her get too close to him."

Joi was a sexy twenty-five and sang in a karaoke bar in Pattaya. She

never talked about her job much, but she said it was better than field or factory work. At least she could choose her dates. She got paid for singing too, so there wasn't as much pressure to provide "special entertainment." It was her fate, she'd say, and it could be a lot worse.

After dinner, Joi took Noke out to the *sala*, across the rice fields where the bus stopped near the Falang's house, and introduced her to Maekhong Whiskey. They drank the liquor with Coke, arm in arm in the cool, humid night. Through the clouds, a half moon tried to show itself, and the air smelled of rain. In the heart of the monsoon, it had poured for two weeks.

Noke liked the looseness of the whiskey. She hugged herself tightly and danced around, singing a pop song into the night. Joi giggled and lit a smoke. "What if we went to see that Falang?"

Noke laughed so hard she had to sit down on the floor, wiping tears from her eyes, but when she looked up to her cousin's face, illuminated by the cigarette's cherry, her joviality turned to fear. Visit the Falang at night? Yai Pui would be proud, but Noke couldn't do that. What if other people found out? Everyone would call her a whore.

"Come on," Joi said. "He likes to drink, right?"

Noke looked at the bottle, then back to her cousin, trying to read her shiny black eyes. She couldn't think of anything to say, her thoughts jumbling together. Yai Pui was right. Joi knew how to act around men and was so sexy, how could the Falang not want her? On the slim chance that he didn't, he'd be angry at Noke for disturbing him. She held her glass out for a refill.

"I won't touch him," Joi said, pouring her another drink. "I've been with lots of Falangs in Pattaya. This is your chance, Noke. I'll teach you what to do on the way there."

The farmhouse shed the only light on the road, a pale yellow bleeding into the darkness. They closed the gate behind them and passed under the tamarind, leaning against each other to walk straight, stifling drunken and nervous giggles. The Falang was writing when they approached, his desk strewn with stencil papers for the duplicating machine, and he drew pictures with a metal-tipped pen next to typed passages. It was unlike any test Noke had ever taken. She laughed and wobbled against her cousin, but the Falang didn't look up. Joi knocked and opened the door.

The teacher snapped up from his work, his pen clattering to the cement. Noke swayed into Joi, laughing at his surprise, but he recovered himself without even blushing. He leaned against the desk and silenced them with a smile that looked more teacherly than cheerful. After his introduction to Joi, he asked Noke what they wanted.

"I told her how you like to dance," she said.

With a smile, Joi walked past him, to the kitchen area.

He looked at Noke and said, "I have to finish these exams."

Joi returned with a full glass of whiskey. She placed it on his desk. He glanced at the drink but didn't reach for it. He gave a sigh.

"You can put on some *maw lum*, but I have a lot of work left," he said, sitting down.

As he turned back to his test, Noke rummaged through his music collection. She knocked tapes crashing to the floor in her haste, searching for Siliporn's *The Black Ribbon*, the first song she'd danced to with him. Joi laughed at her eagerness.

"Sing it yourself, Noke," she said. "It'll be quicker."

Noke gave her a look. Finally she produced the tape and clicked it into the machine. With a nudge, Joi murmured, "Remember what I told you."

Noke danced with Joi and called for the Falang to join them, but he repeated his work excuse. He did take a gulp of whiskey, though. Joi nodded and whispered that this was a good sign.

"Now," she said.

With a deep breath, Noke walked behind him and laid her hands on his shoulders. He felt warm, and she couldn't believe she was actually touching him. Her head spun, a surge of excitement. He sipped his drink, then turned and faced her.

"What?" he said.

She looked down at the wispy hairs of his balding head and squeezed her fingers around his shoulder and neck muscles. "Can't I just give you a massage?"

From across the room, Joi met her eyes and winked encouragement.

The Falang shrugged, and Noke dug into his flesh. Soon his head lolled. He sighed. She leaned closer, her breasts rubbing against his shoulders as she massaged his arms. Her entire body seemed to quiver, and she felt as though her consciousness floated above her, looking down. He was going limp. What had Joi said to do next? She bent down and covered his ear with her mouth.

With a jerk of his head, he pushed away from the desk, the chair's back digging into her belly. He whirled around and barked, "What are you doing! You're just a little girl!"

Her mind felt clogged as she stood dumb before him, her jaw loose. Near his fly, his pants bulged, and she stared as he hastily arranged himself. His eyes seemed to penetrate her, and she felt transparent and small, like a chunk of ice. He turned without speaking and looked at the door.

Joi rose from the couch and blew smoke in his direction.

"What's the matter with you, Baby," she said in English, opening the door.

Noke fled past her into the night and kept running until she reached the *sala*, where she collapsed, sobbing, gulping air. Knees hugged to chest, she told the black rustling fields how the Falang hated her, and that she never should've gone there, never should've gotten drunk. Everything would be different now. She could hear her cousin's footsteps on the wood. Joi held her and buried her nose in her hair, shushing her.

"You can always come to Pattaya with me," she said. "There's any kind of Falang you want down there-American, German, whatever. A lot cuter than this one, too."

Noke continued weeping, and Joi wiped her cheeks with her thumb.

"You have a nice voice, Noke. I could get you a job."



Teachers came to Noke's house the first week of October vacation. She was hanging laundry in the side yard when Ajaan Malee, the English department chair, and Poochuey Soang, the director of discipline, parked the silver pick-up in the driveway and stepped out in school uniforms. Yai Pui sat twisting thread from silkworm cocoons in the open living room. She looked up when Poochuey Soang's gruff voice greeted her.

"Yai Pui, we must talk about your granddaughter."

Noke froze, and for a moment thought about running, but she came inside when her grandmother called, as if her voice had a magnetic pull. With a sinking feeling in her belly, Noke dried her hands on her shorts. The Falang must have told of her advance. She bowed as she passed the teachers, then sat down next to Yai Pui. She had been in trouble before, but no one had ever come to the house. Her pulse slammed her temples and she moved closer to her grandmother.

The teachers ignored her and addressed Yai Pui.

"Your granddaughter has been telling stories about the Falang," said Poochuey Soang. "Telling lies about his love for her. Students report that she's trying to seduce him, force him to marry her."

Yai Pui snorted, her eyes narrowing. "That's ridiculous."

"You will wait to speak!" Ajaan Malee snarled. She took a step forward. "We know your part in this."

"The Falang is our teacher, and he remains in our care, even if he rents your son's house," said Poochuey Song. "We must protect him. This behav-

ior of the girl cooking for him, doing his laundry, *visiting him at home*, cannot continue.”

Noke opened her mouth to protest, but Yai Pui grabbed her arm. “The Falang is like my son. He eats with us because he lives alone in the farmhouse. He needs a family.”

Ajaan Malee crossed the dirt courtyard, and Noke drew back behind her grandmother, bracing for a blow. She remembered her last whipping, with a bamboo switch, for cheating on a test. Ajaan Malee hissed, “Don’t bother lying about your intentions, Mother-of-the-Snake-Head-Fish!”

Yai Pui leapt to her feet, crossed the floor to the kitchen area, and snatched a cleaver from the wash pan.

The teacher continued, “Everywhere we hear stories—‘Yai Pui says the Falang is sleeping with her granddaughter.’ ‘The girl Noke says the Falang loves her’—but listen: there is no way our Falang will marry a *village* girl!”

Weapon raised before her, Yai Pui charged the teachers, shouting at them to leave, words she normally hurled at chickens and pigs. “Bai hu! Bai lote!”

Villagers passing on the street stopped to watch, and the teachers retreated to the truck. Noke stepped back, leaving her grandmother shaking her cleaver in the air. She breathed a sigh of relief. They hadn’t mentioned the kiss at least, so maybe the Falang hadn’t told anyone. No, they surely would’ve beaten her for that.

Poochuey Soang laughed, and the confrontation was over. Yai Pui had lost her temper. The director of discipline opened his truck door and fired a parting shot. “I will expel the girl Noke if we hear one more rumor about her and the Falang.”

Later on, Yai Pui told Noke that she would never forget the smug grin on Ajaan Malee’s face. “No one in my family will study at that school as long as she teaches there.” She spat in the dirt.



On the first day of the new semester, Noke rose an hour earlier than normal to cook breakfast for her family in the dark. It was six-thirty when she trudged across the rice fields and caught the public bus at the *sala*. Her new school was twenty kilometers east of the village, in Bua Loy, a half-hour ride if the bus driver didn’t stop for breakfast or gas. Noke had made the trip many times to go to the market, the movies, and to buy school supplies. The sky was just beginning to brighten, a hazy gray, as she passed Tong Fa school. She missed her friends already and wondered if the Falang would teach their classes.

She hadn't seen him in over a month, though she knew he had returned from his beach vacation nearly a week before. She had never been to the ocean and wished that things were different, that he'd taken her with him. She dreamed about waking to the sounds of waves crashing on the beach, his breath on her shoulder, the sun rising over the hotel balcony. Out the bus window, the fields of rice, tall and green from monsoon rains, were almost ripe, with harvest only a month away. Noke wondered if the Falang was still angry with her. Did he know about the teachers' visit or that she had transferred to a new school? Would he ever eat dinner with her again? Yai Pui was certain he'd be back—he was just getting ready for the new semester, she said. But she didn't know what Noke had done.

At the edge of Bua Loy, the rice fields ended abruptly. The bus passed general stores, an ice cream parlor, and the town market where Yai Pui went to sell her silk and Woot sold their rice. This morning, when her grandmother had given her money for the week's groceries, she had told Noke to buy some catfish there, the Falang's favorite. As Noke went over the week's shopping list in her head—shrimp paste, fish sauce, chiles, pork, vegetables—the bus turned into the station, an open cement room with wooden benches and exhaust-blackened walls. She stepped down to the pavement. In red paint above the ticket window, city names were written in Thai and English—Korat, Bangkok, Pattaya, Rayong. Vendors lined the parking lot, selling grilled chicken and sticky rice, sausages and noodle soup.

Noke walked down the sidewalk, past a motorcycle repair shop and an appliance store. She recognized the wall around the school, blackened cinder block with broken glass fixed into the upper edge. Inside, the school looked similar to Tong Fa, but more run down. There were more buildings, but even from a distance, Noke could tell they were in disrepair. The gray morning light washed their chipping blue surfaces. The playground looked like a construction site rather than soccer fields, more mud than grass, and all of the trees had been recently pruned, hacked off right where the limbs branched from the trunks, leafless and black, man-high stumps.

Since her bus had gotten in early, she walked around back to the canteen and ordered a small bag of phad Thai noodles. Students pushed and yelled, kicked at the mongrels that begged for scraps. Others sat in groups of three and four at tables, finishing their homework. Everyone had at least one friend. They made Noke miss her group, her old morning rituals of copying homework, gossiping about boys, and trading comic books or pop tapes.

The noodles tasted dry and flavorless, barely salty, and if there was any pork in them, she couldn't find it. She wished she could go back in time to

before the Falang came to school. As angry as she was with the teachers and as humiliated as she was by how she'd ruined their relationship, she knew that she was to blame. She *had* bragged about him, maybe even believed it when she told her friends that he loved her. Yai Pui had always said that she could get anything if she wanted it enough. She had wanted to believe her grandmother's logic—that if they could get the Falang to love her cooking, they could get him to love her. But he didn't love her at all, and that one drunken kiss had driven him away forever. Noke worried that her heart would never mend as she listened to the music over the school loudspeakers. "We don't want to love those who don't love us...." the new hit by Beau. She ached for someone to care for her, to hold her fingers and tell her how beautiful she looked. Someone with enough money to support her so she wouldn't have to bend over and plant rice, chase chickens, turn thread from silkworm cocoons in her old age. In the Falang's easy smile and American wealth, Noke had read the potential for that romantic future, and as she looked around the school canteen at boys running in packs, she doubted that she could ever settle for one of her own people.

It seemed like the morning would never end. Without friends to joke with and copy from, Noke felt lost. Math seemed especially opaque, and she still couldn't twist her tongue around English sounds. The girls all sat in cliques and always seemed to be giggling at her. She guessed it was just that she was new and alone, but she was afraid that someone would recognize her from a party or volleyball game, that someone would know why she had transferred to Bua Loy Pittayakhom School. She kept her head low, her hair veiling her face. Despite her efforts to hide, a lanky boy with slicked hair and sharp features stared at her constantly. The first few times she had glared at him, but he hadn't turned away. By the third class, Noke had gotten used to the feeling of being watched and no longer looked back at him. From the way he remained aloof as his friends wrestled and joked, she thought he must be the leader of the cool boys' clique. He made her skin creep.

At lunchtime, Noke used the bathroom, pausing only briefly to tuck in her blouse and fix her hair before the grimy mirror. Two seniors smoked out the window, smirking at her. She washed her hands quickly, avoiding their eyes.

"You like to smoke," one of them said. Noke faced them, and they exhaled in her direction. The taller one laughed.

"No thanks." Noke turned and walked towards the door.

"That wasn't a question," followed the voice. "The girl Noke likes to smoke the Falang."

Laughter echoed through the cement room. Noke ran until she reached the canteen. She could feel the blood in her neck, sweat on her forehead. She bought a plate of rice and garlic pork, sat down behind the building and forced herself to concentrate on eating. For a minute she questioned whether she'd actually seen the girls, but the sound of laughter rang too clearly in her ears. Her hands shook the way her mother's had after she'd been drinking, and she could hardly maneuver the spoon from plate to mouth.

Just as she was settling down, the cool boy clique turned the corner. They surrounded her before she could stand up, eight of them. The leader sat down across from her.

"My cousin goes to Tong Fa," he said.

Noke stared at his black eyes, saw that the whites were bloodshot. They hadn't been, during class. She could smell smoke and chemicals—glue?—on his breath.

"What class is he in?" She took a bite of pork, trying to bluff.

"I like your milk." Two of his friends held her, and he reached across the table and squeezed her breasts. She struggled and gasped for breath. Blood throbbed in her arms and neck, and all she could think about was breathing. Air in, air out.

"Is it true what they say about Falangs?"

All she had to do was scream and the boys would scatter. Someone would hear her, the teachers at the canteen would come to her aid. Hundreds of people were eating nearby. She told herself to open her mouth, to force sound from her throat, but nothing responded; her jaw was locked.

"They say Falangs have big *kuay*." The boy stood up and unzipped his fly, still smiling. "As big as this?"

Her cry seemed to come from outside her body. The hands released her arms, and space opened up around her, but she screamed until her voice gave out. She opened her eyes and looked down at her blouse. It was still buttoned, and she was still sitting where she'd been, though her plate had been flung to the ground, a mangy dog finishing her food. Nobody had come to her rescue.

From all points in Noke's field of vision, students laughed and pointed. Ravenous teeth and eyes. Only the group of boys moved, walking casually away from her. The leader turned and blew her a kiss. She glanced out the gate and across the street to the row of shops and, eyes downcast, walked straight out the driveway as though in a nightmare, through the sounds of students jeering, "*Fan Falang, rak Falang, see gap Falang!*" Nobody obstructed her path, and she focused on her feet moving along the dirt.

The bus station was virtually deserted when she arrived. An old woman

sat nodding into sleep on a bench, and a mother with three small boys waited near the ticket window. Two of the chicken vendors argued about the upcoming rice harvest. The air smelled of exhaust and cooking meat, and the loudspeakers blared *maw lum*.

Noke took a handful of bills from her pocket, two hundred *baht*, money she was supposed to use for groceries. She pushed eighty through the ticket window and said, "Pattaya. One way."

The agent flashed a creepy smile, his eyes groping her face and chest, and she turned quickly away. As she crossed the room and sat down in the far corner of the station, *The Black Ribbon* warbled from the speakers, and Noke stared at the cement floor. Images of Uncle Woot's beard and Yai Pui's dentures flashed through her mind. Soon they'd be harvesting the rice, working longer days to make up for her absence. For a moment she wanted to cry, but she clenched her jaw and looked up the highway for the bus. Nothing but the empty road and dark rice fields stretching to thunderheads on the horizon. The fields waving in the wind looked like a picture Joi had shown her of the ocean, and she imagined herself in a cafe near the beach, the water keeping time with music as she sang to crowds of Falang men, all with eyes like the teacher's, lapis reflections of the sea.

David Musgrove

Crystal Meth

She was short
with straight black hair.
They told me she had been on everything
at one time or another.
In and out of rehab.
She was pretty
but had a washed-out look,
an empty look.
She wasn't the type of girl
I usually went for,
for anything besides
the fumlings and moanings
of a single night.
But it seemed a logical progression
for me,
a heavy drinker,
suddenly alone
and often enough
caught in a madness
that was far beyond
any tab of paper
or line of powder.
The first night I saw her
they were in the laundry room
of that house
with their short clipped straws.
She had on a short dress
and was hunched over the washer
sniffing up a line
of crystal meth
off the white metal surface
that was covered with a film of dust and detergent.
Like all things, I gave it a try
but nothing ever seemed to affect me
like the warm, old embrace
of whisky.

Drugs were like women,
expensive disappointments
and I guess it's hard for either to compete
with a six dollar pint
of Evan Williams
and mostly now
I don't let them try.
But I usually give things a chance
and I gave her one
or maybe she was trying me out,
I don't know
but after a few weeks
the newness wore off
like it does with most things.
She was staying at my place
every night.
I began to be cruel,
say things
and even refuse that one obsession,
feigning sleep,
too much whiskey,
something.
Eventually she moved on
to one of my friends
and I moved on too
but to what
I'm not exactly sure.

David Musgrove

Old Man Fishing

.....Old, brown, withered man
shaves while the coffee's brewing.
So early in the morning
nighttime ghosts shudder and sigh,
indignant, disturbed.
His hair is grey, but
leaps from his thick, dark scalp
like a tangled tumbling of young animals.
He fries an egg, two slices of bacon,
eats their smoky, animal smell,
their sizzle, their sustenance.
Finished, he leaves the house.
Suspenders hold trousers
high on his gaunt frame.
Old boots, the sour dankness of wool socks,
a crumpled hat,
stained and faded by a thousand outings,
all seem to hold him up, carry him along,
offer protection,
the pajamas and wheelchairs of nursing homes
cannot provide.
 Old cigar box
filled with dirt and worms;
he takes one out,
hurts it with the hook.
Blood, bile, slippery,
wetting his rough, brown fingers.
The worms wriggle with the pain of existence.
He leans against the rail
of an old wooden bridge,
drops a hook and squirt of tobacco
into the murky, moccasin water
sliding slowly by the bridge
as the years
have touched, then slid past
the old man

hunched now over the water,
along with the warped wood,
forgotten iron rails
and the silence that comes after a train passes.
The old man dangles death on a hook,
and waits for the fish. He remembers
other waiting,
things that never came.
He can vaguely recall,
like the bridge can the train,
her face,
but he no longer remembers her name.
He pulls up a bream
slips in it a dirty cloth sack,
then two more, then heads on back.
And the rotted bridge
whose purpose is done,
remains waiting for the train
that no longer runs.

Katharine B. Ferguson

Peaches

When I was seven
my father planted a peach tree
beside the wood of our backyard.
Each sweet smelling spring
brought petals that fell away from
firm green peaches taut with promise.

I thought they would ripen
from some inherent urge
to be like all other storybook peaches
and bloom full and soft,
to be plucked and eaten by day
and lit by fireflies and moonlight by night,
though, somehow, in the fairyland of summer
they always grew sick and died,
fell to rot,
fermented sickly sweet in the humid air
and stifled

like hope, like touch,
like the promise of you,
like wantings that remain hard
and will not ripen.

Katharine B. Ferguson

Eyeglass Shopping

In the eyeglass shop I am trying on frames,
sifting through glossy rows of
cat eyes, soft ovals, or sensible squares.

Each of them seems more like a mask
than something to accentuate--
pompous birds who perch on the bridge
of my nose then unfold their wiry wings.
They are marvels of science
haughty in the presence of these,
my impractical, inept, failing eyes

and concealment is key
so I choose the least obtrusive of them,
brushed silver wire framing
two delicate concaves that aren't yet the lenses
I need to see ordinary things--

the orange on the breakfast table
bright as the sun after rain

or each leaf's meticulous outline in July

or the stars
myriad and piercing as the eyes which are everywhere tonight
turning upward to take in once more
the agelessness of the sky.

David Musgrove

Peer into the Dark

Sometimes on summer nights
at my grandfather's house
we'd sit in rocking chairs
in the back yard.
Fireflies would blink
high among the pine trees
and owls would hoot
down by the creek.
Grandfather would hoot back
and tell stories about owls,
ghosts and black cats.
We would laugh, slap mosquitoes
and peer into the dark.
Now he and I wait
out in the blue hallway
while the nurse feeds my grandmother
who tries to keep singing
between mouthfuls of soft food.
When we go back in,
she keeps on singing
and clutches at the brown blanket
with hands like heron feet.
Her eyes are empty.
My grandfather rubs his eyes
- I never thought I'd see her like this.
There is nothing to say,
nothing I can tell him.
I put my hand on his shoulder.
As we leave,
her singing follows us out into the hall.

When I was very young,
so small and unknowing
I would peer into the dark
past the firefly lights in the pines,
trying to see the owls
in the darkness,
but I could only hear them,
calling, calling.

Contributors

Marlin Barton's collection of stories *The Dry Well*, was published last year by Frederic C. Beil. Geroqe Garrett recently awarded it the Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook Award for a Distinguished First Volume of Short Stories Published in the United States in 2001. Barton teaches in the "Writing Our Stories" project, a program for juvenile offenders. He lives in Montgomery.

William Cobb's sixth novel, *Wings of Morning*, was published last fall. His collection of short stories, *Somewhere in All This Green*, was named the Alabama Library Association's Book of the Year in Fiction in 2000.

Katharine B. Ferguson is an undergraduate English major at Troy State University. She has been published in *Cicada* and *Footprints*. She also placed second in poetry in the Alabama School of Fine Arts Youth Writers Contest.

Peter Huggins teaches in the English Department at Auburn University. His collections of poems are *Hard Facts*, Livingston Press/University of West Alabama, 1998, and *Blue Angels*, River City Publishing, 2001. *In the Company of Owls*, a novel for middle readers, is forthcoming from NewSouth Books.

David Musgrove is the author of *The Bear Hunter*. He received his Bachelor's in English from Troy State University in 1996 and his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Alabama in 1999.

Christopher M. White grew up, seasonally, in two little villages of Vermont and Cape Cod and did a bit of wandering before running off to the rice fields of Thailand with US Peace Corps. After over two years of teaching English there, he returned to the

States for an MFA at the University of Arizona. Now he's back in Thailand working on novels and stories while teaching at a small university in Phuket for the silver that keeps his motorscooter's tank full of high grade petrol and his belly full of fish curry.

READ ALL ABOUT THE ARTS IN ALABAMA

Grant Guidelines, published annually, provides comprehensive information on the programs and services of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. The publication includes funding guidelines and all forms necessary for a grant application.

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The State Arts Council also publishes a weekly email newsletter, *AlabamaArts*, that contains recent arts news, grant lists, and other information about the arts and artists of Alabama. To subscribe, go to <http://www.onelist.com/subscribe/AlabamaArts>

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