

SHADOW OF THE SUN

Brendan Connell

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SHADOW OF THE SUN

Brendan Connell

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CHAPTER ONE

Mother, do not think that I cannot remember, when you were young and a handsome woman? How you pampered me, and showed me the tools to live by.

Your little boy was not always befriended by his classmates; but by you, I was always adored. Those memories will be cherished, wherever the wind takes me, blows me — Be it Asia, or the deserts of Arabia — In all places I will live by your teachings, and let the wind's pressure recall a mother's caress.

You fed me too well; but I will not blame you — For everything I have become. Yes, tinker or tailor, we all must bare the burdens — And oh, how I know you have yours — And desires.

For the old oak is still verdant. And there are some small birds who find comfort on its branches, and squirrels that store nuts in its boughs.

Forgive me if, when the winter comes, I gather up the dead wood for my fuel — I know very well that you would never let your son grow cold or hungry.

CHAPTER TWO

Tom felt the force on his shoulder and opened his eyes and saw Mike Yoko looking down at him through the car window. He had a cup of coffee in his hand and was looking down and Tom was stretched out in the back of the car. "I'll take you wherever you need to go now," Mike Yoko said. "If you need to use the toilet or something you can go inside and do it. My old lady didn't like that I let you crash out here, but if you need to use the toilet go inside and do it. We need to roll, so you just get up."

He got out of the car and was in the fenced in yard, three or four cars dismantled, two of them looking like parts cars. He was led up the wood steps and inside and could tell that a woman lived there and then he saw her, her head slightly turned and her nose hawk-like and eyes like two blackberries set in her face, hostile and without apparent depth.

After he used the toilet he came out, but she was not sitting there any more and Mike Yoko was in the yard with the motor running and a grifa jutting from his pursed lips. They moved through unfamiliar streets, which were very quiet, then past a waste treatment plant that smelled very evil, and the grifa was passed to Tom.

"That tastes like Mexi," he said.

"Yes."

The smoke made him feel less nauseous and he was no longer drunk, just sick. The time he had lived through up until then came back to him, the flotsam and backwash of his stupidity. He did not need to gauge the loss. He could feel it, complete and simple.

I should get him to buy me a fifth, he thought.

"You want to buy a fifth?" he asked.

"Any liquor stores around here?"

"No."

"That's my answer then."

Tom looked out toward the east, toward the direction of the State Penitentiary. He could not see it but could feel it and knew it was there. There was shackled darkness behind the hills and a kind of captivity that gripped him from within, and, even though he could not take hold of it, it went with him and was malignant and evasive with its net.

Wild sunflowers grew along the side of the road, as well as bunches of knotweed and cows came in from the sparsely vegetated flats and ate. The men drove past a sill of extrusive, black rock, which a small creek ran below. Russian olives grew thick around the water and the damp soil was marked and disturbed by hoof prints where the cows had come to drink.

When Tom had begun to sense where he was he directed Mike Yoko off the county road and into the bubbling hills. There were no road signs, and as Tom called out directions the roads became more and more rutted and hostile. They passed no cars and there were no houses, just that untainted bleakness.

"So where the hell is your place?" Mike Yoko asked. "We've been driving all over these goddamn backroads

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and I haven't seen a house yet."

"We'll get there," replied Tom. Thinking, We'll get there soon enough . . . I'll get there without either the money or the smoke, just the hangover.

Vague memories came back to him, but they were without the taste of reality and only perfumed with truth. They were logographs, and in the muddled aftermath could not be distinguished from the dream of the chase and the hunt, the blond hair, the barrel and the fear.

Mike Yoko lit a cigarette and handed the pack to Tom. The windows were rolled down and the smoke from the cigarettes blew outside into the fresh, clean air. He drove at reckless speed, one hand on the steering wheel, one arm draped over the seat, smoke curling from its hand.

"So you're pretty sure that there was no sign of that Mexi when you picked me off the ground last night?" Tom asked.

"No, I did not see anything," Mike Yoko replied, his face grave, eyes looking straight ahead. "The only Mexi I've seen is what we just smoked and that's mine."

"Well, too bad. I guess I might have dropped it somewhere. I was pretty drunk. I wish I had never gone into town yesterday, and had just stayed home. But I had to go get drunk, try to get laid, make some money."

This statement held the sum total of Tom's hopes and ambitions in life, ambitions which, for all their pettiness, drove, propelled him to rash actions, so painfully consequential. Liquor. Sex without love. Money without work.

He dragged at his cigarette and the smoke felt good in his lungs and eased the void of his stomach. It was his first cigarette of the day and tasted as it should. It was not a traitor.

"So you and Zango growing a big crop this year?" asked Mike Yoko, his eyes still staring straight ahead at the contours of the dirt road, apparently indifferent to all else, him seeming to speak out of mere politeness, words jointly meaningless and unnecessary.

"Well it is really our old man's crop. It's his and we help, but he usually shakes us a pretty even cut."

The night before was still with him, a peripheral blur that contained the barely hidden truth.

"Turn right here."

Mike Yoko fired his car up the drive, through the yellow-red hills grown with piñon, cedar and juniper, a cloud of dust rising up behind him.

"That is my yard," Tom said as they came in sight of an old trailer in a clearing carved out of the hillside, a Volkswagen Van parked alongside. It was an old trailer raised on cinder blocks and a ten speed bicycle with flat tires leaned against it as well as several sheets of old corrugated tin. Out front two ragged figures stood, a third sat on a chopping block. Two dogs came out. They were black and lean with muscular bodies. One of them squared its legs and barked.

"Tom," said Zango, as he saw his older brother pull up.

"Who's he with?" asked Art. "That doesn't look like the interior decorator."

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"Hell if I know. Looks like Yoko to me. I guess Tom thought one loser showing up at a time wasn't enough."

The dog continued to bark. Art stepped forward and kicked it in the side saying, "Shut your damn trap Adolph."

Adolph yelped and slunk away. Stormy, the other dog, growled.

"Stormy!" threatened Art.

She went and joined Adolphe in a pawed up area beneath the shade of a piñon tree. They sat down in the New Mexico dust and were quiet.

"Zango," Mike Yoko said, taking the young man by the hand.

Zango let it be taken, his face unflinching, pure dead pan.

"He gave me a ride out here," explained Tom. "I told him to take me all the way because my feet were too damn sore to hoof it, even part distance. I walked hell a far yesterday."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Aubra sat on the chopping block smoking a poorly rolled cigarette and stared at Mike Yoko through her glasses. He could see that she had large, firm breasts and a good figure, but her face was oily and unpleasantly round, curtained by wisps of dirty brown hair. He felt jointly repelled and attracted, and brooded internally over his misogynistic lust.

Art looked at the younger man with undisguised distrust. A half-smile of wary contempt played behind his white whiskers as he surveyed his son's friend, the blond hair, the blue eyes, the even jowl. The outer form was what it was, but, Art imagined, something of the inner man could be seen through the holes in the fence.

"So you have much luck with that pound?" Art asked, turning to his elder son. "It looks like you've been celebrating, so I guess that means you had good luck with that pound."

Tom's eyes were on his father's boots.

He said:

"I'll pay you back. Don't you worry about that, you know I'll pay you back. Come harvest if nothing else, but you can believe that I'll pay you back. And you can ask Mike Yoko here, he'll tell you it wasn't my fault, because you can't help what you can't help. But I knew I should have just stayed at home and not been out there messing with that pound of dirt weed. 'Cause you know I was just trying to help you out. That is what I told Mike, wasn't it Mike? That I was just trying to help my old man out. But it's not like anyway —"

"Whoa there Tom —"

"I tell you it wasn't my fault," Tom cried out, his eyes shining with moisture. "You know it wasn't my —"

"Where is my pound boy? Is all I want to know is where the hell my pound is and then we can start talking about faults."

"Hell Daddy, like I've been telling you, somebody nabbed the stuff from me last night."

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"You're out there paying more attention to some piece of scab tail than to Dad's weed," said Zango. "You just keep on trying to ride a lot of fast horses and getting burned in a slow race."

There was silence. Mike Yoko took out his pack of cigarettes and lit one.

"Those prefabs?" asked Zango. "Give one to Aubra. She gets all freaky if she can't get any prefabs."

Mike Yoko handed Aubra two cigarettes, thinking, Put a bag over her head and she might just do.

Art stepped out of the way of the tobacco smoke. Waving his hand in front of his face he said, "I hate the smell of those damn prefabs. Gives me an allergic reaction." Looking at Mike Yoko, "You citydwellers come hunting me down out here with your prefabs, smoking that horse shit!"

He drew a pouch of American Spirit tobacco from his back pocket and quickly rolled a cigarette.

"This is smoke," he said in a low and especially gentle voice.

"I'm sorry about that pound," Tom started in again. "I'm sorry that I didn't sell that pound, but like I was saying, you can't really blame me —"

"Blame you hell," said Zango. "Dad can blame you any way he wants, you running off with that weed, rubbing up against some girl and dropping it who knows where. Like you can't hang around camp and help out with the work; the two of us busting out royal asses hauling water all to hell and back. Then when harvest rolls around who is it that's going to be whining about his thirty-three and a third percent. The way you're going you'll be lucky if we don't give you about two and a half grams and tell you to go stick your thumb out on the interstate. Blame, hell."

"He's right Tom," said Art, looking at his older son, without emotion, without any apparent love or especial resentment; whatever he was feeling just kept inside and undoubtedly pored over in his private moments of regret. "You've been off hanging out with the townies all summer, you're face getting whiter and whiter. Me and Zango have been doing a lot of work. Now you come and tell me I'm out eight hundred dollars. Because what am I supposed to tell Jesús? He's sure as hell going to want his money next time he rolls around here."

"Christ," said Tom, "these wetbacks don't know what to do with money."

"That's not right son. Mexicans aint no different than you and me. I owe Jesús money for that bag of smoke you went and lost, and I'm going to pay him. I'm not going to let myself be cut ear to ear because you think Jesús doesn't know what to do with money. You can be damn sure he'll know what to do if he doesn't get it."

"But —"

"You keep your mouth shut," sneered Zango. "You went and dropped that smoke down some girls pants, so you just keep your mouth shut. Is all you're ever doing is running off to town to go rub up against a pair of titties."

"You don't need to keep after me that way Zango. It's not like I'm the only man that ever poked a girl before. Look at you and Aubra: Keep poking her the way you do and she's liable to break out in a baby . . . Anyway, I hardly ever get a piece. You've got to be rich as bat shit for a woman to look at you these days."

"Well, you son of a bitch, you. Don't think you can get away with running off down the county road every time there's work to be done. I'm going to knock you off your pins if you don't start straightening up."

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"You two keep quiet," said Art. "The last thing I need is to have my peace of mind torn up by you two's bickering. I didn't raise you all to bitch like women. Zango, just appreciate what you've got and I'll take care of Tom here. I've been doing it all these years and I imagine I can do it for a few more."

In the mean time Aubra had been looking at Mike Yoko. She did not see too many city men around the trailer. He was dressed neat and his blond hair was clean and shiny. He looked like the lead singer of a rock band. She looked at him through the thick lenses of her glasses, trying to make eye contact. Mike Yoko did not like her face, but could not help but notice her body, his nature compelling him to notice and evaluate every female anatomy he ran up against, indistinctly imagining what it would be like to caress them.

"What the hell are you looking at Aubra?" asked Zango. "You keep looking at Mike Yoko and rubbing your rear around on that chopping block like you were trying to make yourself feel good. If you want him, take him, but don't blame me if I beat you with a stick."

Mike Yoko laughed, high-pitched, nervous.

Aubra looked at the ground.

Zango spit into the dry New Mexico dirt. With the toe of his boot he ground it into the earth.

Mike Yoko asked him where all the smoke was and Zango, his lips smiling in ridicule, produced the drug that to him was nothing, was nothing more than a livelihood. They all smoked, in silence, each one's thoughts only to be guessed by the expression of countenance. Mike Yoko inhaled and coughed his lungs out onto the dry dirt. He coughed them out and his eyes watered and their whites turned red, red around the sky blue of the iris.

The smoke burnt his lungs and as he coughed he could feel its narcotic effect spread out over his chest and up into his head. His eyes were watery and a kind of nonchalance permeated his cerebrum. He looked at the others and through them, inside feeling sedate, inviolable.

A whole pound of dirt weed, thought Tom as he smoked.

Aubra rubbed up against Zango's leg.

"She's all high and she feels guilty for looking at Mike," he said.

"That's not guilt she's feeling," remarked Tom.

Zango kicked her away and she drew herself back to the chopping block. She had been with Zango for nearly three quarters of a year. The previous winter he had told himself that he needed someone to warm his bed. One night he was at a friend's house drinking beer. There were females there. "Damn if I'm going to sleep alone tonight," he had said in disgust. He saw Aubra, her figure and breasts, and grabbed her. "Come here," he had said and sat her down on his knee. Now they shared the same blanket and Aubra was an almost permanent fixture on the chopping block in front of the trailer, a limp, poorly rolled cigarette hanging from one hand and her eyes hidden by the thick lenses of her glasses.

"Look at Stormy," Zango said.

Stormy's ears were pricked up and her hackles rising. She lifted her head and growled. Adolphe rose, sniffed the air and looked around. He looked into the distance, into the low red hills and piñons. He growled and barked furiously. Two grim human figures appeared from out of the piñons. Adolph planted his front paws

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firmly in the earth and barked ferociously, slobber running from his red gums down his jaw.

"It's just Amy and Minn," said Tom.

Art stepped over to Adolphe and kicked him in the side. "You god damned shut up," he said. The dog yelped and jogged off. Stormy was still growling. "Shoe leather for you," he said, kicking her. She whimpered and went to join Adolph a number of yards away beneath the shade of a piñon.

"How is everyone doing?" asked Amy as she walked up.

She looked like an old woman. She was only forty but looked like an old woman and her face was gaunt and hair stringy and steel colored. Both she and Minn wore army fatigues. Mike Yoko wondered what they were doing wearing army fatigues and coming out of the hills like that.

Minn was only eighteen. She was Amy's half sister. Beneath the dirty clothes she wore and her tangled hair there was a physically attractive young woman.

"Stormy smelled us," she said.

"That was Adolph barking," said Tom.

"But Stormy smelled us."

Mike Yoko looked at the young woman. She had nice green eyes which were very calm and he could make out the shape of her round breasts beneath her shirt. Looking at her stirred something inside of him and he could feel his throat become dry and his lips tighten.

"What's your name?" he asked, his voice wheedling, his blue eyes looking directly at her, presumptuous.

"Her name is Minn," said Tom.

"She is my sister," Amy put in, in a precautionary tone.

If that's your sister, Mike Yoko thought, then your mother must be your daughter and your brother your uncle.

Amy looked like an old woman. The sleeves of her jacket were rolled up and Mike Yoko could see the scabs on her arms. He could see the imprints of the dead veins like lines in wood where termites had burrowed. Her eyes were set deep in her skull, on her collapsed face. They were neither profound nor mysterious, just deep and dead looking, dead but cruel and greedy.

"My name is Amy," she said, sticking forward her hand.

Mike Yoko took it. He could feel the action of its tendons as it grasped his. It was vicious, unfeminine and like the talons of a bird of prey as it closed in on his hand.

"We're the neighbors," Amy said.

Neighbors hell, he thought. He did not understand how her and Minn could be related and did not really believe what he had been told. If these two are sisters, Art over there is my son, he thought.

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He could feel her scrutinizing him. She was seedy and full of death and seedy was ok, but death was a jinx. It had begun that way, with it, and after being capsized once he did not want to even taste the water.

"What's your gig?" Amy asked. "We don't see too many nice looking boys like you back in here. No offence Zango, but this one's a looker. He's almost pretty. He's prettier than me and I'm a woman."

Her mouth opened wide and red as she talked. Several of her teeth were missing, making it like a raw wound; naked flesh, corrupt and inimical.

"I'm a friend of Tom and Zango's," he said.

"He's my friend," put in Tom.

Mike Yoko looked at Zango. Zango's face was hard and any and all emotion he might have felt was within him, any and all of the ridicule and hatred he might have felt was frozen in his eyes, in his hard cold stare.

"Aubra," Art said. "Why don't you go inside and get me that melon for everybody. I think we've all got the cotton mouth and a little melon might be nice."

Aubra got up from the chopping block and went inside the trailer. She came back out with a honeydew melon. Art took it from her, cut it open with his pocketknife, and handed everyone a slice. They ate the melon and spit out the seeds that Art had missed scraping away with his knife.

"This is some damn good melon," said Tom.

He ate the melon and felt it cold and wet slide down into his empty stomach. The innermost part of the melon was cream colored and very sweet. Going toward the rind it was a lime green and not as sweet but the flesh was meatier and more substantial.

"This is some damn good melon Aubra," said Tom. "You don't get good melon like this except at harvest time."

"Not yet," said Art.

"But this melon is damn good stuff," said Tom, scraping the rind with his teeth.

Mike Yoko did not eat his slice of melon. He held it between his fingers, but did not eat it. He watched Minn eat hers. She looked at him but her face was without especial content. Seeing her wet mouth close around the flesh of the melon stirred something inside him. He felt the blood run warm through his head and thought, It might just be what's in between her thighs but it might not be.

"Here," he said, handing Tom his slice of melon. His voice was thick. He felt it in his throat, noticed its change, and laughed suddenly, shrill, nervous. Minn looked at him, her face still, perspiration on her forehead, clinging to the roots of her unwashed hair.

Amy threw her melon rind off into the weeds and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"So how are your holes doing?" she asked Zango, manipulating a wad of reddish-tan tobacco in the folded rice rolling paper.

"Fine," he replied. "They're doing fine. We just have to wait a while and everything will be fine."

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She rolled it and licked the paper into a cigarette before she said:

"Ours are too. Which is good because after last year when the marshal came busting into my kitchen and I had to abandon all that smoke, I really cannot afford to go wrong this year. I burn up money you know, and I really cannot afford to do without a stock of it."

"That's because of that habit," said Art. "You've got to quit it before it kills you."

"I know I do, but I can't. I can't and I know I can't so I don't even try. The real crime is that I cannot even get the stuff. I can't get it so then I go off and sink my money in bad coke, which is even worse for you and doesn't hardly do a damn thing. All the good chemists are busted and I can't get anything good. If I have to keep wasting my money on what I don't want, it is going to kill me. If I knew a chemist it would be ok, but all the good chemists are busted."

Mike Yoko looked at her arms and understood what it was.

"I know a chemist," he said.

He looked at Minn. He did not look at Amy when he spoke, but Minn, into her and beyond her, his eyes blue and unshifting.

"Well you bring me something," Amy said with a grim smile. "Something good, none of that horse shit, and I'll make it worth your while . . . God knows I need it. I've been hoping to find a good chemist for a while now, and God knows that's the truth."

CHAPTER THREE

The figure walked along the silent and empty street, slapping the traffic meters as it went. He had already passed by two times that evening, at intervals, an hour apart. Abruptly, he ducked in between two buildings, one large, taking up the better portion of the block, the other a small out building.

Monte looked through the glass side door of the larger of the two government buildings. He saw the light blue of the security guard's shirt stretched taught over the fat belly. The man, in his ungraceful uniform, went leisurely down the hall, his heels clicking, then turned off, and disappeared around a corner.

Monte moved toward the other building. A small window, just above head level, was cracked open. He slid it over as far as it would go, hoisted himself up and squeezed through the opening. Inside, his feet rested on an office desk, which was just below the window. The room was cross-hatched with various depths of shadow and transformed, from its daytime existence, into a forlorn and vaguely mysterious place.

He climbed down to the floor, accidentally knocking over a scotch tape dispenser. Rifling through the desk, he found nothing of fiscal value. The computer was contemplated. But to be seen carrying something like that down the street, at two in the morning — Hardware was clearly not an option.

A picture sat on one of the desks of two children sitting on a mustached man's lap. The background was blue sky modulated by a breath of clouds. It was one of those "studio portraits" that are taken at the shopping mall at a competitive price — the kind that show up in news broadcasts highlighting the family's tragic end.

He let out a low whistle through his teeth.

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There were two vending machines in the next room over, which was a small break area.

If there's any cash in this place, I guess that's where it is, he told himself.

He tried prying the candy and chips machine open, but without success. He tipped it to one side and wobbled it around, then kicked it. Finally he took a chair and beat on it violently and the room rang with sound. The plastic case cracked. Still, he was no closer to getting the money out.

And if he had been heard, the police would be coming. A flush of sickness and stress pervaded his stomach and chest. He made his way back to the desk, climbed up and slithered out the window. In the building across he could see the guard sitting on a chair and reading a magazine with obvious unconcern. For a moment Monte considered climbing back in. There was certainly a way of getting the money out of the machine.

"I guess I should just forget it," he said, reluctantly.

It was late and there was no place to go — No place except his mother's apartment, which was not near. He had a bedroom there with holes in the walls from his fists. There was a refrigerator with food to eat and a cat he knew and petted and photos which hung and leaned that he knew and hated. He walked in that direction.

Very few cars were out and where there were no streetlights the stars were like candles. The fresh smell of plants and dry, semi-desert air was there, subtle, yet permeating. He wanted money, though he could not have said why, because at that hour even the liquor stores were closed and his own goals were unclear, limited and loose.

"There's that Rob," he said to himself.

Across the street a down and out man walked along rapidly, hands in pockets. The head was extremely oval, with a knit cap exaggerating its pointed appearance to that of a yeti. The jaw, with a thin growth of hair, jutted forward.

"Poor bastard," Monte said as he saw the other move into the night, unaware of his presence.

He felt the experience and hollowness of it, then saw the light shimmering past his legs and spread across the sidewalk before him.

It must be a cop, he thought, and his blood flowed rapidly, propelled by a throbbing and apprehensive beat. Already he was considering his responses to the inevitable questions about identity and destination and verification.

The car pulled up slowly alongside him.

"You need a ride?" came from the window of the brown Volkswagen Rabbit.

Monte looked at the fat face of Joe Wheat behind the steering wheel, that huge and soft double chin prominent, the little salt and pepper mustache floating on his upper lip.

The driver was not without renown. Monte did not know him, but knew of him.

"No. I don't need a ride," he said.

"You want to smoke a joint? I have a joint in here if you want to smoke it," the voice soft and nasally.

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The car was stopped and Monte stood still. He did want to smoke. That was all he had to do, and accept the ride.

When he sat down in the car, he could smell the man redolent with cologne and sweat. The tonguey mouth started lisping as they drove away, the huge belly squished behind the steering wheel, the legs, short and corpulent in sweat pants, one foot manipulating the gas and break.

Joe Wheat fumbled around in a compartment between the seats, saying, "It's somewhere around here."

His small eyes blinked behind his glasses and darted from the task to the boy, the legs and upward. At a stoplight he leaned over, opened the glove box, and fumbled through the maps and papers. Monte could feel the warmth of the man's body and its softness as it brushed against him.

"It must be at home," Wheat said. "You don't mind coming to my house, do you? . . . You're a nice looking boy, you know. You're very handsome . . . I bet you have a lot of girlfriends, don't you?"

Monte had been half expecting this. "You can let me out right here," he said with a strange grin.

"You don't need to get out," Joe Wheat said. "I won't bite . . . We can just go to my house and smoke a joint. I don't want anything from you . . . You seem like a nice boy — It will be ok."

They continued to drive out, beyond the edge of town. Wheat did nearly all the talking and in between his words Monte could hear the wheezing fat man's breath. The small eyes looked out into the night which the Volkswagen Rabbit cut through, then to the boy in an indirect and sub-effeminate glance. The houses became fewer and outside the piñons and hills were black against the black-blue sky. They pulled into a long circle driveway and Joe Wheat turned off the car.

"Come on inside kid," he lisped.

Monte followed the squat, round form, taking note of how short and prissy the man's steps were. The house was a nice upper middle class southwestern home, with knick-knacks and Indian pottery decorating spare shelf space, a Navajo rug on the living room floor, and a number of bad Spanish-American style landscapes hanging from the walls.

As they sat down on the couch, a voice, high pitched and cracked, came from the back of the house:

"Joey, is that you? Is that you out there Joey?"

"It's just me mother," the man called back. "I just brought a friend home to visit." Muffled footsteps were heard advancing. An ancient, withered creature emerged from a darkened hallway. The woman moved precariously, placing her slippered feet with infinite caution. She wore a pink nightgown of some sort of cheap, synthetic material, her arms unsheathed, wrinkled, the flesh hanging loose around the fragile bones.

"I was afraid it might have been an intruder," she said, blinking into the room.

"Don't worry mother, I brought a friend home to visit. That's all. You go back to bed now. We'll be ok."

"You brought a friend?" she said, peering at Monte. "Does he want a snack? He looks sort of worn out . . . There is some pie in the ice-box if you boys want."

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"Thanks mother, but we're ok," smiled Joe Wheat indulgently. "You go on and get some sleep."

"You want some milk and pie? I'll fix you boys some milk and pie if you want."

"We're fine mother. You can go back to sleep. We'll be ok."

"I'll just go back to sleep then if you don't need me. There's pie in the icebox though. I know you like that pie Joey . . . Goodnight."

The old woman turned and moved slowly back into the dark hallway, feeling along the walls, guiding herself by touch.

Joe Wheat held a marijuana cigarette of incredible thinness between his chubby fingers.

"We had better go back in my bedroom to smoke this," whispered the fat man, his salt and pepper mustache quivering. "I don't want my mother to catch us."

Uncertainly Monte followed him to the bedroom.

The room was as neat and well ordered as that of a hotel. The furnishing and decoration were conservative. There was a queen size bed set squarely in the center, a dresser with mirror and a little desk off in the corner with an antique toy Pullman train car on it. The aroma of Joe Wheat was even more pronounced in the room where he slept.

"Sit down next to me," he said, seating himself on the edge of the bed.

Monte set himself down by the fat man's haunches. He looked over and saw the wreath of flesh draped under the other's chin, undulating slightly with its semi-liquid consistency. The sliver of marijuana cigarette stuck out from under the salt and pepper mustache, the point of its cherry sending up a filament of smoke. Then the lips protruded, heart shaped, and emitted a thin stream of smoke.

As Joe Wheat passed it to Monte with his right hand, he placed the left on the boy's knee.

CHAPTER FOUR

Do you remember Mother, how we used to talk of what I would be? In my pajamas I snuggled close to you, and was soothed by the breath of your sweet mouth. How did you make your teeth so white, and lips so jungle red? If I knew this, and other secrets, the love of orchids might last for longer than an hour.

In the fall we walked through the woods, me with my yellow suspenders, you with your broad straw hat. The mushrooms called to us, the boletus, the morel, and how attracted we were together, to those moist and conical caps. Do you know, it was you who first told me, that to eat such things could be deadly? But how we enjoyed the succulence of those that were safe and there. They were more than just a feast for the eyes.

And have I ever told you, that still I awake, from dreams of those days, and mushrooms?

Yes, it is true — I have far too many pairs of boots for a man who prefers to wear sneakers. But you know mother, how much I adore the smell of leather and the grooming of the soldier. I would lean against the trunk

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of a tree and examine its roots, while you, with your little knife in hand, continued to sever the stems of the mushrooms we would later fry in butter.

CHAPTER FIVE

There I was, down next to the vent; down the steps and under the grate, trying to get some shut-eye. The vent was roaring and puffing out warmth and I was curled up there, my face buried in the collar of my jacket. I was in a bath of tomatoes and sausages, then talking with a bluebird, then running, my legs like rubber bands, but I couldn't get away from the masks and they kept following me. The rain was on and I opened my eyes.

Through the grate above I could see the clear sky of stars, the upside down of his spread legs and the long white finger spraying on me. It was over before I fully realized what that was doing and I felt the soak and stickiness, could smell my social level.

Oh Jesus, I cried out, and him up there laughing, crow-like, against the night, and that blonde hair glowing like just ripe hay.

Crawling up out of there I kept on saying our saviors name in vain, coupling it with the other's — Mike Yoko, I was saying, Mike Yoko. But the more I spoke my suffering, the more comedy he saw in it, until God help me if I wasn't laughing myself, a kind of laughter mixed with tears.

He talked about how bad the smell was and I took off my wool cap and kind of shook it and wrung it out, thinking, They call me Throbbing Knob, they call me Throbbing Knob. And knowing that when a guy is let drop so low, there's not much use or purpose in him getting sparked up with pride, because it wasn't like what he did to me I wasn't liable to do to myself.

He had some beers in his pockets and told me he would let me drink one to make up for what he had done. I would have preferred it if he had a few burritos, because that was a Monday and the Sally hadn't served; is all I'd eaten was a fair sized chunk of government cheese.

But we sat down in the hedged-in lawn of the Court House, or whatever kind of public building it was, and he handed me one of those black beers that he was always drinking, the neck all frothy white with foam. I just sipped and nursed it and could feel it making its way through the cheese in my stomach, up into my forehead.

Meanwhile he had twisted up a bomber and lit it, the lick of flame mirroring in his eyes and then snapped up by the night. I smelled the aroma, as if I were back in Texas on the hog farm, scooping up those leavings. It was all whiting around him and rising in the air towards the dots in the sky and Jesus Christ and his mother Marry, and other forms of life for all I knew. He just passed in on to me, his face all red and him laughing crazy like, the way he did.

The burning was in my chest and running around and out my throat and I could hear, like it was coming from a cheap pocket radio, that laughter, it turning into a watery version of him as I opened my eyes. So I cussed and cussed, happy as hell and not caring in the least about the little damp I could still feel around the neck of my sweater. It was like the world had quieted down and was suddenly mine and the black beer was working at taking away the thirst and the sky was winking away like a casino, a downright gaming palace and I was hitting jackpot.

I just sat there on the grass Indian style, not too sorry to be away from the warm air under the grate, and he was walking around and talking, saying things I couldn't quite follow but sounded good the way they stretched out over to me. Then he's got his pocketknife out and has cut away a sort of spindly branch from

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one of the trees that was weeping, and he goes about stripping the thing down, making a regular switch out of it.

When he got done he started switching at plants and flicked the tops and leaves slick off of them. He ripped and tagged them all over, his teeth white and showing through that smile he had like a shark's. The vegetables of the trees and shrubs flew and filled the air and I heard the switch cutting and whistling around. He started talking Satan like and then he's switching at the palm of his own hand, laughing and wincing at the pain.

Is all I did was sit there quiet, watching the streaks the switch branch made in the air and feeling a sort of reaction in my stomach, picturing that hunk of yellow cheese floating around like an island in the black beer.

That's when I realized that his two eyes were set on me, and I felt like when I was a kid and had arrested my foot right over a long rattler. There it sat in the middle of the path, my foot hanging over it and my bottom lip shaking around. I simply backed off, slow as could be; but this time he had me locked in his stare and I said, Mike, really pleading like, because there was something in me that knew.

Rob the Throbbing Knob, he laughed, Rob the Throbbing Knob. Then, flicking swish through the air it came against the back of my hand, the empty bottle dropped out and it was stinging real bad. I told him to let me alone, but to his ears it must have sounded like I wanted more, and the sucker started furiyng at me, that big white smiling face dancing around behind the whipping like it had nothing to do with a human being or body. Rob the Throbbing Knob, I'm hearing through my pain, Rob the Throbbing Knob.

I was on my hands and crawled across the grass, the switch ringing against my back and a whimpering coming from my mouth like from a dog's. Come on guy, I heard myself say, the sound quivering and weak, fear climbing around in me.

And then he got on my back and tried to ride me like a horse, saying, Gee-up Rob, gee-up, and he swatted my rear end and snapped that thing around my ears. I could feel my eyes wet and burning and I bucked, collapsed and rolled over. He loomed there, lashing like hell, against my cheeks and forehead and all over. I screamed out for help, but guess no one heard me or cared, and I felt the air going quicker than I could get it in and then the hiccups coming, mixed with the taste of beer and cheese.

The switch must have broke on me after a while — Everything was still flying in my head, but it was all quiet around. He was a little bit away from me, smoking a cigarette, the smile gone from his face and his eyes sort of cold and far off.

He said, You ok buddy, and I didn't answer, just got up and walked.

He was right next to me the whole time, talking and talking like he was a better friend than I had ever had, which might have been true, because Rob was a lonely guy, he was a boy without a roof over his head.

When we got to the 7-11 he went in. The phone was there outside, and I dialed the number, it repeating in my head as the only number I could have dialed, it stamped on the phone as the number I was supposed to dial. So when he came out I told him what I had done and said that he better go because they were coming. But there was that smile again, the sound of his bad joy spilling out of it and stabbing at me; and he must have thought me incapable or a liar, because he just lit up a stogie and even gave me one, which I parked behind my ear.

It must not have been five minutes before they came. Scared and sorry as I felt, I walked right up to the car, the lights making me squint, and started talking, telling them how it was me who called, how Rob was the

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victim. He beat me up, I told them, he beat me up.

I figured he would have been gone as soon as they pulled up, but looking over, he was right there next to me, drawing on his cigarette as calm as could be, like the whole thing was not about him or his concern. One of them held a little note pad in his hand and wrote down what I said I guess, jotting the pen slow and hard over the paper like he was carving out the letters.

All the while Mike stood quiet, not saying a word, until he was asked by one of the men if he attacked me. Did you beat him with a stick, they asked.

Mike Yoko stepped on the butt of his cigarette and said that me and him were just rough housing around and that I took it the wrong way. The way he talked I thought that maybe I was wrong, and taking it upside down, and he was the best friend I ever had after all.

Did you touch him, the officer said. Is all I want to know is if you touched him.

I might have poked him but — But I guess that was all it took, all they were waiting to hear, because then they asked me if I wanted to press charges and my head started going up and down like a sinker on a nibble. Those silver cuffs were off the man's belt and clinking around Mike Yoko's wrists, locking his hands and arms behind his back and there was all that talk about rights and remaining silent and everything you ever say held against you.

I should have kept quiet and knew it even while I didn't do it, while I spilled the beans. I suppose I just thought that adding rat to what people thought of me wouldn't much matter, the scales already tipping so far against me. His face looked too calm and not really caring. I thought of all he had done without my provoking, and knew like it was a solid thing that my charging of assault would not make a run under the bridge, would not be so easy as water. They seated him in the back of the car and he sat still like he was made of ice, not blinking or even turning his head towards me.

I watched as the car pulled out of the parking lot and drove away, the back of his head of blond hair showing through the rear window. I wondered what was passing around under that yellow hair and started scratching my own, which was black, and felt my nails fill up and fingers run against some mats. That was when I felt the stogie stuck behind my ear and took it off and put it between my lips, thinking, Rob the Throbbing Knob, and knowing nothing but the sensation of the night sky as my roof.

CHAPTER SIX

"You sure are pretty," Tom said.

"I am old," she replied.

"But you are pretty. I haven't ever been with a classy lady like you before."

"My body is soft, isn't it?"

"Yes. I haven't ever been with a classy lady like you before."

She felt Tom's face, like a blindwoman, his cheekbones, down his face to his neck, over where there was not a chin. She did not know whether she was driven by middle aged woman's lust or despair and did not care what was outside the darkness, what was outside the intoxication produced partly by alcohol mostly by what

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she had in her hand.

"Do you want to," she said.

She's an old animal, he thought.

"Yes," she said. "You young man. Yes. You know it. You know it. Aw, you know it. Aw, be it. Be it. Aw, be it. Yes, you you you. Yes. Don't finish. Don't finish, damn you. Damn you. Damn you."

Tom woke up and looked over at the woman next to him. The light from the porch came in through the window and he could see her face, worn and sad. He got out of bed and put his pants on, reached over, took one of her cigarettes, a long, thin woman's cigarette, and lit it. He felt like a homosexual smoking that long thin cigarette, but he had no tobacco of his own and smoked it, the light, mentholated smoke like nothing in his lungs, feeling weak and effeminate, misplaced.

"This sure is a classy place she's got here," he said as he walked around the room. "These paintings are what the rich people like. They like what poor sons-of-bitches like me can't understand. They just throw their greenbacks away any old how. She's a nice lady though. A real classy lady."

He walked into the living room and opened the liquor cabinet. The bottle of gin was in his hand, its delicate neck touched in indecision and guilt and then he let go and left it, shut the liquor cabinet and went over to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

"She doesn't keep any beer," he said. "These classy ladies don't I suppose."

There was a half full bottle of white wine and he took that out of the refrigerator and uncorked it. Drinking from the bottle, he walked back to the bedroom, the cigarette long and thin still hanging from his mouth, absurd, smoke twisting up in his eyes. He sat down and drank in the semi-darkness, still not wearing a shirt or socks or shoes. The wine was cold and without freshness — sweet and effete — and the cigarette, with its slight flavor of mint, left him nugatory, as much as an invertebrate shadow.

When he again opened his eyes a strip of daylight slashed out across the room from the partially open curtains. The bed was there, unmade and empty, and he could hear the shower in the bathroom. Then the sound stopped and she came out with a towel wrapped around her, cinching her small breasts, her face tired, moist and disappointed, all traces of putanity disappeared.

"Are you still here," she said. "If you don't want to walk, call a taxi. Call a taxi if you need to go somewhere. I cannot give you a ride. What are you looking at? Here's your damn shirt," she said, picking it up off the floor and throwing it at him. "Now take it and get out. I don't owe you a damn thing, so get out."

He put on the shirt and slipped his feet inside his boots, stuffing the socks in one jeans' pocket, then grabbed his jacket and walked out the door, the laces of his boots still undone. In silence he stepped outside and closed the door, finding himself in an unfamiliar yard and then walking out onto a street that he did not at first recognize.

He tied his laces and then walked down the road, the late morning sun extremely soft and the shadows of tree branches delicately patterned on the sidewalk. The acequia ran near and somewhat below the road, and the thin trickle of water covered light green slime and shone emerald in the light.

He could feel the sleep still in his eyes and the emptiness and soreness at the base of his spine.

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If she knew what I am, he thought. She guessed, but did she know she had an ex-con in her bed. Ex, hell. I am damn well not ex enough; and if I don't keep sober. That was too bad about last night. Poor her. Poor me. If I don't keep sober. But I didn't drink her Gordon's Dry. No, I should have, but I didn't. And where did it get me. No further and I feel like hell but it's too early for the first one of the day. The best one of the day. Just get some beer old pal. Just get some beer and stay on the beer and you will be ok. As long as you stick to the beer you will be ok.

"You look good," she had said, and he knew that she was drunk. The music played loud and people danced. Single men stood, leaned and stared at the small proportion of women. Tom danced, as well as he could and heard her say, into his ear, "Take me to my house."

"What?" he had replied, in near disbelief.

"Take me home baby."

Later that morning, by way of restorative, he ate a bowl of menudo, a plate of beef enchiladas covered with very hot green chile, a sopapilla with honey and drank a pitcher of dark beer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mike Yoko drove along the county road. He drove fast and his car hugged the bends and gravel shot out from beneath his tires. It was a beautiful late fall day and the sky was the pure blue that one only sees in the high empty hills of the southwestern United States. The layered hills were dotted with yellow flowers. Hawkbeard and cholla cactus clung near the road, mostly of a rich forest green, some bunches or arms dried to skeleton, a dull gray. High up on one hill a cross was laid out in white stones and to his left, on the verge of a precipice, a wooden crucifix was planted with fresh flowers set before it.

Just don't even blink when she takes the stuff, because she will never notice, he told himself. Just don't even blink. Because you don't care about her. You do not care about her or what happens to her is all you care about is what she has. And that Minn. You care about what she has. You care about what she has but are God damned if you care about more than that, care about what she feels or thinks.

That morning he had gone to the drug store and bought twelve Vic's inhalers. He took them home, cut them open three at a time and put the short, moist filters into a blender. He added a little water and a few drops of hydrochloric acid, in the form of pool cleaner, and turned on the blender. The mixture was poured through a number two coffee filter onto a Pyrex pie pan and then cooked down over an electric burner. When the crystals appeared he scraped them off and they made a fine, cream colored powder.

I'll be damned if she knows the difference between d-pseudoephedrine hydrochloride and methamphetamine, he thought. A junkie from Dallas might, but not one from New Mexico.

He drove through the town of C and was on the backroads following the directions he had been given. The air was clean and dry and the adobe hills were tinted green with growth from recent rain. Nipplewort and other weeds, ugly and grabbing at life, grew along the side of the road. He passed a man and woman, pulled off to one side, who were changing a flat on their truck, but he did not stop. The eyes looked up at him and he continued on, the dark side, the sky and the hills all vast and tumescent.

He found where Amy lived; an old mud building of three rooms surrounded by wattle fencing; laundry hanging in the yard three days dry, now dusty and dirty. A creek ran off to one side of the house, forming a fissure of green that wound into the distance. Behind the place rose the open, high desert country, strokes of

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dark blue mountains to be made out off in the distance.

Minn answered the door saying, "Amy's not here."

She wore a t-shirt and khaki pants and the t-shirt was too small, her belly showing a little fat and white and round.

Provocative, he thought, and said:

"Well, what made you think I came here to see Amy? Do you know you have beautiful eyes."

"You can wait for her if you want."

They went inside and both sat down at the kitchen table. The house had the dark cellar smell, the desert, musty, woman, old sheets and pillows smell. Minn fixed two cups of coffee and rolled an American Spirit cigarette while he smoked a Camel straight from his pack.

They talked and she told him about how she was going to college in Houston, Texas and how she was living with her sister for the summer.

"I'm living with her and helping her with the holes so that I can have money for school."

"I bet you look hell of different in school."

"I guess so."

"That is not to say that you do not look good now, because you do look good. I've been wanting to tell you that I think you're pretty. I have been wanting to tell you that since I first saw you. I have been wondering about you since I first saw you."

He was closer and kissed her.

"You are rubbing up against me," she said.

"Yes," he said.

A long hum came from her mouth and they kissed. He felt her teeth with his tongue and her body with his hands. She took her shirt off and Mike Yoko could see her firm breasts, the nipples like two wounds, and he took her over to a dirty unmade bed in a back room, in the room where she slept, and pressed his lips to hers and to her breasts and she lay back and looked at him contemptuously and he did not say anything, just continued and inside his body what had been stirred moved faster and spread out and it was like a hurricane of gelatin.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"Yes."

"You're beautiful."

"Yes."

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"Yes."

"Yes."

And then afterward they lay back on the dirty sheets and did not speak. Minn did not look at him but stared at the ceiling, at the raw wood crossing over the vigas, and her face was plain and unemotional. I was in the closet and saw. There they were, but she's here next to me and so warm.

And now you've done it, he thought. You have done it and don't really need to do it again. You can burn her, he thought. You can burn her.

He looked over and saw her face. It stirred something inside of him. Once more it stirred and moved something inside of him.

Now stop that, he told himself.

Then she rose and put on her clothing and left the room. When he had dressed and gone into the kitchen she was there making a pot of coffee. They sat and drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and when Amy came through the back door neither of them spoke but each looked cold and unemotional.

"I didn't figure seeing you around here so soon," Amy said. "What have you got? I have been having the fever for the flavor. You don't know how bad I have been having it. I keep telling myself if I just knew a good chemist everything would be ok. And then I got to thinking about you and what you said, but I didn't expect to see you here so soon."

She was dressed the same as before, in army fatigues, and her hair tied back in a pony tail, thin and ratlike. There was that vague and merciless look in her eyes that spoke of unaccountable suffering and heartless sin, that mirrored something dark in his own soul and produced an aura of general unease.

Mike Yoko took a ziplock bag of white powder out of his jeans pocket and handed it to her.

"You get out of here," she told Minn. "This is my own private vice and I want to deal with it on my own. I'm all screwed up on this stuff and I don't need my little sister getting mixed in too. Weed is ok, but I don't want you getting mixed up with this one. You just go off for a while."

Minn took her pouch of tobacco and cigarette papers from the kitchen table and stepped outside.

"I do believe this is what I have been looking for," Amy said, dipping a wet pinkie inside the bag and tasting it.

Caca de baca, he thought. Excremento de baca.

"Let me just get out the works and mainline a little of this and we'll see what it's like," she said.

"You have to pay me first because it is not mine."

"I told you I would make it worth your while now, didn't I?" she said, putting one hand on his thigh and moving it up. "Now didn't I tell you that? Do you know that I could make you very happy? Do you know that?"

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Happy hell, he thought as he looked at her grinning, decayed mouth. It was dark and cool inside and light without, where the birds sang and sat on the fence. He could see Minn through the front screendoor. She was squatting down and smoking a hand rolled cigarette and in between where her shirt ended and pants began he could see her naked back.

"You can go ahead and try the stuff if you want, but just leave my fly alone," he said, rising from his seat.

Amy emptied a small pile onto an old newspaper and went in the back room, her movements predatory and serious.

"I am going to just try a little of this and then we can talk business," she said. "I have been wanting to get my hands on a good chemist for a while now, so if this is any good I'll be hot for the stuff. The right connection is all that I have been wanting. I have greenbacks enough for quality."

Mike Yoko went out front and sat next to Minn, a flagstone feeling hard and cool beneath him.

"She's all worked up over that powder," he said.

"You brought it to her."

"I did do that."

I slept with her fine, he thought, but that does not mean that I need to be her soul mate.

They sat in silence smoking cigarettes, linked, if by nothing else, than by the sexual act.

"Sis has been spending an awful long time in there with that pile of powder," he said after a while.

"So."

"So I need the money for it awfully bad and I was just wondering, that's all. I came driving out here to get some money and what you and me did was a lot of fun, but I still need the money."

"I thought you said you came out here to see me. You said I had beautiful eyes, and boy you sure were excited. Were you play acting? You weren't play acting now were you?" Minn smiled.

"That is the first time I've seen you smile. Do you know that you have a beautiful smile?"

"I have beautiful eyes and a beautiful smile and what we did was a lot of fun."

"Cut that out. You act like I'm pulling your leg or something."

"No, I just have beautiful eyes and a beautiful smile."

"You do."

"Yes. I do."

He could feel her eyes on him, calm and luxurious, a seeming blend of love and derision and he could recognize his own discomfort and what he wanted to suppress grow more compact and active inside him.

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"Sis is still taking a hell of a long time, he said nervously."

"Well I'll go get her for you so she can pay you your money, or whatever she's going to do to you, and you can leave. God knows I'm not keeping you here."

She is talkative now, he told himself, watching Minn go inside. And that means that you are in trouble. They only get talkative when they start thinking about hitching you to their apron strings. Her body is awfully sexy though. Have to give her credit for that. Still . . .

"Mike Yoko. Come here Mike Yoko," Minn shouted from the house.

When he got inside Minn showed him her sister.

"She doesn't look good," he said.

"I think she's dead."

Mike Yoko looked into Amy's eyes. They were rolled back in her head and only the whites, which were not white but a dull yellow, showed. He looked around on her wrist and tried to find a vein by which he could feel for a pulse. Failing at that he put his ear to her mouth.

"Well she isn't breathing like a champ, that's for sure. She's still alive though. She is breathing a little, so she's still alive."

"What the hell were you trying to sell her anyhow? Amy's been mainlining crystal for years and she hasn't ever died before."

"She isn't dead now," he said in exasperation.

"Well don't get hostile. She sure looks dead."

Amy did not look alive. Her skin was gray and her breathing was hard to perceive. She lay sprawled in a chair, the works — a Beckton-Dixon syringe and a blackened spoon — sat on a near by coffee table along with other paraphernalia. Her thin body was taunt and motionless, the ponytail, like that of a rat, curled out from behind her head onto one shoulder.

I must have used too much pool cleaner, Mike Yoko thought.

"Should we bury her?" asked Minn.

"Goddamn it, she is not dead! Besides, she still owes me the money for that powder."

"If she is alive she's going to want to shoot you. I don't think she will pay you anything for that crank," Minn said. "So maybe it is better to bury her than take her to the hospital."

"Well I am not taking her to a damned hospital. Let's just leave her be, give her coffee or toss some cold water on her or do what people do. If she dies I will dig the hole myself, but she won't die."

"There's a creek," Minn said. "If we put her in the creek she might wake up, but I don't think she will drink any coffee."

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They picked Amy up, carried her down to the creek and sat her in the water. It was very clear and shallow and watercress and moss grew up to and along the bank and they laid her head against the bank. Cottonwoods grew and formed shade and, without speaking, they listened to the water as it rippled over Amy.

"Let's just leave her here for a while and see what happens."

"If she dies, you killed her."

"For Christ's sake, nobody is dead! Quit talking that way. Your sister is just high, that's all."

"I have seen a lot of high people, but they don't usually get all stiff and white like that."

A car pulled up by the house. Mike Yoko and Minn could hear the engine and they walked away from the creek and up to the house, leaving Amy in the shallow water with her head leaning up against the bank. Tom was there with two men that Mike Yoko did not recognize.

"I'm looking for Amy," Tom said.

"She's gone," said Mike Yoko.

"She is gone alright," Minn said.

"Goddamn," Tom said. "My buddies here were looking for some local smoke and I was hoping that Amy could fix them up."

"What's up with your old man?" Mike Yoko asked.

"Not ripe. Nobody's really got it ripe yet. I was hoping Amy could help me out."

"I know a guy down around Lamy that does," Mike Yoko said. "He's got it ripe."

"Let's go then," said one of the men. "If there's greenbud to be had, we want it."

He was well built and short with a beard and mustache, but the beard and mustache were trimmed very low so his features and facial skin were clearly and unfortunately seen. His face was covered with freckles and his hair was smooth and light brown and his eyes were quite small and violent.

"I would have to go it alone," said Mike Yoko.

"Mike's a good friend," Tom said. "You don't need to worry."

"Are you worried Jake?" the freckle-faced man, whose name was Ty, asked the other man.

"I'm worried for Tom," Jake replied.

He also had a mustache, though no beard, but the mustache was prominent, and he looked rougher than the freckle-faced man, his face pitted with acne scars and dotted with blackheads.

"Does your friend have a pound?" Jake asked.

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"There is all you want down in Lamy. The high grade is thirty-eight hundred a pound and I can be there and back in less than two hours. You give me fifty bucks for the service, my friend in Lamy will give me fifty on his end, and I'm squared. Straight up."

"Mike is good for it," said Tom.

Good for it hell, Mike Yoko thought as he drove away. Cojones is about all I'm good for. The mustache looked tough though. I could still forget about the whole thing. I could but I won't. I'll be God damned if I have to turn to white slave work to make my living. Anything is better than white slave work. Even dealing with the mustache and Toms of the world.

He felt the wad of money in his pocket. It was all hundreds and fifties, but it was still thick and felt whole and meaty in his jeans pocket.

Cojones bull sized, he thought.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mother, how I long to plant a crocus in your hair.

Were you jealous of those boys? I can assure you they meant nothing to me, beyond a little laughter and a tear. Yes, I know that you want me to have friends ever-lasting, and in the bottom of your heart realize who I am. But you I will keep for my own, my hidden gem, and observe your luster behind locked doors.

Do you know how much I love the old family photo albums? You have always been right in calling me sentimental. To live in the smiles of long ago is a beautiful thing.

The picture of you in your bathing suit at Lake Sumner has always inflamed my imagination in ways best left unsaid. It is so true that the styles of swimwear have only changed for the worse. I am old fashioned and believe that to wear a one piece would be charming.

And do you remember our trip to Muscle Shoals? What a hot summer it was. I recall vividly how impressed you were with Wilson Dam. It makes me sad to know, that the photos of that trip are all of me, and not of you — If there is an again, I will take the pictures and let you pose.

There is another thing I have always wished to tell you: I am enchanted by women only when they eat fruit — strawberries, bananas and, of course, the plum. This is one action that us men will eternally be put to shame in. I wish it were otherwise, but, Mother, as you have often said, we live in a not quite perfect world.

CHAPTER NINE

The shadows of the trees and hills grew long and the light soft and clean and the smoke from the cigarettes looked silver and lingered low in the air. One man flicked his away and then the other, in punctuated and final disgust.

"That less than two hours is sure stretching out," said Ty, the freckled man.

"He's good for it," Tom said.

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The knot was there again, that feeling of failure that had haunted and nauseated him all his life. It was a sounding of lost control, its depth a demi-fear of patient suffering. There was something that couldn't be grasped, and, try as he might, evaded him.

"You're sure he's going to come back?" Jake asked, and looked at Tom darkly.

"Yes," Tom lied.

"I guess he wouldn't leave his girlfriend past sunset with a bunch of undesirables like us," Ty grinned savagely.

Smoke curled in front of Minn's face. She took the cigarette from her mouth, dropped it at her feet and stepped on it.

"I am not his girlfriend," she said.

"Well, where the hell is he?" asked Ty in a raised and aggressive voice. "He is not your boyfriend, he is not my friend, chinless over here seems to trust him but I don't know if I trust chinless, thirty-eight hundred dollars drove off in his pocket almost four hours ago, the sun's setting and I am getting pissed as hell."

"What should we do Ty?" Jake asked.

"Hell, I'm pissed," yelled Ty.

Here it comes, thought Tom.

He had that impression of pending disaster. Compelled toward it, just as when his mother had dropped him on his head, and afterward, always, worse luck followed bad, until, now, he knew and expected it and wanted nothing more than to be done with the latest trauma so he could get started on the next.

"What do you suggest we do," Jake said to Tom.

"He's coming back," Tom said stubbornly.

"What do you think sister?" Jake asked Minn.

"I don't know," she said. "It's none of my business. I am just here."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. I don't even know where he lives."

"We don't know where he lives," Tom said.

"Don't know where he lives, hell," Ty said. "Your good friend. I'll be damned if I spend my daylight hours being jacked around for money that's mine."

He grabbed Tom from behind, twisted his arm and had him down on the ground. Jake's boot was on the back of his neck pressing his head into the dirt and then Ty took the hunting knife out and snipped off Tom's left pinkie and Jake let go and kicked him in the side.

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"Aw, aw, aw!" Tom yelled. "You son of a bitch. Aw hell, you son of a bitch."

Ty took Minn by the wrist saying, "He loses a finger a day till we get our thirty-eight hundred back. And sister, your boyfriend better be good because maybe I might want to castrate that dog."

"We'll be back," Jake said as they got in their car and drove away.

"Aw jeez," Tom said. "Aw jeez."

He held onto where his finger had been and his hands were wet with blood.

"I'll go see if I can find you a band-aid or something," Minn said.

Amy, she thought. I forgot about Amy.

CHAPTER TEN

I had come from a feed at the Sally and still had the taste of franks and coffee in my mouth. I looked straight at the side walk as I walked, liking to see the ants file out of a crack, the way we did going to get our food. My stomach was so full it stuck out about four inch and I had a pouch of Top in one pocket and some papers and about nine dollars left from the Joe money.

My mind was on rolling a stogie, my feet watching not to step on the cracks and ants, when I heard the laugh. The two of them were pulled up next to me and I looked at Jimmy sitting shotgun, one arm leaned against the window. Right away I started talking about how I was sorry and hoped there were no hard feelings, my voice so high and quick that I hardly knew it was mine.

I could see the reflections of my arms moving wild-like in Jimmy's glasses, and as I walked up it turned into two faces that were me, like two catfish swimming around in the lenses.

Jimmy told me to get in the back seat. I leaned over and saw the smile on Mike Yoko's face, so I went ahead and climbed in and we burned out and were cruising down the road. Mike had on a baseball cap and he was blasting K-BOB, a lot of oldies, and nodding his head to the music. I could see the bill of the cap rise and fall, which made me feel comfortable, together with the sound of Bobby Darin.

He turned around and asked me if I wanted beer and when I said that sounded fine he pulled up to the drive-up window of the El Torro liquor store. He asked me if I had any money, and I took out the nine dollars, meaning to give him maybe two, because when you don't have a roof to keep the rain out it's better to keep a close watch over what you do have, even if it's little enough. He didn't seem to want to hear about it much though and snatched up the roll and shoved it through the liquor store window, ordering up a sixer of that black beer.

I felt like crying for real when Mike Yoko handed me back my nineteen cents change, but we were speeding right along, the music louder than ever and then on a dirt road, the town below us and a tail of dust blowing around behind. And then I thought it was good to be out there with wheels under me. Wake Up Little Suzy came on, so I nodded my head up and down and looked out the window at how things passed by real fast.

We were up by the dump. Each man had an open beer in his hand and Mike was talking, but I don't think Jimmy hardly opened his mouth. Across from the El Torro liquor store there had been a school yard full of kids, bouncing balls and skipping ropes, happy as could be. I suppose Jimmy went distracted when he saw

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them, or at least that was what Mike Yoko started laughing about, saying that Jimmy liked those little ones.

If he was joking or not, Jimmy didn't deny the thing, and just sat squared behind those silver lensed glasses so you couldn't see his eyes, something that very well might have been a smile jumping across his face.

I thought of me and what I was and who I was and how I couldn't help it. I couldn't help it and it felt good and I couldn't help that.

We were parked and I had a rolled stogie smoking in my mouth. Mike plucked up a rifle from the floor of the car — I thought it was some kind of toy, like a popgun — and then he started shooting at the crows. They flew around over the dump, probably looking to get a little grub and he let go at them. He must have been a good shot, because I could see puffs of feathers blooming off of them, then they would reel to the ground, but usually swoop up before they hit and make skyways again.

They were tough birds.

Still, I didn't half like it. Where I came from it was supposed to be bad luck to shoot buzzards and crows because they kept the land clean. My hair was black like them.

The dump was closed, and we left the car outside the gate and walked in. The two of them made faces and said it smelled bad, but I didn't smell a thing and Mike Yoko laughed. There was just that long sweep that led up to the landfill and plastic wrappers, torn paper and packaging blew around. A lot of useful things were scattered and I picked some of them up thinking that they might come in handy or I could sell them for dollars. There was old furniture that I would have put in my house if I had one, and even without I saw a chair that might have looked pretty nice down by my grate, and certainly more comfortable than the cement.

Jimmy asked me if I liked grubbing around and I told him that I did. Then he asked me what the women thought of that and if they didn't mind kissing garbage lips. The heat came up into my face, and my feelings were right in my cheeks and throat. Haven't you ever kissed a girl before, he asked me, and I lied, my voice coming out weak and quiet so they knew I was scared.

Then Mike Yoko asked Jimmy if he didn't know what my name was, and started saying that I was a spanker. I've seen you driving away with Joe Wheat, he looked at me and me and said, and started talking and laughing about how Joe had told him what it was. You're Rob the Throbbing Knob, he looked at me and said, Rob the Throbbing Knob.

Jimmy was bent double, all teary eyed because he thought it was so funny I guess and I just backed away. The hurt was real bad and I didn't want to be their friend and didn't want to be mine and didn't like who I was or anything else and just wanted to go away from that dump. I remembered and knew that at first I didn't like it and later I did and still later was glad to have it.

They asked me where I was going and I backstepped and saw his eyes and recalled the switch and the pain. I had done wrong to end it the way I had, but understood there and then, when I saw his eyes all funny, that he hadn't forgotten. Something came up inside of me and I up and turned and ran and it was there and so real.

My feet kept moving and moving. I heard Jimmy's voice and slowed and almost stopped, but then there was that laugh and I knew that Mike Yoko was cutting after me. So I let loose on all eight cylinders and trucked right along, scared as ever I was, and not looking back to see. My heart bumped and bumped in my chest and the breath hurt to come in and then I came right up against the edge.

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I was hoping that it was all a big mistake and that there had been no reason to run, but when I turned around Mike Yoko was coming up, jogging right along, fresh and handsome and smiling. Jimmy trotted up behind him and was breathing hard. I could hear my own breath and started to pray inside my head and heart to God. I don't know that I had a good reason to be so scared, but I was and prayed to God, because I still remembered the switch I suppose.

Come on Mike, I said. Come on Mike, can't you leave me alone?

He told me that he didn't want to leave me alone way out there in the country at the dump and started to move towards me and then picked up something and said catch. I don't know what it was, but it hit my arm. There was no pain, but I did not like it and asked him to cut it out.

Jimmy told Mike that he should leave me alone, but then Jimmy threw a few things too, not the same as Mike, but he threw. And so I shielded my face and coward and said, Please, please, and begged to be left alone and they kept laughing and throwing and I kept stepping back and then was looking at the sky. The sky was there, then the ground, then the sky again. Next thing is they are right up on top and I am down in the landfill, flat on my back and hurting for real again.

I figured they would leave me alone down there, or at least not come and get me, and I was half right. They didn't come, but they kept on tossing stuff that hit me in the head and knocked off my cap. It felt like it might have cracked my head and the pain went back over all the way behind one ear.

The crows flew around overhead and cawed and Mike Yoko did too and he sounded just like the crows. Then he started booting the edge of the landfill and heeling it until it slid down. At first it wasn't much, but then it came in big sheets mixed with dirt and knocked me down and sunk me in.

I remembered the roosters and how when they saw a chicken bleed they would get all excited and get pecking until there were no feathers left on the poor thing. I was that poor thing and even heard Jimmy tell Mike Yoko to cool it. But he wouldn't, even when I screamed for help. I felt the thing inside of me and knew and panicked but could not run, turned but could not go.

The dirt was in my mouth and I thought of the Sally and how they feed you on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday, and how it was Tuesday and they would be laying out food on Wednesday. It kept coming and I could not move and then saw the last piece of blue go away. Mike's laughter was still going but not the air. I tried to breath but could not. I thought of the grate and the warm air and how it would be nice to eat and to smoke a stogie of Top and to sleep there and the fear was gone with all the letters so I could read them and actually know.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

And she would be in there with them and I could hear them and I would cover my ears and put my head under the pillow but I could still hear them. Those bastards. That was bad and what can come of something that bad? You, boy, he told himself. You not only can, but did and were born of a bad seed, but take it as it comes, because you can't wish it away. You can't wish it away, so deal . . . I'm sorry for Tom. But Tom's a fool and you shouldn't like fools or feel too sorry for them otherwise you are a fool as well.

Mike Yoko raced down the road, one hand on the steering wheel, the other arm hanging out the window. The money felt firm and good in his pocket and he did not feel badly about what he was doing. He made up his mind not to feel bad and sped down the road and thought deep.

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They would come and unbutton their shirts. I came in and saw her kneeling. I thought she was praying. I thought she was praying. They had hair on their chests and mustaches and I can see the red hair on his chest and I slept in the little bed in the closet. She was in there in the bathroom and I knocked and knocked and then the woman from upstairs heard me crying and yelling and came down and used a hairpin to open the door and I could see her head thrown back and her long blond hair hanging over the edge of the bathtub. I could see her arm and it was white, it was a white woman's arm and everything was red. Jesus, Jesus, the woman said. Jesus, Jesus, and I looked past her to the puddle on the floor and noticed how the window of the room was all fogged over.

He lit a cigarette with the car lighter and decided not to think.

The sun was getting low and the light was profound in its serenity and sadness, ultimately nonexistent and visibly dying. The New Mexico landscape grew dark, collapsed into night and was only comforting in its desolation, its sheer wishlessness.

He had been driving without apparent aim along country roads, intoxicated by deceit and deeply involved in his own private religion and karma, an avatar in a role of American madness. There was a woman, nose hawk-like and eyes like two blackberries set in her face, who he often slept with and often lived with and there were others, and now another.

The cherry of the cigarette glowed red over the steering wheel. He crossed railroad tracks past an old coke chute and stars filled the sky and he found himself going past dwellings which stood like ghosts against the night sky. There were buildings which were empty — long ago gutted, — and others, in the distance, light flickering in far-off windows. The road curled past a rural ball park, then a few empty shops, and he pulled his car up in front of the Mine Shaft Tavern.

Motorcycles and trucks were parked there and on the raised porch large men in leather jackets and leather or denim Harley Davidson vests talked. Their voices were loud and muddy with drink. Mike Yoko took the wad of money out of his pocket, peeled off a fifty-dollar bill and put it in his wallet, then stuffed the wad back in his jeans' pocket.

He walked up the steps and onto the wooden decking of the porch and past the men, but they did not look at him. They were drinking bottles of beer and standing with legs wide apart and joking freely, their voices carrying off into the cricket-filled darkness.

"What'll it be hon'?" the waitress asked when he sat down.

She wore a t-shirt that was tied up under her breasts which were large and bounced and moved as she moved. He did not think she was pretty but liked her breasts which drew his eyes away from her face and the human that was there.

"A Guinness."

"A what?"

"A Guinness stout. It's an Irish beer."

"Hey Joey," the woman shouted behind her. "We got any Irish Beer? This guy wants an Irish beer."

"We've got Mickey's," Joey said. "That's about the only thing Irish we've got."

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"No," Mike Yoko said, "I'll have a Tecate."

"No problem," she said. "We have all kinds of Mexican beer. I haven't ever tried any Irish beer, but we've got all kinds of Mexican beer."

She brought him a can of Tecate and a mug and poured the beer at an angle into the mug until it filled up with an imperfect and short lived head foaming over the top. The stale, hopsy odor reached his nose and he put the mug to his lips and drank.

Three young chicanos sat at one end of the bar and from their expressions and the way they turned their heads Mike Yoko could tell that they were talking about him. He could tell but it did not bother him and he was not worried.

A boy with long, red hair threw darts and Mike Yoko watched him. He was very good and the darts always went into or very near the bull's-eye, extending out of the boy's hand and sucked in by the board. The boy could not have been above eighteen years old, let alone twenty-one, and he drank bottled beer and threw darts and his eyes were only slightly less red than his hair.

The men at the bar laughed and talked low and one of them came over, slightly stumbling, and leaned against the table, his eyes bloodshot and distant in the land of drink. He had a thin growth of mustache and a very Indian face and he was short but well built.

"Hey, my friends see that you like the Mexican beer and think maybe you would like to buy them a drink."

"No. I wouldn't."

"No? You don't like drinking with the boys? We thought you might like drinking with the boys."

"I would love to drink with the boys if the boys pay. I don't want to pay for the boys."

"You hear that Myron? He says you gotta pay."

"Cool him off Leonard."

"They say I should cool you off cavron."

"I thought I was pretty damn cool already."

"Cool him Leonard."

The bikers who had been standing outside were now at the door and looking in with smiles on their faces.

"Leonard couldn't cool a son of a bitch," one of them said.

"They say I couldn't cool a son of a bitch, cavron. Are you a son of a bitch?"

"Yes."

"Alla vedgas! He says his mother's a bitch."

And a whore, he thought.

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He could see the look of stupid yet committed violence in Leonard's eyes but did not care. He was beyond caring and mere mortality seemed distant, fictional and altogether apart from him.

"Are you a bearded woman gringo? You look like a bearded woman."

To hell with it, he thought. I am a son of a bitch and a whore so to hell with it.

The dart flew across the room, a continuation of the boy's arm and then Mike Yoko found himself up against something hard, a hundred bubbles popping in his jaw and under his eye in further accents of red.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The labels shone brand new and attractive through the big glass pane of the refrigerator door. Tom opened the door, took out a six-pack of Negro Modelo and walked with it up to the counter.

"Pack of Camels and a quart of Gordon's Gin," he said.

"Looks like you got the whole Indian Nation waiting for you out there," the man behind the counter commented, putting the bottle and cigarettes in a paper bag.

"Oh him," Tom replied, turning his head and looking out the liquor store window. "That's only one Indian. I was hitch-hiking and he gave me a ride into town and he says he wants me to buy him a beer, and I say fine, and I'm figuring it's not really the same as a wet back because, when it comes right down to it, he's more American than us."

"Eighteen forty-six."

"What?"

"That'll be eighteen dollars and forty-six cents."

Tom put a twenty dollar bill on the counter, pocketed his change and went outside holding the paper bag in the crook of his arm.

"You got the medicine?" Joe the Sky asked as Tom sat down in the car.

"I bought some beer."

"I see a bottle in there friend. Beer is good stuff, but I can tell you're a man crazy about the medicine as I am. I know one when I see one. You don't need to tell me about beer — I know what I see."

"I bought the dew for later. I bought it for tonight. I don't want to open it until tonight. I don't want to get all liquored up in the middle of the day and then be so stone drunk by the time the sun sets that I'm not good for anything but watering the flowers."

"We'll take the war pony down by the arroyo and drink your beer and I will just try a little medicine and you can keep the rest for later."

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Joe the Sky turned the key in the ignition, put the car in drive and pulled off onto the street. He bent to the passenger's side, opened the glove box and took out one of six or seven cassettes, slipping the cassette into the cassette player and turning up the volume. A guitar slashed out like a chain saw and vocals cried out in absolute terror and abandon. The beat and rhythm, though without beauty, formed a backdrop that brightened Tom's awareness of existing as a living being. He felt the music become a part of him and knew that this was his story and would always remain with him, inside of him, cool and impenetrable. He looked out through the streaked window and felt the motion beneath him, grinding and shockless. The stucco houses were out there as well as the citizens, and the car sped through a yellow traffic light, maneuvered through streets and over the old bridge.

They parked the car, got out and sat on the edge of the arroyo. Cottonwood trees grew up around the edge of the arroyo, though on the opposite bank none grew, or at least very few. Sagebrush and bushes lined the embankment, forming a shelter from the road.

Tom lit a cigarette with his lighter and then opened a Negro Modelo with the back end of the lighter and handed it to Joe the Sky. He opened another Negro Modelo and took a long drink. The beer was cold and tasted very good with the cigarette.

"Cigarette me," said Joe the Sky.

Tom handed him a cigarette and the lighter and Joe the Sky took the cigarette, broke the filter off, flicked it away and then lit the broken end of the cigarette, the loose tobacco flaring up.

"So white man, what happened to the finger?"

"It got caught in a salami slicer."

"Salami slicer?"

"Sure Chief. I was making salami sandwiches and not paying attention and cut my little finger off."

He lifted the bottle of beer and drank hard, frustration thinly hidden in the motion, betrayed by the gaunt look up of his features. A drop of beer ran down his chin, or where it should have been, and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The cigarette was back in his mouth and he let it hang there, drawing on it.

"I've got a feeling you're a crazy white man. I've got a feeling that you're a crazy son of a bitch. When you get drunk I bet that you are a crazy son of a bitch. Are you a crazy son of a bitch?"

"Sometimes when I get drunk I'm a crazy son of a bitch, but not the way you think. I'm a stupid son of a bitch."

"Don't put yourself down man. Give me the medicine and when I get drunk I will be a crazy son of a bitch and a stupid son of a bitch but I don't care. Live free man. You know it. You know it. We all have to live free and keep the man off our asses and keep right by the spirit."

Tom took the bottle of Gordon's Gin out of the paper bag, unscrewed the top and took a pull, chasing it with the last swallow of Negro Modelo. He handed the bottle to Joe the Sky who pulled hard and then set the bottle down between them.

That's a hell of a way to drink, thought Tom. That was a damn drink alright.

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He could feel the piney sensation of the gin burning lightly in his stomach. It shrouded the guilt, then tingling warm punctured the continuum of his pain.

Marching to the tune of a different drummer, he thought.

He opened another Negro Modelo, took a deep drink and then oscillated the remaining liquid in the bottle. The shade of the cottonwood trees was pleasant and on the opposite bank, in the sun, there was an anthill. From where he sat he could see the ants move and, though himself cool, understood the heat of the hill.

They had to cut me out like that, he thought. They *would* have to buy me out for a few lousy thousand dollars, him disparaging me like I was nothing and not the brother that had to wipe his ass when he couldn't even do that. It is a lot to lose in twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours or seventy-two hours, to lose sobriety. Hell, a whole pound of Mexi and then thirty-eight hundred dollars. But don't sweat it, he told himself. Your luck is what it is. Just enjoy things while they last hombre. You still have a few things to enjoy, so enjoy them.

And then he saw the bottle, its shimmer and translucence, and how it was raised up one-hundred and eighty degrees, disappearing in rapid fluidity down the other man's throat.

"Go easy on that goddamn stuff," he said, grabbing the bottle away. "I wanted to save this for later. I don't want to be so drunk I can't see straight and its still light out."

"You don't have to be drunk. I need to be drunk, but I never said you had to."

"Sure."

The piney taste was in his mouth again and he could see the tree branches loose and placid, drifting like moss underwater.

"You know that I'm a white man," Joe the Sky said. He had the Gordon's Gin once more and he spoke, holding the bottle in expectation, "My father died on the rez and then my mother married a white man; I don't know where she met him but he married her and then out on his ranch she cooked beans and tortillas and he beat me with his belt, and we used an outhouse under the apple tree. I reached for the tortilla and his teeth were in my arm and he's telling me that I have to say 'please pass the tortillas' or 'please pass the salt' and if I want something I have to ask for it . . . Learn some manners. Then she was sick and the school wouldn't take me any more. I was an angry kid; angry as hell. I used the outhouse under the apple tree till I was seventeen years old. And the school wouldn't take me any more and when we buried her he looks at me and says that I better pack my spurs. So there I am in Gallup, walking up and down main street and the Sheriff's grabbing my ass and throwing me in jail. I was all liquored up and he's grabbing me by the pants' seat and throwing me in jail."

"You're not the first man to go to jail."

"I know jailbird, but my people don't like that. It kills something inside us. Something dies inside us. The real medicine dies inside us and is all we're left with is this stuff. The gringos take away what you have, take away your mother and what you have and in the end leave you with nothing. You're not white, you're not Indian, you're nothing."

"I'm white."

"What?"

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"I'm white and you're an Indian."

His hand was around the bottle and the other man's was around the neck. There was that haggard desperation before him, a meaty, puffy feeling and the earth under him and in him, abrasive against his face and he saw the sky blue pink and felt the gentle stillness of evening.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were the lilac bushes and he was behind them, his stomach like a whirlpool and arms drawn inside his shirt, crossed, hands feeling soft, alcohol loose pectoral muscles. He looked out through the foliage at the pure, even morning light and did not think, did not want to or dare to, his eyes tired, lower lip tucked beneath his mustache which thus almost ran down onto his neck, without chin or lip to offset it from the rest of his body.

That predominate sense of failure swirled around inside of him and he rose and batted dirt, dried leaves and twigs off the seat of his pants and came out onto the empty lot. There were beer cans scattered through the weeds and high green grass and pigweed. The trail led out to a dirt lot where cars were parked and then there was the paved road and people driving along it like the world was an absolutely safe and insoluble place, their faces absorbed in an apparent mirage of satisfaction far separate from the silent and ever-present turmoil that ran through it all.

The road led up to the very liquor store where he had been the previous day. He knew that it could not be before ten in the morning, because, when he pulled the handle, the door swung open and he went in.

"You looking for the hair of the dog?" the man behind the counter said. "Shit. I knew when I saw that Indian out there waiting for you that you were in for a hell of a time. You take my advice and lay off for today though. You don't look so hot, so if I was you I would just take a break and lay off today."

"A cup of coffee," Tom said. "— And a fifth of Smirnoff."

"Yes sir. You've got a mustache so I guess you're over twenty-one. They're not paying me nine dollars an hour to implement social changes."

He picked out a small package of oatmeal cookies and put them on the counter where the cup of coffee was and the man put them in the paper bag with the fifth and took the wrinkled twenty dollar bill that Tom offered him.

Outside he took a sip of the coffee and felt its warmth go down into him and then his stomach jolt. He was unscrewing the fifth, but before the top even came off he was over in the weeds, his insides burning in his mouth and coming out. Afterwards he took a drink of the fifth and then emptied half the cup of coffee onto the dirt and filled it the rest of the way from the fifth. He walked and drank the luke warm liquor mixture and felt much better and opened the little pack of oatmeal cookies and dunked them in the mixture and ate them.

His thumb was out and his mind far away when the pick-up truck pulled along side and the driver flicked his head back toward the bed of the truck. Tom climbed in and called out thanks and his destination, and then they were moving along the State Highway, him hunched up against the cab, the wind blowing through his hair and whistling in his ears. They turned off on the county road and drove past the state penitentiary, but he did not look over, just knew it was there like he always knew. It was something he dreamed of at night and

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remembered during the day and did not fear any more than a man fears death but did himself equate with death and all finality. Its towers stuck up from amidst the foreground of sagebrush, not ominously, just plainly and without mystery.

The truck pulled off at the last Quickstop, in front of the gas pumps, and the man got out of the cab and from beneath the shade of his cowboy hat informed Tom that he would not be going any further along the county road. Tom thanked the man again, without smiling, simply shaking his hand and speaking, looking into the dark patch where the other's features were, wrinkled and weather beaten.

His feet moved. He could feel his skin dirty and dry and the New Mexico dust blew up around him. In the distance turkey vultures moved high in the air, black and slow, with infinite patience and void of tenderness. They circled, and out beyond could be seen the dark blue sawblade of mountains veiled by the atmosphere.

The county road stretched out, winding through the low hills of cracked rock and dry dirt, cactus and cedar, and Tom could hear the sound of his feet as they ground the sand that lay between them and the black top. He looked ahead at the silent stripe of yellow that receded over the next dip in the road and reappeared much smaller further on as it wrapped itself around a bend of red-rock. From a distance behind him came the purr of tires and he slowly turned his body around, walked backward, his thumb to the wind.

It's that son of a bitch, he thought. Of all people it has to be that son of a bitch.

The passenger door swung open.

"Get in," Mike Yoko said.

Tom sat shotgun and looked over and saw how puffed up and bruised it was and how one eye could barely open, dark blue like the skin of a dead duck. Mike Yoko drove with his left hand on the wheel, his right laying limp on his lap.

"You too?" Mike Yoko grinned.

"Yes."

He could feel a kind of whinnying pain as he said it and could hear the crunching in his neck as he turned his head away.

"I'm sorry about that money, but you can see that I tried not to let it go. I thought I could trust him and then he got hold of the money and him and his buddy beat me. If there had been one it would not have happened. I tried to get it back but I couldn't. I am going to get your friends their money though. You don't need to worry about that."

"I paid them."

"Well, I'll get you the money, don't worry. You can see I got beat up and would have done anything to not have let this happen."

"You think you can get me the money?"

"You're damn skippy I'm going to get you the money. Hell, you think I would let you hang? I'm not going to let you hang. I got burned, but I'll be damned if I let you get burned . . . Did they do that to you? Did they mess you up like that?"

SHADOW OF THE SUN

"No. They cut this off. An Indian messed me up. I got drunk and he messed me up."

"Fuck."

Tom thought briefly about the truth and what it was, but realized that it did not matter; to him it no longer mattered what was true and what was right. No conscious decision had been made, yet a way lay before him jointly detrimental and severe, an inevitable groove beyond all thought and profound in its hopelessness. He did not care what happened, would always happen, and spiritually or metaphysically resigned himself to his fate. There was just that dull pain, that difficulty in thinking, a further difficulty in acting.

Mike Yoko drove along the back roads, one hand on the steering wheel, eyes squinting from the smoke that curled before them. Even with his wrecked face, that look of sly impassivity remained, that look of bounty killer, absolutely calculating and impulsive without any actual contradiction.

"This will have to do for now. It's all I've got, but it will have to do for now."

There were two fifty dollar bills folded in Tom's hand. Mike Yoko still drove with one hand on the steering wheel, the other laying limp and motionless on his lap and the bills seemed to have been delivered mysteriously and incorporeally. Tom held them and felt their money softness, without absolute value yet outwardly symbolic of lives of pain and suffering, of the work of millions and the power of a few.

Take what you can get, he thought. Just take what you can get and what's coming to you and to hell with it. There's no justice now. There's no justice, so just take what you can get and to hell with it.

Aubra sat on the chopping block in front of the trailer. She smoked a hand rolled cigarette and sat there while the dogs barked. Her glasses were shiny with reflected light and Mike Yoko could not see her eyes, but knew that she was looking at him. By the way she started moving around on the chopping block he could tell that she was looking at him, and as Tom got out of the car he handed him six cigarettes and told him to give them to Aubra.

"Ok," said Tom. "It looks like she is here all by herself and doesn't have anything else to do but smoke cigarettes. Zango never buys her any prefabs, so she'll be grateful to get these."

"I'm going."

"To Amy's?"

"To Minn's."

"I might see you there later. I might drop by."

"What's the walk like?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes if you walk over the hill."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Then the man said to get in there, he thought. He said to get in there and he had that big red jaw. And when I was in there I could still see through the door and he and the other men were laughing and drinking coffee out of paper cups and acting like they were at a Sunday picnic. Then she saw me looking and closed the door, her pants tight like they didn't fit, like they were her kid brother's or something. But I could still see the hand laying over the edge of the white tub, one finger slightly extended and immobile. That floor was dripping wet and water pink and I could hear them laughing.

Hell, he told himself. Just let it go. That's not a way to live, thinking like that. You gave Tom a hundred dollars without any more grounds than stupidity and here you are running around with plenty of money and more to come and you can't think straight. Get it together. You've got a woman to keep your bed warm, another waiting for you in the wings, a full tank of gas and a pocket full of smoke. You're lucky brother. You're all that and more and you're lucky.

He was in front of Minn and Amy's place and got out of the car and went to the door. Minn was standing there in khaki pants with her hands in her pockets. She leaned against the door jamb and her face was very still and unreadable.

"How is Amy?" he asked. "I came to see how she was. She looked a little sick when I was here before. I was concerned."

"You're a real sweetheart aren't you?"

"What?"

"You might not look as good as you did the other day, but you're still a real sweetheart coming out here to check on my sister. When she starts talking again I'm sure that she will thank you personally. My family has always had a soft spot for sweet hearts like you. She just wants a way to express her gratitude, that's all."

Amy sat at the kitchen table. Her eyes were vacant and her jaw slack. She looked at Mike Yoko without apparent recognition.

"I even have to feed her," Minn said. "I have been thinking that I should take her to see a doctor, but I have not gotten around to it. If I have a chance I will tomorrow, because I am sick of spoon feeding her and having to take her to the outhouse. She's alive, but she is not the same. She can't talk, so she is not quite the same. Whatever you gave her might not have killed her, but neither did it do her a whole lot of good."

Minn made coffee and Mike Yoko rolled a grifa and then they smoked and drank the coffee. Even though Amy was sitting there, Mike Yoko took hold of Minn. He kissed her on the lips and felt her breasts.

"Cut it out; she's right there."

"She can't tell," he said. "She is right there, but she can't tell what we are doing."

Minn was not sure what her sister understood, but her and Mike Yoko went into the back bedroom and made love three times. Then they smoked cigarettes and another grifa and Minn lay back and stared at the vigas. An oblong block of light came in through the one little window and lit up a patch of the bed and she felt its warmth through the sheet and then opened her eyes and the patch was across the room, against the wall, and he was no longer next to her.

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She got up, put on her shirt and khaki pants, and went into the kitchen. Amy was still there, her head slumped against her chest, a thin string of drool hanging from her open and decayed mouth. Minn lit the stove beneath the water kettle and began to make coffee. Then she saw that the back door was open and went and he was coming down over the hill, walking sideways, stirring up dust and galloping down the hill. As he approached he waved one hand, laughed nervously and batted the dust from his pants' legs.

"I just went for a walk," he said.

"You needed fresh air, did you?"

"Yes."

"It's funny I didn't take you for a natural person. I didn't take you for a natural person and then we make love three times and when I wake up you're climbing around in the hills, just like you have tons of energy — Just like a young buck. You're quite a man Mike Yoko. I was tired out from what we did, but it looks like you had tons of energy left over."

"I wanted to take a walk. I needed some fresh air."

"Yes."

The water kettle whistled and they went inside and she poured the boiling water through the coffee filter. The comforting, nutty aroma filled the air and she poured the coffee into pottery mugs, added milk and sugar and they drank. The back door was left open and a fly came in and buzzed through the silent room carrying with it the energy and gravity of the fall day outside. Then Tom was at the backdoor, the old ten-speed bicycle over one shoulder, its two tires flat.

"Hello," he said.

He left the bicycle outside and came in.

"What are you doing with that? Mike Yoko asked. "You're supposed to ride *it*, not the other way round."

Tom was very serious. His mustache slumped down over his lips in a frown.

"They kicked me out," he said. "I should have expected it, but I didn't hardly. I was going to take the bike and ride into town, but then I realized that the tires were flat. I didn't want to even look back, so I just up and took it and climbed over the hill."

"What's it all about?" Minn asked. "I don't think that your father would kick you out."

"He would not kick me out. He wouldn't kick me out, but he did. It's Zango. It's Zango and, I hate to say it, but you too Mike. It might not be your fault directly, but they didn't like me bringing you around from the get go, then that money we lost, forget about my finger, but that money. And now Zango says that I am going from bad to worse and they tell me I had better go into town and look for a room to rent. Nobody needs to ask me twice, so here I am."

"I'm not renting rooms if that is what you mean," she said.

"No. I want a ride in. Yoko can give me a ride in."

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"It sounds like it is about the least he can do."

They finished the coffee, smoked another grifa, and then Tom put the bicycle in the back seat of the car and they drove to town. He said that he wanted to get the tires repaired so that he would have transportation. When they got to town Mike Yoko took him to the bicycle shop and left him there. Tom went inside, carrying the ten speed over one shoulder.

"I want to get this repaired," he said. "The tires are flat and I came in to get them repaired."

The young man behind the counter looked bewildered.

"What do you want?"

"To get these tires repaired. They're flat; I want to get them repaired."

"You want to buy a patch kit?"

"Did I say I wanted to buy a patch kit? I want to get the tires repaired."

"Well, we don't usually do that."

"What do you do? This is a bicycle shop, isn't it?"

"We sell and repair bicycles, but we don't usually work on old flats like that. I could sell you a patch kit for two-dollars and fifty cents and then you can repair it yourself. If I do it it will cost you too much."

"That's what I want. I want you to repair the tires."

The young man finally took the bicycle and went into the work room to repair the tires. He obviously did not want to, but saw that he had little choice.

"That will be sixteen dollars," he said when he had finished.

"Sixteen dollars?" Tom said. "That sounds like an awful lot for repairing two old tires. You said it would cost a lot, but you didn't say that it would be sixteen dollars."

"Twenty-four dollars an hour for labor and I spent forty minutes repairing those tires. They had a lot of holes sir . . . I didn't charge for parts."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When he started up the car it was still dark. There were emotions inside of him as yet undefined. It was not only hate against the other, but also against the self; antipathy directed not only at the creator but the creation.

Both anger and a grim satisfaction played on his face as he rolled down the window. The car bumped along the dirt road and then contacted the pavement and the headlights followed the broken yellow stripe that centered the road and the cool and whistling air of the morning brushed against him, and hopefully abolished the smell of the other.

The road followed the outlying hills, past habitations, and circumvented the body of the town. With one hand

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he fingered the wallet which he had set on the passenger seat. There were credit cards and cash. He could not determine how much of the latter, but could feel the crispy newness and minute substantiality.

The filth was there, lingering at the edge, but the tree spotted hills became backed by a gray and soft light and the stars melted into the horizon. The way led toward the mountains and high above the road sat the houses of the rich. The car, which was a Volkswagen Rabbit, had very little pick-up and slowed at the increasing grade and labored as its owner had for breath.

He passed an early morning jogger and later the piñons gave way to larger pines which were still dark and the rising mountains did not let in the morning light. He tried the radio and heard the songs, or pieces of songs, of Credence Clearwater Revival, Kenny Rogers and a woman called Madonna, but then turned it off in disgust, because they did not speak to him and did not tap or deflate his suffering.

The road spilled down into a grotto and was railed off on one side where the drop was. The bottom was littered with boulders of uneven size and shape and then the road began to climb again. It wound up and into the National Forest. To his left a meadow opened up which was high with yellowing grass and olive green mullein, whose velvety flowers were to him gross and reminiscent. They were a phallic host, the totem and taboo and a stream ran alongside the road and it fed the massive trunks of trees, poison hemlock and mugwort.

Trucks were parked in front of the outpost where the rangers worked and he passed this. The grade increased and he downshifted into third gear. There were deer which came in the morning to drink from the stream and on the surface he acknowledged them as they broke and ran. That there were sacrifices he knew and self sacrifices and things sacred and human sacrifice. The light touched the top of trees high up on a ridge and, as he came around a bend, he saw the distant summit of the mountain, yellow with fall color.

The car labored up, into the mountains, and the pine trees became interspersed with the changing aspens. A truck was pulled off at a parking area to the left, and without thought Monte pulled the Volkswagen Rabbit in along side. The engine of the pick up truck was running, but there was no person in the cab.

Monte put the wallet in his pocket, opened the door of the Volkswagen Rabbit and stepped onto the gravel of the parking area. A trail led off, through the trees, and he walked and felt the cool of the high altitude morning and heard the sound of a bird deep in the shade of the forest. He stepped over the big roots that crossed the trail and saw footprints in the dust and saw fallen trees that lay propped against others, and some that were broken or completely fallen.

It was not on the trail, but off to one side. At first blue, and then black, and then a stripe of white, as he approached, his mind not in the forest, but back there, in degradation and dirtied by shame. It was not of nature and might have been clothing or a duffle bag. He linked it, in some way, to personal gain, and nearly grabbed at it.

And then he saw how the buttocks were prone up and the pants stretched over them and the back of the jacket stretched forward and the small of the back exposed and it was the skin of flesh. The limbs were thrown in disorder. He stepped back, repulsed and saw how the fingers clung to it. The head was buried in the leaves. He could just see the black, oily hair.

There was the silence of silence and then the bird that sat perched deep in the shade of the forest cried out and the wind came from on high and blew through the trees and he moved back to the trail.

The way lay through the big shade pines and the spindly, whitish gray trunks of the aspens shone, with their golden leaves. In the small meadow, that the trail went down and through, there were wild geraniums, toadflax and dandelions whose flowered heads were white. Stinging nettle grew toward the edge of the

meadow and he walked through and beneath the tall trees, then down and into the lower forest.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dearest mother!

I cried last night. I am sorry, but I must insist that we continue to eat those cucumber salads. After all, it is not my fault that friends are merely for a day.

You are the only one who really knows me, and I still blush when you call me sweet. Yes, you have a son, and I dreamed last night that I searched throughout your kitchen for some pudding. I could not find it, and awoke, alone in tears.

Do not blame Uncle Jack. After all, am I not here for you to take care of? For me, you are irreplaceable, and the dumplings that you cook are more than just a meal. They are a simple fare, but a comfort food.

Do you not notice, at Thanksgiving, when it is just the two of us, how happy I am? You have often suggested that I should invite a guest, but some things are best left private, and the candles we burn on those special occasions do wonders to your skin. I will remember you just so, smiling when I put out my plate for seconds.

What kind of a flower would you be if you could choose? I have always imagined you as a white orchid, with your stem long and slender, and your petals opening up with golden pollen.

I myself am a rose. My red color does much to attract, but also repels. I cannot help it that when I am picked I prick, but for you I will always exude perfume and dew — Yes, all these years it has been me absconding with your special soaps, the avocado, myrrh, jasmine, and those shaped like plums and other fruits. It has been an ongoing joke, because you must have known where they went, along with your stockings.

But you have been a lenient and good mother. Your little boy will not leave you for the others. If I were a brave man I would pluck out my moist and beating heart and sacrifice it, adorned with silver, at the alter of the matriarch — See, it is true what you have always said, about my romantic notions.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was a little after ten in the morning and Tom sat on the curb, the bicycle propped up next to him. He pulled a miniature of Jose Cuervo tequila from his pocket, drank it in two separate swallows and then chased it with coffee from a Styrofoam cup.

There is no need for reluctance now, he thought. That got washed away. Whatever chance you had to play it cool got washed away when your brother disrespected you and him and Dad said to rent a room in town. Just play with the hand that is dealt you, he told himself. If your mama dropped you on your head and now your dysfunctional, grin it like a man, bear it like a man, but damn well go down swinging.

He opened the paper bag that was next to him and took out the pair of pantyhose. They were tan and very sheer and made him think of sexual intercourse. He opened up his Swiss army knife and cut one leg off the pair and threw the other away and then pulled the remaining pantyhose leg down over his face. It pressed down his nose and was tight against his lips and filled him with a sense of otherness and subtly erotic urgency akin to the brutal. He picked up the paper bag, got on the bicycle and rode up to the walk-up window of the

bank.

When he got to the window he took the .38 snub-nosed revolver out of the paper bag and pointed it at the teller. She smiled at first and then, when she understood, became very frightened.

"What you want? What do you want?" she gasped.

"The money," he said, putting the barrel of the .38 against the plexi-glass window.

"Don't do nothing. Don't hurt. Yes sir, just don't hurt me."

She started unloading the money from her cash drawer into the sliding customer interaction drawer. She was behind that plexi-glass window and would not have been hurt even if Tom had fired the gun, but apparently did not take this into consideration or did not trust her life to a transparent sheet. Behind her the other bank personnel could be seen working, unaware of the occurrence.

Tom filled the paper bag with the money from the customer interaction drawer, thanked the teller and rode away. He moved along a back street and then crossed the acequia and then got off the bicycle and carried it down into the acequia. Only a thin trickle of water ran late in the year and the bed was dark green with dried algae and, where the water ran, light green with strands of slime.

He tried riding the bicycle down in the acequia, but then heard the distant whine of sirens and stowed it in bushes off to one side.

The acequia led back behind houses and the cinderblock walls of their yards butted up against the thick foliage. His feet splashed through the trickle of water and his hand grasped the paper bag. The sirens approached where he was or where he had been, he could not tell. He did not know if he had been seen climbing down into the acequia.

There was a bridge and cars and he ran through and under the bridge. It was cool and he leaned back against the rocks. He could hear the cars overhead and smell the acrid, ruinous odor of the underbelly of the bridge.

"That is the second time in two days that someone has called me sir," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I was thinking about you," he said. "I know that you were angry at me and that I don't know you very well, you probably do not want to know me, but I kept on thinking about you."

She was silent and looked at him from inside and he was outside. He could see the roots of her hair, which were gray, and knew that she was not a young woman.

"You can come in," she said. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I have been frustrated lately, women get that way you know, and sleeping with a man was the wrong thing to do."

"You mean sleeping with me."

"I mean sleeping with you or any man without love, with only margaritas and loneliness. It wasn't your fault. I asked you over and, well . . ."

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The silence was painful for him. It was filled with the unsaid, which was the meat of his life. She was not a young woman, but he longed to be fed as well as warmth and solvency.

They sat down in the living room and she offered him a drink. She could smell the liquor on his breath, but he did not appear to be especially drunk, so she opened a bottle of white wine and poured two glasses. They drank and the wine was fresh and cold and brought with it hope, for whatever it was worth.

"What is in the bag?" she asked. "If it's a chicken salad sandwich you're treating it awfully rough."

"I'm in trouble and don't have any place to go and came here."

"That was nice of you."

"I sure would like to know you better. I know that I am not as classy as you are, but I sure would like to know you better. I just bet that you are lonely like you said you were and you might not have liked what you saw that first night, but if you got to seeing more you might like what you saw."

"I've seen an awful lot Tom. I've seen you and I've seen seen men besides you and I've married and I've been divorced."

"I could show you something though. Something I don't even know about so, you couldn't possibly. It's been driving me up the wall, all this, and now I feel relaxed. This wine tastes good and your house is classy and I'm relaxed and ok, and I know everything will be ok."

It was dark when he again opened his eyes. He knew he was alone and that the house was empty, but not beyond that.

"You were tired," he told himself, "and that wine puts you to sleep before it gets you drunk. Perfect drink for a lush."

Tom did not turn on the light but sat up, felt for his cigarettes and lit one, the paper match exposing the oval of his face and then expiring in the ashtray.

"You're stupider than a brick wall," he said to himself, because he remembered.

"You are just that stupid . . . If I get away with this one," he said to himself. "If I get away with this it'll be a miracle and I'll try to live half way clean, by god I'll try."

The smoke, that he could only see by the streak of moonlight or streetlight that came through the window, volumed out of his mouth and then he heard. He did not realize what it was at first because it was very low. Then the dog next door barked, and he heard the slither of tires slowly turning on a dirt road, slow and predatory way, but the give away was the radio.

Tom could feel his stomach move and he did not know where the bag was and did not know whether to get out. He looked through the window that overlooked the front yard and at first did not see anything. Then the gate opened and one came in, walking low, the glint of pistol uptilted. The static radio was clearly audible, with its clipped, muffled voices and there was more slithering of tires.

"A goddamned pack of them," Tom said.

SHADOW OF THE SUN

She was not there. Whatever else it was, it was a cycle, with a few smiles and a great deal of pain and the scar on his head that still left him hungry, with the desire to be fed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The dogs, Adolph and Shadow, barked and bared their teeth. Adolph's legs were taugth and he barked, stepped forward in challenge and barked again.

"Anyone home?" Mike Yoko called out, but there was no answer aside from the jarring outbursts of the animals.

The Volkswagen Van was not there and Aubra was not sitting on the chopping block. Mike Yoko walked cautiously to the trailer, slowly pursued by the muscular body and bared teeth of Adolph, with Shadow just behind. He tried the door, but it was locked. The window was dirty, but could be looked through, and he saw the humble and unclean interior. The table of the kitchenette was there and on it the refuse of the drug and a .44 magnum pistol, its long barrel dark and apparent and reminiscent of the morbid male subconscious.

He felt the induration and considered breaking through the door to take what was there, but the dogs were becoming more alarmed and other reasons also prevented him.

"Shut up," he said. "I'm going, I'm going."

Just keep on track, he thought as he drove away. Don't throw up the mother load for a nugget.

He thought of Tom and Aubra, Jack and Zango, Amy and Minn. Don't go there, he told himself. No sir, I won't, he replied. I will do my duty by the devil and have hell to pay. The wicked might suffer, but I guess just a little bit less than the good. They stood around and laughed. I was not supposed to see, but saw, her arm and red and red and red. They took me outside. The neighbors were there and I heard them talking about us, about her like she was no good and me, like I needed their pity. You don't need it brother, he told himself. You don't need it or another, or god help you Minn. The woman's pants were all tight like they were her kid brother's and I could see the way they hugged up and clinched like camel toes. She told me she was going to take me to get ice-cream and then I was in the front seat of her car and the radio coming on and off, the neighbors looking over and their foul mouths moving.

He lit a cigarette with the cigarette lighter from the car, took a long drag and angrily flicked away the first bit of ash.

The ice cream wasn't all you got, he told himself. You got ice-cream and a whole lot more. There was the agency and then Ivy and Len Burton and they made a dollar or two off your hide. They had me and the rest of them and they had religion, he thought. Dinner was served and everyone clasped their hands and prayed, but I did not pray to god and would not say grace. The corners you sat in boy, he told himself. And then there was her and you were thirteen then and I guess she was about eleven. There was that hole in the bushes and we climbed in and she lifted it up and pulled them off.

There was no car parked in front of the wattle fence. He felt the induration again and half wished that Minn would be there after all. There was a reason he knew, and another which he did not want to.

Mike Yoko shut the door of the car and stood listening. There was no sound except that of the cottonwoods down by the creek and the creek itself. The leaves rustled and then a bird sang from a branch. He looked over and saw the small bird shoot up from the yellowing fall foliage. It bowed around and then descended into the

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branches of the cottonwoods and Russian olives further down the creek.

He went into the yard and onto the porch. The screen door was shut, but the wooden door was open behind that and he knocked on the edge of the screen door and heard the hollow, clattering resonance.

"Anyone home?" he shouted. "Anyone home?"

The feeling had begun to build in his chest, though only slight. It was like many things and did not worry him. He opened the screen door, went inside and saw her.

The eyes, accusatory, and shot with desperate light, stared up at him and the lips quivered.

"Amy? Are you ok Amy? . . . For a minute there I thought you were going to tell me something. I guess not, huh? I guess you're still not up to talking, but when you are I guess I'll have hell to pay. I was looking for Minn, but since she's not around I thought I would step out back and go for a little walk."

The eyes did not move. A thin strand of saliva threaded out of the mouth and broke away onto the floor. There was dullness once more and the apparent recognition an illusion; the woman remained almost allegorical in her representation of greed, hate, pain and abused lust.

He walked through the dark room, out the back door and into the light. The slope was under his feet and he stepped from foothold to foothold, avoiding the patches of cholla cactus and the other small cactus that sat sunk in the dry earth. He stuck close to the cedars and small pine trees where he could and moved quickly up to the crest of the hill.

The view rolled out on all sides, bubbles of reddish earth dotted with sparse growth, in the middle distance certain hills rising like young and erect breasts behind which loomed the blue block of mountains to one side and, to the other, the atmosphere veiled saw blade of peaks.

There's gold in them there hills, he thought and laughed nervously to himself.

He moved, stepping on rocks and patches of weed where he could, though disturbing the dry earth nonetheless. A jackrabbit shot out from behind a piñon, disappeared over the ridge of the hill and, moments later, reappeared ascending the next hill. It stopped and looked back, then darted into the seclusion of the rough country.

From where Mike Yoko stood he could see the dirt road down below. He followed its line with his eyes and saw the place where the clearing was carved out of the hillside and the fabricated top of the trailer. The line of the road was clear and, to the extent of his vision, without rising clouds of dust.

He walked over the country between the trailer and Minn and Amy's adobe shack. The earth was uneven and full of gulches where the water flowed when the rain came and made the rock smooth. Aside from cactus, there was much yucca and the dried pods stuck out from the nests of sharp leaves. The random patches of scrub oak were where he looked, because the thick foliage, which also changed tone with the season, offered cover for other things.

Along the slope of a certain hill, amidst a patch of scrub oak that pressed near a cedar, he found it. The odor attracted him first, which was redolent as incense and repulsive, though not to him. The rich foliage blended in with the scrub oak imperfectly and the broad leaves fanned out in the sun.

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He took a black plastic trash bag out of one pocket and then his pocketknife. He severed the flowering stalks, gripping them with one hand and applying the blade of the knife with the other. His hands became tainted with the dark resin as he worked and he worked quickly, with base and agitated joy, until the plants were left stripped of their virgin buds, in intention, if not in truth, raped.

The bag was full and the sun cast his shadow over the rough earth. There were others, many, and also an empty plastic trash bag in one pocket of his jeans. He walked toward where the trailer was, leaving the full trash bag to pick up on his way back.

The places in between the hills where water, when it came, fed patches of plant life were where he looked. The ground was covered with colorful rocks and occasional obsidian. Prickly pear cactus were ripe with their red fruit. In the distance he heard a dog bark and knew it was Adolph, though he also knew, or suspected, that his own scent could be carried that way. There was a slight breeze, and having come that far he continued, and as a dog might, he once again smelled the aroma, redolent as incense and repulsive.

The pocketknife was in his hand. He began to violate the hole and laughed to himself, soft and high pitched. The barking was louder, but his work was done and the second black plastic trash bag lay full on the dry and infertile New Mexico soil. He turned toward the ridge of the hill. The dog, Adolph was there and barked, his body stiff with aggression.

The movement was perceived by his eyes, but not before, it seemed. He felt pain spidering out across his leg and one on his back and then he registered the shots. He knew that they were from a .44 and remembered the gun he had seen in the trailer, which was a .44 magnum pistol. Human outline was near, against the very blue sky on which clouds floated.

"Move," he told himself. "Like hell."

His hands were in the dirt and his chest was very cold and heavy. He could feel the wet and the cold inside him and remembered all the times. There were people out in the world who moved and talked and lived and the rocks and the sand were real.

"Fuck," he said.