Euchre Creek

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in deep water
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dark . . .

Chapter One

1.

Between the wars, Euchre Creek was one of many settlements that sprang up, weeds along the coast. Oceanlake, Delake, Kernville to the north. Agate Beach, Seal Rocks, Waldport to the south. The names stretch as far as the tide, rising and falling, some higher, some a little faster, all digressions in ordered prosperity.

The War brought orders for Sitka spruce airplane spars: C.D. Johnson's Toledo sawmill employed a thousand men. Log trucks were exempt from gas rationing, beekeepers could buy sugar, but rifle ammo and deer were scarce, especially in Lincoln County, where two and three generations of fishermen and gypo loggers pulled on green chains, cursed sawdust and sawdust savages, and banked their forty-four dollars a week, while waiting, patiently waiting, always waiting another tide, another log sale, another column of casualties.

Someone saw a Japanese submarine and a Coast Watch was started. A blimp hanger was built at Tillamook high enough that it rained inside, at least that's what Thor Olson, Terry's dad, claimed; he spent the War there as a watchman, while in Euchre Creek, his young wife picked ferns for Portland florists.

Peace, like canary grass, sprouted in the atomic fallout that rained across the Pacific. Fisherman, some leaving mills, some returning from the fighting, began to catch salmon again. New canneries were built at Coos Bay, Newport, Euchre Creek. Old ones were expanded. Jetties were lengthened, breakwaters poured.

Before the Corps of Engineers decided to make its harbor safe by extending a natural sand spit, Euchre Creek was among the leaders, a port of highliners. Will Schirmer, the older Ted Painter, four generations of Halls, Ellis in his 18-footer, Charley Johnson, the three Heroun brothers—all fished out of the mouth of Euchre River, day boats mostly, selling to Bill Heroun's cannery.

In Euchre Creek, the spring of 1948 heard talk of getting a railhead and of being the busiest port between Coos Bay and Astoria. Calkins built a boatyard, built a dozen trollers, all easy in a following sea. That fall the town helped elect a governor and both senators, and funding was approved to extend the spit. Construction began a year later, and the town had its best years ever, attracting five families of Poages, loggers mostly, from Long Prairie and Norton, a town now remembered only by a misplaced historical marker locating the community miles from where it was.

But during the storms of the first winter after the spit was extended, the harbor sanded in. The bar grew treacherous, drowned both Abe and Joey Heroun, good as they were at reading breakers. So most of the fleet started fishing out of Depoe Bay, while here on Euchre River, salmon runs dwindled to nearly nothing. Crabs quit coming in. And no one remembers the last time somebody caught a lingcod.

First crabbing, then gillnetting was banned in the bay. But the logging prospered on either the even or odd numbered years. No one in town agrees which, every year seeming the same once the spit was extended. However, the people who pay attention to numbers say that, indeed, certain years have been better than others. It all has something to do with the housing starts on the East Coast, rail freight rates through Canada, and California's aerospace industry.

For Bill Heroun, there have been only bad years since the spit was extended. His story, like the hot vinegar and honey he takes to keep his arthritis in check, a little bitter, a little sweet, could be the folksy homily Elder Gosson told last Sabbath morning if not for a couple of details, the most important being that it's true. Of course, Heroun didn't hear the homily; not many did. Most of Euchre Creek drove up to watch the hydroplane races on Devil's Lake. Jess Saterlee's boat, powered by a Ford flathead, won his heat and finished third overall. "Propping cost you that race," Heroun told Jess afterwards. They had lofted the hull in a corner of the cannery's warehouse, and they'd gotten its lines right.

During the years of its prosperity, Euchre Creek grew old without the help of city planners or a strict zoning code. At first houses were built wherever four stumps could be found the right distance apart. Streets connected one house to another, and as the town grew, straightened up until they looked like they were laid out with a transit and chain. Cement blocks replaced stumps (houses will grow in their own shade; they're not persnickety like Douglas firs), and everything looked bright until the harbor sanded in. Now, the old dock is rotten, the pilings half eaten away.

Worms and weather and a bar a fellow can't get across, Bill Heroun had no choice about selling. His cannery will be a luxury resort where rich tourists come to troll for the few salmon still entering the bay. "California money," he said when Vern asked what he'd get from the sale. The investment corporation, like the Corps of Engineers, will change Euchre Creek. New faces, new money, a manager, new construction, remodeling. The town will be like it was before; it thinks itself ready for the future. At least that's what Bill hears at the Harbor View.

2.

Somewhere in the east, the sun rises in a clear sky. Men go to work, children play, dogs wag their tails, and Ike is president. But along the central Oregon Coast, fog thickens, gulls sleep, heads beneath their wings, and the morning drips from everything it touches. Wipers flapping, Robin Steele turns his rented Lincoln off Highway 101, turns upriver towards Euchre Creek. Tired from driving all night, he passes a community church, partially shingled, a white Grange Hall, and an unpainted plywood shack, a VFW sign over its door—and swerves to miss a dog with a stiff hindleg. A general store with a false front, an ancient Coca-Cola sign showing a girl and a dog, a tavern already open for business. No, it's a cafe, open beside the tavern. Maybe what he needs is coffee.

So this is Euchre Creek. I guess it'll do.

Glancing at three loggers around a table, Steele takes a stool at the counter, between a jar of pepperoni and a United Way canister with a slot for his change. The loggers, chairs pushed away from the table, sit with legs crossed, grease and sawdust fines on their jeans, once-red suspenders and shapeless striped shirts, hickory shirts if he remembers right. Suspecting he got this assignment because of the summer he'd spent setting chokers—he was playing football, then, and he thought he could stay in better shape working in the woods than coaching summer youth leagues for the city; he hadn't thought about getting hurt. That summer ended his football career: he wasn't good enough to go pro anyway; he knows that now, didn't at the time though.

He shudders a little as he tips over the waiting coffee cup, upside-down and heavy, of stoneware the color of wet straw.

I wonder what this country looks like without the fog.

The coffee, strong like it was brewed with twice the grounds, steams in the chipped mug. Steele glances up, sees the loggers in the mirror at the end of the counter. They look tough enough to eat wire rope for breakfast and

chase the cable with mugs of diesel fuel; they probably think the coffee is about right. He's forgotten where he first heard that description of loggers, probably in the cafe at Grass Valley, where he dated that Whiting girl; her dad was the rail station manager or some such position, not as high as he was looking for. There are lots of pretty women. Even this waitress is cute.

"This the only place to eat?" he asks.

"Just about." The waitress scowls.

"I had to drive all night to get here, and this isn't the best place to eat?"

What the hell? Who is this guy, the waitress wonders. *Slacks and a belt at this time of day, who does he think he is and where does he get off asking if there's someplace else to eat?*

"Well, where is the best place?"

"At home."

"An invitation?"

"Not hardly."

She disappears into the kitchen: *I'll be damned, he hit on me that quick. I've never even seen him before . . . . He's an ass. So what if he wears a sport coat? His shirt was probably even pressed.* She pours a saucer of milk. The only reason she irons her blouses is to dry them after they've hung a week in the rain—*and what does his fancy clothes get him; his BO stinks. For people like him, traveling all night is no excuse. He could ask where the head is. He probably thinks he doesn't have to impress us. That's the way they all are, coming over here.*

The waitress returns with the milk. The logger on Steele's left pets a black kitten with one white paw. Purring, the kitten pushes its nose through the milk, then licks its lips, tail and butt raised. Evidently, this is a morning ritual: the kitten acts like it's been on the table before. And in the mirror, Steele notices that the waitress reaches for the kitten a dozen times, each time stopping as soon as she starts, setting her jaw, making a mole on her jawline quiver like a bee about to sting. She could be pretty. "Hey," he motions to the waitress, "I'm going to be here awhile. Any place to stay?"

"Like a motel?" The waitress keeps her eyes on the kitten.

"Or a furnished apartment."

"There's motels either way, up or down the Coast." She says, thinking, though, about the kitten, knowing that Vern doesn't mind it in the tavern but will wring its neck if he finds it in the café.

"There're 'No Vacancy' signs. Nothing here?"

The waitress looks at Steele as if trying to make sense of what he said. *Why can't he just drink his coffee and go?*

"Well, is there any place to stay here?"

"Nobody stays here."

"That's too bad. What can you tell me about Bill Heroun's cannery?"

"What's there to tell? When it closed, the town died." Now, she has him pegged: "You part of them buying it?"

"I'm here to take possession today. Home will no longer be the best place to eat."

She snorts, a barren doe winding a hunter.

And he chokes on the coffee, coughing in his cup, splattering the counter. When he recovers, he says: "I'll be hiring. Come by."

"No thanks, but I'll tell Vicki?"

"Vicki?"

"Olson, our afternoon waitress. You'll like her. Lives a mile upriver." *Vicki knows how to handle his type*. Jackie has always been a little envious of her sister's way with men. "She's looking for another job."

Steele pockets his change, leaving a dollar tip. He smiles warmly at Jackie as she picks up his cup and wipes the counter. But outside, beads of fog cling to his smile as he gets in the rented Lincoln. He still can't see upriver, can't see across the street, suspects he should've ordered breakfast, should've waited for the fog to lift. He has time. Heroun doesn't expect him till nine. But more tired than hungry, tired enough to be content idling the half mile to where a weathered sign points to the cannery, a complex of small buildings fronting a wood barn like suckers around a tree trunk, Steele smiles as he recalls the metaphors of that summer at Grass Valley, rattlesnakes and Ponderosa pine, an occasional sugar pine with its long cones, ankle-deep dust. The Feather River canyon: that country isn't anything like what he's seen of the Coast so far. He must be tired; he's quit making sense.

I'm here to make money, not to like this country . . . at least there are no rattlers.

Getting out and skirting puddles, the wet grass soaking his wingtips and trouser cuffs, Steele tries the office's locked door and the doors to the messhall, peers through streaked windows—everything seems in order—and enters the warehouse, its door ajar. Old fish and ammonia: he wrinkles his nose. Having both received salmon and housed the can lines, the building probably isn't usable for anything but indoor boat storage; at least that's the plan. Even for storage, he'll have to install an overhead trolley and buy a mobile hoist, one big enough for ocean cruisers. But now that he sees it, perhaps the better idea is to tear it down.

Maybe we'll insure it and burn it down, spontaneous combustion, some oily rags in a corner. Just an idea.

Steele waits until his eyes adjust to the gloom, then wiggles between rows of wood fish totes and stacks of collapsed cardboard boxes. A rat runs along the edge of a tote, pauses, its eyes shiny black, nose twitching. Steele comes face to face with the rat. He tries to jump back, can't, tries to shoo it away as if it were a fly. Bolder than any rat he's seen before, it rises up on its hindlegs, teeth bared. Hands behind him, searching, Steele grasps a loose board, swings it around, missing the rat, swings again even though it ducked into the tote, swings a third time. He grips the board, a gauge of some kind, a crosspiece nailed to its end. Brandishing the cross as if he were swinging a sword by its blade, he works his way to the far end of the building. There, through a dirt-streaked window he sees an old man sitting as if dead on an oil bucket, the bucket squashing grass growing between the planks, stunted and going to seed. Bareheaded, white stubble stained brown below his mouth, the old man, his face worn gray like the planking of the dock, doesn't move when Steele raps on the window. He raps again, hard enough he fears breaking the pane. Still, the fellow doesn't move, though he doesn't look quite so old. *The fellow must be deaf.* Steele shoves open a door and hollers, "Hey! Who are you?"

Without moving, the old man, almost lost in fog, softly asks, "Hansen Investments?"

"I am—"

"Early."

"I came a few minutes ago, just looking around . . . . Who are you?" Steele tosses the gauge back into the warehouse.

"Do you know the occupation of God?"

Steele checks over his shoulder as he backs a step towards the warehouse. *What kind of question is that?*

"Are you Bill Heroun?"

"Creator, that's his occupation. Creates things. Starts with nothing and makes something of it . . . . Just look around you. What do you see? The river, trees, a helleva lot of work."

"That bucket you're sitting on—"

"I built everything here, everything. Even drove the pilings." Rising from the oil bucket, Bill turns to face Steele. *Pimples and polish, a kid with a million dollar budget, what's wrong with this world? Surely there's justice somewhere.* Bill turns, looks across the river, looks into the fog. "It's all like I said."

The river boils against the pilings, whispers further out. Two chinook push into the current, rolling it aside, under and over them. The strength of four years at sea, four years of growing, four years in the Aleutians—they've come back heavy, determined, survivors of the many pre-migrants that, four years ago,

splashed in brackish water like boys in summer swimming holes, hiding from herons and kingfishers. They push, and the river pushes back. But unlike a strong man who only holds even swimming against the current, they'll power their way upriver before turning dark and ugly, sores on their tails, fins, back. They'll spawn mid-river; then spent, they'll hold on for a while longer, a couple of days, maybe a week. Eventually, high water will wash their carcasses into the spindrift caught in the willows. Maybe a coon, maybe a mink will gnaw their skin, taking what little strength remains from four years in the sea.

Bill offers Steele his key ring. "I trust the money will be freed up this morning."

You're pretty dumb, Steele wants to say, *if you think you're God, bankrupt, a pauper even after your money's released* . . . this god-talk grates on Steele's nerves. He heard enough of it growing up. "You'll get your money soon enough."

"Shouldn't take more than a couple hours to complete your inventory."

"Then you can relax away from this damn fog." The first two people I met, unfriendly! The waitress and now this guy. *At least he isn't as old as I first thought, but damn him and his god-talk*.

"Got nowhere to go."

What, God with nowhere to go, you poor pathetic bastard, Steele looks south, over the river and up the hill. "A hacienda, a couple senoritas, Yankee money spends eight to one in Mexico." *That's what you ought to do, get yourself laid, get your mind off God.*

Steele's mother, at one time or another, studied with every marginal sect in the country, or at least with every one headquartered in Southern California. "Every crackpot religion dreamt up," his dad used to say. His dad was a Realtor, a Jew by birth, a Benjamite who liked fast convertibles and even faster blondes, especially young actresses looking for their first break. His mother didn't cause his dad too much trouble, and she didn't believe in divorce; so the two of them stayed together, each going their separate ways. And Steele grew to despise his mother. When his dad rolled a borrowed Jag, smearing himself and a strumpet calling herself Ann Foster across the pavement outside of Bishop, Steele, nineteen, left home for good, taking with him his mother's blessing and his dad's MG. He hasn't had anybody ask him about God since that day. *God doesn't live in Berkeley.*

"I know a Mex, a national," Steele says, "that you can buy property through for a picture of President Grant."

"My age, all's left is fishing . . . . If you need help, hire Jackie, Jackie Bower, B, O, W, E, R, just like it sounds." Now, he has no reason to stay. *Jackie can do better than waitressing for Vern.* If not for her, he wouldn't have sold out. He

damn sure isn't getting even what the land's worth. *But nothing's selling here. Houses aren't moving; farms aren't. The store was on the market ten years before that sawdust savage, that cedar mill sawyer, bought it with his insurance settlement and Workman's Comp checks. Nobody but Californians have any money.*

Steele watches Bill disappear into the fog, the old man seeming to levitate past a shed and out of sight. The key ring suddenly feels heavy in his hand. *I should've ordered breakfast.* He grabs the oil bucket by its bail and pitches it into the fog, and into the gurgling river, hears it splash, then again curses Heroun.

3.

After surveying the office for a third time, Steele pecks at one of the two manual typewriters; dirty characters strike the platen. He pecks more to see if the keys work than for the words he leaves—he has one more call to make. He's already called Los Angeles for the old man. *The occupation of God, imagine.* Well, he'll soon be done with him.

Office musty, everything smelling of mildew, a typewriter probably older than his mother, he'd trade with Jack Ellis in a minute. Seattle. Everything new, near the future site of the Space Needle. A personal secretary. A car. *Am I here because of that summer I set chokers, or has there been an eclipse I'm not aware of?* M.B.A. from Berkeley, two years with Wells Fargo, in his third year with Hansen. *Promotion or banishment to a wasteland?* Steele looks out the office window. The fog is burning off, rising like a temple veil, revealing a green Holy of Holies. He picks up the telephone receiver. *Sure I have logging experience, but so does Jack . . . . I'm twenty-eight, and still haven't made any real money, haven't made any mistakes that I know of, have a balanced portfolio, perhaps a little heavy in aerospace, but Boeing is up after splitting five-for-four twice in the last year. A model portfolio . . . maybe Dad was right, twist the model, wring it for everything you can get out of it.*

He's still on the phone to Hansen's Salem lobbyist when a woman enters, a possible blonde if she lived where the sun shines. She checks the coffeepot, grimaces, returns with it shining, and removes a can of grounds from the bottom drawer of the end filing cabinet. Covering the mouthpiece, he asks, "Anything I can do for you?"

"Not right now."

"Looking for someone?"

"You. Jackie said you're hiring."

He sees another pickup stop, a red International with a rusty barrel in its bed.

Having already interviewed, admittedly, briefly, a dozen of the most poorly educated men he's ever met while checking the inventory, he has changed his mind about hiring locally. So he is pleased when the would-be blonde greets the two men from the International, says she's sorry that "Mr. Steele is on the phone and has an interview afterwards," that they "should fill out an application." She takes two forms out of the second drawer of the near file cabinet. "Bring these by tomorrow. Be sure you put down a number where he can call you to set up an interview." The men take the applications, stare at them as if they were brittle, stammer something about not having a phone; and the would-be blonde says, "A message phone is fine—I know you boys, don't I? You live on the other side of Dirty Eddy, and he has a phone." Both men smile, nod yes, and backing out the door, hurry towards their pickup, their applications fluttering like butterflies.

Steele motions the blonde to a chair as he tells the lobbyist: "We got to stop the dumping of logs in the river. It's terrible. You should see it, bark on the banks, the bay like tea." He listens, then adds, "Yes, stress the damage being done to the river, the tannic acid pollution, but the fact is, we'll never attract the clientele we want if they have to dodge rafts of logs while fishing." Smelling the coffee, what he's wanted since morning—he couldn't drink that stuff in the café—he again covers the mouthpiece and says to the woman, "You seem to know where things are." He interrupts himself: "What do you mean? Who are they? Who do they represent? And why are they the butt of legislative jokes?" He listens. "Ecolo-what?" Again he listens. "I see. Well, do what you can."

"Things are still where they're supposed to be, where Bill put them."

"Did you work for him?" Steele asks, hanging up. "And who are you?"

"Vicki."

"Vicki Olson, afternoon waitress." Another pickup, a green Dodge with a split rear fender, stops in front of the office door. "Where," Steele asks, "are those applications?"

"That's pretty good, knowing my name. I see why they sent you to take over the cannery. You're smart . . . . They're in that drawer, under the p.o.'s. Yeah, that's them."

Holding up two applications, identical except for the paper they are printed on, Steele asks, "Why different colors?"

"Bill gave the yellow ones to people he knew he was gonna hire, kept them separate from the white ones—and I used to fill in for Jackie, especially when Bill got where he couldn't pay her . . . . Do you want me to talk to this guy?"

"If you want." He notices the rise and fall of her breasts, the tightness of her jeans, the width of her hips. They're a little too wide—and she ought

to use liner and shadow to make her eyes appear farther apart, her cheeks a little less full. "Did he pay you?"

"In fish," she says smiling, before turning to greet the logger driving the Dodge. She gives him a white application and tells him to drop it by tomorrow.

Steele grudgingly admires how quickly she sends the fellow on his way: he probably ought to hire her. He might—if he hadn't already decided to bring up the help he needs. *It isn't that I'm so smart as it is that she's so, what, telling me that I'm smart. Don't they have schools here?*

"There seems a surplus of labor," Steele, smiling, says in words without meaning. "Are there always this many men looking for work?"

"Usually more . . . . Did they—do you have a limit on how many people you can hire? At one time the cannery had three shifts, a hundred and fifty people, all working right here."

"They, as you so quaintly say, is a very large privately held corporation, who've sent me to build a resort, not to take over a cannery. Let me worry about how many I'll hire."

"The talk in town has been that you'll have to hire at least twenty carpenters. That's why fellas are coming by."

"Besides knowing where the coffee and the applications are—and how many men I should hire—what can you do?"

"Waitress, tend bar, fry cook."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm good at—"

"I believe you are, but it'll be months before I need a waitress."

"I can pound nails."

"What do you know about bookkeeping?" What the hell, she, at least, is enthusiastic—and attractive in a rugged, self-confident sort of way.

"I learn quick."

"That's not good enough." *I should've known.* He needs someone who knows ten-key by touch, the double entry system, the difference between a ledger and a level.

Another pickup, another Dodge, passes the office, backs up, pulls forward, turns around and stops. "I'll get it," Vicki says, fetching several white applications from the file cabinet.

Steele checks the coffee—it doesn't look like mud—listens to Vicki send another logger away, and thinks of a dozen reasons why he shouldn't hire her, none particularly convincing, though. But he knows what he needs: "I have to have a bookkeeper."

"You'll want the books done your way. It wouldn't matter what I know, you'd still want them done your way. If you show me what you want, I can do it."

Surprised that she read his mind, not realizing that she hadn't, that he had voiced his thoughts, Steele says, "I thought you have a job."

"I do, but I wanta quit. I want something better."

"What exactly do you want?"

"Outta this town, enough money to get away, learn something besides waitressing and tending bar."

Two pickups pull into the yard, both Chevrolets.

Vicki listens to the idling engine purr in the Chevy that stops first in front of the office. *A 216, babbit bearings.* "He rebuilt that engine himself," she nods towards the truck. The second pickup turns around between the bunkhouse and the messhall. It idles rough. *Bad lifters,* she suspects. *Maybe they're solids.* "I'll take care of them," Vicki says, separating white applications.

"It looks like you're already working for me," Steele says, when the pickups leave. "If you were, what would you want from Hansen? From me?"

"A chance."

"At what?"

"Getting away . . . maybe not right away, but someday. If given a chance, I can do better than what this town offers." Pouring two cups of coffee, she hands him one. "You take anything in it?"

Steele shakes his head. A breeze springs up; it pushes the door open and scatters dust. "You live upriver?"

"Just around the bend and up the hill."

"Alone?" Their eyes meet, hers cooler than his damp collar. *Damn this fog! And maybe I am out of line, maybe you think I presume too much, but if you want a job, there are conditions.* "I have one-point-seven million to work with. Every cent to be accounted for."

"I can keep my checkbook balanced. The numbers will just be bigger."

He likes her: the eat-at-home waitress was right. "How about wages? What are you looking for?"

"I have the job?"

"Maybe."

"I want this job real bad."

"I believe you."

"I'd like what you'd pay in California when I learn what you want done."

"Until then?"

She thinks for a moment, then says, "What you think is fair."

"The bunkhouse here, is it livable? I need a place to stay." Again she stares: her eyes, he feels their pricks, cold thrusts. "I like the way you handle yourself, but perhaps it'd be better if I hired more experienced help."

"You won't find anyone more experienced." She looks out the window. A raven flares its wings and lands on a hemlock, bowing its crown, looking like a black angel a top a Christmas tree. "I have a whole house . . . plenty of room."

* * *

Chapter Two

1.

Hansen Investments has grown by thirty percent a year since incorporation. Like Georgia-Pacific, Hansen began with a sawmill and a lumberyard in the south, but the two corporations followed different trails to Oregon. G-P borrowed money to buy C.D. Johnson's mill and timber holdings at a price no other timber company would pay. Hansen entered first California's real estate market where the corporation financed subdivisions. That is the corporation financed subdivisions in which the general contractors agreed to purchase all of their building materials for row after long row of tract homes from the corporation. Hansen then sold mortgages as if paper were logs before Hansen divested itself of its southern roots. An ambitious financier named Salmo Gairdneri wrestled control of the corporation away from its founder.

Gairdneri was from the Northwest. He knows Owen Cheatum, Georgia-Pacific's founder: they get together several times a year, often in post-game parties after Oregon State basketball victories. They once teamed up for a week-long drift trip down the Deschutes River, where investigative reporters pursued them from shore until Warm Springs tribal police arrested the reporters for criminal trespass.

Reporters have written about Salmo Gairdneri for decades: he has been featured in the *Seattle PI* and the *Portland Oregonian* numerous times, usually in the outdoors or weekend section. He is one of the Northwest's big fish in the business waters that flow around the Pacific Rim. Books—one of the most authoritative by Dr. Ferris Neave—trace his family lineage. But for all of the reporting, not much is known about Gairdneri, other than that isn't his name.

Although concentrating on his holdings in Washington State, reporters have documented his influence in the banning of salmon traps in Alaska, a

means of catching and holding fish that packers have argued is necessary for their survival. His influence delayed construction of a hydro-electric dam on California's Trinity River. It seems probable that he has influenced decisions in both the Soviet Union and Japan, principally concerning Hokkaido Island. And he personally selected Robin Steele as manager for Hansen's Central Oregon Coast project. Steele possesses youth, ability and an uncanny likeness to Mr. Gairdneri himself.

2.

After leaving their Mr. Steele, Bill Heroun stands framed by the picture window at home, watching the river and what had been his cannery beyond, watching the current curl around dock pilings and pass on, like a dog on its way home, sniffing posts, marking them, taking its time before lying down. Bill sees the boil of a king, a large fish fresh from the Aleutians.

He spent four years in the Aleutians, plus a dozen summers, maybe a few more. Now, sore, feeling spawned out, wondering what it is that he's hiding from, he notices Homer climbing a stack of Dungy pots; the raccoon picks at the stainless steel mesh, pulling pieces of dried crab through the wire.

He's fifty-seven, with no family but Homer. A fisherman, the son of a fisherman, the grandson of a fisherman—he dory-fished the Portlock Banks for halibut and cod, picked a million salmon from hundreds of miles of net, cut trap poles, built a cannery, and went bankrupt. He's tired: life's too short to start over. And he's too poor not to. The sale hasn't given him enough not to, not when bills are paid, not if he's gonna take care of needs and wants, another pickup, some work on his teeth, a new cook stove. He yawns.

Sea and sky, whirlpools of ice and scud. Snow pellets like pith BB's. The blind schooner Freyja *shudders as her bow splits walls of white, watery slush. Timbers groan. She rides low, heavy. Snow twirls around his feet—he glances along the starboard rail. Tears freeze. Can't see land nor logs nor Nip cruisers, not even their bow. Kriska's out there somewhere, and they're in too close. A stuffed puffin, that's what they are. A target for every Rufe fighter in the theater.*

The Atlas murmurs, a bad injector. But, six inches of ice on the antennas, what's wrong with the main won't matter if they roll. Clutching the handline, skating across the deck, slamming into the wheelhouse, he staggers into the smell of hot coffee. Skipper and the lieutenant sit at the chart table; they have ever since the Navy's weather team left Kanaga. They're going to grow there, damn college boys.

"We gotta beat ice. The rigging's too heavy."

"What about," the lieutenant asks, "Smokey and Dan?"

"Sick . . . . A little cold water ain't gonna hurt you."

"You're a disrespectful sonnabitch, Heroun. Have some java while we get oilskins on."

Sven looks away from the wheel long enough to show his smile.

"You know all about ice, don't you, Sven?"

"Ve know. Many a time ve iced up codding."

"Yeah, so I've heard . . . so I've heard."

He hits the stay, hits it harder, and ice falls, breaking like glass. The stay rings, rings, keeps ringing and ringing.

The telephone rings, rings, keeps ringing. Groggy, Bill grasps it as if it were the stay.

"Mr. William Heroun, please."

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"Will you hold for a call from the governor?"

Awake, he sits up.

"Bill, how you doing?" JG's voice booms, even over the phone. "Say, I'm coming over this weekend, the wife's hosting a little get-together. You free for some fishing?"

"You couldn't have called at a better time."

"I heard the sale went through."

"I'm out of it, no more cannery . . . . There's silvers working the sixty-degree curve."

"Don't think I want to cross the bar. How about floating eggs for jacks?"

"The river here's as good a place as any for jacks."

"That's my thinking. Five o'clock Saturday, that be okay?"

"Sure." Hanging up, Bill glances at the clock in the kitchen, 2:30. The money ought to be his, or rather, Jackie's, and he looks at the cannery. A glass pane and half a mile away, Steele turns a run of pickups around, sending them back downstream. Word's out: new owners, jobs. *Not since Schirmer netted 300,000 pounds of chinooks between the 4th and Labor Day has the cannery seen so many people.*

3.

When Bill enters the Harbor View the sun is a red ball pinched between a bank of gunmetal blue clouds and a gold sea. He glances at the ball, knows it lies about what kind of day tomorrow will be, then turns towards the bar, feeling its pull. He nods, not identifying the angular figure, towards Blackie Poage, leaning on a pool cue.

"Well, he hired me," Vicki says before Bill's eyes adjust to the poor light.

"Who?"

"Robin, the guy you met this morning." Instead of being behind the bar, Vicki sits around front, her legs crossed, her skirt above her knees. "He's okay, smart as can be."

"He seemed all right . . . . Where's Jackie? Home?"

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Do you?"

"Yeah, I think so." She swirls the inch of beer remaining in her stein. "He can do a lot for Euchre Creek. You should give him a chance."

"I didn't know that I wasn't."

"You don't like him. Even now, you don't like him."

Vern is behind the bar—and to Vern, Bill says, "*Blitz.*" *No, I don't like him, but why do you care?* He tosses a four bit piece onto the bar as Vern draws the beer. "Have you met him?"

"Me?" Vern asks, then without waiting for an answer adds, "No. He stopped in the cafe this morning. Jackie met him."

"Is she home?"

Before Vern can answer, Vicki intrudes: "I don't know why you two don't like him. He's really okay . . . I gotta go. I only stopped to tell you," she looks at Vern, "that I got a job, that I won't be working here no more."

"You told me that an hour ago. You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"What will you be doing?" Bill asks. "Office?"

"Robin wants me to learn all of the business. He says—" She looks from Vern to Bill. "You don't wanta know what he says. Neither of you like him. See if I care!"

"What's wrong with her?" Bill asks, watching Vicki slam the door.

"Who knows. Maybe Blackie," Vern glances at the faller. Their eyes meet. And Blackie looks away as Vern says, "Never mind."

Realizing who he'd seen, Bill twists on his stool. "There's still a couple of trees down over across if you want to cut her more wood."

"You rolled those alders around in the mud too much for me to buck up. No thanks. She'll have to look after herself."

Vern wipes the bar. "I saw the Olson boy go by with a chinook that must've weighed fifty pounds. He had it over his shoulder, its tail slapping him in back of his legs." As if for emphasis, he slaps the bar with his towel.

"I dunno where he's been fishing, I haven't seen him on the river for quite a while." Bill sips his beer. "The kid must be about outta school."

"The boy and Orlando cleared a spot, cut a trail down to the river, right through those damn berries behind the Grange."

"Now that you mentioned him, I ain't seen Orlando's truck along the road either."

With a clean towel, Vern tenderly polishes the sugar maple bar. Chipped varnish, many coats thick and darkened from age, protects the three-foot wide slab his grandfather received as payment for sharpening knifes at a Harpersville, Ohio, inn, while pushing a handcart west. The slab was originally twelve feet long, six inches thick and too heavy for one person to carry. Vern's sure the slab was given to his grandfather out of orneriness: *Let's see how the little Jew gets that outta here. By damn, he's stronger than he looks. Look at that! the bastard's carrying it on his back*. His dad never said how his grandfather got the slab to St. Louis, or why he brought it all the way to Portland, or why he had a five-quarter piece sawn from it for the top of his casket. The plank now is only a little over four inches thick and ten feet long, the rest of it buried with his grandfather on Mount Tabor.

"Orlando's been parking in back of Grandma Hodge's just so people won't see him along the road, I suspect." Vern rubs a water spot until it seems to evaporate, leaving the varnish shiny. "I see him walking away from Grandma's some mornings when I get here."

"I'll have the boat in the river tomorrow, I'll find him."

"Don't say nothing about where he's parking to Grandma unless you want a lecture about minding your own business." Vern flips the towel over his shoulder.

"I take it you said something."

"I saw her in the store. She said she wasn't, in her words, sparking with that squaw man. Then she went on about me being in the devil's business." Vern's voice fades on *business*.

"I gotta go."

"I was up to the Whale House a bit ago. She wasn't there. She said something about going to her mom's when she left this morning."

"Well, if you see Jackie, tell her I'm looking for her."

4.

Steele sits behind his desk, lights off, Vicki gone home, his chair pushed back. Darkness creeps downriver, softly stealing sheds and fishing shanties along the shore. A gold strip lingering on the western horizon tinges the tired surf; the ebb tide leaves bare patches of black sand and gravel beds where old men

on slow feet probe for agates. But Steele, his legs crossed, sees neither the gold-bearing sand nor the bent-over rock hounds, his view of the surf blocked by the office wall. If he stepped to the window, he would see bushy alders and grousy hemlocks, rustled by the shifting breeze; he might see Vern's black Lab following the river, trotting towards the Harbor View, the Lab's nose close to the ground; he might see Grandma Hodges taking down clothes before the dew sets in or Leo checking his roosters, handling each, feeling their craws; or he might see Bill's pickup on the bridge. He certainly would see Thor, on nervous feet, standing in the parking lot—one at a time, Thor's feet, like windshield wipers, scrape gravel aside, leveling circle segments, their centers under his heels. But Steele doesn't look out the window, not yet. He has a report to write, detailing the day, his first in Euchre Creek. However, what he has started to write isn't the report but a letter.

The office, its walls having contracted in the darkness, seems smaller than his rented Lincoln. He can neither read his answer nor the letter he's answering, the letter balanced on his knee as if it were a child . . . he's past draft age now. Perhaps he should have gone to Germany for two years. Perhaps he should've married that Whiting girl—he can't even remember her name. *Alice. Alice Whiting.* Fast trips to Placerville, parking, radio playing, pines and the moon and love, always love, then Cynthia. He'd rather not think about her.

A car turns in the driveway and stops in front of the office; an out-of-adjustment headlight, blinding white, spills through windows, sloshes against the file cabinets, soaking applications, then backs up, like water behind a dam, filling the office, drenching him. He holds his breath, waiting for the knock, waiting, drowning—and when it doesn't come, when the light swings away, letting him breath again, he pushes the letter away, then reaches for it and twists it thin as a candle string.

Rising, his feet asleep, he fumbles for a match, finds one and strikes it on the wall. The letter sputters pale green, sputters and smokes, sputters as if wet. He holds its end, watching it burn, its jerky flame singeing his fingers. Though feeling the heat, he holds it till only the blackened fragment between his fingers remains; he's paid enough.

* * *

Chapter Three

1.

Shimmering, ripples reflecting the sun, each sun blinding, the river laps at the boat, splashing against it, rocking it. Bill and JG, his face sunburned, cast upstream and watch their bobbers drift past again and again. Reel and cast, drift for a while, tie to a piling, reel and cast—they have been on the river since a little before daylight. High clouds blocked the sun till noon. Now, a bright wind pushes against the falling tide. And Bill's plank dory, painted gray, with natural crooks for knees, bumps along with the current.

JG in the bow, Bill in the stern, one hand on the tiller of his little Mercury, the 36-cube, four cylinder—Bill hasn't fired off the 75-horse. He doesn't need it. Besides, that big Merc is damn tough to maneuver in the river, having to shut it down, then re-start it reversed for reverse. *Too bad Evinrude's lower units blow up. I'd buy an Evinrude if Olie'd make a shiftdog that works.*

JG's mind isn't on outboards, nor fishing: Salmo Gairdneri epitomizes what's wrong with Oregon politics: influence peddling, keeping fulltime lobbyists, the encouragement of regionalism. He has known Gairdneri since grade school; they used to be friends, skipping school, meeting on the Trask or Wilson Rivers, fishing together, terrorizing undersize trout, catching crawdads, sculpins—boys in the midst of the Depression, happy as water ouzals with craws full of caddis nymphs. Both their dads worked in the woods. But that was before the Burn, something neither of them ever talked about. Charred hillsides, muddy runoffs, the river swollen, dirty—the country changed, as did they.

Gairdneri started buying fish and bullying other buyers, drifters pewing that day's catches onto the dirty ice filling their pickup beds. He grew ruthless, devouring brokers who'd grown soft as jellyfish, who'd stung retailers and fishermen alike till any change seemed preferable. And he became a recluse,

though occasionally turning up unexpectedly at a poolside party or waterfront gala before seeming to slip into the water, not to be seen until next season.

Then came Pearl Harbor: a Senior at Willamette University, majoring in pre-law and co-eds, JG joined the Navy two weeks later. He had intended to wait until Christmas, but by joining immediately, he received his commission in March. And he lost track of his former friend somewhere off Kriska—they were no longer two kids looking for nightcrawlers, a river separating them.

Perhaps I should have seen it coming, the predator in Gairdneri, his wanting to hunt alone, not willing to share. I certainly should have when he took over. JG looks away, downriver, and sees the broken water where wind and tide struggle against the current. *What the hell. It doesn't matter now . . . but it does.*

After a night chipping ice off stays and mast, off antennas, off himself, he—well, JG would rather not say. Even remembering that night, the sea slushy, the *Freyja* moaning, dead wood coming to life for a little while, the mast an icy cross, gets him thinking about giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Fisherman like Bill Heroun are, as his mother would say, the salt of the earth; *she probably wishes I was more like Bill.* So when he learned how little Gairdneri's company paid for the cannery, he called Heroun. He still doesn't know what he should do.

I'm not going to let you have this one, Salmo. You owe more, you can afford to pay. Perfect businessman? You might be. The new essential man, the predator with a purpose, planning his kills, pragmatic . . . . Not this time, Salmo, not this time. I know you too well. I know you . . .

JG had sat in his office Friday, leaning back, looking through streaked windows, looking across the Capitol lawn to Willamette University and the ivy-covered bricks of the Law School. He saw the traffic on 12th Street, the asphalt as gray as the day. Beyond the street the railroad, the woolen mills—if he could've seen through buildings, he would've seen Arctic Circle's drive-in with their fifteen-cent hamburgers, the Darigold Creamery, the state pen, towers, barbwire, searchlights; and if he had turned just a bit, he would've seen Fairview, its mental patients becoming political pawns in a game they don't even know they're playing. Beyond both the pen and the state hospital runs I-5, the highway always busy at that time of day, the Jack Kerouacs and Gary Snyders on the road between Seattle and California. It's twelve hours from Salem to San Francisco, thirty-five to Chicago.

The dory seems too long, too wide, too high for the river, catching too much wind. JG rocks as he did in his chair yesterday, thoughtful. Bill, in a trance of his own, picks at his hook, tugging on the white, pulpy membrane,

all that remains of his bait. But Homer, his back to the breeze, scampers along the gunwale. Fat, with a split ear, the raccoon rinses Borax from cut chunks of roe, tastes each chunk, then drops it overboard before returning to the can for more bait. He finally tips the can. Bill can ignore him no longer: "You damn varmint, you can't catch a fish without a hook."

As if waking from an all-day dream, JG says, "You're right. What I need is a hook?"

"You break off?"

"No, no . . . . What do you know about Hansen?"

"Their Mister Steele seems all right—and their check cleared the bank." He casts towards the boom sticks shackled to pilings dividing the river, sectioning it off, the shore belonging to loggers, the deep water to fish and fishermen. "Why? Is there something I should know?"

"Perhaps, not now. Later." JG casts towards the far shore, his plan still not clear to him. What he has in mind will involve a little influence peddling of his own, nothing extralegal though. "Bill, you're just the fisherman to land me a record."

"How about if I first catch one for me?"

"I want you to come tomorrow, and bring this masked bandit. I promised the grandkids a year ago I'd introduce them to Homer."

"Come where? What are you talking about?"

"Tomorrow. I want you there."

"Where—and what's this about records? What are you trying to catch?"

"Bring your friend. Jackie something, isn't it?"

"Now wait a minute. I'm supposed to do what, where?"

"Helen's tea . . . . I told you about it."

"I ain't much for parties, you know that."

"Be at this one. I'll have a surprise for you." *At least I hope I'll have a surprise for you.*

"To hell with your surprises." A jack jumps near the shore, upstream from JG's bobber.

Reeling quickly, JG, laughing, casts towards the splasher. "Now, Bill, you still don't have hard feelings about that little number in Portland, do you?"

"I wasn't thinking of her." Bill says, watching JG's bobber, knowing splashers never bite, but watching in case the impossible happens.

"She was something, wasn't she?"

Bill tries to remember the brunette, her face lost, the incident fuzzy. He recalls only the mole on her toe. "Did you ever pay her?"

"Don't remember, that was too many tides ago." JG casts again towards where the splasher jumped. "You get mean on tequila. I thought you broke my jaw that next morning."

"I shoulda killed you," Bill says, without emotion. After a pause, he adds, "You know, I should've skippered that boat."

"You still are upset about her, aren't you?" JG's bobber disappears. He strikes back, doubling his rod, jerking the little jack two feet in the air. "Got him! Did you see that? Now there's a surprise."

"You're supposed to catch them, not gant them."

"What did you get out of the sale, you mind saying?"

"I shoulda skippered the *Freyja*."

"Maybe," JG says, reeling in the stunned jack, flopping like a put-n-take trout.

"No maybes about it." Bill slips the net under the jack. "I got enough to pay everybody off, a couple thousand besides."

"A couple thousand is no money at all. You'll spend that on a new truck." JG presses his hook into the cork of his rod handle. "Let's run past the log dump one more time, one more drift."

"That must be a different jack than the one that jumped."

"It wasn't luck."

"Like hell."

"Bet you—"

"What? That you catch another splasher? I'll take that."

"No. That'd be too easy." JG wedges his rod handle between the kicker can and his tacklebox; its tip dangles over the bow. "No, I'll bet you this rod against a willow stick that I can put you back in business within a week."

"What kind of a bet is that? I just got—"

"Don't say it. I know I was the one who got you into the cannery business."

Bill jerks the little Merc to life. Over its whine, he yells, "There were good years."

"You'll get your payday tomorrow."

"Payday? You mean my neck broke like that jack's." The immature silver male, barely seventeen-inches, tries to swim in the loose water under the slatted floor, his gills rising and falling like a runner's chest, gasping air.

JG moves close to Bill, letting the bow lift, letting the heavy skiff climb onto step. Then loud, he says, "You'll get respect tomorrow, Bill, respect. What are dollars without respect?"

"They spend the same."

"Like hell they do!"

Serving away from a deadhead, Bill hollers back, "Maybe they don't."

You've been giving orders every since I met you, guess I'm in the habit of taking them, the only way we could get along there on Portland's waterfront, and we had to get along. That damn Freyja *was too small not to. Well, we've drank together, chased whores together, and once or twice fought together—and somewhere on a forgotten hillside . . . it was June, raining, not hard, a shower actually. Wild roses & salmonberries bloomed, their pink blossoms nearly hidden by chest-high grass. That damn island was supposed to be deserted—we'd gone ashore for water, just the three of us, you, me and Sven . . .*

They split up, Sven going with Bill, climbing the headland, staying on a faint parting of the grass, marked more by fox scat than by use; JG followed the creek inland. On the headland, where a rose bramble narrowed the trail, two sparrows, perched on drooping briars, each with dripping crest and fluffed breast, spiraled their graven tune towards heaven. Out of breath, Sven stopped to watch. Bill turned to peer at the curved bight behind them—gray light, misty, drifting in quickstepping columns battering the cape, gray sky wedged between high and roily horizons, a gray day.

I almost didn't hear that damn shot. Bill glances at JG, who's watching the shoreline bounce by. *The wind carried down to the creek. You heard it, all right. Maybe that's all that counts.*

Sven coughed, fell forward, the bullet through his chest, just under his collar bone, between his heart and spine.

The soldier, a coast watcher, probably left when the Japanese pulled out of Kriska, couldn't have been more than sixteen, just beginning to shave . . . JG came up behind him while he had Bill pinned down.

Sven knew his wound was bad. Bill, supporting Sven's head till the end, tried to stop the blood coming from the 7.7 millimeter hole too near Sven's heart. And when Sven asked him to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers," he tried but he couldn't. He just couldn't.

JG could: he hummed the hymn more than sang it. Nevertheless, Sven was satisfied.

I owe you for that. Still do. Probably always will. And if I didn't, I sure wouldn't go to your damn tea party.

So there they were, "marching as to war . . . going on before," JG standing, Bill kneeling, neither of them mentioning the incident afterwards. They buried Sven on the headland, looking out over the Pacific, calm as far as they could see; and they've kept in touch, fishing together a half dozen times every year, more often before JG ran for office.

"It'll be casual," JG says as Bill cuts power, "a chance for the ladies to show off summer dresses one last time, but you'll have to blow the dust off your dark suit."

"The one they'll bury me in?"

"Or you'll bury them in. I mean for you to be there."

Bill, ready to call it quits (he can't fish all day like he could even five years ago, doesn't have the heart for it, not that there's anything wrong with his heart; he just loses patience even when fish are biting), steers towards a pair of limby spruce marking the drift on Big Bend. Slowly now, the skiff plows upstream against the falling tide, its bow wave curling wide, banging against pilings, running far up the beach, sliding back, spent water draining down, drawn across moss and mud, trickling into the flow of Euchre River. Farther upstream, where Hay Creek enters at Moonshine Park, the two chinooks rest, waiting for night; while in the skiff, Homer is after something shiny that has fallen between the flooring slats, a church-key, its sharp end rusty. JG catches another jack and a fir branch that gives the best fight of the day. In an hour, he'll be on his way to Newport. "Who was that you waved to as we went by?" JG asks, striping egg membrane from his hook.

"Orlando." Bill kills the little Mercury.

"I wouldn't have recognized him."

"You ain't gonna tell me why it's important that I be there tomorrow?"

"I have to make a couple of calls first. But remember what I told you going into the cannery, that you needed to operate on someone else's money other than your own."

"We've had this conversation before." Bill casts into an alder, his bait swinging itself around a limb the size of his thumb.

"I think I can reach it," JG says, standing, risking falling, in the bow. "Netting diddly squat from the sale proves you were wrong."

"Like hell—"

"Don't jerk . . . there, I saved you breaking off."

"Thanks, but hooks I can afford." Bill checks his leader, running his fingers along its length, feeling for nicks. "You know how much I hate Helen's little get-togethers, you gotta give me more reason for going than just saying it'll be worth my while."

"I can't, not today. But," JG pauses as he looks towards the cannery, "Hansen's board president got his start brokering fish."

"Seattle?"

"I'm not sure what years."

"He talk Italian?" Grasping the tiller, Bill, his knuckles white, says, "I couldn't have given lox away in New York at the end." *Damn brokers filleted me, and the fucking bankers, phoney bastards.*

Bill tried to break the stranglehold Seattle brokers have on this country's fresh fish market, but circumstances were against him, circumstances that spoke with bad Italian accents, telling store managers, *No buy our fish, no buy our produce,* meaning that if the stores wanted to continue buying lettuce and broccoli from these brokers, they had to buy their fish from them too. And once the Puget Sound brokers left Bill long on inventory, local bankers, like a drift of crabs, picked his bones clean. Now, he'd rather become a Republican than apply in town for a loan, *damn bunch of scavengers.*

"Gairdneri doesn't broker fish anymore. He's bigger than that."

"Is that who owns Hansen?"

"Chairman of—"

"Guess I'll be there."

"We'll get you some capital tomorrow."

"I ain't borrowing money." Bill glares at the river as if expecting the current to argue with him. "If I'm going to do anything more than fish the rest of my life, and that's not saying I want to, I'll use my own money." As an archer fish might, he spits, his sputum striking a salmon fly, staining its orange body dark brown, the tobacco juice knocking the slow-flying insect onto the river where a premigrant noisily splashes around it but doesn't take it, apparently not liking its taste. "Maybe I'll open an agate shop, polish gravel I find on the beach."

* * *

Chapter Four

1.

Rays of the midday sun climb down tall firs, stand beside their trunks, and as thin soldiers, surround Vicki's house, trampling flowerbeds, twisting pole beans, upsetting her hens. They're not laying right now. The four brown-shelled eggs she scrambles for her and Robin's late breakfast come from her mom's White Rocks. "Green pepper and onion?" she asks, taking both from her refrigerator.

"What did you say?" Robin hollers over the pre-game hype from the living room. Oregon State will play Cal, Beavers against Bears, Terry Baker against Berkeley's defense; Baker thinks he'll have a good game. Robin snorts. *One person? Oregon State better have more than this hotshot quarterback.*

"I asked if you wanted—"

"I heard you. Do whatever. I'm not hungry."

"You sure?"

"If I want something, I'll go down to the cafe . . . . Have you seen this Terry Baker play? What's he like?"

Vicki wonders if she shouldn't throw the green pepper away, mostly black, its edges slimy, limp, withered, but the only one she has. She trims around spots, salvaging pieces, none more than slivers, dices them and a slice of onion, then scrapes both into the chicken pail and slams the screen-door behind her, the door bouncing open a foot, pausing, as if held by ghosts, then slowly closing itself, the latch grasping rollered fingers.

Halfway up her driveway, Terry, his hand grasping the jaw of a salmon, tail curled and dragging, hollers: "Sis, can you give me a ride back down to the river? They're biting."

"Sure." Her voice resigned, drawing out the glide before trailing away.

"Blackie dropped me off, said to say 'Hi.' I guess they broke down, track pins or something."

"Was he headed for Vern's?"

"I dunno, probably."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Mom told me to bring you this. Said you might need it now that you have a boarder."

"I may not have one for long." Vicki wonders who told her mother Robin was staying with her, not that she intended it to be a secret. "You want me to take you home?"

"No. Skunk Creek. Ol' Man deFader . . . we've got a hole nobody knows about. Only hens lay behind this one rock. Bucks hold across the river. And we've been cleaning up, plunking eggs, crawdad tails, even sand shrimp."

"You sure nobody knows about it?" Everything is known in Euchre Creek. Everything. By everybody. And she can imagine what's being said today. *Well, it's true, so what? . . . What I do is my business.* Taking the salmon, grimacing as its teeth cut her fingers, she says: "Get in the car. I'll be there in a minute."

In the house, she realizes she hadn't turned the burner off. Robin has smelled it and now leans over the stove. "It's the one on your left," she says.

"You didn't answer me, what kind of player is Terry Baker?"

"I don't know—and don't care." Her words whetted till they cut without pain, without blood.

"Are you interested in seeing him play?"

"I can't today . . . . Take this," she holds out the chinook of fifteen pounds or a little more, her arm shaking, "and keep it damp. I'm taking Terry downriver."

"Terry?"

"My kid brother. He's still in high school."

"Does he play football?"

"No. He fishes, peels bark in the spring. I doubt he knows what a football looks like—or for that matter, a basketball."

"I thought he might like to watch the game."

"Robin." She sighs. "Never mind . . . . I may stop and talk to Mom, but I'll be back in a little bit."

Perhaps it'd be better if he found someplace else. Perhaps I'm not meant to get out of here. Perhaps . . . ah, hell. She motions for Terry to get behind the wheel: "You drive. You need the practice."

A red hen chases a small green frog across the driveway and into the timber where crisscrossing boomer burrows, half-tunnels that look like trenching in

front of breastworks, plow through mulched needles and cones, most gnawed by squirrels. The hen, heavy, awkward, runs with her wings half spread, never quite able to catch the frog, but never more than a lunge behind him. The frog leaps left, right, right, left, over limbs, up a tree. Terry, watching the hen, almost drives up a tree.

"Stop!"

He does, with tires scrunching, stones galling stones.

"Pay attention! . . . You scare me like that again—never mind. Just pay attention to what you're doing."

"Sorry, Sis."

"When you're driving, you can't watch chickens and frogs and what's going on around you. You have gotta watch the road."

"I know."

2.

Bill dresses JG's jacks, then washes his hands in the river, washes and washes them but they won't come clean. Borax and slime, like dried mortar troweled smooth, cling to his cuticles, not dissolving, not softening, refusing to crumble. His hands smell like gurry, and his fingernails are thick and whittled short. He picks at the Borax while JG breaks down his rod and packs the fish in an ice-filled cooler. "Till tomorrow, then," JG says. Bill waves back as if saluting, then goes back to picking at his cuticles.

He still picks at the Borax and gurry as he drives slowly upstream. Seeing Orlando deFader's pickup parked in the turnout for Blackberry Hole, he stops, one wheel of his boat trailer still on the pavement, the dory's transom jutting out over the county road. *I need to talk to you, Orlando. You can't do what you're doing for the kid. You're gonna force his mom to choose between him and Thor—and you know Thor as well as I do. You know he'll come after the money. And you know she feels responsible for the way he is.*

Scratched but not bleeding, Bill ducks under a last berry cane, skirts a clump of willows, and almost steps on the handle of a fishing pole propped on a forked branch pushed into the sand beach. He sees only young Terry Olson squatting behind a second rod, also propped on a forked stick. "Where's Orlando?"

"Nature call," Terry says, pointing with his thumb towards bushy willows to the side of the hacked-out opening.

"Be out in a minute," deFader hollers from the bushes.

"Take your time, what I have to say will keep." *I need to talk to you alone, not with the kid, here, listening.* Bill stoops to pick up a length of

weathered beaver-chew. "I'll catch you another time, Orlando. I got a debt I gotta pay."

"That money's burning a hole in your pocket, huh?"

"Yeah, it is . . . if you see my pickup at Vern's, stop in. I owe you a beer. I gotta go."

"Can't you wait till I get my pants up?"

"What's the matter, you getting so damn old you need help?"

"You just leave that beer with Vern, I'll come get it."

"I'll do that." Nodding to Terry, Bill says, "Tell your dad hello," then he hurries back up the trail, pushing berry cane out of his way with the beaver-chewed limb. He suspects he ought to keep his objections about what Vern said Orlando was leaving the Olson boy in his will to himself. Orlando's not in good health; it's doubtful he'll live until the boy is of age. *And if Thor finds a way to drink up whatever Orlando leaves the boy, that's just the way it is.*

Bill throws the beaver-chew away when he reaches the road. Flip, Vern's black Lab, followed Terry as far as the stickery cane—he's been waiting under Orlando's pickup for Terry to return, but when he sees Bill's throw, he springs out from under the truck and retrieves the stick. Bill doesn't want the beaver-chew, and throws it away again, farther this time, across the road and over the ditch and the barbwire fence. But again, Flip retrieves it.

"Keep it, Pup," Bill says, opening his pickup door. But Flip, stick in his mouth, hops into the truck, unaware of Homer, curled up on the seat. But only for a moment: Homer rakes the Lab's nose with his claws, bloodying it. Flip snaps, but the stick starts to fall so he grabs it again as Homer growls, lips curled back. Now Flip doesn't seem to know what to do, and he whines, hurt, as Bill grabs him by the collar and pulls him out of the truck, the stick still in his mouth.

"Go-on, get outta here, Pup." Bill pushes Flip out of the way. "Go find the kid. He'll play with you."

When Bill looks in his rearview mirror, Flip still has a hold of the beaver-chew as he lifts his leg on Orlando's rear tire. Bill looks back at the road, shifts up, then downshifts and turns onto the Harbor View's graveled lot. He's like the tide, spending the day going back and forth, getting nowhere. He doesn't want to go to Helen's tea tomorrow, but he knows he will. He doesn't expect anything to come of it, but he knows something will. He doesn't want to go back into business, fighting bankers and creditors, the weather and a depressed economy, but he's already tired of recreating. He doesn't know how Orlando stands it, on the river rain or high water, fishing every day with one

hook. *Maybe the problem is I know how many more fish a shackle of web will catch; maybe I've been in business too long not to be; maybe I'm just greedy, like a sculpin, all mouth and gut. Whatever, JG knows which strings to pull—I feel like a damn puppet.*

The last time he heard Gosson speak, that was the subject, except the preacher called it predestination, said actions don't need psychological motivation, said there were only two kinds of men, essential and existential, that fate is—he doesn't remember. He's surprised he remembers as much as he does.

He felt about as jerked around by the preacher, having gone to hear Gosson's sermon for Jackie's sake, as he does now. *Well, turnabout's fair play.*

Still thinking about Gosson's sermon when he enters the Harbor View, Bill doesn't see Jackie until after he orders: "*Blitz.*" He might not have noticed her then if he hadn't glanced up when a log truck downshifted, its jake brake rumbling, rattling windows. The truck, loaded with alder, seven thousand feet or more, is way overweight. He suspects it is headed for Cain's mill at Rose Lodge, taking the back way to avoid scales. *And what's she doing in here this time of day? She ought to be home.*

"Vicki quit. I'm here by myself until Vern gets someone else."

"He better hire someone quick. The governor invited you to a party tomorrow."

"Don't make fun of me." The circles under her eyes darken more as she swishes the bar towel over the already-clean counter. "Why would he invite me to a party?"

"He said to dress up. You got a good dress?"

"I ain't going."

"There's still time to get you something in Oceanlake."

"Bill, no! . . . And that's that."

"I'll tell Vern you're leaving."

"You're serious . . . . Who's gonna buy this dress?"

"Me."

"I'd rather have my wages."

"I got them." He tosses, onto the counter, a raft of bills, damp and paper-clipped together.

Picking them up, she asks, "You been down on the river with these in your pocket, you're crazy . . . . There must be three thousand here."

"What I owe you, forty-seven hundred. Told you you'd get it when I sold."

Dropping the bills as if they burned her hands, she asks, "Anything left for you?"

"Some."

"Then pay for your beer. For once. I'll have Vern put this in his safe," she says, snatching the raft off the counter.

Another truck, also loaded with alder, rumbles past, shaking the building. Stools shudder. Beer sloshes in steins, foaming again. *Icy foam, swirling on the rigging, freezing. Deck shuddering. Timbers moan. Lost in whiteness,* Freyja *weeps brine, pitches down, snaps up, leans hard port. Ghost gray and black, unarmed, an insane mission with a lieutenant j.g., standby in the Aleutians. Eareckson's war. We should cross into the Pacific, sail for open sea, get away from these islands. Sven knows. But JG won't listen, never has listened.*

"Are you all right?" Jackie asks, returning from Vern's office. "Another of your attacks?"

"No! . . . Just 'cause I'm thinking about something doesn't mean I'm having a mental lapse." Bill sips his *Blitz*. "There's a story I should tell you sometime."

"Tell me now. You looked like you were in another world."

"Just on shaky ground, that's all. Till tomorrow then."

"Aren't you gonna take me to get that dress?"

3.

The rain begins while Bill and Jackie are in Oceanlake. Drizzle at first, the sky dark as gunmetal, the smell of fresh water sending salmon upstream—the drizzle starts as a welcome mist, settling dust, streaking windows. Vern watches it drift in, under yardlights; it lingers a moment, then passes on, a poor fisherman with empty pockets. It pauses at his door as if thinking about coming in, then staggers off, stopping for a moment at the edge of town. The humidity, according to the State Forestry signboard, is still under twenty-five percent and the fire danger high. The drizzle curls up around the sign, sleeps for a while, waiting for its brother, the hard rain due next month that will knock the big, brittle-yellow leaves off maples, flatten ferns, muddy roads and the river. Vern glances behind him: the tavern is busier than usual, the log market uncertain. Stoker shut his third side down. Olf Gunnarsson's crew is here; they'll be down until Olf rebuilds his D-7's finals. Olf's crew should be worth an extra fifty in the till; this week will be okay, maybe even a good one.

Vern Jakobson has lived in Euchre Creek since the war, has lived here for more years than he cares to remember, to hear him tell it. He has watched, through the Harbor View's front window, drifting rain sweep in, following the

river upstream since the year Grandma Hodges gave up the idea of marrying again. He's noticed the small changes: more thistles vie with the blackberries, a little tanzy shows in Kenatta's lower pasture, Jess Saterlee's cabbages have been getting smaller and more yellow for the last five years. Leo's roosters still strut and crow, but Leo doesn't fight them anymore. Dudley, since caught in the bight of that haulback a year ago (that was an accident that shouldn't have happened), doesn't get out like he used to; his bear hounds sleep, chained, on the roofs of their doghouses. Willie Brown's boy was expelled from school last spring for putting a boomer in his English teacher's desk—Willie put a skunk in his teacher's desk, and he only had to write he wouldn't do it again a hundred times. Old Man deFader fell asleep fishing and damn near died of the chills last week. Brice Christians bought the store and replaced the beer cooler with a produce section; Brice will never know how much he appreciates, *yes sir, appreciates that produce section.*

Automatic yardlights, on in spite of the early hour, cast halos through the drizzle drifting beneath them. Vern, neon *BLITZ* sign glowing beside him, stares, feeling the drizzle; the town seems to feel the settling drizzle. *"He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and smote the waters, and the waters parted." That won't happen here. Now that it's started, it'll keep raining till spring. Always has.*

4.

. . . this is a wasteland, regardless of how green it is. At least the fog has turned to rain, better than yesterday's opaqueness, oppressive, heavy, like a bully sitting on his chest . . . . What's keeping her? She's been gone since her brother came with that fish—I should do something with it. I wonder what she likes, what she has to cook with. Perhaps a salmon salad, with almonds and fresh mint. A surprise.

The surprise is by how much Oregon State with Terry Baker calling plays beats California. At least that's the first surprise of the afternoon, now drawing dark, the rain like bars, imprisoning and isolating Euchre Creek. Steele doesn't know when it started raining, sometime during the game, nor does he care. Nor does he hear the voices at the windows, firs and tree frogs, *kalicheix'y* ghosts talking nonsense to unhearing ears. *doo x'adaadzaayee ak'oots' x'aksiyaayee ee yatlekwk* He searches Vicki's cupboards, not really thinking about the game, not forgetting it either. Her knives are dull and her refrigerator mostly empty. She has neither lettuce, lemon, almonds, nor mint on hand. What she has is dill and eggs, rice, flour, Crisco, enough ingredients for a

Russian salmon loaf. He hasn't a recipe, but doubts he needs one. Yes, he can cook. *waa sa gees.ee nooch?*

Perhaps that's another reason why he . . . he throws a knife at the drainboard and watches as it ricochets away, landing on the floor, sliding under the stove. *Already, my stay here feels like banishment and this damn fish—*

"What are you fixing?" The screendoor hesitates, then snaps shut behind Vicki. "I picked up a couple lemons at Christians'. A quarter a piece. Someday his prices may even be reasonable."

"Terry Baker can throw a football."

"Yeah, Dad told me about him, said he was good, gave me a couple articles you might be interested in." She sets her sack on the drainboard, takes several folded newspaper sections out, then stares at Robin, his hands now white with flour. Except for Vern, she knows of no other man in Euchre Creek who cooks. Oh, they may be able to fry a steak and eggs—Blackie can—but nothing like what Robin's doing, combining rice and hard boiled eggs in a meat pie, rolling the dough thin with a Dr. Pepper bottle on a floured corner of the table, his dark brown hair brushed aside, it too tinged with flour, grains of which cling even to his eyelashes and to the small hairs on his cheeks, above where he shaved. "There's a rolling-pin under the sink if that'd help."

"I'm almost done. I hope you don't mind if I used up your Scotch."

Used up? used up? "Used up?" *That fifth was full! You're damn right I mind.*

"Drank, then."

"You drank it all by yourself, the whole fifth?"

"You weren't here."

"That was Dad's. Mom was having me keep it."

"I'll get him another bottle."

"He doesn't need it, he probably thinks he already drank it." *But why did you have to drink it? . . . That worries me, the whole fifth. Dammit, I don't need Mom's problems.*

The *kalicheix'y* whisper and firs groan. The creek gurgles and Thor stands beside the woodshed, gazing at the lighted windows, each casting yellow shafts into the slanting rain, each shaft falling harmlessly among dandelions and burdock.

* * *

Chapter Five

1.

In his three-piece suit, twenty years out of date but once the best that could be purchased in Portland—that was before the War, before the shipyards were expanded, before the city swelled like a surreal moth, veined wings stretched across the Willamette, concrete and brick, plywood and asphalt—Bill is still handsome, his hairline receded a bit, hair parted on the side, oiled and combed back, his shoulders still square, chest bigger than his waist, pants a little baggy, breaking on his shoes. He shaved this morning. That's twice in the last five days. He steamed his face, trimmed the hairs in his nose and pulled the few red hairs that grow in his eyebrows; they grow faster than the rest of his eyebrows and stick out, usually hanging down like trotlines trying to catch his attention. And he did dishes trying to wash his hands clean, but he still had to use his knife to dig the Borax from around his nails.

Using an old red sweatshirt that won't quit bleeding color, he dusted off the pickup seat. Now, he is ready to call for Jackie.

And he doesn't know what to say when he sees her, hair teased, combed up and back across her head, lacquered stiff. Pearl earrings, necklace, little moons. Her gown, plum-colored, exposing only the top of her left shoulder, looks better on her than in the store. He hurries around and opens the door, realizing that he should've swept out the cab; it's dustier than the seat was. *Where does this dust come from when it's raining?*

It rains from Boiler Bay to Otter Crest, and is dreary the rest of the way. The surf seems farther away than usual, the lighthouse smaller. They're through Agate Beach and into Newport, past the new Ford dealership and to the light before Bill cracks his window. Stopped, they smell the waterfront, dead crabs and diesel. *Money, that's what Newport smells like.* Bill wonders if he shouldn't buy a boat; there's still fish in Alaska. He could pick up a small

power troller for five thousand, maybe even forty-five hundred; could fish it for a couple of years, then maybe buy a little bigger boat. He doesn't need much to support himself; he has enough for the down payment. Or he could hire out as a skipper. He could work for John Hall; he's not too old.

Stopped at the light, Bill feels his pickup's idling engine . . . does he want to go back to sea, put himself out there, days spent waiting out the weather, days spent listening to the hull work, listening to the overhead deck creak, listening to the boat talk to him, the soft talk of a lover, little lies of passion felt or once felt. That sardine seiner he helped ferry north—*it wasn't constructed heavy enough to withstand North Pacific gales*—moaned, groaned, worried and fretted, and came apart on the passage from Dixon Entrance to Gore Point. He and Sven went to Monterrey to pick it up; they were to get two thousand apiece, a lot of money in '37. Its owner intended to use the seiner as a salmon tender working out of Sand Point, but the first blow caught them off Heceta Head. They ran beam-to. Bulkheads worked. They were sure the wheelhouse slipped at least an inch starboard, but in Astoria, where the seiner was hauled, appraised and insured, nothing seriously wrong was found. Nothing that good weather wouldn't have taken care of.

The weather was shitty from Vancouver Island north, and the seiner talked to them continuously. Each sea racked her, and the boat began to sing a beguiling song. Twenty hours out of Dixon Entrance, they turned back, running with the sea. The seiner assured them she could make it, but she lied. She sprung a plank. They should've gone down immediately. But he was always lucky when he was with Sven: the seiner continued to sing. They had a raft with them, one of the new French-built rubber ones. And the seiner sang long enough for them to blow it up. Then like a dog shaking water, she shuddered and rolled. He and Sven, more under water than out, buoyed by two thin tubes of French rubber, spent nine hours swallowing saltwater and shivering. A Canadian ore freighter finally picked them up—even bankrupt, he's never been as cold as he was in that raft.

The light has changed when Bill looks up.

"Are you sure you're all right," Jackie asks. "You're not having blackouts?"

"No . . . . I was just thinking—about something that happened a long time ago." Easing out the clutch, he turns towards the saw shop overlooking Yaquina Bay. "And you know how I feel about your blackout ideas."

"They're not something to be ashamed off."

"I don't have 'em." Bill doesn't even like the word blackouts. Thor brags about his, about how he fools "the Misses." So does Lenny's no-good brother, Hiram. Damn shirkers. Even Golda, Lyle Squier's first wife—even when her

brain tumor was so damn big he, deFader, and Lyle wondered how it fit in her head—didn't have blackouts.

They stop in front of JG's summer house, three stories and cedar, overlooking Yaquina Bay and the mud flats of South Beach; and they sit, neither wanting to get out. Finally, Bill says, "Stick with me, you've sat in on rougher meetings, where creditors wanted blood."

"I'm here . . . but against my better judgment."

"Jacqueline Bower and Bill Heroun," JG presents them to the sheep, Republicans all, Bill suspects. Once inside, he whispers to Jackie, "Shearing us will be like shearing pigs, they'll get lots of squealing and damn little wool."

JG draws Bill aside and asks, "Where's Homer?"

"In back of the truck, under the canopy."

"Bring him around to the side. I'll meet you downstairs."

Jackie chats with a matron in a sky-blue gown, and Bill goes to call Homer, who trills back but refuses to come. "I'll feed your insolent carcass to Dudley's hounds if you don't get over here."

Sharper, louder, Homer trills, not moving, curling his lips around his teeth instead. The coon doesn't come till Bill pretends to take a goody from his jacket pocket. "You ain't so damn smart. I suckered you again."

Holding still, JG's grandchildren, three girls and a boy, wiggle on the couch. Homer jumps up beside them. The smallest girl offers him a raisin, which he tries to trade to the boy for a banana. The boy trades, but then, wants to trade back, two raisins for the banana. Homer curls his lips, hugs the banana and reaches for the raisins with his free paw. The boy drops them, and scoots down the couch, away from Homer, who seems satisfied with the deal. Bill shakes his head. JG tugs on his sleeve: "There're people I want you to meet, an announcement I want you to hear. The grandkids have orders not to grab for Homer. He'll be fine with them."

JG hasn't changed: Bill has seen this approach before. This is how JG got him alone with that brunette, invited him into the officers' club, made a big show of what friends they were, then left him in a corner with a bottle and a pickled worm. Well, he has Jackie here this time. There won't be any corners.

A photographer for the *Newport News* captures smiling ladies chatting pleasantly while their husbands discuss business. JG flashes his campaign smile. The phone rings, a call from Salem, and the photographer snaps JG at work. After several Yes's, a No, and a grin, JG turns towards the gathering in the corner, and using the receiver as a baton, punctuates his words: "Gentlemen, you're familiar with the story of Bill's cannery." He goes on, giving the full

history, making, Bill thinks, the cannery more important than it was. Bill straightens his vest. *Here it comes*. His jacket seems too tight. It's stuffy in here: he needs a breath of fresh air, needs to use the bathroom. And there's still Borax under his cuticles. He picks at a hangnail, tears it loose, gets his finger bleeding. He can't suck the blood here; where can he wipe it? Inside his jacket pocket.

"Bill and I go way back, to when I was a lieutenant j.g. on a tough little boat called the *Freyja* and he was the daring behind an impossible mission . . .

Impossible all right, because it was stupid.

—"After the war, we went our separate ways. Gentlemen, times are once again changing. Basic industries, such as his cannery, traditional Oregon, while they will always be with us, are hard pressed to compete . . .

You bet. The fish are gone. Olf's logging second-growth. Johnny Holiday took his outfit to Alaska. Halls are going north every summer.

—"I've been under considerable pressure to spend large sums promoting tourism. So far, I have resisted that pressure, feeling public money could be better spent elsewhere, preferring for the private sector to advertise itself.

I've never liked long speeches, and this one is away too long.

—"But no longer. I now think it's time for the State to encourage the development of quality resorts, and I now believe it is in the State's best interest to feature selected resorts in a nationwide media blitz. I intend to ask the next legislature to promote OREGON in a big and expensive ad campaign.

"Bill's long term lease of the spit at Euchre Bay"—

What lease? What have you got me into now? You bastard, you have bought me another cannery, haven't you? Bill now understands, maybe not entirely but enough, what JG was getting at yesterday . . . *I should've left the sonnabitch hooked up to that fir limb, left him to fight it all night, would've kept him outta mischief . . . . I damn sure would like a say in what I do, not that that has ever mattered much to you, JG.*

—"His lease, just approved, that's what the call was, is the basis of the most promising development anywhere in the state. Of course, he will have competition, even on Euchre Bay, but that's what this country is about. Competition. It brings the best out in a person. Therefore, I encourage each of you to become involved in projects like Bill's. He has wasted no time in becoming part of the future. Gentlemen, he has my support. Euchre Bay, Corona Beach are destined to become household words. Congratulations, Bill."

Not sure how appreciative he should be, Bill tries not to look too surprised. He smiles a lot, shrugs his shoulders, his hand repeatedly shook by

the same Republicans who treated bankruptcy like leprosy a year ago. Now, miraculously healed by divine proclamation, what's he supposed to do, bathe seven times in the waters of Euchre River?

If JG wants that lease so damn bad, let him do something with it. *What the hell am I supposed to do with it? Or why should I do anything with it? If it's such a sure fire moneymaker, why don't you develop it—and what the hell was he saying yesterday about trying to catch a record? A record for suckers, the number of times you can sucker me.*

"Bill, over here," JG waves. "You have to get your picture taken." Then turning to the smiling assemblage of businessmen, JG adds: "No specific questions. The details of Bill's development are not public knowledge. Unless you become an investor, the less you know the better."

Lars Aangister, owner of Yaquina Larry's, a bayside bar and grill, slips in front of the reporter for *Newport News*, extends his hands and says, "If you need help with your liquor license, come see me."

Not sure how Lars interpreted JG's vagueness to suggest that he would be applying for a liquor license, Bill nevertheless thanks him: "It'll be a while, though—"

"What kind of a place are you gonna be building up there?" Jack Janzee asks, interrupting Bill. "I always thought that'd be a great location for a beach house, there on the spit, with Corona Beach razor clams at your front door. That's not to say that some sort of convention facilities wouldn't go good there. Rhododendrons and clams in the spring. Ducks and salmon in the fall. All you would have to add would be a little after-hours entertainment."

The reporter, pushing between Aangister and Janzee, questions Bill: "What to you intend to do with the property? Who else is involved? When will construction begin? Where will your financing come from? Why have you chosen Euchre Creek?"

But to each question, Bill stammers some non-answer. Frankly, he can't answer any of the questions. Liquor license, beach house, convention center—all possibilities that hadn't occurred to him. Clams, salmon, ducks, these he understands. He lives on south bay; he can see why someone might want to visit there, visit the type of operation Hansen Investment plans for his cannery. But what's he supposed to do?

This is all happening to him, but he masks his confusion well enough that nobody reading about this in tomorrow's newspaper will comprehend the *whys* and *wheres* of it all. Readers will decide for themselves what he

should do, or plans to do. He can hear them now: *Have you heard about the bar that Heroun fella's gonna build where my duck blind is? It's all there in the paper. He's planning to drain the bay, reroute Euchre River. He might as well. There ain't any salmon in it anymore.* Perhaps this is like being drafted into righteousness this being thrust into a realism lacking psychological underpinnings. No explanation—especially any Bill could offer—would be entirely satisfactory. Certainly the businessmen present misread his reluctance to speak.

Seeking safety on the sofa, Bill settles back, accepting the approval now given him, but still inwardly as confused as tomorrow's newspaper subscribers. Across the room, Homer, under the end table JG's wife's teacup sits on, leans out—and while Helen talks to Jackie, the coon sticks his paw in her cup. He watches her. When Helen turns towards her cup, he pulls his paw back and ducks out of sight. The movement attracts Bill's attention. Helen, holding her saucer in her left hand, sips tea, something she didn't do, Bill notes, on the ranch before JG ran for office. *Helen's always put on airs as if she's never stepped in shit.* She then returns her cup to the end table, and Homer again slips his paw in. Bill wants to grab the coon. But before he can move, Helen turns towards her cup. Homer's paw disappears. She sips tea, sets her cup back down, and for the third time that Bill's seen, Homer again slips his paw into her cup. Bill bounces up as if bitten by the sofa springs, excuses himself, and tells Jackie, "Time to go."

"I thought you'd want," Jackie scowls as she nods towards the reporter who still wants to question Bill, "to say more about your wonderful ideas of developing Corona Beach. You should tell them about your plans for the hotel."

He starts to ask, what plans, then realizes the extent to which she's putting him on as well as everyone within earshot.

"Like I said, it's time to go."

"You're planning a hotel?" Jim Allen, a Newport auto dealer, asks. "Beachfront?"

"No, on the ridge across the bay," Bill says, pooh-poohing the question.

"I suppose that would be even better—firmer foundation. You could build a multiple story building. How many stories are you planning?"

"Three at least." *What am I saying? This is crazy. I gotta get outta here.* "Come on, Jackie. We have work to do."

Helen, cup in hand, tells Jackie: "You must come again. I've so enjoyed your insight on the problems of the underemployed."

They squeeze hands. Then Jackie, smiling at the banker who wanted a receiver appointed to take over the cannery, turns to Bill and says softly, "Homer is behind you."

"I hope so," Bill says, anxious to be gone. "Vern won't believe what that varmint's been into."

* * *

Chapter Six

1.

Time passes in Euchre Creek without calling attention to itself. After the first rains, two weeks of Indian summer sees the last of the big-leafed maples turn yellow, viney maples red. Blackberries ripen, and the whole town spends evenings and mornings picking berries in the pastures along Cabbage Creek. Old sheets become jelly bags, and Uncle Leo starts fifty gallons of juice fermenting. Terry's mom digs potatoes and carrots in her garden; his dad tries to solder together a still made from the radiator core of a TD-14. Vern tells him not to use it, but Thor knows of one made like it during the War. School has begun. But Terry continues to fish every day, usually taking a pair of chinooks in the stretch between the log dump and Mattress Hole, sometimes, though, having to go as far as Cedar Tree. He's a senior this year, and not very interested in his studies, even though he's the top of his class, a position he inherited when Betty Ann Poage got pregnant during the summer and had to drop out.

Bill Heroun saw Betty Ann and the Saterlee boy she married parked along South Bay Road several times in June, his headlights suddenly filling the inside of the boy's pickup, an unwelcome intrusion wrestling sweaters down and pants up. He didn't know then that he'd bulldozed out the alders that screened their hideaway. He was too worried about the cannery to even notice what they were doing. He has since been too worried about the rains coming in earnest, rains that mire Cats in track-deep mud, to notice which kids were parked where, the kids practicing the same dance of dissent that his generation had practiced in hay lofts.

Still without a solid plan for what's to be done with the land he leased, Bill has nevertheless started work, apparently the therapy he has needed for some time. He no longer feels as old or as tired, and he's not thinking about the War

so much. Instead, with money from a dozen investors, he and Glenn Tinker, a surveyor he knew in Alaska who recently retired to the Coast, have started to lay out roads and plots, clearing Devil's club, alders and second-growth hemlocks east of 101, and scotch broom, stunted pines, and rhododendrons west of the highway. They have a few sketches and an architect working on the sort of building that JG suggested, a multi-story motel with convention facilities, not that he even knows what constitutes *convention facilities*. But then, he didn't know much about the canning business when he began.

Unlike Heroun's lack of direction, Hansen Investments have, for *THE CANNERY*, a detailed plan as complicated as schematics for a 17-jewel watch. Robin Steele has only to implement the plan and adhere to its timetable, earning performance bonuses for early completion of each phase. However, Steele's personal service contract also includes penalty clauses, the most severe being dismissal if the project falls forty-five days behind schedule.

But gutting the cannery goes faster than Steele anticipated. While he supervises the disassembly of the stainless steel can-lines, Vicky negotiates the sale of both boilers and the iron chinkman to a Portland salvage dealer. A Kenai Peninsula cannery purchases the lines and freezer compressors. Totes are burned, as are old walls and ammonia-soaked timbers. Blazes redden the evening sky every day of the short Indian summer, and renovation of the warehouse is weeks ahead of schedule, earning Steele a substantial bonus. Then the rains come.

2.

Robin Steele spends October staring through the office window, worrying, watching the rain, Nazi gray, never letting up, oppressive, always advancing, slicing, cutting deep, gullying hillsides. All work moved inside when the rain came, and termites were found in the bunkhouse, necessitating a new floor and ceiling joists on its south end. But the replacement joists have different dimensions than the rough-cut originals, and the carpenters have to cut and fit and scab together pieces. The building should be burned, and new construction begun. But that's not part of the plan. Although he's asked permission to modify the plan, he hasn't received it; so the cutting and scabbing goes on.

The rains came before pilings could be driven for the new dock. Firs toppled over power lines; outages lasted a day or more, one three days. The phone was out, he couldn't even complain. Roads washed out: the new road from Newport to Toledo slid down over the old one. And the contractor who was to drive the new pilings couldn't move his crane. This is the damnest

country Steele's ever seen, dark all the time, wet all the time, moldy, everything mildews.

In Euchre Creek, folks worry that the rains might stop, and that it might snow. It snowed in '37, and again in '48. But their fears are groundless. The rains hold, day after wet day. The only snow is on TV screens, where ghost images wander, making the six o'clock news hard to distinguish from *Have Gun, Will Travel.*

Vicki hasn't time to watch TV. She is too busy learning bookkeeping, too busy making deals. Robin put her in charge of turning the mess hall into a restaurant, and she borrowed books about commercial kitchens from the state library. Unbeknownst to Robin, she has visited every restaurant from *Moe's* in Newport to *The Pixie Kitchen* in Oceanlake, has talked to their cooks, contacted their suppliers, and called New York, making arrangements with the sale representative of a German manufacturer for a discounted package price of a complete kitchen, thereby getting the manufacturer into the West Coast market. The rep jokingly asked if she wanted to work for them; she said, "Maybe, if your range works as well as you say it does."

But some of the deals she makes turn sour: the iron chinkman sits wrapped in black plastic, an shapeless Buddha in the middle of parking lot. The salvage dealer wants to wait until it isn't so muddy before he picks it up, or pays for it. She ordered ten loads of gravel that the yard swallowed, and now, Robin doesn't want to pay for them: "I'm not paying for gravel that's not there." She wonders how Wild Bill kept the yard fed. *Maybe with chicken scratch or Layer Ration, judging from the sprouts poking up along the edges. Robin ought to get it paved, but he'll have to wait now till spring.*

The rains come a little earlier than usual this year, catching several gypos who Cat-log still working across summer bridges, and without rock on the new roads they've punched in. Their bridges wash out and their roads turn to mud, forcing them to spend days in the Harbor View, drinking. Stoker has to drum trucks up that Little Euchre Hill; his third side, still down, will probably stay down all winter. And tawny, swollen, Euchre River curls around deadheads, and roars on.

Steele watches the river boil around the willows on the far bank, watches without leaving the office; he hasn't been in the warehouse or on the dock for a week, two weeks. There's nothing to be done, nothing that can be done—and if there were, Vicki would take care of it; she takes care of everything. In the bunkhouse, carpenters replace a board or two a day. More carpenters will just get in each other's way. And both it and the warehouse will soon fall behind schedule.

"What's the matter? Worried about flooding?" Vicki asks, hanging up the phone.

"Where were you calling this time?"

"I was talking to Orlando, I wasn't calling anywhere."

"How high has the river gotten?"

"Bill and Orlando—"

"He's the old fellow who gave you the fifty?"

"What if he did? He just wanted to be nice." Vicki tosses her pencil across the blotter.

"What about them?"

"Do you really want to know? Or is there something you want to say about that fifty?"

"I asked you," Steele steps to the file cabinet, takes the fifth from the bottom drawer, then continues, "what's the highest the river's gotten?"

"High enough to flood that bottom drawer." She wishes it would, but suspects she does so just because *I don't want to go through what Mom has, I won't.* "Bill and Orlando rowed through the warehouse one winter, but nothing else here flooded."

"When was that?" He pours an inch of cheap whiskey into a water glass, turns back towards the window and tries to imagine water in the warehouse.

"My junior year. Jackie was working for Bill. He and Orlando—"

"Spare me the details."

"You sign my checks, but that's all the claim you have on me. If I want to be nice to him, it's none of your business."

"You're the one who keeps bringing him up. I don't want to hear about him."

"Why? Afraid charity is contagious?"

"My, but we're feisty today."

"The fellow who bought the freezer unit wants to know if we have any spare parts for the compressors. He called after you went home yesterday."

"What did you tell him?" He's concerned about her becoming too friendly with customers—she's already too friendly with the crew and with nearly everyone in the valley, especially with that Blackie guy. "I don't want you sending anything out of here without checking with me."

"Bill has enough parts to rebuild both compressors several times over. They weren't included on the inventory. Do you want the fellow in Alaska to get a hold of Bill himself?"

"They should've been part of the inventory. Tell the old man to bring them over, that we want them." He doesn't even know how the compressors

work. Oh, he knows the principle, but not which pumps do what or what it takes to rebuild a pump. "Threaten him if you have to."

"What's come over you? That's not the way to get anything from Bill."

"Don't tell me my business."

"Yes sir—"

"I don't like being mocked."

"Then don't set yourself up to be."

Steele cocks his arm as if to throw the glass, seems to think better of the idea, and with more hurt than anger in his voice, asks, "Can we keep to business?"

"I'm sorry. I'll get a hold of Bill and have him bring the parts over. He can't use them."

3.

Orlando deFader, once fish began to run in earnest, has spent every morning and afternoon along the river, the middle of every day in the Harbor View, lunching on chilimac and *Blitz*. As far as Steele knows, deFader doesn't have a home; he seems to live in a fishing shack above the log dump, a leanto with a stove of some sort in it—and the old fellow must have plenty of money. He gave Vicki fifty bucks for mending his pants, if that's all she did for him. Steele heard one of the carpenters say something about he, the carpenter, would like his pants sewed that way.

The incident remains troublesome for Steele: Hansen thrives on appearing as the corporate Good Samaritan. Mr. Gairdneri stresses Hansen's image. Scandals are quick tickets to dismissal—and nobody pays fifty dollars to get their pants mended, unless something else was altered.

Standing at the window, staring at the rain, wishing he was lying on the beach at Malibu, Steele suspects that he needs another place to live, that he might even have to get rid of Vicki, despite her doing all of the hiring as well as looking after the crew for him. He asks, "Have you heard back from ChrisCraft?"

"No. I think that's one you're gonna have to handle."

Damn rain. Already, my stay here feels like banishment. I'm becoming another damn fish—

"Get ChrisCraft on the phone. A call from Oregon will impress them." He twists the empty glass in his hand, looks through its transparency at his distorted palm, and wonders if he should pour himself another drink. "I want that dealership."

"What about Calkins Craft?"

"No. I want a line of boats our customers will have heard of."

"But everyone knows Calkins Craft—"

"Everyone? I hadn't heard of them until you mentioned them last week. It's a regional line. Perhaps worse, just local." *I'm tired of her. I need another place to live.*

Rain drips from the beard of the raven, feathers fluffed, perched atop the hemlock across the road; the drips fall into puddles, streams, the river, swelling it, turbulent and black, as evening spreads like a shade drawn down. The phone rings. Steele's surprised Vicki isn't on it, calling only she knows where, trying to find a buyer for who knows what, not realizing the money is in the performance bonuses, slipping away from him because of the rain and mud. She doesn't even ask him anymore before she makes a deal—and that has to stop.

"It's for you, Robin. From Salem."

"Good news, Steele. The cease and desist has been signed. Miami will stop immediately. Their gypos, within a week. As of three o'clock, there'll be no more logs dumped in Euchre River."

Having forgotten about the logs, Steele thinks of nothing to say for a moment. He turns, with the receiver to his ear, and looks at the raven. Across the river, lights shine up the hill, crawling through treetops, jumping from branch to branch, holding on, then swinging to the next tree. Steele looks away from the raven, hating it. He notices the lights and wonders aloud, "What the hell is that old man doing over there?"

"How would I know? What old man are you talking about?"

Realizing he'd unconsciously spoken into the receiver, not knowing exactly what he'd said, Steele tries to cover himself: "I was talking to Vicki. Sorry about that."

"That reminds me, Mr. Gairdneri has heard some ugly rumors about Mr. Heroun's project. What does he call it?"

"How did you know I was referring to Bill Heroun, and he's only knocking a few trees down. That's all. So what's this about a project?"

"Rumors have him building a motel and restaurant."

"This is the first I've heard—"

"Where have you been hiding? Don't you read your own newspaper?" Hansen's lobbyist explains what he knows about the governor going into partnership with Heroun to build houses and condominiums on state land. "Mr. Gairdneri said just today that you would've called him if we should be concerned about Heroun's venture. Perhaps he was wrong."

"No. I would've called—and I haven't seen a local paper. We don't get one here." *So the old bastard has Mr. G worried. I'll be damned.* "Tell Mr. Gairdneri that—"

"You need to speak with him yourself. And I'm not so sure you would've called."

"Why do you say that? That's nuts."

"Oh, is it?"

"Of course it is."

"I'll be talking to Mr. Gairdneri in the morning. Perhaps you should speak with him first."

"What don't I know that I should? What have you heard?"

After a pause that seems overly long to Steele, the lobbyist says, "Mr. Gairdneri thinks you're an awful lot like himself, perhaps too much so."

"I see—"

"Call him. Stay in touch with him."

"I'll do that. Thanks."

"Don't thank me." The lobbyist hangs up.

"Who?" Vicki asks, returning from the window. "Who were you talking about? Wild Bill?"

"Wild Bill is it? He was about as wild as a corpse when I took over here. He oozed defeatism—talking about being God."

"Naa, you just don't know him."

"Well damn him anyway—that's a cement truck over there, isn't it?"

"Jackie said they were pouring fifteen yards today, the slab for the equipment shed, someplace dry to work on whatever breaks down. And for sure, something will break down."

"In this weather?"

"Yeah. Vern asked him if they were gonna trowel it by flashlight. He didn't think it'd set up without too much calcium for it to have any strength. But," she pauses as she looks across the river at the headlights, "Bill said he needed the shed before he could punch in more roads."

"So he's pouring while we're stymied because of the weather, probably pouring just to make me look bad. Why can't the bastard wait?" He'd be pouring, too, if a pour were part of the plan. Unfortunately, dock pilings aren't as easy to set as a slab is to pour. "What else do you know about—"

"They're all manmade, D's and TD's and HD's . . . Jackie said he has to do it now if he's gonna get it done, the weather will only get worse and the mud tears up everything manmade, gets in bearings and wears out rollers and I don't know what all else."

"What do you know about bearings?"

"If you don't give 'em a shot of grease once in a while the grease worms will eat 'em up, the grease worms are really bad here in the wintertime."

"I don't want to hear anymore nonsense, anymore *Jackie said's*, anymore about engines or . . . and what has she to do with what's going on over there? You keep mentioning her."

"Bill tells her everything. I didn't ask what he's doing, but she wanted to know who you were voting for, see if she had to counter your vote."

"What?"

"Don't look so surprised. You know, if you're going to vote for Nixon, she'll have to get Bill to vote for Kennedy. Right now, there's ten more Kennedy's than Nixon's so a lot of us don't have to go, we'll just cancel each other out."

"I don't understand what voting has to do with bulldozers and cement." This isn't the first occasion where her logic has escaped him.

"It's simple. Grandma Hodges is going to vote for Kennedy. If her nephew-in-law Frank votes for Nixon, like he wants to, then he'll cancel her out, so she'll have to get her grandson Blackie to vote for Kennedy, and Frank will get Jess Saterlee to vote for Nixon, then Grandma will get Eddy to vote for Kennedy, and it gets real complicated. But if Frank stays home, then everybody else can and the election is real simple. That make sense to you? It's just now, we're building a restaurant so Wild Bill has gotta build one."

"Do you know for certain he's building a restaurant?" Perhaps he should welcome the competition. *He could be my excuse for spending more than's budgeted.* "Or is he just going to build houses over there? That's all I've heard."

"Well, houses for sure. But Jackie says—"

"Never mind. Just find what you can about the old bastard's project."

"What about how you're gonna vote?"

He hadn't thought about the election; it doesn't seem to matter much here. It won't matter at all once he falls behind schedule, and that appears inevitable the way it's raining.

"Maybe I won't vote . . . give yourself an hour of overtime, I don't care. Just find out what that old fisherman is up to—and make it stop raining."

The raven shakes its beard, slings rain against the rain, and sudden gusts dash office windows. The building seems to swell, to rise reeling, like a hemlock bough swept up, straining but going nowhere. Steele turns away from the window. For a couple of years in college, he drank too much. So, though pouring another inch of Black Velvet from the bottom drawer of

the near file cabinet into the water glass—Vicki's whiskey; he hates cheap whiskey—he knows he can't start needing a drink. He's been having one every afternoon, just one, not that he stops at one. Maybe when he wakes up, it won't be raining.

* * *

Chapter Seven

1.

Vern watches the always-gray sky darken, the neon *BLITZ* sign blinking fifteen times a minute beside him, the warm orange pulse pushing against the rain, stopping it at the door, absorbing it. Behind him, Dudley awkwardly thumps around a pool table. Vern hears the break; a ball drops. And across the road, the Olson boy, wearing neither hat nor coat, lugs a gunny sack over his shoulder—Flip, sniffing the sack, follows the kid. He ought to holler at his dog, a damn nuisance, more nuisance than keeping him is worth, especially now that Martha's working for him, her bitch Airedale in heat and always with her.

That Olson boy, Vern notices, has started to fill out, his shoulders squaring like his daddy's. Bill had his say about Orlando naming the kid in his will; told the story everybody has known part of for years, or if not known at least suspected. But looking off into the rain, Vern suspects Bill's reason for not wanting to see the kid given anything is in a still-untold part of the story.

Blackie, rapping the window behind the *BLITZ* sign, says, "I'll match your thoughts for a beer."

"You lose," Vern says, hearing again the story Bill told:

"We were running for Alitak, late in the fall. The year was '36. In a bad blow, bad even for Shelikof Strait, a hundred knots, maybe more. Tide falling. We were taking thirty footers head on—and getting beat by thirty footers broadside. Thor was rollerman. He and I were trapped in the fo'c'sle of one of those newer sixty-four foot schooners. Ever'one of them ride wet, but none of you would know about that. Well, the Asgood*, with her big stern, was one of the wettest. Her bow wouldn't lift, couldn't. Water was dumping down our stack, the main sputtering, the whole boat shuddering, and I prayed. Never had before, haven't since, but I did then even though I didn't know much about praying.*

"We foundered a long time, more under the sea than above. Our skipper was a Norski from the Old Country, and he held into her all night long. Later, he said only, 'Mama had lefse waiting.'

"The bow timbers worked. Water squirted in between planks, got pretty deep in the fo'c'sle. We had a handpump, but we couldn't begin to keep up. We were in water to our waists before the tide turned. Then we ran with it till we were swinging from the hook behind Harvester Island.

"Thor couldn't pray. He tried, but every time he ended up cursing God. He went on to swallow the anchor and take to drinking. He never was any damn good again."

"You worried about the kid?" Blackie nods towards Terry, now about out of sight.

"Tell Martha she owes you a beer."

"He'll be all right. He wants outta here, away from this rain."

The story Bill didn't tell, Vern knows, has to do with the kid's mother, then a young widow, her first husband a high climber killed while greasing a block on a spar tree, of all things. Vern's heard it said that when her husband got killed, she swore she'd never marry another logger, that she was a truly striking woman, long brown hair, long neck, chiseled classic features, that Bill and every bachelor fisherman along the coast put in here to see her. But they all sailed with the next tide. Only Thor hung around—and she was too damn anxious to get remarried.

It's hard to know the part of a story that's not told, Vern surmises. *It's a mistake to think there has to be a reason for everything that happens. That's not how life is. Time & chance happens to all men.* Vern leaves the window and walks past the pool table. *Take Dudley for an example, who would've expected him to lose his leg. It just happened, an accident.*

"Hey, Vern, seeing how you're easy today, I'll match you for a couple beers," Nils Gunnarsson says, stepping around the pool table. "Dad will be along in a minute."

"Martha's luckier than I am," Vern says, pointing towards the bar. "You'll have to try her."

"If I gotta match her, I may as well give her my money now." The big logger smiles at Martha, behind the bar, as he adds: "How come somebody doesn't marry you?"

"You didn't when you could have."

"Yeah, well, there's no accounting sometimes for what people do."

"It's not too late—"

"Whoa! You'll have to talk to Betty about that."

2.

Terry plods, feet and sack heavy, counting his steps, beginning over again at fifty, hearing the taunts, mocking voices without faces, pushing him here, there. Hemlocks and shadows, bending in the blowing mist, loom over the bent road, dark and long.

The voices aren't like voices: they're wires twisted into snares, strangling him. He wants to cry out; he wants free; he wants the voices to go away. He doesn't want to remember his dad, coming into school, into class, mumbling something about waiting for him, saying he was waiting for him.

Miss Pinkey saw Dad first, looking in the window of their third grade class. She reached up, like she always did, and ran her hand past the combs holding her hair—I used to want to marry her . . . or someone with red hair just like hers, beautiful red hair, long & flowing over her shoulders and down her back.

He doesn't want to remember his dad, fumbling the doorknob, finally getting it open, then coming in, pants unzipped, drunk, vomit on a shirt buttoned crooked, saying that he was waiting for him.

"Ah'm, ah'm here for Sonny. His mama wanted me to pick 'im up . . . . Ah'm, ah'm his papa."

He hated his dad then, hated him more than he hates the voices now, faceless and silent. And Old Man deFader saying "snap out of it, grow up" doesn't help a bit. He'll snap out of it all right, when the old bastard drowns in his beer—and who the hell is deFader to tell him what to do, who gives him that right? Just because . . .

On-coming headlights cut through the rain, bounce off the hillside and pass, winding downriver. Terry recognizes the Chevy, Vicky Poage's. He has seen it around, has seen her around, had a class with her a couple years ago. She still says hello—and he feels the cold slap of the silver, sea lice still clinging to it. Wet sack against his shirt, wet steps, counted and carried, he doesn't want anyone telling him *to snap out of it*, especially not that old firewood cutter, who probably hasn't sold a cord for years.

The headlights turn around, catch Terry; they feel like cat whiskers brushing across his jeans and sleeves. Vicky stops, and Pam Riley scoots over. "What's in the sack?" Pam asks.

"Dinner . . . . It's all right, I can walk."

"Smells like fish," Pam says, scooting farther to the middle.

"You smell bait, my eggs. I wiped my hands on my pants, I better walk. Thanks anyway."

Leaning across the wheel, Vicky says: "Don't be silly, get in. Behind the seat's a rug. I can wash it."

The seat is warm from Pam, who twists so not to touch Terry. "You're soaked," she says, as if surprised.

The rug is too small to cover more then just where he sits; so Terry rolls the sack around the fish and rests it on his right leg, careful not to let it touch the door. He wishes now he hadn't caught the salmon, that it would have spit the hook like the one old deFader had on. But the wish is stupid; there's nothing else at home to eat.

Vicky switches the heater onto HIGH, but no more heat comes from it. The fan just makes more noise. "You're gonna catch a cold."

"I'm not that wet."

Pam touches the inside of his thigh as if seeing how wet his jeans are, and she doesn't move her hand. Vicky glances over and sees what's happening. Terry, ears and cheeks burning, wants to say something, must say something, but not just anything. But before he does, though, they're past the log dump and stopping. He lifts the gunnysack, careful not to let it touch the seat, closes the door and watches the slope-backed Chevy disappear upriver. When he can't see its headlights, he waves, just a little wave, not much more than lifting his hand, but enough so that it embarrasses him.

He doesn't know why waving embarrasses him; he just knows it does. Just like he knows his dad embarrasses him, knows that his dad is a drunk. Why isn't important. The reason doesn't alter the fact—and facts are enough for everyone in Euchre Creek. So if asked about his feelings, Terry would say, *Dammit, there's nothing to deal with. My feelings are just fine. It's old deFader that has problems. His kids won't even talk to him. Everybody says he's a squawman who got rich during the Depression, buying land and timber at tax sales; they say his boys screw their sisters, are drunk all the time, won't work, kinda like Dad. And everybody is probably right.*

Today, the fishing was slow: optimists went home early, leaving Terry and the old woodcutter by themselves, plunking at the Glass House Hole, their rods leaning on forked willows pushed in the sand. Terry had to catch a fish. Orlando deFader stayed to help him if he needed it, two rods being better than one, not that deFader's rod is much, an eight-foot beryllium stick that, years ago, had its tip caught in a car door. Now, six inches extend beyond the last guide, which, like all of the others, is held on with once-white adhesive tape (loose tape ends occasionally foul his pink, sixteen-pound test Scotch line during a cast, but haven't yet cost him a fish). The cork grip, encrusted with

dried salmon eggs that don't soften in the rain; the early Pflueger Supreme, attached with baling wire and black tape; the whittled extension, fitted with black thread and ferrule cement—the old man's rod isn't as good as Terry's, and Terry often wonders why everyone says the old man has so much money. *Even the old bastard's pickup isn't as good as Wild Bill's; it isn't even a Ford.*

Above the rain and clouds, the moon rises, a slow fish bright as the fat silver in Terry's sack. The two chinooks that entered when the river was low and warm rest in the pool above Elk Creek, fifty miles above tidewater, fifty miles above the optimists. The hen, tail beaten white, worn down, rotting, laid half her eggs in redds dug this afternoon; the buck now stands guard, having driven away thieving cutthroats and jacks. Tomorrow, he will lie in the shallows; he will not see the eagle that attacks him, that sinks its talons into his back. He won't feel pain, won't feel his flesh being torn from him; he'll feel only the pull, the struggle to stop him from spawning. And he'll swim, slow at first, then faster once he realizes it won't let go, into the deep pool, where the eagle, its hoary head up, tail spread, wings beating, will be pulled under, drowning from its greed.

But Terry knows nothing about the chinook, they having slipped upstream while he was still fishing for cutthroats. Instead, alone in the rain, he thinks about what deFader said: "I was gonna be a doctor when your age, when this county was still part of Benton county and state legislators thought only fern pickers and stump jumpers lived over here." He doesn't want to be a doctor; he doesn't want anything more than to be into a fish, fighting it, winning. The old man had insisted that "everyone wants to leave their mark on the world, high school football players thinking they belong in the National League." He doesn't play football, wouldn't play if he was forced, doesn't want to be another Jesse Owens, doesn't go out for track or for any sport, doesn't want to be Paul Bunyan or to save the world. The world doesn't want saved, he knows that. He doesn't have to be told. And no, glancing up towards the moon he can't see, he doesn't think there's life out there, despite what Elder Gosson has to say, despite what, as old deFader called them, "Sunday-moaning preachers translating divine edicts personally received from heaven" have to say. He doesn't believe any of that stuff. God. Universal good. An Oversoul, from the essay he read for English class—that has to be the most ridiculous idea he has ever heard. Why read something so stupid, a naked eyeball.

Sack over his shoulder, heavy, Terry stands looking up into the darkness, feeling the wind, the rain running in rivulets like tears down his cheeks. He has his dad's dark hair, square jaw and shoulders, but his mother's hands, her

long, delicate fingers. Though out in the weather most days, he is as white as the belly of a watermarked pink salmon—Euchre River and Little Nestucca Creek have small runs of pinks. He wants to be a biologist, to know everything he can about salmon, to release premigrants into the river; he's never been more excited than last spring when he helped at the hatchery on Rock Creek, there on the Siletz, watching the little guys adjust to the current once they were released, splashing about, schooling in the shallows, so small, with such a long journey ahead of them. The only person he knows who's been to the Aleutians is Wild Bill. He'd like to go someday just to see how far it is. *Imagine swimming there? two thousand, three thousand miles, then coming back, smelling your way home.* What does he care about doctoring: old deFader is right, it ain't so much, setting bones in plaster, stitching loggers back together. *Dad done smoother plastering on that brick retaining wall out back than the doctor did on Tim Saterlee's cast, and in one of them Black African countries, the Congo, maybe, witch doctors massage bones back into place and those bones grow together as well as if they were plastered.*

Terry knows the moon is up there somewhere though he hasn't seen it for a month; he has faith it's up there, faith without doubt, without even thinking about it. He has seen the moon enough times that he really doesn't notice its absence as he gazes into the blackness, wondering why deFader said so much about becoming a doctor today. Does old deFader want him to go to medical school? It almost seems so. The old man all but offered to pay his way, even though saying, "No man can heal anothern." *Maybe no one can. Maybe people have to heal by themselves. That retaining wall already has cracked, will probably have to be replaced next summer, at least the end where Mom planted strawberries. The ground's slipping. The river keeps eating away at it. And this damn fish is heavy.*

3.

Vicki fusses in the kitchen, not able to get the cookie dough stiff enough, adding a little flour, then a little more, then still more. The cookies are for the Grange tea, the monthly meeting of Euchre Creek Women's Club, this month's meeting devoted to *The Battle of the Bulge*, or as Grandma Hodges says, "How to fit in your Sunday dress without needing a new girdle." Vicki doesn't usually go to these meetings, hasn't gone to one for over a year, hasn't gone since . . . she'd rather not think about it. Blackie's wife. No! she'd rather not remember what was said. She'd accepted Peggy's apology, even if it was more than a month in coming and that's enough said.

Jackie invited her to come, said even their mom was going, said she didn't have to bring anything, that "Mom will bring enough for both of us." But she doesn't want to go empty-handed; it wouldn't be right. She thought about bringing a low-calorie plate, dill pickles, celery, carrot sticks, but even though she'd be complimented for her good sense, none of it would be eaten. Plus, everyone likes her oatmeal cookies, and her mom always makes brownies, okay brownies, but only brownies, nothing else, never having on hand the ingredients needed for anything else, not that her mom wouldn't like to have a fully stocked cupboard. *Thor just isn't much of a provider, and Mom doesn't make but her house payment picking ferns—and to think, their house was free & clear just five years ago.*

Feeling some sort of a premonition, she looks up in time to see the kitchen doorknob turn. Orlando deFader lets himself in without knocking, without so much as having hailed the house—comes in without invitation, without saying a word. He draws a chair from under the table, sits, his legs extended, feet crossed. If she hadn't seen the door open, it would seem as if he'd suddenly materialized there in her kitchen, his hands behind his head, elbows extended as if they were wings.

"You gave me a start." She says, bending to get a cookie sheet. "Did you walk up? I didn't hear a rig."

"Got any coffee?"

She gets a mug from her dish cupboard and pours most of what's left in her gray enamelware perc pot into it. "It's been on the stove since breakfast. I hope it's still drinkable."

"Terry show you that silver he caught last night?"

"No. Did he catch a big one?" She begins greasing a cookie sheet.

"Thirty-two pounds. Record size. Maybe a damn world record. Certainly the biggest one that's come from Euchre Creek." Orlando sips the thick brew, then continues: "Fought her an hour and forty minutes, had all of his line a couple of times, chased her from the Glass House down to the bridge, most of two miles."

"I bet he was excited."

"Didn't seem to be. Acted like he'd been doing it all his life." Again Orlando sips the coffee that probably isn't drinkable. "Yup, a big one—and in with a bunch of bucks."

"I'll have some cookies out in a few minutes."

"Fixin 'em for the Grange?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Stay away from that pack of busybodies." He shoves his mug towards the middle of the table, stands, and hand on the doorknob, adds: "It may be a mite lonely out here, cut off from woman company, but you got blood showin and them hens ain't colorblind."

"I'm not afraid of what they'll say."

"Ought to be."

Orlando disappears through the door. If he opened it, she didn't see him—she finds herself alone in the kitchen, the half empty mug on the table, the only proof that anybody had been there.

* * *

Chapter Eight

1.

"A golf course, I don't believe it. Jackie, no."

"Bill, please, listen. What did the governor say, the brochure plan is growing faster than, what did he say, skunk cabbage. Corona Beach needs to be in that brochure and will be if he has his way. But what's there to take a picture of now, the start of two houses on a strip of sand." She pauses, then adds, "You know he's doing this for you."

Staring out the picture window, watching ravens tumble in the wind, riding the currents, closing their wings, free-falling two hundred, three hundred feet, flaring at the last minute, like bombs, *the high roar of radial engines, explosions, so many explosions, the Kriska Blitz, PBY's as dive bombers, chunks of plywood, life preservers, a diary wrapped in oilskin,* Bill (he wonders if that diary ever got back to the fellow's mom; he should've taken it himself) stands as still as Priest Rock, *the pass running eight knots, the rip choppy, wind blowing, Mukuskin snow-covered.*

"What is it, Bill? Are you all right?"

Yes, I'm all right, now. It's just the idea, golf! And the confusion, the bombed hospital, Strawberry Hill, pillboxes, the smell of diesel and JG saying how much Margaret's Bay looks like some cove on a course he once played.

"You're not all right, are you? Say something."

"You don't understand JG." Bill suspects no one does, certainly no one who hasn't seen JG in action when his life is on the line. Always being a politician, always professing public good while looking out for himself, that's JG. He saw that on Attu, pinned down with those GI's from California.

Fog crawled out of the valley and sat down on us like a baby with a wet diaper, and above the fog, planes, radials leaned to stretch time over target, and above them, JG, bouncing radio signals off the ionosphere. It wasn't quite

daylight, and those GI's couldn't see their front sights; couldn't hear either. They thought Sven's accent sounded Japanese. That inept bunch of bastards, squirrels with fangs, fighting in the clouds. JG was as close to heaven as he'll get: he took the radio, worked his way down to those Californians, took credit for stopping their shooting, made himself out to be a hero.

So what's in this for JG now? And what kind of record is he after?

"Jackie, I don't know anything about golf." He's sure she got the idea from yesterday's gabfest: chocolate must affect her thinking, or maybe it was the walnuts, the happy nuts her mom put in those brownies, nuts from that Claro tree on the Russian's place, nuts soaked in the wine Ken Wyscaver ran through his still. "And I don't want to know anything."

"That's silly . . . and not like you." She hands him a fresh cup of coffee. "You're not even gonna break ground for the main lodge till the first of March, and then you'll need good weather before you can build. If, Bill, listen to me, if you put in a couple of greens, the early spring grass will make a pretty picture, a gull on a new green, pin flag fluttering, an old duffer bent over his putter, a smiling couple watching, the man wearing a red sweater, his wife a red skirt. You've seen the kind of pictures."

"The ground's so wet I can't get a Cat on it. When I can, we'll start work on the lodge. We won't have time to screw around with a golf course."

"Why not put part of the course on the bay side of the spit. That's all sand and you can work it anytime."

What she says is true, but, "Plans call for building lots on all of the spit."

"What plans? You only made them up last week. You can change them."

Rain tiptoes across the roof, tapping lightly on the cedar shingles. Wind leans against the kitchen door, moans, then goes away, banging the steel sheeting of the woodshed, leaving a downdraft to force little puffs from the stove, making the house smell like roasting alder. Bill would've lost the house, damn near did, if it wasn't leased from deFader, who wanted to keep title to everything that wasn't state land on the south side of the river. Orlando leased him the five acres instead of selling them, a lifetime lease for ten dollars and a hundred skeins of eggs—Bill still owes him eight skeins. Now, he deals in six-figure loans, and with investors who won't want plans, such as they are, scrapped without compelling reasons. But she's right: he made the plans, he can alter them. Only, "Grass won't grow on sand."

"There're ways of making it . . . . Come on, give the idea a chance."

"Okay, against reason and my better judgment, we'll lay one out, maybe even put in a couple greens if you think we can find the money." *What am I saying? That's nuts!*

"Take it up with your backers. Don't you suppose every one of them plays golf? I'm sure they'll think it's a great idea, especially if you make the course exclusive and give them memberships." Jackie knows that she's won, that the idea, discussed at length after the Bulge lady left yesterday, will not only be implemented by Bill but adopted by him as if it were his own. "Please, Bill, give it a chance."

"Call the meeting. I'm going to Newport, gonna duck outta this one, let you take it, seeing how it's your idea."

"Whose idea it is isn't important. It's the right thing to do."

"Run with it, then. I ain't wanting to get laughed at."

*

In Newport, Christmas lights are draped across Highway 101; broken Plexiglas Santa faces hang from power poles. Western Auto advertises a clearance sale. Ray's Home Town Market, on a butcherpaper sign covering two windows, advertises oranges for twenty-three cents a pound, or four pounds for a dollar. A western plays at the theater. Under the marquee, a city cop sleeps in his car. It's still early. Bill enters the cafe next to John's Department Store, brushes crumbs from a stool, orders coffee and pie, peach, a double piece. The waitress says, "It's been awhile." He agrees; it has been a long while since he bought breakfast.

Johnny Wiles, owner of the *Blitz* distributorship, claims the stool next to Bill, letting, when he enters, rain and wind rush past him, stirring newspapers, scattering loose receipts left lying beside the cash register. The waitress scowls, but John doesn't notice. His wife has scowled at him for so long he doesn't see trifles like that, especially not when he has his mind on shooting. He's a muzzleloader, a fine shot, and lacks only a coonskin cap from being Davy Crockett. "I saw your pickup, Bill, thought you might be in here. And that hat of yours is scratching to get out."

Johnny has joked about skinning Homer for years, all in good fun of course, but Bill suspects he might make a cap from the coon's pelt if he had the chance. After all, John had a muzzleloading smith, now in Alaska, build him a gain-twist halfstock from his mother's favorite apple tree; fell the tree right after she made butter from the last of the fall picking, planked it there in the orchard, used the chips to smoke that batch of salmon he traded the cannery for, another of those no-money deals.

"Tell you what, Bill. Just for today, I'll trade you breakfast for his hide."

"That's a fine offer, but I've already eaten."

"What the hell you doing in town on a rainy morning like this? I thought an old salt like you would be working out in it."

"I'd rather be, believe me . . . . Came in to see the bank. Jackie thinks I ought to put in a golf course."

"Golf course? If you were smart, really smart, you'd build a shooting range. You ever try eating golfs?"

"Your boys tell you that one? How are they?"

"Growing, always growing. They eat ten pounds of potatoes a meal, a deer lasts a week, and they tell me those golfs taste like paper targets, only stringier."

"Paper targets, huh? You suppose a range would support itself?"

"I think so."

"Tell you what, you put up the materials, and I'll build it." There, he's called John's bluff. *Let's see if he wants to stay in the game.*

"An indoor range, how much are we talking about?"

"I'd have to figure it up." Bill pauses, savoring the peach pie.

"And I'll have to think about this one. Of course, you'd have to throw in that coon on a deal this big."

The pie is or isn't better than he had last time, Bill can't decide. It's good, but it seems like it used to be sweeter. And as far as trading Homer, "He'd bite you, John, even after you tanned his hide. Your range will have to wait."

"Let's not be hasty. Let me think about this. I may want to put up the materials."

"Call Jackie. She should be at the house." Bill slides a couple dollars towards the waitress. "Remember, this offer is just for today, just till I figure out what the labor will cost me. Just as soon as I do, I have to get one of Don Lynch's crying towels."

"I saw Don last week, he's buying clocks now . . . . Your number's the same?"

Bill says it is, then lets the door close behind him. He leans into the wind, which, along with the rain and the traffic, has increased. Homer scratches to get out; the coon will shred the seatcovers in another few minutes—he shredded the original upholstery a couple years ago, about the last time Bill could afford coffee and pie.

"You're more nuisance than you're worth. Come on, ride on my shoulders." He picks up the raccoon, places him on his left shoulder. But Homer wants on his right so with claws clutching Bill's halibut shirt, the coon climbs around the back of his neck and perches himself precariously on his right side, tail curled around his neck, rocking back and forth.

If the receptionist notices Homer, she doesn't let on, as she ushers Bill into the senior vice-president's office—this is before Don Knapp transferred over from the bank's Toledo branch. The office, more like a den than someplace to work, smells like cucumbers, its rockwork reminiscent of a desert arroyo. Homer jumps from Bill's shoulder and dives under the banker's desk, evidently not liking the buzzing, low and annoying and not readily identifiable. Bill starts to yell at Homer, but checks himself. Yet as he sits, he leans forward to see what the coon is up to. He's suspicious, for cause. There's nothing that damn varmint won't play with.

Fascinated, the bank officer asks, "Is this the animal at the governor's tea?"

"He's about as tame as an old coon gets, that is till a dog chases him. Then he gets a little wild-eyed."

"How old is he?"

"Dunno. He was grown when he showed up at the house. I figure he's good for another seven, eight years."

"While he's down there, what can I do for you? Everything proceeding according to schedule?"

Bill broached the subject of a golf course in a roundabout way, describing first the stunted pines and rhododendrons on the spit, then expressing his desire to share its beauty with the most people possible, keeping in mind that its bay side is out of the wind and mostly free of quicksand. He asks if the banker plays golf. He does. "Good," Bill says, wishing Jackie were here, wishing he knew more about the game, wishing Homer would bite this slick bastard who wanted to padlock the cannery just a year ago. *Damn him, sitting here listening, not saying a thing, tapping his pencil, his pasted on smile slightly askew.*

"Who'll be laying out this course?" the banker asks, still drumming his pencil on his desk's blotter. "I know who you can get, Smokey Stover, he laid out that famous course at Onion Bay. The wind blows there all the time, but the course is playable in anything less than a gale."

"I haven't heard of him . . . . He's famous?" Bill shifts position, trying to keep an eye on Homer.

"I'm surprised you haven't read his book."

"I'm ah, new at the game. I don't know too many golfers other than Sam Snead."

"How much will you need?"

"Dunno yet. We're having a meeting to see where we stand. I thought I'd do a little test fishing."

"Rest assured, you can count on our support." The banker makes a couple notes to himself, then says, "Excuse me while I check some figures," as he rises from his padded swivel chair.

Homer has found a case of counter checks, has gnawed his way into the box, and is now busily tearing checks from the topmost box. Bill, looking around the desk, snaps, "Get over here." The raccoon stops, stares at Bill, then grasping a crumpled check in his teeth, hops onto the padded chair and from the chair to the desk. Probably sensing he is in trouble, he drops the check, grabs at it, doesn't get it, and the check bounces over the edge. Homer, then, leaps to the floor and scratches to get out. A quick step and Bill has him—in one motion, Bill hoists the coon, tucks him under his arm, and sits back down just as the banker returns, all smiles. "I've just spoken to Tom Smith over at Yaquina Supply. He has a little money he wants to invest. You should see him, he's there now."

But Bill only half-hears what the banker says: *that damn buzzing seems to come from the banker. How can anyone work here, noisy as this office is. It must be the fluorescent lights, a bad ballast maybe.*

"We can, of course, arrange the transfer if you and Tom wish . . . . By the way, how's fishing?"

"There's no mud left in the hills, it's been raining so damn much. But there's bright fish showing, a few anyway."

2.

Hating the rain and the raven and how the raven shrugs off the rain, Steele stares, a prisoner of the gray skies and drizzle, every day the same, no sunrise, no sunset. Wind and wetness form days, weeks without markers—and always out there, like the hemlock, the raven sits watching him, spying on him, telling Mr. Gairdneri lies about the weather. And always out there is Cynthia: he feels the seared ridge, hard callus, on his thumb, on his index finger where burning her letter charred his fleshy heart. He no longer cares what his draft board does. Time has put him beyond their reach. And beyond hers.

Cynthia Kashaph appeared before Steele's draft board with a marriage license and two sons, asked that the board reconsider his 1-A classification, then didn't disappear with the five one-hundred-dollar bills like she promised. Instead, monthly she asked for more money, never directly threatening to say she lied to his board, but suggesting that if he didn't pay she'd have to apply for ADC. She never asked for more than he could afford, not really. But she

became, he felt, like mistletoe, a parasitic growth sapping his strength, with no life of her own, ever there living off him.

He has other concerns now: he falls nearly a day per day farther behind schedule, with no hope now of another performance bonus. Work can't start on the dock; the pilings can't be driven till the river quits flooding. He has to have some good weather before he can go to the next phase. Everything hinges on the dock, and if his job is to change the weather, they better get somebody else. He isn't God.

That bird, that raven, sits there, on top of that hemlock, causing all his problems, its black eyes boring through his soul, if he has a soul or even a fragment of one. If anybody has a soul, he should, M.B.A., a respectable portfolio, from a good family, his mother happy in Sun City, his brother. He'd just as soon not think about his brother even though he received a card from him, *Happy Holidays from Bermuda*, and a photo of his brother, in swim trunks, a breeze rippling the tide flats behind him, the glare off the water almost ruining the picture. He hasn't seen the sun since he got here, and if not for Vicki, he wouldn't have sent out any cards. As it is, he only bought a dozen, and he has half of those left. Maybe more than half.

He has started thinking about himself, now that completion moneys are beyond reach. He's a little over-extended; he was counting on another couple of bonuses. Bowed hemlock boughs, mud and drizzle, more grayness and more drizzle—glancing down at his shoes, ruined by the rain, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his hands nervous, Steele wants to explain, wants to tell Mr. Gairdneri that these delays aren't his fault; he's doing all he can. It isn't that he's not doing anything. The restaurant will open ahead of schedule, and considerably under budget. That's the way everything would be if not for the rain.

Actually, he's tried to tell Mr. Gairdneri that the weather is responsible for the delays, that he has done everything anyone could, that no one could have foreseen the continual rain. But Mr. Gairdnrei, interrupting his explanation, said that the weather is never an excuse, not on the coast, that he grew up wet, went to school in wet clothes, worked in the rain and wind, that he didn't want to hear about the weather; he knew all about it.

How long before I'm forty-five days behind? First of the year? Opening the restaurant will purchase another month, but it's no panacea. Without rooms and support facilities, The Cannery *will be just another restaurant, a little more out of the way than most. Damn him, anyhow.*

"Robin, I've located us a chef, a real one, and he'll come at his expense." Vicki sharpens a pencil, then another. "I guess it's true about Bill putting in

a golf course. Mom said Jackie's reading everything she can about the game, even went up to Neotsu to take a lesson."

"There should've been a 'no engagement' clause in the sale."

"What's that?"

"You have enough to do keeping the books in order. I'm taking over the day-by-day supervision of the restaurant."

Vicki, surprised, stares, not knowing what to say. She's been worried about Robin lately, always standing in front of the window, looking out but doing nothing. Maybe this is a good sign, but it has been her project. "Want me to see about the marina, get it started?"

"If you want."

"There's more you could do, like—"

"Nothing! You hear me, nothing can be done till it stops raining." That's the last thing he needs, criticism from her.

"I thought maybe—"

"Don't you think I would've already thought of it if it could be done?"

"I'm going home." She flips the folder on her desk shut, takes her coat and starts for the door.

"Wait a minute." Steele wonders how much he should say about billing changes. "It's slow enough that it might be a good idea to take a few days off, with pay, of course."

"I thought I'd vote, if that's okay with you."

"The election was weeks ago."

"This is for school tax." *You're an asshole, Mr. Bigshot . . . an arrogant asshole . . . . How come I can't stay mad at him.* "We kept turning it down, but it doesn't seem to do any good. The school board doesn't understand that Typing doesn't need new typewriters and the football field doesn't need lights."

"How will the old lady, Grandma Hodges, vote?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter in this election. Everybody votes. Nobody wants higher taxes." Vicki checks her purse, making sure everything she'll need is in it. "The information about the chef is in the restaurant file, the one on my desk"

"I want you to start paying bills the day they come."

"Even if we haven't received the merchandize yet."

"Yes."

"You're certain?" Paying before receiving doesn't make sense to her. In fact, the idea seems downright ludicrous. *What happens if there're shipping delays, or if there's freight damage, and why pay for supplies until we have to?*

"What's with you today? Can't you just do what you're told?" He softens a bit, not wanting her to question the practice of paying early too deeply.

"There may be some budget problems coming up," Steele turns and looks at the raven, "if we don't show a substantial profit next quarter, so I want as much outgo as possible in this quarter."

"You're worried about your job if we don't show a profit?" She knows about the forty-five day clause, but doesn't believe anyone would actually hold rain-delays against their project manager. To do so would be stupid, and she's sure Mr. G isn't stupid, hard maybe, but not without understanding. She can, though, imagine a person being fired if, after spending so much money, the person doesn't show a profit.

"Frankly, yes."

"Then we'll show a profit. I can pay duns early as well as late . . . . I thought I'd stop for a little while at the *Whale House* if you need to get a hold of me about anything." Vicki opens the file cabinet and sees that the fifth of *Black Velvet* is almost empty. Holding it up, she asks, "Didn't I just buy this day before yesterday?"

"You may have. Why don't you pick up another one."

She says nothing as she closes the drawer.

* * *

Chapter Nine

1.

Alone in the store hours after it closed, Brice Christians dusts the stuffed elk head in the poorly lit clothing section, dusts the braid of garlic that hopefully will keep the clothes from smelling like cigarette smoke, dusts the *No Smoking* sign that's universally ignored—all raising dust that settles on hickory shirts, Levi's and black Frisco jeans. A flypaper helix dotted with dark balls casts, as if it were the store's DNA molecule, its sticky shadow across the cash register, mechanical flags raised for *No Sale*—unconsciously, he dusts around the spiral shadow. He ought to get rid of this register; use just the one by the door. It isn't good business to leave a register unattended. The government pamphlet on *How To Run A Business* said as much.

Christians had sent to Pueblo for the pamphlet, figuring if anybody knew how to run a business, it ought to be the government, seeing how this is a capitalistic country. He has prided himself on being a Capitalist. But several things the pamphlet says don't set well with him: extending credit when somebody needs a little help is the right thing to do even if the pamphlet says otherwise. What it says about cash registers, though, makes sense. He'll have to spend more time standing behind his when folks are in the store. As it is now, he feels like he's stuck indoors. Why, from the register he can't even see if it's raining, and here it is, almost Thanksgiving and ironheads starting to trickle in, Orlando catching one Monday.

Setting the feather duster under the counter, looking at his hands—he had been the head sawyer at the cedar mill, but he'd nicked a finger every now and then; he's down to one finger on his right hand and two on his left—Christians wishes he was still sawing, not weighing onions, dusting shelves, selling milk . . . if not sawing, then skinning a Cat. He might not be able to hold the brakes on a set of triple drums, nor throw tongs with a

heelboom, but now that Cats have hydraulics, he could skid, especially with an arch; he probably could build road okay. A man needs to smell of pitch and sweat and the earth he comes from; he doesn't have any business selling dish detergents and perfumed bath soaps.

On the counter lies the color brochure for a metal detector: *Find GOLD! Lost RARE COINS! Other VALUABLE METAL Objects!* Christians decided to buy one of the metal detectors when he first saw the brochure. Pappy Hodges allegedly buried a hundred double-eagle gold pieces in tobacco cans behind the outhouse on his homestead. Since he died, most of Euchre Creek has been up there looking for them. But Christians knows something most everyone else doesn't: when he was seven, maybe eight, he went with his dad to visit Pappy. He ate too many green apples. The outhouse wasn't where it has been since Pappy got religion—Pappy moved it away from his garden. He won't say where it used to be, won't even think it in case somebody reads his mind, but with this detector, the deluxe model, he'll find those double-eagles.

Needing gas, Elder Gosson looks through the window in the door, his bulging eyes spying the pencil-circling around the detector pictured on the brochure's back cover, a feat less remarkable than him seeing the evil such a machine could unearth. Gosson is a tall puritan with thin fingers strong as talons, an overly-large Adam's apple, and iron-gray hair, combed back, as the forehead of a man should not be covered; hair is the woman's glory, ordained by the God he serves. A man isn't to look like a woman, not if he serves the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and serves not the mammon found in dust.

The sign in the window says *Closed*; the door is locked. But the new storekeeper is in there. Gosson bangs on the door, his fist striking the wood framing as it does his pulpit, the blows resonating like the curled surf, rolling, tumbling agates, leaving lying streaks of black sand. His blows spill the cups of Circe that turn reasonable creatures into beasts, and gall the apples of Hippomenes that hinder the course of Atalanta, the drink and meat of the devil.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Christians hollers, fearing the fiery preacher will break his door down any moment, its top bowing in an inch under each blow, glass rattling. "I was closed up, but you know I'll always make an exception for you. You don't have to beat my door down," Christians says, again locking up behind the preacher. The only other person he'll open for is that Jew tavern owner, though he might extend the privilege to the new cannery manager if their restaurant sends him enough business. "Have you met our new cannery manager?"

"No, but I expect I will." Gosson doesn't explain his remark. Instead, he goes directly to the shelf where the soda was—it isn't there. The shelves have been rearranged.

"Can I help you find something?" Christians asks, slipping the brochure under the counter. The fewer people that know about these money-finders, the better, not that he expects Elder Gosson to blab about them, but he's heard the minister preach against trying to get unearned wealth. That sermon of October a year ago, the one using Jacob as an example, still makes him cringe even though he didn't understand all of the references, especially the Greek-sounding ones, not that Gosson uses as many of those strange names as he did before being invited to that first Ladies' Club tea-party. They say he was red for a week afterwards, about as red as that brother of Jacob's, Esau . . . *a man has to be pretty near dead not to be able to tell the difference between venison and mutton: that Jacob was a bad one, taking advantage of a dead man, and just think, all of those Jews are descended from him.*

"I've a sour stomach, too much sugar."

"Take these. They have aluminum in them, the latest thing for heartburn," Christians says, handing the preacher a roll of antacids that he tried for the first time a week ago. They worked for him, quenching the fire left from a can of tamales he ate cold. He would have heated them up if he'd been home, but there's no place to cook at the store. He suspects he ought to fix the apartment upstairs; he could store his bulk flour and beans in the back room where he has been keeping Super Dairy and sacks of dried beet pulp. That would be easier on his back: he wouldn't have to lug hundred pound flour sacks up those outside stairs, rickety as the gun rack his nephew made for him in seventh grade, the one he hangs coats and aprons on just inside the back door there by the loading dock.

"You've moved your shelves," Gosson says without moving his lips. He's already framed a sermonette; he awaits only an opening to deliver it—a mention of talents, pearls, or fields. Then a parable. An explication of taking no anxious thought for tomorrow and the evils of greed. Yes, he must pluck this bud of avarice before it blooms. He's seen its seed, fireweed fluff drifting in the wind, a lifetime of good works dry and rootless.

"I'm still fixing things up. Got some good ideas, but need more room—and that back wing's got a rotten floor, termites I suspect."

"Termites?" Gosson says, wondering how to bring up termite mounds in African fields.

Gosson doesn't preach about virtue as often as he used to. When he first came to Euchre Creek, he knew more about virtue than about love, more about grace than about mercy. He had one suit, a dog-eared Bible, a Greek-English lexicon and two years of Bible college. Now, he has a library plus his study full of books; he wears his blue suit, with threadbare cuffs and

shiny elbows, on the second and fourth Sabbaths of each month, his brown suit on the first and third Sabbaths, and his gray suit, still missing a button on its right sleeve, when visiting. Other than the new cannery manager, he's the only person in Euchre Creek who seems comfortable in a jacket and tie—his ties are dyed calf-skin, solemn and narrow, except for the yellow one he wears when visiting Mary Poage the last Friday of each month. He has been calling on her for the five years since that widowmaker got her husband there a mile above the forks at Abby Creek. But tonight, he's on his way home from dinner with Grandma Hodges: chicken and dumplings, blueberry pie with fresh cream from her nephew Frank's Shorthorns (Grandma claims the bottled, watery stuff Christians sells isn't fit for pigs; everybody knows, she insists, that brown cows give better milk than black-and-white ones). Her blueberry pie was rich, too sweet for Gosson's liking. Nevertheless, to please her he had seconds, causing his, as he terms it, "rather delicate constitution" to pay for that extra piece; so he's come to see what Christians has for an acid stomach. He couldn't find soda in the parsonage when he looked two, three years ago. He hasn't bought any since though soda is something, like olive oil for anointing, he knows he ought to keep around, not that he's had much occasion to use either. The last person he anointed was that Poage girl, the one about ready to graduate. She'd asked him to pray for her. She wouldn't tell exactly what was wrong, but he gathered that she was bleeding, woman problems. The doctor she went to in Newport had shrugged his shoulders, said he didn't know what more to do for her, and sent her home, charging her eighteen dollars. "The Eternal God doesn't charge money," Gosson had explained when she said she couldn't even give an offering, she not wanting to say nor tell her mother exactly what was wrong either. Within a week she was, as Gosson told her, forgiven and healed.

"Yes sir, termites. Big white ones that just eat up any profit I put in this store. I called up one of those exterminator places in Portland and they said they weren't interested in coming down here, that there was so much rain and wood here we'd just have to live with termites, but I dunno how a person can live with them. That corner of the store is already eat up and pretty soon the roof will be on the ground. What this building needs is healed." Brice grins as he now asks, "Would you pray for it?"

"No . . . . You usually have better sense than to appear stupid before me."

"I didn't mean no harm." *He must not feel good tonight. I bet he did see that brochure and wants to jump me about it.* "I was just trying to have some fun with you."

"I see. Then you don't think it's possible that the Eternal God could heal this building."

"I never said that."

"Then you believe it is possible."

"Certainly, it's possible."

"I'll pray that your faith isn't devoured by those worms returning this building to dust."

"I didn't mean no harm, really."

"Then I'll expect you in services Sabbath." Gosson scribbles his name on the sales slip, takes the antacid and leaves, the door closing slowly behind him.

That stomach of his must really be giving him problems for him to be so all-fired serious. Brice pulls the brochure back out from under the counter, leans on the worn fir planking and again reads the description of the Deluxe Model LT3, the one that's going to find gold. *I might oughta walk into Pappy's place and kinda look around, just curious like.*

2.

Somewhere under the rhododendrons, Bill lost Sunday, an inch and five-sixteenths socket, and his D-4's final. Mud, hidden springs, and more mud. He lay in mud, pulled the Cat apart in mud, dropped tools in mud, dropped parts, blood, and his hangover in the mud, the kind that swallows boots and splatters eyes, that grinds bearings into dust, plugging grease xerts and air breathers, clay and sand and a little soil, bottomless over the springs. The Cat snapped teeth on a bull gear and pinion; Bill snapped a breaker bar. The Cat needed—still needs—a new ham; he needed a bath and for his knuckles to quit hurting, his right hand so swollen he could hardly pull a ratchet. His knuckles still hurt. Now, on his way to Newport, he has to steer with his left hand. He could've waited for Jackie this morning, for she was up late counting ballots. He voted against the school budget, which was defeated again, this the third time since September. Jackie, Grandma Hodges, and the school teachers are about the only people for it; so what would it have been this morning, the cold shoulder or the lecture?

*

Losing her war against time, perhaps a worst defeat than yesterday's election, Jackie pauses before applying her lipstick. The mirror confirms what she knows. Lines extend beyond her eyes. Other lines, deeper this year than last,

curl around her mouth. She wiggles her nose; she's still attractive, except for the mole. Perhaps she ought to get it cut off. Vicki had hers burned off with acid; said it didn't hurt. They used to be close—before high school, before the six years between them became six million miles. Classes, boyfriends, dances. They quit doing things together. She didn't want a "tag-along," and Vicki didn't want "another mama." What can she say? Was she really that bossy, that much of a mama? She'd like to be one. Yes, she would.

People can't know what it's like to be alone when there's someone else around. Oh, they can kid themselves into thinking they're alone—and maybe they're worse off than really being alone. That'd be bad, nobody caring for them. But to be truly alone, to know really being alone, someone has to be by him or herself. She suspects it might be easier for a man to be by himself although she doesn't know about that. It may not be easy for anyone. That's why she'd asked Vicki to come to Ladies' Club, but perhaps it was better that Sis hadn't come, especially with Susie and Peggy *what a pair of blabbermouths . . . I wouldn't have believed they could be so cruel, with me and Mom right there.*

"Knock, knock. Can I come in?" Vicki pokes her head in Jackie's bedroom. "Your door wasn't locked."

"Oh, I let the cats out already, and you know you can come in anytime." She hugs her sister. "I was just thinking about you."

"I hope something good. I need that right now, I'm pregnant." Vicki hadn't intended to blurt it out so bluntly.

"Have you told Mom?" She doesn't know what else to say.

"No . . . . Jackie, I don't know what to do. Robin and I, well we don't get along so well. Oh, he can be nice enough some of the time."

"But you don't love him?"

"I dunno. I suppose I do."

"Let's go in the kitchen and sit down, you can tell me about it." Jackie glances towards the mirror, sees herself and wishes suddenly she hadn't: she's a spinster, such an ugly word, a name she wouldn't have called herself even a year ago. Now, Vicki will probably be getting married, leaving her more alone than ever.

"I was gonna come by yesterday, but I went home and cried instead . . . Jackie, what am I to do?"

"Here, sit down . . . . Coffee or tea?" She must now be that big sister Vicki never wanted; she hopes, she prays is more like it, she'll say the right things. "Robin doesn't know, does he?"

"How can I tell him? He'll just think, you know, that I'm trying to trap him into . . . I don't want to do that. I'd rather go someplace and have it than do that.

"I dunno, a little longer . . . . Oh, Jackie, I wish—I dunno what I wish, maybe that Doc Stevens would . . ." She doesn't finish her sentence. She's never told anybody what he did for her before; it wouldn't do for her to mention her abortion now. "I'd really like to have this baby."

Jackie would like to have one herself: *Perhaps things would've been different if the cannery hadn't been so financially strapped from the beginning . . . . I don't mind that Bill's so much older than me, or that he chews snoose. He has a good heart. That's all that really counts.* "You were smart not to come to the Club. There was some suggestion that, well, what, that you were—"

"Then everyone knows?" Even she heard the anger, the defiance in her voice. "I mean, then Mom knows?"

"She wouldn't listen—and wouldn't have believed it if she had . . . . Look, Sis, Mom will understand. Tell her."

"No. Not today, not unless I decide to keep it."

"You don't know that you are?"

"Oh, I probably will, but how can I afford to? Robin may not . . ." Her voice fades into a deliberately inhaled breath. "*The Cannery* just has to be successful, has to be."

Jackie wants to second that, but can't. Bill's project, his resort development—that is the one that must be successful this time.

"Jackie, I'm scared . . . not of having it, or even of what people will say. Do you understand?"

"I ah . . . yes . . . yes, I do." And she does. "It's okay to be afraid." She too feels helpless, not something Bill or Robin or any man would necessarily understand. In the kitchen window, she again sees herself . . . just look at her hair. *I won't do.*

* * *

Chapter Ten

1.

Rain slung from advancing clouds strikes a cowering Goliath, green as the bowed fir boughs of Table Mountain—it is raining as hard in Newport as in Euchre Creek. For the third time this winter, Bill has to wait for Yaquina Supply to open, has to wait for the yard boys to drink their coffee and for the counter help to brew a fresh pot and for the secretaries to finish complaining about the amount of grounds used, has to wait for a gull to mute on kedge anchors lined up in front, for a raven to swoop down, inspect the white spot, caw twice, then hop away, looking for bits of sandwiches loggers, fishermen, the yard boys threw it last night. Finally, the sign's turned around and the door's unlocked. Bill follows painted yellow arrows past the stuffed dummy labeled *The Happy Hooker* and to the parts counter. The dummy, with a coil of haywire over its shoulder, sports the jeans, hickory shirts, caulk boots, and tin hats the store's clothing department sells. Bill suspects the dummy also answers the parts counter phone: he's never been able, even when having part numbers, to get what he needs unless he comes in person. *It's a damn nuisance having to drive down every time I need anything. What the hell did Bell invent phones for if they're gonna have dummies answer them?*

She missed him. Of course she would: it's mid-morning. And she still feels outraged, Vicki afraid to tell Robin, afraid to keep the baby if he spurns her, afraid to face herself if she gives it away, afraid to risk killing it. Jackie also feels a twitch in her outrage, a twitch of perhaps loneliness, perhaps just a muscle spasm, just under her left eye when she opens the door to the empty house on the hill. The parlor stove, draft closed, has burned down to coals. So her most immediate need is another length of wood. Then maybe she can think about, damn Bill anyhow. He's just like every other man, can't pick up after himself, can't even put his dirty dishes in the sink . . . a plate bearing the

massacred remains of greasy eggs once smothered in ketchup weights a note explaining about going to Newport. *How can he eat so much grease and not look like Uncle Leo, who must be three hundred and fifty pounds now, or more?*

Her outrage can't be sustained. Once in the kitchen—she should've been here to cook him a decent breakfast—she realizes that Homer's gone. The coon would be curled around her leg if he were here. And the phone . . . "Hello?"

"Jackie, that you? Is Bill around?"

She recognizes Vern's voice, explains about Bill needing parts, what the notes says, and asks, "Is this something you can tell me?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"What is it? Who's in trouble?"

"Sometimes, Jackie, I wish you weren't so damn perceptive . . . . I think Orlando is. His wife called. She was sober—"

"Are you sure? She sounds sober over the telephone when she can't stand up."

"No, I'm not sure . . . . She was looking for him. Adam is out of the State Pen, and Orlando hasn't been home since Thursday."

"Terry has been bringing home steelhead every day, so maybe he's staying over here on the river, fishing."

"I thought of that. I called the school. Terry is here with me now. He hasn't seen him since the weekend, and he said Adam threatened to kill his dad, you know how none of Orlando's boys like him much."

"You think—"

"That's what I wanted to talk to Bill about."

"You have to do something."

"Now don't go getting upset . . . . When do you expect Bill back?"

"I dunno. He took Homer, so probably not for awhile."

"Maybe I better call Newport and try to catch him."

"I want to go with you."

"Damn it, Jackie. He may be off somewhere just fine."

"Try Yaquina Supply first, then the *Blitz* warehouse. Bill's working on another deal." Jackie shifts the receiver to her other ear. "Where's Adam?"

"Who knows. Everything will work out. It's too bad about the election yesterday."

"We'll try again in January . . . . Vern, be careful—and don't let Bill do something stupid." Jackie hangs up the receiver, then her raincoat on the peg beside the front door. She sets the greasy plate in the sink, shoves the frying pan Bill used into the oven of the woodrange, adds a piece of wood to

the enameled parlor stove, and sits down to her desk in front of the picture window overlooking the bay. Trying not to think—how can she not think; first Vicki, now Orlando—she begins to sort the mail, separating duns from invoices. If she doesn't take care of the duns, Bill will eventually toss them, still unopened, into the stove. It isn't that they're not important to him; it's that he knows how much he owes, usually to the dollar. He doesn't have to open them. It's not that he's afraid of them. *Well, maybe he is.*

The parts man at Yaquina Supply answers the phone, looks up, nods to Bill and says, "It's for you."

"Heroun, here." Bill, puzzled, hears squeals, grating as galling steel, realizes he has the receiver to his deaf ear, switches hands and ears, and asks, "Is that you, Vern?"

"I told you it was . . . . You listening with your good ear, now? I don't wanta repeat this again."

"I heard you just fine." Filtering the screeching, running what he heard through his memory, sorting sounds, cataloguing them, pawing through the noise, picking out what might be words, Bill asks, "What do you want to know about Orlando's will?"

"You didn't hear what I said, did you?" Vern repeats what he told Jackie, adding, "I'm gonna need your help finding him."

"Sure, but have you called the cops yet?" Bill's had an uneasy feeling about deFader ever since Thanksgiving, something gnawing in his guts, like maybe how a dog feels when it swallows a steak bone, round and hard, indigestible and impossible to pass, just there blocking things, tearing things up, killing the dog. "I don't doubt he's in trouble."

"He brought me his will two weeks ago, said I was to hang unto it, keep it in my safe, that he named you executor of his estate."

"Sounds like he knew there'd be trouble once Adam was out." Bill wonders what it'd be like to have your own flesh and blood hate you so much. "He may have gone home."

"No, I told you, his wife called me."

"Not where he lives now. His home, where he was born. He took me up there one time, years ago. I think I can still find it."

Deer hunting, extended season, agricultural hunt, we were to be within a mile of farmland. But there's no real farmland up Slick Rock Creek, just a couple stump ranches that once plowed their pasture. Thanksgiving morning '52, I think. I climbed the ridge on the north side of the creek, and just over the top, fell, plugging my barrel with mud and rotten wood. Whittled a hemlock limb to use as a ramrod. Then with the bolt out, my head down, a doe trotted up the

skidroad and stopped fifteen feet away, her eyes big as a Jersey's. She stood there, debating whether she ought to go or stay. Sitting on that log, I probably looked like I sprang from it.

I cursed her, softly at first, then louder when I realized my voice held her as still as if blinded by a light. Called her stupid, warned her that I'd kill her if she didn't get out of there. But she just stood there, looking with her dumb eyes, not knowing the danger she was in. If I were God, I couldn't have said it plainer—and all this with Orlando on top of the ridge watching.

I cleared the barrel, slipped a shell in the chamber, and still she stood there. Eased the bolt in, and only had to close it to kill her. But it clicked twice. She was off as if shot. And Orlando's deep, rumbling laugh—loud as the creek running over boulders and through pockets—echoed around the bowl the ridges formed. It could've been God laughing, for all I knew at the time.

Orlando had come in from the Fall Creek side, crossing Salmon River a few miles upstream from Rose Lodge. He was hunting—firewood more than deer. Bill met the old man in the bottom of the bowl, and he invited Bill to have a look in the orchard of his parents' farmstead. It wasn't much more than a rifle shot away, but the road was grown up, hardly more than a thin line through the alders. Not even ruts remained. The land was owned by Miami Corporation, part of their tree farm. Stubby firs and alders had reclaimed the fields Orlando's dad and brothers worked so many years clearing. All that remained was the caved-in house, the orchard and the barn . . . . There was a three-point and a half dozen does under the farthest apple—he didn't make as good a shot as he should have.

"Answer me, Bill! What the hell's goin on? You okay?"

"I'm fine. You don't need to yell." Bill, wondering if he's done it again, drifted off, losing time, looks at the parts man studying a blowup of a long-frame D-4, matching reference numbers to parts numbers. It's now raining harder outside, pounding roofs, lashing windows. Tires sing, slinging rain across lanes, splashing curbs. Bill hears a log truck, its jake brake rumbling on the bridge, the sound falling over, falling into the bay, landing hard, a bellyflop of noise.

"Damn you, Bill. You stopped in the middle of a thought. You never finished it out."

"I'll be there in an hour. Talk to you then."

"You're gonna go look for him, aren't you?"

"I imagine."

"I'm goin. Terry wants to come along . . . . All right with you if I ask the preacher to come too?"

"There's room for three in the truck. I suppose the kid could ride in back with Homer—and I ain't got nothing against the preacher." Bill, still watching the parts man, really hasn't anything against Gosson other than his wanting to pray about everything. He prayed once a long time ago: it might or might not have got him out of a jam. He certainly doesn't have anything against praying—and this preacher, he suspects, prays better than most.

Bill doesn't hear the click when Vern hangs up; he holds the receiver to his ear waiting for a response. When he doesn't get one, he says, "Hello," twice, realizes the line is dead, and somewhat sheepishly, returns the receiver to its cradle. What happened, he wonders. Did they get cut off? A tree blow down over the line? The wind's hard enough, one could have, and the high water probably has taken out the bridge over Salmon River there at Fall Creek. It was in bad shape last year, nobody driving over it for fear of falling through.

The parts man says, "I'm gonna have to order most of this." Before Bill can ask how long it will take, the fellow calls Portland, reads off a list a parts, waits a minute, then covering the receiver's mouthpiece with his hand, says, "They have the bull gear and gaskets, but you need the whole ham. The rest of it will have to come out of Illinois unless you want used parts."

"Fifty percent?" Bill asks.

"Seventy-five."

"That's too much for used."

"He says there's no wearing showing on the face of the gears . . . and it's either used or three weeks."

"Guarantee?"

"None."

"Fifty percent."

The parts man tells the Portland distributor what Bill said, pauses, then adds, "Better order them, then."

"Three weeks?" Bill asks.

"I'll see if I can't hurry them up."

"I have to go," Bill says. "You take care of it. See if you can't get them quicker, maybe put them on the stage there in Illinois. The Dog ought to get them here in three days." Bill steps past the dummy, steps out, into the rain. Homer is in the pickup. He should drop the coon off at the house, but he'd rather not see Jackie right now, at least not until he knows for sure if Orlando's alive or dead. She'll just get her hopes up either way.

The surf, like guns of battleships in *Victory At Sea* (Jackie heard the record last night; Terry played it when she stopped to give her mother a few dollars, not as much this week as last, but enough for the phone bill and a few groceries)

rumbles along the coast, combers booming, salvos pounding deformed pines and beach grass. Wind lifts the galvanized steel of the woodshed's roof, then bangs it down hard. Twisted hemlocks shake above stunted devil's club. Maples creak. Vineys chafe each other. Bitter cherries snap. The house groans, little puffs of smoke forced from the stove. And Jackie watches a raven tumbling in the wind, riding currents high, then folding its wings, freefalling, spinning, twisting downward until, at the last moment, it opens its wings, brakes, catches the wind and again spirals up, almost out of sight. She wants Bill to take her with him—he'll look for Orlando. She knows he will. Orlando was her friend, too. She can help, but the men won't let her.

Although daylight, a doe heavy with fawn months too early timidly searches the gnarled pines on the lee side of the spit. If alders and young hemlocks weren't in her way, Jackie would see the doe. Maybe she would see the coyote, its back to the wind, trotting along the roughed-in Cat road that will someday be part of the golf course. Hungry, the coyote, its side and rump peppered by blowing sand, hurries after the doe; brush bunnies hide in the rhododendrons and the wind-sculptured pines. As it is, she doesn't see more than the tumbling raven and two grounded gulls perched atop the stack of Dungie pots. But she feels the falling barometric pressure . . . it is just a feeling, an uneasiness that she'd like to blame on the weather. This winter, more so than some years, has been a series of storms, one closely following another. It has to stop raining pretty quick; it has to.

* * *

Chapter Eleven

1.

Her stomach upset that morning, Vicki, after having gone to see Jackie, returns to bed till after the mail comes. Only then, with some reservations, does she dress for the office. *Robin needs help. He can't do it all by himself, he can't. No one can. No one can make it stop raining. And Mr. G. shouldn't expect that of him.*

Besides the usual bills, there is one letter, marked *airmail*, addressed to Robin. Posted in Seattle, with no return address, the envelope looks expensive, water-marked paper, thin, crisp as a new dollar bill. She smells it—it's scented, she thought it was, but she doesn't recognize the perfume.

"Who's it from?" Vicki asks, sitting in Robin's office chair, easier on her back than her own, waiting for him to read the single page note. "Oh, the school tax was turned down. It doesn't look like we'll have to worry about it again this year."

"That's good."

"You didn't hear what I said?"

"Sure I did. We don't have to worry this year."

"About what?"

"I can't prevent more delays. This rain will probably ruin my career, will definitely set it back years." He throws the letter onto his desk, looks out the window and sees the raven—it's the raven's fault. The bird knows his thoughts, knows about his plans. If he had a gun, he'd kill it before it could tell.

Vicki picks up the letter. It's blank, nothing written on either side. Scowling, she asks, "What is this, a joke?"

"Give it here!" Robin snatches the blank page, tearing it as he does. He twists the letter into a tight roll, finds a match and lights its bottom corner, angling it, holding its upper edge as flames devour the indecipherable message. "It's none of your business."

"What did that mean? And no return address?"

"Nothing . . . it doesn't mean anything so just forget you saw it."

"Don't lie to me. It has to mean something."

"If it does, it doesn't mean much."

"You know who it's from, don't you?"

"An old girlfriend. She told me she knew where I was, that she'd be getting a hold of me."

"It was blank, it didn't say anything. I saw it. Don't lie to me."

"You," his finger burn, *damn, there's no ice here*, "just couldn't read it."

"What was there to read?" *I have eyes. I know what I saw.* "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing." *Dismissal. Such an innocuous word for such a horrible action.* "Why weren't you here this morning? If you're going to work here, you better be here."

"But I thought . . . . Never mind." He told her to take some time off; he must have forgotten.

She has lived with moody men before, and she saw the mistakes her mother made with her dad. And she is surprised to see her dad walk from the messhall to the warehouse, his coat pocket bulging. "What's Dad doing here?"

"I hired him yesterday, night watchman."

"Why? Do we need one?"

"We will."

"But why Dad? . . . He drinks."

"He was drunk when I hired him. I know how much he drinks."

"You don't care?"

"He can do what I want, and I'm not paying him much."

Suspecting Robin has hired her dad for her sake—and this the same day he gets such bad news, whatever that news is—she feels warm inside towards him, and she kisses his neck. "Thanks. Dad needs someone on his side."

But Steele pulls away, feeling the raven's gaze, the black bird condemning him, telling him he won't get away with it, that its black beak will peck at his soul until his soul bleeds, until his soul dies, not in hell but in the rain, mired down like the truck, buried in mud over its axle, driveshaft twisted off. He needs a drink, just one more, a little one, and he opens the file cabinet. "I thought you were getting another bottle."

"It's in the car. I didn't bring it in . . . . Robin, are you sure you want it?"

"Where in the car?"

"It's in a sack on the back seat."

Steele twists the doorknob, feels it slip a little, but doesn't stop. The backseat is buried under groceries. Tearing sacks open, he can't find the bottle. *It's not here! Oh, there it is.*

Vicki has seen this pattern before, the need for a drink, soon the tremors, then the shakes, and more whiskey to get rid of them. She stays a step behind Robin, needing to talk to him, knowing that the rain extends to Oceanlake, through the Corridor and beyond, past Grande Ronde, before becoming more like wet fog around Willamina. The lights of Sheridan will glow like a candle beneath a gray platter. The first real traffic will be at Dundee. Barbur Boulevard will make her want to turn around. She would go to Portland for the weekend if . . . it's always that *if*. She told Jackie that she wanted to get away, but that she was scared to leave. *It's always that if.* "Going to Vern's tonight?" she asks, hopeful he's not.

"Maybe." Robin pours a water glass full of—what. It's blended, that's all he cares. Vicki's whiskey. He'll have to say something to her about the weight she's gained; he will when the time is right. But he knows it'll never be right. He's lost interest in her, and now that he's taken over the restaurant, he could get rid of her. He might if it'd ever quit raining, maybe when the bunkhouse is renovated; he could live there.

"I wish you wouldn't."

Glass in hand, more in control, Steele stares at the raven through the rain, burps, tastes Alka-Seltzer and salmon, onions and dill, burps again. He's becoming a fish, needs sleep, hasn't got any since the rains started, could sleep here if the raven would quit watching, *watching him, always watching him, spy, spy, spy!*

"Dinner'll be ready by seven. Do you want me to get some hamburger?" She wants this baby. Yes, that's it: she wants a baby, even if it is his. But she won't be able to take care of it and work at waitress wages.

"I don't know when I'll be home."

"We need to talk." She shudders, thinking about coat hangers, about what Jan, Blackie's sister, had attempted just a year ago and about how she nearly bled to death, about her sterilization afterwards. Because of Jan's dilemma, Old Doc Stevens probably will help her, although last time he said never again.

"That's all we do. Talk, talk, talk. You're—never mind."

"What's wrong? I know you can be nice." She touches his arm, carefully, as she might a steam pipe, not knowing for sure if it's hot or cold. "This is important."

"Most of what you say isn't?"

"No, you know I don't mean that."

"This have anything to do with your being late?"

"You told me to take today off, with pay."

"I did? . . . Okay, I did. I apologize."

"And you don't mean a word of it. You bastard." She backs away from him, her hands over her mouth. "I didn't mean that. It's just . . . we need to talk—not about business—about us."

"What's a matter? Am I not paying you enough?"

"You are a bastard. I'm pregnant, and it's time to end it, or get married."

"Why tell me?"

"It's yours, that's why." There, she said it.

"How can you be sure?"

"I hate you." The tears, they come faster than she can hold them back. If she believed in God, she'd pray he does what's right by her, but she's known too many men to believe. "It's yours, believe me."

Steele tosses down the tumbler of whiskey. Its heat fogs his mind. Still, he understands that Vicki is pregnant, but can't figure out what her pregnancy has to do with Cynthia's letter. *Maybe there's no connection.*

What can he do, stop the rain, the constant drizzle, drizzle under the yard lights, on even though it's mid-afternoon, drizzle swept up and swirled, drizzle like the murmurs of town gossips, falling lightly on clothes hung in backyards, soaking them till they're wetter than when washed, whispers loud as the surf, wrung out, pinned to phone lines, dripping; he can't breathe. He's drowning, he has to get away, has to escape the rain and the raven and its eyes, those black eyes, shiny as Apache tears, hard, so very hard. They're boring through him, grinding up his guts, and the gossips, like lampreys, will suck out his life. Eels, they're all eels.

"Robin, are you all right?"

He hears her, but the rain; he'll drown if he opens his mouth.

"You're not all right." Vicki hurries to get him a glass of water. "Here, drink this."

Backing away, crossing his arms, stopping her, Steele bumps into the door. Quickly grasping the knob, he jerks it off, the set-screw not holding. He stares at the white glass knob, and she comes to him with the water, wanting him to drink, pressing the glass to his lips. He tries to push her away, swinging the knob to keep her back—she's trying to drown him, he gasps air. He can't breathe. Can't. Swimming, he's got to swim and he strikes out, the knob

catching her cheek, knocking her down. Another breath, he can't stop now, he has to keep swimming, another stroke, there, he sees the car, another stroke, one more, now he's moving, faster. He's safe, he made it.

*

"What the hell you doing with that doorknob?" Vern asks, looking out the window, watching the rain and the traffic.

"Doorknob?"

"Yeah, the one you're holding."

"It's bloody." Steele, with thumb and middle finger of his right hand, carefully takes the knob from his left, twists his hand to examine all sides of the knob, then asks, "What the hell?"

"You know," Vern suspects Steele has had enough for one day, that the bar oughtn't serve him, "there ain't any log to stop you."

"Huh?" Steele looks for something to wipe his hand on. "I'm not logging."

"No, no. Out there in the parking lot, the way you come in, sliding to a stop two feet short of the berries. There's just bank there. You go into those berries and you're off into the river."

"What are you talking about?" The knob, Steele realizes, is from the office door. *Did I cut my hand? And what am I doing here? . . . Yes, there my knuckles. I am cut.*

Vern, concerned about the blood, asks, "Need a bandage?"

"I don't know yet."

The tavern smells of cigarettes, sweat and pitch. The floor creaks, seems to slope towards the bar. A cue ball strikes another ball. Murmurs roll. Blackie Poage cuddles a beer while Dudley, wooden leg propped on a chair, plays cribbage with Leo Poage, Blackie's uncle. Lenny, Leo's brother, leans on his cue stick, waits for Frank Hodges to miss. Elmer, Frank's brother-in-law, waits to play. Steele knows these men: they're all against change, against *THE CANNERY*, against him.

"Sorry, Vern. I have to take care of my hand." He starts towards the men's head behind the pool table.

"Sure. Martha's got bandages under the bar if you need one." Vern, waiting for Bill to get here, still thinks he ought to refuse Steele service. But refusing service has never been worth the fight afterwards. It's better to let them get sick, pass out, miss a day of work than for him not to take their money. Besides, if someone wants something to drink they'll get it somewhere else if not here.

Steele, once by the pool tables, follows the groove worn towards the bar rather than continuing to the head.

"*Blitz*?" Martha asks.

Steele nods though not altogether sure he wants a beer—it's coming back to him, what Vicki said. Well, if she thinks she can trap him, she has a surprise coming.

He turns to stare at Blackie. There had been something between Blackie and Vicki. The whole town knew about it, knows about it, and some think it's still going on. He wonders if it still is, if her pregnancy is his. There's reason enough to suspect it might not be. *I've seen the way she looks at you.*

Martha, if he remembers correctly, told him she'd once been a Poage, that being a Poage didn't mean anything other than you piss out the bedroom window; her dahlias turned yellow and died.

Martha brings his beer. "Your blood?"

"I feel like it's raining inside my head."

"Here, give me that knob. I'll get you a couple of aspirin."

Steele, though seeing the knob in his hand, doesn't feel it. He tries squeezing it. Can't. Tries to drop it. But it lies there, hard white and bloody in his extended hand.

Martha takes it. "The last time I saw an antique knob like that was at Grandma's. She had all Bible-n-Cross doors and skeleton keys."

The draft beer is green and no better tonight than last night; 104 years of brewing experience isn't enough. Steele hadn't heard of *Blitz* until he arrived here, where no one drinks anything else. The green beer and rain have gotten to him; there's mildew growing in his belly.

Olf Gunnarsson lets in wind, pauses at the door and asks Vern, "What the fuck is the preacher doing out there?"

"Waiting for Wild Bill, same as me."

"Why the fuck don't he come in?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm too tired to listen to a sermon."

"He may not feel like delivering one, suppose?"

Steele wants away from here, away from Olf, from talk of chokers and tailholds, from the gray sky, the fog, the courage he holds in his hands. He'll piss it out in the morning. Maybe he ought to dump it now, order a double scotch instead.

Martha offers him a damp rag. "Wash your hand off before somebody thinks you work for a living."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The backs of his fingers are cut, his knuckles scraped. He gingerly wipes the blood from them.

"Nothing . . . if you don't already know."

"Know what? How about those aspirin?" His mind really isn't on his fingers: he'll have to do something about Vicki, fire her at least. She isn't going to blackmail him into marrying her. Even Cynthia isn't that low. All she wants is money.

How many times have I thought about firing her lately? A dozen? At least.

Taking the next stool, Nils Gunnarsson, shoulders wet, suspenders threaded through a leather pad on his left shoulder, fines clinging to his hickory shirt and stagged jeans, orders a beer, matches quarters with Martha, losses, and turns towards Steele. "Wife tells me Vicki's pregnant. When you gonna marry her?"

Without looking at Nils, wanting to say *Fuck off* but knowing all of the loggers are too anxious to use their fists and that Nils is four inches taller and fifty pounds heavier that he, Steele asks, coughing as he speaks, "Vicki say something to your wife?"

"No. Wife can tell by how she walks. Had five of her own."

Steele rolls Nils' words around, racks them, breaks them, driving them into side pockets. *Perhaps it's too late to take her to a Portland clinic. If Nils' wife knows, everyone in town knows.*

"What business of yours is it? I don't tell you how to log."

"Your beer's doing your talking, Steele. If I were you I'd think about what I'm saying."

Pushing his beer away, Steele faces Nils, who now disdains looking at him.

"Marry her. Town'll remember you done what's right." Nils promised Blackie that he wouldn't break Steele up too bad. It's a promise he'd rather not keep. "So when's it gonna be?"

"What if I don't?"

"I'll sit here, get good and drunk, and think about castrating you."

"You aren't that stupid." Shivers run from Steele's hands, through his arms and down his back, the tide against the river, choppy waves pushed by the rain. "She only told me this afternoon."

"You can have the Grange Saturday."

"Is that what happens if I say yes, a Grange wedding?"

"Good news always calls for a fun raiser, you becoming one of us."

Detesting the big logger, probably, Steele suspects, as dumb as a fir tree, he nevertheless says, "You aren't giving me much choice."

"Usually ain't when it comes to marrying."

He won't be bullied and he'll never be one of them. But he's also afraid his hands will give him away. *It's that cheap whiskey. That's what's giving me the shakes*.

"I'll have to talk it over with her. She may not want to."

"Vicki knows what's right . . . . Let Vern know what you decide."

"We'll see." Tossing four bits alongside Nils' stein, Steele nods to the big logger.

Wind bows firs, swirls the rain, and drives stinging drops all directions. It takes two tries to close the tavern door, him pulling, Vern finally helping out, pushing from the inside. The Lincoln seems sluggish: he suspects water in its gas. Wipers slap back and forth, never able to get ahead, nor wipe away the grayness.

Vicki isn't home, her car not in the driveway, no smoke coming from the chimney. *Maybe she's still at the office.*

* * *

Chapter Twelve

1.

Someone on the beach hunting glass floats—a flashlight beam probes the scud and driftwood. It seems to probe Vicki's soul, searching bruises, swollen fears, battered affairs. There's no face behind the light, just its piercing beam and darkness. She wants to hide, to burrow into the sand, to protect her face, also swollen, her left cheek cut. Butterflied Band-Aids hold the cut closed.

Her face stings from washings of salt spray and tears. Her front teeth, still loose, are numb.

After he hit her, all she wanted to do was drive around; maybe not all she wanted to do. As volatile as vaporized gasoline, she exploded a little at a time, her Ford trailing oil smoke behind her, its engine as worn out as her patience. She went as far as Road's End where she spent a while listening to the surf. Now, she's stopped at D River, and she hurts: her body hurts, her face does, her feelings do. She's really angry, but why does she have to tell herself that? Of course, she's angry. She has the right to be. But her dad, drunk, can hit harder, and if not for the knob, it wouldn't have been so bad.

But what about the baby: Terry has a birthmark on his leg, a bruised-looking spot the shape of a pig's head. It's the same place on his leg as where Strawberry ran into Mom, knocking her down, when Mom was about as far along as she is. Wild Bill helped butcher the sow right after that. *Oh, not a birthmark where he hit me. Please, not there.*

Uncle Elmer smoked Strawberry's hams—he was still a butcher for Premier Market, there in Delake. He didn't go to work for the county until after Mom butchered Vanilla, from Strawberry's last litter if she remembers right. Vanilla, though, could have been out of Rascal. She can't be sure anymore. What she is sure of is that she doesn't love Robin.

She thought Robin was different, not like her dad. Now, she doesn't know. Staying with him is still her best chance to get out of Euchre Creek. The restaurant is coming along, maybe another month. When it opens, it'll take some of the pressure off. She knows his job is on the line—his job, her future, and now, the baby's future. She doesn't want it to become part of Euchre Creek, dipping snoose, fighting after Grange dances, a logger, or worse, married to a logger. She won't even be able to keep the baby if he doesn't marry her. Yet, if he's like her dad, if he turns out like her dad, she won't stick it out twenty-five years like her mom has.

No one needs to know that he hit her.

He can be awfully nice, doing little things like hiring her dad, giving him a chance, but nobody likes him here, not even Vern. If word gets out that he hit her, people will talk about her, just like they do about her mom. But, if they marry, she'll be in LA, where it doesn't rain all the time, next year. So let them talk.

She could tell Blackie that Robin hit her, but she doesn't really want to do that. Blackie would likely take a peevee handle to him. Besides, if she tells him everyone will know for certain. He can't keep his mouth shut, couldn't in high school and probably never will be able to. He has always had to be a Poage first, damn him. He used to brag about their time together. He couldn't quit being a Poage even while they were going steady and look what it got him.

The Harbor View is as bad as the Ladies' Club for gossip: everyone knows about Blackie crashing Toledo High's prom the year they went to State, losing to Grant High on yardage. They say he took away the date of the state representative's son, that he showed those big-time snobs what a real logger could do . . . he had to marry her; both families insisted. It hasn't been a happy marriage.

She won't make excuses for Robin, no more than she will for Blackie. No way. But maybe she doesn't deserve anyone better than Robin; he's really too good for her.

Is this what it has been like for her mother? Guilt and silence. Shame. Putting up with the constant abuse. Insults. Slaps. A fist to her face if she stands up for herself. Her mother would rather pick ferns and avoid people than let anyone her see, especially after her dad runs out of money.

Blackie is probably home with her, their couch covered with ironing, sink full of dirty dishes, and her pregnant, complaining about not being able to get fresh lemons or grapefruit or whatever it'll be this time. He still comes by now and then, tells me his problems and leaves a pickup load of wood usually, but he won't come by anymore if . . .

She knows that she shouldn't go back to Euchre Creek. Not tonight. Nor tomorrow. Not ever. But she's pregnant, with no money, no truly marketable skills, and no connections outside of her mother.

The flashlight beam, closer now than it has been for a while, picks apart a kelp raft, lights on a glass ball, and showers fragments of the spectrum across the sand and scud, fracturing the future. She's seen enough. She starts the Ford. Its tappets rattle while the oil pressure builds.

Traffic is light. She doesn't pass another car, either direction, for more than a mile, and the road, dark and wet (it rains steady but not hard) seems lonelier than usual. On the curve before Drift Creek, her headlights catch a set of eyes that shine blue. The deer looks away, and the headlights pass on, over the bridge and across the flats, where, tide's in, backing up the Siletz till it's as high as Euchre River. Uprooted stumps lie in the mud, deadheads waiting, forever waiting and rotting.

Lights. Across the road and ahead of her, a car flicks its headlights on and off, its lights dim, its battery weak. She doesn't know whether she ought to stop; yet she slows and turns until her lights land on the young woman climbing out of the Volkswagen.

"I'm outta gas."

"If you have a can, Lighthouse Texaco is still open."

"Can you take me?"

Nothing coming, Vicki turns around in the road. The young woman gets in and by the dome light sees Vicki's face. "Have you been in an accident?"

No, I haven't been in an accident. "Close your door. The station won't be open for much longer."

"I'm Cynthia March and thanks for stopping."

Lighthouse Texaco has a can Cynthia can use, and no, she doesn't have to leave a deposit as long as she promises to bring it right back.

"Do you always trust people?" Cynthia asks.

"No," Jim Miller, owner and attendant, says. "Have you ladies seen the size of trout Devil's Lake holds?"

He sort of insists on showing them a rainbow he caught this evening on a Spruce Fly, size 6, 3x long, not that either of them are interested in fish or flies. But they look. The fish is as long as Vicki's arm and several times bigger around, though it looks sickly. "My brother catches a lot of fish," Vicki says. "Mostly salmon."

"A few salmon," Miller says, "still enter the lake from D River." He pauses as if to ask a question, but rather adds, "World's shortest river," in case they

haven't noticed the signs on both ends of the bridge. His station is, he explains, technically on the lake though the lake above the bridge looks like a river, its south side lined with salal and rhodies. Then he turns directly towards Vicki and asks, "Were you in an accident tonight?"

"I'm sorry but we have to go. We'll bring your can back in a few minutes." *Robin's probably hungry, and I haven't fixed anything for dinner yet. I shouldn't have argued with him. The fight's my fault . . . but he shouldn't have hit me, not with the knob.*

Cynthia starts to tell Miller about the rhododendrons she saw being bulldozed into piles, but Vicki says that they now have to hurry.

"This is important," Cynthia says. "You should see what someone is doing to those beautiful rhododendrons, bulldozing them up in piles and burning them, and that's not all, they're destroying lots of wind-shaped pines. Have you seen them? They're wonderful, and they're being destroyed."

How, Vicki wonders, can her passenger worry about stunted trees and brush. If Wild Bill burned every snarly jack pine, she wouldn't care. That's his business. She wouldn't care if he did it just to roast wienies. Maybe he'd invite her. *Robin wouldn't like that, would probably think I have something going with Bill, but I haven't given him any reason to be jealous. I'm about out of wood, though.*

Her face: well, she hasn't been in an accident.

2.

Among gnarled pines on the lee side of the side, the coyote stretches as she awakens in a depression out of the wind. She licks her left paw, rubs around her eye, brushing caked blood from her fur, then, her stomach still full, she rises on her forelegs and feels her growing pups press against her bladder. Ravens feed on her kill. On soft pads silent as time, she approaches the birds, crouches, but before she can charge, the ravens squawk, hop, launch and land on pine boughs higher than the bitch can leap. She makes one attempt before returning to the doe, now only hair and bones . . . if Jackie could see the doe, she would take a rifle after the coyote. But all she'll see are ravens tomorrow, tumbling in the wind.

Two grounded gulls perched atop the stack of Dungie pots, a wood rat gnawing broken crab legs twisted through the wire webbing of the pots, and the ravens, soaring on set wings—Jackie feels the falling barometric pressure, or does she just feel an uneasiness that she can blame on the weather. This

winter, more so than some years, has been a series of storms, one closely following another. It has to stop raining pretty quick, it has to.

*

The front shocks of Bill's pickup are badly worn—the truck wants to hop across the rain-slick pavement. He drives faster than usual, fifty-five, sixty on the straight stretches, forty through the curves, the Ford's L-head engine winding to twenty-three, twenty-four hundred rpms. And just outside Euchre Creek, he's passed by Jody Poage in his lowered 1940 coupe, the kid maybe doubling his speed.

Vern, Terry and Elder Gosson are waiting for him at the Harbor View, the preacher outside, disdaining to go in even for a minute. Terry climbs into the back with Homer; the men crowd into the cab.

They pass through Taft and the "Twenty Miracle Miles," the three of them saying nothing. Soon, Otis is behind them, then Rose Lodge and Rapid Inn, Widow Creek and the wrecking yard. Bill slows, turns onto Falls Creek Road. The bridge is passable, if a person doesn't mind that there's no support on one side.

"Let me out," Vern says. "I'll walk across."

"You want out, too, Elder?" Bill asks, surveying the log spanning the missing cribbing. The log sags, though nearly three feet in diameter. "If Orlando crossed this, we can."

"We don't know that he has." Vern tosses a rock into the river, twenty feet below them.

"I'll ride, thank you." Gosson doesn't even look at the water roaring between the concrete abutments.

"What do you mean you'll ride?" Vern points to the ten-foot gap between the concrete and the log. "I think we ought to walk from here. How far is this homestead?"

"Maybe three miles. It's about two to the forks."

"That isn't very far. We could make it in no time." Vern looks across the river and up the hill.

"What do you think, Elder?" Bill asks. "Do you want to walk?"

"I'm not driving. If I were, the decision would be mine."

"For a tedious sonofabitch." Vern checks his sentence. "Sorry about that. If you ride, so will I."

"I assume you invited me along as a witness. I'll go wherever I'm needed . . . . I may seem tedious, pompous, self-righteous, yes, that's so."

"Are you," Vern pauses as if thinking about his word choice, "circumcised?"

"What kind of question is that, Vern?" Bill thought the two of them had resolved the bad blood stemming from Vern's short marriage. "I'll put you two in back. Terry and Homer can ride up here."

Bill gets out and walks off, stopping in the middle of the bridge, where he tries to bounce the weak side.

"Circumcision is of the heart for a Christian."

Vern stood too long watching Gosson silently condemn him by not entering the tavern: "What do you do, something like what the Atezs did, cut your heart out? Kind of a messy business, isn't it?"

"You never struck me like much of a Jew, Vern. You act too much like a Christian."

"That's enough, I said." Bill gets back into his pickup and shifts into gear. "If you wanta ride get in. I'll wait for you on the other side if you don't."

"Suppose we ought to get in the back?" Vern asks Gosson.

"Let's walk across."

Bill eases onto the bridge, with Terry now in front, his hand on his door handle, ready to jump if necessary. Gosson waits beside Vern on the near approach, watching the log sag a foot, two feet, more, as the truck creeps across the middle and starts up the other side. High water took out the support cribbing, and the bridge will collapse before the winter is over. But it won't today.

"Can you heal bridges?" Vern asks.

"It isn't me who does the healing, and I doubt this bridge has much faith."

"Is that what it takes, faith?"

"Not your faith, but the Eternal's faith active in you."

Starting onto the bridge, Vern asks, "What if you have no faith?"

"To say you have no faith takes faith and is of the Devil." Gosson pauses to examine the log on the supported side of the bridge. "Look, it's broke. Bill was worrying about the wrong side of the bridge."

Vern leans over the side. "The planking is enough to hold a pickup, but I wouldn't want to take a load of logs across."

"You two coming, or am gonna leave you here looking while the Kid and me tend business?" Bill hollers from the far side.

No one lives, this year, on the homestead by the falls. Even the sawmill has collapsed to a pile of weathered boards and timbers covered by berry vines, with alders growing through it as they do through rock slides and gravel

washes, fixing nitrogen, building the soil up to begin another cycle of life. Ferns and alders grow in the fields, across which leaning posts and sagging barbwire, rust red, shamble towards the timber like tottering winos towards the next bar. A red-horned buck, a three-point, maybe four, jumps the fence and runs diagonally through the far field. Two does bound after him, then a third and a fourth.

"Too bad it isn't season," Bill says, fighting the steeringwheel as his pickup bumps along, bouncing from chuckhole to chuckhole.

"Would you shoot a doe?" Terry asks.

"I have before, and you will. A fella can't always find a buck when he needs meat."

They parallel the creek until they reach the second homestead. Bill stops in the orchard. There's too much broken glass, mainly beer bottles from partying highschoolers, now married with kids of their own, to park in front of the house, its door hanging by one hinge.

"We'll have to walk," Bill says, pointing to the hill now separating them from the river. "It's about a half mile through the timber, then it opens up on top."

"Those ruts," Vern points across the road, "that's where we're goin?"

"Yeah. That's the old road."

"Looks like somebody's been up them."

"Maybe, but I think we better walk."

"Who's got their rifle?" Terry asks, closing Homer in the canopy.

"Do we need one?" Vern looks at Bill.

"Shouldn't."

Although rain has washed the sharpness off the tire tracks, it has also kept the spun grass fresh: a vehicle chewed its way up the old lane today or yesterday or the day or days before.

"Orlando's tracks?" Gosson picks up a chew of grass.

"How would I know?" Bill asks. "I'm not Natty Bumpo."

"Who's that, someone you know?" Terry shoos no-see-ums away. The gnats shouldn't be out this time of year, nor should the buck in the lower pasture have had his rack.

"It doesn't take four of us to go up there. Vern," Bill points towards the creek, "why don't you take Terry and check out both forks. Elder, if we don't get up the hill, we're gonna get eaten by bugs."

Bill and the preacher hurry through the stand of bastard-growth fir, timber too small for old-growth yet never logged. It's dark beneath the firs,

the afternoon far advanced, the gray sky never really having lightened during the day, the rain more of a mist than hard drops.

Gosson pulls ahead of Bill; the preacher's long legs and lean frame are used to walking. Neither of them speak. There's nothing to say, at least not yet.

Terry watches the two of them disappear into the trees, then turns to Vern and asks, "Do you know who that guy Bill mentioned is?"

"No. Probably somebody he knew in Alaska." Vern, also under attack by no-see-ums, quickly adds, "We probably ought to split up, one of us going up each fork."

"You think he's up there, don't you?" Terry nods towards the hill.

"Who, Orlando?" Vern breaks off a scraggly sword fern blade and uses it to fan the gnats. "Do you know about his boys?"

"Nobody tells me anything. You heard Bill, 'the Kid.'"

"Be patient. That'll change. I used to be Sonny and hated the name."

"That's better than being called a kid."

"Helleva yoke to bear, isn't it? Being young."

"I'm not that young."

"Listen to what I have to say." Vern picks up a stone and casts it at an apple tree in the orchard. "Orlando's oldest boy got religion, Indian religion, peyote and visions, a spirit-quest, that type of stuff. He killed a fellow, an arrowhead collector. In his trial, he said the guy was robbing Indian graves." Vern looks around, then bends down and picks up another stone. "The prosecution, well, they probably shouldn't have done it, but they called Orlando to testify. Adam swore he'd get his dad."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, till now." The stone bounces off an apple tree. "Take the creek, that fork is shorter. I'll go up through the fields."

"You think—"

"I don't think. I'll meet you back here."

*

The ridgetop farmstead where Orlando deFader was born, where he learned to read and shoot, to deliver breached calves and graft trees has all but disappeared, swallowed by bracken ferns, alders and fir saplings. Here and there, a mossy post defies the rain, while the spring-house and most of the main house remain standing. The barn, though, blew down several years ago, its hand-hewn cedar timbers lie shuffled through the ferns. And the apples in

the orchard are so full of suckers they probably haven't born fruit for a decade. Nevertheless, five does and a gray-faced buck break from the orchard when Bill and the preacher top the hill and momentarily pause, skylined, staring at Orlando's Dodge parked next to an wood log, half cut into blocks.

Orlando sits slumped over the wheel in his truck.

Peering in, careful not to touch anything, Elder Gosson says: "I'll wait here for the troopers. They'll want to look at him."

"Stroke?" Bill asks.

"It'll take a doctor to tell. You'd better hurry. It'll be dark soon."

"I guess we're gonna have a burying Saturday."

"It looks that way."

* * *

Chapter Thirteen

1.

The morning, quiet, respectful of the community's loss, sweeps past like the river, offering no advice at all. As if unaware of the season, budding catkins poke from sap-red branches. A *trillium* bows its budded head, and a bright orange Oki Drifter dangles at the end of a tangled hank of monofilament hanging from an overhead spruce bough.

Bill, his rod held low, casts sidearm. He ought to be working, rooting out more rhododendrons, but somehow, work seems inappropriate.

A ruffed grouse struts near the spruce trunk, trampling bleeding hearts heavy with rain. In the sand near the high water mark, a wren scratches among fresh raccoon tracks, and a cock bluejay swoops silently across the river.

His eggs bouncing along, held down by four inches of pencil lead, Bill misses feeling the steelhead pick up, then drop his bait. He casts again, quartering his cast upstream. He casts and drifts, casts and drifts, his mind following his bait.

*

Clutching her pillow, Jackie turns and tosses like the tide, curling up, stretching, ebbing into dreams about weddings. She had the same dreams before Martha married Hank; Joyce, Nils; Lorna, Blackie. She smells flowers and hears the song. Nils couldn't sing and Dudley hired somebody from Newport. But Hank has such a good voice. Too bad he didn't mean any of those words he sang to Martha. And processions: she loves processions, especially Old Lenny in a borrowed gray suit, cockier than one of Leo's roosters, strutting down the aisle beside Joyce, embarrassing her. Lorna had a black eye, sort of covered up with makeup. Her dad said he'd "learned her a lesson" for embarrassing him,

but she still had a good time. Her wedding was so romantic, such a big cake and Blackie's little sister as the flower girl, Lorna's nephew the ring-bearer. Nobody said anything about her eye, but Bill left early, wouldn't stay for the reception. He went out fishing the next morning, and pinched the head off a searun cutthroat with Orlando watching. By the end of the day everyone in town knew about it, and Lorna's dad moved unexpectedly to Prineville, where he got a falling job with a bunch of cowboy loggers.

She can't really separate her dreams from her memories. She knows it's early, and that it's warm under her covers. Should she open her eyes?

A raven's raucous calls seem to rattle the cage hanging beside her bedroom window, wavy and streaked. The streaks bend the sun's long rays, and cast half-spectrum bows around the cage, empty since her canary escaped and was eaten by crows.

Although it's gray and misty outside, foggy in the hollows and along the river, everything in her small bedroom appears rosy, even the case on the second pillow, untouched since she changed sheets Monday. She doesn't need the double bed: it takes up too much room. But it was given to her by Mr. Hodges, the former storekeeper, Grandma's brother-in-law, when she graduated from high school. He said he didn't need it, that he'd be living above the store now that his wife had passed away. That was, she refuses to remember how long ago.

Her house overlooks the school. It stands alone on the knoll between the ball field and Cabbage Creek valley. It was built by her uncle Leo when he first settled along the river, looking for timber, bringing with him only his axe, saw, and a sack of steel falling wedges, most two feet long. One of the wedges is still under a floor joist. Each year, that corner of the house settles during the rainy season. She has to tap the wedge farther in if she wants her oven to bake level. The cake she made for Ladies Club was lopsided. She trimmed its bottom so it didn't look too crooked, but she knew it wasn't right, just like she knew the golf course was a good idea. She could see the way investors were leaning.

Her bedroom door sticks. She doesn't know why she closes it at night. No one can see in, even if she wanted them to, not that she does, although maybe if Bill looked. She doesn't finish her thought, not daring, she suspects, to admit staying here after high school was a mistake. She could have taken that job with New England Fish, *the one Grandma and Mom thought I ought to make a career of. Who knows where I'd be now if I had.*

Her uncle gave her this house. Its porch and long entryway, with a single window on each side and the shingles weathered gray, causes it to look like a

beaked whale, stranded far from the beach. Grandma Hodges was the first to notice the resemblance; said it looked just like the *National Geographic* color plates of a Stejneger's whale, those salmon eaters with only one tooth in their lower jaw. Grandma claimed one came in the bay when she was a girl, even though her dad said she was mistaken, that they live in deep water. Grandma said that he may have whaled off Alaska, but he didn't know everything, that she knew what she saw. She told Jackie never to doubt herself. "Just look at the way those shingles are weathered gray. Don't they look like a whale to you?" Grandma said, pointing to the front of the house. Jackie didn't, still doesn't know. She's never seen a picture of a salmon-eating whale. But now everyone refers to her place as the Whale House.

The fog thickens. Her bedroom's rosiness fades, leaving the birdcage looking cheap. Rust and chipped black paint. The cage holds her memories.

The trap under her bed has caught a mouse. She drops it in the toilet, flushes, then in the kitchen, rebaits the trap with bacon grease and sets it beside her refrigerator, its bottom edge blistered with rust and needing repainting. She picks at one of the blisters, pops off a steel flake and crumbles it between her thumb and index finger. Maybe she should start looking for another refrigerator, one a little newer, with a sealed unit so it can be more easily moved.

Pouring orange juice, noticing the frost around the too-small freezer unit, thinking that perhaps she should spend enough for a frost-free model, Jackie, with the phone receiver wedged between her shoulder and chin, calls her mom, dialing with her little finger. "Have you talked to Vicki?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No."

"Why don't I believe you?"

Jackie hears Terry holler in the background, then the muffling of the receiver. Her mom must have covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

Closing the frig, Jackie fills the coffee pot, sets it boiling, takes a package of graham crackers from the cupboard above the stove and a loaf from the breadbox, brushes crumbs on the counter into her hand, dumps them in the sink, sprinkles scouring powder on the tea stain, fading but not really going away. "Mom, what do you use to get stains off porcelain?"

"Comet."

"I've tried that."

"What kind of stain?"

"I made some tea for Grandma Hodges when she was over Sunday."

"What should I know about Vicki?"

"Mom, Bill's coming up the driveway. I'll talk to you later."

Jackie still has the receiver in her hand when Bill knocks once, then opens the back door and crosses the kitchen to the sink, with a willow fork holding two dripping cutthroats about a foot long. "Okay if I put these in here?"

"Let me have them." Jackie saves the trout from the scouring powder, catching them as Bill drops the stick into the sink. "Does this mean you're coming over for dinner tonight?"

"No. It means I couldn't catch a steelhead." He wipes his hands on his shirt sleeves.

The cuts are already gutted. She only has to rinse them off before putting them in the fridge, covering them with waxpaper so they won't dry out. Working for Bill means fresh fish, and her butter always tasting like fish. When she worked for him before, he sent her home with something almost every day. Usually salmon. Sometimes perch or yellow-eyed rockfish, her favorite. Once a halibut. She told him he could keep all the flounder that came his way, that she didn't like fish that tasted like lumpy Cream of Wheat. But what's really good is lingcod, poached with lots of dill.

"If you're not coming for dinner—"

"I just heard your sister's getting married Saturday. That true? That the date they set?"

"You think that's a mistake? Is that when . . ." Her voice catches in her throat as if it tripped one of her mousetraps.

"Yeah, we're burying Orlando Saturday. So how's that gonna work, both on the same day?"

"Tell me," she turns away so he won't see her tears, "how is it? Can't you wait until Sunday?"

"No. If we wait any longer, he'd have to have a vault—and that's the one thing he wouldn't want, more money spent on planting him."

She pours two cups of coffee, turns the handle of one towards Bill, then asks, "Would you stay if I cook these cuts for breakfast?"

"I suppose." Bill turns a chair around and pulls the coffee cup towards him. "We can't bury him Friday. That's too soon. The coroner said he won't be done determining the cause of death until mid-morning. Maybe . . . how many will come to his funeral?"

"Vern, you, Terry, Grandma, a few more, a pretty short list."

"We shouldn't have any problems burying Saturday morning, early."

"Sure. Do you want me to make the arrangements?"

"If you would."

2.

"Sin, that's what it is, just plain old sin, living with that new man," Grandma Hodges can't abide such flaunting of the Commandments. She called Elder Gosson—Lenny asked her to decorate the Grange Hall—the morning after she had him over. He told her that angels sing when sinners change their ways, that she could do no less. So with Lenny again in her kitchen, smacking when he chews—she likes to see a man eat, but he doesn't have to be a hog about it—she agrees: "I'll see to the decorating of the Grange, but only as a favor to you, and I'll not have crepe paper draped around like toilet paper. There'll be real flowers, fresh from Corvallis, a real linen tablecloth and punch ladled from my own circus glass bowl. You know the one. It'll be no loggers' bash with fighting and drinking, carousing and such-like."

"I'm sure that's the way somebody important like Steele would want it. Nothing less would be good enough for him."

"Pooh! He deserves bit by a rabid dog, the scoundrel."

"Don't be so hard on him. It's just these modern times we live in."

"Now don't be telling me that, Lenny Poage. There's nothing new under the sun, 'pecially when it comes to fornication."

"Maybe not, but there is things new here in Euchre Creek. My pappy would have used the shotgun on me if I even thought about doing what they're doing when I was their age."

"Oh," Grandma Hodges raises her eyebrows. "What about Maggie—"

"What you think happened didn't. I've told you that before, so let it go. She was my cousin."

"I've never said she wasn't. That's what's so bad about you uncovering her nakedness."

"You don't know what happened between her and me, so put your imagination back to bed. Just take care of the Grange."

While Grandma Hodges oversees the decorating of the hall, in the fir behind the Grange the cone-cutting squirrel sleeps in its bushy nest, 68 feet in the air. The high school Geometry class triangulated the height; the Physics class computed the energy needed to throw a size 9, West Coast brand caulk boot that high. Both classes will bet that Blackie Poage can't knock the squirrel from its nest. He tries every time he ties-one-on. Eddy Poage normally holds the bets.

Mr. Green, the high school's math and science teacher, has promised to take both classes on a field trip to Portland if they win enough money; so anxious, the classes help out on Friday when a communal pot of chili is set

simmering. They help make a crock of potato salad, just part of what will be brought to the reception.

Cakes are baked by the advanced Home Ec class as well as by three Mrs. Poages. Ray Brown contributes six steelhead and three silvers taken from a net he set after work. The silvers are so dark he would've turned them loose if they hadn't already drowned by the time he got to them. Wild Bill and Gary Poage contribute a pair of steelhead apiece. And behind the Grange, the barbecue pit, a hole lined with river rock, is covered with a piece of shaker screen Dudley stole from the Forest Service rock crusher years ago. Vern has contributed two kegs of *Blitz*, Steele one, and Stoker gave a keg to the barbecuers. So after dark, after the women and the high school help go home, Lenny and Dudley kindle a fire and tap Stoker's keg. The fish won't be grilled until tomorrow, but building a good bed of coals takes a long time, especially the night before a wedding, Lenny says. He cackles like an old hen, threatens to burn Dudley's leg, and pours another cup of gasoline on the wet wood. Flames shoot up four, five feet, then fall back, leaving the cedar knots, cut from bolts Gary split last fall, blackened but smoldering, spitting sparks, one of which lands on Dudley's hand. "Hot damn," Dudley yells, "building a fire deserves a keg."

Vicki stays away from the Grange, not that she's superstitious. She just doesn't want to be seen: her eye is still puffy and squalid yellow, and she has a Band-Aid on her cheek. So she stays home, knitting, counting her stitches, wondering about love.

Elder Gosson has preached about love at least once a month since coming to Euchre Creek, varying his sermons only enough to incorporate his deepening conviction that love will not be found on Earth when Christ returns. Love is, he says (she knows for she's heard it enough times), outgoing concern for others equal to concern for self. And therein lies the problem as far as the preacher is concerned. People no longer truly love themselves. Greed, lust, vanity, selfishness—these are facets of self-hatred, according to Gosson. Self-love is really self-hate.

When Vicki returned home after dropping off Cynthia, who'll probably end up making trouble for Wild Bill, she fought with Robin, who was watching TV, some show about the President, highlighting his career from a school boy to Navy hero.

"I suppose you think I fell down." She cocked her arm to throw a package of frozen hamburger.

"Don't you think I'd remember something like that." He laughed at her, said she had things mixed up, then asked, "What to you think you're going to do with that meat?"

"You bullying bastard." She stomped out and spent the night on Wild Bill's couch, where she woke up every time Homer climbed up or down.

"I suspect Robin," she woke during the night to hear Bill tell Jackie, "is a damn fine manager. He's just not handling the rain."

The next morning, she asked, "Did Dad used to be a highliner? Was he really a highliner?"

Bill, in the kitchen, Jackie's hand on his arm, looked at her and through her, through the picture window and into the darkness, seeing perhaps yesterday's raven swooping over the valley. "Yeah, he was a highliner. A highliner until he took to drinking. It doesn't figure."

"Does everything have to make sense?" She remembers asking the question, remembers thinking that it all should if we knew enough, but she can't remember what Bill said.

Robin called, looking for her. She talked to him for an hour. He promised to cut back his drinking, said he realized he had been drinking more than he should, said she could help, that opening the restaurant will help. She doesn't know much about performance bonds, but she suspects that normal rainfall, the river rising this year like it does every year, isn't a justifiable reason for not rebuilding the dock. Robin should've known that last fall his first priority was driving those pilings. But he can't know everything. Nobody can expect that of him.

*

What Vicky can't know is that Bill suspects it's the cannery, not the rain that affects Steele. Surrendering that damn keyring made him feel years younger. The place is jinxed, though he tries to convince himself that he doesn't really believe it is. It's just that the damn weather is against anything a person wants to do with the buildings. For him, either the river or the bar was too high, or there wasn't any fish or market, or there were too many fish and no ice. Just too damn many variables, and too much pressure. He canned it, froze it, shipped it to Seattle, but he never got out from under that pressure until he got rid of those keys.

The other thing neither Vicky nor Jackie can know is what happened in Bill during the night: feeling Jackie's presence, her hand on his arm, he started getting sentimental, his memories stealing backwards to Ellie. *She could jerk a soaker over the rail with any rollerman fishing halibut on the banks. She fished for a full share, and I loved her, blonde and square, with just the corners rounded off. And then that damn boom snapped and that splinter nailed her*

to the wheelhouse. Thirty years ago. Bill shuddered as he again felt his hand cradling her head, his hand as red as the foot-wide streak of blood from the wheelhouse to the scuppers. *I tried scrubbing it off. Sven said to quit, that the blood was gone, but I could see it, can still see it.*

The crew took her to Seward, buried her in a Christian manner on a little knoll above Fourth of July Creek. And after the rest of the crew returned to the schooner, well, I stood over her grave and promised I would never love any one else, and I haven't, maybe not even myself.

Before I'll let myself love anyone, I'll have to go and say goodbye to her in a better fashion that I did that day . . . damn! I don't wanna hurt like that again.

For all I know, they've built homes out Fourth of July Creek. That'd be the shits, go up and find out her grave is under someone's foundation.

* * *

Chapter Fourteen

1.

Drizzle runs in rivulets from the awning erected over the open grave. Gusts snap the canvas, nearly snapping poles, threatening to snare mourners as a fowler's net traps quail, an analogy Gosson uses to show how quickly death can overtake even such a man as Orlando deFader. *The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: the merciful men are taken away, none concerning that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come.* Gosson leaves Isaiah, but continues to read in the same monotone.

Standing beside Jackie, Bill wishes Gosson would shut up and get on with the planting. He has never liked funerals. After Ellie's, he has tried to avoid them. But this one he couldn't.

"And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill."

Gosson isn't making any sense, Vern mutters, paying only slight attention to the preaching of death to the living. He glances at the drizzle, drifting in across Saterlee's pasture like a bull looking for a heifer, intent upon goring whoever gets in its way. The drizzle soaks the pastor's jacket and wets his Bible, causing its pages to stick together.

"Yes, power," the preacher looks up from his Bible, "is given to Death. A man is not unlike a tree, bowed by the gales of life. He has no more defense against Death than a fir against a saw."

Vern sees Bill's face harden as if hit by some thought.

"Brothers, Sisters, Orlando deFader lived bound to the soil from which he came, his roots deep in this community and in Grande Ronde, where his wife lies too ill to say goodbye to him today."

Bill hears the preacher but knows that Orlando's wife isn't too sick to be here; she's too drunk.

"Brothers, Sisters, it is only our relationship with God that separates us from the timber we log. Once we deny that relationship, we are logs cold-decked by the devil, ready to be sawn asunder, and don't think we'll get fair scale from Satan. Yes, power is given to Hell," Gosson pauses. He can't preach hell anymore. "Yes, power is given to the Grave so that all men may know that life is but a vapor, weighed in the just balance of God."

Nils stands beside Martha, who's here, Vern knows, as much to get out of work as to show her respects. After all, she's drawing time right now. He had been afraid nobody would show, so, yes, he'd encouraged her to come and stand in the rain for an hour. Only the rabbi was there when they buried Deborah. He didn't get word in time.

When the pages of Gosson's Bible are wet enough that the words show through from one side to the other, the awning is taken down, and everyone goes home except Blackie, who stays to fill the grave, and Terry. On a bush two graves away from where Orlando deFader rests, Terry notices a lone lilac leaf hanging limp, its shriveled point straight down, its edges tightly curled. It's brown and very dead; yet it hangs on, enduring beyond its season, spinning in the wind unknowingly, maintaining the same semblance of life the body in the casket does. He reaches over and gently takes hold of the leaf, supporting it with his hand. He studies the pattern of dead veins, then snaps it loose, carries it to the grave and casts it in.

"Hang around, Kid. There's beer in the pickup," Blackie says, not breaking rhythm. "Don't let it get to you. His problems are over."

"You're gonna tell me he's gone to a better world," Terry says, his voice challenging everything Gosson preached.

"*A better world?* Naa, Kid, not a better world, no *better* life. That's what Vern sells by the case, and who's to say that world is less real than any other . . . . Naa, he ain't goin to a better world. He ain't goin nowhere. He's right here with us, only dead." Blackie stops shoveling as he looks across the field, drizzle falling from his cheeks.

"I'm gonna walk," Terry says.

"There's another shovel in the truck. I could use the help. I'll give you a lift afterwards."

Although the grave was dug late yesterday, the dirt is already mud, clinging to shovel and shoes. Terry looks at the pile, soft clay and dark loam, the sod set aside. From the clay come the voices, faceless taunts, mocking, jeering. He's here because. Why isn't important. All the reasons have the logic of a revolving door.

Bill bought the plot, a strip separating the ancestral graves of the Poages and the Saterlees. Soon deFader will be just another name among headstones,

his stone a little bigger than some but smaller than the Victorian angel, St. Louis marble, marking the grave of the first Poage in the valley.

Hurling a clay lump into the pit, all Terry wants is away from rain and rumors, the faceless voices, internal brands that have blistered but will never heal. Maybe they will heal when Euchre Creek is remembered only by its headstone.

"Here, Kid. Take the shovel." Blackie hands Terry the second spade, its handle warped and taped, the ends of the black friction tape dangling, caked with dirt. "There's a beer in the truck for afterwards."

Terry tries to bury the voices, shoveling faster than Blackie, faster than the taunts come. Ignoring the mud clinging to his new suit, he attacks the pile. Blackie has turned on his pickup's radio. The disc jockey says that today is the 78th consecutive day with measurable precipitation. Terry hasn't been counting, but it seems like it's been raining forever. Forever and tomorrow. There's now no escaping this baptism into death.

When last year's quack grass and dandelions again cover the rectangular plot, Blackie opens two bottles of *Blitz* and hands one to Terry: "I need to swing by the house before I take you home. Okay?"

Holding the cold bottle with both hands, not sure whether he ought to drink it, his forearms resting on his thighs, Terry finds he can't sustain his anger. He's madder at deFader for dying than anything else.

Although he isn't able to fully voice the thoughts he feels, Terry wonders who he can talk to now, who knows anything. His dad has pickled his mind, if he ever had one. His mom knows ferns and canning salmon. Mr. Green knows math. Elder Gosson knows how to offend about everyone, especially him. He doesn't know Old Lenny or Leo, though he'd like to hunt nightcrawlers in their gardens. Who else is there? Wild Bill, Vern, the new storekeeper.

Blackie parks in front of his house. "You might as well go in, get dried off, have a bite to eat. I'll run you home after I check the pump. The creek was up this morning. Our water was muddy."

But Terry hesitates after climbing the front porch steps.

"Fight your way in," Blackie hollers, heading for the spawner creek between his woodshed and the homestead's orchard, mossy, scaly, needing pruned.

Still, Terry waits. Then taking a deep breath, he knocks. From within the house, confusion: a radio playing, a baby crying, a child yelling, "Mama, Mama, the door is knockin." He'd take the knock back if he could, and where can he set the beer? He doesn't want it, nor want seen with it. He shouldn't have taken it.

Terry sets the nearly full bottle of *Blitz* on the porch beside the door before Blackie's wife opens it, the baby in her arms, the older child peeking out from behind her leg. The baby has a wet diaper and runny nose, with now-dried snot smeared across his cheek and green snot slowly crawling down his upper lip.

"Yes?" Blackie's wife asks, trying to wipe the baby's nose on his dirty T-shirt. "Are you with Blackie?"

"He took a shovel and went down towards the creek."

"About time. He shoulda taken care of our water before he left this morning."

The older child—girl or boy, Terry can't tell which, its blonde hair longer than a boy ought to have yet shorter than a girl's, its jeans and T-shirt sexless—finds the beer, and while its mother wipes the baby's nose, it drinks as if the *Blitz* were water.

"Put that down, Jamie!" Its mother slaps the child, knocking the nearly empty bottle out of its hands. "Damn that Blackie, leaving me here without any water."

"Can I use your phone to call Mom? She can come get me. Blackie was gonna give me a ride home."

"Sure." Her voice softens for the one word. "If that sonofabitch goes to town, he'll just drink. We'll be another day without water."

The house has about it an unpleasant odor Terry can't identify. Dirty dishes fill the sink and are stacked in front of the couch; the couch is covered with ironing. A mound of dirty clothes blocks the door to the utility room. Jam and chocolate pudding and something Terry can't identify cling to the phone's receiver. His shoes are muddy, and bits of drying mud spackle his slacks; so he's careful not to move much as he dials, his face flushed, ears hot. His mom has never let her house look like this.

"I said I'd give you a ride home. You don't have to call your ma," Blackie says, entering the kitchen without making any noise. "I already got the water taken care of."

"You need to stay home. There's other things around here that need fixing." His wife, her hair uncombed, still with the baby in her arms, pushes the ironing aside and sits on the couch. "If you aren't gonna make any money, you at least ought to get something done around here."

"I told the Kid I'd take him home. I gonna take him home. He's gotta get ready for his sister's wedding."

"And you're gonna stop at the Harbor View, is that it?"

"If I stop, it's my business. Now, you wanta fight in front of him, or you wanta wait until I get home?"

"I don't wanta fight at all. I just want you here."

Blackie, motioning towards his pickup, says, "Go on, get in. I'll be there in a minute."

Terry, his mom not having answered yet, returns the receiver to its fork and tries to wipe the stickiness off his fingers as he hurries towards the pickup. He's happy to be out of the house. And when Blackie joins him, he asks, "What happened?"

"Never mind her. She's just on the warpath, that time of month." Blackie turns the truck around, cutting new ruts in his front yard. "Maybe the rain gets to her a little bit, suppose?"

"After you drop me off, are you gonna go home?"

"I'm gonna be at Vicki's wedding."

"You liked her a lot, didn't you?"

"Who, your sister? Yeah, I did."

"How come you didn't marry her?"

"She already had a date for the Prom." Blackie looks out his side window. "There's a doe down there, see her, there by the manure spreader."

Terry sees the deer, but can't tell whether it is a doe or a buck, most bucks having dropped their racks more than a month ago. "I don't understand about the Prom."

"You will someday." Blackie volunteers nothing more.

2.

In the Grange Hall after the wedding, folding chairs and tables, brought from the school last night, are used for the meal, served, with Lenny's sister Alice bossing, by the women of the Boosters' Club. Martha's youngest boy spills his chili on Eddy Poage's daughter Nancy; she may have tripped him. The truth is a little hard to determine. Both children accuse the other of wrongdoing and both mothers insist that their own child stop lying.

Outside, there's no room to park and rains drips from the overlapping slab roof above the fire pit. The rocks that line the pit, some glowing red, explode, sending jagged fragments deep into the coals for future generations to ponder. And Terry moves from side to side, trying to avoid the smoke and drips.

Smoke and steam, bent by the rain, swirl around the fire pit where Leo remembers his dad logging with a pair of Durham bulls yoked together, and

remembers the steam donkey that killed Russ Saterlee when it blew up. Lenny says it's too bad that widowmaker got Jess Saterlee—Jess always gave a side of beef to these get-togethers. Willie Brown, who processes singled salmon eggs on halves, says Jess's dad once brought roasted seagull to a potluck, didn't tell what it was until Grandma Hodges, then still a Poage, asked if he'd been feeding his chickens herring. Willie laughs, before complaining about the log truck Lenny sold him, the one with solid rubber tires that exploded from gas pockets around rocks. Lenny says that was thirty-five years ago, and Elmer tells about a dance at Cannon Beach, the dance floor the top of an old-growth stump twenty-one feet across. Leo says he remembers the dance, that being the summer he fell the fir that took three 10-foot misery whips brazed together to reach across its center. And rain drips from the slabs, sizzles on still-hot rocks, and rises.

Six o'clock, the food gone, the wives with small children gather belongings, coats and hats, baby bottles and dirty diapers. Martha's arranged a babysitter for her kids; so while the tables are put up and a record player set up, she kisses them good-night, then freshens her makeup.

Grandma Hodges takes her punch bowl home, telling Alice before she leaves that if there's fighting, it'll be the fault of that no-account Vern Jakobson, imagine, donating a keg of beer just to make their menfolk sin. And though there's still free beer to drink, Steele wants to go. Teabo, saying, "For a city fella, you're all right," has him in a one-arm bearhug. Steele slips away from the Breed, and looks for Vicki, who dances to the first record with Blackie. Before he can cut in, Olf shakes his hand, and damn near wrings his arm off, congratulating him, saying, "You done okay." Benny Poage now shares a bottle in a brown bag with Teabo. Eddie dances with Ray's wife, Nils with Blackie's, and Martha cozies up to Sam, her brother-in-law.

It won't be long before Blackie does some serious drinking. The odds are three-to-one he can't hit the nest, eight-to-one he can't knock it down. Wild Bill has fifteen bucks saying he'll hit it. Blackie came close Fourth of July. It's not settled yet if he touched the nest. Young Lenny said Thursday that Eddie still hasn't paid off. Bill saw the throw probably as clearly as anyone. The boot hit the limb and knocked that little bit of nest down; it didn't actually hit the nest. But no one asked him what he saw. He hadn't yet been resurrected.

An hour passes, and couples pair off. Slow records play and tension builds, a river dammed as time seems to stand still. Wind slings rain onto the front porch, where an unfrosted bulb burns under a rusty shade. A white moth flutters and flutters and finally flutters onto the light. Wings smoke, its fat

body sizzles. Bill hits it with spittle, leaving a spot on the glass. He spits again, then takes another pinch of snoose.

Martha comes out holding Sam's hand, and Bill steps into the shadows, bumping into Terry, nearly knocking the kid down, grabbing his shoulder to keep him from attracting attention. Terry tries to twist away from the hand, strong like something mechanical. Tongs grasping a log, lifting it, the heelboom swinging the log, loading it, chainbinders tightened, logs scaled, the dump, rafted together, sawed, graded, lumber on the green chain, pulled and stickered. Terry twists, but like a board nailed to the Grange, he can't move. Bill won't let him go till Martha is out of earshot.

"How come you ain't inside dancing? Who stood you up?"

"Nobody," Terry says, sounding like a struck wet match, a spark followed by a red smear. "I was just here thinking."

"Embarrassed, huh, Kid?"

"I know you don't mean nothing by it, Mr. Heroun, but I'm not a kid, not anymore."

Bill steps back, studies the kid, and sees that, indeed, Thor's boy has grown since Thursday, that the boy is at least two inches taller than his dad, that his shoulders have begun to square. Maybe, Bill thinks, he's not a kid, but he's still young. And Bill looks out into the parking lot, the direction the boy's looking. "Who's out there?"

"Nobody."

Spitting, hitting the gum wrapper on the porch, Bill asks, "Want a chew?" offering the boy his can of Cope after taking another pinch.

"That's a filthy habit."

"That it is, Kid." Bill nods towards the parking lot: "Go on out there, if she means so much to you."

Kicking a hidden clump of grass, Terry mumbles, "She wants, I can't, can't do that, do . . . anything about it."

"What're you afraid of, getting licked? You're plenty tough." Bill spits again.

"I'm not afraid of getting hurt."

"You're daddy wasn't, at least not when I first knew him." Bill pauses, spits, then adds: "Don't be ashamed of your daddy. Learn from him. Now go on out there."

"What makes you think I'm ashamed of." He can't say the word, can't call him Dad. *Bill's as bad as old deFader, telling me how to think.* And as he looks off into the darkness, it all comes back, the gradeschool jeering, S.O.S., Son of a Stumblebum, the taunts, every time he was tripped, the glances,

the stares, the contempt. His eyes water. Wild Bill will see him cry if he stays here; he's gotta go out there.

Twenty feet from Jody's coupe, Terry sees the silhouette of one person, and he wants to run, escape the faceless voices, the ocean of voices, each laughing, laughing, laughing at him. But Wild Bill won't be laughing. That old man is mean, lots meaner than his dad.

He can't escape those voices. They're awful, mocking him over and over again. Like the surf in January, the voices roll in booming, curl and break, but this time, breaking something in him, something unconscious. Strength surges through his chest and out, into biceps. Those taunts seem to all come from the coupe. He wants to smash Jody, hit till he can't lift his arms, can't double his fists. One more step. That's all, one more.

But before he takes that last step, Bill grabs his shoulders and says, low but sharp, "Kid, it ain't who you think."

He tries to break free, knows he can't, but nevertheless tries. Bill shakes him, as a dog might a kitten. His anger breaks, and he goes cowering where Bill points him, back towards the Grange. But before Bill follows, Bill steps to the Ford and slaps its roof hard. The one silhouette becomes two, and the couple hastily pull pants and panties up, a sweater down. Terry spins around as if slapped, and sees the dark faces of Jody and Pam. *Where's Vicky?* He saw her clutching Jody's arm as they skirted puddles in the parking lot. *And where did Pam come from?*

Giving Terry a push towards the Grange, Bill says, "There's someone who wants to see you."

Jackie and Vicky Poage, their hair wet and their dresses clinging to their thighs, step under the porch light. Vicky's cheeks are flushed. In the stark, white light of the unfrosted bulb, her face looks red, and she doesn't glance towards Terry, whose ears burn. He jerks his arm free from Bill, turns and stalks past the two rigid figures in Jody's coupe. He keeps walking, surrounded by darkness.

Vicky is related to Jackie somehow. Bill has been shaking hands with Jackie's relatives for sixteen years, and hasn't yet met them all. He never got it straight just how close Jackie is to the Poage girl. But right now, he can't dwell on their kinship. "Has either of you seen Vern? He ought to be here."

"Vicki was wondering why he didn't come," Jackie says. "She didn't think he'd miss her wedding."

"Maybe he thought he had to keep the Harbor View open."

"Yeah, he might miss some business," Jackie says, undisguised disgust in her voice.

"Hey," Bill protests, "he closed up for the funeral."

"I'm sorry. You're right. He's probably just affected by Orlando's death. They were pretty close, both of them loners."

"Yeah, that's probably why he ain't here. I won't worry about him, then." Hungry again, Bill asks, "Wanta get something to eat?"

"Go ahead. There's still chili and fish left."

"That's the beauty of fish. There's always some left. A few fish and you can feed thousands."

"It was good this time. I thought Lenny did fine." Jackie steps back to avoid a sling of rain. "Did Blackie hit the squirrel?"

"Hasn't tried yet."

* * *

Chapter Fifteen

1.

Drawn by the river as if he were a steelhead, newly arrived, a strong fish already hooked, battling swift water, invisible lines, Terry hurries upriver, with rain trickling down his cheeks like tears. The night seems darker than usual, the river closer. Seven steelies, three pairs and an extra buck, hold in the eddy behind the boulder that gives Petra Hole its name. They swim to hold even. Overhead, the current boils like storm clouds around the eye of a typhoon. For Terry, overhead and ahead blur: he floats, walking just to hold even. *What's Vicky to me? She gave me a ride once. Most every fellow in school chases her, and plenty*, he'd rather not think about that. Maybe they have, maybe they haven't. It doesn't matter to him, other than he should've hit Jody. He would've if Bill hadn't stopped him.

Headlights: he feels them crawl across his wet shirt, down his leg and along his ankle, wrapping around him like tentacles, stopping him. A car stops beside him. "Get in before you drown," Vicky says.

Her Chevy smells of cigarettes and perfume, a disagreeable combination, and he cracks the windwing as he leans against the door. She steers with her left hand and twists the radio dial with her right. "Here, let me get that," he says, reaching for the knob.

"That's all right. Nothing comes in while we're driving, but if you want to go somewhere."

"Sure, why not." He hears himself, surprises himself; he hadn't known the words were in him. And he scares himself.

But what the hell, it's a rainy Saturday night, the evening of Sis's wedding and everyone will be looking for a place to park.

"The reception's real good down by the river." Vicky turns onto a double set of tracks graveled with round river rock, slippery as mossy stream beds.

Alders scrape both sides and knock her mirror crooked. "Sometimes, if it's raining real hard, I can't hardly get back up this hill, but I think it'll be okay tonight."

"This is a good hole. I fished it yesterday." Terry grips his armrest, not so much afraid they'll slid off the road, a definite possibility, as afraid of what he has found so many mornings in the turnaround at the end: rubbers, beer bottles, cigarette butts. "It's called the Mattress Hole, at least that's what deFader called it. He showed it to me."

"You're lucky. I wish that old woodcutter had liked me." Vicky pumps her brakes. "That's an awful name, Mattress Hole."

"I guess there used to be a mattress factory along the road. It burned down during the Depression." Terry instinctively ducks an alder that bangs against the windshield. "All of the holes have names, the Glass House, Thompson's, Petra, Garden Hole, Blackberry, the Caboose, Cedar Tree, Mattress, Ladder holes, Bluejay Creek, Red Bridge—"

"Is that the covered bridge?"

"No. That's Twin Bridges. Red Bridge is that real deep hole where the school bus ran off the road last winter." Terry doesn't know what else to say. How can he tell her about what he finds here Sunday mornings, about the ribbings he takes: *Caught that one on the rubber you left last night? Not yours? Now don't try to squeeze outta it, Kid, a handsome boy like you. I'll bet all the girls are after you. That one-size-fits-all big enough for you, Boy?* Old Lenny, Mr. deFader, Willy Brown, even Dudley—all give him a hard time, and he hasn't even seen one rolled up.

"Is this where you caught the fish you brought to the reception? They were sure good."

"No, those came from Cedar Tree. But the two biggest steelhead I've caught, both over twenty pounds, came from here." He waits until she turns off the engine before adding: "They were both bucks. Four-five fish."

"Bucks are males?"

"Yeah, and four-five means they spent four years in freshwater and five years at sea. You can tell by looking at their scales. You can count the growth rings just like in trees."

"That's neat, salmon are like trees."

Terry's face suddenly feels hot. The idea is ridiculous. What will she think next, that trees are people, that nonsense Gosson was preaching.

"This is the only spot where my radio will pick up KUGN. If I park even ten feet farther back, I get nothing but static." Vicky, half behind the steeringwheel, leans against her door. John Horton sings *Whispering Pines*,

and willows brush against the antenna. Rain taps the roof. Drips pound little craters in the sand, cut through rims, and ebb away, towards the river. "You're quiet."

"Just thinking about the rain. River may be too dirty to fish in the morning." By the light of the dial, Terry watches Vicky watching him. He wonders how many times she parked here before she discovered this exact spot. Those empty stubbies, the ones he has lugged home and turned in for the refund—how many have been hers? How many of the cigarette butts? He looks away, sees the glass of his window and his reflection, an aberration, ghostly and dark.

"You thought I was in there, didn't you?"

"In where?"

"I never thought you noticed me."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"What you did was sweet."

"I made a fool of myself—and you wouldn't have thought it was sweet if you'd been in there with Jody."

"Probably not, but I wasn't."

"Well, I'm glad you weren't." There, he said it. How much plainer can he make it? Terry's cheeks burn again. He's being as stupid as she is, trees as salmon people. "I wouldn't have done it if Wild Bill hadn't made me."

"I still think it was sweet, and don't go putting yourself down. You've got everything going for you. You're smart. You're going to college."

"How? Mom doesn't have any money."

"Everybody knows Mr. DeFader . . . you know. Someday you're gonna have money, you're gonna leave here, you're not gonna remember us." Vicky looks at her shoe, scuffed, the strap nearly broke in two. "You're already rich, even if," she doesn't finish her thought. Rather, she says only, "You know."

"How come you're so sure about what's gonna happen?" He, too, has heard the rumors about deFader leaving him a little money. Right now, though, he doesn't have enough to take her to a show. If he did, he would. He wouldn't have to talk, then.

"Look at yourself. You're so far ahead of the other guys they're uncomfortable being around you. You show them up so bad. So don't go putting yourself down." Vicky again studies her shoe. She wants to kiss him, or maybe for him to hold her. But she's not gonna do, you know, what she used to.

"Since when did you become an expert on me?"

"Be careful of Pam. She comes on as a tease, but she wants to get her fingers on the timber, you know."

Terry wants to ask, *Why tell me this*, but to do so, well, that just isn't something he would ask.

The river slides by, gurgling, unmindful of the raccoon that, rigid as the concrete Irish Setter on point in Elder Gosson's yard, stares at the car. Gosson bought the cement dog in Portland; said he set it to point out the meat God fed Israel, and he aimed it at the plywood Bible, open to Hebrews, "forsake not assembling together as some do" underlined.

When Terry was in third grade, he threw a rock at the plywood rejoinder, missed and broke a window in the parsonage. His dad wouldn't pay for the window, said he had to take care of it himself; so Terry had mowed the parsonage's lawn every Friday, even though he was barely strong enough to push the well-oiled reel mower. At the end of two months, Elder Gosson gave him ten dollars, more money than he'd ever seen before. The preacher then showed him how to throw, how to pick a throwing rock, how to hold it, how to step into his throw, where his feet should be on his follow-through. By fifth grade, he'd gotten good enough he could kill a grouse three throws out of four. He kept practicing. They, that is almost everybody in town, wanted him to play Little League ball. But all he wanted was to stop getting laughed at, to get away from those faceless voices that tonight, all belonged to Jody. Neither Pam nor anybody else will stop him from leaving.

"Pam wants to go out with you. She thinks you'll marry her if she has a baby." Vicky fiddles with the latch for her windwing, averts her eyes and turns to face the window. Sonny James sings, *Running Bear loved little Whitedove*, and willows softly brush fenders, as if trying to seduce the formed steel. "Pam knows about, you know."

"I don't know. What does she know?"

"That you're gonna leave here," Vicky pauses, then adds, "maybe rich."

"Do you believe that?"

"I'd like to. It's be nice . . . for you."

"Well, I always knew she's kinda dumb. If she thinks," he can't say what he feels. It's sound silly. "I don't care what Pam does, really I don't. She's okay, I suppose, but—"

"Terry, you've always treated me real nice. I'd like for us to be friends. I think a lot of you for not trying to, you know." Vicky reaches for his hand, catches his fingers, and adds, "Martha says that, when you're older, you'll be the best catch in Euchre Creek. I really want us to be friends."

There, he has just been told *no* in about as polite and as firm a way as possible. This is what Terry expected. "I don't need friends here."

"Don't be angry with me. I couldn't stand that tonight." Vicky smiles, but even in the dim light, it looks forced. "Terry, people are cruel. I know I . . . there was a time I didn't respect myself much, but I do now."

"I wasn't picking on you."

"I know you weren't." She squeezes his hand just a little. "When you go away . . . what the heck, I may as well say it. I don't want you to go away. Uncle Blackie says he'll help you get a job, make a logger outta you. I know you don't want help, but—lots of people like you."

The last thing Terry wants to be is a logger, not that he would mind working with Blackie. Vicki should've married him when she had the chance. Blackie wouldn't have ever hit her.

A chill suddenly runs from Terry's wet shoulders, down his back, out past his soaked jeans and into his toes. Goosebumps pop up on his arms. He realizes what was wrong today: it was embarrassing seeing his sister get married with a black eye, and knowing how she got it. And he shivers all over.

"I think we'd better go. I'm soaked and starting to get cold."

"If you go away, will you go far?"

"To where it never rains, to where roses grow in the desert."

"That sounds exciting." Vicky starts her car. The raccoon breaks for the willows, and a boar beaver, paddling by, sees the coon and veers away. He has a scent pile on a point across the river.

* * *

Chapter Sixteen

1.

In the Grange, a few minutes before the fight begins, Wild Bill tells Olf, "You damn squarehead, logging right up to the creeks, you're killing all the fish."

"We don't steal logs."

"No, you kill spawning creeks. You gotta stop. You gotta leave some trees for shade. Those little creeks get too hot in the summer otherwise."

"We buy all the trees. We don't steal 'em."

"I know you buy the trees."

"Then why're you accusing us of stealing 'em?"

"Damn you, Olf. Unplug your ears. I said you're killing fish."

"If they don't want us to log there, they shouldn't sell us the trees." Olf punctuates his common sense statement with his beer, causing it to foam up, out and over his hand. "There's no money in fish, you know that."

Blackie, already in back, with Olf's new caulk boots, walks around the fir, sizing up the nest, seeing where best to throw from. Eddy calls Gary a liar for reasons nobody knows. Vern steps back inside, hears Olf mention fish, and says, "There's no money in timber either, just a lot more of it."

"All the good stuff's been cut," Lenny says. "When they went from 24-inch tops down to 16, I knew there weren't no good logs left. What are they down to now, 12-inch?"

"They can saw clear down to 8 inches." Olf spills more of his beer. "But there ain't no fucking scale in pecker poles. We sent one load to town last week, 45 trees."

"I saw that load," Dudley says. "You should've give it a haircut, it was a furry bunch of shit."

"Logging minnows, huh, Olf." Bill opens another stubby. The kegs were emptied hours ago. "You gotta stop cutting those trees along the creeks."

"We don't gotta do nothing. You don't tell me how to run my business, not you."

"Calm down, Olf," Lenny says. "Leave the fighting for the barbecue pit."

"You don't tell me either, you damn Poage. You don't tell me how to log."

"Go ahead and yard those pecker poles one at a time. See if I offer to help you again."

"Yah, yah, yah, you talk all you want. You funny now, just you wait."

"Shut up, Olf. Nobody's hard timing you." Willie Brown says, smiling. Willie, sly as Aunt Alice's tom cat, slips a dog turd on Bill's plate. "You're Lenny's best friend. Heard him say so last Tuesday."

"Fuck you, Willie Boy. You cheat me on those eggs."

Nils, standing a step inside the back door, knows he ought to take his dad home, but he wants to see Blackie's throw. He rubs his knuckles, wondering if Martha will be back tonight. Sometimes she shows after the fight. He wouldn't mind taking her home. Sweet meat.

"You dumb sonnabitch, you took eggs out of a dead fish. They weren't no good. They turned white when I cooked them. I gave you some of mine cause I felt sorry for you."

Teabo, hoarse, his paw around a bottle in a brown bag, butts in: "You shorted me too, you fucker. Half of three gallons ain't no dozen baby food jars full."

"Quit your fucking bitching. You know damn good and well my single eggs work better than any you can buy."

"Yah, yah, they work good, but you cheat us. And those eggs weren't from no dead fish. Nils and I gaffed those fish right there in the creek by the covered bridge. They were good fish, dark all right, but no dead fish."

"There damn near ain't any run left in that creek," Bill says, his face in Olf's.

"How long did you wait before you stripped the eggs, the next day?"

"You call me a liar, Willie Boy?" Olf looks around Bill, raises his hands, but before he can push Bill back, the fisherman shoves him.

"Forget Willie, you bastard. You're gonna kill that run just like you did the one in Bear Creek."

"You shut up. I won't listen to you."

"You're gonna listen or I'm gonna beat your square head round."

"Yah, yah, yah, just like you pay your bills. You don't talk to me."

Bill has known how Olf and others felt about his bankruptcy. Yes, he made mistakes. He pushed too hard. But the collapse of the salmon runs wasn't his fault. Then to gaff the few salmon that make it into the creeks,

well, he won't have it. "You dumb sonofabitch, gaffing spawners so you can fish trout in the spring, I ought to—"

Olf telegraphs his punch.

A few minutes before nine, about when the State Police were called for the past three dances, the fight starts inside and out. Bill flattens Olf's nose, knocks the logger down, and Nils comes to his dad's aid. Even though age and size favor Nils, Wild Bill "tears him a new asshole," if Willie's account of the fight can be believed. Teabo ducks outside, sees Gary Poage and "pastes him a good one in the chops," according to Willie. Eddy breaks a bottle over Teabo's head. Lenny waits on the front porch. He knows that it'll take an hour for the troopers to respond, that they always take an hour getting to Euchre Creek. He also knows that everyone will have settled their differences and have become friends again in that hour. No one remembers when a logger was last arrested for fighting. Perhaps the cops only come to make sure everyone gets home safe. Certainly Lenny hopes Olf gets home okay. He didn't mean it about not helping the Swede. *Logging pecker poles is a helleva state of affairs.*

The troopers don't believe Blackie can hit the squirrel's nest. Neither do Willie, Lenny, Frank, and who knows how many others. But Bill, Nils, and Stoker's crew think he can. Olf won't bet. Otherwise, the loggers are divided, two-thirds against him. Mr. Green bets he can't: the nest is too high. The throw requires too much speed. Blackie's arm needs to be two feet longer. Mass, resistance, inertia—all are against the throw. And it doesn't matter whether the boot is a West Coast or a White, at least not in his calculations. Buffaloes are slightly lighter, but not enough to affect the outcome. So brand difference doesn't matter, unless wearing them. But then, Fred Green hasn't worn corks since he worked the rigging, yarding Sitka spruce for airplane spars during the War. That was so long ago no one had yet thought of the "little zero." Only recently has he learned to use it. How could mathematicians have lived without it for so many centuries?

"Blackie's got your boots, Olf," Willie says, waiting for Bill, with cut knuckles, to return to his plate.

Olf, still hotter than a ring gear ready to slip on a flywheel, stomps off, muttering something about pinheaded pricks. "There's no need to curse," Elder Gosson says, appearing as if by magic. "Have any of you seen Vern?"

Lenny turns to Frank, Frank to Willie, Willie to Bill. "I asked Jackie earlier if she'd seen him and she hadn't, but it may be that he doesn't want to shut the Harbor View."

"It's closed."

"How do you know?" Dudley asks, incredulous.

"That kitten," Gosson says, joining the circle, "he pretends not to like came by the parsonage. I stopped to return her."

"How do you know about that cat?" Will asks. "You never stop in."

"The eyes of God see everything."

"Now that's a politician's answer if I ever heard one," Bill says, picking up his neglected plate.

"Did he really pay a hundred bucks of a cat?" Gosson asks. "I heard she has a pedigree."

"Paid a hundred and ten for it," Dudley says. "And yeah, it's got papers from a line of champions a yard long."

Willie says, "You'd think he'd be too pretty damn anxious about the little fart to let it get out."

"I hear tell she's taken quite a liking to Blackie," Gosson says, knowing that it has.

"Never thought Blackie would take to a cat," Frank says, remembering when he and Blackie used to shoot every one they saw. "Guess you can never tell about a fella."

Bill, without looking, picks up a piece of fish that feels funny, stinks. "Sonofabitch!" He drops the turd. "I knew Olf was logging close to the creeks, but I didn't think this close, that bastard."

Elder Gosson hands Bill a wet dishrag. "Do you want another plate? There's just a dab of fish left."

"It'd probably bark at me . . . . No, I think I'd better go. I've got work in the morning."

"You can't call dozing out rhodies work."

"Laugh if you want. They get caught between the cletes just like vinies, but they smell better when they knock the shit outta you."

"Blackie's winding up," Gary says, poking his head in the backdoor.

With the troopers around, less money has changed hands than usual. Still, betting is heavy. Old Lenny pisses behind a lilac that hasn't bloomed for years. While he's there, Olf uses the bush rather than track mud inside, complains about the odds, but bets a fifty. After Olf, Teabo, his face swollen, his billfold in his hand, steps behind the lilac. Then Gary and Eddy joke about yellow leaves.

Blackie's first throw misses. One trooper shines his flashlight on the nest; the other watches, listening for their dispatcher. And Nils sits, his back against the tree, his thoughts black as his bruised face. *Damn that Heroun, the sonnabitch got in a lucky punch.*

Blackie throws until Olf's right cork catches in a crotch maybe ten feet below the squirrel's nest. Olf doesn't realize the boot is his. After taking his new pair away from Blackie once, he thinks they're locked in his truck, not realizing that neither boot of the mismatched pair he locked away fits him. Eddy pulled the switch.

Alfred tries to climb the fir with neither spikes nor belt. Actually, Alfred gets up thirty-five feet before slipping, falling across the limb he'd been standing on. The limb breaks. He hangs onto its stub, swings around till his toes find another limb, then starts down, cursing. Olf loses his boot, but he might not be aware of his loss until the weather breaks and the Cat loggers get back to work.

Mike loses twenty dollars, Dudley more. Bill a little less. And Mr. Green makes over a hundred, enough to take both classes to Portland and maybe to Detroit Dam, all because of that little zero.

2.

Troubled, Vicky returns to the Grange near midnight. Jackie, Bill, and of course, the newlyweds have gone home. A few girls remain, mostly ones that run in the rough crowd. Everyone she knows has gone. That is, everyone except Elder Gosson, who is in the kitchen wiping down the stove. "Did you have fun?" he asks, flicking his dishrag over the oven door.

"Do you have time to talk?"

"Always." Gosson rinses out the rag and hangs it on the faucet. "It went rather well today, don't you think?"

"I liked the fish."

"As your cousin's namesake, I pray that someday you find as much happiness."

"I don't think she's very happy. She just had to do it."

"Well, I pray then for the difference when the time comes." Gosson smiles. "I think you're right. She's not happy."

"It's kinda confusing, both of us having the same name and everyone thinking we're the same. I sometimes feel," she pauses, looks puzzled, then adds, "like we're the same person."

"You can choose not to be."

"Can I?'" She looks directly into his eyes, then quickly looks away. "That's sorta what I want to talk about. I saw Terry tonight."

"I didn't see him around."

"Can we go someplace? I don't want anybody to hear what, you know." Vicky wrings her left ring finger, unaware of what her hands do. Although more than half the town attends his non-denominational Sabbath services, very few of the people who really count think much of the minister or take what he says seriously. That they don't take him seriously embarrasses her. But Blackie would say that nobody she thinks counts is worth the stick of stumping powder necessary to blow them up. Any rate, those who count say the Commandments are good principles to live by, but that times have changed, that the Bible can't be taken literally, that it isn't scientific. She knows only that she isn't bleeding anymore. That was awful, having to use a bath towel, even then leaving spots where she sat.

"Certainly. I'm about ready to leave for the parsonage. A moment more, and we can go together." Gosson checks the refrigerator, takes out a foil-wrapped package of fish—nothing else is left that will spoil—and pulls the plug to save wear on its worn compressor.

"I'll follow you over?" She's about to lose her nerve. Her hands are wrung white and red. "I was with Terry tonight, you know."

"So you told me."

"I did?"

"Everyone is outside. We can talk here. We're quite alone." Gosson is afraid that she won't follow him to the parsonage. "There's a bit of ice cream left. Chocolate okay?"

"You sure we'll be alone."

"The devil stands at our elbow whether we see him or not, speaks whether we hear him or not, strikes, wounding us when we least expect it . . . . There's two scoops left." Glosson scrapes the carton clean, hands Vicky the bowl, then pours himself a cup of tea from the thermos he brought.

"What does he say?"

"He accuses us of being who we are, consigned to disobedience, our righteousness that of a filthy rag . . . . I'm sure you have heard him."

"Maybe I have."

"He knows that the soldier is sooner killed with a little bullet than a long sword. His wounds are small, but very deadly."

"Have you ever doubted what you believe?" Vicky glances towards the doors and the voices outside, sees the empty frame, then looks back at the minister. "I mean, really doubted?"

Gosson wonders how serious is her doubt. "The weakest wasp stings the stoutest man of war, even when wearing the whole armor of God. I have been stung many times."

"Really, you?"

"Yes, me. I've given our accuser plenty to bring before the Eternal God. You don't have to give him anything."

"I don't want to."

"You were," he asks, "tempted while with Terry?"

"I don't think he likes me."

"But you like him."

"He wanted to kiss me. Oh, he didn't say so, but I know. I can tell."

"Be patient."

"Was it wrong of me not to let him?"

"No, it wasn't. Where honey and gall are mixed, it is hard to separate one from the other."

"I think I understand."

"Your doubt isn't about what's right, but about whether Terry will accept you if you—"

"He's heard stories."

"And you think he expected—"

"I hope not. I really like him. He's not like the others."

"Then you have answered your doubt. Trust him. If he's not like other boys, he will respect . . ."

"Do you really think he will? Tell me what to do. Should I, you know." Her ice cream melts.

Gosson realizes that her doubt isn't the type troubling him, that of preaching faith when Faith is a gift of God, of preaching heaven when the promise is the Resurrection, of preaching hell and eternal damnation by a God of Love. Condemned in the pulpit, condemned by the Law, he, like Saul, hasn't waited for his Samuel. Instead, he proclaimed himself Samuel, taking the office, choosing to spare the defeated king, saving the best of this world's goods to sacrifice to the Lord, when all God wants is obedience, the one thing he hasn't given Him. "Vicky, my daughter, do not condemn yourself. Repentance means to sin no more. It is not penance for past sin."

"You mean that's all I have to do, just don't do, you know."

"Yes, I mean that, and I do know what you mean."

The centuries-old phrases, inherited like property, have been handed down to Gosson, father to son, for eight generations. And like the yellow leaves and spindly stems of crops grown on increasingly tired soil, his faith is weaker than his father's, his father's weaker than his grandfather's. His question may be the same as theirs: what worth has a man? What is mankind that the Eternal God should be mindful of this species? But he has more answers than his fathers

had. Too many answers. Too much knowledge competes with the old phrases. More and more he tills the ditch between belief and unbelief: if a man doesn't obey his Creator, how is the man better than a tree or a fish in the brook?

"Elder, tell me, if, you know, Terry . . . I think I hurt him tonight."

"If you want, I will speak to Terry."

"No! please don't." Vicky against glances at the door. "I don't want him to think, you know, that I'm after him."

"But you are."

"Not really. Oh," she studies her melting ice cream, "you're getting me all confused. Of course I'd like him, you know, for a friend. But I don't want him to think I'm after," she doesn't finish her sentence.

After a moment, Gosson says, "You're referring to—"

"You know, Mr. deFader."

"Ahh, I thought so. I have not seen Orlando's will, but, yes, I've heard the rumors about him leaving Terry some of his estate. Remember, though, Orlando has six natural children and a wife to provide for. I doubt that he'll leave much, if anything to Terry, so I wouldn't worry about it. And whatever Terry receives will be a blessing."

"I know it will be. I'll be happy for him."

"Just be yourself around Terry, and let nature take her lawful course." Has he told her the truth, he wonders?

Vern keeps Orlando's will in the tavern's safe, and said that, yes, Orlando named the Olson boy as his principal heir. But Terry will have to make his way in the world by himself or the inheritance will be as much a hindrance as a help. The last thing Terry needs is more pressure.

"It'd be okay, then, if he wanted to kiss me?"

"For you to kiss him back? I cannot give you permission to sin, nor can I tell you when kissing becomes sin."

"Are you telling me not to, then?"

How, he wonders, can he counsel her? How can he know the will of God in this matter? There are more houses than churches, more Greek horses than Epaeus'; for broad is the way of destruction, narrow is the path beyond the slough of despondency.

"That decision is between you and Eternal God. Remember, however you decide you will have to live with your choice the rest of your life."

"I think I know what you mean. If I do what I used to, well, I won't." Vicky picks up her spoon and samples the melting ice cream for the first time.

* * *

Chapter Seventeen

1.

The squirrel sleeps, its nest lined with grass and thistle down. If she'd been aware of the loggers, she would have scolded them sternly. She would scold Vern now as he leans against the fir and stares at the Grange, its doors locked.

Vern, wet, lingers like the smoke from the still smoldering fire pit. Everyone has gone, everyone that is but him, who was never there. The fir sways as little gusts push it around, rocking the nest. He twists his head. He knew Blackie couldn't hit that nest. *Why did I bet against myself? Eddy will stop by the Harbor View tomorrow and tell me I lost twenty. Why did I do it, bet against common sense?*

But he might have made most of a hundred in sales, even counting the kegs he gave away. He's glad he thought to leave a key to the tavern with Martha, who opened up and brought back to the Grange a pickup load of cases when the kegs ran dry.

He heard everything said tonight, heard what no one could possibly hear, and no amount of money can take away the distaste of how he was called a Jew, not that he's ashamed of the fact, only the way it was said in silence. He heard the accusations of price gouging. He witnessed his trial, the guilty verdict, and his sentencing, expulsion to the stone pits, lead there by the hand of a good-man if one can be found in Euchre Creek. He couldn't speak in his own defense, so no one told of how he ate two raises. It isn't his fault gypos have decked logs for thirty-five a thousand since the War. Nor is it his fault that they probably will continue to log for the same money for another fifteen years, the way they bicker among themselves.

Headlights. A car pulls into the Grange's parking lot, backs around and leaves.

Vern wonders who that could've been. It's late for highschoolers still to be out, but he can't see his watch's luminescent face. The numbers quit glowing the day he bought it.

The gusts that rock the fir swirl the smoke from the smoldering pit. Like a boy on his way home from school, the smoke begins to wander behind the Hall, stopping here, following the path there, bumping into the fir, then continuing on, through the blackberries to Leo's garden where it awakens a rooster, his crow loud in the soft darkness of drifting rain and fog. Vern again glances at his watch, again sees nothing, but suspects that it'll be morning soon. Martha will work the early shift; he won't have to come in till one.

It seems like I spend my life standing and looking. Waiting. For what? To be a damn Jew. She lived it, Ruth did. Maybe that was what was wrong with her. She understood it, understood what is it to be a damn Jew.

Vern married Ruth Deborah Beny'min, tattooed, dirty, nearly starved, in a little patch of woods, fifty miles into Austria. They stood on the tracks of a Sherman; the rabbi strattled the machinegun. She had to wait six months for permission to join him in America after he was shipped home. Maybe it would have been better if permission had never been granted. It was one thing to live through the camps, but another to be raped by your liberators.

When Vern meet her in Newark—the day as nice a spring morning as New Jersey has ever seen—she, well, the tattooing was deeper than he suspected. He'd been on the train for three days just so he could be there. Maybe he was too tired, not patient enough. Maybe he couldn't understand what it was like to be a damn Jew. Whatever the reason, she tried to kill herself that first night.

His mom insisted that they commit her. *Were padded walls better than barbwire? Probably not*. She hung on for five years, and he didn't finish paying for her care until last year. He couldn't afford to eat another price raise. It's time for him to make money, not that he hasn't. But being a damn Jew, well, he may have to leave someday.

Ruth's family could have left Munchen in '33. *It's a damn shame her papa—what the hell, he died for his decision to stay.*

The rooster crows twice more when the fence creaks, the slack barbwire suddenly pulled taunt through rusty staples. Vern hesitates, his weight on the bottom strand of wire. A splash. Another. The flooding ditch behind the fence gurgles under the matted grass, beaten down by weeks of rain.

The ditch intersects Cabbage Creek across from where little Mary Poage got stuck in that bank beaver's burrow two years ago. Maybe she didn't know how to crawl backwards. Whatever the reason, they had to dig her out. Ray,

Blackie, Eddy. He doesn't remember how many more had chopped berry cane, clearing both the creek and the river bank.

Their effort made front-page news: *Town Saves Girl Trapped in Beaver Den.* A social worker followed up the story. She wanted to know why a sixteen-month-old child was along the creek, alone, and she threatened to place all of Ray's children in foster care. The situation was tense for more than a month. Finally, Ray's wife left, taking their children with her. It was pretty hard on him for a while, but he remarried last summer and has started another family.

Another splash, followed by the stirring of a fish in shallow water. And yet another splash.

The splashes come from between the rows of hilled carrots that Leo left in his garden for the winter. They'll keep growing, getting fatter and developing woody cores, as long as the weather stays above freezing. Coons will find them, as will nutria, all descendants of a pair Frank Hodges ordered from a breeder in Texas. They were, they are easy to raise, but the market for their fur was oversold last year. Frank already wishes he'd never heard of them.

Stepping over the barbwire, Vern steps into the flooding ditch, his foot slipping into deep water, his hip pocket filling with water, wetting his wallet. He flounders across and drags himself out. But the ditch, swollen and dirty, flows through the garden. So he still has to slosh through shoe-deep water as he heads towards the cooped roosters.

Again a splash and close this time.

His ears pinpointing the stray steelhead, Vern crouches, waits, then pounces, arms outstretched, fingers grasping slime. The steelhead flops free, flops over a row of carrots, and bidden by its confused instincts, wiggles away from the safety of the ditch and creek. Instead, it struggles up the row, swimming towards the raised cold frames where Leo starts his cabbages and broccoli.

Vern follows on his hands and knees, grabbing for the steelhead, which again and again squirts free. He almost catches it, but it's strong and slippery. Muddy, he lunges one more time, lands on the fish. His hands find its gills, and he rises to his knees, holding the steelhead. He has done it; he has caught one, his first.

2.

Blackie decides he isn't drunk. He's not certain why he decides he isn't. Sure, he feels good, feels the buzz, feels like getting along with everyone, the reason why he's in no mood to go home and fight with his old lady. They can fight anytime. *And do.* So he's not drunk and not ready to go home. *What's a fella*

to do? A year ago, I would've visited Vicki. Not now. In fact, he hasn't been by to see her since Steele arrived. And that's only made the fighting with his old lady worse. A little less guilt. A little less desire to get along.

He'd stop at the Harbor View if Vern were there . . . he's disappointed he hadn't come closer to the squirrel's nest. *Probably the rain, heavy air. Or maybe I just didn't have it tonight, that Prom night finally coming home for keeps. Sonnabitch. A fella can't get away with nothin.*

Dashes of rain duck beneath the porch roof, strike a slug crawling across a step, its slime trail silver and slick, a streaked mirror, narrow as that path of righteous the preacher said he'd never find if he didn't mend his ways. *What does that mean? Mend my ways. They ain't torn. There ain't nothin wrong with them that changin one night wouldn't fix.*

The 312 he'd rebuilt ought to be broke in by now. It ought to make that Ford of his go if he were to open it up. Maybe he ought to see what the truck will do. There isn't any traffic on the river road, so seeing how he isn't drunk, he ought to go for a run.

A rolling start, clutch in, he romps the throttle, and the V-8 winds, its solid lifters floating for a moment, then disappearing into the whine of the engine. Three grand, four, five. He dumps the clutch. Smoke and squeal, then the tires grab. The pickup shoots ahead, fishtailing, a wobbly bullet. Forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, seventy-five, eighty—speedometer pegged, he heads into the mile-long straight past the scale shack and logdump. The truck shimmies. He'll have to add a second set of shocks.

The county road follows the river's twisting course. Past the logdump, the road lies like a serpent with hiccups. Driving familiar curves, Blackie tromps the throttle, then backs off, then floors it again as he twists the wheel hard. His Ford seems to glide through shallow curves; he power slides those that cut back on themselves, passes the VFW cemetery, sails over Klamath Grade and past Twin Bridges. Ten miles. He forgot to check his watch for when he left. The pickup is quick, that much is certain.

Miles melt into darkness as he overdrives headlights. He misjudges a curve and almost loses the truck in the river, then misjudges the next curve and takes it on two wheels, scaring himself a little. He slows some, though still unwilling to admit he's drunk. It's the truck's fault. Its steering needs tightening. Nevertheless, when Blackie nears the Little Euchre road Stoker graveled last week, he turns onto the spur, and slowly bounces up it a mile.

A bear!

It's across the road and out of his headlights before he stops in the middle of the road and jerks his .30-30 from behind the seat. His wife couldn't be mad at him if he brought home some meat, and bear is sweeter than pork.

Mud already seeps through the new gravel, and rain comes in blowing sheets of tiny drops, silent as owls. Hemlock boughs rustle, their crowns drooping. The radiator gurgles. Chambering a cartridge, Blackie, the breech of his rifle under his arm, pisses on a rear tire. The bear is probably a half-mile from here by now. He knows that. But it may be in the skunk cabbage patch along the creek bottom. And with this road being graveled, he'll be going back to work. He might not get another chance to go hunting.

Damn skunk cabbage anyhow, like jack-in-the-pulpit but stinks . . . that's just what he needs tonight, to walla in the mud like a fuckin bear.

Crawling through the second-growth hemlocks, trunks the size of his arm, as close together as unthinned carrots, Blackie sees nothing. He seems to be locked in a wood box, wet and pitchy, suspended in darkness. Boughs envelop him, springy walls that give when he pushes against them, kicks them. He twists and turns, keeping his head pointed downhill, his hand around his rifle, one arm ahead of the other, narrowing his shoulders. At times, he feels like he's sliding, falling down a chute. Then the hemlocks contract, hold him still, squeeze him till he can't breathe. The bear, he remembers, got through here somehow. And he pushes, sometimes with his back, sometimes forward, all the while squirming downhill, drawn by gravity and the need to breathe.

He hears the creek. It's not far now. He's almost to the beaver pond.

Beaver have dammed the creek for most of a mile, creating a string of ponds, none really large, all trapping the silt that now covers the gravel redds where generations of salmon had spawned before beaver pelts became nearly worthless. Blackie splashes from one pond to another. In mud to his knees, sometimes to his waist, he wallows through darkness and drifting rain, the tremors starting suddenly. Covered with mud, on his knees, shaking, confused, he sees nothing, hears only the flowing water, above him and beside him. Surrounded by leaves—skunk cabbage—he smells the pulpit-shaped flowers, and falls forward into one in full bloom. And he lays there, a shivering mound of mud, with cold bugs crawling up his nose, around his eyes, one in his left ear. He reaches to brush the bugs away, but doesn't feel them. Yet he does feel them crawling on him. They don't wait till he's dead.

I didn't want this, not this, please not this—

Holes from bears digging roots are full of watery mud as the flooding creek flows around the stick dams. More beaver canals and dams front the

skunk cabbage patch. And the bear waits beside a break in a dam. The old boar will snap the neck of whatever beaver comes to repair the gap.

The boar was denned in a hollow cedar, but the rising water woke it from its nap. Now, wet, cold, hungry, the boar will kill to live, and he will kill tonight.

Energy spent, shivering, already delirious, sober or drunk, he doesn't know which, Blackie clutches his rifle as he lies with his knees drawn and his head to his chest. And in his delirium, he prays . . .

I screwed up, I shouldn't be here . . . I dunno you, dunno if yuh exist, dunno what to say, but—but what? It's middle of the night, dark as hell, and I'm here, in this fuckin hole, stuck in knee deep muck, can't move hardly, and I need help . . . I ain't gonna bargain with yuh, ain't gonna promise nothin. But I need help, and I gotta change my ways—I know I do.

Simple pleadings for help; a vague promise to change, repeated again and again, mumbled thoughts that begin without commitment, but more sincere with each repetition: Blackie's shakes bodily rack him, causing him to puke until not even bile comes.

Decaying skunk cabbage, slimy as dead spawners, rotting salmon left in the spindrift by high water and contented bears, putrefying sorebacks—Blackie sees a spark, but his eyes, they're shut. *Are they?* Now he isn't sure. He thinks they are. They were.

The spark is gone, and his shivering has mostly stopped.

Am I dead? Will I know? How can he see with his eyes shut? He's in this slime hole of darkness; yet he saw a spark. *I know I did. I wasn't seeing things . . . or was I?*

He isn't too far from the river. If he gets up, if he can get up and follow the creek, that is if he can again find the creek, he'll cut the road.

Every step he falls. Using his rifle for a muddy, slippery crutch—he leans on it, its muzzle against his stomach—he pushes off with it. He balances with it. Using it as a deadman, he pulls himself out of bear wallows. And while stuck in the deepest hole so far, he again sees the spark, an orange glow under the clouds, a glow like the sun rising in the west. *That can't be*, his words lost in the mud. *I must really be turned around.*

* * *

Chapter Eighteen

1.

In the foggy darkness that squats along the river, Blackie tries to climb the slick embankment where Little Euchre Creek passes under the river road. His bare feet slip. He lost his Wellingtons and his delusions in the skunk cabbage and mud hell he wallowed through on stumbling steps, crawling on hands and knees, on his belly, his face in the mud. He knew he wasn't drunk. *I ain't never hurt this much when drunk.* So struggling to climb to the gravel shoulder, he pulls himself from one handhold to another as if scaling a mountain. He inches ahead, inches upward until he finally wiggles onto the gravel shoulder. There is no walking. He hasn't the strength and his feet hurt too much—he collapses beside the formed steel post of a mile marker, manages to sit with his back against the steel, his muddy rifle across his lap. *Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. Lord, forgive me, forgive me.*

He knows where he's at, but he's not sure how he got here. Siletz is twenty miles on up the river road and across the cutoff. The Harbor View is fourteen miles downriver. And his truck must be three, four miles away, maybe another mile farther. He really got himself messed up this time, and he did it when mostly sober. He did it because of her.

The gurgling of the flooding creek wrapping itself around bridge timbers presses against the throbs within his head. Each heartbeat seems to explode, seems to hammer temple and eye as he sits in the heavy blackness, warped by the drifting waves of rain. *I ain't done what's right, I know that. But how do I go back and fix things?*

Waiting for someone to pass by, he shuts eyes that now see nothing, and he sees himself on the front porch of his house, saying, *You ain't been the wife I wanted and I ain't been the husband I oughta be. Yuh wanta start over? Do it right this time. No more fightin, no more spendin all day at the tavern, no more*

pigsty of a house. I'll be here if yuh'll be. This ain't workin what we're doin, ain't good for the kids. He sees himself, but can't imagine saying the words he sees himself saying.

*

His morning began yesterday: Salmo Gairdneri took United's milkrun from Seattle to Salem, the flight stopping at every airport with a strip long enough for the plane to land, going even out of its way to cross Mt. Hood and stop at Redmond before crossing back over the Cascades. Tires squealed on the capital's rainy runway. There, he rented a car, stopped and picked up his lobbyist, then stopped for gas at Fort Hill, stopped for dinner at Rapid Inn, stopped to call his secretary from Oceanlake. His original plan was to discuss with Steele the progress of Hansen Investment's fishing resort, making sure it would be open by July 4th. A sort of *pat on the back & check the books while I'm here* weekend visit that all of his middle managers dread. But between the Willamina cutoff and the Corridor, his lobbyist brought him up to date concerning Bill Heroun's lease of the south bay.

"So you think we should buy Heroun out?" he asked just before Widow Creek. "I doubt he'll sell cheap."

"Heroun doesn't know what's he's doing. He's a marionette of the governor, who as you know hasn't been any friend of yours."

"That wasn't always the case . . . so you think Heroun doesn't know what he's doing. What are his plans?"

"God knows. No one else does, and certainly not Heroun."

"How has he progressed as far as he has?"

"He hasn't been using commercial money, so whatever seems like a good idea today is what he does." The lobbyist opens his briefcase to remove the summary of events he has prepared. "He's winging it, and he is hurting Steele. This is a case where you need to protect one of your own."

"I'm not happy with Steele. He has made serious mistakes . . . . Do you want the job of bringing the restaurant on line? A temporary position."

"Not really. My counsel is to give Steele until Memorial Day. If he is not back on schedule, then there is time to remove him before additional damage occurs."

"But your counsel is also to buy out Heroun?"

"Not without carefully looking his lease over, for the governor could have inserted unacceptable language. However, if a person had it and had the cannery and could consolidate the properties, I would recommend that

you secure it. There will not be enough traffic to support competing resorts. Both will fail."

"You are certain that our investment will fail if it has to compete against Heroun's project?"

"When I project revenues, both will fail whereas one would be highly successful."

"My former friend should have arrived at the same conclusion before supporting Heroun, don't you think?

The lobbyist turns to stare at a kid riding a bike, a steelhead hanging from the handlebars. When he looks back at his employer, he says, "You pay me for my expertise—and you pay well. I cannot address what the governor knew, or what his thoughts were."

"Yes, I pay you for your advice, and I would squander my money if I don't take it." Salmo Gairdneri waits a moment before again asking, "What have you heard? The same conclusion?"

"One resort will dwarf the other even if not catering to the same clientele. We can bring in a Nevada floorshow if we need an attraction, but Heroun will catch more fish because Presidents will play his golf course."

"That's interesting." After a moment, he adds, "Let's see what Heroun has. I know what I would do with the south bay."

"You'll get wet."

"I imagine so."

While Euchre Creek spent yesterday taking care of its business, Salmo Gairdneri, in street shoes and rubbers, followed streams barely large enough for cutthroat to spawn in. He pushed aside budded rhododendrons and stunted pines, found the gnawed remains of a doe, saw the D-4, its final apart, then returned to Salem with the lobbyist. Without pausing for sleep, he floated enough liquid assets that he can buy another man regardless of his price.

Returning to Euchre Creek in the early morning hours, coming over the hill from Kings Valley to Hoskins to Nashville and Siletz, then across the cutoff and down the river road, watching for deer, seeing a few, Gairdneri feels the excitement of the fight as his headlights strike the muddy shirt of a man leaning against a road sign.

"Are you hurt?"

Blinded by the lights, Blackie shakes his head.

"Have you been involved in an accident?"

"Naa . . . got lost huntin a bear. I'll be all right."

"What can I do for you?"

Blackie, realizing the car is a Lincoln like the one Steele drives, says, "I'll just get your car dirty . . . . Yuh goin downriver to Euchre Creek?"

"I am."

"What time is it?"

"A little after four."

"The Harbor View oughta be open by the time yuh get there. Tell someone there where I am."

"And you are?"

"Blackie . . . I'm all right, really. A little cold, but okay."

"If they're not open, is there anyone else?"

"Yeah, the preacher. He lives right beside the church. Yuh can't miss it."

*

Elder Gosson doesn't appreciate pounding on his door at, he checks the time, 4:37 a.m. Nevertheless, he rises to see who could possibly need his help at this unreasonable hour.

"There's a man sitting alongside the road upriver about ten miles. Said his name was Blackie and that I should contact you."

As quickly as the message is delivered, this Samaritan disappears.

An angel? Gosson doesn't see the Lincoln, its lights off so as not to shine through sleeping windows, pull back onto the river road and turn towards Highway 101. Gosson sees only the drifting darkness that pushes against the light coming from the parsonage's open door. He hears the quiet roar of the flooding river and the faint rumble of the distant surf. And he convinces himself that his visitor was not a living, breathing human being, which translates into an urgency he wouldn't have otherwise felt if this *Blackie* is Blackie Poage, a scoundrel of the worse sort. As godless a man as this county can produce.

With very little sleep, Gosson dresses in the same clothes he wore to the Grange. It seems as if he hasn't been to bed at all, as if this morning is a continuation of last evening. And venturing a step into the rain, he turns around. *A man out in this weather will be drenched and cold. He'll need a blanket or two and a hot bath when I get him home.*

Gosson now drives a 1954 DeSoto, dark red with silver trim, and he doesn't see a need for its upholstery to be ruined by the Blackie he knows, so he spreads a blanket across the passenger's seat before he backs onto the river road. He drives slow. Taking no needless chance of hitting a deer or of knocking the frontend out of alignment, the preacher doesn't drive over

thirty at night, and not over forty-five during the day, unless of course, he is on 99W, where everyone drives recklessly. So it takes a half-hour before his headlights sweep across the slumped figure, muddy as the swollen river.

Tucking his arm under the cold logger's shoulder, Gosson lifts Blackie to his feet and helps him into the car, where the heater silently spews forth a double stream of warmth. He slips the mud-jammed rifle onto the backseat floorboards. "You are a lucky man, for God has seen fit to save your miserable life."

"I know—"

"What do you mean, you know?"

"Yuh ain't gonna believe what I tell, so I ain't gonna bother" Blackie leans forward, getting as close to the heater as he can. "But I'm gonna want yuh to baptize me."

Having started to turn around, Gosson now stops. "Maybe you better tell me what happened."

"Dunno that I can. Somethin changed . . . . I changed." Blackie feels the heat, and suddenly feels the cold deep inside him. He shivers, almost violently from the piercing cold that grips his heart and wrestles with his belly. And between tremors, he says, "Down there along the creek, I dunno . . . I gotta change the way I live. It ain't been right."

"Let me get you to the parsonage. We can talk there." Indeed, an angel had paid him a visit this morning.

2.

Bill's truck stinks like fish. He ought to, Jackie thinks, do something about the smell, like setting that coffee can of Boraxed salmon roe in the back, under the canopy. She scoots the can over with her foot. It doesn't belong on the floorboards, it'll spill. Then where would he be: sticky egg juice on everything. The Indians used to chew salmon eggs, spit the juice in a bowl and use it for paint. It's certainly gluey enough to use for paint. She can't get it out of the dress she wore to Newport. One spot, just a little one, but enough to ruin the dress, and all because Bill had to stop at Molock Beach and let Homer run around.

JG's tea was nearly seven months ago. *Has it been that long? Where has the time gone? It seems like, well, I don't want to say yesterday. It seems a little longer ago than that. Robin took over the cannery and the rain started and here I am, working for Bill and trying to build what. It's still not clear. Robin has a better idea of what he wants to do than Bill does. But they're both building kind of like how Dickens wrote his novels, give the public a chapter and see what they want.*

John Saterlee just got drafted. His mom was telling Grandma Hodges about taking him to Portland, to the Induction Center. Said he was real excited about going so he wouldn't have to set chokers for his dad. Her husband doesn't pay him. Said she was worried about him getting killed, with Germany being in turmoil and even Elvis going there when he got drafted. She hopes Terry doesn't get drafted when he graduates, not that she thinks he can't take care of himself. It's just that if he leaves, he probably won't come back, and Mom needs him, especially now that his dad is finally holding a job.

Terry isn't happy. "Why are you reading his will the day after you bury him," he asks Bill. "That isn't right. That's not what you should be doing."

"Get in, shut the door." Bill shifts into reverse. "It don't matter to me, talk to Vern. This is his idea."

"But why do I have to come?"

"Ask Vern. He said to bring you along."

"This isn't right. How'd you like it if people started dividing up your stuff before—"

"Terry! that's enough." Jackie reaches across her half-brother and cracks the windwing. "You know why we're doing this."

"No, I don't."

"Don't start this with me. You can run Mom around, but I won't put up with it."

"With what?"

"Bill, you'll be the administrator of Orlando's estate. I don't think Terry is old enough to receive anything yet." Jackie glares at her brother. "Maybe when he learns to answer as an adult—"

"Vern tell you Orlando named me administrator?"

"Grandma Hodges did. She saw Orlando. I wasn't supposed to say."

"Figures. She's been slipping him pies for years."

"Yeah, but she doesn't pit her cherries," Terry says.

"She what?"

"She doesn't pit her cherries when she cans them. Then she just dumps them in that way." Terry pulls the windwing shut. "And she doesn't use enough sugar. They're always real sour."

"How would you know?" Jackie reaches over to again crack the windwing.

Leaning forward, turning, his back to the side window, Terry looks around his sister: "Why can't this wait, at least until he's cold."

"He was cold when we found him, yuh know that. Besides, Kid, his boys didn't want to give him a proper funeral, didn't want to spend the money."

Bill pauses. "Vern says there's instructions in his will about how he wanted buried, and we done followed the instructions, so we gotta make what we did legal."

Terry leans back. The windwing is shut. And the sun, a lighter gray spot in the gray sky, has risen as high as the firs along Cabbage Creek. Bill turns onto the county road, and points to Dudley's front yard where, tail raised, a spotted skunk watches a pup play with her two of her kittens. Tail wagging, the pup, probably not weaned, runs into the smaller kittens, bowls them over, then bounces away, bounces back and knocks them over again. "It's a good thing that pup's young," Bill says, turning now into Vern's lot. "Christians ought to be along pretty quick. Vern asked him and Sam Kenatta to be here, too."

"Oh, Bill, not—"

"I know, but Vern thinks we need a lawyer. He's probably right."

Although the cafe's open, there's only one person, a lanky Native with a greased ponytail and a red tattoo reading *Mother* on his left biceps, present. The fellow stands by the back wall, a crush-proof pack of cigarettes rolled into his T-shirt sleeve. Bill sees him, nods: "Hello, Adam. Didn't expect to see you."

"I'll bet you didn't."

"Thought you were still in Salem."

"They let me out, good behavior."

"Your brothers gonna be here?"

"They sent me."

"I see." Bill pours himself a cup of coffee. "Want a cup?"

"Fuck you too." The expression is without heat.

"Same old friendly Adam."

Christians and Kenatta, talking about whether the road into the Hodges' homestead is public domain, enter, letting in a dash of rain. "Just started," Brice answers Bill's unspoken question about how wet they are. Snapping his fingers, Christians adds, "Went from mist to pouring just like that."

Seeing Jackie, Sam Kenatta smiles and says, "That house of yours will swim away if it rains any harder."

"Sam," Vern says, poking his head out of his office, "will you step in here a minute. Bill, you too. We'll be with the rest of you in a few minutes."

* * *

Chapter Nineteen

1.

The Kid is right. He ought to be working even if it is Sunday. The Cat still needs a new ham, and he needs his knuckles to quit hurting. He was a damn fool last night, his right hand now so swollen he can hardly sign his name. *That was dumb, takin on Nils. None of us are as young as we were.* His fighting upsets Jackie. *Says it's juvenile. Maybe it is.*

"All right, we're ready." Vern motions for Adam, Jackie, Christians, and Terry to enter his office. "Sit there, Terry." Vern points to a broken bar stool, black Naugahyde with arms and chrome trim. "Just don't tilt. Legs need to be brazed. Think you can do that, Bill?"

"Those stools have awful thin metal. They don't take much heat. I'd need an aught or double-aught tip and don't have one."

"The store has them, Bill," Christians says, examining another stool before he sits on it. "This one's broken too."

"All of them in here are."

"Dudley's pretty good with a torch." Bill scoots his padded chair over so Jackie can sit beside him. "Why don't you get him to tack them back together?"

"He doesn't have a torch anymore. Sold it along with most of his tools to pay hospital bills Workman's Comp didn't cover."

"If yuh want to get a tip, he can use my torch. Fixin these won't take enough acetylene to matter."

"I'll tell him," Vern says, "and thanks, Bill. Since he lost his leg, well, he hasn't done anything but drink and play cribbage. That was okay for awhile."

"Is everybody ready?" Kenatta, voice strong and sounding very legal, interrupts the digression. "We're here for the reading of Orlando deFader's last will and testament."

Terry, head down, kicks the stool leg, held upright by a wrap of baling wire around the circular support. He knows he's in the will: Mr. deFader told him that much, maybe not directly but at least indirectly. He knows there are provisions attached to him receiving whatever, making deFader just like everybody else, wanting to control his life, telling him what he can't do. Only deFader isn't like everybody else. *How can yuh tell someone dead to fuck off especially when they'll all expect me to be thankful?*

The lawyer reads too damn slow and so far none of it has been about me. That's good. I don't want him tellin me that I have to go to college . . . . One thing for sure, he owned a lot of land.

"That covers the dispensation of Orlando deFader's properties in Polk County. Now, concerning his real property in Lincoln County." Before Kenatta resumes reading, he looks directly at Terry. "I think, young man, that you are most fortunate."

Head still down, Terry listens to legal descriptions and expressions, none of them meaning much to him. He's never been able to tell anyone to fuck off. *Maybe the taunts would go away if I could*. He leans back, hears the range and township of a piece of reforested land—second growth—and wonders why he's sitting through all this. He knows what the legalese means: he's going to get land and timber, snares tying him to Euchre Creek. *I gotta get out, I gotta go now. I can't wait*.

The broken leg of the stool Terry sits on suddenly rotates around, dumping him. He crashes into Jackie, knocking her into Bill and Bill into the desk and the desk into Kenatta, staggering the lawyer backwards, Orlando's will still in his hand. Adam snorts as he stomps out. Embarrassed, Terry follows him from the office.

"Where you goin, Kid?"

"Nowhere."

"You think you're real fuckin smart, connin the old man into givin you what's rightfully mine."

"Leave him alone," Jackie says before Terry knows how to reply. She pushes between him and Orlando's oldest boy.

"He's fuckin yella. That's it, isn't it? He's yella. Hidin behind a bitch's skirt."

"You sonnabitch—"

"No! Terry." Jackie moves so her brother can't get around her. Then to Adam, she says, "If you don't want Bill all over you, you'll leave now."

"You ain't heard the last of me."

"I don't expect we have."

"Bitch!" Adam slams the cafe door hard enough he cracks the pane in its upper half.

"I don't wanta stay." Terry starts for the door.

"You aren't goin anywhere, young man. You're goin back in there, and you're goin sit down." Jackie grabs her brother by an earlobe. "I've about had it with you!"

"I ain't done nothin—"

"That's the problem."

"Everything all right?" Christians asks. "I thought I heard cursin."

"Everythin's fine." Jackie, having released Terry's ear, points to her brother, then to the back room. "He can only do one thing at a time, and right now he's pouting."

Kenatta lays his hand on Terry's shoulder. "Son, none of us are happy about Orlando's passing, but you have an especially heavy burden. He has trusted you with his legacy. He had great confidence in you. Don't let him down."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Grow up." Bill sort of magically appears. "That's what yuh're supposed to do, grow up. Make somethin of yourself. Make your mom proud."

"That's easy for you all to say—"

"Oh? . . . Easy is what Adam wants. He don't wanta have to buck logs or set chokers or rig a tree." Bill turns his back to the kid.

"And I'm supposed to want to?"

"Maybe if yuh did, yuh'd want to get yourself an education."

"Maybe." *Right now, all I want is outta here, away from all of you.*

"Go fishin. We can get along without yuh."

"I'll stay."

*

He stayed, but now it's all over. Everything will shortly become official—and known. Maybe the river is his only escape.

A skein of boraxed eggs rolled in the Sports section of last Sunday's *Oregonian*, a damp picture of Mel Counts (he again scored 40 points against Portland State, Baker added a dozen) releasing a fadeaway jumper under his arm, Terry counts his steps as wind swirls treetops. Firs groan. Sprinkling, dark from the threat of hard rain—it's been raining four months and school is still in session; the flood couldn't have happened, not in 40 days—Terry doesn't have far to walk, only to Cedar Tree. The river was falling and clearing when he quit Friday night. Fresh ironheads should be holding in the run below

the popular hole this morning. The deep, slow water is okay for salmon. He's caught a few chinook and a silver plunking there, his rod looking poor in that row of poles propped on little rock cairns, his a Herter's blank he tied up himself, most of the others Fenwick's. At least he has a hollow glass rod, not a metal one like deFader or a solid glass one like Wild Bill.

Cedar Tree is an odd hole, a bend against a rock bluff, deep inside and shallow along its outer edge. Named for the leaning cedar clinging to top edge of the bluff, the hole has no beach where forked willows, as if divining rods pulled into the sand, support the leaning poles of plunkers, mostly old men who want to watch the river. They all have homes. Some even have televisions. But the getting out is what's important, even if that means sitting under a tree with rain-loosened roots. Oh, they'll catch a half dozen salmon in a month, more than they can eat. Once in awhile, one of them will hook an ironhead. But Terry will catch ten to their one in the swift water past the tailout, and as far as he is concerned, it's a waste of time to sit listening to how hard the Depression was. Things aren't so good now, and nobody starved then, not here anyway.

The trail to the tail-run is a faint parting in the brush, twisting around a six-foot maple and through green scotchbroom switches, thick as bundled broomstraw. It straightens along a fenceline overgrown with blackberries. A dangling cane grabs Terry's shirt, hangs on like a squid jig. He squirms till scratched. Bleeding, he pulls free, ducks another cane, and tangles his rodtip in alders. Now without choice, he stops to separate his tip from the twigs without breaking his line. Sky, berries and a monstrous spruce snag drip as if crying. *About what? Trees don't have feelings or drunks . . . shit, why do I have to go there?*

Sword ferns replace the scotchbroom, willows the alders. Terry stops at the opening near the bottom of the slick. Across the river, wielding a stout flyrod, the new storekeeper wades in the shallows. *How'd he get here this quick?*

A water ouzel lights on a rock near Terry and begins bobbing. The ouzel watches him watching the storekeeper, then suddenly spears a cased caddis larva from the downstream side of the rock, spears a second and third larva, and bobs again as if doing deep-knee-bends. Terry coughs. The ouzel bounces off the rock, flying upstream out of sight. And the storekeeper quits fiddling around with his fly and starts to fish it, his cast across the current and downstream a bit. *It should have been longer: his drift won't reach the chute that always holds an ironhead.*

Terry hasn't seen anyone fish two flies before, didn't see the upper one until the cast straightened out. The bottom fly swims sideways; the dropper

fly skips along the top, in and out of water, causing a wake that stops and starts like—a smolt grabs the fly, and thrashes-about bleeding, blackening the water. The storekeeper strips it in, splashing it across the surface, unhooks it and tosses the pre-migrant back. His feet cold, Terry (he has a leak in his left boot, a crack in the sole he hasn't found) sees the smolt's white belly as it swims on its side. It won't live, one less salmon four years from now. Maybe he won't be here to care then.

Before the storekeeper makes another cast, Terry lobs pencil lead and eggs into the middle of the run, well upstream of the smolt. He sees his line hesitate before he feels the pecks. His pole arches. The fish, bright as the frosted moon, leaps once, races to the head of the run, leaps again, and again, then tears to the tailout where it cartwheels once, twice, three, four times. It then sulks in the fast water while he keeps pressure on, his thumb serving as drag. If he could, he'd buy a spinning reel, maybe a Mitchell. Their drags seem best.

The ironhead's fury, fading now, mostly spent on its first run, passes through the line and down his pole. Terry leads the fish to the willows where he gaffs it. He glances towards where the sun ought to be. He ought to cut school tomorrow, but he's already cut once this month. Maybe it'd be better if he went. Mr. Green again, his "little things," little decisions that determine the quality of life, little lectures that are a pain-in-the-ass to sit through.

2.

A day of marriage doesn't slow Steele's drinking. If anything, he drinks more. Vicki straightens their bed, fluffing pillows and tucking sheet corners, pulled loose when Robin tried to. Never mind. He was too drunk and too limp. Although Vicky doesn't know much about Steele's past, she suspects she isn't all the cause of his drinking.

Steele looks in the mirror, remembering a little of last night, confusing Vicki with Mary Beth, his hand shaking as he plugs in his shaver. The razor turns the radio to static, the noise as grating as the dull heads. That's how he can tell them apart. No radio. He likes it quiet in the morning—only, it isn't morning. It's almost dark outside.

Vicki fixes breakfast or dinner, she isn't sure which, while she waits to use the bathroom. Frying anything bothers her. She's glad Robin is satisfied with juice and toast. But even the smell of toast makes her queasy. Her mom said it would be this way, worse if expecting a boy than if a girl. All nonsense, she thought, but now she's not so sure. Her mom said she'd start craving things,

pickle and peanut butter sandwiches, that type of stuff. But so far all she wants is left alone, not to be touched. Even her clothes give her the creeps.

"Do you want to meet Mr. G?" Robin asks, his mouth full.

"Yes, I would." Vicki opens another can of grapefruit juice. Robin prefers orange, but Christians was out and she didn't feel like driving to Taft. That reminds her, she needs to go shopping: Kenny's IGA has rump roasts on sale, and Robin said no more fish. Terry has been bringing them something every day, but Robin's had enough.

"Try to look decent."

"I always do!"

"Yeah, well, Mr. Gairdneri expects you to look professional. No squirrel cones in your hair."

"That was uncalled for—and what is a squirrel cone?"

"A pine cone—"

"For your information, the only pine trees over here are those little scrubby ones along the beach. If you don't want to sound like an outsider, get your facts right."

"Pine cones, fir cones, who cares, that's not the point."

"The point is you're a jerk—" She ducks, seeing him cock his arm. "What are you gonna do, show me how much of a jerk you are?"

"Don't think I won't."

"Oh, I think you will." Vicki hears the slap before she feels it, then feels it in her neck as her head snaps back before her cheek starts to sting.

"Now call one of your boyfriends," Steele sneers. "Maybe that old man. You can mend his pants while you're telling him how awful I am."

Her legs rubbery, Vicki leans against the wall, slides down and sits with her legs spread, head down, her arms over her head. Thinking of the baby, hoping it won't have a birthmark, a bruise like Terry has where Strawberry hit her mom, she mumbles, "I'm sorry," as she hears Robin slam the door, the Lincoln start, then spun gravel. He didn't wait for her. That hurts as much as the slap.

She tries to push herself up, gets halfway up and stuck, her legs, straddle of her arms, her arms too short to push her higher, are too far apart to support her, so she stays like that, bent over and unable to move up or down, until the phone rings. Sliding back down and rolling over; she pushes herself onto hands and knees. Grabbing for the wall before her, her hand clasping the yellow wallpaper, finding nothing to hold onto but the momentary friction of palm against paper, she draws her legs together, straightens up and waddles, very pregnant, across the room. "Hello, Mom?" she says, not knowing for sure who's calling.

"It's me, Jackie. I just wanted to let you know that Terry, well, he has some land and timber. Actually, he has a lot of land and timber, mostly second growth, but some of has enough size to log." Jackie pauses, then after a moment, she asks, "Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"What's happened?"

"Nothin—"

"That's not the feelin I'm getting."

"I'm okay."

"No, yuh're not. I'm comin over."

"I'll come see you."

"Is your car running? Terry said it wasn't, said your engine was making noise."

"It has a knock. Sounds like a cracked piston. I'll run it until it quits." After a moment, she adds, "Maybe I can get Blackie to rebuild it."

"He sure has been outta work a long time this winter. I don't think Stoker has ever been down this long before, has he?"

"I really am fine . . . . What did you want to tell me?"

"You stay where yuh're at. I'm comin over . . . . You're not all right."

Vicki stares at the phone after the line goes dead. Wondering what her sister knows, she slowly returns the receiver to its hook. All movement hurts.

Before she moves away from the phone, it rings again.

"What happened? I thought you were coming. Are you sick?"

"Don't try to pull that crap on me. You know what's wrong." *Damn him, the nerve*. She slams the receiver onto its cradle. *That does it*.

But she did provoke him. He was being a jerk, but she didn't have to call him one, and she could've kept quiet afterwards. Still, he owes her an apology. He shouldn't pretend he doesn't know what happened. That's not an excuse.

The phone: "If that's you, Robin—"

"Don't hangup. Mr. G's secretary just called saying he won't be here. Something about meeting with someone interested in rhododendrons. So if you're sick, stay there."

"You really don't know what's wrong ?"

"Should I?"

Vicki sighs, wondering how could he not know. Outside, it's raining harder. Water droplets fly like shotgun pellets, peppering the window pane, bouncing off, collecting in the mud where her ducks, beaks open, scoop,

shovel and strain weed seeds from the puddles where grass once grew. The half-Mallard, half-Peking drake still attacks her. He used to just try to rape her when she was having her period, but now she doesn't know what's wrong with him. Now, it's whenever she turns her back. "Robin, I'm gonna roast a duck for dinner tonight. We have things we have to talk about."

* * *

Chapter Twenty

1.

"You need to go to school more than we need another fish." His mom has already refused to write him an excuse if he cuts today. "Besides, your dad will be getting a paycheck in a few days. We have enough of everythin to last until then."

"He'll drink it up before we see it."

"Don't speak ill of your father."

"Yeah—"

"Terry! Stop it. What has gotten into you?" Jackie, having come by to talk to Mom about Vicki, then adds, "Yuh've become extremely ungrateful."

"What do I have to be grateful for? Tell me! . . . Dad wasn't enough. Now yesterday."

"What about yesterday?"

"I'm yellow, hidin behind your skirt? Sis—"

"Shut up! Adam was in prison for killing two men. Beat them to death."

"So?" He's not afraid of Adam. "I promise I'll make classes after I make a few casts."

"Be careful, Terry." Nodding towards the door, Jackie adds, "Adam might be waitin for yuh."

"I'm still goin fishin—and he doesn't scare me."

"He ought to." Turning towards her mother, Jackie asks, "What's gotten into him?"

"The same thing that got into your sister. Hormones. He thinks he's in love."

"I'm outta here." He slams the door behind him. They'll talk about him behind his back, he knows they will. But let them talk. *I don't have to put up with their bullshit. Don't have to put up with anybody's bullshit. That's the one good thing he did for me.*

The walk out of town seems long. He counts his measured steps, counts to fifty and starts over. He's again headed to Cedar Tree . . . where again, one cast and he has a fish.

The ironhead's teeth cut his fingers. The fish feels like holding an anvil by a string, not that he ever has. He once pulled a snared beaver out from under a rootwad for his dad, the wire slider as hard to grip as the ironhead's jaw. Cut about the same, too. And hearing a car, he switches hands. It's Vicky.

"You're all wet," she says, rolling down the window.

"I'll dry."

"What are yuh doin fishing?"

Ignoring her question, he asks, "On your way to school?"

"Where else would I be going?"

"Fishin." He holds up the hen ironhead.

She laughs, sending surges of joy, like shivers, through him. He smells like fish, and doesn't want to ask for a ride. Lowering the hen, swinging it in back of his leg as if he's suddenly ashamed of it, he keeps walking, his face hot. He has no other clothes. He should have remembered that, and he feels those taunts, the years of taunts, faceless voices. He hates those voices, always there like the wind. *So damn unfair. Everybody stumbles out of Vern's once in awhile. Nobody's perfect.*

"I put a gunny sack in the trunk after last time. Just turn the handle. It'll open."

"I don't want to stink up your car."

"So it'll smell. That's okay. You might as well get in."

"Suppose I ought to go to school."

"Yeah, yuh ought to." She reaches across to open the door for him. "How did it go yesterday?"

"All right, I suppose."

She stares at him, but doesn't ask anything more about the will. Instead, she asks, "You want to stop by your house?"

"Mom hasn't done wash this week—"

"I mean to leave the fish."

While Vicky waits in the driveway, Terry lays the ironhead on the drainboard, alongside ferns his mom had been trimming, a couple bundles' worth that she picked since daylight. He hollers for her, telling her what he's done, then not knowing where she's at or if she heard him, he runs back to the idling Chevy, still feeling shivers up and down his spine.

Vicky parks behind where the school bus offloads, away from the student lot, where no one will see her and Terry together. They enter separately, she

by the main entrance, he through the gym. He picks up a basketball left on stage, dribbles outside the baseline and sinks a jumper from the corner, then heads for his locker, ignoring everyone. Vicky does math homework on her lap while her friends argue about Amy having clap. Of course, none of them have ever had anything like that, though they glance towards Vicky as if she would know about having had it. But their concern isn't whether Amy has it. They all agree she does. But whether she gave it to that Coast Guard fellow or he to her. JoAnn thinks Amy had it when she moved down from Portland. Pam says no because Jody doesn't have it, and they got-it-on parking behind Devil's Lake after the Sadie Hawkin's dance. "How do you know that," asks JoAnn, knowing that they had. "I was cruising with your brother, ask him," Pam snaps. And Vicky erases figures, wrinkling her paper. She doesn't know what to do with a negative exponent under a radical sign. Inverting and multiplying doesn't work. She still has a radical sign. She can't stand radicals. They're so hard to get rid of.

Terry's first period passes very slowly. More slowly than that. Much more slowly. His jeans dry on top, stiffen, and stink. The early morning sprinkle turns to slanting rain, pelting classroom windows. Orwell's *1984* is assigned for next week, and the test on *UTOPIA* will be put off until Monday. They're to think about whether More's classic is satire. Terry cocks his pencil, pretends it's a flyrod, and wonders whether he could catch ironheads on feathers, wonders whether More or King Henry fished. Fishing must have been pretty good then, 1500, before fibreglas poles and nylon lines, even before bamboo poles and linen lines. Imagine using ash, horsehair and catgut. Even a chinook jack could've broken rods, lines or leaders, especially leaders.

His second period passes slower than his first. The seams of his jeans are still wet, and rain rattles window panes. The river is rising. Ironheads that just entered will scoot upstream without stopping. Terry undoes the hangman's noose someone tied in the Venetian blinds' cord, ties the cord to his pencil and sends ripples up it as he practices rollcasting. He should be fishing. The storekeeper doesn't know the river, would have hung that steelie if he did.

In third period, Terry's book of math tables opens obediently to sines and cosines, but he's on a tangent. What does a flyrod cost? He has a few dollars made last spring peeling chittim, and he could pick ferns though the patches close to town are picked out. He won't sell fish, though he could. The Smokehouse would buy them same as it does from trollers, same as it does from Jess Saterlee and his cousins, damn bunch of crooks.

The noon bell. A line forms in the hall, today being Thursday, hamburger day. But Terry sits, playing with his pencil. Mr. Green says, "You better hurry or that line will be as long as the hall."

"I brought a lunch."

"Then you'd better get a seat in the cafeteria before they're all taken." Mr. Green straightens chairs, then asks, "You do have a lunch, don't you?"

"I said I did."

Mr. Green finishes straightening his room. He erases the chalkboard, counts a stack of mimeoed handouts for his class after lunch, then again notices Terry. "I'm going fishing Sunday. Can you tie some Okies for me, bring them tomorrow?"

"How many?" Terry has plenty of drifter bodies and a box of hooks Old Man deFader gave him. He scrounged most of the bodies (from the river or out of trees). A few he got when the store sold. A hundred for three dollars. They were the same as the twenty-five cent apiece ones, only lots cheaper. "A half dozen should be enough." Mr. Green brushes chalk off his hands, then says, "Let me pay you for them now."

"Tomorrow's okay. I can't get them to you until then."

Offering two one-dollar bills, the math teacher insists: "Take it. My wife, she checks my wallet before payday. She'll have these if I don't spend them today."

"That's more than they'd cost in the store."

"Then tie me a couple dollars worth. The way I lose them, I can always use more."

Taking the money (his pockets are still wet), Terry gathers his books and hurries from the room . . . he is standing in the lunch line before he realizes why the Okies were ordered. His face reddens. *He saw through me, knew I lied*. He feels tight inside, his stomach all cramped up. He ought to return the money. *I don't need his charity*. But he hasn't eaten and he is hungry. The hamburgers smell tempting. They couldn't smell better if they were a smokehouse full of salmon ready to eat. Besides, if he left now he'd lose his place in line. He's near the end, a little behind the jocks and just behind the Freshman shop class. Vicky is forty feet ahead of him. Pam is in front of her, Jody behind. He wishes he didn't stink. Salmon eggs smell as bad as sorebacks.

Terry envies Jody. He has since Jody's dad gave him a bicycle in grade school, bringing it over at Christmas along with a turkey Jody's dad said the fellows at the mill wanted to donate, making the season a little more jolly

for everyone. His dad wrecked the bike, riding it after getting his license suspended. That was six years ago, the last time they had a car. Their Chevy is still over the bank there by Skunk Creek. It wouldn't take much to get it back on the road. Probably could do it with a come-along and a couple of half blocks. Whether it'll run after sitting so long is the big question.

With his elbow, Jody jabs the fellow behind him, nods towards Vicky's back and winks. The fellow gives him the thumb's-up. And Jody leans forward and whispers in her ear. Terry doubles his fist as he looks away. There're more students getting in line, the latest that sissy preacher's kid and Gwendolyn, with glasses and acne. She's nice enough, but not very bright. She wouldn't hold hands with that pimple if she was.

Jody steps back smiling.

Vicky squares her shoulders, turns and asks loud enough for everyone to hear, "What do you want a piece of grass for?"

Jody turns red as everyone in line turns and stares. Terry covers the forty feet in a couple steps and a slide, pushes into line behind Vicky, and pushes Jody back. If Jody says anything—

"Butt out, Olson," Jody says. "You stink like a dirty cunt."

Terry's fist lands on Jody's nose, flattens it, snaps his head backwards. He steps into Jody, a hard left, a glancing right, then a wild left hook that puts Jody down. He hears the taunts, sees a face, Jody's. He jumps on him, flailing away, his fists cudgels. But it seems like the whole school jumps him. He kicks, jerks, fights free, and more hands grab him—and the tears come, damn those tears.

"Terry, get a hold of yourself."

He hears the principal's voice, but it's faint and comes from far away.

"Calm down, Terry. Get a hold of yourself. We'll let you go as soon as you stop fighting us."

The principal is closer now, but still shouting across a river without a boatman.

"Are you gonna behave yourself, Terry?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm all right."

"There's a chair behind you. Everyone else, out! Go to your next class and stay there if you've eaten. If not, get back in line."

Terry hears shuffling feet and murmuring, soft like the surf when the wind doesn't blow. The carpet rustles. A chair is drawn next to his. "I have bad news, I have to expel you. No choice. Do you want me to call your mother?"

"No."

"The expulsion is for the rest of the year."

"Why not two weeks."

"You know why. The Saterlee boy had to go to Newport. You hurt him bad."

"If it was anyone else, you'd give them two weeks."

"You're not anyone else . . . . Terry, I'm ashamed of you. You played into their hands. You should've stayed in line."

"I'll be back in two weeks."

"No. You won't be. Don't make my job harder than it is. You're not well liked, you know that. There're members of the school board who, let's say, expected you to fail."

"It's because of Dad, isn't it?"

"You have enough credits, but you won't graduate, not now, not from here."

"Can I go?"

"Tell me, why did you do it?"

"The school board wanted it . . . . I dunno why, I just did it."

"You didn't have to hit him when he was down."

"I didn't know I did."

"Does this have anything to do with the money you'll get?"

"Can I go, now?"

"I'll give you through the weekend to talk to your mother. It's school policy to notify parents in cases of expulsion. Yours is no exception."

"I'll tell her."

"Don't let her hear gossip before you do."

"I won't, promise." Terry knows the principal is right. His expulsion will wag tongues of Euchre Creek's gossips more fiercely than the tails of Dudley's bear hounds wag when they catch a cat. The knuckles of his right hand hurt. He must have landed a punch he doesn't remember. He blanked out when he fell off the cliff and landed in the river. This must be like that.

"Take care of yourself, Terry. It's not the end of the world."

Terry had been after an Okie Drifter a weekend fisherman had cast into the top of an alder growing close to the cliff at the Ladder Hole. Leaning over the edge, he hooked the branch the lure was caught on. The edge let go. He hit halfway down, hit on his back, and bounced into the river. When he came up, he couldn't kick, couldn't move his legs. His wet clothes pulled him down. The second time he came up he was near a willow hanging out over the water. He caught a limb smaller than his finger, held on, and the current swung him close to shore. He crawled out using only his arms, laid on coon tracks and spindrift, and fell asleep. He woke shivering, his hands blue and stiff; he woke dreaming of hell and remembering his hat, watching

it float downriver, bobbing along like a yellow buoy, a marker for a favorite spot disappearing around the bend. That was a good hat even if it did have flaps. It kept ears warm.

"Sure you're okay, Terry? Want me to call someone?"

He doesn't answer. No answer is necessary. Instead, he tucks in the tail of his shirt and leaves, with neither hat nor coat. He stretches his steps, pushing each step a foot past his natural stride, hurrying his stride. Wind presses him, tugging at his shirt, and rain, turning now to sleet, stings his ears and neck. He reaches for his ears, stops. He can't protect them, not for long. Besides, they're talking about him. He knows they are. He feels the whole damn school talking about the fight, saying he got what he deserved. They'll feel sorry for Jody, but they won't mess with him anymore. Not now. He saw that in their eyes. Fear. They were afraid of him, and it was all so damn easy.

The River Road has little or no shoulder. Terry walks on the broken edge of the asphalt, and he sees the car stop beside him before he hears it. Vicky leans across the seat and opens the door: "I didn't need you to defend me." Wind slams the door against its hinges, and rain dashes the seat. He grabs the window, stopping the door from slamming a second time. "Get in," Vicky snaps. He does, ignoring her sharpness, saying, "I'm the one expelled."

"You deserve it."

"Where're you goin?"

"Home to change. Yuh got blood all over me. It'll probably never come out."

"Soak it in cold wa—"

"I know that . . . . That was the dumbest thing you've ever done." She shifts gears, pulling the transmission into first. She can't hold her anger. A smile creeps over her scowl. "When you hit him, his nose exploded like a blood-filled balloon. Boy, did he ever deserve that."

"I'm sorry about the blood."

"You should be. Shut your door before more water splashes in."

"I'm sorry you had to see it."

"Damn you, shut your door."

Terry does, his sleeves dripping onto the seat, the seat wet with rain. Her tires sling rain against the fender, splash puddled rain out across crawling blackberries, across drooping thistles, across tanzy seedheads, washing the noxious seeds deeper into the ditch, spreading the poisonous weed into Ed Park's lower pasture, carrying it into Euchre River and out to sea, along the coast to California and across to Japan, where, someday, old men with bent backs will nurture it in flower gardens, admiring its full head of tiny yellow blossoms, not knowing that it's a hated plant, killing horses and cows. Terry

says nothing as they pass Bob Brown's Welch stallion riding the bay mare Dudley boards for Tina, Bob's niece. He says nothing when they pass Flip sniffing the rear tire of Steele's Lincoln, nothing when they pass the cannery. He and Vicky sit as far apart as possible, neither anxious to talk nor quick to turn on the radio. And it's not until Vicky slows down that Terry speaks, "Don't stop, Mom isn't gonna understand." He knows she'll say she does, but she won't. She can't. She's a woman. A mom. Yet he wants held—and to hold someone, to hold Vicky—more than anything else. She'll understand. She's like him, maybe.

"Where to you want to go?"

"Away from here."

"Terry, it was so dumb defending me, getting kicked out. I'm not worth that."

"Maybe it wasn't just for you."

"I hope it wasn't."

The heater fan hums, wipers push rain aside, the engine rattles, its mains sloppy. Wind whistles around both doors. Somewhere upriver, a mink drags a salmon skin into its hole; it'll chew the skin tonight and tomorrow. Three days from now, hungry, it'll step in a trap Blackie Poage set. He'll get fifteen dollars for its pelt . . . Terry reaches for the radio. He wishes Blackie had married his sister Vicki. Maybe things would've turned out different, for his sister, for Vicky, making the name mean something other than what it does in Euchre Creek.

"You have to get back to school."

"Why? What will I learn there? How to change diapers? Will they teach me that? Yuh're lucky, Terry. You were born a boy." She looks at him as they pass the logdump. "Wanta go someplace and listen to the radio?"

"Not really. I'd rather listen to the river."

"Mattress Hole? It's close."

"Don't get stuck."

The river laps at the tiny sand beach, littered with bits of yarn and line, and a Flatfish box (for a red F-7, probably left by Uncle Leo, he and Dudley being the only two who fish such expensive plugs, and Dudley hasn't bought a license yet this year). It rises all afternoon, sweeping past the beach with a quiet roar. By evening, its current bows submerged willows, boils around alder roots and reaches to the charred stones of the fire ring at the end of the lane. Terry watches the eddy that plunkers fish swirl faster and faster, like a centrifuge powered by wind gusts, washing silt and sand out of the middle, changing the hole, reshaping chutes, separating fishermen into those who

adapt and those who cast where they always have. The sky remains gray, never lightening more than it had early in the morning. Gusts rock the Chevy. Between long kisses, Vicky holds his sore knuckles between her breasts. An uprooted fir drifts pass, gets caught in the eddy, spins around as if it would be sucked under, then boughs like layered skirts, lift, breaking it free. Vicky holds him, her hair brushing his cheeks. He repeats her name. It's magic, like the fir dancing downstream.

The fir is one of Terry's, a second-growth that had stood with a hemlock above the Garden Hole. Old Man deFader used to nap under it when summer blueback fishing was slow. He once woke to see a searun leaping with his bait, a bullhead fillet. He didn't get to his pole in time even though it looked like the cutthroat had swallowed the strip of white meat. After that, deFader switched to a treble hook before he dozed off; caught lots of bullheads but no searuns while asleep. He tried to get Terry to use fillets. But Terry stayed with nightcrawlers and crawdad tails, drifting both without weight through the pocket water between holes. And he caught more searuns than anybody but the barber from Rose Lodge who fished a white fly at sunset, always the same fly and always at the tail of deep pools. Terry tried getting a look at the fly several times, but each time, the barber cupped his hand around it, said it was a White Miller and that the pattern wasn't important, the presentation was. He used to think the barber was shitting him, but, now, watching the river, kissing Vicky, he thinks he understands. Kissing Vicky isn't like kissing his mom.

Most of the timber on the south side of the river belonged to Orlando deFader. Terry hasn't thought too much about what the old man left him, not truly believing the inheritance was for real. But he does now. That is, he thinks about it. He wants to share it with Vicky. He needs to see Wild Bill about when he's to acquire control of the timber. If he marries Vicky (he doesn't want her kisses to end, ever), he has to support her. He can't be like Dad.

Shivers, different shivers flow out Terry's arms, raising goosebumps. Fear is a funny emotion, not always having its basis in the rational world, affecting each person differently. And what is the rational world but another literary reality. Terry read *1984* last summer, especially page 104. It wasn't scary, nor even sad. Rats never have bothered him, not that he'd ever want to eat one. Why couldn't what's his name have gotten away from the city, gone off to live in the hills, taken her with him? That's what he'll do when *1984* comes, go someplace like the old Horner Ranch on Cougar Mountain, take Vicky, his pole and maybe a .22 rifle, quiet, but big enough to kill deer. He's been in the cabin where Uncle Rocky hid out during the War. He could build a

place like that, use a bear tree as the front, dig it out behind. It wouldn't have to be very big.

Quilt-like darkness settles over the river. Terry lifts Vicky's leg off his, says, "I need to see Wild Bill."

"You have to tell your mom what happened."

"I will. Later. I have to see about, you know, supporting us first."

"Don't think . . . you have to . . . because of . . . because I like you."

"I have to see Bill."

The hill is gullied, the cut opening up a week ago, deepening each day, washing through the river-rock base, through clay and decomposing granite, slick as slime trails. Vicky's rear tires spin. The engine winds. The speedometer's long, red needle climbs to fifty, sixty, seventy miles per hour; but the Chevy crawls, straddling the wash, slowly up the hill. Terry doubts they'll make it. Then, they're over the top and on the county road, through town and going too fast to turn onto Highway 101. The Chevy lifts, feels like its taking the corner on two wheels as they sail through the stop sign and over the bridge. "Slow down," Terry says, clutching the seat; his legs braced. He's in a hurry, but not this much of one. Wild Bill might not be home.

They bounce across chuckholes and up Heroun's lane. Light streams through his picture window, swells with rain, divides and backs up, flowing past stacked Dungie pots and stickered spruce, quarter-sawed and intended for a boat that will never be built. The lumber has been piled there as long as Terry can remember—he is again reminded of the story Ol' deFader told about a boat Bill helped build. Bill and one of the Freemans kept a buoy tied to its mast so they could find it, they swamped it so many times. He'll have to get Bill to tell the story to Vicky. She'll laugh, and she has such a nice laugh.

Vicky's laugh begins in her eyes, wrinkles her nose and puckers her cheeks, making them round like peach halves, then spreads to her lips, parting them, before dipping lower to her shoulders and breasts, wiggling, jiggling them. She doesn't laugh often away from home (all of the movement embarrasses her), but with her sisters, she is freer, as she is with Terry. With other guys, she hasn't loosened up until she had something to drink, at least a couple of beers. But with Terry, she doesn't have to pretend. He's like a brother, only better. His kisses don't feel guilty.

They kiss again as if touching lips imparts courage, Terry already feeling butterflies emerge out of cocoons spun from taunts, once faceless, threads all tangled up, but now with each coming from Jody. He knocks on Wild Bill's door, and enters timidly when Bill hollers, "It ain't locked." He wants to ask

about his inheritance, about when will he receive it, but taking a deep breath, he says, "Mr. Heroun, I need a job."

Tilting a staightbacked chair, Bill nods as if pondering the origin of the universe, gives no indication that he heard Terry, and none that he wants to hear what Terry has to say. He takes the round Cope can from his shirt pocket, pinches a chew between his stained thumb and index finger, tucks it behind his lower lip. Then still not looking at Terry, he reaches over, opens the stove and spits, the sputum sailing as true as a cannon ball, striking the length of sizzling alder, knocking down flames as if they were enemy soldiers, red army against blue. Terry shifts his weight, shuffles his feet, and waits. He'd stand at attention if he thought it'd help; that is. That is, he would if he knew how. Maybe he ought to join the Army. He'd at least have a job.

"I said I need a job. Do you need help?"

"I heard yuh just fine . . . also heard what happened at school today. Your ma called around looking for yuh. She's plenty worried, dunno what happened to yuh, fears the worse. She wants yuh home."

"I'm not goin home."

Bill raises one eyebrow, and Terry feels Bill stare through him as if he's smoke.

"Who's that in the car, the Poage girl?"

Terry doubles his fists without thinking. He came asking for a job. He doesn't need a lecture.

"You been with her all afternoon?"

"We didn't do anything."

"I didn't ask that."

"Yes, I was with her. Listening to the river."

"You owe more than that to your ma."

"About that job—"

"You're only seventeen. You're not your own man. I can't use you."

"Thanks for nothin."

"You ain't goin nowhere. Sit down."

"Vicky's waitin—"

"She'll wait for yuh a damn sight longer than she ought."

"What do you mean by that?" He sits, he won't defy Wild Bill.

"If yuh don't treat her better than yuh have your ma today, yuh don't deserve her."

Smoldering, Terry bounces to his feet, blood rushing to his head, swelling it. There's much he wants to say that he can't. He hadn't, hasn't forgotten about his mom. Wild Bill doesn't understand anything, certainly not what

it's like growing up in modern times, the Bomb, Welfare, doesn't understand what school is like, what it's like having a drunk dad. *Damn him*.

"Sit down or you're gonna have to fight me . . . . Yuh got lucky today, put a snot-nosed punk in the hospital."

"I won't fight yuh, Mr. Heroun." He'd be crazy if he did. Bill's reputation extends from Eureka north. In waterfront bars, he's better known than Moses, and more feared than Christ, having beaten faith into many once-irreverent fishermen, even into quite a few loggers. His dad admires Bill, once said Bill was a symbol, but he passed out before he could explain what he meant. Terry suspects his dad wants him to be like Bill. "I need a job. I don't want to fight yuh. I'm not stupid."

"Yuh deserve a lickin."

"Jody had it comin."

"Not for that. For not tellin your ma . . . . The fight was nothin. Don't be makin somethin of it."

"What do yuh want me to do?"

"Call her, tell her you're all right, that you're stayin here for a few days." Bill points to the phone on Jackie's desk. "I just can't work you where I really need you till your birthday."

"Then I have a job?"

"You can tell your ma yuh're workin for me. I dunno how else I'll keep an eye on yuh like I promised Orlando."

* * *

Chapter Twenty One

1.

Even for a Monday night, the Harbor View is quieter than usual. It was busy earlier, the regulars having been here since the middle of the afternoon, but nobody drank much. Cat loggers have been out of work long enough their rocking chair money is drawing to an end. Stoker's third side remains down, and the log market has gone to hell, thanks to Georgia Pacific. Those bastards are still sending a hundred fifty loads a day through Valsetz and another three hundred down the Gorge even though they've started logging South Tract. They've punched their mainline road all the way through from Toledo to Bull Run, even up onto Mary's Peak. There won't, Vern suspects, be a stick of timber left in this country in another ten years if somebody doesn't stop them. *Cut every stick big enough to make a log, then borrow against the seedlings coming back. Replant enough that a price can be established for how much each seedling is worth, then write everythin off as expenses. A helleva scam, and entirely legal. Maybe I'm in the wrong business.*

Martha sits with Blackie, who came in to say he wouldn't be coming around much anymore. *Caught himself a case of religion. We'll see how long it lasts. Most fellas recover.* Martha tends bar for him, but he suspects, she's really intending to find somebody to support her. *If she had any intentions of snagging Blackie, those are now gone. That boy is still in love with Vicki, but he's finally gonna stand by the wife he has. That boy just planted his seed in the wrong garden.*

That boy, as Vern thinks of Blackie, is only a dozen years younger than the tavern keeper. Martha laughs at something Blackie says, as the unemployed logger stands to leave. It probably wasn't funny. *Go home! If you're not gonna come by anymore, then get outta here and let me close. You don't have any money to spend. You aren't doing anything but keepin me open.*

All winter, Blackie's wife has called every evening. She didn't want to talk to her husband. She just wanted to make sure he was here, that he hadn't gone home with someone else. *If he had, what would she to do with the kids? She can't support them.*

Martha laughs at everybody's jokes, even his. Her laugh's good for business. She makes loggers as dried up as Olf Gunnarsson feel like they have a chance with her. Truth of the matter is that they do.

Just as the logger reaches for the door, Vern asks, "Blackie, did you hear what happened at the school?"

"Yeah, I did. Seems the kid finally had enough. 'Been comin for years."

"He ain't old enough to go to work for anybody but family."

"Meanin?"

"He inherited some ground that could be logged even in this weather . . . . You need to get back to work. Why don't you get together with him?"

"I'll think about it."

"Go on, get home . . . . I wanta close up."

"If yuh're closing up, I'm gonna take off too," Martha says. "It'd be nice to get home early just once."

"Sure, why not." Vern begins setting chairs upside-down on the tables.

Blackie disappears into the darkness, pushed back from the edge of the tavern by the light falling through the windows and lying prone on the gravel and mud parking lot.

Martha looks at Vern, "You sure it's all right if I go?"

"I told you it was."

"Then why don't I believe you? Somethin's goin on that yuh're not tellin me."

"Why do you say that?" Vern keeps on setting up the chairs. "Don't worry about goin. I'll take care of things."

Martha takes the bar towel from under the counter. "Do you want me to take the towels home and wash them?"

"If you want."

"Are you just gonna keep using them if I don't?"

"Today would've been my wife's 35th birthday." Vern pauses to listen to rain drip from the eves. He has been thinking about Deborah since morning, not knowing if he really did all he should've for her. Maybe he should've moved her West, found a sanitarium in Portland, someplace where she could see Mt. Hood, maybe Washington Park, the rose gardens, the monkey house. *She would've liked that.*

"I never knew you were married. You've never mentioned her before." Martha stares as if seeing him for the first time. "What happened?"

"Go home. I'll finish up."

"Not yet . . . . Tell me about her."

"There's nothin to tell."

"Vern, I know when a fella's shittin me. What happened?"

"Ah, the war . . . . She spent too long in the camps."

"The death camps? You were in the war?"

"It's not something I wanta talk about, sorry." He stands beside the blinking *BLITZ* sign, its glowing neon tubes casting flame orange flashes against the darkness, the flashes like the artillery muzzle blasts, the illuminations of war, of dead men struggling through the long night that will not conclude in his lifetime. *There'll be a generation that sees the end to all of this, that lives through the end of the age. Then what? The pattern beginnin all over again? The Judges, the Kings, Captivity for a season and a time as once again war comes out of the north country. That is the story.*

Ever so gingerly, Martha touches Vern. "I'm sorry about your wife. Yuh should've said somethin before."

"There's nothing that can be done now . . . . Go home. You have kids waiting for you."

"They wait every night." She is seldom unsure of how to proceed. "After the reception, what happened? Somethin did 'cause you haven't been the same."

"Go home. I'll be the same old Vern tomorrow."

"Which is reason enough for me to stay."

"How many times do I have to—"

"Listen. You've been holdin this inside yuh for a long time, haven't yuh? . . . Maybe it's time to let go of it."

Staring into the darkness beyond the shell of life falling from the windows, Vern shakes his head, slowly at first, then faster as he says nothing. Seconds pass into minutes, and still he says nothing. There is no stirring behind him. It's as if he has passed into timelessness where everything that is must coexist with what was and what will be. He and she must coexist. *How can that be? How can we . . . what? . . . Why not?* "Get yourself a cup of coffee and sit down. You asked for it."

Bar towel over her shoulder, Martha turns a chair sideways to a table and sits, her back to the door. Perhaps she should've gone home.

"What do you know about bein chosen, then rejected—"

"Sounds like you're talkin about divorce, and I didn't do nothin that warranted divorce. So maybe I know a thing or two about being rejected."

"I suspect you do." He turns to again stare into the rainy darkness. "A man dies at night, then lives again in the mornin—and they say it's biology.

What do you think? Shall a chosen nation live again, or are we doomed to eternal damnation?"

"What are yuh talkin about? Being Jewish? You're not a very good Jew."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know Elder Stambaugh there in Oceanlake. He don't eat pork, and he's only a Seventh Day Adventist."

"Is that the test, a kosher kitchen?" The darkness beckons to him. *Was this what happened to Deborah? The darkness beckoned and she answered?* "Is that all there is to being Jewish? Food and what, the Sabbath?"

"That'd be a start. You don't, never mind. I said too much."

"You're right. If it really mattered, I'd live like it did. So it must not matter."

"But it does, doesn't it?" She turns to face him, and reaching across the table, she says, "That's what happened, isn't it? You remembered who yuh are?"

"I've always known who I was—"

"You lie to yourself, and don't be tellin me I don't know what I'm talkin about."

"You don't." *Damn her anyway.*

"Vern, I'll match yuh, tear for tear, if yuh wanta have a crying towel." Her fingers rest on top of his hand. "Now, I'm goin go home, and I'd like for yuh to come with me. Yuh can see for yourself what it's like to live on a bar maid's earnings."

"I don't have to look in your cupboards to know what's there."

"And I don't have to be a Jew to know what it means to be chosen, then rejected." She stands. "Come by sometime."

"Maybe someday . . . when I get everythin cleaned up."

2.

Blackie doesn't immediately enter his house. Instead, he sits in his pickup, listening to the rain, thinking about going back to work, wondering what it would be like to log for the kid, wondering why nobody has ever given him anything but a hard time. Even the preacher was pretty rough with him, not that he expected Gosson to be gentle. He was baptized yesterday afternoon. Just him and the preacher there. He didn't want anyone else to know, especially not his family. He has enough changing to do that he doesn't need them throwing his failures back in his face.

That's what crucifying the old man means, killing all those things that have made him who he is. The Cross kills slowly. The old man doesn't die all at once, but weakens over time until he loses his breath. The new man, according

to Gosson, born from above through receipt of the Holy Spirit, then dwells in the same tabernacle of flesh that the old man inhabited. *What does that mean? Two of us, father and son, living in one body? The son has to kill his old man? I gotta quit being me? I don't know. I just gotta quit doin the things I've always done.* The way Gosson put it, a Christian isn't defined by actions, but by the lack of hypocrisy. All he has to do is what he knows is right, and when he screws up, he has to go back to where he screwed up and remake the decision to do what he knows is right. *That actually sounds simple enough . . . but doing what's right means tellin her how much of what's been goin on? I don't wanta tell her anythin. It's all in the past, now. I'll just make a bad situation worse.*

Wonder where that bear went—it had to be close.

Wonder what's it's gonna be like, no poachin, no getting drunk, no getting a little extra on the side—and then not wantin to do any of those things. It's a long walk from Egypt to Jerusalem. Forty years. Guess I got that much time.

That is what all of this means, I'm committed for the long haul. Did it to myself. Don't have anyone to blame but me . . . well, that might not be true. I didn't choose myself, wouldn't have.

He sees the door open, sees his wife peek out. After a moment, she dashes toward the truck and opens the passenger door. "Are yuh okay?"

"Get in. Talk to yuh for a minute."

"The kids—"

"They'll be all right for a minute."

"What do yuh want?" She closes the door, but stays close to it.

"Ah dunno . . . suppose things will get better when it stops rainin?"

"I ain't seen it rain for this long before, not even here."

"Wanta start over, sorta make a clean break with the past?" The night seems exceptionally dark. "I ain't been around much, and that's gonna change."

After a long period of silence, she says, "I'd like to believe yuh."

"Let's get in there and see what the kids are doin."

"I wanta believe yuh." She opens the door and flees towards the house.

He delays a while, his thoughts returning to the bear and the swamp, the skunk cabbage and beaver dams, the flooding creek and the light he saw that was probably reflected headlights trapped by the fog. At least that's what Gosson thought the light was. *Said the Lord doesn't work that way anymore, not like how the Apostle Paul was converted. Said He don't send lightning bolts to stop a fella from killin anothern like He did for Sargent York. But I think the preacher's wrong. If the Lord don't change none, is the same today as yesterday, well, I wonder what thing it is that I have to do—besides learn a helleva lot more. I'll be thirty years and an old man before I learn enough . . . probably never learn*

enough. So what does that mean? Don't have anythin to do but do what I know is right? Maybe that's all this is about.

3.

Terry's call to his mother wasn't as hard to make as he thought it would be. *Yes, she said she understood. No, she really doesn't.* He said he was fine, lied about having eaten dinner, told her he'd be over to get his pole tomorrow, that he was working for Bill, that she shouldn't worry, and he hung up feeling small as he stared at the fire in the parlor stove. *A spider over the flames of hell. No way to save himself. Good thing I don't believe that nonsense.*

After he'd finished talking to his mom, he waved for Vicky to come in and met Bill.

"Yuh're the young lady he went on the warpath to get?"

"He didn't need to do that."

"I suspect he did . . . but he could've picked a better place for it to have happened . . . "

"I never would've been in a car with him. Jody's a jerk. Has been since his dad bought that big house on the river."

"The Kid's gonna spend the night here. Why don't yuh come by for supper tomorrow, say, six? The Kid and me—we got some things that need done in the mornin."

Terry spent the night, at least from midnight on, turning and worrying, Bill's lumpy couch hard on his back, making it ache as if he'd spent the day shoveling. He can't see a way out of the hole he's in. It was all too damn easy. It was all over with the first punch. They waited years for him to prove he was of bad seed, and he confirmed their expectations. Now he needs to get out of here, get so far away no one knows what an ironhead is. He needs to take Vicky with him, make her happy.

When Bill kindles the morning fire in the woodrange, Homer is curled up on Terry's feet. Terry is more off the couch than on.

Cedar shavings crackle and pop. The pitchy fir catches fire, sending sparks up the chimney, into the rain and over the roof, twinkling as they arch high, dying, becoming cold bits of carbon caught by the wind. Bill rattles the grates, sending more sparks higher. Frying pan hot, he then plops in two steaks, splattering grease onto the stovetop, smoking up the kitchen. Into another pan, he breaks a half dozen eggs.

Smelling the smoke, hungry; he didn't eat yesterday, Terry wakes, moves his foot, and Homer, still asleep, growls. "Will he bite?"

"About time yuh got up. Food's comin. There's ketchup on the table."

Bill opens the refrigerator, and Homer, up with the sound of the door unlatching, pokes his head in, locates the smoked herring, and almost has them before Bill can slap his paw. "You damn varmint, you eat too much," he says, shoving the coon back with his foot. "Hang on a moment, and I'll get yuh a plate."

After dishing himself and Terry a steak and two eggs each, Bill slides the last two eggs into a bowl, pours the drippings from both pans over them, and adds a spoonful of strawberry jam. Homer, standing on a chair, eats from the table, gulping down the eggs, slurping the jam and drippings, and to Terry's surprise, not wasting any of it. "His manners ain't so good," Bill says, "but yuh can't fault him for enthusiasm."

Looking out the window, Homer sneaks a paw onto Terry's plate and fishes for what he can find. Terry pulls the charred venison steak to the opposite side of his plate, but slides one of the greasy eggs to where the coon can reach it. Without looking up, Bill says, "Don't go feeding him. He's got enough bad habits as it is."

Startled, not realizing he was being watched, Terry stands.

"Sit down and finish up. Jackie'll be here in a minute. We're leaving as soon as she is."

"I'm not hungry."

"First thing yuh gotta get over, Kid, is lying. People are gonna start takin yuh at your word."

"You gonna watch everythin I do."

"Sit down—"

"Is that all you know how to say?"

"I'm gonna forget yuh said that, your pa never teachin yuh right. But there ain't gonna be a next time."

Terry hears a Ford flathead groaning. Jackie's coming, pulling the hill in too high a gear.

He made a mistake, talking to Bill the way he does to his dad. He doesn't respect his dad the way he should. He knows that. He'll have to be more careful. Bill isn't a *pass out in the street* drunk. He knows from what Jackie has told him that Bill doesn't like smart mouths. He doesn't need fired before he starts work.

Letting herself in, Jackie, before removing her raincoat, says, "The restaurant in the cannery plans to open this weekend. You're takin me to dinner, okay?"

To Homer, Bill says, "Yuh can't go, not this time, and here I thought yuh was the only bandit to pick my pocket."

"I already got a new dress picked out."

"Yuh hear that, Homer. She's figurin on gettin all gussied up just to go to dinner."

Apparently deciding he won't get anything more to eat, ignoring Bill, the coon scratches on the door. He'll scratch for a minute, then try the knob, having mastered doors that open away from him. The front door opens inward; so he comes in at night, but someone has to let him out in the morning. Still, he'll turn the knob with his paws, chew on it if that doesn't work, then go back to scratching, determined to dig a hole through the woodwork. Bill opens the door. He doesn't want to replace it again. This is the third one in five years.

"Terry, here, will be bringin the Poage girl," Bill says to Jackie. "Make sure they both have somethin to wear, and put what yuh spend against his wages."

"What if Vicky doesn't want to get dressed up for dinner? Don't you think we ought to ask her first?" Terry's ears feel hot.

Jackie doesn't say anything, but she stares questioningly at Bill. And before Bill answers her unspoken question, both hear Blackie's pickup pull up the driveway.

"Wonder what's up?" Bill steps to the door. "Vern okay?"

"Dunno. Haven't been over there . . . . I stopped by the Kid's mom. She said he was here. Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Sure. The Kid and me, we were fixin to cruise some timber. But that can wait."

"I didn't know he was gonna be workin for yuh, Bill." Blackie steps inside as Homer ducks around his leg, hurrying in ahead of a wave of rain that stings the door. "Thought I might talk to him about that hemlock patch along Tomcat Slough. Those poles can be logged even in this weather, and there's a buyer in the Valley paying top dollar for pilings. There's almost no taper in those poles."

"He ain't old enough to work for yuh—"

"Naa, I was thinkin about workin for him. All of that land around Tomcat belonged to Orlando. He got it right after John Kenatta died. His heirs got to fightin over it, and none of them paid the taxes. Said afterwards they just forgot. Any rate, Orlando got it for taxes—and I think the Kid's got it now."

"How'd that work, you drawin wages from the Kid?"

"Same as if I was drawin wages from anybody else. Got timber to get to market, gotta get it there. It don't get there by itself."

"Do I get a say in this?" Terry steps to the side of Blackie.

"Yuh got any equipment?"

Blackie shrugs his shoulders. "I got an Idaho jammer that should handle those poles. Don't need much work. Getting it started mostly."

"How yuh gonna load?"

"A-frame, or get a self-loader to do the haulin."

"How long they want those pilings?"

"Forty-eight, seventy-two, and ninety . . . money's damn good for the nineties."

"Yuh gonna need some expensive permits."

"Hey, I want in this if yuh're gonna be talkin about me."

"We're talkin loggin right now, Kid. There'll be time enough for yuh to put in your two cents worth." Bill checks the stove even though it doesn't need wood. "How yuh figure on haulin them?"

"They got axles that steer—"

"Like some of the fire trucks." Terry doesn't wait for an opening. "You use a log for the reach, then lock one of the little short, steerable trailers to the log. I've seen pictures of them. But yuh can only take three or four logs at a time."

"Ahh, I think yuh could get six or seven on there and still get across the scales." Blackie feels a little better now about the possibility of working with the Kid.

"Weight won't be the problem. The strength of the attachment will be. I could run the numbers, but even without doin so, I can tell yuh that the torque of the swing will be too much if—"

"Never mind." Bill turns to Jackie. "Set up books for the Kid. Make sure everthin's all legal and above board. Instead of workin for me, he oughta be workin for himself."

"Sis, wait a minute." Terry isn't sure of what he wants to say, so now he turns and looks toward the river. *Everyone, what, I dunno. I wish I was down there, along the river. Fishin simple, a no brainer.* "I can't—do anythin. I dunno how and have no money."

"Well, yuh're right, yuh got a lot to learn. But Blackie, here, can teach yuh to log. Your sis and me can give yuh a little float money, enough to keep yuh goin for a while."

Blackie, noticing Homer on the table, says to Terry, "I can work with yuh till yuh think yuh know more than I do. Then we might have problems."

"What about dinner, takin Vicky out?"

"You dunno the first thing about women—"

"You're not much of an expert, Bill." Then turning to Blackie, Jackie adds, "And you dunno much either." To Terry, she says, "I'm sure she'd love to go, but I'll ask her just to be certain."

"Don't you think I ought to ask her?"

"You aren't payin for this one."

"I'd better get goin." Blackie reaches for the door.

"Stick around . . . . Restaurant in the cannery's openin this weekend. Your wife might like to get out without the kids. Make it a threesome. 'Sides, the Kid's gonna be stayin here so yuh might as well get in the habit of comin by. He ain't gonna have a rig for a while."

"I'm like him," Blackie nods toward Terry. "I ain't got the money to go out to eat."

"Yuh had the money to buy beer all winter."

"Actually, I didn't buy many. I seemed to win a little more often than my share when matchin for 'em."

"Martha?"

"Yeah, probably. She knew I was havin problems at home."

"Figures. She's gonna land her a husband anyway she can . . . . Got your raingear with yuh?"

"In the truck."

"How 'bout you, Kid?"

Terry shakes his head. *What do I need raingear for? You get wet anyhow.*

"We can't be havin that." Taking a stiff, oiled canvas coat from a peg beside the door, Bill says, "Here, and don't be losin it." Then from the closet in his room, he throws out a pair of canvas pants, double-layered with oilcloth between the layers. "These will work. They're what all the fishermen wore before plastics were invented."

"I won't be able to move."

"Sure yuh will. Put some muscle on your frame. Wearin them made men outta us."

"Tin men, with oil-can hearts."

"That's uncalled for," Jackie says, stacking the plates, scraping Terry's breakfast into the chicken bucket, wishing Bill would eat better, especially if her brother ends up staying with him.

Blackie laughs. "He'll think *tin men* at dinnertime."

The phone rings. Jackie answers it: "It's Yaquina Supply. Your parts are in."

* * *

Chapter Twenty Two

1.

After a day and a half spent splashing through the flooding creeks on the south side of the bay, Salmo Gairdneri returned to Portland rather than to Salem. He needs to arrange a private meeting with Bill Heroun. He recognized the bait being fished, could see his boyhood friend's hand in a strength-against-strength contest, a struggle of wills and wants, fought through strands of a long story that links them to the sea. He realized long ago that he has become a big fish in transparent water, his actions open to public speculation. This includes meeting a competing developer. He must take the bait, but not until he threads their connection through the rocky shoals of financial risk, insurance underwriting, and market development. He must fray invisible filaments of family history that bind them to Tillamook, the Trask and Wilson rivers, and a fire that scorched time.

From his office in *The Ferry*, he telephones his Mr. Robin Steele. "I have a young woman who's come to me about a job. I'd like you to talk to her. You're about ready to open, and she is an experienced waitress."

Not knowing how to refuse an implied directive to hire a waitress he can't really afford, Steele agrees, "By all means."

"I didn't realize you were getting married Saturday, so I didn't stop in when I passed through. I will, however, again be in the area after you open. We can go over the books then."

"Certainly."

"That will be all for now." And as soon as he hangs up, he asks that Mindy be sent into his office.

"Would you like to return to waitressing for a couple of weeks?"

"What's up?" Mindy last worked as a waitress when she left Oklahoma. She had worked her way through college with a stack of orders along her left

arm as she drifted from job to job in one greasy spoon after another. But with the receipt of her degree, she became a professional. For the past two years, she has been Mr. G's unseen personal assistant. Her degree, like those of his managers, is in accounting.

"A delicate situation has been developing throughout the winter with our coastal property." He relays what their lobbyist told him, then explains a little of what happened between him and his former boyhood friend. "We lose our investment if we don't acquire the Corona Beach properties, but there's a catch. The state legislature can revoke the leases as soon as I acquire them. There is an *out* clause in the two ninety-nine year leases Heroun has obtained that can be exercised by the state if the transfer of the leases adversely affects competition."

"Then we cannot consolidate projects, nor close one if we obtain the other."

"That is the hook, a damned if we do, damned if we don't scenario." He admires what the governor has done. "We'll have to operate both, or close down both, thereby losing potential revenue and present investment. . . . I'm not interested in walking away from Lincoln County and its potential."

"You said projections do not support both being successful?"

"That's correct, but my instincts tell me both projections are viable if consolidated."

"Can we break Heroun, close him down?"

"No. My former friend has chosen Heroun because the fisherman will be successful. He really can't fail. So we need to employ him, get him working for us. Then we don't fail, but he can't work for Hansen and probably wouldn't even if he could. That's why I want you down there."

*

The terseness of Mr. G's telephone call suggests to Steele that he doesn't have much time before he's relieved. *Then where do I go? Away from this damnable rain—and from everything that reminds me of this cursed place . . . she thinks she's trapped me into becoming one of these coastal mushrooms. She's badly mistaken. She'll find herself fending for herself.*

"What are yuh thinkin about? The call?"

"Today's Tuesday?"

"It was went we got up this mornin."

"I want the parking lot paved before we open Saturday, and can the smart answers."

"In this weather? And why so sudden? . . . I don't think you're gonna get anybody out here till it quits rainin."

"If all you have to say is *it can't be done*, why don't you go home. I don't need that today, or any other day."

"Robin, listen for a minute before yuh get all upset. Wait at least till the end of the month. The rain always stops for a couple of weeks. Bring in another load of gravel till then. Yuh'll need it anyhow."

He turns his back to her, and once again, stares at the raven, hating it, hating her, the incessant rain, the mud puddles, the paving contractor who sneered something about having to redo the job in the summer. Who are these people? Who are they to tell him what ought to be done? Where are their degrees from?

Already February, raining without let up, snowing on Euchre Mountain, all three of Stoker's sides down, spring seems months away. Steele doesn't have months. If he's to cover certain irregularities, he must have the restaurant open before Mr. Gairdneri visits. He was lucky, very lucky this past weekend. Until he went over the books, cleaning them up prior to Gairdneri's expected arrival, he hadn't realized how easy those early double billings were to spot. Sometimes he feels like he's in the wrong vocation. He should be an artist, recreating, altering reality. What he has done with the books—actually, what he has had Vicki do—is sculpture them, chiseling off a little here, a little there, thereby releasing the figure (a new man, one even he hadn't seen before) locked in the marble. He likes this new man, who'll die if he doesn't get away from this rain soon. *Damn this rain. Won't it ever let up?*

Like all craftsman approaching a new medium, using unfamiliar tools, Steele's first strokes seemed clumsy, but he quickly learned how hard to tap with his mallet, where to place his gouge. The double billings were replaced by more subtle strokes. He quit forcing his will upon the stone and began taking what it offered, a shipping error, a little consideration for an early payment, a variety of means, varied as the angles an artisan uses to chisel a block of cold rock into a face, fingers, feet, each looking alive. His sculpturing has been keeping him sane for the past month. That and blended whiskey and his hatred of the raven, just sitting there, beard thrown forward, rain dripping from its feathers.

"Robin, did we receive seventy toilets last Thursday?"

"You checked that load in, so did we?"

"That's the day you sent me to mail the smoked salmon to California, remember? You said you'd look after that second trailer."

"They're in the warehouse. Your dad will show you where if you want to know."

"No, that's fine. I just wanted to make sure they were here."

Everything is in the warehouse.

2.

Rain sweeps inland columns of wood smoke as if the smoke were an invading army, dividing, encircling, passing on, flowing as the destroying breath of expediency, as the evidence of self-sufficiency mingled with poverty. Alder and fir smoke mainly, with a whiff of cedar. Dudley burns knots left by bolt cutters. No one else fools with cedar. Wyscarver thinks he poaches unsplit bolts, but Dudley says only the knots put out enough heat to bother burning. Terry, though, knows Dudley burns more than knots: he helped Dudley stack blocks in his woodshed. Of course, Dudley said the blocks were for handsplits. But Terry doesn't believe that Dudley has a froe. At least he didn't see one. So shivering, smelling the smoke of Euchre Creek, Terry, muscles tired, legs burning, trails behind Bill and Blackie as they return to the road.

"I'll be too dark to see if we head back to Tomcat," Bill pisses on the front tire of his pickup. "Yuh ready to call it a day?"

Blackie, his hand on the hood of Bill's truck, hangs his head as he says, "Kid, yuh got yourself an awful lot of timber. We didn't hardly get off the road."

Terry doesn't know what to think. The reality of what he has inherited seems distant and unreal. He didn't know most of what Bill and Blackie talked about. He only knew they were impressed by what seemed to him like a lot of acres of poor deer hunting.

"Any value in that spruce the Kid has along the Boar's Back?" Bill asks Blackie.

"I dunno . . . we oughta saw that ourselves. A boat yard oughta give us a lot more than we can get for them sticks as pulp logs."

"Yuh got a mill yuh gonna buy?"

Blackie shakes his head. "That's the problem with always bein broke. Yuh ain't got the money to make any money."

"What about," then remembering that the band mill Mr. deFader mentioned was at Grand Ronde, Terry says, "never mind. Grande Ronde is probably a good place to stay out of."

"What's in Grand Ronde, besides trouble?"

"There's a mill about the end of Long Bell's road that's gone broke. Ted Welty was tryin to buy it, but he was only willin to pay scrap prices for it. Orlando said, I think, the bank would sell the mill for scrap if they didn't get a better offer real soon. But I don't remember for sure. He was ramblin and I wasn't listenin close."

Bill nods. "Might be somethin to look in to."

"He told Vern 'bout the mill, but I dunno why." Blackie shakes his head. "Told Vern I wasn't stoppin anymore, so yuh'll have to ask 'im 'bout it."

"Yuh mean to keep your word?" Bill asks, suspicion in his voice.

"Yeah, I do . . . really do."

"If yuh mean to, why don't yuh take the Kid here over to look at it tomorrow. Tell me what's there. Who knows, if Vern ain't gonna make any money off yuh otherwise—and the new storekeep would saw long enough to learn yuh what yuh need to know."

Blackie looks at Terry. "Suppose there's enough poles to buy a mill?" Then looking away, seeing the encroaching darkness, realizing that he needs to be heading for home, he says, "We could saw not only that spruce but alder for the furniture market. I got the card of a hardwood lumber buyer, met 'im at last summer's Timber Carnival there in Albany."

"When your saw blew up?"

"I ain't gonna use those go-cart engines no more. Got a better idea. Need bigger mains to get the rpms over thirteen grand. Think I ah, never mind. Yuh'll find out if I win."

"Winnin's in the chain, not in the engine," Bill says as he gets in the truck.

"Gotta keep an engine together long enough that the chain has a chance. The guy who won used his work saw after the rest of us blew up."

Terry understands stuffers, and port timing, and most of what Bill and Blackie are talking about, but he doesn't understand the appeal of speed. *Why wrap an engine up until it comes apart? That makes no sense. Why not see how long it'll last 'stead of how soon yuh can destroy it?*

3.

Vern stands beside the blinking *BLITZ* sign, his back to the few regulars who have come in to bemoan another day of rain. *There're out there somewhere, the good times missed, Sabbath dinners, children like olive plants.* He can walk to the edge of the continent and watch the sun sink into the waterline of the horizon *when it isn't rainin*. Tomorrow looks a lot like today, and yesterday, and the day before. *What future is there in natural selection? Everything new comes by randomness. Survival of fittest only comes into play after what's new has been created, makin change the function of time and chance. Change . . .*

He shakes his head as if disagreeing with his previous thought. He stopped by the school before coming in, went to ask the principle to reconsider the Kid's suspension. But there won't be any bending of rules: Terry's out for the

remainder of the year. If it were anyone else, well, exceptions could be made. But not for Thor Olson's boy. Not after what he did to the Poage boy, who'll need reconstuctive surgery. The bones in his face are broken. Terry hit him after he was down, hit him when he couldn't duck. *And what could've changed over years happened yesterday, and not for good.*

It had to happen.

"What yuh thinkin about?" Martha asks, passing close as she takes a full pitcher to where Dudley waits for Nils to miss.

He shakes his head ever so slightly as he continues to stare into the darkness of a primal abyss, his thoughts drifting toward the specificity of knowledge that excludes more than is revealed. A house or a boat from the same pile of lumber—Terry built him an outhouse yesterday when he could have built an ark and escaped the flood of bad blood that flows down Euchre River, disappearing into the Pacific to cause violence everywhere. He had the means to escape given him, and *damn him anyhow, the kid welded himself to Lincoln County, choosing shackles over emancipation.*

"You've been more quiet than usual tonight." Martha holds an empty pitcher as she pauses beside him. "What's up?"

"I dunno. A restlessness—like it's time to move on."

"Where would yuh go?"

He nods towards the darkened horizon.

She looks out through the blinking neon tubes of the *BLITZ* sign. "Yuh'll get your feet wet if yuh go very far."

A thought frightens him. If he goes far enough, no, there's no reason to go to Israel. No reason to find out what it truly means to be Jewish. He needs to leave well enough alone.

After a moment that seems excessively long, he says, "Bring your kids in for breakfast. I'd like to meet them."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." The drifting rain and darkness beckons, a calling without explanation. Although not seeing them, he knows that a clump of daffodils bloom over the edge of the river embankment, the bulbs survivors from a flower bed that went into the fill dirt used to poach a few additional feet from the current, those feet needed to create enough parking to enlarge the Harbor View, making the café possible. And he steps to the door. Letting another gust of rain in, he leans into the darkness and pushes against it as he crosses the gravel corner of the expanded lot. *Shoulda brought a light. Can't see anything. But they're right about here.* He steps alongside a blackberry tangle, and sees darkly the bright yellow flowers. One foot over the bank, one still

on the top edge, he picks one flower, then slips trying to pull himself back up the steep embankment.

Not knowing what got into him, Martha watches Vern until she sees him returning. Quickly averting her eyes, she feels flushed. She feels cheeks and ears redden, the heat passing down her neck and along the tops of her shoulders. But her feet seem frozen, unable to move

"Here," Vern extends the single blossom towards her, "put it in an empty stubby and set it on the bar. Maybe we can fool them into believing it's spring."

Now she's not sure what to think. Is the flower for her, or is it a symbol of the changing season, a symbol of life returning to a drowned world?

Vern returns to his station beside the *BLITZ* sign. Somewhere, the moon rules the darkness, but not here. That orb of reflected glory hasn't been seen for so long that if it weren't for the calendar that costs him seventeen cents each to give away, he wouldn't know when another sacred month begins.

* * *

Chapter Twenty Three

1.

Bill leaves before daybreak. He wakes Terry on his way out the door: "Your sister will be here a little before eight. Tell her yuh're under orders to hang around the house."

"Where are you goin?"

"Got a little business to attend. Let the ol' coon out after I'm gone."

He can't imagine what sort of business Wild Bill has at—he looks at the clock above Jackie's desk, 4:23—this hour. It's damp cold, and he pulls the quilt farther over his shoulders. Before he thinks more about the matter, he drifts off, only to awake with the grayness of the drizzly morning crawling through the picture windows that overlooks the bay, hidden in fog and mist. The backs of his legs are stiff, as are his arms and shoulders. Nature requires that he gets up, his and the coon's. And once up, he turns on the radio.

Bill's radio isn't on the same station as his mom's: *Repent Ye 'nd Believe the Lord*. He twists the dial, seeking another station, and he hears Homer scratching to get back in. He fixed the door last night so it doesn't open so easy.

The frog in Homer's mouth kicks free, hops between the stove and the refrigerator. *What!* Without thinking, Terry moves the frig. *Can't be havin a frog behind there.* And once exposed, the frog makes one long leap—Homer bites the belly out of the frog and strings guts up the front of the sink as he jumps onto the drainboard with his catch.

"Get down!" *Damn him!* Terry grabs the string of intestines and swings it at the coon as it scoots across the sink. "Shit." *Sis will kill me.*

Ignoring the growling, he grabs a handful of hide between the coon's shoulder blades, and tosses the animal toward the still open front door. "Get outta here!" He slams the door behind the coon.

For the couple of minutes, he wipes down the front of the sink as the *Repent Ye* fellow says how much it costs to stay on the air—and while he's bent over, Homer manages to open the door, and puke on the throw rug in front of it.

Damn you, anyhow! He charges at the coon that ducks behind the heavy couch and the *Repent Ye* fellow apparently runs out of money. The news is about a boat that went down off Heceta Head, and he regrets he'd hit Jody. *I should be fishin this mornin, not waitin around for what?* He regrets coming by to see Bill, regrets spending the night, now his second, on the lumpy couch, regrets turning on the radio, regrets even being born.

Blackie's pickup rattles up the lane.

"Afraid yuh'd be on the river," he says, taking a Mac 797 powerhead out of the bed of his pickup. "Got us five of 'em. G-P can't make 'em stay runnin—let me have 'em for haulin 'em away."

"Then they're junk?"

"Naa, they're assets. You're now a businessman. Got to think that way."

He can't imagine going to work with saws that Georgia Pacific would give away. *If they were any good . . .*

"They'll start when they're cold. Won't when they're hot. Typical Mac problem. Pressurin the crankcase. I can put new rings in 'em, make 'em run for awhile."

"Then what?"

"Rebuild the best of 'em, use the rest of 'em for parts."

"When did yuh get them?"

"G-P's saw mechanic works all night tryin to keep their fallin crews cuttin. I remembered talkin to him at Albany, so I swung by their shops this mornin. We'll have to buy bars and chain, but I think he'll keep us outfitted in powerheads."

"When did yuh get up?"

"Four, why?" Blackie pulls a thermos from behind the seat. "Yuh taken to drinkin coffee yet?"

"Yeah, but no thanks. Do yuh always get up at that hour?"

"What? Four. Yuh do when you're workin, why?"

So that's the way it's gonna be. "Are yuh goin over to Grande Ronde?"

"The three of us are gonna go. Yuh're to be ready when Bill gets back."

"Yuh saw him this morning?"

"In Newport on my way back from Toledo. Stopped in for a minute and he bought me coffee, paid to fill my thermos." Blackie grins. "Dunno why he was there, but when I was there, he made a deal with the *Blitz* distributor."

"What about?"

"Ain't supposed to tell so yuh'll have to wait to see."

"Four o'clock, huh?"

"They shut the woods down when humidity drops. Yuh get in the habit of workin early, why?'

Terry hears his sister's car coming before he sees it. The river remains hidden, the morning a dull gray, rusted along its eastern edge. Alder twigs appear swollen by beadlets of fog hanging as early catkins. "It isn't eight, is it?"

"Naa, it ain't much after seven."

"Sis is early."

"Yuh reckon—most likely she's comin by to fix yuh breakfast before yuh head out.

His sister appears middle-aged. He hadn't noticed before. The way she gets out of her car, checks her purse, her keys—he'd never thought about how much older she was, or for that matter, how old he was. People were young or old. *But there's an age in-between*.

"Bill here?" She stops a dozen steps from the door.

"He'll be along in a little bit." Terry looks past his sister and sees the circling raven wringing rain from the twisted grayness lying exhausted over the river. "Evidently I'm supposed to wait here for him."

"I talked to him in Newport," Blackie volunteers. "Seems he's taken an interest in a sawmill. Figures we can cut the timbers he'll need for all the buildin he wants to do."

"That oughta save a little."

"More than that, it'll be a market for the Kid's second growth."

"I heard Uncle Leo say that second growth wasn't strong enough to be used for lumber."

"It's not like old growth, but it's plenty strong."

Movement catches Blackie attention. "There's dinner, Kid." Blackie nods toward a ruffed grouse that stepped onto the graveled driveway. Then in a lowered voice, he says, "Bet yuh can't take its head off, one shot."

"Shame on you, Blackie Poage. It ain't season, and she probably has eggs by now." Jackie would throw something at the grouse to scare her away if she could find anything to throw that wouldn't hurt if she hit the bird. "That reminds me, can your wife wear brown?"

"Have to ask her . . . . She said she's like to go, but didn't see how we could afford it."

"This one's entirely on Bill." Jackie isn't sure how much she should say. "Actually, somethin goin on. Bill got a telephone call right after he got home

last night. He said later not to worry about how many we invited. That's not like him."

Raising his thermos cup, Blackie says, "Then here's to Saturday night."

2.

For no advertising other than the public service announcements and a newspaper writeup, and for a rainy Saturday night, the sparse, early evening dinner crowd is about what Steele expected. Perhaps more from curiosity than hunger, a few of Euchre Creek's residents, some shabbily dressed and all displaying the coastal penchant for obscene plaids, have stopped and ordered the least expensive items on the menu.

The restaurant hasn't yet opened for regular business. Tonight and tomorrow afternoon are test runs, dress rehearsals for the grand opening Easter weekend. At least that's what he told Mr. G.

The early diners eat in silence, intimidated, Steele suspects, by either the wine stewards or by the black stockings and short black skirts of his overstaffed waitresses. But tonight's diners aren't the clientele of *THE CANNERY*. If for no reason other than menu prices, they won't return. *Let them eat fried venison and salmon loafs. After tonight, I don't want them in here . . . if there is an 'after tonight.'*

As the evening grows later, diners become increasingly sophisticated. The owner of the Newport Ford dealership and his wife order baked halibut stuffed with shrimp. Steele greets the mayor of Oceanlake and his lovely wife. He recognizes but doesn't approach Taft's police chief and his date. He recommends a wine to the president of National Security Bank and the young woman accompanying him. He exchanges pleasantries with the assistant district attorney and her escort, shakes hands with the youth attending the retired circuit court judge, and seats the author Lee Stanley and her female friend where they can dine unobserved. He doesn't recognize the elderly fellow who comes in with a couple of teenagers until Vicki's half-sister enters—the old man is the ancient mariner himself. *That old bastard isn't as decrepit as I remember him being there on the dock. I would've bet the fellow didn't own a suit, let alone one that fits*. Until he arrived here, he'd never met so few men who owned suits. Not owning one seems a point of pride.

Lifting Jackie's outstretched hand, Steele says, "A pleasure, Mr. Heroun, Jacqueline." He turns towards the teenagers. In a jacket and tie, the boy doesn't

appear at all like the scruffy youth who regularly brings Vicki fresh fish. "Terry, I don't believe I've had the honor of meeting your date before."

"Vicky Poage, Robin Steele," Bill says, his voice gruff.

"Another Vicky," his voice falsely excited, "and as lovely as mine. I expect we will see you often." Steele doesn't see anything special about her, just another logger's daughter. *Why quit school over her? But then, like father like son*. "Yes, we'll expect you often."

Then turning to Blackie and his wife, who entered a couple of minutes after Bill and Terry but are obviously with Bill, Steele says, "And you are?"

"Blackwell Xavier Poage—and my wife."

"Blackie? I didn't recognize you, my apologies." Steele feels blood rush into his face. "Your wife, I'm certain, has a name?"

"Mary Madeline, but that's not what most everyone calls me." She smiles at Steele, her smile absolutely genuine.

"When we open for the season, the two of you will have to try our Sunday brunch. I'm certain you will enjoy it." Steele glances towards the River Room. "Wait right here. I'll have a table for six prepared overlooking the river."

Bill studies his former messhall's remodeled interior, notes the chandeliers and use of velvet, and mutters something to Jackie about, "What is this, a fuckin brothel," as he remembers a war-time bordello that served the best meals in Portland in '42, or so he believed. Navy officers hung out there. And that was where the fight took place. It wasn't over much, whether redheads have red or brown beavers. He didn't think anybody would actually fight over that. The little shit could've got out of it at anytime. Two redheads worked there. Sisters, he found out later. They offered to settle it, take each of them upstairs. But that little shit—he wasn't all that little, a middleweight, some kind of Golden Gloves champion, Panama Zone Champ if he remembers right. That little shit wanted to fight. Couldn't wait until he met the Japanese. Had to do it right there.

I would've skippered the Freyja *if I'd taken one or both of those redheads upstairs. The little shit wasn't so tough. One punch to the side of his head. A blood clot.*

"Bill, you okay? Our table is ready." Jackie worries more all the time about these lapses of his. They didn't occur as often when he had the cannery to run. But since they quit buying fish, it seems like every time she turns around he's having another one. He insists they're nothing. "Did you hear? Our table is ready."

"I heard yuh the first time. Yuh don't have to keep repeatin things."

"You blacked out again, Bill."

Lowering his voice, he says, "I'm not gonna fight with yuh right here, but dammit, I'm not havin blackouts."

Bill scans the restaurant's patrons as he waits for Jackie and the kids to go before him. He recognizes most everyone, including several of his investors; but sees no one he would trust his wallet with. *A bunch of cutthroats, egg-sucking bastards. They've bled this country white.*

"Bill, our table. You're driftin off again. I can see it in your eyes."

"Dammit—"

"Shh," she takes his hand. "That's the thing about blackouts, Bill. Yuh won't know if yuh have them." Then turning to look behind her, she says to Blackie, "They called about that mill. They're gonna take your offer, but they want the whole amount before yuh take anythin apart."

"You gonna eat or talk business?" Bill winks at Blackie.

The secluded table looks to be in a private dining room. Floodlights at each end of the building immerse the river in light, harsh white glare on ripples. The river, clay brown and swollen, seems to suddenly rise and swirl around Bill's feet, rise higher, pulling at his legs, threatening to upset him, sweep him away, drown him. *Damn, it's Alitak all over again, Thor and the pump, the fo'c'sle.* "You'll have to excuse me, Jackie. I gotta step outside for a minute."

But looking away from the river, the feeling passes.

A gnawing inside him, a bone he can't digest—he hasn't taken a step—*somethin's up. Not right. I don't get feelin like I'm drownin except when shit happens.* He waits a moment. The river must have triggered a memory. *If it's been like this for Thor, well, I can't blame him for swallowin the anchor. That night was a bad one.*

Careful not to look out the window, Bill pulls his chair from under the table. "Kid, we've all been hard on your dad. Yuh're old enough now, yuh gonna have to cut him a little slack."

Not knowing what brought about the mention of his dad, Terry looks towards the room's open door as he wants to . . . *I really don't care anymore. Why ruin the evenin?*

Vicky, in bright yellow organdy, beams as Terry holds her chair while she sits. Blackie seats his wife. Jackie, visibly worried, waits for Bill to be as chivalrous. Yet when he reaches for her chair, she whispers, "We don't have to stay if yuh're sick."

"Dammit, woman. How many times do I have to tell yuh, there's nothing wrong with me."

"Yuh don't have to be mean." She puts her napkin in her wineglass. "I'm concerned about you."

"There's nothing to be concerned—" Again he feels the river rise all around him, the muddy water cold, the current strong. Quickly, he looks out the window, and the feeling goes. The river isn't triggering memories.

"I think there is," Jackie says. "I think yuh need to see a doctor."

"You worry more than a banty hen."

"I have a right to worry."

The steward brings the wine list and maintains his neutral expression when Bill says, "No *Blitz*." Jackie blushes. Then to the steward, Bill asks, "Do yuh have a domestic red wine yuh'd recommend?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then I'll accept your recommendation."

The steward returns with a California label. Its cork is pulled, a swallow poured, and after sniffing and sipping, Bill gives his approval. He doesn't, however, order the crab plate, recommended by their waitress. Instead, he orders steak. Outside, the floodlights create shadows that frolic in the current, shadows that look like ducks and otters and salmon, shadows that live for a moment, then pass away, leaving only their memory.

His steak's raw. He's afraid to poke it with his fork for fear that it'll *moo* at him; he's seen cows hurt worse and still live. *Damn cook is drawin pay for nothing*.

"Trust me, Bill. Don't send it back."

"I'm no barbarian, Jackie. Dammit. All I want is a piece of meat I can eat."

Her crab plate, king and snow legs arranged around a whole Dungie, looks okay, if a person doesn't mind eating sea spiders.

"Mr. Heroun," Vicky says, "if you'd like to trade, I will. I really don't, you know, like shrimp very well."

Vicky has the halibut and shrimp, another of the recommendations. Bill doesn't mind shrimp. *The little buggers used to come up on the groundline, fall off on the deck, sometimes cover it when fishin schooners. If the boat had a squarehead cook, we'd find shrimp in the chowder, stuffed in baked cod, stirred in the rice. The same damn shrimp as on the deck that got stepped on and tracked in the fo'c'sle*. He feels the water, waist-deep and cold, pulling him, pulling and pulling, sucking him down, under farther and farther. He can't breathe.

"Bill, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothin! I wished yuh'd quit askin 'what's wrong.' There's nothing wrong. How many times do I have to tell yuh?"

"Something is, Bill. Promise me yuh'll go to the doctor."

"For what?" Bill hands his plate to Vicky and accepts hers in exchange. "What am I to say? I have this friend who thinks I'm mentally deficient."

"Is that what yuh're afraid of?"

"Nothin's wrong with my mind."

"Promise me yuh'll go if I make the appointment. Yuh're, well, old enough yuh should have a checkup." Jackie looks out the window. "It might be all my imagination, but at least yuh should find out."

The halibut, Bill decides, is actually quite good. Maybe Steele hired a fish cook. The fellow, the newspaper said, trained in New York. He's probably never seen a live cow.

"Look, Bill, Terry. Your dad." Jackie points to Thor shuffling along the dock from the warehouse to the fuel shed. "It's good that he has a job."

The halibut seems to swim on Bill's plate, a whole fish, hook in its mouth, the gangion, still white, becketed to the groundline. *Somethin wrong, somethin involving Thor*. He feels it, the sort of feeling he gets when he knows it's time to batten down the hatches, that the pressure just dropped into the blow-hole.

"Why don't you go say hello to your dad? He'll be surprised to see you in a suit."

"No thanks. He's probably already drunk."

"Go ahead, Terry," Vicky says, squeezing his hand. "He's always proud of you."

"I don't want to."

"I think you ought to," Jackie adds. "He'll tell Mom, and it'll make her feel good."

"What is this, gang up on Terry?"

"Then don't go. Be a horse's ass about it." Her brother absolutely infuriates her at times.

"That's good. I won't."

"Terry, please. For Mom's sake."

"He doesn't care anything about Mom." For a long time, Terry has hated his dad, not just his drinking.

"Please." Jackie would like to slap her brother. "He's not as bad as yuh think he is—and he does care about her."

"He has a funny way of showin it."

"No funnier than yours." Another minute, another answer like that and she will slap him.

"What am I supposed to say to him? Drunk yet?"

"That's enough." Bill throws his napkin alongside his plate. "Yuh need to see him tonight if yuh want to say goodbye to him."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Dunno . . . can't rightly say. But one thing I know, yuh need to go out there."

"He's your dad," Jackie adds.

"What has he ever done for me?"

Bill ignores the kid's last accusation. *Maybe there's no reason why the Kid should go out and get wet just to say hello. Thor ain't been much of a father. That don't change none the Kid's obligation. But how do yuh explain that to someone a month shy of eighteen.*

"Maybe he'd like some of this steak," Vicky says. "I'll go with yuh to see him."

"No. Yuh'll just get wet for nothing." Terry picks at his baked potato. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt if I went out there."

* * *

Chapter Twenty Four

1.

The midweek rain is no more nor less hard than last weekend's rain, a soaking drizzle that adds an inch to the annual amount of precipitation every three or four days. *THE CANNERY* will open Saturday—he might as well take the evening off as he did last Saturday for the wedding. If Martha doesn't want to be here by herself, he'll close. *Closed on Saturday night, I wouldn't have imagined ever doing that . . . what's the world comin to? Columns of smoke, a whiff of cedar. Soon a wigwam burner, if the Olson kid gets the bid on that sawmill. Where will they put it? The South Bay roadbed won't support loaded trucks. They need a piece of ground off the paved county road, a piece like the old Kenatta place—that I happen to own.*

He could sell out, sell the Harbor View, the Kenatta place, the four acre piece on Cabbage Creek, even that sixty-eight acre piece of scotch broom, blackberries and skunk cabbage he has along Highway 101. But who would buy? Elder Gosson? Not likely. Who else has cash money? Christians has already discovered how little money is available in Euchre Creek.

Turning away from the lighted *BLITZ* sign, blinking off once every fifteen seconds, its light lost in the mid morning gray, Vern surveys the dim interior of the tavern. "Dudley."

"Yoel, what's up?"

"What would it take for yuh to buy me out? Buy the Harbor View."

"A lot more than I got."

"Would yuh be interested?"

"Dunno . . . what kinda money yuh want?"

He doesn't immediately answer. The building itself would go for, in Eisenhower dollars, maybe five thousand, but in forthcoming Kennedy dollars,

probably a little more. Then there is the value of the business and the liquor license. "If you're interested, I'll work yuh up a price that's fair."

"Yah, I'm interested. I'm here more of the time, but what would yuh do?"

"I need to get away from the rain." He needs more than that, but what else he needs remains as obscured as the winter sun here in Lincoln County.

"The dreariness getting to yuh, huh?"

"I need a vacation, a long one."

"It's the dreariness, the rainy winter, wind and fog. Can't go anywhere. Just more mud, alders and skunk cabbage, junk timber and washed out roads—that's all that's here . . . and once in a while, once in a great while, yuh meet someone yuh like a lot."

"I met Martha's kid this mornin." He hadn't figured on liking them. "Cute bunch. Deserve better than they're getting." *Yeah, they do. The boy, Sam, is quick. Nobody's gonna get anything by him.*

"She's lookin—and yuh're a decent enough sorta fella." Dudley wouldn't mind seeing his former sister-in-law, by marriage, with the Jew, who acts more Christian than his brother-in-law ever did before pulling that dumb stunt with the log truck. Got him killed there outside of Willamina. So technically, Martha is now a widow even though she's divorced.

"That's quite the vote of confidence."

"Yuh stand there by that window lookin for somethin yuh ain't gonna find comin down the River Road . . . and yuh know yuh ain't gonna find it." Dudley taps his wooden leg on the worn fir flooring. "Yuh know that even better than I know that . . . nothin much happens in Euchre Creek, except another kid's born every once in a while—and yuh're right, they deserve better than they're gonna get here where there ain't enough work for everyone, and ain't enough wages paid for what work there is."

"What am I lookin for?"

Dudley thumps over beside Vern. "Yuh need to get yuh a dog. That cat's just another cat."

"And you'll suggest a breed?"

"A cur bitch, one that'll be loyal to yuh 'gardless of where yuh go or what yuh do." Dudley points at Flip, trotting along the road, going somewhere with haste on his mind. "A male ain't what yuh want. Yuh want yuh a female, one without a pedigree, one that's only lookin to be loved. Then yuh'll have loyalty."

"Flip's on his way down to the preacher's. There's a cocker spaniel down there that's in heat." This winter, more than last, Flip has run the road, going

from one to another. *But I have to stay here, tending to business, making a little money so I can buy dog food. Maybe I'm envious.*

"That oughta be a mismatch."

"He got her last time. Pups actually turned out pretty good."

"There yuh go. Raise the pups. Make sure they turn out all right."

"I might just do that."

2.

Blackie brought his wife by to talk, nothing too serious, just to talk about starting over, maybe saying their vows to each other again. His wife seemed afraid to speak, afraid that her changed husband was an illusion—Gosson has learned not believe anything is too difficult for the Lord, but the conversion of a Poage, that is a work worthy of God. However, time will determine if the conversion is genuine, and not merely a reaction to the Olson woman marrying the man from Hansen Investments.

Every night this week, he has counseled someone. Mostly just listening, letting the person convince themselves that what they want to do is right, the person knowing right from wrong through receipt of the Holy Spirit. Those without the Spirit go to the tavern, where they pour out their hearts in the urinal, making the Jew barkeep a wealthy man.

He's on his way to the store, promised Christians that he would cover the business for two hours, enough time for avarice to bring forth its misshapen fruit. The storekeeper received his money detector. It works. They found Martha Poage's wedding band where she threw it the last time that worthless ex-husband of hers walked out. She thought she threw it in the river, but it didn't go that far.

There's a note on the door saying that Christians has already gone. The door's unlocked. *Anybody could've walked off with everything.* Gosson enters hesitantly. He'll have to speak to Christians about being as wise as serpents while remaining as harmless as doves. Christians left the open store uncovered. *As man will be when the Son of Man is revealed. The garment of grace removed. Obedience will then be the only covering for sin . . . and only those who have cleaned the inside of the cup will cover the natural lawlessness received with that first breath of life.* A person is not supposed to be as wise as a dove, trusting the one who wrings it neck.

The rain wets the two gas pumps, regular and ethyl, the pumps themselves modern and not ones that hold five gallons in raised glass cylinders so a person

can see how much fuel is received. These pumps a person has to trust, which is reason enough not to trust them.

The rain wets the porch steps and drips from the front edge of the porch roof, cutting a narrow trough through the packed gravel, filling the trough and flowing across to fill the low spot in Dudley's front yard, then across the road to the corner lot Ed Hodges used as garden, now gone to canary grass and blackberries. A bank beaver lives under the berry cane next to the river. He saw it last spring, a big boar, its tail as wide as a square point shovel blade and about twice as long.

The white skies of July and August, a clear day a couple of times a year, the rain the rest of the time—a tough country on folks that don't like mud: there's not much to do in the parsonage, or even here in the store. Not much to do anywhere in Euchre Creek but log, fish, snipe a deer every once in a while. *That's all there is. Don't matter where you go. Just looks like more in some of those other places . . . a fellow still lives in his head, and here, there's more room to move about than in a lot of those other places.*

He sees Grandma Hodges stop perpendicular to the gas pumps, blocking anyone from pulling up to the pumps from the downriver side. *Wonder what she wants? Probably heard about Blackie.*

"Those onions I got were no good inside. Been frozen, I recollect."

If Grandma is surprised to see him behind the counter, she doesn't let on. "What would you like Christians to do about them?"

"Get different ones. I don't want the ones he has."

"I'll tell him. What can I do for you till then?"

"Tell me what that no good Blackie Poage is tryin to—"

"Nope, nope, nope. Can't do that." *She won't be satisfied if I don't tell her something.* "Mr. Poage had a near death experience that has changed him . . . for the better."

"Mr. Poage is it? Now yuh listen to me, Stephen Gosson. He ain't no good, and won't never be nothin but a liar!"

"His crucified old man did stretch the truth," A no truer statement has he ever uttered. "But it's the new man dwelling in the same tabernacle of flesh that'll enter heaven. So you be forgiving him."

"He's foolin with yuh. He ain't gonna change none. He's a Poage . . . and everyone knows they're born thieves 'n liars."

A lash of rain stings the door, rattles the windowpane, and drips from the inside edge of the glass. "Looks like the weather's turning bad. I suspect Christians will be back shortly to take care of those onions."

"He's ain't gonna find no gold. Never was none . . . . And don't be thinkin I dunno what he's up to." Grandma Hodges takes one can of tomato paste from the shelf. "We used to grow tomatoes here, but that was when Bill gave us scrap fish to put under every plant. Now I gotta buy what I used to do for myself."

Rain and drizzle, wind and fog—the day can't decide what it wants to be as grayness remains firmly locked between the crowns of the Euchre Mountain and South Ridge. Cries of gulls, the caws of a raven, a jake brake on 101—the fog absorbs noise, holds it very still, then dribbles it out a little at a time as if sound were rationed in this river valley, unchanged since it was spoken into existence. Yet change occurs as the moment passes into another, allowing the living to die, usually peaceably, and the dead to decompose into nothingness. Salmon return to spawn and die, their decomposed bodies nourishing another generation of smolts and fry. Only birth from above breaks this cycle of decay. Every spring, Gosson sees, in the pastures along Cabbage Creek, does with fawn, ewes with lamb, cows with calf, even a beaver with kit once in a while. He sees his creator in the buttercups and trilliums, robins and bluejays, moles and muskrats, hemlocks and maples, but he seldom sees Him with child.

"Leo said he used to grow muskmelons, but I couldn't get mine to set fruit."

"Too cold at night. Gotta spread out a mature pile to give 'em enough heat . . . and don't be changin subjects. That Blackie Poage is up to somethin no good."

"Maybe—but how many times are you supposed to forgive him?"

"He ain't never asked me for forgiveness. Besides, he ain't done nothin to me. I never trusted him, never gave him a chance—"

"That's the problem, you never gave him a chance." He smiles. "I want you to invite him and his wife to dinner, and I'll come and eat the best cooking in the valley. Afterwards we can talk about what he's up to 'cause he won't be able to fool you."

"Flattery will do no good . . . but I'll think on invitin him and his misses."

3.

Even though Grandma Hodges has, for years, denied that her father buried gold on their family homestead, Christians has never believed her. And he really doesn't now, especially not after getting the beeps in the earphones of his money detector, beeps right behind where he remembers the outhouse being.

The metal detector arrived by stage, Greyhound, last Friday, but he didn't get much of a chance to try it out before the wedding. However, he gave it a tryout about dark Sunday evening. The preacher saw him down by the river, stopped, and picked up the ring his money detector found. The preacher recognized it, and took it with him. Otherwise, all he found were bits of rusted iron that could have been anything from fish hooks to nails.

The beeps come mostly from one spot, and they're real strong. He brought a shovel, one of the stamped sheet steel spades he sells, but the ground's so muddy he can't get it to shake off the shovel blade. He doesn't remember even mud clinging so hard to a shovel. *It's a conspiracy, that's what it is. Yup, a conspiracy to keep me from findin what technology here will unearth.* Even the sod won't shake loose. He has to step on the severed grass roots and almost pry his shovel away from the lump. *I'll bet that Puritan turned the ground into goo. Did it so he could preach at me.* He's helpless until the ground dries a little. He'll give away the location if he digs more, but the ground shows where he has started to dig. *It is a conspiracy, has to be, and a bad one at that. Darn rain anyhow . . . . Gotta come back in the mornin. Don't wanta, but this darn conspiracy don't give me no choice.*

Although he doesn't want to return in the morning, he doesn't want to leave either. Pale violets and bright Johnny-jump-ups bloom along the tiny stream coming from the spring-house. Trilliums bloom under the firs, grown large in the past eighty years. A huckleberry growing from the top of a stump, with springboard notches still visible, leans precariously over its edge, the huckleberry's roots piercing the stump as well as sliding down its side. Half tunnels of boomers; lacy leaves of bleeding hearts, dull red and heavy with rain; bright blue grape hyacinth poking through the greening thatch—all remind him of his grandparents' place, left neglected for two decades before Long Bell logged it, destroying everything, even the memories.

Yes sir, a conspiracy. But not one between ordinary men. Weepy skies. Blowing drifts of rain, piling up like snow, but running off, leaving behind puddles and boggy ground, sopping wet boots and cold feet. There's nothing more he can do except sweep the area and see if he can find more hotspots. And he finds too many to remember. His detector beeps almost ever place he tries. *There must be money everywhere. I knew it! I knew it. This here homestead's a regular gold mine.*

Wonder if Grandma would sell me this here place. Couldn't be too much. He sits under the barn eves, its shake roof swollen thick with moss. *Sure be better here every day than in the store. Buyin that was a mistake. 'Specially with money buried on this here place.*

He knows what needs done . . . an hour later, he parks his pickup in front of the café. Even if he has to talk to Vern in the tavern, he won't park at that end of the building.

Martha and the Crowley girl from Siletz are working the café, still serving breakfast it looks like. "What kinda mood is Vern in today?"

"Pretty good, I think," Martha says. "Yuh wanta talk to him?"

"If he has a minute."

Slow minutes pass, but finally, Vern steps around the corner from the other side. "You've been out in the rain."

"That I have . . . . I wanta buy Pappy Hodges' old place. Think Grandma will sell?"

"Yuh'll have to ask her—"

"I'm gonna need some help getting it." Christians hesitates, then adds, "If she'll sell, I'm gonna need someone to buy the store."

"And you're wonderin if I'm interested, is that it?"

"Don't know anyone else who might be."

"I was just thinkin about sellin myself."

"Then yuh wouldn't be interested?"

"Let me think about it." Vern notices that Martha is pretending not to hear what's being said. "Yuh paid too much for it. That'll be the biggest problem."

"That might not be a problem if I can buy Pappy's place right."

"You go make yuh the best deal yuh can, then come back and tell me what yuh have to have. There won't be any dickerin. Just a straight up yes or no."

"That's fair." Christians nods to him, and leaves.

Once the storekeeper is outside, Vern turns to Martha and asks, "What do yuh know about runnin a grocery store?"

"Why are yuh askin?"

"Just curious."

4.

Bill sees the car with the Oklahoma license plates, but doesn't recognize the driver, a woman wearing a halter top and purple peddlepushers even though it isn't much above forty-five degrees if it's that. The woman's stopped at the post office, open only when June is there—and this time of year, the postmistress, after getting the mail out in the morning, spends her days hunting agates or

glass floats, which she sells to the few tourists that venture off 101 during the summer. He has a handful of bills that Jackie has given him to mail, so he politely nods to the woman as he enters the post office.

"Sir, there's a new restaurant that's supposed to be opening. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Yuh mean Steele's Cannery . . . up the river a mile. Yuh'll see the sign."

Smiling, she asks, "And your name?"

"Bill Heroun—"

"Mr. Heroun, you're the other person I came to see. Can I make an appointment to discuss a business matter with you?"

"Jackie take's care of—"

"This is about a matter I need to discuss privately with you. Would Monday be satisfactory?" Mindy would like to see how *THE CANNERY's* dress rehearsal for its Easter opening goes before she makes Mr. G's offer. "What time will be convenient?"

"How much time's this gonna take? If not too long, follow me over to the store and we can meet right now."

It might be better if I made the deal now. "All right, I'll follow you." *Sometimes luck happens.*

* * *

Chapter Twenty Five

1.

Not wanting to talk to his dad, not wanting to have anything to do with his drunken father, Terry, nevertheless, leaves the table, with Vicky promising to order dessert, blueberry cheesecake, for him. He's doing this for her. He knows enough now about what happened off Kodiak Island that night when his dad cursed God he can answer Bill, even if that means respectfully matching words with him. He won't ever do that, he knows. But he can if he has to *which will mean puttin Bill on the spot, for he prayed but afterwards didn't do what he promised, makin him a hypocrite.*

Bill, he realizes, is like his dad, only sober, mad at himself instead of down on himself, fighting instead of drinking, wind and weather, tides, an economy that's against him, and since he leased the spit, the people who forced him to sell the cannery. The success of Corona Beach will give those folks a worse licking than they imagined possible, but even that won't stop the fighting. Nothing will. He saw that when they were making the bid for the sawmill. Bill didn't have to get involved, but he took an interest when he learned that National Security carries the notes of Lundy Brothers, a mill below Seal Rocks that controls the spruce lumber market. *Seems Bill's gonna go after that market and a particular banker. Wants to hit the banker where it hurts most.*

Shivering, smelling the wood smoke coming from Euchre Creek, Terry avoids floodlights as he circles the warehouse. His shoes are muddy. He ought to go back in. His dad can go to hell as far as he's concern. But light reflected from the river casts eerie shadows on the dock, bullying and devouring, and he stops to watch the play of shadows, one of them his dad. Terry steps under the warehouse eves so as not to be seen.

Thor doesn't see his son, who watches him check the bottle taken from his coat pocket, holding it up to the light, uncapping it, taking a nip, then again

holding it up to the light. *This is typical, how I remember him. Am I supposed to remember him any other way than drunk? What does Bill expect, a miracle?* Who will know if he talks to his dad? Who really cares? If he waits a few minutes—how long? Five minutes? How long does it take to say hello to a drunk?

"You aren't as wet as I thought yuh might get," Jackie says when Terry returns to their table. "What did he have to say?"

"He's drinking, drunk. There was nothin to say to him." Terry's uncomfortable about lying. "I don't think he knew I was there."

"Damn, I'd hoped gettin a job," Bill doesn't finish his thought. "I suppose Steele will let him go."

"Vicki said Robin likes him, for reasons she doesn't understand, that they will sit and talk . . . and drink all evening sometimes."

"What do they talk about?" Terry asks.

"The old country mostly, Vicki says. Robin wants to visit Sweden someday." Jackie realizes she's close to betraying a confidence. "But what they talk about ain't important. What's important is they get along so well together. Vicki's excited about that."

"She would be." Terry wonders what the funny taste is. He never had cheesecake that tastes like this before.

"Don't be bitter against your old man."

"Why? why shouldn't I be? He's done everythin he could to make Mom miserable. He drank up very bit of money he made, drinks most of what Mom gets. He lies to her, hits her, steals from her. He's no good. He came to school once, his pants unzipped. If he dropped dead tomorrow—"

"Button it up, Kid. I've heard enough." Bill wads up his napkin. "I think it's time we all go home."

"Terry," Jackie says, "yuh've ruined this evenin. Think about that."

"It wasn't my idea to talk to him."

Quick, so quick Jackie isn't sure what happened, Bill backhands Terry, knocking him out of his chair, against Vicky, and unto the floor. Even Terry is surprised. He sits, his back resting on the windowsill, his cheek smarting, three teeth loose. "What was that for?"

"Get outside." Then to Blackie and Jackie, Bill adds, "Take him home. Yuh can come back for me later if yuh want."

"I think, Kid, yuh need to apologize to Bill." Blackie offers Terry a hand. "I was headin down that same road your dad's on, but I got let off it. I didn't get off on my own. So I ain't gonna be quick to condemn your old man."

"Bill," Jackie says, "I won't be coming back later if yuh don't go with us now."

"Then I'll catch a ride. Get outta here."

"Yuh're being silly, Bill. Yuh'll catch a cold."

"Is everything all right?" the waitress makes her question sound routine. "Will there be anything else?"

"The bar open?" Bill slips a couple of folded bills under his plate. He looks at the check. *I could buy a steer for less*. Nonetheless, he says, "Everythin's perfect."

2.

Her pregnancy beginning to show, Vicki leaves *THE CANNERY* early, leaves shortly after the dinner crowd began arriving. She leaves the tally to Mindy, and closing up to Robin. And once home, she calls her mom, talks for an hour, then sticks a roast in the oven. Robin will eat before he comes home; she should've eaten before she left. It's silly to cook just for herself when Robin's paying three times what she makes to a chef who barely speaks English. But she needs something to do. Besides, she's tired of seeing Robin humiliate himself. She and Mindy had a talk about him, and he won't get anywhere with her.

The house was cold when she got home, and still is. Damp cold, the kind a person feels. The stove needs wood; the wood box needs filled. She had thought Robin would keep it full for her, but she's lost hope. He drinks with her dad. That's about all he's done for her since the wedding a week ago . . . her eye is still discolored, another reason she came home early.

She slips her coat around her shoulders and steps into the rain and to where Blackie dumped, split and stacked the many loads of buckskin fir blocks he brought last July. The stacks are down to a few sticks and some knots that need to be split more. She'll need wood before long, and she doubts Robin will get any. She'll need at least a cord to get them through till summer. And with Orlando gone, who sells wood? Everybody gets it for themselves.

For the past couple of days, she's heard rumors about Blackie getting religion, a bad case of it. Maybe she can buy a load from Terry, who managed to get kicked out of school this week. A lot has happened in seven days, more than during the rest of the winter. But that's the way it has always been. Weeks of wet weather, then a couple of days of change, then back to the daily drizzle.

She bends her left arm and balances five chunks between her hand and chin, careful not to rest any on the baby. Wind blows her hair over her eyes, and wet sawdust chafes her neck. *Robin really ought to do this for me.*

In the dark, the grass slippery wet, Vicki stumbles, falls hard, straight down, landing on her butt, the wood on the baby, one piece bouncing up, hitting her mouth, loosening teeth.

Robin, why, why have you done this to me? Why . . .

A squall rides the in-coming tide. Fir boughs whip back and forth. Rain pelts windows and roof, and seems to kick her stomach, her ribs, on fire, pain like she's never felt before. She lays still, her arms around her. Firs moan. She moans, alone in the darkness, with the light from the open door beckoning. *Why, Robin, why couldn't you bring in the wood, why, ohh that hurts—*

The pain extends along her back, its grip seizing her breath, squeezing her lungs, souring her stomach, making her want to puke, but not able. Rolling onto her stomach, she crawls a foot, two feet, then lies on the wet grass, shivering, feeling the contractions begin, knowing the child within her is dead. A warm trickle runs from her, and she weeps, stopping only to grit her teeth when contractions rack her. Movement, any movement, no matter how slight, sends pain waves through her torching her ribs as if swallowing fire.

The warm trickle becomes a flow, life draining from between her legs. Nauseated now, she slips in and out of consciousness, and she prays to God that He'll let her die. She prays for forgiveness, her words lost in wind and pain.

Rain comes in sheets, snapping in the wind.

Cold, so cold, the cold hurts . . .

She really doesn't want to die, but she doesn't want to live either. She wants the pain to stop, asks God to stop it, promising Him she will do right and good, but promises are broken by yet another surge of pain beginning in her abdomen, pushing upwards to her chest, then sweeping through her, an ebbing sea until all becomes blackness.

3.

Robin Steele fidgets as he watches the clock, and the waitress from Oklahoma, the blonde with breasts and no ankles. She came down from Portland, asked for a job wearing a halter top and peddlepushers, said she worked on *The Ferry*, one of Mr. G's clubs and one known for its Nevada connections, said she was looking for someplace quiet. Vicki didn't want to hire her until she called *The Ferry* for a recommendation. He, however, had insisted on hiring her from the beginning. Unfortunately, she won't tell him where she lives, really the least of his concerns tonight. He sent Vicki home hours ago so everything is now arranged.

Midnight. He stares at the clock, feeling the limitations of time, knowing what he has to do, realizing it's time: Taking two fifths of Black Velvet from the bar—Mindy scowls, but he says, "They're for Olson, everyone celebrates tonight"—he wonders if that'll be enough. For a derelict, Olson holds his liquor fairly well.

"Are you usually that generous?"

Steele stares, not knowing how he should take her question. "Get me a bottle of peppermint schnapps."

"Along with the Black Velvet?"

"Why not? He won't drink them all tonight."

"You're boss." Mindy steps behind the bar. "I thought for your wife's sake that you would try to dry him out."

"He has a right to his life."

"Evidently."

"You're pretty cozy with my wife."

"We're friends."

"I know the kind of friend you are."

Mindy hears the implication, and if she had a doubt about the proposal made to Bill, that doubt ignited from the heat of her unspoken rage. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

Steele snatches the schnapps from her. "Pretend if you want. I know all about your kind?"

"You've had too much to drink."

"What I drink, or how much is none of your business."

"That's it. I'll come by tomorrow to pickup my pay."

"Hold it, Honey." Wild Bill, appearing from seemingly nowhere, catches Mindy's arm as she charges around the end of the bar. "Steele, yuh're an asshole when yuh drink—yuh better apologize before I housetrain yuh."

"You, old man?" Steele starts to laugh, then remembers seeing, Sunday morning, the big logger, the one that thought he should marry Vicki. Heroun had marked him up. He heard the logger hadn't touched Heroun. *I knew I could take that logger all along, and I can take him . . . if we were someplace else.* "All right, I misspoke. It's the pressure, and maybe I'm jealous."

"Is that enough apology, or do yuh want more?" Bill looks at Mindy. He's been pissed since he saw Vicki's eye. *A fella don't hit a woman and get away with it here. If her brothers ain't around, well, he is.*

"Look, Heroun, don't take advantage of your friendship with my wife's sister." Steele has heard rumors about the old fisherman since coming here, rumors about his fights, about how tough he is. He doesn't, even in a suit,

look like anything special. He can't be as tough as the rumors have him. Still, it's easy to say, "I was out of line. Let it go at that."

Mindy, brows furled, lips hard, says, "I don't get paid enough to be insulted, apologies aside. But I thank you for intervening."

"Did yuh hear that, Steele? Yuh aren't payin her enough." Then to the short-skirted waitress, Bill asks, "How much of a raise is fair?"

"Fair? Or how much do I want?"

"Don't run off, Steele." Bill releases her arm. Although he has drank more than he probably should, he motions for Mindy to get him a drink: "Tequila." And while she goes behind the bar to pour, he says to Steele, "I think what she wants is fair, don't yuh?"

"How about all of us discussing this tomorrow?"

"Naa, yuh owe this lady an apology tonight."

"I can't agree to a raise tonight. That's Vicki's department." Steele looks around, buying time. "Besides, can't you see how that would look, the rumors it'd start, with me having to work late tonight."

"Bastard!" Mindy throws a handful of salt at Steele. "A dike, then a whore. Make up your mind. What do you think I am?"

"Yuh made the lady cry, Steele. Time for yuh to cry." Bill catches Steele's left arm, and in one quick motion, he slips his open left hand up and against Steele's armpit, then gives Steele's arm a jerk with his right hand. The shoulder dislocates. A gasp, a wince, and tears run from Steele's eyes. "Yuh do what yuh got to. I'm gonna take the lady home, then I'm comin back for yuh."

He doesn't intend on coming back, at least not tonight. If he were to come back, well, he won't because of what he'd do. Besides, the trap's been set.

*

Thursday, when Mindy followed him into the store, the preacher was there tending counter, not that there were enough customers to bother keeping the store open.

Her purse in hand, Mindy said, once out of the rain, "I don't look very professional when traveling so should I change into a suit and pumps before we discuss what I have to offer? Or can you accept a woman who wants to talk business . . . I want to buy you out."

Both Bill and Gosson stared at her without blinking.

"I have the money—and the expertise to develop Corona Beach, but I'll need you to continue on as you have been doing. I'll be a silent, behind the scene majority partner." Mindy smiled before she added. "Actually, I want

your development as well your competitor's because only by having both will either one really succeed."

"Yuh've set your sights high. Yuh might be shootin over everyone's head."

"I don't think so. Actually, I'm aiming higher yet, but those plans will wait until Corona Beach becomes the premier resort along the coast." She opened the water-cooled Coke case, and pulling a twelve-ounce glass bottle up out of the water, she asked, "Why don't you leave them outside in the rain? They'd be about the same temperature," as she placed a half-dollar on the counter.

Gosson, not knowing how much to charge her, said, "Bill will get it," and he pushed the coin back toward her.

"I didn't come without a plan, but I didn't expect to meet you," she points the bottle at Bill, "so soon. I expected that I would have to arrange an *accidental* meeting, not actually accidentally run into you. But now that I have, my offer is this," she takes from a baggy purse a sealed envelope. "Open it when you're alone. I have no intention of pressuring you into doing anything. Then think about it. If you want to sell, come by the restaurant and tell me that you want to take me home. A little bit of code. I'll understand that you've said yes, and we'll proceed from there . . . we might not be able to again meet without your competitor becoming suspicious. I'll be working for him."

"You're certain about that?"

"I have the right connections, so yes, I'm certain."

*

Heroun's tone changed just enough to worry Robin, who can't afford any kind of an altercation tonight. To Mindy, he says, in words choked with pain, "I'll be happy to work out what's fair."

"Who's signing the checks, Steele, you?" Bill hasn't, for years, felt so strong a desire to hurt a fellow. Hitting a woman is never okay, especially with a cue ball—and that doorknob was like hitting a person with a cue ball. He can't set everything right, but he owes Thor more than he's given the former rollerman. He realized that when he heard the contempt in the Kid's words. So he has a debt to repay to Steele.

To Mindy, Steele asks, "Two hundred more a month?"

"Three."

"You can thank him for it," Steele, his left hand clutching the front of his shirt, his arm pulled in tight to his body, with his right hand points the bottle of schnapps at Bill, then sort of cribs out of the bar, letting the entryway door

slam behind him. None of this really matters, not tonight. He hasn't been the best administrator, but for the past couple months, he has been an effective one. Auditors will admire his creativity although his new wife will get credit for it. That he won't mind.

In the warehouse, Steele finds the older Olson asleep on a stack of mattresses still wrapped in brown paper as if obscene. "Wake up," he snaps in pain, dull and long running. When he tries to move his left arm, he hears what sounds like plunging a toilet. So he shakes Olson with his right hand. *Damn this hurts. I'm not going to wait till morning to go to the hospital, but maybe this is the needed alibi.*

Thor sits. Blinking, looking around as if trying to find a hammer, as if he'd not been asleep but merely resting his eyes, he knows he's been caught, again. "Oh, Robin, Ah musta just dozed off."

"Relax. Everything has gone perfect." Holding out the schnapps, Steele adds, "Here, for you. We're celebrating tonight," then awkwardly taking the Black Velvet out of his jacket pockets, he tosses them on the mattress beside Olson.

"All this, mine?"

"If you want a little nip before you go home, go out to the fuel shed. You know what I think about drinking in here."

"Ah've never drunk none in the warehouse here."

"You're a man of the world, you know how it is with insurance regulations."

"Ah've seen a little of the world. Did Ah tell yuh about me and Wild Bill buring the only woman to gaff on the roller?"

"No. Long story or short? I don't have much time, not with this being opening night." *And with this damn arm hurting as it does.*

"Ah'll give yuh short version. This here big Norski blonde, Ellie we called her, got herself killed doing a job that Wild Bill shoulda done. Well, we put her on ice down there in the hold with the fish. Of course we didn't gut or slime her, but the tarp we wrapped her in was pretty slimy."

"Olson, I see now I don't have time to hear of this. Have a drink. Keep your voice strong. I'll be back out later."

"Yes sir, Ah'll do that . . . . Don't yuh worry none, Ah won't drink nothing in here."

"You've done the job I asked of you, so go have a good time. You deserve it. Everyone else is . . . or will be."

Before Steele can say more, Thor, clutching both fifths to his breast, holding the schnapps in his left hand, is off the mattresses and headed for

the fuel shed for, actually, the third time tonight. Steele watches him go. *Two hours will be long enough*. Too bad he won't hear what happened when Heroun buried that woman. The story might have been interesting.

*

Watching Steele crib sideways out the door, Mindy says to Bill, "I won't spend that three hundred just yet. He's likely to conveniently forget about it."

"Tell me if he does. I'll make sure you get it." Bill read her proposal after Jackie left Thursday evening. Terry was with Vicky, outside in her car talking—and doing a little petting. And he finally understood what JG meant about him getting a payday. He's being offered more money than he has made in the past twenty years for selling what he doesn't own. Neither the land he's been working, nor the money he's been using has been his. But that slimy fish buyer wants to purchase it all from him, then pay him a salary that's probably more money than that damn Newport banker makes. All he has to do is maintain the appearance that the project's his. "Where am I supposed to meet him?"

"My place." Mindy wants to know where Steele went. She fears he might have gone for a gun. Since working for Mr. G, she has seen a few men hurt—Bill easily hurt Steele, who really is not a small guy. But he didn't finish the job. He hurt Steele just enough to make him dangerous. "My car's outside. I think we should go." She turns towards the regular bartender, back from delivering a drink (the waitresses' job, but they were all busy). "Sarah, when Robin comes back, tell him I've gone home."

"Any reason?"

"Just say it has to do with him. He'll understand." Then to Bill, she adds, "Meet me outside in two minutes."

Her *two minutes* aren't as long as his mother's, but Bill decides they are much longer than Jackie's. Still, he's not too wet when her Buick Roadmaster with its Oklahoma plates pulls up to the door. Its interior is tucked and rolled leather, dark red, trimmed in white, smelling of perfume. "How do you keep the leather from molding?" Bill asks, getting in.

"Hasn't been a problem yet, but I've already found out the trunk leaks."

The dynaflow slips. The Roadmaster seems sluggish, a waterdog, those blown-backed, orange-bellied newts that mount each other wherever two of them meet, making them the source of coastal kids' sex education. Their skins are toxic. Nothing will eat them, not even the bass a sawyer from Arkansas

planted in the Valsetz millpond. It's the perfume, Bill suspects, that makes him think of waterdogs. *That and the leather*.

"It looks like the tavern closed early tonight. That's good to know. Our influence is already being felt." Mindy says, adding, "I need to find a phone to set up the meeting."

"I got a key to the tavern. We can use the one in there." He doesn't explain why he has a key, doesn't say that Vern gave him one in case there was ever a day Vern didn't open up, that Bill was to take care of his affairs.

"You're full of surprises tonight."

"How'd yuh know I'd sell?"

Turning around in front of the store, Mindy returns to the Harbor View before she answers. "Mr. G knew because none of it was yours. You wouldn't sell if the land belonged to you, but a lease, that you'd sell." She waits a moment, then adds, "He said, when you asked how he knew, to tell you that your mutual friend knew what both of you would do. He wouldn't tell me who your mutual friend was, but apparently, he's the reason why you are to remain on."

"Yuh better call him." If Bill had doubts about JG's sincerity, he doesn't now as he opens the Harbor View's rear door. *It's been a rainy winter, a long wet winter, not much goin on. Little stuff happenin, though. Like in the Aleutians, before Sven got it. That's it! Like before Sven got it. That's when I felt this before, this . . . dunno how to describe it. Somethin ain't right.* But he can't identify the cause of the empty hollowness inside his chest.

She dials a memorized number, speaks very softly into the receiver. Bill listens, but only hears her say, "On that other matter, you were right, but his wife's not involved. She's a nice lady." Then returning the receiver to its cradle, she looks around the tavern without commenting on what she sees. She says only, "He's on his way down from Portland. He wants to meet with you tonight, and he's bringing a check, the paperwork, his attorney, and if you want one there, he'll cover the expense. Is there anyone you want to call?"

"It's after midnight on a Sunday mornin. No. Who'd I call at this hour?"

"Will you trust me to advise you? Not legally, but I am an accountant, and a very good one, even if I work for Mr. G. However, he doesn't own me." Mindy looks Bill directly in the eye. "Look, my family got screwed by the oil companies. I'm for what's fair, and I don't want to see what happened to Dad happen to anyone again."

"All right. But is this another Hansen Investment deal?"

"No. Mr. G will be buying this with his own money. I suspect I'll be overseeing his interests—and yours. You will be partners with him so whatever is done should not be adversarial." She opens the door to leave, letting in rain when she does. "Hansen cannot buy you out without losing the lease, so Steele will remain completely separate from what you are doing, if Steele remains. That hasn't yet been decided."

Mindy turns north on 101, then left at the light in Taft. She rented, Friday, a small house across the street from Siletz Bay. Once blue, the house hides behind peeling paint and cactus, stunted by rain and wind. Bamboo and pampas grass grow along its west side. A rowboat, still holding the dead stalks of last summer petunias, lies angled to the heaved sidewalk, its chines split. Driftwood chunks that might look like animals stand around, waiting to be fed. Bill looks towards her neighbors, another house differing little, its cactus suffering from too much attention. The streetlight casts dead shadows. Mindy turns to catch the light so she can see which key unlocks her door. Bill hears the surf, the bar heavy tonight, breakers rolling in from Japan. He feels its roar in the rain, a beast drowning, caught in the undertow; and he remembers his brothers. Abe should be here. *Misjudged the bar, got sideways, beam-to, and that's all she wrote. He loved women, and they in turned loved him and his handlebar mustache . . . . There was no damn reason—*

"Sit down." Mindy sets her purse beside an empty aquarium. The only light she turns on in the living room is the one above the aquarium, a low-wattage bulb, casting what a candle would. A little light comes from the kitchen, another couple candles' worth. "It'll be a couple of hours."

*

Steele hired Olson for tonight, or a night like this one. He's prepared. He's planned every detail. And the dark stillness between squalls begs him to proceed silently. He'll never stand less chance of being observed. Yet as he paces the worn dock, sagging as if ashamed of what's about to be done, he's apprehensive. The rain will conceal the start of the fire for several minutes, and should hide the flames until the warehouse catches. Then if the volunteer fire department—including Vern and his new fire pump—can extinguish the flames they'll deserve praise. But those self-appointed firemen have yet to save a house.

The dock planking feels spongy . . . he has stuffed the warehouse with cardboard and dry wood and barrels of naphtha, eliminating, he believes, any chance of the blaze being controlled before the warehouse is leveled. He

has, now that the restaurant's closed, only to wait. *Olson's pickled brain and alcohol-poisoned system won't allow just a sip. Nobody will mourn him for long.*

The warehouse, sprawling, barn-like, stands between Steele and restaurant. He has never liked the corporation's plans for it: they will be ahead building a design that suits their purposes. It needs burned.

Gusts sting, bringing rain in sheets hard as boards, beating regular as a heart. Olson sleeps, passed out on the floor, curled around the schnapps bottle. Steele steps over the prostrate Olson, crosses to the back of the fuel shed, and with a T-shaped barrel wrench, quietly and quickly unscrews the bungs from two barrels of diesel. He then tips the barrels over. Their *thuds* cause Olson to stir, but fail to waken him.

Steele watches the fuel oil gurgle from the barrels. Olson said he'd once been a Lutheran. *If there's still a man inside that shell . . .* the diesel flows across the shed floor and drips through cracks, drips onto the storage tank below. Olson stirs again when the oil reaches him. He rolls over, his padded jacket oil-soaked, and if he had opened his eyes, he would see Steele toss a lighted match into the shed. As it is, when the storage tank ruptures, sending flames skyward a thousand feet, the all-wood warehouse fairly blows as it ignites spontaneously everywhere at once. Within seconds, it's a wooden skeleton standing naked in an orange fireball, and the restaurant's in danger.

As if alive, bright orange flames lick the blackness as they stretch towards heaven. They ride the water, the river burns. Tiny men stand against them as the flames scatter the men and gobble up the bunkhouse, toy with the men and threaten the restaurant, worry the men and when victory is within reach, trick themselves by burning too bright, consuming too much too fast. They lack the strength to break through the line of tiny men, and they glow in anger as the men tread upon them and the blackness encircles them and the rain spits on them. By morning, they are dying embers.

* * *

Chapter Twenty Six

1.

Bill wasn't prepared to like Salmo Gairdneri, Mr. G, as he asked to be called. Outside, the sky is beginning to gray as they read through the last of the documents the attorney presents, none excessively difficult to understand, none suggesting caution or weariness, none deviating from a straightforward limited partnership that makes the junior partner the salaried managing director of the soon to be renamed Corona Beach Development. Mr. G wants to incorporate *salal*, the brush that he fought his way through for a day and a half, into the name. Indians ate its dark purple berries. Its waxy, rattly leaves are late winter forage for deer. The brush is a distinguishing feature of the coast, especially of the south beach.

The check is for seven times what he received for the sale of the cannery. There will be, this time, no bills to pay. Jackie will remain as his office manager, but from now on, her salary will come from Portland. Mindy knew more about his business than he suspected anyone knew. It was on her recommendation that Mr. G added Jackie to his salaried staff.

"What about Steele? There's no love lost there." Bill expects trouble from Steele whenever the sale becomes known.

"We will address his future with Hansen Investments later today."

"Meanin?"

"We may fire him . . . if he doesn't have very good answers for some hard questions. I am aware that the rain has slowed your progress, as would have been expected, but it hasn't stopped you. We didn't expect it to stop work across the river." Mr. G smiles at Bill. "I want to work with you because you have been at work throughout this winter. You didn't shut down as some of the logging contractors did. Rather, you kept plugging away so that you are

ready to exploit the coming good weather. That I admire, as does our mutual friend who got you into these leases."

A knock on the door surprises the four of them.

"Yes, Officer?"

"Is Mr. Bill Heroun here?"

"I am. What's wrong?"

"There's been a fire at the restaurant where you ate last night. We want to verify your whereabouts during the night."

"Been here since—when, a little after midnight. Mindy, here," Bill points with his thumb toward the accountant (he doesn't now think of her as a waitress), "can tell yuh where I've been."

"As can I, Officer. Here is my card." Mr. G hands the State Police officer his business card. "How serious is the fire?"

"Yuh say a fire, what happened? Anybody hurt?" Bill knew something would happen. That gut feeling of his hasn't been wrong yet.

"We're out accounting for people right now, but the dock structures are completely demolished. The fire was exceedingly hot."

Mindy furls her brow as she steps to the side of Mr. G and whispers, "No accident, what I told you." Mr. G nods that he understands.

The officer, to Mindy, asks, "You are the waitress that went home early?"

"I am. Steele, the manager, was out of line, and probably had more to drink than reasonable."

"Do you know if he left before you did?"

"He went somewhere, but I don't know where."

"Sir," the officer jots notes on a small spiral bound tablet, "is that your recollection?"

"Yeah. Steele's shoulder was hurtin him. He went for a walk out on the dock. Was takin Olson a couple of bottles."

"And you had nothing to do with his shoulder hurting?" The officer, his head still bent down to focus on his writing, raises his eyes to meet Bill's.

"Yuh're tellin me that yuh've already talked to him—and what did he have to say for himself?"

"He's being held for questioning."

A reality sweeps Heroun's other thoughts away: "Yuh say the dock's gone—yuh find Olson? He was out on the docks. Steele was taking him a bottle."

Mindy adds, "Actually, three bottles."

"His full name?"

"Thor Olson. Dunno if he had another name. Lives there in town. Steele's wife's his daughter. Yuh can ask her about a middle name."

"I'm afraid that will be difficult. Robin Steele is being held for questioning concerning her murder. She was apparently hit in the head with a piece of firewood."

"That sonnabitch! The last time he hit her with a doorknob the size of a cue ball."

The officer pauses, his pencil temporarily motionless. "I see. Is there anyone else we can ask about this? About having previously hit his wife?"

"Yeah, yeah there is. Vern, at the Harbor View, saw him with the doorknob still in his hand, all bloody. I think Martha did, too. Yuh can talk to 'em. I dunno how many others were there when he came in, not rememberin a thing about hittin her, or so he said."

"Thank you . . . . Have you seen him hit her?"

"Naa, but she was wearin a pretty good black eye last week." Bill feels a rage build inside him, a rage that causes him to wish he'd pinched Steele's head off. "She come up to the house afterwards, after he hit her, and called her mom from there. Jackie, her half sister, was at the house. Steele called afterwards. I heard what was said between her and Steele. Weren't happy about what I heard. There ain't any doubt about him hittin her."

"Hence, the shoulder?"

"If he had a hurt shoulder, it was his own doin."

"His shoulder was dislocated. He said you did it, but he couldn't explain why he didn't immediately go to the hospital, why he waited hours in apparently considerable pain. So the time of his injury has not been determined." The officer closes his tablet. "We'll look for Mr. Olson."

After the officer pulled away, his car's headlights still needed, Mr. G, to Bill, says, "So you administered quick justice. I would have expected that." Then to the attorney, he says, "We will need to survey the damage." Turning back to Bill, he adds, "Mindy will return you Euchre Creek. If Jackie Bower will be available, I would like to meet her this evening. It's been a while since I have been with stump jumpers and fern pickers, said complimentarily of course. I will enjoy coming down for visits—and perhaps we can get in a little fishing. I understand that you occasionally fish with our mutual friend."

"I do—ever now and then. And yeah, we can hook up once in a while." *Why have I spent so much time dislikin this guy. Yeah, he screwed the fish market up, but, what, he was protectin himself. I expect I would've done the same if I'd been in his place.* "So yuh knew I'd sell 'cause I didn't own it."

"You never before were a businessman. You were a collector." To Mindy, Mr. G says, "I'll check in with Portland, so leave messages and we can keep in touch." He nods toward Bill, and with the attorney beside him, he disappears into the rain as if he never were there.

2.

Euchre Creek changed on back to back Saturdays. What was will never be the same.

The rain-swollen community withered in the heat of the blaze. Surrounding fire departments as well as State Forestry were called. The State Police found Vicki where she lay, beat to death. At least that's how it appeared to the officer who found her body. They located Steele in the hospital at Newport and arrested him for suspicion of murder. He protested his innocence, but his blood alcohol level made him legally drunk—and he couldn't account for the hours between when the bar tender last saw him and when he arrived at the hospital with a dislocated shoulder. He claimed Bill Heroun did everything, dislocated his shoulder and started the fire. But the bar tender said Heroun went home with the new waitress, a revelation that was kept from Jackie, and sure enough, Heroun was with the waitress when he was finally located. So dawn Sunday morning found Terry and Blackie, Vern, Gosson, Christians, Leo, Lenny, Dudley, Nils, Olf and his whole crew—all working alongside fellows from Depoe Bay, Siletz, and Kernville to mop up a blaze that seemed supernaturally hot.

Terry and Vicky had gone home with Blackie and his wife. Jackie, worried about Bill, was looking through his picture windows when the blaze erupted, so she was the first to telephone the fire department at Kernville, then call State Forestry. She called Christians and Gosson, who took over summoning sleeping husbands, most of whom really didn't care if the restaurant and everything around it burned. But they turned out because it was expected of them, because it might be their house next time . . . the fire melted the steel beams of the boat hoist.

When he was arrested, no one thought to ask Steele how he knew about the fire. But by nine o'clock Sunday morning, the realization that Steele knew about the fire even though he was in Newport established his guilt beyond doubt in the minds of Euchre Creek. *He went home to kill her. That's what he did. Her and the baby. He oughta fry . . . knew he was no good from the minute he got here. This case shouldn't oughta come to trial. Let's get rid of him.* And the

sheriff's office began to worry about holding Steele in the Newport jail. They asked the new judge, the one elected on a campaign of harsher sentencing and who recently sentenced one man to forty-five days in jail for stealing a gallon of gasoline, for permission to relocate Steele to another facility. Permission was granted. Steele will be moved Sunday evening.

When certain there is nothing more that could burn, Blackie told Vern, "Guess that took care of your competition."

"Don't think so."

"Why do yuh say that?"

"Bill will open a restaurant and bar before the 4th. His will be the one that makes money." Vern has been thinking about what Christians offered. The tavern is no place for kids to be hanging around. The store will never make much money, but if it were to again sell beer, then the gross should be high enough to cover costs.

A few minutes after eleven, Martha brings by a box of sandwiches and two thermoses of coffee. "I thought yuh guys might be gettin hungry."

The fellows from Siletz and Depoe Bay have already left, but the crew from Kernville help themselves to a sandwich each. Martha brought a dozen, blue enamelware cups that are shared. There's not enough coffee to go around, so Vern passes as does Blackie. Martha sits beside Vern, the two of them on the extended bumper of the Kernville pumper truck. Vern asks, "What do yuh think?"

"He set it."

"That's it? . . . Why would he do that?"

"To distract attention." She stares across the river and up the hill to where Bill's house sits. Nodding toward it, she asks, "Did yuh ever wish yuh had a house like that?"

"I've been in it. Other than the view, it ain't much."

"The view must be wonderful." She nods towards the restaurant. "Will they open again?"

"I suspect—"

"I saw Vicky Poage. She said the food was very good."

"When is she gonna marry the Kid?"

"Probably when school's out. That's not too long to wait." She should've waited. Maybe things would have turned out differently if she had. "She helped make the sandwiches. We talked a little."

"About what?"

"Girl talk. Marriage, kids, makin ends meet, that type of stuff."

"The Kid's gonna be all right. Yuh didn't see any of the other highschoolers down here last night. He was the only one." Vern had spoken to the trooper

about the Kid's dad. Evidently, old Thor started the fire. Burned himself up. But not too much will be made of him starting the fire. "What have yuh heard about his old man?"

"Nothin? Is there something I should know?"

"The story I got from the troopers is that Vicki must have pulled Steele's arm out of joint, hangin on. He hit her like he did last time when he didn't know he did it. I think they're gonna put him away for a long time."

"Figures. He never belonged here, never fit in." She sees a raven glide overhead to land on the bent top of a scorched hemlock. "What about Terry's dad?"

"No one's seen him since last night . . . he was on the dock a little before the fire began. Apparently he started it in the fuel shed. Smoking, I imagine. But the troopers are more concerned about what Steele did."

"So Steele murders Vicki, and her dad dies in the fire. That's a helleva way for things to end up."

"Poetic justice." Vern wonders about how much he should say, or when he should say something about the store. "Jackie's gonna be movin in with her mom. The whale house is gonna be available. Think yuh'd like livin there."

"I couldn't afford it, not on my wages."

"You didn't answer the question—"

"What," she pauses as she looks at him. "Are yuh gonna buy it?"

"I might—"

"Well, yeah," she hesitates, then adds, "I'd like to live there." *Yes, I would like to live there, but not alone.*

3.

Hard rain bounces from the windows, from the roof, off the flower beds, the ricocheting drops running across the lawn and out into the street as Gosson opens the door of the parsonage to let Blackie, his wife, and young Vicky Olson in for a Bible study, tonight's subject the second covenant mediated by Moses. He hopes that someday Terry will attend, *but the Lord is patient. If not this year, then there is next, or the year after that, or a decade from now*. The fire here was a year ago; the fire in the jail there at Oceanlake eleven months ago.

The jail at Oceanlake didn't have a night jailer. No one was there to let the two prisoners out when a mattress caught on fire. Both tried to get somebody's, anybody's attention, but both ended up dying of smoke inhalation. Robin Steele was still awaiting trial. His conviction was never in doubt. The question was whether he would receive life, with the possibility

of parole after ten years. The consensus of the county has been that justice was best served when he died along with the young fellow who was the one actually smoking in his bunk, who was the one that actually started the fire with a dropped cigarette butt.

The jail fire in Oceanlake made national news, for there was another about the same time in Arizona. Both jails were unattended at night. Both jails have since been closed. But the question of the prisoners' innocence or guilt hasn't stopped the lawsuits from being filed. Lincoln County now wishes it had never heard the name of either prisoner.

Blackie asks, "Are yuh gonna marry Martha and Vern now that they decided to get legal?"

"They've decided not to have a Christian wedding, so no. But I'll wish them well. It's good that he sold the tavern."

"What do yuh think about Bill goin back to Alaska? That surprised me."

"He went up to Seward, there on the Kenai Peninsula. Said he had to say goodbye to someone." Gosson motions for them to be seated. "He'll be back most any day."

"Wonder who he knows there?" Blackie opens his Bible. "The blessings and cursings are part of the second covenant, the one made at Moab."

"Made with the uncircumcised children of the nation that left Egypt, that left sin."

"They didn't stay gone for very long. Seems they kept goin back to sin ever chance they got."

"And so do all of us . . . if we love this world."

Vicky winces. "Frankly, I'd like to get away from this rain. Terry said that this rain will be the death of all of us yet."

of making many books, there is no end

* * *