

KEROUAC'S SCROLL

A novel

Charles Deemer

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For Brad and Kass

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars 'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.

– Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

We carry our death masks inside our minds.

–Simon Goldhill, *Love, Sex & Tragedy*

PART ONE:

EROS

I am not now and never have been a pedophile. I need to get this straight from the start. But here's the rub: saying so, denying the most heinous charge that can be made against a man's character, becomes, in the strange logic used by some shrinks, evidence of guilt. To protest your innocence is to reveal a state of denial, and the more outraged you become of a false accusation, the more convinced certain trespassers of the mind are of your guilt. If you are charged with pedophilia, you are guilty until proven innocent. And so it was to prove my innocence that

shortly after my 70th birthday I decided to drive across the country and confront my accuser.

1: The Proposal

I often think about Red Hooker. A man is not your closest friend for half a century without becoming a kind of spiritual appendage, a silent accomplice to everything you feel and do. We'd gone through significant deaths together (our parents) and five marriages and divorces (his advantage, 3-2). Even though we'd never lived in the same city until recently, we'd kept in constant contact on the phone and in letters from the day I got discharged from the Army shortly before him in 1959. We'd both served as Russian linguists in the Army Security Agency at the height of the Cold War.

Hooker and I regarded one another as brothers and were far closer than he was to his biological sibling. It went without saying that one of us was going to bury the other unless somehow we went out together in a blaze of glory, and when on my 70th birthday Red suggested a road trip across the country, I wondered if this was what he had in mind.

I hadn't celebrated a birthday in years but this one, falling on a Saturday in August, at least embraced company. Hooker and I had been sharing Saturday breakfasts at Nobby's Bar & Grill ever since he joined me in Portland, Oregon, in 2001, saying he needed to be closer to a modern VA hospital than living in the Idaho outback afforded. Compared to our new facility, the Spokane VA hospital, which was the closest one to him, was a relic. Besides, he admitted, it would be nice living out our old age together as neighbors.

We hadn't missed a weekly breakfast since his arrival, more often than not at Nobby's because the back bar used to be one of my drinking holes and the owner was a friend. I wasn't about to cancel an established ritual just because it was my birthday. Hooker wouldn't remember it anyway.

A tad before seven, I picked up Hooker at the boarding house where he rented a room. Nobby's was on the downtown side of the river in my neighborhood in northwest Portland, which I'd seen change in the name of progress from thrift stores and small taverns to boutiques and expensive restaurants. This wasn't progress as far as I was concerned, and Nobby's was one of the few places in the neighborhood that resembled what it had been a quarter-century ago. Another was the square brick building in which I rented two bedrooms (one converted to an office), where only the rent had changed.

After breakfast I was surprised when Hooker passed me an envelope that obviously contained a card. Despite being close, we had a mutual disregard for the formal exchange of gifts. I don't recall either of us ever giving the other a birthday present, and our Christmas exchanges during half-a-century of friendship could be counted on one hand. Instead of exchanging gifts, we bought one another drinks. At least during our drinking days.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Open it."

But it wasn't a birthday card at all. Apparently it was a card to send off a traveler on a trip because it showed an airplane skywriting "Bon Voyage!" in a sky filled with balloons and birds. As I opened the card, a newspaper clipping fell out.

I retrieved it. A small headline read, "Kerouac's Scroll Begins National Tour."

Hooker said, "I think we should go see it."

The Kerouac scroll was the original manuscript of his most famous book, *On the Road*. Jack Kerouac had written the novel on one continuous roll of teletype paper, which he had guided

through his manual typewriter during several frenzied weeks in 1951. This much I remembered. What I didn't know was that the scroll still existed, measured 120-feet in length, and recently had been bought at auction by the owner of the Indianapolis Colts for over 2 million dollars. The owner was sharing the scroll with America by putting it on a five-year tour, which would begin in a few weeks with a late summer-stay at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

When I looked up from the article, Hooker asked, "When do you want to leave?"

"You're not serious."

"Of course I'm serious."

I glanced back down at the article. Surely the tour would come to Seattle, which was considerably closer than Washington, D.C. But the closest it came to the Pacific Northwest was San Francisco, which was several years away. At our ages, one or both of us could be dead by then.

Hooker said, "You don't have anything better to do this summer," his tone suggesting he was stating the obvious.

"I was going to start a novel."

A retired English professor, a playwright, a screenwriter, I had been threatening to begin a novel for most of my life. Novelists, I had decided some time ago, were the real writers, which was partly a ploy to soften my sense of failure as a playwright and the frustration of wealthy anonymity as a screenwriter. If people knew of me at all, it was as a teacher, not a writer.

"Write your novel on the road," Hooker said. "Bring that laptop of yours. On the way back, maybe we can even do some sightseeing. I want to go to the U.P."

"The upper peninsula of Michigan?"

"Calumet, to be exact." Then he sang, if Hooker's off-tone voice could be called singing: "In Calumet, Michigan, in the copper country."

The line was from Woody Guthrie's song, 1913 Massacre. Hooker had introduced me to Guthrie's music fifty years ago.

"You want to go to Calumet because of the song?"

"That's not good enough a reason? Actually I have a personal one. That's where my brother ended up."

Hooker, who often called me brother, almost never talked about his younger brother, Clyde.

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"Why are you asking so many goddamn questions? Do you want to go or not? Because I'm going anyway."

Clearly he didn't want to talk about his brother. I didn't know how Hooker would manage to take the long trip on his own. His old age wasn't as financially secure as mine, and he didn't own a car. His last years in the real estate business had been marked by bankruptcy. As near as I could tell, he barely made it on his Social Security check, which was why he lived in a rooming house and why I always picked up the tab at our Saturday breakfasts.

"I think you mean it," I said.

"I'm seeing Kerouac's scroll if I have to hitchhike to get there. I'm surprised you don't feel the same."

"Who says I don't?"

"You don't act very enthusiastic."

"I'm recovering from the shock of the proposal. Do I get the rest of the day to think about it?"

"Why not?" After a silence, Hooker said, "We've always threatened to take a long road trip

together.”

“As I recall, the last time this came up we were in our forties. And still drinking.”

“Better late than never.”

“This is an ambitious trip for two old farts,” I said. “I have to think about it.”

“I’m going with or without you, brother.”

“I believe you. Give me until tomorrow.”

2: The Letter

My mail is junk mail. I’ve outlived almost all of my friends, and neither of my two ex-wives has talked to me in decades. My social security and retirement checks are automatically deposited. I no longer have an agent, and Hollywood no longer calls to bribe me into turning a terrible movie script into an acceptable one. A theater company hasn’t written to ask for royalties information since I retired from the university. My mail, in other words, is not something worth looking at. Typically I empty the mail box, look quickly through the credit card offers, medical insurance offers, and whatever other unsolicited benefits have reached my doorstep as I step inside to the trash can to deposit them.

After the early breakfast on my 70th birthday, however, a letter among the junk mail stopped me in my tracks. Its return address was a detective agency in Seattle that I had hired almost a year ago to find my estranged daughter. I hadn’t heard from them in so long I had forgotten they might still be working for me.

Stephanie was born some 40 years ago. I’d married Helen because I’d knocked her up during my senior year at UCLA but had left the marriage before Stephanie was a year old. Although I had not deserted Helen for another woman, before our divorce was final I’d become enamored with a colleague in graduate school, a tall blonde folklorist named Sally. Shortly after getting our graduate degrees, an MFA for me and a Ph.D. for Sally, we married and moved to Chesapeake on Maryland’s Eastern Shore to join the English faculty at a small liberal arts college.

In the summer of 1972, Helen let Stephanie come east to spend a part of the summer with us. This, as it turned out, was the last time I’d see my daughter. She was eight years old, a dark-haired pudgy girl with a premature double chin, who bore no resemblance to me that I could decipher. Apparently Stephanie’s later report of our lifestyle, which involved hosting and going to frequent faculty parties at which considerable amounts of liquor were consumed, combined with Helen’s reborn Christianity to conclude that I was a sinful influence on my daughter. Helen no longer cooperated when I requested to visit Stephanie, and for a variety of reasons, all of them self-centered, I didn’t fight her resistance. Stephanie and I still corresponded, if irregularly, but when she became a teenager, hearing from a distant father interested her less. In time, we drifted apart.

After retirement, I felt great guilt about having lost contact with my daughter. I no longer knew where she was, or where Helen was for that matter. I’d heard through mutual friends that Helen had remarried and later that she was the minister at some fundamentalist church or other. I shuddered at the notion. Was Stephanie also a reborn Christian or had she escaped the nest in time to find a more tolerant way of dealing with spiritual matters? Who the hell was this product of my loins, my daughter, anyway? I hired a detective agency to look for her so I might find out.

At first the detective assigned to the case, a gruff-sounding man (at least on the telephone)

named Hank Brownell, sounded optimistic. With the Internet today, you could track down just about anyone, he assured me. But I had precious little information to give him and none at all that was recent. He remained optimistic. Then slowly he backed away from this position, writing instead of phoning to keep me up to date on his efforts, sometimes to ask for another check if I wanted to continue.

He had not asked for money in months, so I assumed the search was over. Yet here was a letter from him. When I opened it on the porch, I found a cover letter and a small envelope with a handwritten return address from College Park, Maryland. I didn't recognize the handwriting.

If this was a birthday present, I wasn't prepared for it. Beyond the porch, the day was beginning for my neighbors, many of whom I knew by name. Mr. Arnold was carrying his briefcase to the nearby bus stop. Mrs. Wilson, a recent widow, was fetching the morning paper, still in her robe, her white hair a fright. Looking down at my mail, I saw that my hand was shaking. I rushed inside to learn the news in the privacy of home.

I took the mail into the kitchen. My heart exploded when I read Brownell's cover letter. He'd found her! She had written me a letter, which was enclosed. I tore open the envelope.

Dear Robert,

Hello. I really don't know where to start with this letter. It has come to my attention that you have been trying to get in touch with me. I don't know why, after all these years, you have an interest in me. I can only assume that you are trying to make amends for the past.

However, I am not at all ready to make amends with you. About 3 years ago I had a memory recall regarding my visit with you in Maryland. In that recall I remembered an incident of sexual abuse that occurred between you and I. It has taken me a long time to begin coming to terms with this memory, though I have absolutely no doubt that the incident did, in fact, take place.

I want no part of you! I am asking that you respect my boundaries and stay away.

Sincerely,
Stephanie

Needless to say, I was stunned. I am not now, nor have I ever been, a pedophile. Nonetheless the accusation devastated me.

I recalled seeing a documentary on public television about what amounted to witch hunts to convict innocent child-care workers of child abuse, all based on the false memories of the children involved. Was Stephanie having similar false memories? Or had she, in fact, been abused while visiting Sally and me in Chesapeake? To be sure, we had so many large and loud parties in the sprawling farmhouse we rented out of town, she could have been abused by anyone and I wouldn't have known a thing about it unless she told me. All I knew was that I had not abused her. I was not a pedophile.

Then I imagined what Helen and her ilk would conclude, hearing me deny this. Aha!, they would think. See there? You are in denial! Your very denial, in fact, proves your guilt!

This was the Catch-22 of the recovery industry, which I well knew from my experience in a treatment center for alcoholics. In my fifties, I'd spent almost a year in a VA program to get alcohol out of my life – and Hooker, in fact, had joined me, to demonstrate how much we lived on the same wavelength. We both had been dry for fifteen years now. But even in treatment, even as I had to admit my own past denial of having a drinking problem, I understood that here was a measure for truth that was greatly flawed because if an innocent man cannot protest without being judged guilty for the effort, then what recourse is left to him?

I dropped the letter onto the kitchen counter and picked up the phone. I dialed Hooker's number.

"Hello?"

My first instinct was to share the letter with him. But how do you tell even your soul brother that your daughter thinks you are a pervert?

"Hey."

"Make up your mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I have." I was talking off the cuff, letting my gut reaction lead the way. "How about leaving Monday?"

"All right!"

"We'll take our time."

"This is great, Bear. I didn't think you'd do it."

Hooker was the only one who still called me Bear, no doubt because he'd come up with the nickname, a natural one for a big man with short legs and small hands. I told him I'd touch bases with him on Sunday and hung up.

I reread the letter many times through the day. I even went so far as to dial an information operator but my daughter's phone number was unlisted. I felt like I had to talk to her. This was my motivation in deciding to drive across the country with Hooker. College Park wasn't far from D.C.

By evening I couldn't stand it any more. I went to the university library to find out what I could discover about repressed memory.

3: Repressed Memory

I love old libraries. I love their high ceilings and long alleys of shelves, their bad light and cavernous silences. A man can lose himself in a library, can leave the stress and pressures of the world outside to find private solace in the pages of a forgotten book found on a dusty shelf.

I knew what I was looking for. I went to a library computer and brought up the subject index. A few minutes later I was overwhelmed by an avalanche of titles like *The Courage to Heal*, *Uncovering Incest*, *Reclaiming Our Lives*, *Sexual Healing*, *Michelle Remembers*, *Too Scared To Cry*, *Dancing With Daddy*, on and on they came onto the computer screen, a long parade of memoirs, confessions and histories. Just the titles were moving, and for a moment, feeling something close to grief, I forgot that according to my daughter I was the perpetrator of comparable horror.

Then I saw a title that jumped out like a nudist at church. I scribbled down the book number and hurried into the stacks.

The book was called *The Myth Of Repressed Memory: False Memories And Allegations Of Sexual Abuse*. Its primary author, Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, was considered one the country's leading experts on how memory functioned. I grabbed the book off the shelf and took it to a table to read.

For the next hour I was mesmerized. The book was filled with case histories no less horrific than those suggested in other titles but here there was a difference: the accused pedophiles were innocent. The memories used as evidence to charge them and in some cases to initially convict them did not hold up.

Again I remembered the documentary I had seen on public television, about the day care

workers, men and women alike, accused not only of sexual child abuse but of putting children through sadistic and satanic rituals, committing acts of unspeakable perversion on them. In the long run, they were proven innocent but their lives already were ruined. Where were they now? No doubt living anonymous lives as best they could.

As I read, I dog-eared pages to copy later.

Memory, according to Dr. Loftus, was a very complex and dynamic process. It was not a matter of remembering something static, the way one finds a lost coin in the grass. In one chapter she wrote:

I explained to the court that memory fades with time, losing detail and accuracy; as time goes by, the weakened memories are increasingly vulnerable to “post-event imagination” – facts, ideas, inferences, and opinions that become available to a witness after an event is completely over. . . . Once these details were inserted into a person’s mind through the technique of exposure to post-event information, they were adopted as the truth and protected as fiercely as the “real,” original details. Subjects typically resisted any suggestion that their richly detailed memories might have been flawed or contaminated and asserted with great confidence that they saw what their revised and adapted memories told them they saw.

Later another statement caught my eye, and I dog-eared the page to copy it:

In a psychotherapeutically inspired double bind typical of our times, denial itself is evidence of denial, the pathological indicator that makes declarations of innocence virtual proof of guilt.

Here was the Catch-22 in a nutshell, which I’d become aware of during treatment.

I was getting bogged down, the book becoming repetitive as well as depressing, by the time a young woman told me the library was going to close in thirty minutes. I immediately hurried to a copy machine.

I was stepping down the library steps when I heard a voice behind me.

“Robert Bass?”

I turned and faced a woman, not quite my age, her hair turning gray, tall and slender, a nice-looking woman who was weathering the years quite well. She was grinning at me.

“Don’t you recognize me?”

She did look vaguely familiar but she was too old to be a former student.

“Mary Warner.”

“Mary!”

As soon as I acknowledged her, she raced forward, arms open for a hug, the smile broader than ever. We embraced and then she stepped back, studying me.

”I kept staring at you in the library. I was sure it was you.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Mary Warner had been a history professor when Sally and I were teaching in the English Department at Chesapeake College. That was thirty years ago. I remembered thinking I was deliriously happy then – until Sally dropped a bombshell one humid summer afternoon: she was sexually attracted to women.

“I’m retired, of course,” Mary said. “My daughter lives here. I live in Seattle and come down quite often. I heard you ended up in California.”

“Briefly, right after the divorce. But I got a teaching job here and stayed.”

“You’re not still teaching?”

“Oh, no. Retired five years now.”

We had blurted out the basics and stood grinning at one another. I’d always liked Mary.

“And Don?” I asked.

“He died almost ten years ago. I never remarried.”

There was something almost flirtatious about the way she added the latter. We’d done our share of flirting at faculty parties but never in a serious way. We just enjoyed one another’s company.

“Listen,” Mary said, “I have to pick up my daughter for a late dinner. I’d invite you but—”

“No, no,” I interrupted.

“I would like to spend time with you to catch up. Are you doing anything for brunch tomorrow?”

I wasn’t, of course, but hesitated because I wasn’t sure how far I wanted to go with the spontaneous joy I was feeling in our chance meeting. At any moment it might disintegrate into depression about my daughter, and I wanted to be alone when this happened. When Mary noticed my hesitation and looked disappointed by it, I quickly said, “Brunch would be great.”

We made a date for the Hilton Hotel downtown at ten, hugged a farewell, and walked off across campus in opposite directions.

Before calling it a night, I again tried the information operator. The second one gave me the same information as the first, Stephanie’s number was unlisted. I pictured myself walking up to her front door in College Park unannounced in several weeks, and the notion was terrifying.

Finally I dragged myself to bed. For a moment, before slipping into sleep, I regretted accepting a brunch date with Mary Warner.

4: Sunday Brunch

My daughter’s accusation was not easily dismissed. It didn’t help that the field of repressed memory was controversial, that distinguished scientists doubted its very legitimacy. Stephanie believed I was a pedophile. Was she hallucinating or did she have the wrong guy? How could I convince her I was innocent?

In this state of mind, I dragged myself to the Hilton. I am habitually early anywhere I go. Even with my reluctance to appear, I walked into the hotel restaurant ten minutes before ten. And Mary Warner was already there.

Her smile across the room lit up the gray morning outside and the poor “mood” lighting inside. She was sitting at a small table in the back corner, in a gray suit, purple turtleneck sweater, and dangling silver earrings to match her graying hair, which had been pulled back last night but now was loose and falling to her shoulders. She was one of those women who looked better with age. At least I didn’t remember her being so beautiful thirty years ago.

I complimented her appearance, and she politely returned the favor, noticing that I had lost weight since the Chesapeake days. This was true but misleading. I still struggled to stay at 250, and this morning I felt underdressed in the slacks, shirt, tie and sports coat I had grabbed from the closet. I actually wasn’t underdressed in comparison to other men in the restaurant. I just felt so because Mary looked so damn good.

Sitting down, I resisted a sudden urge to tell her everything. What I wanted was understanding, and her smile and radiance suggested it was available. But I knew better. Pedophilia was not a topic for casual conversation over brunch with a woman I hadn’t seen in thirty years.

What was suitable for conversation was a summary of our professional careers and personal lives since the Chesapeake days. She seemed surprised that I hadn’t remarried. She also was

surprised that she never read about me in the Sunday arts section of the New York Times.

“Your plays at Chesapeake were so good,” she told me. “I can’t understand why someone didn’t do them in New York.”

In the five years before my breakup with Sally, three of my plays had been produced at Chesapeake College. All had done well enough before what was, after all, a small and decidedly easy audience. My agent at the time tried hard to find a home for them in New York, warning me that stories about small town Oregon would be a hard sell in the Big Apple. Sam Shepard would own similar territory soon enough.

I shrugged and smiled, which was all the answer I could give her.

“Are you still writing?” she asked.

Although this was a question that always annoyed me, there was something in her tone that showed concern rather than polite inquiry. I confessed that I hadn’t written a play in almost ten years. I was mainly writing short fiction now but precious little of that. I thought I had a novel in me but hadn’t started it. Then I told her the story of my Retrospective.

After I accepted the job at Portland State University and got my artistic bearings in Portland, I was offered a playwright-in-residence position at a small company called The Cubicle Theatre, which suggests how tiny it was. But I was in heaven. Over the next fifteen years, ten of my plays premiered there, several moving on to larger venues in Seattle, San Francisco or Los Angeles, but none to New York. I had no professional complaints at this stage of my life. Then, as theater companies are wont to do, The Cubicle went under, and I was without a theatrical home. A local director came to the rescue and dedicated his next season to my work, a retrospective called “Robert Bass’ Oregon,” a season of four revivals culminating in the world premier of a commissioned new play.

“That’s wonderful!” Mary said. Then I told her the rest of the story.

After the Retrospective, no one in Portland would touch my work. It was as if the season dedicated to my plays had been a farewell, a funeral, and locally I was dead as a playwright. I continued to write, and occasionally my work was done out of state, in Chicago, in Minneapolis, in Dallas. Never in New York. I won a few contests, the kind that may look good on a resume but had no other practical consequences. But I no longer needed a resume since I was approaching retirement. I also didn’t need the royalties. Some years earlier I’d sold the film rights to a play of mine and wrote the screenplay myself. Although the script was never produced, this opened doors in Hollywood, and I found myself getting a lot of gigs rewriting other people’s scripts. The money they paid me to do this was sinful but there was little satisfaction in the work.

“I finally got tired of it all,” I explained to Mary. “The collaborative part of playwriting, which is essential, began to feel like the proverbial albatross. I still wanted to write, of course, but I wanted to write in a context that didn’t depend on producers and directors and actors, on other people. I actually began as a short story writer and a failed novelist before I turned to playwriting. So I decided to retire from the theater and write fiction instead.”

“How’s it been going?”

I loved her for the question. It was so much more sensitive than the automatic question, Have you published anything?

“I’ve published a handful of short stories. Did I already tell you that?”

“I’d love to read them some time.”

“When I get back, I’ll send a few to you if you like.”

“Where are you going?”

I told her about the cross-country trip with Hooker to see the Kerouac Scroll.

“It’s like a literary pilgrimage,” she said. “How exciting!”

A pilgrimage, indeed. In a sense, I was making the trip to defend my character, to defend my soul.

I said, “An adventure indeed.”

“And how’s your daughter?”

Her timing was uncanny. I hesitated, wondering what to say. I ended up lying.

“Doing real well. She’s in College Park. Excuse me, I’m going to find the men’s room.”

I took my time. I splashed cold water on my face. I took deep breaths. You can do this, I told myself.

As I sat back down, Mary reached to the floor and picked up her purse.

“This has been great,” she said, “but I have to run.” She brought out a business card, which she handed me across the white tablecloth. “I’ve always been a great fan of your work. I’d really like to read your stories.”

I took the card and said, “You’re very kind.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re a damn good writer. Why wouldn’t I be interested in what you write?”

If I were younger, I probably would have fallen in love with her on the spot for expressing such sentiments. It had been a long time, too long, since I’d been with a woman who cared about my work. I defined my very being by my work, as many writers and artists do, and an insurmountable barrier was raised in a relationship with a woman who did not respond to my writing. Usually, in such cases, sex held us together for as long as it could, after which we rapidly fled from one another. I’d had a few relationships like this in my life. But I hadn’t been intimate with a woman since retirement.

I managed to say, “Thank you.”

But Mary didn’t leave. We lingered and accepted refills of coffee, as if not wanting the morning to end. I had eaten too much, in part from nervousness, the act of eating being a substitute for talking – or put another way, it was less stressful and much more pleasant to listen to her talk – and in part because the long tables of food offered such a variety of irresistible selections. I felt very comfortable in Mary’s company, which was not frequently the case.

“Have you kept in contact with anyone in Chesapeake?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

Mary started to speak and stopped herself.

“What?”

“I’m not sure how to say this.”

I waited for her to try.

“After you left, the way you left, you weren’t very popular, needless to say. Then a year later, when Sally came out, things made more sense. You suddenly had a lot of people who cared about you and wondered how you were doing. For some reason, they often came to me to ask. I think some people thought we were lovers.”

I nodded, understanding how they might.

“I wish you’d kept in touch,” Mary said.

“Like you say, I wasn’t a very popular guy at the time.” I cleared my throat, a gesture to change the subject. “So tell me about Kidder. He stay at Chesapeake?”

Frank Kidder had been my best friend in the department. He, like everyone else, had taken Sally’s side in our breakup. No one knew she was a lesbian. Everyone assumed I was a

philanderer. End of story.

Mary said, "Only for a few years. He went to Harvard."

"Harvard! My."

"It surprised the hell out of me."

"How about Jim and Stacy?"

Jim and Stacy were older students who somehow ended up at most faculty parties, mascots of the English department.

Mary said, "Of course, if you didn't stay in contact with anyone, you wouldn't have heard."

"Heard what?"

"They had a very, very ugly divorce."

This was hard to believe. They had been the darlings of the department, with their young daughter, Carrie, Stacy's by a previous marriage, and ambitions to go into teaching literature. Jim and Stacy were everyone's favorite couple.

"It was the scandal that pushed yours out of memory," Mary added.

"I thought they were as happy together as you could get."

"Stacy accused Jim of molesting Carrie. The papers had a field day."

I stopped listening after that. Mary must have wondered what the hell had happened to me; I'm sure my sudden distance showed. But the news was too much for me to handle, to make sense of. I could not believe Jim would molest Carrie, his cute four-year-old, any more than I could accept that my daughter would remember "an incident of sexual abuse" between us. It was as if the world, my world, was suddenly a very different kind of place, no longer serene and safe, but a place where unthinkable acts rose into view like demons in a nightmare. But here was a nightmare that might also be my salvation. If Jim had abused Carrie, might he also have abused Stephanie as well? The possibility, as hard as it was to understand, made my heart race.

"Robert?" I had no idea how long Mary had been trying to get my attention. "Are you all right?"

I realized I was sweating. I picked up the check.

"Let me get this."

"No, Dutch treat."

I ignored her and strode quickly to the cashier. By the time my credit card was being processed, Mary was beside me.

She moved close and took my hand. There was genuine concern in her expression.

"I'm okay," I said.

Mary squeezed my hand.

Outside the hotel I said, "The news about Jim really got to me."

"I understand."

"What happened to him?"

"Actually it ended as suddenly as it started, and just as shocking. Charges were dropped, and Jim moved away. I heard he went to Oyster Island. There were rumors of a settlement. I don't know."

"But it was true?"

"A lot of people thought so."

"And you?"

"I'm not sure what I think. It's such a loaded subject, it's hard to be rational about it."

I nodded and looked away. A loaded subject indeed! There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

“Robert, I’m worried about you.”

“Really, I’m okay.”

“You have a big trip ahead of you. Will you send me a postcard?”

“If you like.”

“I very much would like.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Maybe when you get back, you can visit me in Seattle.” When I hesitated, she added, “I guess I’m being forward.”

“No, I’d like that very much.”

“Well, good. I had a very nice time this morning, Robert. I’d enjoy seeing you again.”

Suddenly, she leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. We looked at one another a moment, and a part of me felt like kissing her back, a gentle kiss on the lips, but I stood frozen, doing nothing. I was still obsessing about Jim, who might be the proof of my innocence.

Mary touched the part of my cheek where her lips had been.

“Send me a postcard,” she said.

I let her walk off alone. While we were in the hotel, a dazzling summer sun had reached high noon but my interior weather was gray. Mary’s good company had been only a temporary diversion from what was on my mind.

I drove home, entered the house and went immediately to the bedroom. I drew the blinds against the warm sunshine, casting the room into a gray shadow that suited my mood. I stretched out on the bed.

Sometimes the gods are kind. They let me drift to sleep despite my over-active mind.

It was late afternoon by the time I woke up. It was time to pack for the cross-country journey.

5: Bon Voyage!

I was on my second cup of morning coffee when the phone rang. Since I’d been debating whether or not it was too early to call Hooker, I guessed it would be him. I was right.

“You packed?” he asked.

“I packed last night. You?”

“Ready to go.”

I glanced at the kitchen clock. It was almost seven.

“If we leave too early,” I said, “I’ll have to quit too early. I can’t ride more than five or six hours any more.”

“I can relieve you driving.”

“I’m not talking about driving. Just sitting in the car. My back’s not what it used to be.”

“So what are you thinking? Nine to three, something like that?”

“That sounds good. I’d like to make three hundred miles a day.”

“Works for me.”

“So we could have breakfast first,” I suggested.

“Maybe out of town, so we feel like we left. How about that truck stop in Troutdale?”

The cafe at The Columbia Truck Stop was a local legend, with slabs of chicken fried steak so large they hung over the large dinner plates.

“Now you’re talking. I’ll be by in about forty-five minutes.”

I was traveling light with two small suitcases. Tucked into the pocket of one was Stephanie's letter, which I still intended to show Hooker. But the time had to be right.

Hooker, it turned out, had stuffed his clothes into an Army duffel bag. I didn't know he still had one. Dragging it to the car, he looked smaller than the five-four he always claimed to be. I'd seen his curly red hair turn white over the years but he had kept most of it, which is more than I could say for myself. His face was a patchwork of deep lines and shadows, making him look older than he was. But this had been true about him since the day we met when he was a young soldier in his twenties who looked forty, a visual trick helped considerably by crooked, bad teeth, an old man's teeth, animal teeth. They looked like hell but apparently never bothered him because Hooker kept them the way they were, like a badge of rebellion.

At the truck stop I ordered an omelet instead of the legendary special because I knew what the latter could do to my digestive track, harmless enough a disorder if one could go home for a nap. I had three hundred miles to drive. Hooker was more reckless and ordered the chicken fried steak.

We had done precious little concrete planning for the trip, which was our way. We both liked to act first and think later. We had a bit of time on our hands before continuing east on the Interstate, officially beginning our adventure.

I took out my wallet and handed Hooker five twenties.

"What's this for?"

"Spending money."

I had assumed from the beginning that most of our expenses were mine. A gift from Hollywood.

"Why do I need spending money?"

"Just put it in your pocket."

He did.

I said, "A couple of ground rules. We get one motel room, two beds."

Hooker grinned and said, "You really know how to hurt a guy."

"Number two. No side trips on the way. We'll do all that on the way back."

"We're going to Calumet."

"Right. Number three." I hesitated. "I should have written them down."

"You've been losing sleep over our ground rules?"

"I was thinking about them this morning, asshole. We stick to the Interstates and go as direct a route as possible. Like I say, we can take our time on the way back."

"Whatever you say, boss."

There was a pause.

Hooker asked, "Can I smoke in the car?"

I'd quit over a decade ago but Hooker still smoked, though not as much as he used to.

"No. We'll take smoking breaks. I'll stretch, and you'll puff."

"Smoking rooms?"

"You can smoke outside. Red, I know what you're like without a cigarette, but I have my own health to think of. Second-hand smoke is a killer."

"Last I looked, you aren't dead yet."

Our itinerary, according to my road atlas, was roughly this: we'd travel most of the 2800-odd miles on only four Interstates, 84, 80, 76 and 70, which would connect Portland, Boise, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne, Lincoln, Des Moines, Iowa City, South Bend, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Washington D.C. On paper, the distance looked overwhelming. At the same time,

Hooker's idea of the trip was like an omen, a gift from the gods saying, Now's your chance to prove your innocence. D.C. was practically on Stephanie's doorstep. Maybe the fact that I had driven across the country to speak to her would open up her heart. And maybe not.

After breakfast we quickly picked up the Columbia River and headed into the most beautiful section of the Columbia Gorge. On our Oregon side, rimrock cliffs rose to dense forest. Across the river, rolling farmland, golden for the harvest, stretched across Washington.

When we had driven along the river for a while, Hooker suddenly yelled out, "It's a big river!" and started laughing like hell. I grinned and nodded. The line was from Ramblin' Jack Elliott's version of Woody Guthrie's "Talkin' Columbia," which was on a record I played endlessly through the 1960s. Ten miles later, just because I felt like it, I said, "It's a big river! My, oh my."

As we approached Hood River, I finally felt like we were really on our way. The realization, which should have brought the joy of adventure, was compromised by the stress of my real motive for traveling east. For a fleeting moment, I almost told Hooker about the letter, as I knew I must eventually. But when I turned to him, I found him leaning against the window, eyes closed, head unstable, on the verge of a nap. A few miles later he began to snore.

Oregon interstate highways are generous with rest stops, and we made use of every one of them. If one of us didn't have to pee, then Hooker needed a smoke or I needed to stretch. We seldom drove two consecutive hours without stopping for something or other, which from the beginning gave the trip a more leisurely rhythm than supported by the secret festering in my gut, which felt more urgent the longer I kept it to myself. I finally decided to show Hooker the letter as we sipped coffee after our first dinner on the road.

We had stopped in a motel off the Interstate past La Grande, having driven longer than I would have preferred. A restaurant was next door. We ate early, just past five.

The letter was in my pocket. I'd taken it from the suitcase as soon as we checked in, doing so while Hooker was in the bathroom. At the time I didn't know if I was ready to share it or not. But I wanted to be ready to.

"Read this," I said, dropping the letter on the table in front of him.

Hooker unfolded the letter and started reading. When he was done, he shook his head.

"Helen put her up to this," he said softly.

My first wife and Hooker never got along. From Helen's point of view, Hooker was a bad influence, the guy who took me away from home to party, the guy who seemed more important in my life than she was, which was true.

But it never had occurred to me that Helen had anything to do with this.

"How do you figure that?"

"She wanted to get back at you for leaving her. What better way?"

I didn't buy it but didn't feel like arguing the matter or defending Helen.

I said, "It's all so surreal."

"Helen planted the idea in her head."

I told Hooker what I had learned at the library, that the entire field of repressed memory was filled with controversy. Some experts doubted its very existence.

"See there," said Hooker.

There was another possibility, of course. Jim could have abused Stephanie during one of our loud, sprawling parties. But this still made me responsible, not as a pedophile but as a terrible parent.

"What?" Hooker asked, seeing my mind working.

“What if something actually happened to her? I mean, we had some pretty wild parties. Anything could’ve happened in that huge house.”

Hooker shrugged and said, “Maybe.”

Sally and I had rented the four-bedroom Victorian farmhouse from a local doctor, which was located five miles out of town and surrounded by farmland, which was rotated with soybeans, field corn, melons and strawberries. Our faculty parties were large, loud and long-lasting, and in the huge house any number of things could occur out of the sight and sound of the party nucleus. Once, in fact, a member of the English Department had passed out in an upstairs back room off my study, and it was the next afternoon before he recovered enough to wander downstairs, much to our surprise, disheveled and hungover. We’d given Stephanie the guest bedroom, which was upstairs in the very back of the house, far from the party activity downstairs. Anyone could have visited her there and had considerable privacy. Jim, for example, who had been accused of molesting his step-daughter. What if he were guilty? Then he was a pedophile – and he had been in my house dozens of times, including when Stephanie was there.

I said, “I had lunch yesterday with an old friend from Chesapeake College. She taught in the history department.”

“A romantic lunch?”

“A friendly lunch. Actually she lives in Seattle now. Anyway, she told me that Jim, a mutual friend, had been accused of molesting his daughter. The point is, if it’s true, maybe he did something at one of our parties. God knows we had enough of them. In a house that large, who the hell knows what went on?”

“Maybe,” he said again.

He returned the letter. I folded it and stuck it in my shirt pocket, next to my heart.

“So your daughter lives in College Park?” Hooker said.

I nodded.

“And this is why you suddenly decided to make the trip, right? You plan to see her?”

“What would you do?”

“The same thing, brother. I’d have to tell her I’m innocent to her face.”

“I don’t think she’ll talk to me.”

“She doesn’t have to talk. She has to listen.”

“She might not even let me in the house.”

“How long’s it take to say I didn’t do it?”

“Then you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“It’s not a matter of right or wrong. It’s necessary.”

I nodded.

“This is an affront to your character,” Hooker said. “The ultimate affront. Helen gave her a very distorted view of who you are, in my opinion, and you may not be able to change her mind, probably can’t, but you can give her something to think about. You drove across the goddamn country to look her in the eye and tell her you didn’t molest her.”

Without either of us noticing, the waitress had arrived with a coffee pot. She was a large woman with an outgoing manner and easy smile. She stood at the end of the table now, looking very interested in our conversation.

“Maybe you have an idea,” Hooker said, looking up at her.

“Pardon me?”

“We’re working on a movie plot. A man is falsely accused by his daughter of sexual abuse. We’re wondering if he should confront her or not.”

“You write for the movies?”

“He does,” said Hooker. “I’m just an idea man.”

“Wow. Did you write anything I might have seen?”

“You see Rain Man?” Hooker asked.

“I loved that movie!”

Hooker gestured my way. I glared at him, then smiled at the waitress.

“I should get your autograph,” said the waitress.

Hooker quickly took out a napkin from the dispenser and dropped it in front of me.

“Would you?” the waitress asked, taking out her pen.

I scribbled a name on the napkin. It wasn’t my own. It was Red Hooker.

The waitress retrieved the napkin and broke into her signature grin. Then she hurried away to show the cashier.

“Harmless fun,” Hooker said before I could ask what the hell that was about. “And I saved your ass if you think about it. You want her to think you’re a pervert?”

“Why am I laughing if I feel like shit?”

“Because it’s the nature of things, Bear. It’s the nature of things.”

6: Are we there yet?

I knew that such a long road trip would include spells of boredom, especially since we were trying to get to our destination as directly and quickly as weak bladders, bad backs, and nicotine fits permitted. We were allowing no time for side trips and spontaneous visits to museums or historical landmarks. We’d take care of all that on the return trip. But I did not expect boredom to arrive as early as our second day on the road. It hit us both almost at once.

“Jesus!” Hooker yelled without preface. “Are we there yet?”

We were back on the Interstate after breakfast, which had turned from the river to head south through the Blue Mountains and toward the Wallawas and Idaho beyond. A country music radio station played in the background.

“Enjoying the trip so far?” I asked, grinning.

“How many days did you say this would take?”

“I don’t know. A week and a half.”

“Three thousand miles, right?”

“A bit less.”

“Five hundred miles a day is six days.”

“I don’t think we can do that much. That’s over eight hours a day.”

“Drive faster.”

“Try a little patience.”

Hooker squirmed, then turned up the radio. Some country song I didn’t recognize was playing. Merle Haggard was the last country singer whose songs I enjoyed. In the distance, the Wallowa mountains reminded me of a summer long ago when I’d rented a cabin on the lake and written a screenplay on assignment in two weeks. The little town of Joseph had been a frequent escape for me in those days, a place to work without interruption or temptation. The last time I’d visited, a decade ago, Joseph already had turned into a touristy, artsy façade.

I turned down the music during a commercial.

“What we need,” I said, “is a strategy for passing the time.”

“A strategy? My, oh my.”

“An activity. Something to pass the time, asshole.”

“What, you want me to sing or something?”

“Please spare me.”

Hooker smiled. He knew he was the worst singer in the western world. He loved music, especially jazz and blues, but his attempt at singing was something like chalk screeching across a blackboard. Or what used to be called a blackboard. They were green now, or white requiring erasable markers.

After a silence I said, “I need a distraction. I’m going crazy here. I can’t believe what Stephanie thinks about me.”

“I can’t believe it either, brother. Helen—“

He cut himself off. He’d already made his point.

We drove a while longer in silence.

I said, “We can rap.”

“Pardon me?”

“The sixties aren’t dead. We can rap.”

“You think the sixties aren’t dead?”

“They never died. They just got usurped by the mainstream.”

“Rap about what?”

“Well, we can pick a topic and rap about it. A different topic every day.”

Hooker thought a moment.

“Is this like The Canterbury Tales?”

I laughed.

“That’s an idea, too. Take turns telling stories. But this is more like Tuesdays With Morrie.”

“Heavy, heavy.”

“Not necessarily. We can rap about lighter things than the meaning of life.”

“Sex,” said Hooker.

“You want to start?”

“Too early in the morning to talk about sex.”

“I was always a morning man myself.”

“Notice you said was.”

I grinned.

“One point for your side.”

Hooker said, “So why don’t we each make a list of subjects we want to rap about? Then we take turns and pick a topic from our list.”

“Now you’re thinking.”

“You got anything to write with?”

“Not handy.”

“You’re a writer and don’t have a notebook handy?”

“Retired writer. Sort of. I got something in my suitcase.”

“I need something to write on.”

“We’ll stop at the next convenience market. We need gas soon anyway.”

This satisfied Hooker, and I turned the music back up.

A bit farther down the Interstate, we passed a hitchhiker standing at the end of an on-ramp. She was the first hitchhiker we’d seen and a sight to behold, a young woman with spiked pink hair dressed entirely in black. She had a backpack and a guitar case.

“Jesus Christ,” Hooker said as we zoomed past her. He turned around in his seat to look. “I think she’s wearing black lipstick. And nose rings.”

“A punk rocker.”

“Is that what you call them?”

“I think so.”

“You get students who look like that?”

“Not for a while. Actually she looks out of fashion.”

“So if you have a nose ring, and get a cold, can you sneeze bubbles?”

Hooker laughed like hell at this and lightly hit me on the arm. He was feeling good and cranked up the radio some more. The station was finally playing someone I recognized, an old song by Hank Snow about a blue velvet gown. For a moment, cruising down the Interstate with the music and the morning sunshine, I felt like I was on vacation and not on a personal pilgrimage to defend my soul.

In Oregon you can’t fill up your own gas tank. It spoils you. We had crossed into Idaho before stopping for gas and writing supplies for Hooker, and I was fumbling with the electronic pump, trying to get my credit card to register, while Hooker shopped in the convenience market. I’d barely started pumping gas by the time he returned.

“Gas pumps get more complicated every year,” I mumbled and headed for the john.

When I returned, Hooker was holding out my receipt for me. For some reason I saved the damn things in an envelope in the glove compartment, though I never looked at them again.

Back on the road, Hooker started writing in the tablet he’d bought.

“Okay, I’ve got my list,” he finally said. “You want me to drive so you can make yours?”

“What’s your list?”

“I’m not telling. You have to come up with your own ideas.”

“I’m not going to steal your ideas. I mean, what’s to steal? I thought we were trying to decide what to rap about.”

“Right. I got my list of topics. You make yours. Pull over and I’ll drive.”

“I’ll tell you what to write down.”

“Why don’t you want me to drive?”

“Because you’re out of practice, and I’m more comfortable driving myself.”

“Asshole.”

“Topics to discuss,” I said, thinking aloud.

“Now I’m your goddamn secretary.”

There was a long silence.

Hooker said, “A college professor can’t even think of anything to talk about.”

“Okay, okay. In no particular order. Sex, I’m sure you’ve got that one. Women, love, lust—”

“Slow down.”

I smiled. Hooker was actually writing this shit down.

“Sports, history, the good old days, music, literature, politics, religion.”

“Wait a minute,” Hooker said, scribbling away. In a moment he said, “Okay.”

“That should be enough to get us started. So when do we begin?”

“No time like the present. You’re first.”

“Why am I first?”

“Because you’re the college professor.”

“Retired college professor.”

“Once a professor, always a professor. You have more familiarity with the Socratic

method.”

“Listen to the man.”

“Better to lead a discussion. Better to pass the time on this boring Interstate. Why aren’t we taking the scenic route there and the Interstates back?”

“Because we want to get there sooner rather than later.”

“So you can look up your daughter.”

I shot him a look that must have revealed how quickly my mood could change.

Hooker said, “I know how you feel. I really do. Let’s talk about something else. Let’s rap. You want me to start?”

“I’ll start.”

“What’s the topic?”

“I’ve forgotten them already.”

“Asshole.”

He read me back my list of topics.

“Sports,” I said. “Let’s rap about sports.”

7: Rap #1 – Sports, now & then

“Compared to the fifties,” I began, “sports suck. Especially professional sports. What’s the difference? Lack of team spirit. Lack of personal character and class. Today team sports are a game of inflated egos. Look at professional football. Some lineman sacks the quarterback. Big deal. That’s his job. That’s what he gets paid to do. So what does he do? He does a little dance and pounds his chest and struts around like he’s the best lineman of all time. What an asshole.”

“And how they carry on after scoring a touchdown!” Hooker put in.

“Exactly. All that showoff garbage. Can you imagine Huge McElhenny doing a dance after scoring a touchdown?”

“No way! Or Jim Brown, Alan Ameche, Joe Perry, Gayle Sayers.”

“It’s disgusting. And they’re all millionaires.”

“More millionaires are sitting on the bench,” said Hooker.

“You got that right.”

“You know what started it?”

“Expansion.”

“And free agency,” Hooker added. “No player is loyal to a team anymore.”

“Exactly. I mean, it used to be every team, no matter how far down in the standings, had its superstar. The Pirates had Ralph Kiner. Know what I mean?”

“I do,” said Hooker. “There was stability. You rooted for the home team. You knew all the players and knew they’d still be around tomorrow.”

“They played on grass, for God’s sake! I can’t believe they started playing on carpet.”

“Sports heroes used to be heroes, somebody to look up to.”

“Exactly. When I was a kid, I used to collect autographs.” I told the story again, even though Hooker had heard it many times before, about how as kids a friend and I would go to the Green Hotel in Pasadena, where I grew up, to get autographs from visiting teams coming in to play the Los Angeles Rams. On one occasion, my hero, Hugh McElhenny, asked Roger and me to help him pick out a birthday present for his nephew. We spent an entire afternoon with him! It was like hanging out with God.

“Once McElhenny was asked to compare college ball and pro ball,” I continued, again telling Hooker what he’d heard countless times. “I like pro ball all right, he said. But I don’t like the salary cut.”

Hooker said, “I ever tell you about meeting Archie Moore in an airport?”

Of course he had. Many times. He told me again.

“Now there was a gentleman,” Hooker concluded. “There was a man with class.”

“That’s what jocks don’t have today. Nobody has any class. I think Cassius Clay started it.”

I glanced at Hooker. He looked at me with narrow eyes. I continued.

“He’s the template for egomania in sports, right? He started the loud, flamboyant, show-offy style. The media loved it, nurtured it. Now any third string jock has to strut around like Cassius Clay.”

“Mohammed Ali,” Hooker corrected me. “Who was one of the great heavyweights of all time.”

Boxing was Hooker’s sport, not mine.

I said, “You can defend his skill but you can’t say he had class. He was a loudmouth.”

“He was psyching his opponents.”

“In the beginning maybe, but it became his trademark even after he’d established how good he was.”

“He had the balls to live by his convictions,” Hooker said.

“I understand he’s one of your heroes, Red. What I’m saying is, the rampant arrogance in sports today may well have begun with him.”

“Maybe.”

After a silence I said, “I feel sorry for kids today. You look up to a jock and he ends up beating his wife or doing drugs or creaming some asshole in a bar. At the very best, he’s just an arrogant jerk who couldn’t walk in the shoes of a player from the fifties.”

“I don’t know about that. Records keep getting broken. Jocks must be getting better.”

“Improved technology, sure. Steroids and all the other enhancement drugs they take. We’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg. Soon we’ll be building robots that break all the records, too, but so what? Where is the team spirit? Where is the humility? Where are the jocks a kid can look up to?”

“They do look up to them now,” said Hooker. “That’s the problem. You watch a basketball game in the park lately? Kids after school or on the weekend? They strut around as much as their heroes. They obviously look up to them and mimic them.”

“That’s depressing.”

“But there it is.”

“Arrogance begets arrogance.”

Hooker said, “Parents can be just as bad. Look at Little League games. Parents cussing out the umpire, screaming at their kids, even getting in fights.”

“Winning matters too much.”

“Maybe it always mattered too much.”

I said, half singing, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I think it was true once. When I was a kid and played what used to be called sandlot ball, sometimes I was on the winning team, sometimes the losing, but the game was fun no matter what side I was on. It was sports. It was fun. Winning or losing was just what happened on a particular day. Didn’t you feel that way?”

“Yeah. But it’s different if it’s your job, the way you make your living. Because then winning means more money.”

“It always comes down to money, doesn’t it?”

“The bottom line.”

“You know what I like to watch these days? Women’s sports, like basketball and soccer. You still get a sense of team spirit.”

“Not to mention all those young things in shorts and tight bras,” said Hooker.

“Very funny, asshole.”

“You don’t notice things like that, right? What are you, senile?”

“It’s frosting on the cake. I go because the games are exciting. It’s sports for sports sake.”

“Or sports as intellectual masturbation,” said Hooker.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nobody watches young women in skimpy clothing for the love of sports. Unless it’s bedroom sports.”

“Everything isn’t reduced to sex.”

“Of course it is,” said Hooker.

And so it went, until I glanced at the clock on the dashboard and saw that it was past lunch time. I took the next exit and drove several miles into a small town in Idaho called Mountain Home.

Mountain Home was one of those typical small western towns, with its Main Street lined with brick and stone buildings, everything square and squat and right-angled. It didn’t take too much imagination to picture horses instead of cars on the street. I found a café and parked in front of it.

We barely had settled in with our hamburgers when Hooker said, “My favorite sport is boxing. One on one. As basic as competition can get.”

I remembered in the Army how Hooker used to drag me to an all-night movie house playing Fights of the Century, where we’d drink the bottles of beer or wine we had snuck in.

“And poker,” said Hooker. “There’s an underrated sport.”

“Poker isn’t a sport.”

“Of course it’s a sport.”

“Poker is a game.”

“Same difference.”

“A game isn’t necessarily a sport,” I said, my voice rising.

“Of course it is. I think the terms are pretty much interchangeable.”

“I assure you they aren’t.”

“What are you, playing the intellectual snob card? To most people, a sport and a game are the same thing. You don’t believe me? Let’s take a survey. Miss!”

Gesturing to the waitress, Hooker hit a glass of orange juice, knocking it to the floor. The glass shattered and liberated a tiny orange pool.

The waitress hurried over and was about to speak until she saw Hooker, who had risen to his feet. She looked terrified.

“A sport is a game is a sport, madam!” Hooker said. Then he mumbled, “I need a smoke,” and stepped toward the door.

The waitress stared at me, still speechless.

I pulled out my money clip and peeled off enough for lunch and a set of new glasses.

“This should cover it,” I said.

The waitress took the money and stared at it.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll finish my lunch now.”

“Of course. I’ll get this cleaned up right away.”

“There’s no hurry on my account.”

But a bus boy was already on his way with broom and mop.

I finished my burger and left. The car was parked right outside the café but Hooker wasn’t anywhere to be found. Then I heard a shrill whistle.

Hooker was across the street, up at the corner, waving his arms.

What now? I crossed the street and headed his way, trying to look casual about it.

“I have proof,” said Hooker as I arrived.

He was standing in front of a small wooden building identified as the library.

“Follow me if you dare.”

He led me inside to a large dictionary, which he had bookmarked in two places. He opened the page at the first bookmark and read, “Sport: physical activity engaged in for pleasure.” He turned to the other bookmark. “Game: activity engaged in for diversion or amusement.” He gave me his bad-toothed grin. “I rest my case.”

“Let me see that.”

I looked at the definition of game. Then I turned to the definition of sport.

“You editorialized,” I said, then read the definition of sport again, with my own emphasis.

“Physical activity engaged in for pleasure.” Growing excited, I flipped back and read again.

“Game: a physical or mental competition.”

Now it was my turn to grin.

“There’s a huge difference right there,” I said. “Sport is always physical. A game is sometimes mental. Obviously poker is a mental game and not a sport.”

“Let me see that,” Hooker said and reached for the dictionary but I put my arms in the way, stopping him from turning the pages. We arm-wrestled over access to the dictionary. Finally Hooker faked me out with a move and grasped a page of the dictionary. I quickly recovered, grabbing his arm, and in the struggle for control of the page, it suddenly tore with an audible rip. We both froze as the librarian rushed over.

“Gentlemen, please!”

The librarian, a white-haired woman, stared at the torn dictionary in horror.

“I need a smoke,” said Hooker and beelined out of there.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, reaching for my money clip. I dropped three twenties onto the dictionary. “I think this should cover it.”

When I came out onto the porch, Hooker said, “You’re a poor loser, brother.”

“Bullshit. Poker isn’t a sport because it isn’t physical.”

“The hell it isn’t physical. I’ve seen poker games where fights started. I’ve seen poker games where somebody got shot. Not physical, my ass.”

I let the matter rest. There was no more discussion of sports for the rest of the day.

8: Rap #2 – Love & Lust

We spent our second night at a motel about half an hour past Twin Falls. Our sleeping arrangements were to share one room with two beds, but by our second night on the road, staring up at the ceiling while Hooker snored, wheezed, and coughed beside me, I considered making

the investment of my own motel room. Hooker was one of those people who went out like a light as soon as his head hit the pillow – and then made all variety of strange sleeping sounds to keep anyone near him awake. I, on the other hand, had the writer's occupational hazard of a lively consciousness into which voices, old and new, spoke to me with unrelenting energy. Some wanted their stories written, others bitched about their stories already written. Now and again the voice was my own, usually giving some kind of acceptance speech or another, winning the Oscar for Best Screenplay, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the National Book Award for my unwritten novel. But now, of course, my mind invented scenarios for the confrontation with my daughter, none of them with the Hollywood happy ending I was so used to writing. Hooker sputtered in oblivion while I tossed and turned, my head filled with stressful possibilities.

In the morning, I awoke to an empty room, feeling tired. After visiting the bathroom, I stepped into my pants and opened the curtains to find Hooker outside, smoking a cigarette. After I'd quit smoking, Hooker insisted a man needed at least one active vice. I suppose mine was megalomania.

I opened the door, and the warm desert morning rushed over me with the sun. I loved it.

"How long you been up?" I asked.

"Long enough to read the paper and have coffee. You'll never guess what I saw a while ago."

"A hooker come out of a room."

"That young lady we passed with the pink hair and nose ring? She was sleeping in the back of that Chevy Cavalier. Same model as yours, isn't it? She hopped out about twenty minutes ago. Caught a ride not ten minutes later, right in front of the motel. A trucker stopped for her. Probably expects to get a blow job for his trouble."

"You sound envious."

"Me, envious of a blowjob? What a concept."

His bad teeth looked worse than usual but the eyes were sparkling like the morning sun.

"You ready for breakfast?" Hooker asked.

Back on the road, we had driven for almost an hour before Hooker said, "Okay, my turn to pick the topic. Sex."

"Oh, boy."

"Or to make it more poetic for your academic sensibilities, Love and Lust. You want to go first?"

"Be my guest."

"A pleasure. America's roots are Puritan. The Puritans were totally fucked up about sex, and we've been fucked up about sex ever since."

"Is that a pun?"

"America can't separate sex from sin."

"Okay, you suggest an historical context. What's the difference between love and lust?"

"How's the cliché go? Men give love in order to get sex. Women give sex in order to get love."

"I'm not sure I buy that."

"Okay, professor, your turn. Fill me in."

"The Greeks handled all this much better because they had a different vocabulary than we do. They had three words for love: *Fidelia*, *eros* and *agape*. Roughly translated as friendship, sex and spiritual love, soul love. What's interesting about this is our word infidelity. Note that its

root meaning is a betrayal of friendship. Not extracurricular sex. We call betrayal infidelity, not inerosity.”

“Inerosity! I like that. That’s an interesting point, brother. Never thought of infidelity quite like that. But it’s meant fucking somebody else for a long time now. So I’m not sure what the point is.”

“To go back to your Puritan roots, maybe if infidelity was understood as a betrayal of friendship, then screwing somebody else would be permitted as long as the friendship remained strong.”

“So you can fuck somebody not your wife if she approves?”

“Something like that.”

“The Greeks believed in open marriages!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.”

Hooker said, “The bottom line is, man is not biologically constructed to be sexually faithful. So marriage is against human nature.”

“Spoken like a man with three ex-wives.”

“Experience counts, asshole.”

“Fidelity probably came into being for the welfare of children.”

“Bullshit. Relatives can raise a kid just fine. It’s the sex and sin thing again. The Puritans went apeshit when anybody had a good time. Especially a sensual good time.”

I said, “Let me play devil’s advocate. Now and again you meet someone, a couple, who have been married for fifty years and still act like teenagers groping at one another. It’s rare, I know, but it happens. When it does, don’t you think, now that’s the way it’s supposed to be? You get your best friend and your lover in the same body. How could love be any better than this?”

“That’s rare – and you never really know the dark side of a relationship.”

“If there is one.”

“There’s always a dark side,” said Hooker. “Anyway, I thought the sixties were getting closer to sexual utopia. Free love. You meet someone at a party, you hit it off, so you go home and screw your brains out. We’re animals, Bear. We should start acting like it.”

“All that free love was before AIDS.”

Hooker ignored the comment and said. “Free love. I loved the sixties.”

I remembered a time in the sixties when Hooker was separated from Jennifer and going with a graduate student named Hannah at the University of Idaho. His letters were filled with rhapsodies about sexual exploits in downtown doorways, apartment hallways, public parks and buses. He seemed to be making up for some kind of lost youth. When the young woman got her Ph.D., she went off to teach in the Midwest and Hooker stayed behind. Eventually he dropped out of school and repaired his marriage.

“Free love ignores one important human quality,” I said. “Jealousy.”

“Jealousy,” Hooker repeated, as if testing the word for meaning.

“We like to keep our love mates to ourselves,” I said. “Our personal property.”

“Not everywhere. Remember the story about the Eskimos? Your friend comes in shivering from a long trek and you let your wife warm him up.”

“Heard the story but I don’t know if it’s actually true.”

“It’s true,” said Hooker.

We drove a while in silence.

“Your best sex ever,” said Hooker.

“Say what?”

“I’ll tell if you’ll tell. I probably already know. Sally in the early years, right?”

Yes and no. When Sally and I first got together, when we moved in together and I immediately concluded that this bright tall slim blonde was my soul mate, a conclusion I retained until she told me some years later she was physically attracted to women and had decided to explore this attraction, in those early lustful years sex was as urgent, easy and necessary as breathing.

But just as I was about to reply with the obvious, someone else came to mind.

“Sally was a very, very long time ago. Actually I have clearer memories of Lilly.”

Lilly, a dark gypsy of a girl, had been my graduate student in the early 90s. Later, just before I retired, we ran into one another at the Oregon coast, myself on a retreat from my normal routine, she lamenting the loss of a lover, and somehow we ended up playing musical motel rooms through the long weekend. She lived in Seattle now, teaching at the community college, and for a few weeks we tried the commuting lovers routine but neither of us were much into it. The memory of a special weekend threatened to be lost if we continued, so we mutually agreed to reduce the relationship to occasional phone calls and exchanging Christmas cards.

Hooker said, “Refresh my memory about Lilly.”

I filled him in.

“What Lilly and Sally had in common,” I said, “was a determined aggression in bed, making sure they got what they wanted. They weren’t inhibited or shy about sex.”

“Know what you mean. I love nymphos, too.”

“Well, not that exactly. Just confident and comfortable with their sexuality. Who was your best sex with?”

“Guess.”

Obviously not the mother of his sons, Joe and John. Hooker often had strayed in his first marriage with Jennifer because he wasn’t getting what he wanted, especially blow jobs, from the proper girl he had knocked up in high school and married. Still he ended up staying in the marriage for the benefit of his sons, though the gods dealt him the irony of outliving them. Hooker’s second wife had been a black woman, a jazz singer, named Carolyn, who eventually left him for her business manager. Since the third wife had resulted from a drunken drive to Reno after a party, the marriage lasting only a few months, I guessed it might be Carolyn and said so.

“Close. Maybe even right, but it’s not who I was thinking about.”

“The grad student in Idaho.”

“Bingo.”

“I should’ve guessed her first. You sent me a lot of hot letters about her.”

“There’s a close second,” said Hooker, “but I’m not sure I should tell you. You won’t like it.”

I turned and looked at him. He wasn’t grinning, which I took to mean he was serious. He had a secret to tell me.

“Who?” I asked.

“Sally.”

I almost ran off the road.

“I shouldn’t have told you,” said Hooker.

Sometimes the gods cooperate and offer relief in the middle of a crisis. In this instance, it took the form of a rest stop. I pulled into it, parked and shut off the engine.

“You’re telling me you and Sally had sex,” I said.

“Jesus, Bear, not when you were together. You know I’d never do that.” I waited for more.

“You’d already left her. I was visiting Joe in Baltimore, it was the year before the car crash, and I figured, hell, it’s a short drive down to Chesapeake, might as well say hello to Sally. Obviously I wasn’t expecting anything to happen, you’d already filled me in she was a lesbian. So when she seduced me, I was the most surprised guy in the house.”

“If this is your idea of some kind of sick joke...” I couldn’t finish.

“Obviously she did it to get back at you.”

She had reason to. When I learned my soul mate had decided to live the rest of her life in the sensual company of women, I had a kind of mental breakdown. Suddenly the most important thing in the world seemed to be getting one of her students into bed. I picked her favorite one and managed to do the deed in less than a week, having already laid some flirtatious groundwork because the student had been in a play of mine. The campus scandal was major, and I split to Oregon before the vigilantes caught up with me, staying a short while with Hooker and his family before moving on to California, where I found a teaching job.

“She screwed you to get even with me,” I said, as if saying so would make it easier to understand.

“Boy, did she.”

I glared at Hooker.

“Sorry. But that’s the topic at hand. You are perfectly right about her determination to get what she wants. That’s exciting to a man.”

“I can’t believe you’re telling me this.”

“Right, I shouldn’t have.”

“I have to pee.”

In the men’s room, I splashed cold water on my face. I stared at myself in the mirror. I wore a short beard, which was white, but my hair was still brownish. Where the gray sideburns met the hairline looked like the intersection defining a wig. But I looked oldest at the neck in the area under my chin. Whenever I swallowed I released a pouch of loose flesh that a rooster would envy.

Hooker was leaning against the car, smoking.

“It was only once,” said Hooker right off. “A fluke. It was pure payback on her part. I was the vehicle. She knew this would piss you off. That was the point.”

“You still fucked her.”

A lady walking by heard this and her pace quickened.

“I shouldn’t have told you,” said Hooker.

It took me the better part of an hour to get over it. He was right, Sally had manipulated the moment to get back at me, and in a sense it was her loss that it had taken Hooker so long to make his confession.

I broke the long silence as we entered Wyoming.

“Well, at least we can say we’ve slept with the same woman. I think she’s the only one.”

“That’s weird, isn’t it? In the Army we even had different tastes in barmaids and whores.”

“We had the good sense not to compete for women.”

After another silence Hooker asked, “Do you still wake up with a hard-on?”

“Now and again.”

“I need to get laid before I die.”

“Better start working on it.”

“Tell me about it,” Hooker laughed. “What about you? Any prospects?”

I thought immediately of Mary and the open invitation to visit her in Seattle.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I’m too stressed out to think about it.”

“Your daughter?”

“What else?”

“You have to let it go, brother.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Something like that is not in your character.”

“You know it, and I know it. Unfortunately, I think the truth is irrelevant in a situation like this. Guilt by mere accusation, case dismissed.”

“Now you’re depressing me.”

Hooker reached forward and turned up the music, the inevitable country song.

“Hey!” he suddenly shouted. “If we pass her again, let’s pick her up.”

“Pink hair?”

“Why not? Maybe she’ll blow us both.”

“Get real.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

On the radio country lyrics whined about a good old boy in his cups feeling sorry for himself.

“We should have gone through Nevada,” said Hooker. “Stopped at a whore house in Winnemucca. Let’s be sure to do that on the way back.”

“You certainly have sex on the brain all of a sudden.”

“Of a sudden? I still wake up with a hard-on now and again. Besides, we’re too fucking old not to get laid.”

I laughed.

“Isn’t that a contradiction?”

Hooker said, “There are young women who fantasize about getting someone our age in bed. It satisfies latent lust for their father or something. Or grandfather.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“I’m not shitting you. There’s this guy who hangs out at the Starbucks I frequent. White hair, trim, tan, looks like a tennis pro or some goddamn thing. I’ve seen him leave with more than one beauty in her twenties or thirties, believe me. The guy is phenomenal.”

“You and I are not tennis pros,” I said. “We’re not even tan.”

“Fuck that shit. Sexual attraction is all in the attitude. The eyes are the most important organ for the chase. I have great eyes.”

True enough.

“So do you,” said Hooker. “You just don’t realize it. Women like men who are confident about themselves. Sometimes you get into your neglected-writer mode.”

I smiled and shook my head. Hooker was on a roll.

“An egotistical, arrogant writer is more sexy than a writer who thinks he’s a failure,” said Hooker.

“I don’t think I’m a failure. I think I’m marginal. There’s a difference.”

“Whatever. Look, man, you made tons of money in Hollywood. Who cares if no one ever heard of you? You’re a screenplay doctor. You can tell a lady you touched up whatever film you want. Her favorite film, for Christ’s sake! You were the script doctor for her favorite film! You don’t think that will make her pants wet?”

I laughed again.

"I'm damn serious," Hooker said.

"I wish we had a recording of this. Grumpy Old Men Talk About Sex."

"Youthful Old Men Make A Strategy To Get Laid," said Hooker.

"Sounds like too much work to me. You know what I really think about sex at my age? I think it's a cosmic curse. I think it's some joke the gods have played on the male gender. Sure, young women still look good to me. Maybe better than ever because I know their sad destiny. As in, who the hell wants to go to bed with an old lady? And what chance has a dinosaur got with a young woman? Zero to none. So you take care of business, know what I mean? When the biological urge raises its ugly head, hard-on or soft-on as the case may be, you open a magazine or turn on a tape and take care of business yourself. Thirty seconds, a minute or two later, the urge is gone and you're human again."

"I don't know whether that's sick or hilarious," said Hooker.

"No doubt a little of both."

Whether intending to or not, Hooker had lightened the mood, rescuing me at the precipice of obsessing about my daughter's accusation. I let the country music wash all thought away. The Interstate cut through the rugged brown spaciousness of southern Utah, the miles adding up and the destination creeping closer.

9: Rap #3: Wives

"Wives," said Hooker when we were back on the road after a late lunch.

"Oh, boy! Wives. There's a hornet's nest."

"I'll start. The first truism about wives: They are never the woman you courted and married."

"Hear, hear!"

"They become this different person, this social construct, this wife. Wife's rule number one: rule the nest! Keep it in order. The wife is a boss first and foremost. It's biological. She protects the nest."

I picked up the theme.

"So you come home from work tired, wanting nothing more than to relax, have a drink, think of nothing or at least nothing that involves work or responsibility. And what happens? The wife meets you with a list of things to do."

"Sooner rather than later," said Hooker. "The lawn needs mowing. The faucet in the bathroom is dripping. I think we need a new roof. On and on and on."

"You never get a moment's rest and relaxation."

"Because it's always something. Have you paid this bill yet, have you paid that bill yet? Or if you have kids, then it really starts. Something always is wrong, and something always needs fixing."

"The thing is," I said, "she has to keep bringing it up. She doesn't have a concept of just laying back and mellowing out. Worry about it in an hour or a day."

"Or a week."

"It has to be right now," I said.

"The next thing is giving you advice."

"Meddling."

"That's the word, meddling. Wives are born meddlers. They don't know shit about

plumbing and now they're telling you how to change a washer."

"Or saying, Let's call the plumber because if you don't get it right immediately the first time, you're worthless."

"Dear, don't you think blah blah blah."

"Wouldn't you feel better if blah blah blah."

"Endless advice," said Hooker. "Constantly telling you how to live your life."

"She can be thirty pounds overweight but if you're five pounds overweight, boy does she have some advice for you!"

"The boss, the meddler. What else?"

I said, "The whiner."

"There you go!"

"Poor me, poor me. My back aches. I couldn't sleep because of your snoring. I think so-and-so insulted me at the party. Worry, worry, worry."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch."

"Or getting on your case about cleanliness. You left a dirty sink after you shaved! She leaves makeup all over the sink, it makes you want to puke when you see it, but she has the audacity to get on your case anyway."

Hooker said, "You leave a few skid marks on your underwear. Horror of horrors! What a goddamn uncouth slob you are! Meanwhile she piles dirty dishes in the sink, piles all her goddamn shit where it doesn't belong. Her shoes all over the goddamn place. Her bras all over the goddamn place. She makes the bathroom smell like a laboratory."

I said, "Now try and remember the woman you courted. Try to remember the funny, sexy, spontaneous woman who won your heart. Where the hell did she go?"

"It was a conspiracy from the first sexy smile. She'll do whatever it takes to get control of your sperm. Only then, when she's in control, will you see her true colors."

"You think it's all biological?"

"Of course it is," said Hooker. "The woman is built to raise the kids and rule the nest, make sure the kids get fed. She needs the sperm of a strong partner, that's all she needs sex for. After that, to hell with him, she'd as soon be a lesbian. Women are on her wave length."

"Different wave lengths for sure. It's amazing men and women have anything to do with one another."

"They wouldn't – except for biology," said Hooker.

"What's the first difference between men and women that no one can dispute? Women have periods. Everything follows from this fact. Women bleed. What's the old saying? Never trust anyone who bleeds for three days and lives."

"Cruel."

"Periods, and later child birth, make women practical. Biology socks it to them and gives them no other choice. Men, on the other hand, have no anchor like this, biology to them is just another idea. Men live in their heads. Men are dreamers. Hence also romantics."

"Interesting," I said.

"Asshole."

"What?"

"Interesting means fuck you, you're full of shit."

"I just haven't thought of it in quite those terms."

Hooker said, "You ever eat out someone who was on the rag?"

"What a delightful subject before dinner."

“I did once. Man, oh man! Talk about one excited lady. Something about the marriage of orgasm and menstruation pushed her over the edge. Incredible.”

“Thanks so much for sharing that.”

“What are you, senile?”

“No more than you, I trust. But what you said about women having periods – maybe you have a point.”

“But men have their biological charge, too,” said Hooker. “To screw as many women as possible. That’s why marriage is such a crock. It’s against the laws of nature.”

“Some species are monogamous,” I said.

“Not ours. Marriage is a religious conspiracy established by religious fanatics who believe sex is sinful. That’s what the Garden of Eden is about. You have to figure out a way to make sex sinful so you have an excuse to keep man’s natural instincts imprisoned by the institution of marriage. It’s like my man Mailer wrote long ago, we’re all Prisoners of Sex.”

“Bertrand Russell wrote that marriage exists for children. To get a marriage license, the woman would have to be pregnant.”

“Right on,” said Hooker.

“What if God is a woman? He created marriage to help mothers tend the nest and all that. Marriage is family stability.”

“That’s cultural relativism or whatever the fuck you call it. But God a woman – what a concept.”

Hooker laughed.

“God a woman,” I repeated. “It’s no wonder everything is so screwed up.”

“No, not possible. If God was a woman, we’d have become extinct long ago. Women are emotional wimps. You think women can beat off the dinosaurs? Not a fucking chance. They’d have had the whole goddamn species for dinner. We’d be extinct.”

“Weren’t dinosaurs vegetarians?”

“Somebody would have had us for dinner, believe me. Fortunately it was up to men to defend the species. Men are natural warriors. Survival of the fittest.”

“Weren’t there Amazon warriors?”

“The exception that proves the rule,” said Hooker, as if this explained everything. “Women start bawling at the sight of blood. Where the hell would that have gotten us throughout history?”

I said, “I just thought of this. Relating back to love. All great love affairs are adulterous. Think about it. Marriage and passion are contradictory terms.”

“As I’ve been telling you.”

“Passionate love needs an obstacle. Somebody’s already married to somebody else. The families don’t approve. The lovers belong to different classes or cultures or neighborhoods. You need to take great risks to express your overpowering love. Marriage is too safe.”

“Marriage is too boring,” said Hooker.

“Marriage is too settled.”

“Marriage really sucks. I can’t believe I did it three times.”

I said, “Marriage is too literal! That’s it. Everything wrong with the culture goes back to Protestant Literality, to the loss of mystery, the loss of metaphor.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Bear?”

“A pet theory of mine.”

“Save it for another day. I need a smoke.”

“Next rest stop.”

“It better come quick. I also need to pee.”

“I need to pee myself.”

“Old men’s bladders. There’s a topic.”

“I can get depressed enough,” I said, “without thinking about the dysfunction of my bladder.”

“Can you still get a piss on?”

“Some mornings, I don’t know whether I’ve got a piss on or the evidence of an erotic dream I can’t remember.”

“Often?”

“Often enough,” I said.

“How often is that?”

“Enough to let me pretend I’m not as old as I actually am.”

Hooker said, “Old age, Jesus. Now I’m getting depressed.”

We were silent till we passed a sign for a rest stop.

“Piss call,” I said.

“I need a smoke. Are you exhausted? Rapping wears you out.”

“Funny thing about wives, though,” I said. “Sometimes I wish I was still married.”

“When was the last time you thought that?”

“Last night. Listening to you snore.”

“Asshole.”

“Seriously. Sometimes I really miss it. As difficult as a wife can be, it beats living alone.”

“Bear, are you telling me you’re thinking of getting married again?”

“Of course not.”

“Who to, that lady you had brunch with?”

“I’m not getting married.”

I took the turn off to the rest stop.

Hooker said, “Sometimes I miss being married, too.”

10: The Hitchhiker

Our destination on day four was Cheyenne. I decided this in bed, sipping the coffee Hooker had brewed after recovering from a morning coughing fit. The coffee made, he poured himself a cup and stepped outside for a smoke.

In bed I looked at the Western States map I’d brought in from the car after dinner. Cheyenne was about three hundred miles away, just about perfect. I liked to cruise at 55 or 60 in the slow lane, making about five hours of driving to Cheyenne, add two more hours for a lunch break and several pit stops to stretch and pee, and for Hooker to feed his nicotine cough, all of which added up to about seven hours on the road, which was plenty for a couple of old farts whose butts and backs were sensitive to long spells of sitting.

This decided, our next decision was whether to have breakfast before or after hitting the road. Hooker was hungry, and we ended up in a coffee shop with Formica tables and a counter, where we sat for no other reason than that lunch counters were getting as rare as the liver and onions we’d found on the menu last night.

We were on our way, almost two hours down the Interstate, when we pulled into a rest stop. Hooker saw her first.

“Look what we have here,” he said.

The pink-haired nose-ringed lady was sitting on a concrete picnic table, staring off at nothing in particular. She didn't have her guitar any more.

“I have to pee,” I said, which was a mistake. I didn't realize this until I returned and saw Hooker at the picnic table. Apparently he had given her a cigarette.

I wasn't sure what to do. Was Hooker just making casual conversation or did he have something else in mind, like offering her a ride? The mere thought tightened my stomach muscles.

I waited by the car, wondering if I should join them. Before I decided, they both came my way, cigarettes in hand.

“This is Angel,” Hooker said. “She needs a ride to Cheyenne.”

“Hey, man,” said Angel.

At close range, I saw she had silver rings hanging from her eyebrows, lips and ears. Her spiked hair looked as shiny and stiff as pink plastic. Her black lips looked like tar. I guessed she was younger than her hard attire suggested, probably in her early twenties at most.

Hooker quickly opened the back door of the Chevy, then took Angel's back pack. Before tossing it onto the seat, he gave me a long look that read, Speak now or forever hold your peace. I didn't have the energy to argue.

“I'm Robert,” I told Angel. “Cheyenne it is.”

“I really appreciate this.”

Hooker said, “Our pleasure.”

He made a broad gesture for her to get in, which she did.

I immediately felt the change Angel's presence introduced to our trip. I found myself putting on the trusty social mask, the kind of thing one wore at business meetings or job interviews, anywhere you were on guard not to make a wrong impression. No one spoke until we were back on the Interstate, cruising again in the slow lane.

Angel said, “Where you guys going?”

“To Washington D.C. to see the Kerouac Scroll,” said Hooker.

“What's the Kerouac Scroll?”

Hooker told her.

“That's really awesome,” Angel said. “If I ever write a book, I think I'll do it just like that. It's so cool to end up with a book you just roll up.”

“It's a very old tradition,” said Hooker. “What would your book be about?”

“My wild and crazy life.”

“Like losing your guitar?”

“You passed me before, right? I left it in a truck.”

“Sorry to hear that. So what are some other highlights of your wild and crazy life?”

“Well, I just quit doing tricks three years in Nevada. Legal, I mean. In Winnemucca mostly. You won't believe some of the experiences I've had.”

Hooker shot me a grin and his message was clear: We'd picked up a young professional prostitute! He continued the interrogation.

“I can imagine. But you don't look old enough to be a hooker.”

“I hate that word.”

“My apologies. How would you describe your employment?”

“I'm a provider of human services.”

“That makes sense,” said Hooker.

“Male services,” I said under my breath, not expecting anyone to hear. I was wrong.

“Human services,” Angel repeated. “You’d be surprised how many women and couples come to a house.”

“Must you do whatever is requested?” Hooker asked.

“No way. Like I don’t do anal, and I don’t do kissing, and I don’t pee for anybody’s kicks. I don’t do animals either. One cowboy brought in his greyhound and wanted me to screw it while he watched and took pictures. You wouldn’t believe what people want to do to get off.”

Hooker nodded and glanced my way for a reaction. It would have been a great time to roll my eyes, which is one of the major screenwriting clichés. I raised my eyebrows instead.

“Anyway,” Angel went on, “do you mind if I catch a nap? I haven’t been getting my beauty rest lately.”

“No problem,” said Hooker.

She appeared to be out like a light. I wanted to talk privately with Hooker but already had learned that our guest had been hearing. Hooker just grinned at me, flashing his bad teeth, and I kept shaking my head. We drove mostly in silence for another hour, stopping at the next rest stop. The only exception was when I suddenly blurted out, “Rebecca West!”

“What?”

“The main difference between men and women is that men are lunatics and women are idiots. A character in a Rebecca West novel says it.”

I’d cited the quotation at dinner last night, a contribution to our continuing discussion about the differences between the sexes, but couldn’t remember who had said it.

In the back seat, Angel made a sound and stirred. I put an index finger to my lips, and we drove on silently to the rest stop.

When Angel was out of hearing range, on her way to the rest room, I took Hooker’s arm.

“As far as Cheyenne,” I said. “No farther under any conditions. Understood?”

“What’s the real problem here?”

“When I agreed to this trip, having a pink-haired prostitute with rings hanging off her flesh was not part of the bargain.”

“I bet she has nipple rings.”

“Red, listen to yourself.”

“You’re exploding this into something it isn’t. Calm down and think logically. We are doing a favor for a hooker. A human services provider. What are the odds she’ll do us a favor in return?”

“Don’t tell me you think she’ll ...”

“You can’t even say it, can you? I had no idea you’d turned into such a goddamn prude.”

“I’m not a prude. I have serious things on my mind, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Ah.”

For a rare moment, Hooker was at a loss for words. But only for a moment.

“Okay, this is just between me and her. But I’ll be up front with you. I think I can get a blow job out of the deal, and I’m not turning a chance like this down. You okay with that?”

“Red, you can jump in the back seat and fuck your brains out, if you’re still capable of such a thing. I just want you to understand that Cheyenne is as far as we take her.”

“Fair enough.”

“Just so we understand each other.”

Hooker was full of surprises. After everyone had used the facilities, and Hooker and Angel had finished a smoke, we piled back into the Chevy – and Hooker crawled in back with the girl.

“Onward, James!” Hooker shouted in a phony British accent as I pulled away, and Angel laughed like this was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

It was hard to keep my eye off the rearview mirror. From the snippets of activity I witnessed over the next hour, it was impossible to say who was seducing whom. The sex came gradually, after sitting close and whispering, after kissing (something Angel didn’t do in her professional life, I remembered), after cuddling and more kissing – and then I looked into the mirror to find stiff pink hair bobbing up and down over Hooker’s crotch, and I realized he was getting exactly what he had wanted.

The realization of what was happening in the back seat made me feel light-headed. I slowed down, took a deep breath, and turned up the country song on the radio. I couldn’t resist looking in the mirror again and found the same pink rhythm, up and down, up and down. I couldn’t believe what was happening. The situation was somehow very stressful, as if a policeman might pull beside us out of nowhere and arrest everyone for indecent exposure.

Suddenly Hooker grunted. I looked in the mirror. The pink hair was still.

After a silence, I heard Angel cough and looked in the mirror yet again. Angel was looking back at me, and I swear to God she winked.

Hooker caught a nap before we reached Cheyenne. I drove on after they were done, trying to pretend nothing had happened, hoping above all else that no one spoke to me. I just wanted to get to Cheyenne and let Angel out of the car and continue on our journey without her. Then Hooker started snoring, and I couldn’t help but look into the mirror. Angel was getting comfortable, arranging her head on his shoulder, and when she found a fit and closed her eyes, they looked like a strange couple indeed, and for the first time it occurred to me that I might be jealous.

11: A Revised Plan

At the last rest stop before Cheyenne, I followed Hooker into the men’s room. When we were alone, I said, “Where do we drop her off in Cheyenne?”

“I have to talk to her.”

“Front door service, I suppose.”

“Will you relax and let me talk to her?”

He left first, and I went into a stall. When I came outside, I saw Hooker and Angel sitting at a picnic table across the lawn, smoking. I waited in the car.

Hooker arrived alone and came to the door. We talked through the window.

“Actually Cheyenne is just where she catches the Interstate to Denver. She has some business there, then it’s on to New York.”

“No,” I said.

“No what? Look, I explained our situation, and she’s cool about that. I convinced her to spend the night in Cheyenne. I’m getting her a room.”

“You’re getting her a room,” I repeated sarcastically.

“Then we’ll send her on her way in the morning.”

Angel was approaching.

“And if I say no?”

“What’s there to say no to? I’ll give her the money for a room in any case. If you can’t stand having her in the same building, that’s your problem.”

He stepped away to meet her. They exchanged a few remarks and returned to the car.

Hooker opened the back door for Angel, then joined me in front.

I was shocked when Hooker joined me in our room after dinner. He and Angel had sat together in the booth of the restaurant, giving one another gooey eyes and special looks. The looked like the strangest couple on the planet. No one talked much.

For once, Hooker didn't go out like a light. He was reading when I fell asleep first.

Later, at some dark early hour of the morning, I got up to pee. I was back in bed before I realized something was wrong. Hooker wasn't snoring. In fact, his bed was empty.

So he'd joined her after all. Now I feared the worst, and it met me as soon as I opened my eyes in the morning. Hooker was sitting across the room in a stuffed chair. Apparently he'd been waiting for me to wake up.

"We have to talk," he said.

"Right now?"

"I think we'd better."

I leaned up on one elbow and waited.

"Change of plans. I'm going to rent a car and take her to Denver, let her do her business, then take her to New York. After that, I'll meet you at the Smithsonian."

I closed my eyes and opened them. He was still there. He seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

"You can afford this?"

"Actually she has a bit of money herself. Between the two of us, we'll be fine."

"Do you realize how crazy that is?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Hooker. "But not quite as crazy when you understand the context. I'm keeping something from you, brother. I really didn't want to get into it until after we'd made the trip. But sometimes you have to go with the flow, so here it is."

He stopped, searching for the right words.

"Well, there's no right way to say it," Hooker continued. "I have cancer. It's in the lungs and spreading. It's inoperable, and I have a very short calendar. My doctor at the VA says a few months at best. That's another reason for the trip, so we could spend time together. And to see my brother while I can. And now it's the reason I'm going with Wanda. Her real name's Wanda."

I studied him – and believed him. A prank of such proportions would undermine his moral fiber.

"Jesus, Red."

"No sympathy, goddamn it."

"Lung cancer? Damn it, Red, you're still smoking."

"What's the point of quitting now?"

"I'm stunned. I don't know what to say."

"Maybe this sounds crazy, Bear, but I consider what's happened a small miracle. That little lady gives me a lot of pleasure. I have no idea why she's decided to do this for me, unless she actually is an angel, but I have a chance to ride this pony a little longer, and I goddamn well intend to. I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch but there it is."

"This is happening too fast. Let me think a minute."

While I was thinking, I dressed. Hooker waited patiently across the room. My thoughts were scrambled, scattered by too many feelings rushing forward at once. I was stunned, saddened, confused, angry.

I grabbed the road map from the bedside table and looked at it.

“We can catch I-70 in Denver and continue east,” I said. “How long will her errands there take?”

“A day at most.”

“It’s not like we have a deadline.”

“You’ll do this?”

“It beats driving across the country alone. Even if watching you two carry on sometimes turns my stomach.”

“Keep it real, Bear. She’s a pro. I can’t imagine she wouldn’t give you your turn if you want.”

For some reason I laughed. I felt more like crying.

“Just say the word if you want some time with her,” Hooker said. “I’ll go tell her the plan.”

I stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. So the trip across the country was Hooker’s swan song, his parting gesture, and I felt honored to be a part of it even as I found it impossible to imagine what life without him would be like. For half a century he’d been my soul brother, confidante, drinking buddy (booze and later coffee), straight man (as I’d been his). He felt as much a part of me as an arm or leg, and I’d taken him just as much for granted.

I don’t cry often but I cried now, in a gasping, choking sort of way. I undressed again and took a long shower, letting hot needles of water numb my body and mind. Stephanie’s accusation was forgotten for the moment, one horror being replaced by another that was far worse.

12: Denver

Death, having entered the house, now picked out a room and locked itself inside. Hooker had no more to say about it. I couldn’t find words to say anything. Hooker spent time with Angel, and I felt numb, empty, alone in the motel, staring at television without watching it.

The next morning no one was in the mood to get going. We’d chosen our motel off the Interstate just before Cheyenne, which meant we needed to start before or after morning rush hour traffic. In our leisure to check out, we chose the latter. Hooker was with Angel, or Wanda, again, and I could just imagine what kind of orgy they were enjoying while waiting for traffic to disperse. I sat alone in the room, watching CNN parade the usual stories of war, murder and mayhem. None of the news was as depressing as the thought of life without Hooker.

The drive to Denver after morning traffic thinned out was silent. The radio played the usual country and western music – and without even a comment from Angel about it, which surprised me. I thought by now she would have suggested something more current and hip. In fact, she dozed in the back seat, and Hooker, riding shotgun, dozed on and off while leaning against the window, leaving me to my private thoughts and demons. When I pulled off the Interstate in Denver, everyone came to life as if right on cue, their naps not deep enough to ignore the change in the car’s rhythm as we entered the city. Angel immediately sat forward to provide directions to her destination.

We dropped her off in front of a beauty parlor where her sister worked. Hooker asked if this was where we should pick her up later.

“Sure.”

“When?”

Angel made a face and said, “Is four too late?”

Hooker looked at me. I said it was fine.

As we pulled away, I said, “Any suggestions on how to kill four hours?”

“There’s always the public library. And we should get lunch.”

Silences were no longer comfortable now that Hooker’s secret was revealed. I tried to put myself in his place. What would I do if I knew I had only a few months to live? Screw my brains out if I had the opportunity. Angel indeed had dropped into Hooker’s life like an angel.

But not into mine. I couldn’t compete against flesh. What was Fidelia or even Agape against Eros? I imagined that the dying body craved sensuality more than anything. For the time being, Angel was giving Hooker what he needed, as I couldn’t, but the time would come when we would have our moment as only the closest friends could. I was sure of this. Angel was a passing diversion, a blessing in the short run, but before this was over – the trip, his life, our friendship – we were going to share a moment closer than the present silence.

I found the library. A fast food restaurant was up the street from it. We ate first, silently, Hooker reading the sports page of the Denver paper, a quick necessary meal, and then we entered the library to kill some time.

I was in turmoil inside. I wondered if this was what ulcers felt like, a burning sensation in my gut. Hooker had found a book and taken it to a stuffed chair near a window. He seemed to be reading without a care in the world. But I was trapped in a library, feeling like I wanted to scream.

I told Hooker I was going to take a walk. He nodded and returned to reading. I was several steps away before I returned.

“What are you reading?”

Hooker said, “From Here to Eternity.”

Of course. It was a favorite of his. It was a monstrous book to spend a few hours with, but perhaps he was returning to favorite passages.

Outside I took a deep breath, which didn’t relax me at all. I started walking.

I passed two phone booths before I stopped at one. I took a business card out of my wallet and punched numbers.

“Hello?”

“Mary?”

“Yes.”

“This is Robert Bass.”

“Robert! I thought you were driving across the country.”

“I’m in Denver.”

“Well, what a surprise. How are you?”

“I’m not good, Mary. I’m ...”

I couldn’t hold it back any longer. I began sobbing.

“Robert, what’s wrong?”

I regained my composure.

“I’m sorry...”

“What happened?”

“He has cancer.”

“Your friend?”

There was a silence.

“Oh, Robert, I’m so sorry. Is it serious?”

What I thought was coming out as an ironic laugh sounded like a gasp.

“Robert?”

“Terminal. They give him a few months.”

“Oh, my God...”

Another silence.

Mary said, “At least you’re able to spend the time together.”

Not quite. I didn’t expect to see much of Hooker as we continued across the country. In the car, of course, but even if Hooker rode shotgun, Angel would be in back. Perhaps we’d have a few isolated moments alone. Most of the time, I expected, he’d be screwing his brains out or thinking about it or waiting for the next time, time spent with Angel in any case. With Wanda. I needed to start thinking of her as Wanda. She wasn’t an angel, after all. She was a young woman who was either screwed up, eccentric or some combination of each. She’d come between Hooker and me. The bottom line.

“Robert, what is it? Is there something else?”

“No. I’m sorry. I just felt like I needed to talk to someone.”

“I’m so glad you called. I feel, I don’t know, honored. Thank you.”

I exhaled audibly.

“Mary, I shouldn’t lay this stuff on you.”

“I’m glad you called, truly. And I’m so glad you two can spend this time together. That’s so important, Robert.”

Words of wisdom How would she edit them if I told her the truth?

I said, “Yeah, I’m glad we’re together, too. Listen, I left him in the library. I have to go.”

“Thank you for calling me.”

“I feel like I should apologize.”

“Don’t be silly. Call me any time you want. I mean it. Day or night, it doesn’t matter.”

“I may take you up on that.”

“I’m counting on it. I’m a fan, Robert. They had your collection of plays in the library here. I’ve been reading it. You’re a wonderful playwright.”

A small press had published it years ago. A few libraries purchased it, a few productions came out of it. I regarded the book as a failure.

“That seems so long ago.”

“Don’t you dare stop writing. Not with a talent like yours.”

I smiled and realized an elderly woman was waiting for the phone.

“I have to run.”

“You hang in there, Robert. Focus on the positive things. Always on the positive things.”

When I returned to the library, I found Hooker slumped into an uncomfortable posture in the chair, breathing with a heavy rhythm that promised soon to erupt into snoring. I shook him before this happened.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

We hadn’t driven far, going nowhere in particular, when I said, “I called Mary.”

“Who’s Mary?”

“The woman I had brunch with. I told you about her.”

“Right. What for?”

“I had to get some things off my chest.”

Hooker regarded me with new interest, fully awake now.

“You told her about Angel?”

“Wanda,” I corrected him. “No. I didn’t even tell her I’m jealous.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? You can get off with her any time you want. She’s a pro, for

God's sake."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I thought this trip was about us spending time together."

"I see. I don't know what to tell you, brother. This was unexpected. You want me to kick her out, turn all this down?"

I didn't reply.

"It's like a fantasy," Hooker said. "Your final time spent with a beautiful young woman. Well, beautiful once you get past all the metal hanging off her flesh. I was right about nipple rings. She even has a ring in her pussy."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"You should give her a try. It might improve your attitude."

"My attitude? I'm worried about your attitude."

"Bear, that's bullshit. My attitude is my own damn business. I get to choose how I die, not you."

I thought about this.

"You're right," I said.

"Besides, it's not like she's with us the entire trip. We drop her off in New York and see the Kerouac Scroll alone. You do what you have to do in Maryland, and then we can go find my brother so I can say what I need to say to him. After that we take the scenic trip home alone. We'll be sick of one another by the time we get back."

I had to smile.

"You may be right."

"In the meantime, don't go off on some mind trip. Get your rocks hauled. She's damn good at it."

"Eros, eros, eros."

"Damn right."

I was silent.

"So what do we do now?" Hooker asked.

"Let's go find where the Denver Broncos play."

"Now you're cooking."

We managed to spend the afternoon hopping from one tourist attraction to another, having first stopped at a Chamber of Commerce information booth to collect brochures. Art galleries, of which Denver had its share, were not on our list, neither of us being art aficionados; instead we visited a railroad museum, drove by to gawk at Mile High Stadium, and took a tour of the Coors brewery.

The temperature had reached the mid-eighties, and the sky was free of pollution despite Denver's reputation as smog heaven. The panorama of the distant Rockies was spectacular, as beautiful a horizon as any city in America. We talked little as we played tourists, needing only eye contact or a facial expression to communicate. Each of our demons had gone into temporary hibernation. We had no thoughts of pedophilia or cancer and instead were dear friends taking in the sights in a strange city, enjoying our time together in bonding silence.

I'd wanted to drive to nearby Golden to see Buffalo Bill's grave but by the time we finished wandering through an historic area called LoDo, it was getting time to pick up Wanda at the beauty parlor. With a bit of time to kill, we stopped at a McDonald's for soft ice cream. Then we were on our way.

We were right on time but she wasn't waiting outside. I took the remaining parking spot in front of the shop, and we waited. After a few minutes, Hooker said he'd go in and fetch her.

He returned shortly with another woman. I got out to greet them and see what was going on. “This is Wanda’s sister, Bev,” Hooker said. “We need to pick her up at the hospital.”

“How nice to meet you,” said Bev. I smiled and nodded. “This is such a nice thing you’re doing for Wanda.”

I wondered how much she knew about what Wanda, as Angel, was doing for Hooker. Not much, I bet.

“No trouble at all,” I said, which wasn’t entirely true. I was going along with everything because I didn’t have much choice.

On the way to the hospital, Hooker said, “Bev said their father is dying. Wanda – why the hell am I calling her Wanda? I like Angel a hell of a lot better. She and her dad haven’t been talking, so she was really nervous about seeing him. Ends up he was delighted to see her, so she’s spending as much time as she can with him.”

The new arrangement was to meet Angel/Wanda in front of the hospital at five. She’d assured her sister she would be there but she wasn’t. As I pulled around to the end of the loading circle, preparing to cross the street into the parking lot, I became aware that someone was yelling. Hooker told me to stop, then demanded it, “Stop!”

I slammed on the brakes, wondering what I had missed. Hooker rolled down his window as a young woman raced up.

“It’s me!” said Wanda.

She tried the back door but it was locked. Hooker turned around and unlocked it for her.

Her transformation was extraordinary. The stiff pink hair was now short, brown and soft-looking. All the facial jewelry was gone except for small silver earrings. Her lipstick was red. She could have been your waitress or the young woman selling you a new shirt in a department store.

“Look at you,” said Hooker, grinning.

His tone had been complimentary but Wanda seemed to take offense.

“No wise cracks, okay? My sister talked me into it so my dad wouldn’t freak out. I’m going back to normal as soon as I get to New York.”

Back to normal! Surely we create our own universes.

Although we were getting a late start out of Denver, and in rush hour to boot, my preference was to drive for a few hours before dinner and a few hours more before finding a motel. Hooker had other ideas.

“Why don’t we find a motel as soon as we get far enough from Denver to miss rush hour tomorrow?” he asked. He’d spoken softly, not making a public issue of it.

“I want to make up for lost time.”

I knew well enough what he wanted to do. He wanted to get Wanda the Angel into bed as quickly as possible. The old goat’s lust was a wonder to behold.

Hooker, to my surprise, didn’t argue the matter. Instead he started crawling over the seat to join Wanda in back. Given his age and lack of physical condition, this wasn’t an easy thing to do.

“I’ll pull over, for God’s sake!” I said.

But it was too late. With Wanda’s laughing assistance, Hooker fell into the back seat. Soon I saw him and Wanda kissing in the rear view mirror.

Once again I tried to ignore them. I found a country music station and turned up the volume. The next time I peeked into the rear view mirror, I was shocked once again.

Wanda was on his lap, rocking back and forth, her blouse pulled up high enough to show

bare back, on which a large rose was tattooed. They were screwing their brains out in front of God, country music, and passing traffic.

I panicked. On the one hand, I couldn't stop looking, which made me a dangerous driver, so I slowed down, which caused vehicles to honk at me and speed by. Did anyone notice the sex orgy in the back seat? If they did, they didn't show it – until an SUV of four young men started to pass.

They slowed down to keep abreast of us and honked their horn. Glancing over, I saw them laughing and giving thumbs up. In the back seat, Wanda was still rocking back and forth, her breath coming quickly and audibly now, as if she were near the end of this public journey of sensuality.

I'd had enough. I swerved to the shoulder of the Interstate and stopped. As the car lugged still, Wanda let out a cry of pleasure. Then silence. Unfortunately, the SUV had pulled off the Interstate as well and was backing toward us.

"I think we're going to have trouble," I said.

Wanda had scooted off Hooker's lap and was putting herself back together. Hooker leaned forward and saw the SUV.

"Who are they?"

"Your fans. I think they want seconds. What do we do now?"

"Get the hell out of here!" Hooker said.

Just as the SUV stopped in front of us and several doors opened, I pulled back onto the Interstate, passing the young men as they waved and grinned at us. Obviously they were going to chase us, and sure enough, the SUV pulled quickly behind me.

"I can't outrun them," I said.

Wanda looked out the back window.

"I'll give them a little show," she said.

Without waiting for a reply, I saw that she had lifted up her blouse and was showing the world behind us her breasts.

"I don't believe this," I muttered under my breath.

Hooker said, "Just don't slow down. Get off at the next stop and find the police station. I think that will discourage them."

It was a sensible plan but it didn't subdue the stress of the moment. They caught up with us easily but did not change lanes to pass, perhaps because Wanda was still giving them a show. There had been a method to her madness.

When the turnoff came, I took it. But the SUV didn't follow. It beeped its horn several times, all the guys waved, and they were on their way. I continued off the Interstate and pulled over.

"What are you doing?" Hooker asked.

"Letting them get up the road a ways."

I looked in the mirror. Wanda was dressing again.

"We have to make some ground rules," I said quietly to Hooker.

"Hey, that just happened. I'm as surprised as you are."

"We need ground rules."

We made them in the bar after dinner, drinking club sodas. Wanda and Hooker were staying in one room, I alone in another. This was part of the deal. Screwing in the back seat wasn't.

"We hadn't seen each other for a while," Hooker said, trying to explain the urgency of what had happened. "We were horny."

“You’d seen each other that very morning. You’re 72 years old. Can’t you control your lust for a few hours?”

Hooker’s broad grin had a clear subtext: Isn’t this phenomenal? Isn’t this fantastic?

For the first time in many years, I felt like a drink. I felt like letting alcohol lead me into its unique world of oblivion.

Hooker said, “I might as well forewarn you. I think I’m going to start drinking again.”

Great minds think alike.

“Red, come on. You don’t need that.”

“What difference does it make?”

“It makes a difference with me, for one. I know how you can get when you’re drunk.”

“I didn’t say get drunk. Just enjoy a drink or two.”

“Hey, we’re alcoholics, remember? We can’t take just a few. That’s the deal. It’s all or nothing. Knock yourself out with sex but lay off the sauce. Do it for me.”

Hooker looked thoughtful, as if this point had not occurred to him. Instead of replying, he just shook his head, and I wasn’t sure what he meant by it.

“Is that agreement or disagreement?”

“I’ll give it some thought.”

I’d insisted that our rooms not be adjacent. If they were going to screw all night, I didn’t want to have to listen to it. Of course, I was jealous, but not because Hooker was getting laid and I wasn’t, but because Wanda was getting the most time with him. My best friend, my soul mate, was dying, his time short, and I was being shoved off to the side like a distant relative, a victim of the overpowering force of Eros.

13: Ancient Eros

Given the altered circumstances of the journey, I wanted to reach our destination as quickly as possible. To this end, I tried to nudge everyone onto the road sooner and keep them there longer. I was paying a physical toll for the effort, my back and buttocks not happy with so much time in the car. Hooker and Wanda usually rode in the back seat together. Hooker had managed to respect my request and they didn’t make love in the car again, or at least not in any flamboyant way that made it known to me. They spent most of the time snuggled close, speaking in voices too soft to be heard. They laughed a lot. They seemed to have become great friends beyond whatever strange sexual bond had happened between them.

We were over halfway across the country, spending the night in a motel outside of Kansas City, when I was wakened in the middle of the night by someone at the door. I wore shorts and a T-shirt to bed, and I stumbled across the room in them.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me,” said Wanda.

My first thought was that Hooker was dead. He’d had a stroke in the middle of lovemaking. It was not such an unusual thing to happen to men his age.

I pulled open the door. Wanda was in a shorty nightgown, what used to be called a Baby Doll nighty. Before I could ask her what had happened, she threw herself into my arms and started kissing me passionately.

She pushed me toward the bed, her lips still locked on mine. I was sprawled across the bed with her on top of me before I broke free enough to speak.

“Stop it! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Wanda looked hurt by the question, as if this was the last thing in the world she expected to hear.

“I thought you’d be jealous and horny,” she said in a pout. “I only came over to make you happy.”

“Wanda, we have to talk.”

I moved to the table near the window. The curtains were pulled shut.

“Did Red send you over here?” I could tell by the way she looked away that he had. “I really don’t understand where you’re coming from, and I appreciate his concern, and yours, but this isn’t the way to my heart.”

“What’s the way to your heart?”

“Nothing you can do. That’s not a put down, it’s just a fact.”

“You don’t like sex?”

“I remember liking it,” I said and forced a smile. She’d found the door to my vulnerability, and I didn’t plan to let her in.

“Let me tell you where I’m coming from,” she said.

“Please do.”

She walked across the room.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“Be my guest.”

She sat down at the table. I could see through her nighty that she had the small firm breasts of a Greek goddess.

“I got into the sex biz when I was in high school. Making movies. Sometimes I starred in them, sometimes I shot them and friends starred in them. It was pretty easy money. It beat the hell out of making hamburgers for minimum wage.”

“I can see how it would.”

“The thing is, it was fun, too. Sex is fun. It has nothing to do with love. It has to do with getting off. What does sneezing have to do with love? What does eating have to do with love? You feel a need, and you satisfy it.”

“Eros. It has a long noble history.”

“The thing is, everybody gets really freaky when it comes to sex. Like they can’t separate sex from love. But then a guy – mostly guys, but women, too – turns around and cheats on his wife for sex. People are driven by sex, which is perfectly natural, but they keep fighting it, like it’s a sin to respond to a natural need, a biological drive, which is sick. The world is sick over sex.”

She made a lot of sense, of course. But she also raised a number of questions, most of which surely never had occurred to her.

I said, “I’m not sure how this explains what you’re doing with Red.”

“I’m with your friend because I care about him. Did he tell you he’s dying?”

“Yes, he did.”

I was hurt that he’d told Wanda as well.

“I feel like I’m making his last days really special.”

“I think he has longer than a few days.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I am.”

“He sees that. I think that’s why he suggested I seduce you. You know, I could sleep every other night with you. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

“Wanda, you are a wonder. I’ve never met someone like you before. Are you...?”

“What?”

“Typical? I feel out of touch with the younger generation.”

“My generation sucks. Most people my age are as fucked up about sex as anyone else. It’s a disease, man. You’re not immune just because you’re young.”

“What do you think about love?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that. You know, the Greeks had three words for it.”

And she went on to repeat one of my favorite lectures to me.

“You’re a lot brighter than I gave you credit for,” I said after she was finished.

“One day I’m going to sell a screenplay. And then I’m going to make my own movies.”

Holy Christ. Wannabe screenwriters were everywhere. I was tempted to tell her about my own career in LaLaLand but decided not to. I didn’t want to become a mentor or anything else. She was a remarkable young woman, to be sure, but my best friend was dying, and until we reached the east coast and dropped her off, it didn’t look like I was going to get to spend any time with him.

“Well, good luck with that,” I said. I stood up. “I’m ready to go back to bed.”

“I enjoyed talking to you,” said Wanda. “If you ever change your mind and want a blowjob, just give a holler.”

I didn’t get back to sleep easily. My mind was alive in contradictory counterpoint, marveling at how different Wanda proved to be from my limited notion of professional prostitutes, worrying about Hooker and his cancer and if so much physical activity might hasten the end, however it helped his attitude. I spent a long, restless night.

“What the hell did you tell her?” Hooker said as soon as we were alone the next morning. We were having coffee after breakfast, and Wanda had gone to the ladies room.

“I was half-asleep, I’m not sure. What did she say I said?”

“She thinks it’s a good idea for me to sit in front the rest of the trip.” I couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t see what’s so goddamn funny about it. If you can’t bring yourself to enjoy her, why screw it up for me?”

“Red, I made no such suggestion. She senses I’m jealous of her getting all your time.”

Hooker looked like he wasn’t sure how to respond.

I said, “I don’t care if you sit in back with her. I’ll tell her so if you like.”

“Maybe you’d better do that.”

I did as soon as she returned.

“I’m doing this for me,” she said. “I have a book I want to finish.”

And so Wanda started reading in the back seat. What she was reading shocked me: *The End of the Affair* by Graham Greene, a novel of which I’m particularly fond but not one I associated with a professional prostitute’s reading during a long road trip. Once again Wanda had surprised me.

Hooker pouted for the rest of the trip. They still shared a room together at night, each morning they still emerged like the strangest lovers I could imagine, and each morning Hooker tried to talk himself into the back seat, only to be playfully rejected. Having Hooker in the front seat beside me, however, did not bring us closer together. Wanda’s presence still charged the atmosphere, and I knew Red was counting the hours until we were done driving for the day and

he could escape once again behind closed doors with Wanda.

I'd forgotten about his threat to start drinking again until the morning he emerged drunk. I was waiting outside their door at seven-thirty, which had become our routine. Usually they faced the morning together, often holding hands. Today Hooker emerged alone, stumbled, and laughed in a tone I hadn't heard for a very long time, an exaggerated, loud expression of intoxication.

"God damn it, Red."

He grinned and tried to do a little dance, almost falling again.

"Where's Wanda?" I asked.

He shrugged and said, "Angel."

"Get in the car."

I found Wanda in the restaurant attached to the motel. She was sitting alone in a booth. I slid in across from her.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm really sorry this happened. It's all my fault."

"A drunk is responsible for his own actions."

"Is he an alcoholic?"

"We both are."

"I didn't know."

"It wouldn't have made a difference. Trust me. You had nothing to do with this."

"I felt like champagne last night. I just said it in passing, you know? I didn't expect him to go out and get a bottle. Then another. Once he started, he couldn't stop. He kept wanting to invite you over, but I was afraid what you'd think of me."

"That wouldn't have made a difference either. When you get on the horse, sometimes you just have to ride it till you're thrown off."

"Where is he?"

"I told him to get in the car."

As soon as I said it I knew he wouldn't be there. But it was easy enough to figure out where he was.

There was a private entrance to the cocktail lounge, which is how he'd gotten in without us seeing him. He was sitting at the bar with a Bloody Mary, just like in the old days. That's the thing about booze, it has no respect for time. You stop drinking for fifteen years and start again, and it's the next day two decades ago. All the sober time in between is tossed into the garbage like yesterday's news.

"I'd like to get started," I said.

"What's the rush?"

"Red, we need to leave now," said Wanda.

Hooker regarded us with visible disdain, as if we were asking him to do something unthinkable.

"Can you take me to the bus station?" Wanda asked me. "I'll take a Greyhound the rest of the way."

Hooker said, "Call your alien friends to give you a lift."

Wanda shot him a glance that was positively murderous. Hooker slid off the barstool.

"I'm sorry, that just came out," he said. "Bear, you didn't hear that."

I had, of course, though I had no idea what he was referring to. Whatever it was, he'd pulled her trigger.

Hooker said, "We said we'd take you to New York, and we're taking you to New York." He

gulped his Bloody Mary. "I'm ready to go."

Wanda wouldn't sleep with him after that, and Hooker spent his nights with me. But he didn't stop drinking either, although I must admit he showed admirable control compared to his first night off the wagon. He didn't start drinking until we were settled into the motel. Then he sat in front of television with a six-pack, and when it was gone, he went to bed, though it was always after an hour of coughing and gasping before he stumbled into sleep.

One night I asked him what the remark about Wanda's alien friends had been all about.

"She thinks she was abducted by aliens," said Hooker. "It's her deep dark secret."

"You're not serious."

"It's all she can talk about. It's driving me up the wall."

"She's not just putting you on?"

"She's serious. She woke up one night a few years ago paralyzed. Awake but she couldn't move. She had a sense of somebody being at her bedside but she couldn't even turn her head to see. She was terrified. Well, what she probably had was sleep paralysis, right? Only she's never heard of it because a little later she sees this TV show about how someone had the exact same experience and got herself hypnotized and suddenly remembered how she had been abducted by aliens and shit. So Angel spends a lot of money to get herself hypnotized by an alien therapist or whatever the fuck they call themselves, she uncovers all these repressed memories of being abducted by these little gray guys with big black bug eyes, who take her to their space ship and stick all kinds of medical instruments up her pussy. Bear, it's a real drag to listen to this shit. If I told her what I really think, she'd get pissed and cut me off. Sometimes I wonder if great sex is worth the tradeoff."

"Another repressed memory," I said.

"You're right. I didn't make the connection. The whole fucking world is going insane, brother. Terminal cancer isn't the worst hand to be holding under the circumstances. Know what I mean?"

I didn't agree with his meaning but didn't say so. Hooker slipped back into his cocoon, and I felt powerless to help him.

We were only a day away from the end of our trip when Hooker announced, "This isn't worth it. I quit again."

He was on the second beer of his six-pack in front of television. He stood and took the bottle and the rest of the six-pack into the bathroom. I could hear him pouring the beer down the sink.

When he returned, I said, "I'm glad you made the decision before we see the Kerouac Scroll."

"Fuck the scroll," he said. "This is our last night on the road. I want to spend it with Wanda."

Whatever he said to her worked. I didn't see Hooker again until morning when once again he and Wanda emerged at seven-thirty. They were holding hands.

Moreover, Hooker slipped into the back seat with her, and Wanda didn't object. They cuddled and whispered as I drove the last few hours into the congestion of east coast urbanity.

"I need to know where to drop you off," I called to Wanda in the back seat.

"My friend is going to pick me up at Grand Central. I need to call him"

It was a nightmare getting there. In the back seat, Hooker and Wanda, lovebirds once again, groped and fondled like lovers being parted by war. I was afraid he was going to get out of the car and go with her, wherever her destination. Wanda had become a kind of lifeline for him, the experience that kept him tethered to what little life was left for him. Eros, not Fidelia, had won

the battle of allegiance. He'd chosen the lover over the friend.

But Hooker didn't go with her. Waiting in front of Grand Central Station was a woman with spiked hair and facial jewelry, as wild looking as Wanda had been when we first saw her. They embraced as Hooker looked on, and then Wanda did an extraordinary thing. She offered Red her hand. He shook it. Then they held one another in a long embrace.

I could see by Hooker's expression when he climbed in beside me that he realized it was over. He realized he'd never see her again.

We got out of New York congestion and found a motel. We'd drive into D.C. in the morning. As soon as we were settled, Hooker said he had a headache and was going to walk to a mini-mall up the way to get aspirin.

"I'm not going to a bar," he said when he saw the look on my face.

He was back in half an hour. Now we could have a quiet night of television, reading, relaxing. It felt good to have him to myself again – and to have him sober.

The next morning I knew something was wrong as soon as I woke up. Hooker, still in bed, wasn't hacking himself awake as he usually did. I didn't give it much thought until I went to the bathroom. In the small trash can near the toilet I saw several empty pill bottles. I retrieved them. Sleeping pills – and the two bottles were empty. The son-of-a-bitch had taken sleeping pills on me! He was trying to kill himself.

The ambulance got there in no time, and I followed it to the hospital. In an hour I got the word that Hooker was going to survive, and an hour later the postscript that they wanted to keep him in the hospital for a few days.

It was late afternoon before I was able to speak to a doctor. Not being official family, I was not placed at the head of the line to get information. But I was his best friend, and I was the one who was looking out for him. Finally a nurse fetched the doctor for me.

The doctor explained that they were going to keep Hooker busy for a few days, taking tests, getting counseling, and otherwise keeping him under close surveillance; that, in fact, if I had something to do for a few days, now would be the time to do it since they didn't expect to have their evaluation completed until the end of the week.

"Why don't you come back Friday morning, and we can talk then?" the doctor suggested. "Can you keep yourself busy until then?"

"I'm not going to abandon him."

"It's hardly that."

"I want to stay informed."

"I'll tell you what." He started scribbling something on a business card. "This is the phone number of my nurse. Why don't you check in each day around four? No need to make a special trip, just call. My nurse will bring you up to date."

That would work. As a matter of fact, I could keep myself busy for a few days. Not seeing the Kerouac Scroll because Hooker and I, one way or the other, were going to do this together. I could kill a few days by looking up my daughter and, depending on how she took my insistence on innocence, by visiting some old, forgotten friends in Chesapeake on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

It had been days since I'd thought of my daughter's accusation that I had molested her. It was no fun remembering it again.

PART TWO:
FIDELIA

I no longer believe in happiness. Let me rephrase that. I no longer believe happiness is available to me. This does not mean I'm miserable or even unhappy. It means I've lowered my expectations. What I am is – content. Of course, I used to think I was happy. I thought I was happy with Sally, deliriously happy. I'd found my life's partner, my soul mate. She was a friend to rival Hooker, a fantastic lover, a confidante, even an editor of my writing. How quickly perceptions change! What happened that summer afternoon on the front porch of our sprawling house in Chesapeake, when Sally joined me and handed me a gin-and-tonic, which I realize now was to cushion the blow of what she had to say to me, is an ever-shifting memory. Even now, decades later, I wonder if it happened or if I dreamed it. But it must have been real because my life changed forever from that moment on.

14: Presumption of Guilt

And so I drove to the address in College Park, Maryland, to see my daughter. Perhaps a more accurate description would be to confront her. She'd already told me she didn't want to hear from me. I was going to see her anyway.

The handwritten address on the envelope was to an office building, not a residential neighborhood, which made sense after my initial surprise. Stephanie would not want me to know where she lived.

I pulled into an underground lot and parked. I sat in the car for a long while, getting the nerve to enter the building. A bad scene seemed inevitable but how else could I declare my innocence? Finally I found the elevator and went up to the lobby. It was spacious and plush with a front desk clerk and two roaming guards with pistols on their belts. A corporation couldn't be too careful these days.

The directory on the wall told me my daughter was on the fifth floor – and that she was a shrink. I almost laughed aloud. How appropriate, how perfect, that she would be a shrink! She probably specialized in the victims of sexual abuse. But this was a cheap shot. What real horror may have happened to her?

I took up the elevator, then paced the hallway back and forth in front of her office door before I entered. The closer I got to the possibility of seeing her, the more nervous I became, the more improbable the success of my quest looked. Why would she believe me? An uncovered, vivid memory told her otherwise. She probably dismissed the theories that questioned the legitimacy of repressed memory as intellectual forms of denial. For all I knew, the bread and butter of her practice might even be revealing the repressed memories of her clients.

I took a deep breath and opened the office door.

A classical piano played softly, Chopin I guessed. The furnishings were warm, deep maroons and greens, stuffed chairs and thick carpet. A dentist's office, for extractions of cavities in the mind.

"May I help you?"

The secretary looked fresh out of college, a wannabe model, or airline stewardess, or perfume saleswoman. She looked overdressed in the warm surroundings.

"I'd like to see Stephanie..."

I stopped. I didn't know my daughter's last name. Was she married? Did she have children? Was I a grandfather?

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I don’t. I just came into town actually. I’m from Oregon.”

“What was this regarding?”

“I’m her father.”

“Oh! Just a minute.”

She flashed a smile, bounded up and entered the door behind her desk. I could feel my heart racing. This had been a bad idea, and I was about to bolt when the door opened and the secretary returned.

“She’s busy and wants you to leave,” she said. The smile was gone. When I hesitated to respond, the secretary added, “She told me to call security if you wouldn’t.”

“Thank you,” I said. I walked away slowly, hoping to hide the strange mixture of panic and relief I felt.

I had to sit down on a chair in the coffee area in the lobby. When I got my breath, I left the building.

I already had decided what I was going to do if my daughter wouldn’t see me. I’d try Sally instead. She, after all, had been there when Stephanie visited. Surely Sally didn’t think I was a pedophile, and I needed all the support I could get.

The drive to Chesapeake gave me ample opportunity to revise the game plan that was going to prove my innocence. I had to be realistic and understand that my daughter probably would never believe that I had not molested her. Yet I couldn’t let the matter rest, I had to give her the facts of the case, the information that in time, long after I was dead and certainly no threat to her, might lead her to rethink her experience. Whatever had happened to her, abuse or hallucination, it had not been instigated by me.

Maryland’s Eastern Shore is a place out of time. When I lived there with Sally in the 1970s, it still had the cultural weather of a plantation, with a subtle division of power between the races, a southern formality and gentility in community life, a sense of holding out against all the modern perversions of the world. Blacks working in the fields sometimes sang spirituals as they labored (the first time I heard this, I was certain it was being staged for my benefit, a stranger from the west). Of course, local blacks assured me that these were migrant workers from Florida, the local population being too hip to do such a thing. Coming to Chesapeake had been like coming to another planet, and yet for our first years there, Sally and I were happy, or at least I was, and my daughter’s visit had come in the middle of my time of well being.

We both were teaching at Chesapeake College, Sally starting a folklore program, I teaching a course in playwriting part-time while trying to market my plays in New York with the help of an enthusiastic agent. My short stories appeared regularly in literary magazines. My plays were being picked up by regional theaters. I felt I was about to make a break through, especially with a new agent. An off-Broadway New York opening didn’t seem far away.

My daughter was eight when she visited. The visit had been her mother’s idea. Helen put Stephanie on a plane in Los Angeles and three weeks later I put her on a plane in Washington D.C., direct flights each way. It was an adventure for all of us.

By the time Stephanie arrived, our sprawling farm house had become something of a social club for the English, History and Philosophy Departments at the college. We hosted dinner parties almost every weekend, and when we weren’t, someone else was. Chesapeake faculty, at least the ones we knew, liked to party, and party we did. This was the beehive of activity into which my daughter, a stranger to me, came to visit.

I remember how awkward I felt being with her. Had she been a boy, perhaps we could’ve

gone to the park and played ball, but she was a girl, and I had no idea how to entertain her, even though she had the stocky frame of a Tom boy. Sally saw this immediately and voluntarily took up the slack, and within days Sally became a closer daily companion to my daughter than I was. Besides, I was working on a play rewrite for my agent, excuse enough to spend most of the day in the bedroom I had converted into an office.

Stephanie slept in the guest room, which was at the far end of the hallway, the room farthest from the stairs that led down to the main part of the house. This fact may have contributed to whatever happened to Stephanie later. If, in fact, she was molested during her visit, I think it must have happened during one of our loud, crowded parties, when it would have been easy enough for someone to go upstairs and find her in relative isolation. If this had happened, Stephanie must have been too frightened, and too insecure in her new surroundings, to say anything about it.

I don't know how else it could have gone. Each night it was Sally who tucked Stephanie into bed, not I. In fact, I remember Sally telling me that I seemed to be avoiding my daughter, which was true. I didn't know how to relate to her; worse, I didn't know how to relate to myself as a father. I buried myself in my work and let Sally become the temporary parent. Maybe my daughter's mind was getting even now, meeting my neglect with the most perverted sense of my presence she could create.

Chesapeake hadn't changed much. Driving down Main Street, the town was as small and quaint as I remembered, with brick storefronts stretching across the flat land. The highest point in Chesapeake, which was one of many small towns laid out across the sandbar of a peninsula between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, was a railroad overpass.

I quickly was losing my nerve to barge onto campus and look up Sally. A strategy of impatience hadn't worked with Stephanie and it wouldn't work with my ex. I'd call her first instead. To this end, I drove to The Oysterman's Tavern at one end of town, which had been a hangout of ours. It was still here three decades later. I pulled into the small parking lot behind it.

I didn't expect to run into anyone I knew, not even Rex, the owner, who surely was dead by now. The young woman behind the bar could have been a college student. I took a stool and ordered a cola, gathering courage to phone Sally.

Only one other customer was at the bar, a middle-aged woman with streaks of gray in her dark hair. She looked vaguely familiar. Moreover, she kept staring at me.

"Robert?" she finally said.

"Do I know you?"

"It is you! Stacy, Stacy Evans. Well, Stacy Williams then." She picked up her cup of coffee and came down the bar, slipping onto the stool beside me. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a friend in the hospital outside Washington. I guess I'm killing time."

"You look good. God, how long ago has it been?"

She did look good and had managed to keep her Dallas Cowboys cheerleader figure that more than one faculty member had admired in the old days.

"Thirty-odd years," said Stacy. "Allie, come here a minute, I want you to meet someone." To me she said, "You remember Carrie? This is her daughter. My grand-daughter."

Carrie had been ten or so when I fled Chesapeake, a cute curly-haired girl who was almost too shy to look at you.

"Nice to meet you," said Allie.

"And you."

Allie didn't resemble her grandmother. She was blonde and slender, a California girl

dropped into Maryland's Eastern Shore. She smiled and moved back down the bar, where she had been doing a crossword puzzle.

"How's Jim?" I asked.

I remembered Mary's story of their breakup, the accusation that Jim had molested Carrie, but I wanted to hear her version of what had happened. Carrie was Stacy's daughter from a previous marriage, the father a soldier who'd been killed in Vietnam.

"We haven't been together since just after you left."

"Oh?" I said, fishing for more.

"We had a pretty ugly divorce. I thought the news would've made it all the way to California. That's where you went, isn't it?"

"For a while. I ended up in Oregon. I taught at Portland State for years."

"So long ago."

In the silence, she seemed to be thinking of more pleasant memories than scandal and divorce. I wondered what had happened. Was Jim guilty or not? I wanted to hear more about it.

"You know," said Stacy, "when you left Sally, you really were on my shit list. I couldn't imagine why you'd do such a thing. Then Sally came out as a lesbian, and it all made sense. I felt guilty for not being your friend when you needed me."

"It was a confusing time all the way around."

"I remember you came to me. You needed a friend. I wouldn't give you the time of day."

"You had no way of knowing how it was. I didn't do anything to earn your friendship either. I really lost it."

It all seemed so long ago. One day I believe I'm as happy as I'm capable of being, married to my life's true partner, the next moment she's joining me on the front porch on a humid summer day, giving me a gin and tonic, and telling me things I couldn't imagine coming from the woman I thought I knew as well as anyone – except Hooker.

The gist of it was that she'd met someone at a folklore conference in Washington D.C. from which she'd just returned. Not a man. A woman. She had discovered in herself an overpowering attraction to women, and to this woman in particular, and she thought she might be a lesbian. At the very least she needed to explore this part of herself. She hoped I understood.

I didn't understand at all. When I asked her if she'd slept with this woman at the conference, she didn't have to say anything to communicate the bad news. Bad news to me. For her, I suppose, it was good news, she finally was discovering her true self, but to a husband who'd just learned the love of his life thought she was a lesbian, to my struggling writer self at the time, this was a catastrophic upheaval of the world as I knew it.

I remember leaving, running, with Sally calling after me that we should sit down and talk like adults about this, and I ended up right here at the Oysterman's Tavern, where after too many beers my head finally settled down enough to think coherent thoughts, and the first thought that occurred to me was that I needed to leave town, I needed to return west where I belonged, I couldn't bear to stay here and face the stress of separation and divorce, later running into Sally with her new woman on her arm, laughing like happy lesbians. But before I left, there was something I must do.

There is no greater betrayal of friendship – infidelity in its root meaning – than the idea that came to me in my drunken haze at the tavern that night. This was not a rational plot, a scheme designed for revenge, though this is what it amounted to in the end. It was an inspiration, an evil one to be sure but inspiration nonetheless, an idea for a plan of action that came as suddenly and mysteriously as a plot point in a developing play script. It was as if I were writing a melodrama

for myself as protagonist. What I would do is sleep with one of Sally's students – and, as it turned out, one of them, a pretty one to boot, was in the tavern that night, and I already knew her because she was a performing arts major who had played a role during a staged reading of a play of mine some months earlier. Her name was Yvonne, and everyone called her Vonny. It took me less than a week to get Vonny into bed. The deed was done in the farmhouse, on the couch in my office upstairs, while Sally was at school teaching the class from which Vonny was playing hooky. The deed done, I only needed to plant evidence so Sally would know what had happened, and to this end I told a white lie, that Sally was going out with friends after her class and wouldn't be home till late, which gave us the evening as well as the afternoon to be together. When Sally came home just before dinner, right on time, we were in a sexual embrace upstairs once again, my timing predatory and perfect, and by the time we heard footsteps coming up to the second floor, it was too late to disappear, and during her mad scramble of dressing and putting herself back together, I assured Vonny that we could lie our way out of this, we'd simply tell Sally that we were going over lines for another staged reading of my play, which is what I told Sally as soon as she passed the open doorway of my office to find Vonny and I sitting at the desk like two children caught in the act of stealing cookies – and of course Sally didn't buy it, that was the point, that was the reason I had left my fly open, pretending to notice it only after Vonny had excused herself to rush downstairs and out of there, with God knows what stress and confusion racing through her young mind, and as I zipped back up I could see that Sally hated no human on the face of this green earth more than yours truly, the man who had just seduced her student.

Stacy was asking me a question.

"Can you come over for dinner tonight? I'd like you to meet Larry. Robert?"

I came back to the present.

"That would be great."

She scribbled down directions and her phone number and excused herself. She'd just stopped by to see her granddaughter.

"Are you staying in town?"

"Yes," I said, although I hadn't rented a motel room yet. "One question before you go."

She waited for it. But my question wasn't about Jim. I would save that for dinner tonight.

First things first.

"I'm thinking of looking up Sally."

I could tell by Stacy's expression that she disapproved.

"Bad idea?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Bad idea if you mean just walking in on her. You didn't win any friends the way you left here, you know. I'll tell you what. We'll talk about it at dinner. Maybe I could call her first and test the waters."

"That would be great, thanks."

I had time to kill, and after checking into a motel I spent it driving by old haunts from my past. The town had changed more than was evident on the outskirts, primarily by closing off traffic through the heart of town and making the area an open business mall. I parked and walked around and had a coffee in a tavern I knew but didn't run into any more familiar faces. Or maybe I did but didn't recognize them – it had been thirty years! After another coffee in another tavern, I raised my courage to see what I was most curious about, the old farmhouse out of town in which Sally and I had spent what I considered to be "the good life."

The house was on a road called Peddleton Way, which for miles cut between fields

variously planted with string beans, corn, soy beans, strawberries, and other crops. Every mile or so a home jutted up out of the landscape to mark where a farm family once lived. Most of the land was owned by a doctor in town, who rented these old homes and whose own house was a great three-story brick Colonial-style structure that looked like it belonged on a southern plantation and probably had been designed to create just this impression, the ostentatious home of our landlord, the master. Our rental house was a mile down the road from his, a more modest wood structure of two-stories, with four bedrooms, two full bathrooms, a large formal dining room and an even larger screened rear porch. For just Sally and I and our cats, the house was as much a mansion as the doctor's monstrosity.

But it no longer existed. In its place was another brick Colonial, a smaller version of the doctor's home. I drove away from the scene of whatever crimes had happened there.

When Stephanie returned to her mother, she had stories to tell. She'd come to visit and, five or six parties later, she was gone. But she rejoined her mother with more than she'd left with.

I didn't realize how dramatic these stories must have been until months later. In her absence, my memory of Stephanie's visit had become warmer, more comfortable, more loving, than it actually was. After Christmas, during which I sent my daughter a gift and received a nice card in return, I suggested to Sally that we invite Stephanie to visit during the summer again. Only, Sally insisted, if you take charge of her care and amusement. I agreed and wrote Helen a letter with the invitation.

Helen's reply was quick and curt. She was not exposing her daughter, she wrote, to the drunken debauchery of last summer, and if I wanted to visit with Stephanie I must come to Southern California for a supervised encounter. Moreover, Helen went on, her own life had changed dramatically since finding Jesus Christ Our Savior, a consequence of which was a good if belated Christian education for Stephanie, who now was attending Sunday School at The Church of Inner Light and already did not approve of her distant father's destructive lifestyle. And so forth and so on.

This, in effect, was the end of my relationship with my daughter since I never went to Southern California for a supervised visit. Her cards at Father's Day and Christmas stopped coming. I continued to send cards and notes for a time, then stopped. Our father-daughter relationship, such as it was, ended not with a bang but a whimper, and soon enough I was overwhelmed by a greater loss in my life, the loss of my wife, my partner, my life's mate. Unfortunately I had reacted with a deed of revenge that I would regret for the rest of my life.

15: A Clue

Before going to Stacy's for dinner, I phoned the hospital. I found it impossible to understand why Hooker had attempted suicide, especially alone, without talking to me first. It felt like a betrayal of friendship. Infidelity.

Hooker had made considerable improvement, the nurse told me, although presently he was napping. But he'd been up on his feet briefly in the afternoon, was talking cogently, and was in reasonably good spirits. I felt guilty for not being there to see him and considered the possibility of heading back in the morning. What was I going to accomplish here? Maybe talking more with Stacy about Sally would help me make up my mind.

This conversation had to wait until after dinner. Her husband, Larry, was a large balding man with an immediate warmth for strangers. He had chased us into the den so we could be

alone with coffee and brandy while he cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. He was giving us time alone, which I appreciated.

“You said you’d test the waters with Sally for me. Do you ever see her?” I asked.

“Not often. I run into her in the supermarket now and again.”

“How is she? She must be nearing retirement.”

“I think she’s only teaching part-time now. She was a dean for a while.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“She’s still with Ruth,” said Stacy.

“Really? Wow. Thirty-odd years.”

Apparently Sally, unlike her ex-husband, had found her life’s mate after all.

“Not quite. It was a few years before Ruth joined her here. Did you know about her?” When I hesitated, Stacy added, “We don’t have to talk about this.”

“No, I want to. I was trying to remember if Ruth was the one she met at the conference.

When Sally first told me she was, you know ... I think the name was Ruth. It must’ve been one of those love-at-first-sight deals. Some people get lucky that way.”

“Sally didn’t come out for almost a year. Everybody assumed you’d broken up the marriage by having an affair with her student. You wouldn’t have won any popularity contests.”

“I should have handled it better. I regret losing her friendship.”

“When those things happen, the shock of it, we sometimes do things we regret. And sometimes not. I don’t regret what happened with Jim.”

“What exactly did happen? You guys were the darlings of the college. At least of the English Department.”

Stacy took her time before saying, “Jim is a sick man.”

I waited for more. Stacy sipped her brandy.

“It’s still hard for you to talk about,” I said.

“No, it’s still hard to understand how someone can do something like that. He molested Carrie.”

This was all she had to tell me. My suspicions were correct: my daughter was not hallucinating but remembering an encounter with Jim, something that must have happened during one of our loud sprawling parties, Jim going upstairs and to her bedroom. I felt sick and angry. This had to be it.

Stacy said, “It was a hard thing for me to accept.”

“How did you find out?”

“I caught him. I felt like killing him.”

“Jesus. I’m so sorry.”

“The thing is, he denied it, even though I caught him in the bathtub with her, for God’s sake, and later Carrie told me what they were doing ...”

She couldn’t go on.

“Where is he now?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Last I heard he was working on one of the boats out of Oyster Island. He couldn’t stay here, not after I got the restraining order and everything was in the press, his angry denials and the rest ... he made it very ugly until the actual day we were to appear in court, and then he split. I didn’t press charges to go after him. I just wanted him gone, out of my life, forgotten. I didn’t want to put Carrie through a court fight, so I was relieved when he left.”

Larry made an appearance, carrying the coffee pot.

“Refills?” he asked.

“Join us,” said Stacy, then shot me a quick glance for approval.

I stood up.

“I have to go.”

“So early?”

“My friend is up and about in the hospital. I’m getting an early start to head back.”

I didn’t want to head back. I wanted to drive straight to Oyster Island and look for Jim. But the small ferry wouldn’t be running at this hour, which was just as well.

I thanked them profusely for dinner and good company. I escaped to the nearest bar I could find. I didn’t feel like drinking, not after so many years of sobriety, but I didn’t feel like sitting alone in my motel room. The bar was noisy, which served my purpose, distracting me from thoughts of what Jim might have done to Stephanie on some party night at the farmhouse. His guilt made such perfect sense. But I still had no idea what to do with the information.

In the morning I decided that Sally would offer the perfect second opinion about Jim and about Stephanie’s visit, if only she would talk to me. I wouldn’t ask Stacy to do ground work, which might scare Sally off. I’d just show up at her office at the college. First, though, I wanted to check in with Hooker, even though it was much too early for my usual call. To my surprise, he answered the phone himself.

“Hooker’s taxi service,” he said.

“My, aren’t we feeling chirper?”

“Bear! Where are you?”

“In Chesapeake.”

“Would Sally talk to you?”

“I don’t know yet. Ask me in a few hours. How are you feeling?”

“I forgot how much I like hospitals.”

“Give me a break.”

“It’s all in your attitude. I imagine it’s a resort. All this care and food service. The trouble is, they want money. I’m transferring to the VA.”

“So are they giving you tests or what?”

“Of course they’re giving me tests. They have to make money, don’t they?”

“Anything new in the results?”

“Not that they’ve told me. They’ll take more at the VA, I think.”

I wanted to ask him why he’d done it. But not on the phone.

“Maybe I should drive back today.”

“You don’t have to on my account. I’m fine. You ought to see my nighttime nurse. I think I’m in love.”

“You sure sound full of your usual spunk.”

“Come by the VA hospital in a few days, and I should be ready to roll. We can go see Kerouac’s Scroll. Hey, it that rhymes!”

Chesapeake College was located on the edge of town, a small campus of cedar groves and brick buildings, many of which were wrapped on one side in ivy. A picture postcard of a campus. I parked in a visitor’s space in front of the Administration Building and strolled across campus toward the Humanities Building.

Little had changed. Morning classes were in session, making the campus deserted and quiet, only a few students crossing toward the library, a few faculty members arriving for later classes. I might have been one of them decades ago, happy in my employment here, happy with my life,

my wife, optimistic about my future as a playwright. What a charade it all had been! How quickly the walls of smiles and security could come tumbling down.

Sally had the same office. I'd expected to find her office hours on the door and come back – but her door was open, morning light spilling from a window into the hallway. I stopped, my heart racing.

How do you greet someone who may hate your guts? Seeing me, she might throw me out before I had a chance to state my case. My only option, it seemed to me, was to hit the ground running.

I appeared in her doorway. Sally was at a desk, her hair short and gray. She was still thin, still all bones and angles, her long legs crossed in front of a desk drawer.

As she turned to the doorway, I said, "Stephanie thinks I molested her."

Sally's hand snapped to her heart, and for a moment I thought I was witnessing a stroke. Then she took a deep breath. I went on.

"I received a letter from her. She thinks I sexually abused her during her visit with us. I saw Stacy and learned what happened with Carrie. So I think it may have been Jim. I was wondering what you thought."

"Jesus Christ, Robert," said Sally, her voice breaking.

She stood up, then looked baffled, as if she couldn't remember why she had risen. She plopped back down in her chair again.

"I'm sorry to barge in this way," I said.

"What do you want from me?"

She had spoken so softly I barely had heard.

"Tell me it may have been Jim. Or it couldn't have happened. Did you notice anything strange about her?"

"Robert, that was thirty years ago. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Stephanie's in College Park. But she wouldn't see me."

"I can't help you, Robert. Please go."

But I didn't go. I still stood in the doorway.

"Do I have to call security?"

"Sally, I'm so sorry. Losing your friendship is the worst thing that ever happened to me."

"We were never friends, Robert. Not really."

"Don't say that. That's not true."

"I was a different person then. I had no idea who I was."

"So people change. It doesn't mean we weren't good together for a while."

"Is that why you came here? To reminisce with me?"

"Sally, for God's sake, my daughter thinks I molested her!"

I'd spoken too loud. I was shaking and stepped into the office.

"May I close the door?" I asked.

Sally was on her feet again.

"No, you may not. For what it's worth, I don't believe you molested Stephanie during her visit. You barely spent any time with her. Other than that, I can't help you. Now please go."

Sally was wrong about our past friendship. She was especially wrong about the summer of 1968 when we camped across the country, sleeping in a ragged blue tent that we'd bought at a garage sale. It was in this blue tent that Sally had experienced her first orgasm from intercourse, or so she tearfully told me at the time, and there was no reason for me to believe then or now that she was not telling the truth. We were camping on the Oregon coast, and Sally explained how the

rhythmic roar of the ocean had swept her away in some mysterious synchronization with our own lovemaking, until she was lost in one great sensual dance that carried her places she'd never been before, and I had never been with a woman who had opened up like this to me, to whom I felt so physically and spiritually bonded – Eros, Fidelia and Agape all bundled together – and thereafter, for the rest of our camping trip, Sally's orgasms came quickly and fiercely, adding a passionate new dimension to our lives, and even now, decades later, I could remember the extraordinary sensation of it, the sense of special human connection that came from it, and no matter what Sally told me today, no matter if she had amputated this memory from her consciousness like a diseased limb, no one was going to convince me that this experience had not been real, powerful, and overwhelming. And this fact made Sally a special person in my life forever. No matter what she now thought about me or our time together.

But this fact didn't help me convince my daughter I was innocent. I hadn't checked out of the motel yet and before I did, I sat in front of the telephone. I was thinking of calling Stephanie, pretending I was a client, anything to get her on the phone and try again to tell her I was innocent. If I said it often enough, maybe she would believe me – which was wishful thinking, of course. The world of recovery was surreal, driven by a double bind: there was no way, simply no way, to argue my innocence without appearing guilty. My only hope, the only strategy I could think of, was to find irrefutable evidence and place it before her. And a confession by Jim that he had molested my daughter during one of our parties was about as irrefutable as evidence could be. I needed to find Jim and make him confess. The place to start looking was Oyster Island.

16: Oyster Island

There were only two ways to get to Oyster Island. The first was by private boat, which was obviously out of the question. The other was to buy space on the mail boat, and I learned from the motel clerk that its schedule hadn't changed in thirty years. It left at ten in the morning from a dock in Oysterville, a small town on the western shore of the peninsula, on Chesapeake Bay, some twenty miles from Chesapeake, the town. You had an hour and a half to kill before the boat returned. Otherwise you spent the night and caught the next day's boat. The mail boat made its trip every day but Sundays and holidays.

An hour and a half didn't give me much time, so I assumed I'd be staying overnight. I made it to the dock with time to spare, got my bearings, and retreated to a coffee shop on Main Street for breakfast before the trip.

You couldn't take your car to the island, but the island was small enough to walk through its small commercialized area, and if you wanted to venture into the flat sandbar of countryside, you could rent a bicycle at the General Store. There were really only two business bases on Oyster Island – a number of concessions to serve the needs of tourists, and the larger base of commercial fishermen, largely oystermen and crabbers. Less than a hundred persons lived on the island permanently.

Standing on deck as the mail boat cut across the bay for the thirty minute trip to the island, I again was thrust back into time because whatever had happened to the bay these past three decades had not happened visibly. No doubt it was more polluted each year. Even during my residency in the area, an environmental crisis in the bay was announced at the beginning of every fishing season; but this morning, with the wind in my face and the salt air expanding my nostrils, I was in a space out of time, engulfed in natural sensations as old as human existence itself. I

could see why people lived close to the sea, the very vastness of which had a way of pushing personal concerns into the dark corners of insignificance. The task at hand, to find Jim – if indeed he were still there – and confront him about my daughter, was far removed until the dock at the island appeared, the mail boat's engine changed its rhythm, a boat horn announced our arrival, seagulls swooped overhead to welcome us, and I was thrust back into the more sordid world where grown men forced sexual favors from children.

The small business district of Oyster Island was a short walk from the dock. Only a handful had made the trip, and I walked with them into town. I found a pay phone and looked in the attached directory for a listing for Williams. There were two, and one of them was Jim. Finding him couldn't have been easier. I scribbled down the phone number and address.

Over coffee in a café, I asked the waitress for directions to the address.

"I came over on the mail boat," I said.

"I assumed as much. It's almost two miles. You may want to rent a bicycle."

The General Store was a few buildings down from the café, and a few rental bikes were outside. I had no idea how to choose between them, or even if I remembered how to ride, despite what they say about it all coming back to you.

"How far are you planning to ride?" the woman from the store asked. She was wearing bib coveralls and had her hair bunched under a red bandana.

"Not far. A couple miles out, and a couple miles back."

"There's not a hill on the island, so you really don't need more than a few gears. I think these fancier models are a waste of money."

So I rented your basic three-speed and was on my way. To my surprise, I didn't fall over, despite a few unstable moments as I started out. It did all come back to you quickly.

The trip was glorious, the country road cutting between sand covered with grasses that bent as if in homage to past storms. Here on land the strong bay wind was gone, the late morning still and bright. I peddled on, sweat forming on my brow, getting more exercise than I was used to but loving every moment of it. I wished someone were around to take my picture, an old overweight man pumping the peddles across the sandbar. With the proper punch line, it would have made a great poster.

Before I expected it, a mailbox on the road presented the same number as the one I was looking for. A dirt driveway led back about a quarter mile to what appeared to be a small house or shack. I took it.

About halfway to the shack (and it was a shack) the road got too rough for my sense of security, and I got off to push the bike the rest of the way. A woman was on a sagging front porch, sitting in what was left of a porch swing. I felt like I had walked onto a movie set from the Great Depression, into the poverty of a tenant farmer's habitat.

"Hello!" I called as I approached. The porch was disconnected from the house and tilting enough that I was surprised the broken down swing didn't slide off.

The woman said nothing. She just looked at me. She, too, was a figure from the Depression, her face fleshy and flush, her hair loose and tangled, the color of dirty dishwater. She wore a plain housedress and a filthy apron. She was smoking a small cigar.

I pushed my bike to the porch. I looked for the kickstand, couldn't find it, and finally, carefully, lowered the bike to the ground.

I took a moment to catch my breath.

"I'm looking for Jim Williams," I said.

“You a friend of his?”

She had the hoarse voice of a heavy smoker.

“An old friend. From when he was in college.”

She just looked at me, as if trying to decide whether or not she believed me. She threw away the cigar stub and lit a cigarette.

“I haven’t seen him in thirty years,” I said. “A mutual friend told me he was living out here. I thought I’d come by and say hello.”

She nodded.

“Is he home?”

“He’s working.”

“I see. What time does he get off?”

“He’s checking pots. He’ll be back for lunch.”

Not long.

“Great. Do you mind if I wait?”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Robert Bass.”

“Folks call you Bobby?”

“Mostly Robert. But Bobby is fine.”

“I ain’t calling you Bobby if you don’t want to be called Bobby.”

“Robert, then.”

“Well, Robert, excuse my hospitality, but I don’t move too easily.”

She moved on the swing and I realized that she was missing one leg below the knee, a leg which I thought had been tucked under her. I noticed a cane leaning against the house.

“So if you don’t mind,” she said, the cigarette dangling in her mouth, “there’s coffee on the stove, and clean cups in the cupboard, and you can fill me up while you’re at it.”

Squinting from the smoke, she pointed to a coffee cup on the floor beside the swing.

“I’d be glad to,” I said.

The inside of the shack looked worse than the outside. Clutter and filth were everywhere, especially in the tiny kitchen area, where the sink was a chaotic pile of dirty dishes, surely from several meals ago. There was a large electric coffee pot on the counter. I opened a cupboard, found a cup, rinsed it, and filled it and hers with coffee.

As soon as I stepped outside, she said, “There’s a whiskey bottle in the cupboard next to the cups. I don’t know about you, but I could use a sweetener. I know Jim’s gonna want to celebrate once he sees you’re here.”

“You want me to get the bottle?”

“If you don’t mind.”

When I returned with it, I let her pour her own, which must have been several shots after she poured coffee off the end of the porch to make room for it. She handed me the open bottle.

“I don’t drink,” I said.

“You don’t drink? I didn’t know Jim had any friends who were teetotals.”

“I used to drink. I had to quit – for health reasons.”

“Well, it doesn’t stop Jim.”

She took back the bottle, capped it, and put it on the floor beside her.

I couldn’t think of a thing to say to this woman, who still hadn’t told me her name, but it didn’t matter because she seemed grateful for having an audience to whom to recite a monologue highlighting all her physical ailments, and the more she sweetened her coffee – by the time Jim

arrived, I swear she was sipping straight whiskey – the more bitterly she rambled on, a woman for whom nothing had gone right, whom no earthly sickness had bypassed, a woman so obsessed with everything wrong that I marveled she hadn't jumped off a boat into the bay and drowned herself.

She was pretty drunk by the time a pickup truck pulled in front of the porch and Jim climbed out.

“Look who's here to see you!” the woman called.

I would have recognized Jim immediately. His hair had grayed but his features and weight remained the same, a short slight man with an habitual silly grin, which he showed now before saying, “Well, I'll be damned. The Bear himself. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Well, it's great to see you, man!”

He strode forward and embraced me but it was hard to hug him back. My reason for being there was firmly in mind now. I wanted to find a way to get on with it, find out what I needed to know, and get out of there. But Jim was ready to party.

Partying meant drinking, of course, and I learned several things in the next hour. The first was that Jim and his wife, whose name turned out to be Tina, were veteran boozers on the brink of terminal self-destruction. Jim, I guessed, was in his early fifties, Tina a bit younger, which was about the age I finally saw the light and quit drinking, moderation being an unrealistic alternative. At this stage of drinking, they were entrenched in their own fuzzy world after a few drinks, babbling more than talking, listening selectively if at all and as much to voices in their heads as to what someone else was saying. They'd forgotten about me after a few attempts to get me to fall off the wagon. Jim put on music, Bob Dylan in his early electric period, the volume of which kept being raised, and I could feel in the driving pulse of the music the same energy that was going to explode into a marital fight at any moment. This was a drinking couple like many, whose drinking led to squabbling, which led to fighting, which led to brawling, all of which, if they were among the lucky ones, was a pattern that existed for making up and the lovemaking that would follow, a cycle that I, or anyone with a drinking history, had witnessed in many drinking couples over the years.

The second thing that became obvious was that I wasn't going to learn what I came here to learn unless I got Jim alone while he was still standing and reasonably coherent. One opportunity might be the marital fight I was sure was coming – they already were snapping at one another. If Jim left the house in a huff, I could leave with him. But before this happened, another opportunity dropped into my lap. Jim announced they were running out of booze, and he was making a quick trip to the liquor store in town. Of course, I volunteered to go with him.

I threw the bicycle in the back of the pickup, saying I might as well return it, and we were on our way. In traffic, I wouldn't have gotten into a vehicle with Jim behind the wheel, but it was a short drive across the sandbar, and I needed to be alone with him. We made it to town, and Jim parked in front of the General Store. The liquor store was inside, in the back of the building.

While he bought more booze, I returned the bike. I needed a bed for the night and asked the clerk about it. She suggested a cabin on the bay, which I could rent from her. The price was lower than I expected, and I took it.

When I told Jim I'd rented a cabin for the night, he wanted me to cancel and crash with them. No way, though I made an excuse about why I had to have my own place. Then I invited him to come with me while we checked it out.

The small cabin had a full bay window, which overlooked the water. I found glasses in the

cupboard and pretended to join him in drink. Jim poured whiskey, we clanked glasses, and I raised my drink, pretending to sip. The liquor, which was cheap bourbon, stung my lips. I had no real desire to drink, however. The alcoholic fiend drooling for a fix was a myth in no way suggesting my relationship to alcohol after so long an abstinence. If anything, the smell and sting of booze made me a little sick in my stomach. But the charade, made as I turned away to admire the view, worked enough so that Jim said nothing about it.

But I didn't want to have to repeat the trick too often, so I got right to the point.

"You met my daughter when she visited, didn't you?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. How old is she now?"

"Forty, give or take."

"Man, that was a long time ago."

"She thinks I abused her."

Jim looked at me as if he hadn't heard right.

I said, "She wrote me a letter. She had a repressed memory where she remembers me sexually abusing her. She won't see me to let me defend myself. No way I did something like that."

"No way," Jim said.

It struck me as a curious thing for him to say. I waited for more but he filled up his glass and moved across the room, as if checking out the kitchen.

I said, "I guess you know what it's like to be accused of something like that."

He turned and for a moment, by the intensity of his glare, I thought he might turn violent. Then, just as suddenly as this energy appeared, it was gone, and he offered a sheepish grin, as if to say, Who, me, a sex pervert? Ha ha ha.

"How did you handle it?" I asked.

"Handle what?"

"What happened about Carrie?"

"Where'd you hear that? You been talking to Stacy?"

"Somebody sent me the article in the paper," I lied. No need getting Stacy into this.

Out of nowhere, Jim laughed. He'd become quite the quick-change artist.

"Is something funny?"

"I was thinking of you screwing Sally's student," Jim said. "I thought that was really cool."

"You're the only one."

"I had her pegged as a dyke from day one. I would've done the same thing you did."

"But I didn't do what you did, Jim."

"You lost me."

"I don't think so."

In the silence, I could see his stress level rising in the new flushness on his cheeks. Once again, he covered by pouring more liquor into his glass.

"It was a long time ago, Jim," I said. "Whatever happened is between you and, well, whatever or whoever you believe in. I'm here selfishly, for myself. I need to convince my daughter that I didn't molest her. At first I thought she was probably hallucinating. There's a large body of medical opinion that questions the validity of repressed memory. But the way our parties were, with Stephanie isolated in her room upstairs, anybody could have gone up there during a party and fondled her or whatever happened. It could have been anyone, and who would have known?"

"Are you accusing me of something?"

“I’m asking you to level with me. I’m asking you to help me clear my name with my daughter.”

He moved back to the large window. He spoke while staring out at the bay.

“Stacy thinks I fucked Carrie in the bathtub or some damn thing. Yes, I took a bath with her. We played with her rubber duckys. That’s all there was to it.”

“I got the impression you admitted guilt.”

“That’s what everyone thinks. But I didn’t. I signed the papers to get it over with. That’s all. If I did that, and left town, Stacy agreed to drop charges. My lawyer advised me to do this. He didn’t think I’d win in court.”

“So you’re telling me you didn’t mess with Stephanie at any of our parties?”

“Fuck you, Bear! I don’t give a shit about you or your daughter. I got run out of town for something I didn’t do. You’re an asshole, coming here like you’re an old friend when all you want is relief for your conscience or some damn thing. Get the fuck out of my life.”

After he stormed off, I sat at the window, staring off over the still waters of the bay. I was there for a long time, numb, depressed, frustrated. I actually began to feel sorry for Jim. What if he were telling the truth, that he was as innocent as I was? Where had innocence gotten him? A hidden-away, angry existence on a small island, hidden from the world and all who thought lies about him. But I had no way of knowing whether he were innocent or guilty. I decided I had to talk to Stacy again, and this time I had to tell her what had happened to me.

17: Making sense

I was lucky to catch Stacy home. After catching the ferry back to the mainland and driving back to Chesapeake, it was late in the morning. Stacy was coming out the door as I pulled into her driveway.

“I thought you went to Washington,” she said.

“I saw Jim. He says he’s innocent.”

Her glare should have knocked me off my feet. Its subtext said I was doubting her word – or worse, was siding with the enemy.

I tried to win her back to my side.

“I wasn’t thinking right. I thought I could get him to write a confession or something, so I could show it to my daughter. Of course he’d deny it. I’m a real mess here, Stacy. My daughter thinks I molested her during her visit. I didn’t. I think it may have been Jim.”

Stacy said, “Come in for coffee.”

She sat me down at the dining room table. After pouring coffee for me alone, she disappeared. She wasn’t gone long and returned with a manila envelope.

“Look at this,” said Stacy.

She took a document out of the envelope and dropped it in front of me. I picked it up and began reading. It was her divorce papers.

“You want to read page two,” she said. “Skip ahead.” When I turned the page, she leaned forward and pointed to a passage. “Here.”

I read: “Whereby he took a bath with said child, improperly touching and fondling her in the act of bathing, and further having the child improperly touch and fondle him, the latter to the point of ...”

I had to stop. Just reading this had brought tears to her eyes.

“It doesn’t get more clear than this,” Stacy said. “He signed the papers. He didn’t fight this. You do the math.”

She retrieved the divorce papers and slipped them back into their envelope. She sat down at the table. Her voice turned soft, almost maternal. “I think you’re right. I think he did the same thing to your daughter. No one really gets cured from a sickness like this.”

“It makes sense. Not that Stephanie would believe anything I had to say.”

“I’ll write her.”

The offer was so extraordinary, so kind, I didn’t know what to say.

“I want to,” said Stacy. “Leave me her address. She may believe it from me. It’s worth a try.”

“What would you say?”

“I’d tell her about Jim, about what happened to me, and how he was often at your house. I’ll tell her I know your character, that you are incapable of something like this. It has to have been Jim. Robert, it just makes sense. Don’t you see?”

I did but for some reason I didn’t feel like celebrating.

I took my time driving back to Washington D.C. (We in the west seldom say just Washington, which to our minds is a state in the Pacific Northwest, not our capital.). It was getting dark by the time I pulled into the same motel from which I’d left a few days earlier. I called the V. A. Hospital to see if Hooker had checked in yet. The nurse told me she’d never heard of him. I called the number at the other hospital, where I’d talked to him last.

“Hooker’s taxi service.”

“I thought you were moving to the VA.”

“Bear! You have to get me out of here, man. I’m being held against my will.”

“I thought you loved the place.”

“They want money. I never told anyone to bring me to this capitalistic institution. I believe in socialized medicine, like the VA.”

“I’ll be right over and pay your bill.”

“There’s more.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. Bear, you have to make me a promise. Get me out of here. I don’t want to die here.”

“Red, what are you telling me? Did they find something else?”

“There’s no goddamn something else. Just get me the fuck out of here before I stress myself into a heart attack.”

“I’m on my way.”

18: Prognosis

“Bear, you’ve got to get me out of here.”

“You’ve already said that. Where’s your nurse?”

Hooker looked worse than I’d left him. In fact, he looked worse than I’d seen him in a long time, maybe since Jennifer had taken his young sons and split, leaving him alone in Idaho about to begin graduate school. He never finished. Eventually he followed his wife to Southern California and wooed her back, though the marriage instantly disintegrated for good once the boys had left home as young men. Then the gods took one a few years later in a highway

accident and the other soon thereafter in the first Gulf war. But Hooker had helped to keep the marriage together in order to raise his sons, and I admired him for this. He'd looked like a broken man the first time I saw him in Idaho after his wife had left. Now he looked like a broken man again.

"They want to stick me in a hospice," Hooker went on. "Jesus Christ, who came up with that concept? A boarding house for dying people. I'd rather go up on the mountain and blow my brains out."

Hooker's expression was pleading now. He needed reassurance and support and most of all a pledge to get him out of the hospital.

I said, "Well, they can't keep you here against your will. I'll pay your bill."

"Now you're talking."

He made a move, as if to slide out of bed and get dressed, but even this little movement was visibly painful to him, though he tried his best to cover it up. He got comfortable in bed again.

"Are you sure you can travel?" I asked. He shot me a look filled with disappointment. "I want you to be comfortable."

"Then get me out of here."

"How do I do that if you can't even move?"

"I need stronger pain pills. Where the hell's the nurse?"

"I'll mention it to her."

"They're going to try to persuade you to keep out of it. You'd better expect it."

"I'll tell them you're from God's country. There's nothing worse that could happen to you than to die on the east coast."

"Bear, I love your fucking ass. Go find the nurse."

I found the doctor as well, the pair huddling near a nurse's station. I demanded to know how serious the situation was.

"His situation has gone from a few months to a few weeks," said the doctor. "Our focus now is to make him as comfortable as possible. We can get him into a hospice, but he seems antagonistic to the idea."

"The thing is, he wants to make sure he dies in the west. The Pacific Northwest, to be more precise."

The doctor and nurse looked at me as if I'd just said something in Martian.

"Maybe you have to be from there to understand."

"A plane flight would be very uncomfortable for him," the doctor said.

I wasn't about to mention that we were returning west in a car.

"It's his choice to make," I said. "I need to pay his bill and get him out of here."

The doctor exhaled and nodded, as if to say, What the hell's the matter with you people?

After the doctor scooted off on his rounds, I asked the nurse about Hooker's medicine. She said the problem wasn't with the medicine but with his reluctance to take it. If he followed the directions on the bottle, he should be fine.

The nurse led me to the counter where I could pay Hooker's bill. I expected it to be more than it actually was, which was bad enough. I put it on my American Express card.

Back at Hooker's bed, I found him dressing with the help of the nurse. The nurse said she'd explained about the pills. Hooker had been taking only one a day. He could take one every four hours.

When Hooker was dressed, the nurse left, saying she'd be right back. Hooker said, "I hate taking medicine," as if this explained everything. He immediately popped a pill.

“How’d it go in Chesapeake?” he asked.

“I think I know who did it. The guy’s ex-wife is going to write Stephanie about it. It’s the best I could do.”

“You did good, brother. Did you see Sally?”

“In and out of her office in a flash. That didn’t go too well.”

“A very stubborn broad.”

“She’d put you on her shit list if she heard you call her a broad.”

“I’m already on her shit list.”

The nurse returned. She handed me a small bag.

“Extra medicine,” she said. “You may need it. Here’s a cane, and I have a wheel chair coming.”

“I don’t need a wheel chair,” said Hooker, accepting the aluminum walking cane.

“Do as she says, Red.”

To me, the nurse said, “I strongly suggest you pick one up for the trip. He’s going to need it, whether he thinks so or not.”

Hooker said, “Jesus. You’d think I was dying or something.”

The nurse didn’t know how to respond to this and looked to me for help. Hooker suddenly guffawed. I think he must have enjoyed the visible confusion of the nurse’s response because Hooker kept grinning and chuckling to himself as I wheeled him out the door. I was reminded of the madman Salieri in the film about Mozart, being wheeled down the hallway of an insane asylum and ordaining all the crazy onlookers as being ordinary.

Even using the cane, Hooker had hard enough a time walking into the motel room that I knew we’d need a wheel chair for the trip. I made a note to find one first thing in the morning.

Hooker slept like a baby. As usual I was the restless one, tossing and turning through the long night. I met the morning with a stiff neck, already exhausted before the day began.

We had two morning chores before we started driving west: to rent or buy a wheel chair and to see the Kerouac Scroll.

“We have a few hours to kill,” I said. “What do you want to do?”

“Take care of business and head west.”

I thought a moment.

“We can pick up a wheel chair anywhere.”

“Fuck the wheel chair,” Hooker said.

“Let’s play it by ear. I assume the Smithsonian doesn’t open till ten. That gives us almost three hours.”

Hooker didn’t respond.

“We could skip it,” I said, “and head west right now.”

“No. The whole purpose of the trip was to see the scroll. And to go to Calumet. That’s what we’re going to do.”

“Going to Calumet, assuming we can find your brother there, would add several days at least. I think we should get west as soon as possible.”

“I’m not going to die on you on the east coast, Bear. Even the gods aren’t that sadistic. We stay with the plan.”

We cruised in silence for a while. I found the Smithsonian and then cruised in a large circle around it, keeping it as the center of our wandering.

“Maybe I should talk to your daughter,” Hooker said.

“I’m not sure what that would accomplish.”

“She doesn’t know the first thing about you. If she did, she’d know how wrong her memory is.”

“I appreciate the offer but I think the odds are just as good that this would make things worse. The letter is my only chance. My friend’s ex abused their daughter, and he was over to our farmhouse a lot. If it was anyone, it was him.”

“Jesus, the world is full of sickos.”

After another silence, Hooker said, “How long’s it take to drive to Chesapeake?”

“A couple hours. Why do you want to go to Chesapeake?”

“It’s ridiculous you and Sally are on the outs. Who the hell cares if she became a dyke? You still could be friends.”

“So you want to talk to her, too?”

“Wouldn’t hurt anything.”

“Aren’t you the peacemaker this morning?”

“I’m at the end of the road, brother. I haven’t done much good with my life. Maybe there’s time to help someone in the time I have left.”

“What the hell you talking about, no good in your life?”

Hooker turned away and stared out the window.

“Come on, man. Do you think I’ve accomplished anything in my life?” He didn’t answer. “I think I have.”

“Of course you have.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be who I am except for meeting you, asshole. Look at all the material I’ve stolen from you in my writing.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

“Christ, Hooker, you were almost a millionaire once.”

“I was a millionaire.”

“See there? You’ve been successful. You’ve had amazing experiences. You could have done worse, my friend.”

“How long have we been friends exactly?”

“Since Frankfurt, Germany, summer, 1954. I was playing my guitar in the E.M. Club. Some asshole got a pot from the kitchen and thought he knew how to play bongos.”

“Shit,” said Hooker, and he managed to grin.

“You were driving me crazy. Then you caught up with me in the billets and loaned me a copy of Guthrie’s Bound For Glory. I haven’t been the same since.”

“That’s over fifty years, Bear. Long fucking time.”

“I can barely remember my life before you were at the center of it.”

Hooker smiled and I thought I saw a reflection of light in his eyes.

“I love you, man,” I said.

“You, too, brother. We should have been queer.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

I was still driving within the tether of the Smithsonian. Traffic was a mess but it didn’t matter. The slower we drove, the more time passed.

Hooker said, “I think I could take a nap.”

“We can do that. Why don’t you stretch out in back?”

I pulled over and helped Hooker move to the back seat. It didn’t take long for his snoring to fill the car. I drove on. I pulled into a gas station and filled up. I drove around the Smithsonian some more. Hooker snored on.

Half-an-hour later I nudged him awake. He blinked, looked confused for a moment, and looked around to see where we were.

“I found a great wheel chair,” I said. “I just need you to try it out.”

“Where are we?”

“Not far from the Smithsonian. Let me help you inside.”

It was a “space age” wheelchair, the salesman said, made of one of those strong, light synthetic metals that didn’t exist a decade ago. What I liked about it was how easily it folded and unfolded. It didn’t take up much space at all.

The salesman was waiting with the chair as we entered. I helped Hooker into it.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Where’s the motor?”

“I figured we don’t need one. This is light and easy to handle. We’ll be in the car most of the time.”

Hooker seemed to be thinking it over.

“We can trade it in for a motorized model when we get home.”

Hooker said, “Born comedian.”

He made a move to stand up but couldn’t quite pull it off. I helped him.

“What do you think?” I said again.

“Sure, why not?”

The wheelchair bought, we were ready to see the Kerouac Scroll. Since this was the purpose of our trip, at least on the surface, I expected to feel more excitement than I did. Hooker looked like he felt the same.

“Ready for the scroll?”

Hooker shrugged.

“Want to get lunch first?”

Hooker said, “No, let’s see it and get on the road. I want to get out of D.C. I won’t feel like I’m out of the hospital until we do.”

“Then let’s see the scroll.”

The Kerouac Scroll was magical, after all. Exhibited in a glass cage, it was unrolled to a length of about twelve or fifteen feet, looking like some ancient papyrus. The paper had faded and curled at the edges, and the typescript was irregular by contemporary computer standards and hard to read. But it was *On the Road*, a revolutionary novel that changed literature, even more radical and iconic for having been written on one long seemingly endless strip of teletype paper, a manuscript as long as the road itself, as if its story, the story of a man on the road, the story of a male friendship, was a never-ending story and a story inappropriate for the artificial divisions of page endings and chapter endings and finite word counts. *On the Road* was as much art object as literature, a visual manifestation of Kerouac’s spirit in heat. It was easy to picture him at the typewriter, the long paper coming in one way and rolling out another, writing on a hot afternoon, sweating, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, an open beer bottle next to the typewriter, typing as fast as he could to keep up with his thoughts. Someone had once said that Kerouac wasn’t a writer, he was a typist, but this distinction was not necessarily pejorative if the typing happened in the white heat of creative thought.

We lingered a long time. We didn’t speak. Seeing the scroll, this paean to Kerouac’s friendship with Neal Cassidy, brought to mind my own friendship with Hooker – how could it not? – and my mind wandered back half-a-century to the night in the Enlisted Men’s Club when our friendship had its rocky beginning.

19: God's Country

"You should do more Guthrie."

He'd caught up with me on the stairs, this short redheaded nuisance of a soldier, still in uniform as I wasn't, who had pounded on a pot borrowed from the bartender while I played guitar and sang at the Enlisted Men's Club, thinking himself a bongo-playing beatnik perhaps, but gaining no fan in yours truly; whose grin, even back then, was compelling enough to draw attention away from the crooked teeth; and he was holding a book out for me.

"This is Guthrie's Bound for Glory. You can borrow it if you've never read it."

"I'd like to, thanks."

"Red Hooker."

His hand thrust out once again, this time for a shake.

"Robert Bass."

"People call you Bear?"

"Pardon me?"

"Big guy, small hands, short legs. Like a bear."

I started the book that night and couldn't put it down. I ran into Hooker at breakfast, and we took a table together.

That morning began my indoctrination into the Church of God's Country, the Pacific Northwest, especially the logging country along the Clearwater River in northern Idaho where Hooker was raised. To the ears of an LA boy, his tales of all night poker games and one week runs from small town bar to small town bar along dirt roads through the hills above the Clearwater, of loose women and rough loggers, had the ring of a Hollywood western – and I listened spellbound, as fascinated as I'd been as a kid at a Saturday Hopalong Cassidy marathon. When I got discharged, and Hooker right behind me, I made my first trip to the Northwest and Hooker's home town of Orofino expecting a jolt of reality, the reality that belied two years' of listening to wild stories about this so-called God's Country, Hooker's birthplace.

On the surface, at least, Hooker's country lived up to its praise. On each side of the narrow road that twisted and turned alongside the river from Lewiston to Orofino, hills rose to form dense forests stretching up and beyond the visible summit. I'd never seen so many trees in my life. Welcome to God's country.

Hooker was staying with his mother while looking for a house in nearby Moscow, where the University of Idaho was, so he could bring up his wife and young sons, who were waiting in California where Hooker had been discharged. I was looking forward to partying with Hooker to forget my marital troubles at home, though separation from Helen was still several months away. I'd made the trip to Idaho alone. I was worried, however, that his mother might dampen our style. But I couldn't turn down a visit when I was only a long day's drive away, having moved to Oregon to start graduate school.

I found the address Hooker had provided on a wooded street in the hills above the river. I parked behind two cars in the driveway and went to the door.

When it opened, a woman barely five foot tall was staring up at me, grinning. She had red hair and a mischievous glint in her eye. Hooker's mother.

The first thing out of her mouth was, "So you're the fucking bear."

Hooker's mother's name was Flo. A short feisty woman who used the vernacular of a hard-

drinking logger, she didn't dampen our party style. She inspired it.

"What time is it?"

In the rearview mirror I saw Hooker yawn and stretch.

"Almost three."

"Where are we going?"

"To Calumet, Michigan, in the copper country," I sang.

"We there yet?"

"It's a long drive. Three days at our usual crawl. Four easy."

"I feel like you're a goddamn chauffeur. I want to sit up front."

"No problem."

I pulled off the highway and hurried out to get the wheel chair ready. Hooker would have nothing of it.

"I'm not a damn cripple," he said. "Jesus, Bear, look at you. You look like it's the end of the world. We're not on borrowed time here. I'm not dying till we get back to God's country."

"How come you didn't remember that when ...?"

I stopped. How does one ask why a man attempts suicide?

"It was temporary insanity," said Hooker. "I was feeling sorry for myself."

"It was a fucked-up thing to do. You didn't even talk to me about it."

"I'm sorry, Bear. What else can I say? I've got my head out of my ass now, okay? Relax, for God's sake."

But it seemed to me we were indeed on borrowed time, trying to get to Calumet, Michigan, in what might be a fool's errand in search of his brother, and from there to race across the Midwest to reach God's country, northern Idaho, before Hooker succumbed to the cancerous cells raging in his body. If this wasn't a race against time, I didn't know what was.

Hooker couldn't quite get out of the car by himself. I offered a hand to help. He punched it away and tried again. Finally he took it, and I gave him support as he stood up out of the back seat.

"You sure you don't want the wheel chair?"

He took a tentative step, then another, using the cane for support.

"I'm fine. Just slow. You've seen me in worse shape than this, Bear."

Not physically. Nothing was worse than terminal cancer. But mentally he definitely had a point. I'd seen him more depressed, practically suicidal, and never worse than the time I saw him after Jennifer had left with their young sons.

It was summer, and Hooker was in Moscow with a scholarship to graduate school at the University of Idaho, where he'd just earned his undergraduate degree with distinction. He was biding time, waiting for school to begin.

I was in grad school at the University of Oregon in Eugene, a day's drive away. Helen had returned to California with Stephanie, and I was living with Sally. After a phone call of distress, during which Red was too drunk to be comprehensible, I convinced Sally I'd better make the drive and see what was going on. I'd never heard Hooker in such bad shape before.

Sally was a dream, understanding why I had to go and sending me off with a big breakfast and a long kiss. We were in our best times during graduate school.

I was young enough then to drive the 500 miles with only an occasional stop. With an early start, I arrived at Hooker's rented house near the university in mid-afternoon.

It was a warm summer day, the blue sky cloudless. And yet all the shades of the house were drawn. Hooker was wallowing in the dark in there.

I heard the music as soon as I stepped up onto the porch. A loud saxophone, dissonant to my ear, one of the cutting edge jazz musicians that Hooker liked more than I did, maybe cutting edge Coltrane. I rang the doorbell. I knocked.

When Hooker didn't answer, I tried the door. It was unlocked. In those days, in a town like Moscow, you only locked your door at night if at all.

A wave of louder music hit me as I stepped into the dark house. I called Hooker's name but doubted if he could hear me over the music.

I found him sitting on the floor in the living room, in front of the phonograph. A bottle of Jamison's Irish whiskey, half full, was beside him. An empty bottle of the same was overturned on the floor. Beer bottles were scattered everywhere.

"Red, you okay?"

The loud dissonant music sounded like internal screaming.

I approached and sat down on the floor next to him. I gently touched his shoulder.

Hooker slowly turned, as if I'd been there all along. He took the bottle, took a swig, and passed it my way. I accepted the gesture and took a sip of Irish, the whiskey hitting my throat with a pleasant sting.

"What's going on?"

Hooker made a gesture like brushing away a fly. He leaned forward and turned down the volume of the music. Now it floated in the room like music played at a great distance.

"What's going on?" I asked again.

"Did I call you last night?"

"Yeah, but you weren't making any sense."

"Jennifer left me. She took the boys."

"Where'd she go?"

"To stay with her sister in Pasadena."

"I'm sorry, Red. What happened?"

"Bear, how long you want to stay?"

I found Hooker in the wheel chair, staring up at me. The museum had filled up, and I had become an obstacle at the display case. I stepped back to get out of the way. Hooker was right behind me.

"You seen enough?" I asked.

"I'm ready when you are."

The capital had come to life while we were in the Smithsonian, and traffic was a nightmare. I hated driving in D.C. with all its circles and detours around monuments. I didn't relax until we were on the Interstate, heading west at last.

"The scroll brought back memories," I said.

Hooker was riding shotgun, the wheel chair folded in the back seat.

"I was thinking about that myself. How come you never wrote a play about us?"

"I didn't want to lose your friendship." He laughed. "In the museum, for some reason I remembered the day I found you listening to Coltrane. Whoever it was. Right after Jennifer left with the kids. I don't think I've ever seen you in such bad shape."

"I wasn't too bad a little later, though, was I? I have pleasant memories of grad school."

"You regret not finishing?"

"I had to make a choice, Bear. A Ph.D. or raising the boys. I chose the boys, and then they went and died on me. A parent shouldn't outlive his children."

“You would’ve made a great professor,” I said.

“You really think so?”

“Absolutely. You’re an actor at heart. A performer. The classroom would’ve been your stage.”

“I don’t know. I felt out of place.”

“You said you had pleasant memories.”

“Of the parties, of my affair with Hannah. I should have followed her to Ohio. She may have been the love of my life.”

“Yeah, I thought I had one of those once.”

“We should’ve gone to talk to Sally together. She’s acting like a spoiled teenager with this silent treatment.”

“She held a grudge against her father till the day he died. I should’ve seen it coming and not been such an asshole.”

Suddenly Hooker let out a little gasp.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

But I didn’t believe him.

“You need to take a pain pill?”

“Next rest stop.” Without thinking, I slowed down. “I’m fine, Bear. Stop worrying about me.”

“I don’t want you dying on me on the road.”

“That would be something to see. Don’t tempt me.”

Hooker started to laugh and ended up coughing. It took him a while to recover. He was dying. I’d faced the information first with shock, then moving through an erratic sequence of emotions ranging from grief to anger. I would have no close friends when he was gone. I imagined his departure as an amputation, removing a part of me as dear and taken for granted as an eye. Without it, the very appearance of the world would lose dimension and clarity.

The drive to Calumet was the longest part of the journey, not in time, for I was driving more hours than I preferred now, pushing myself with a new sense of urgency, but in discomfort and restlessness. Hooker, bless him, did his best, revealing the pain he was in only by his consistent popping of pain pills, and I blessed the nurse back in D.C. for sending us off with a reinforced supply.

At night we both slept poorly. Hooker coughed and wheezed when he wasn’t snoring in brief spurts of rest, and it was all I could do not to dial 911 to fetch an ambulance to put him out of his misery. I tossed and turned in the bed beside his, now and again watching a scene in my head as real as a home movie, some memory of Hooker and my life together.

I remembered the event that inspired one of my more frequently told stories about our friendship. I shared the story for what it said about male bonding and male communication. To be sure, I had never met a woman who didn’t shake her head or otherwise communicate amazement at the story, as if to say, Men!

The story went this way. Helen and I were still together, and I was going to UCLA. Hooker had just gotten out of the Army and moved to Idaho with plans to return to college. One Saturday night we came home from a party after midnight to find the phone ringing. It was Hooker. He was drunk and calling to tell me he was leaving Jennifer. He’d had enough. When? I asked. Right now. No, I insisted, don’t do this until you talk to me. Where can we meet? We decided on Reno, which was halfway between southern California and northern Idaho.

Helen, of course, couldn't believe that I actually was going to leave for Reno on the spot. I was half-drunk and my body was ready to crash. To hell with it. My soul brother was in distress, and I left with Helen yelling at me.

Soon enough I got a lucky break. I picked up a hitchhiker, who drove while I caught a nap in the back seat.

It was late morning by the time I made Reno. We had agreed to meet in the bar at the Reno Hotel. But Hooker wasn't there. Maybe I beat him. I called Helen to let her know I was still alive.

Hooker had called, He'd had car trouble and was stranded in Winnemucca. He'd meet me at the downtown motel there.

I didn't trust myself to drive for another hour without more rest. I crawled into my car, and when I woke up, the sun was going down. I hit the road.

It was a tortuous trip. I kept hallucinating that car lights were heading my way. I was hungover and still a little drunk, exhausted mentally and physically, in no shape to be on the road. But there I was.

In Winnemucca the desk clerk gave me our room number. Though it was early, Hooker already was snoring. I took the other bed and in no time was asleep.

When I awoke, morning sunshine was streaming into the room. Hooker's bed was empty. I found him downstairs in the restaurant, reading the paper. I slipped into the booth across from him.

"Sports?" he asked.

"Sure."

A waitress came and took our order. We read the paper and ate. No one spoke. We didn't speak a single word to the other as we ate.

Hooker picked up the tab. Outside the restaurant, I said, "Which way you heading?"

"North."

"Back to Jenn?"

"Right."

"Have a safe trip."

"You, too."

We embraced. We climbed into our separate cars. At the highway, Hooker turned north, and I turned south, each beeping a farewell.

A man always grinned after hearing this story. A woman always shook her head.

20: Brothers

Calumet on Michigan's Upper Peninsula is like a lot of American towns founded on a single industry. They prosper for as long as the basis of their existence thrives, after which decline is quick, sending the community leaders into a frenzy of activity as they try to find ways to keep people working and the young folks at home. Calumet's soul was copper mining, about which Guthrie wrote so eloquently, and as we cruised along Main Street, past the typical brick and stone storefronts of small town America, a sign identified a museum dedicated to the memory of Calumet's glory days, a Copper Mining Museum.

I turned to Hooker.

"Where are we going?"

“We’re here.”

“I meant, do you know where your brother lives.”

“Actually, no. He should be in the phone book.”

I pulled into the first gas station. I got the pump going, then walked across the lot to a phone booth. Clyde was the only Hooker in the book.

Red was waiting in the car.

“Find him?”

“His name’s Clyde, right?”

I couldn’t remember. Hooker’s given name was Charles but I seldom heard anyone use it.

“Clyde the ride.”

“I’ll get directions.”

I finished at the pump and went into the office to pay. The attendant there said we were only a few blocks from the address, which was just off Main Street.

“I’m not ready to see him quite yet,” Hooker said when I told him how close we were.

“We drove a long way to get here.”

“Aren’t you ready for something to eat?”

“I could eat.”

“Let’s see him on full stomachs.”

I knew something was bothering him but knew better than to press for information. When the time came to talk about it, if it came at all, Hooker would let me know. He started talking during lunch, which was sooner than I expected.

“Remember how you were talking about what bad shape I was in that time you found me listening to Coltrane, right after Jennifer left with the boys?”

“Yes.”

“Did I ever tell you what happened?”

“Not the details.”

I remembered asking him the day I found him but getting only the blank stare of someone in his own painful world, where such questions did not register. Now, decades later, he seemed ready to tell me.

“I was out of town, trying to get a loan for grad school, so I wouldn’t have to work so much. Mom had connections with a small bank in Boise, and a loan had been arranged on the phone. I had to sign the papers and decided to drive so I could get the check sooner. I planned to stay overnight.

“As it happened, it didn’t take nearly as long as I thought, and I didn’t look forward to a night alone in a motel room, so I drove on home. I got in about eleven. There was a car in the driveway, and I recognized it. I was actually glad to see it. It was Clyde’s, and I figured he was paying a surprise visit. He was living in Spokane at the time.

“Only Clyde wasn’t up watching the tube and drinking beer, which is what I would have expected to find. I heard noise upstairs. To make a long story short, I found him in bed with Jennifer.”

“My God.”

“My own fucking brother, right? I think I made a pun.”

After all these years, there was still a hint of pain in his voice.

“What did you do?”

“I left. Needless to say, I went on a bender to end all benders. I think I fucked a couple barmaids along the way. When I came back, Jennifer was already packing. We did our screaming

routine, and she left. I went to the liquor store, stocked up, came home and closed the blinds. Coltrane seemed to work best, the right medicine for what I needed, and that's what I was doing when you appeared out of nowhere. I always figured you had vibes that I was in trouble."

"You called me in a drunken stupor."

"I don't remember."

"So this is when you stopped talking to your brother?"

"You got it."

"Did he ever try to contact you?"

"For a while. He finally got the message."

"Why the change of heart now?"

"You know why."

Because he was dying.

I said, "It's surprising how little I know about your brother."

"You're my brother, Bear. You know that."

"Blood is a strong tie. You're here, after all."

"Yes, I'm here."

We continued eating.

"I don't know why it mattered so much to me at the time," Hooker said. "The marriage already was in trouble. I'd been getting some on the side for a few years. Funny how it feels different when the tables are turned."

If he wanted a response, I didn't have one. We ate some more. The waitress came over and topped our coffee cups.

I said, "This is a good thing you're doing. I hope he appreciates it in the same spirit of reconciliation that brought you here."

"Not that exactly. More like hedging my bets. I don't want to take any bad karma with me."

I smiled. Hooker wasn't exactly the eastern philosophy type.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "Wait till it's your turn, Bear. Nothing you believe, or think is true, matters much in the final analysis. You just want to slip away into the void without any bad karma chasing you. Just in case, know what I mean? A lot of folks believe a lot of pretty weird things about what happens after death. How am I to say my version is the right one?"

After the waitress took away our plates and put our bill on the table, no one made a move to leave. I figured this was Hooker's decision.

"Well," he finally said. "Might as well get this little dog-and-pony show on the road."

Clyde Hooker lived in a modest brick house on a street off Main lined with more of the same. Most looked enough alike to suggest they were company built, homes for the miners when Calumet was a company town. I pulled to the curb in front of the house.

"Want me to come in with you?" I asked.

"Of course you're coming in. Jesus, Bear."

"You want the wheel chair?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Hooker tried gallantly to walk to the front door with the help of the aluminum cane. Several times I reached for him, afraid he was about to fall, and each time he slapped my assistance away. I was so focused on Hooker's frailty that I hadn't heard the front door open. By the time we reached the porch, we had someone waiting for us.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

“Hi, Red,” said Jennifer.

His ex had aged since I’d seen her last, of course, but Jennifer was aging well. Her white hair was shorter than I remembered, and she wore little makeup, which meant she made no effort to look younger. She was still trim.

As soon as Jennifer greeted him, I turned to see Red’s reaction. His face was tight and full of stress, his jaw muscles working – and then he quickly recovered, forced himself to relax, flashed his bad teeth and said, “Well, looky here. I come looking for an ex-brother and find an ex-wife.”

“What’s this ex-brother shit,” said Clyde, stepping onto the porch behind Jennifer. He wrapped his arms around her, as if claiming his territory. He was thin and lanky with almost no hair left, just a trace to show he didn’t shave his head. I saw no family resemblance with Red.

Jennifer said, “You lost a wife and gained a sister-in-law.”

“Apparently so.”

Everyone was smiling, even I was smiling, but the tension in the air was electric.

Clyde said, “Well, don’t stand out there like strangers. Come on in and have a drink.”

As I reached to assist Hooker, Jennifer stepped forward and said, “Need any help?”

“I’m fine,” Hooker snapped and shot me a glare that said, Let me do as much of this as I can on my own. So I did.

When finally we were inside and settled into an old divan in the living room, Clyde said, “Name your poison.”

I looked at Hooker.

He said, “You have any beer?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?”

“Let’s ask him.”

Hooker elbowed me in the ribs, laughing. He was going out of his way to have a good time.

“Nothing for me,” I said, “unless you have pop.”

“I heard you quit drinking,” said Jennifer. “You quit, too, didn’t you?” she asked her ex.

“For a while. I’ll have a beer.”

“Glass or bottle?” said Clyde.

“Bottle! I hope you don’t use those goddamn cans.”

Clyde went off to the kitchen to fetch beer. Behind him, Jennifer said, “White wine, please.” She smiled at me. “It comes in a box. Isn’t that awful? I can remember when I thought Gallo was only for winos. Of course, I wasn’t living on a fixed income then.”

I could remember when Hooker would bring out a bottle of French or German wine and proudly announce that it had cost him sixty or seventy dollars. This was during his good times in real estate in Central Oregon. Jennifer would shake her head, as if in criticism, but later would praise it with over-statements of a wine snob, and an uneducated one at that. Now she kept smiling, perhaps unaware of, or simply ignoring, the great amount of tension in the room.

Hooker started to say something and choked.

“You need a glass of water?” Jennifer asked.

“I’m fine.”

Jennifer had taken the stuffed chair across the room. She was wearing red jeans and a yellow shirt, looking like she belonged in a garden.

Clyde returned, a glass of white wine in one hand, two beer bottles in the other.

“I’ll get your pop in a sec,” he told me.

“I can get it.”

I stood up.

“Sit your ass down.”

Clyde distributed the drinks, leaving his on a small table next to the rocking chair he claimed as his own, and went back to the kitchen.

I looked down at Hooker. I was thinking of following Clyde into the kitchen, giving them a moment alone, but Red knew exactly what I was thinking, and his eyes told me, in a more forceful command than his brother had given, to sit my ass down. I did.

Jennifer said, “What brings you all the way out here?”

She was looking at me. I knew Hooker didn’t want the ball, so I replied.

“We’re on our way back from seeing the Kerouac Scroll.”

Jennifer didn’t know about it, or had forgotten what Hooker had told her, and so I explained. I was still explaining when Clyde returned with a bottle of 7-Up.

Handing it to me, he said, “I think I read about that.”

“Why did he write it in a such a strange way?” Jennifer asked.

Hooker said, “Why does a bear shit in the woods?”

For some reason, everyone looked at me. Was it because I was the professor? Or the Bear?

I said, “It symbolized a writing philosophy embraced by the Beats. They believed in a spontaneous flow of consciousness, in instant writing, constant writing, not stopping to interrupt the flow, because the writing needed to come from the soul, not the head. By using one continuous sheet in a scroll, Kerouac was giving himself a canvas that didn’t need to be changed along the way. He could just keep writing, not even stopping to put new paper in the typewriter. It was spontaneous writing taken to its extreme.”

“Jesus, Bear,” said Hooker, “you never told me that. It makes perfect sense. Son of a bitch.”

Everyone was smiling again.

“Cheers,” said Clyde, raising his beer bottle.

Liquor changes everything. Had we visited for a beer or two, we might have been able to go on our way without a scene. Hooker had come to forgive his brother for committing adultery with Jennifer. Now that Clyde and Jennifer were married, the context of the past changed. Or rather, maybe it was Clyde who owed Hooker the apology, not the other way around. All of this is speculation. What happened did not follow plan or order. Liquor changed everything.

Of course, I was sober. There’s a truism about the drinking life: if you can’t stand them, join them. I didn’t want to start drinking again but I didn’t want to stay for the fireworks either.

That fireworks were coming became clear to me when Hooker accepted not only a third beer but a shot of whiskey to go with it. Clyde had prodded him into drinking seriously. Jennifer, sticking to white wine, was out of it after three and was nodding in and out of consciousness, curled up in the big stuffed chair across the room. Clyde had slid the rocking chair closer to the divan, settling in next to Hooker. I was tired of pop, determined to retain my sobriety, and eager to get out of there.

Hooker said, “When the hell did you two get married?”

“We just had our fifth anniversary.”

“Thanks for inviting me to the goddamn wedding.”

“Would you have come?”

“Probably not.”

Clyde laughed.

“I thought I was going to die without you speaking to me,” he said.

“Came close.”

“Your health okay? You look older than shit. Of course, you looked old at twenty-one.”

“My health has never been better.”

“Liar. Seriously.”

“I have no complaints,” said Hooker. Jennifer let out a sound like a preface to snoring. “She still can’t drink worth a shit.”

“Neither one of us drink much any more.”

“Right.”

“This is a special occasion. I mean it. I expected to die wondering what the hell happened to us.”

“You know goddamn well what happened to us.”

“Your marriage was in trouble long before I entered the scene.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Everything.”

“Like hell it does.”

“You were screwing waitresses and students all over town.”

“You keep talking about everything but your own actions. You never did own up to what you did.”

“I took a miserable woman and made her happy, is what I did.”

“You egotistical prick.”

“Fuck you, Red. You started the adultery game, so don’t lay your shit on me. Jen and I have been happy together for a long time, long before we got married, so kiss my ass.”

Hooker struggled to get to his feet.

“Red,” I said. “Maybe we should go.”

Hooker sank back into the cushions. He looked like he wanted to keep on sinking until he was a part of the furniture.

Hooker said, “I have to use the can.”

“Let me help you.”

He slapped away my hand.

It seemed to take forever for Hooker to get himself to his feet and to hobble across the room with the cane. Clyde and I sat so still we could have been holding our breaths. I practically was.

When Hooker was gone, I said, “He’s not himself. He has terminal cancer.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Big C.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“He planned to. Finding Jennifer here was too much of a jolt.”

“We’ve been happy for a long time.”

“I’m sure you have been. Clyde, it was Red’s idea to come here. He didn’t want you to think he held a grudge. He didn’t want to take that to his grave.”

“Not holding a grudge? He wouldn’t talk to me for over thirty years!”

“I know. He wanted to change that.”

Clyde shook his head.

“What?”

“I was thinking what a mess families become,” said Clyde. “We used to be close, growing up. Then we went our separate ways. You’ve been more a brother to him than I have.”

“We choose our friends. We don’t choose our families.”

“You got that right.”

Jennifer stirred, then settled back into her rhythm of heavy breathing.

Clyde said, “Jennifer and I sort of drifted apart. What changed everything was when her boys died, especially both so close together. I was a good comfort for her then. We got back in touch and stayed in touch. As we got older, we found ourselves not wanting to be alone. It’s worked out fine for us.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“What happened was a hell of a long time ago. I can’t believe it still bothers him.”

“I think it’s more complicated than any one thing that happened.”

Hooker appeared across the room. He moved slowly and carefully toward us.

“Bear, you ready to split this scene? I’m not having fun any more.”

I stood up.

“Sure enough.”

Clyde stood up.

“I don’t think we should say goodbye this way.”

I looked at him. He was using the information I’d shared with him. He wouldn’t be saying this otherwise.

“What way is that?” Hooker asked.

“This friction between us.”

“You saying you want to own up to what you did?”

“Red, can’t you see how happy we are?”

“I see. You’re one of those the-end-justifies-the-means kind of guys. I hate you fucking opportunists. Get me out of here, Bear.”

I hurried to Hooker’s side. I supported him, and we started for the door.

Clyde said, “Okay, I made a mistake. I’m sorry for whatever grief I caused you.”

Hooker stopped.

“You ignorant son-of-a-bitch. You caused Jennifer as much grief as you caused me. More, probably. She was still in love with me then. Maybe I wasn’t with her, you’re right on that point. But she was with me. I went back to her for the sake of the boys, which was the right thing to do. To this day I say it was the right thing to do. You were like a thorn under the fingernail, always pricking at us. You made things harder than they had to be. If you’d waited, we’d have split up when the boys left anyway, then you two could have found each other and strolled into the sunset together. But you didn’t have the patience to do that, Clyde. You’ve never had patience. You’ve always grabbed at what you want without any thought to the consequences. Gimme right now. Well, fuck you. Bear...”

Through all this, Jennifer’s heavy breathing didn’t miss a beat.

Clyde waited till I opened the front door before he moved forward. He came next to Hooker and glared at him.

“You’re right. I made a mistake. But I won’t apologize for being in love with Jen.”

Hooker shook his head.

“You don’t get it,” he said.

Hooker stepped through the doorway, and I followed close to him. In the room, Jennifer coughed and sputtered something intelligible.

“Jen, you okay?” Clyde asked.

“Close the door behind us,” Hooker said.

I did.

I expected the door to open and for Clyde to come out and continue to say what he had to

say. But we made it to the car without interruption. I opened the passenger door and helped Hooker in.

When I settled behind the wheel, Hooker said, "I'm glad they got married. They deserve each other."

"I told him you were dying."

"I figured you would."

"You were pretty hard on him."

"I'm an existentialist. I think a man should own up to his actions. He damn near broke up my marriage. If he'd succeeded, my boys would have grown up without a father in the house."

I nodded. I knew Red had no use for dialogue now, so I turned the key for the last long leg of our westward journey home.

PART THREE: AGAPE

I found myself talking to Hooker in my mind – and sometimes, according to Mary, I talked to him aloud. I seldom was aware of this. The difference between what I said to myself, thinking, or perhaps even hallucinating, and what I said aloud was a technical difference, a difference of grammar, of form, and not a difference of content or substance. Mary wanted to get me one of those new digital recorders, no larger than a pen, that I could carry with me and talk into, keeping an audio diary of my imagined conversations with Hooker, but such a blatant display of eccentricity didn't appeal to me. It was bad enough that I missed him so much. Talking to him helped. Letting other people know I talked to him would not help. Sometimes I even regretted sharing what I did with Mary. It's not as if she'd replaced him.

21: Rap #4: Death

"Death," said Hooker.

"Pardon me?"

"Let's rap about death."

"Oh, boy. You sure you can handle it?"

"Don't worry about me. What about you?"

We had hit Highway 2, the great northern east-west route that would take us on most of our remaining journey. In western Montana, we'd drop south for Idaho.

I said, "I don't know."

"Don't get soft on me, Bear. I'm going to need your strength here."

"Okay, let's rap. I assume you have something to say."

"This isn't Oprah, damn it. I'm not asking to make a confession. I want to pass the time. We rapped before, and it worked. You be first. You're the professor."

"Philosophy isn't my area of specialization."

"You believe there's anything for us after death?"

"Not that we'd be aware of. I think consciousness, our knowledge of ourselves, dies with us. But I think our molecules are spread around and in this sense, yes, we have a kind of immortality. When Lee Hays of the Weavers died, he had his ashes put in his zucchini patch.

There was a little of him in the crop that summer.”

“I like that. Song of the Zucchini Patch.”

Song of the Turkey Buzzard by Lew Welch was Hooker’s favorite poem. It was a poem about death and rebirth.

I said, “But I don’t think we get reincarnated into a bumble-bee or something.”

“If we did, I’d come back as a cunt hair. Can’t get any closer to pussy than that. What would you come back as?”

“I haven’t given it any thought.”

“You’re no fun. So you don’t believe in some Great Spirit, some Oversoul kind of thing that we become a part of after we die?”

“I think discussions like this end up being semantic. Sure, if you want to say Lee Hays in his zucchini patch is joining the Oversoul, that’s one way to describe it. I think our molecules are immortal. They change form. They become this or that, some substance, some packet of energy, whatever. I believe in the laws of the conservation of energy and matter. If you want to put the label Soul or anything else on it, fine. Just remember, it’s a label. The map is not the territory.”

“You must have been something in the classroom. You really get off on this shit.”

“You brought this up,” I said, “not I.”

“I’m curious where I’m going. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“I haven’t lost any sleep over it.”

“You never believed in Heaven and Hell?”

“Never. Did you?”

“As a kid, I think. My mother made me go to church for a while. I think she thought she was obliged to. I skipped enough that she changed her mind.”

“Organized religion is a form of politics,” I said. “It’s not about spiritual truth or any other kind of truth. It’s about power. It’s about keeping its coffers full.”

“I hear you there. Makes me feel like a Martian. In case you haven’t looked, there’s a religious revival going on in this country.”

“That happens when people are lost. Unless this trend reverses itself, I think it will lead to the end of western civilization as we know it. We need to return to humanism and rationality.”

“Jesus, Bear, when did you become such a science kind of guy? Do many writers think like you do?”

“Science and art are not incompatible. I believe in metaphor. But metaphor is about what happens in the space between concrete words, concrete ideas. You need great clarity in order to be poetic. The science is the clarity. The art is the metaphor, what happens in the spaces between the concrete parts describing the clarity.”

“Bear, you’re giving me a headache.”

“Sorry. Got carried away.”

We listened to the radio for a while. Merle Haggard came on, singing that tonight the barroom let him down.

Hooker said, “I know how I want to do this. We’re going to need to prepare some things.”

“I’m listening.”

“I want to stop by Orofino for old time’s sake. Say goodbye to a few people. See a few things. Then I want to stop in Grangeville on the way to White Bird and get camping supplies. I want to camp along the Salmon River. I want to go fishing. That’s where I want to be when it’s time.”

I’d been wondering if he’d thought about the details of his dying. The doctor had given him

a few weeks at most but doctors had been wrong before. It could be sooner, even before we got to Idaho – or later. Months later, maybe longer. This is why the doctor had suggested a hospice, an institution dedicated to waiting for death.

“We can do that,” I said.

“Thanks, brother.”

“You have a particular spot on the river you want to camp?”

“I think I do.”

He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I lost my cherry along the river. Shit, almost sixty years ago. That’s where I’d like to camp.”

I smiled and said, “Once a stud, always a stud.”

“I miss Angel. She’s the best thing to happen to me in a long time. I know you don’t approve, but that’s the way it is.”

After a silence, he added, “Maybe she’d fly out and camp with us.” Before I could object, he said, “Just kidding. But I do want you to tell her. She said she wanted to know. I have a phone number she gave me. I also gave her your number.”

“I can do that.”

“Good. So. Are we there yet?”

At a smoke break Red said, “I don’t want to suffer. I’m going to get a gun in Grangeville. If I suffer, you can put me out of my misery.”

“I don’t know if I could do that.”

“Of course you can.”

“I haven’t fired a weapon since the Army.”

“Don’t make excuses. If you can’t do it, it’s because you’re being sentimental. I need you to be tough, Bear. I told you already. No goddamn feeling sorry for me and shit. I had a great life. I lived a lot of years. I’m ready to hit the road. Just like Kerouac, baby. The end of my personal scroll. I don’t mind dying naturally but I don’t want to be in a lot of pain while it’s happening. I don’t want to drag out the inevitable. The pain pills work most of the time but you never know what’s going to happen. I just want some insurance. I want you to buy a pistol in Grangeville. Will you that for me?”

“If I have to.”

“Goddamn, Bear, now you’re pissing me off.”

“This isn’t easy for me.”

“You’re right. This is harder for you than for me. I have to remember that. Bear, look at it this way. Remember the end of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*? How beautiful that ending is? He has to shoot the poor son-of-a-bitch to save him from something worse. Shooting becomes an act of love. That’s the way it would be if you had to do it. It would be an act of love. I’d know that. You need to know it as well.”

“We’ll get camping gear, and we’ll get a gun.”

“Now you’re talking. I don’t think they have any adult stores in Grangeville. I could use a girly magazine. See if I can jack off one last time for the road.”

“Red...”

I didn’t even know how to begin. When I looked at Hooker, he was giving me his bad-toothed grin, just before he fell into a coughing fit that didn’t end until he popped a pain pill.

We were back on the road.

I said, "Did I ever tell you about how my father died?"

"I think so. He dropped dead, right?"

"Right. Did I tell you about the scale?"

"If you did, I've forgotten."

I told him the story, and as I did, the memories came back in a great rush of sound and color.

I'm in New Jersey, there to accompany my father back to Oregon so I can put him in an assisted living facility. He's in New Jersey because his roots are there but I've convinced him to move close to me. I've settled his affairs. He's ready to go.

It's October, and the trees are on fire. The day before our flight leaves, we go to a cousin's home in the country for a farewell gathering. It's early afternoon when I park Dad's car in the lot behind the house. We're surrounded by red and orange trees. As I start to get out, Dad puts his hand on my knee.

"I'm sure glad I got to see the leaves change before I go," he says.

"They're incredible."

People have seen us drive up, and many of them wait at the back door as I walk slowly beside Dad, making sure he doesn't falter. He does fine if he takes his time.

"You're looking great, Chick!" somebody calls.

It's true. Dad is tapped down in slacks, a blue shirt, a brown suede sports jacket – and the small-brimmed hat that is his favorite, with a little feather on the side. With his thin moustache, he could be a retired movie idol.

As we enter the back porch door into the kitchen, his half-sister Betty says, "I think you've put on some weight. Let's see."

She goes to a chart on the wall. She's been keeping a weight chart on him. He's been in good hands here, all the relatives looking out for him. For a moment, I feel guilty about taking him away.

"Chick, step on this and let's see if I'm right," says Betty.

Gubby, her husband, says, "Your son must be feeding you right."

Dad hands me his hat and steps onto the small scale. Betty bends to see the weight. I drop the hat on the kitchen table.

"You gained two pounds! I knew it. Look at this, Gub. He gained two pounds."

Gubby moves closer to see. I'm looking as well.

Suddenly the scale goes to zero.

"I think the batteries just went," says Gubby.

Dad steps off the scale.

"You gained two pounds," Betty tells him.

She goes to the chart on the wall to write down the results.

"Excuse me," Dad says.

He moves into the hallway, turning left toward the bathroom.

Gubby says, "Boy, he looks good. Doesn't he, Betty?"

Before she can answer, we all hear a loud thud from the direction of the hallway. Everyone rushes toward the sound. I am behind Gubby and Betty.

Dad is on the floor at the doorway into the bathroom.

"Call 911!" Gubby shouts.

"Is he all right?" Betty asks.

"911!"

I join Gubby on the floor next to Dad. Dad's mouth hangs open.

A stranger rushes up. One of the many cousins I've never met.

"I'm in med school," he says. "Let me check his pulse."

We let knowledge take charge. I fear the worst. It doesn't take long to hear it.

"I don't get a pulse." A long silence, as he keeps trying. "I'm sorry, I think he may be gone."

The ambulance is there more quickly than I expected, considering our location in the New Jersey countryside. A paramedic gives the same verdict. My father is dead. Moments after leaving us in the kitchen, moments after the scale suddenly registered zero, he dropped dead. Dead on the spot, instantly.

The scale. Hours later, after the rush to the hospital, after still another official verdict, after a long eerie moment alone with my father's body stretched out on a table, looking like a deflated doll, all the spirit sucked out of him, all the soul sucked out of him, I find myself sitting in the kitchen again, drink in hand, the small scale still on the kitchen floor.

People are talking around me but the sound of their voices passes through me without registering. I stand up and go to the scale. I step on it.

My weight registers.

I step off and on again.

My weight registers.

"It works," I say.

"What?" Gubby comes over to see.

"The damn scale works!"

I keep stepping on and off. When I'm off, the scale reads zero; when on, my weight. I can't get the scale to go to zero when I'm standing on it.

"Why won't it go to zero?"

Gubby has to pull me away. I'm sobbing.

Still later, recovered, another drink in hand, I hear Betty saying, "I think it happened because his soul left his body. I think we witnessed his death."

"That's what they say happens," says Gubby. "The soul leaves the body. What do you think, Robert?"

"What?"

"Chick's soul left his body. That's why the scale went to zero."

"It makes as much sense as anything else, I guess."

"I thought you didn't believe in the soul," said Hooker after I'd finished the story.

"I'm not sure what it was," I said. "Maybe a short. Some temporary loss of power that caused it to read zero when Dad was on it."

"Or the soul left his body just before he died. And the scale knew it."

"Does that make sense to you?"

"It makes more sense to me now than it would have a year ago."

"I can see that damn scale like it was yesterday. Why did it go to zero? Something I'll never know."

There was a silence.

Hooker said, "When we get set up along the Salmon River, after I catch a trout or two, that's the way I'd like it to happen to me. Maybe I'm fishing and suddenly just drop dead. Maybe I even have a fish on my line. If I do, Bear, you've got to bring the damn thing in before you start blubbing. Can you promise me that? I don't want to die losing a trout."

I wasn't sure I was capable of promising Red or anyone else anything any more – but I said,

“Sure” all the same.

22: Hooker Country

Orofino, Idaho, where Hooker grew up, has changed less than any American town I know. I’d guess that the population is close to what it was half-a-century ago. The big change happened before World War II when the woods were logged out, and since then Orofino has hung on with its proud memories and occasional ventures to bring new industry and tourists into town, the former with significant success, the latter with little.

After dropping down from Montana, Orofino was on the way to White Bird, our destination, at least when we took the back roads with which Hooker was familiar. He wanted to stop in Orofino to see old friends and relatives.

The Lumberman’s Bar was on Main Street. When we parked, Red surprised the hell out of me by saying he wanted the wheel chair. I fetched it and pulled it open. Hooker sat down, and I wheeled him into the tavern.

I understood immediately why he wanted to be wheeled inside: he became the instant center of attention. The long bar, filled with elbow-to-elbow men in work clothes and baseball caps sitting and standing along its length, with a few couples around the small circular tables down one wall, turned in unison toward the flash of daylight from the door.

“Red Hooker!” somebody exclaimed.

That was all it took. Men who had been slouched over bottles of beer and glasses of whiskey looked up to see what was going on and when they recognized Hooker, they broke into grins. Two women rose to hurry over to the wheel chair, one stooping to be eye level with Hooker, the other simply bending toward him as if he were some lost child who had wandered in. Everybody wanted to know what had happened to him.

Hooker said, “Just a temporary setback. Nothing serious at all.”

A head gesture told me he wanted to move farther down the bar. I began pushing him.

“Uncle Pete!” Hooker yelled.

The bartender, who had followed our progress behind the bar, said, “He turns off his hearing aid when he drinks.”

He pounded a fist on the bar in front of Pete. Pete’s head jerked up. The bartender gestured for him to turn around.

Uncle Pete had a face filled with red and broken blood vessels, a patchwork of a face that looked as if it might explode at any moment. His green baseball cap bore the deer insignia of the John Deere Company and was splotted with dirt and grease.

“Hooky!” said Pete. He smiled, and I saw that most of his teeth were missing.

“We’ve got to talk, Uncle Pete,” said Hooker. “Let’s go somewhere where we can hear ourselves think.”

What Hooker had in mind was the Elk’s Club, a small square building on a side street. We must have been quite a sight getting there, myself pushing Red in the wheel chair as Uncle Pete, already drunk, staggered ahead of us.

As soon as we stepped inside the club, the bartender, a burly man with a crew cut, yelled, “Pete, you know better than this!” He started around the bar to head us off.

“Larry, it’s Red!” Hooker shouted back.

“Red? What the hell are you doing here?”

Hooker waited until the bartender reached us. The short jaunt across the room had put him out of breath.

Hooker said, "I was hoping I could talk to Uncle Pete someplace quiet. The Lumberman's a zoo."

"I had to eighty-six him. Isn't that right, old timer?"

Pete, in place of language, was drooling at the mouth.

Larry said, "How much time you need?"

"Not long. Ten, fifteen minutes. I just need to ask him a couple things about my dad."

Larry nodded, as if this didn't surprise him.

"Take the table in the corner. Fifteen minutes and he's out of here."

"A deal."

"You come to the bar when you're done. I'll buy you a drink."

"Bear, I'll meet you at the bar in a bit."

Red wheeled himself across the room with Pete staggering more or less behind him. I followed the bartender back to the bar and ordered a cola.

"On the wagon?" Larry asked.

"For a long time now."

"I hear you." His expression changed, as if he had just remembered something. "Say, you wouldn't be the guy Red calls Bear, would you?"

"The very one."

"Damn." Larry offered his hand, and I shook it. "I've heard so many stories about you, I feel like I know you. Sounds like you two really raised some hell in the Army."

I'd never quite thought of it that way since we weren't doing anything that most other soldiers weren't doing. The Army, at least in our era, had been a play-hard, work-hard environment and in peacetime, or its approximation as a Cold War, the playing often out-distanced the working.

"We did our share, I guess."

I let Larry carry the conversation while trying to keep tabs on Hooker in the corner. He was leaning close to Pete, whose head was dropping and raising like a man close to passing out.

Larry said, "Red told me about the time you drove, what, a thousand miles or more, so you could talk him out of leaving his wife. Not many guys get that close."

He was right on the mark. My friendship with Hooker was a great blessing in my life.

"How's his health?" asked Larry. "The wheel chair and all."

When I hesitated, he said, "He's sick, isn't he? What is it, cancer?"

Again I didn't reply. Larry went on.

"I figured it must be serious if he's going to all the trouble to talk to Pete. He said about his dad, didn't he? Doesn't surprise me."

I knew little about Hooker's biological father. He'd been a rodeo cowboy, reason enough to idolize him, and he'd died in World War II. Red had been raised by his mother. I'd always had the suspicion that there was more to it than this but never pried. Prying wasn't our way. When he was ready to share, he would.

"He was a rodeo cowboy, right?" I said.

"Idaho state champion three years in a row before the war started."

"I heard he didn't come back."

"He was on the Arizona at Pearl."

"I didn't know that."

“I’m not sure Red knows it, to be honest. His mother had disowned Buck before the war started. Buck was not a one-woman man, if you know what I mean, and besides, he was away on the rodeo circuit a lot. No love was lost between those two. Some of the fights they had in the old days, here or in a bar, people still talk about them. As far as she was concerned, he was dead, and the less Red knew about the son-of-a-bitch, the better. But there are some things a man needs to know about his roots. Maybe I can tell him what he wants to know. Pete’s in no condition to tell him squat.”

Which proved to be true. I glanced at the corner table to find Pete’s head on the table and Red wheeling himself our way.

“Shit,” said Larry and moved around the bar to take care of Pete.

Red planted the wheel chair near my stool and said, “Pete’s worse than ever. I’m amazed he’s still alive.”

“Were you asking him about your dad?”

“That what Larry said?”

“He also said he might be able to help you out.”

What Hooker wanted to know was where Buck was buried. His mother had never told him, and until he got sick, he hadn’t felt an overpowering urge to find out. Suddenly it seemed very important to him.

“He went down with the U.S.S. Arizona at Pearl Harbor,” said Larry. “His name is right there on a plaque they got. I visited it myself.”

“Shit. Too far away.” Hooker turned to me. “You’re going to have to go in my stead, Bear. It’s the next best thing to me going myself.”

“If you’re short of money,” said Larry, “I can foot the plane ticket for you. Might be something to see before it’s too late.”

“Already too late,” said Hooker. “And that’s all I have to say on the matter.”

He turned himself in the wheel chair and started for the door.

“How about that drink?” Larry called after him.

Hooker raised an arm but said nothing.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“How long he got?”

“Not long.”

“He plan to spend it anywhere special?”

“He wants to do some fishing out of White Bird.”

Larry grinned.

“I love that son-of-a-bitch. He knows how to deal himself out with class.”

I’d managed to focus on Hooker’s dying so much that I’d given no recent thought to my daughter. This changed in our motel that night with a story on the news about a high school softball coach being arrested for molesting three girls on his team.

“You did all you can do,” Hooker said when he saw my face during the story.

The room had two double beds, and each of us was stretched out on one.

“I don’t know if I did or not. I hope so.”

“Of course you did. And you said your friend was going to write a letter and straighten your daughter out. Like you say, it must’ve been the guy, right? All you can do is tell your daughter the facts. The rest is up to her.”

Maybe. But what if Jim actually was innocent? The possibility occurred to me now and

again. He'd been angrily insulted by my suggestion – just the way an innocent man would be. I wasn't sure what to believe. It was convenient to believe in Jim's guilt. But was it true?

Hooker said, "The problem is that Helen brain-washed her."

"I did my part disappointing her."

"Quit it. I'm not going to my grave with you getting down on yourself. You know, and I know, and everybody who really knows you knows what the truth is. Let it rest, Bear. Let the gods take care of the rest."

"The gods are too damn fickle to trust."

"Only in the short run. They have a way of coming through in the end."

We got an early start the next morning. Hooker had a relatively good night, which in turn let me get a good night's sleep. We met the day with expectation, knowing without discussing it that we were about to begin the last leg of our journey together. If everything went according to plan, Hooker would enjoy his last days fishing on the Salmon River.

In Grangeville, the last stop before a short climb and long descent into White Bird, we stopped to get camping supplies. At an Army Surplus Store we slowly went up one aisle and down another, Hooker using his cane. We bought sleeping bags and air mattresses, a tarp, a small tent, a stove and lantern, fishing poles and tackle, wading boots, a cooler, paper plates, plastic dinnerware. The shopping cart was packed when I pushed it to the register.

After loading everything in the car, Hooker started hobbling up the street.

"Where are you going?"

"There's a gun shop at the corner."

"Do we have to do this?"

"You don't have to do shit, Bear. With luck, I can handle everything myself."

"That's not what I mean."

Hooker kept limping along. I caught up with him.

"I don't know anything about guns," I said. "Make it something easy to use."

"What I have in mind, even you can figure out. But I'm giving you some O.J.T. just to be sure. We need to do this right the first time. Otherwise you'd have a god-awful mess on your hands."

In the shop Hooker picked out a small caliber pistol that reminded me more of a toy than a lethal weapon. The clerk demonstrated how a cartridge snapped into the handle. It looked so easy that even a child could do it. I found this scary.

I bought the gun and registered it in my name. I tried not to think about having to use it.

23: Camp Thanatos

Since it was after Labor Day, summer vacations were over and families had the kids back in school, which in midweek left the campgrounds along the Salmon River pretty much to us. The few fishermen on the river had put distance between themselves. I was glad that we weren't going to have neighbors, not only for the obvious reason but because I was in no mood for socializing. Our camping trip was a serious matter. This would be our last time together. I didn't want another Angel to appear and make demands on Hooker's time.

Hooker was too weak to help me unload the car but this didn't stop him from trying. Finally I chased him to a log overlooking the river. He grumbled but he let me set up camp alone. I had the hardest time with the tent, being a city boy and out of practice at such things, and I could hear

Hooker mumbling advice as I struggled with the poles. On the fallen log above the river, he looked old, tired, dying.

After the tent was up and the air mattresses inflated, Hooker spent much of the day napping. I had a fire going against the cool bite of late afternoon by the time he came back outside to the world. I'd already set up the stove and had coffee on, dinner planned. We'd bought a case of Dinty Moore's Beef Stew and might as well get started on it.

Hooker sat at the picnic table as I prepared dinner on the Coleman stove at one end.

"We need a sign," Hooker said.

"What kind of sign?"

"You know, Home of the Smiths. Our Happy Homestead. No Damn Soliciting. That sort of thing."

"What would it say?"

Hooker thought a moment.

"Camp Thanatos. You make us a sign, Bear. You can nail it on the tree next to the tent. Camp Thanatos. Then we'll feel at home."

"I can scrounge up the cardboard but I really need a magic marker."

"It's a short trip to White Bird."

"Well, not tonight."

"Tomorrow, after we fish in the morning. We need this sign, Bear. Trust me."

Hooker caught two trout early next morning, which was our breakfast, along with scrambled eggs, bacon and fried potatoes. The scent and sizzle of breakfast cooking saturated the crisp morning air, which might have suggested a little bit of paradise if my best friend wasn't dying. Yet Hooker's mood had improved considerably. After breakfast we drove into White Bird, had coffee and donuts, and bought a few things we'd forgotten, including a magic marker. We were back in camp before noon. I made Hooker's sign, printing CAMP THANATOS in thick black letters. I nailed it onto the pine tree near the tent.

"Perfect," said Hooker. "Now I'm taking a nap. Later I'm catching our dinner. Hope you like trout, Bear, because I'm on a roll."

At first, camping did Hooker a world of good. I entertained the unlikely possibility that he might recover, that the "terminal" part of his diagnosis was in error. We spent our mornings on the river, and Hooker's luck continued to be better than mine, which is to say he knew what he was doing and I didn't. Each day I gutted and cleaned the trout he'd caught and fried them up for breakfast or lunch. The cans of stew became our staple for dinner. We didn't talk much through the day. We'd been talking all our adult lives and didn't have much new to say to one another. It was enough just to be together.

Nights in the tent were the worst. Hooker's breathing was heavy and irregular as he tossed and turned through the night, keeping me awake. Whenever he gasped, I stirred, wondering if he needed help sitting up, a better position for breathing. Then he'd settle down for a while, and I'd drift toward sleep until his next fit.

I wished him peace. I wished him death as sleep, a gentle journey into an unconsciousness from which he wouldn't recover. Of course, peace for Hooker meant peace for me as well. Hooker said the gun was insurance, a way for me to help him at the end if he got too bad. I wasn't sure I was capable of shooting him, and I really didn't want to find out.

One evening, as I was doing the dishes, Hooker said, "Bear, I think it's getting close to time. I feel pretty good. I think this is the way I want to feel at the end."

“That doesn’t make sense. If you feel good, enjoy it.”

“Look at it this way. It’s just like sports. The secret is to go out while you’ve still got your game. Look at poor Joe Louis. A champion turned old man, getting beat to a pulp by guys he’d take out with one hand in his prime. They always try for more than the gods have permitted them. It’s the common curse of heroes. They don’t know when to retire. I don’t have that problem, brother. I’m going to retire while I’m ahead.”

I was silent.

“You should be glad,” Hooker said. “This way I can do it myself.”

“Are you really sure this is the right time?”

“As long as I catch a fish. I was skunked this afternoon. I want to go out with at least one more fish. We’ll see how I do tomorrow.”

But Hooker had a horrible night, dropping pain pills like candy, and by morning he wasn’t feeling much better. He was too sick to go fishing and so stayed in the tent. I sat outside at the table, sipping coffee, listening to him coughing and moaning.

Around noon I bent into the tent to see how he was doing. Hooker was facing me and managed a little smile.

“We should’ve done it while I felt good, Bear. I feel like shit. I’m almost out of pills. I can’t take much more of this.”

He broke into the coughing fit that was all too common now.

“Give me a minute,” he said. “Then we’ll have ourselves a serious talk.”

Hooker struggled to get out of the sleeping bag.

“Stay where you are,” I said. “We can talk here.”

“Bullshit. I’m getting up.”

“Let me help you.”

When I finally had him settled at the table outside, Hooker brought up something I hadn’t thought of. He said it had to look like suicide, even if I pulled the trigger, because otherwise they’d arrest me for murder. A man couldn’t die the way he chose. Laws mattered more than a man’s personal choice and dignity. So Hooker had a plan. He wanted me to do it tonight unless he improved because he was afraid that he’d miss in his condition, in which case there would be one hell of a mess, and I’d have to finish the job anyway. What was needed was a clean shot in the right temple. Hooker was right-handed, that’s the way he’d do it himself. He’d be in his sleeping bag, stretched out on his left side. I would bend over him and pull the trigger. Then I’d set the pistol near his right hand, as if he’d dropped it himself. I’d tell the police I was fishing when I heard the shot. I came back and discovered the body. Nothing had been touched. End of story. Post script. Cremate me, Hooker told me, and drop my remains in the Salmon River. Ashes to ashes and all that. If I can’t beat the goddamn fish, I’ll join them. Song of the River Trout.”

Hooker looked relieved, almost angelic, after telling me this. I realized for the first time how much he’d thought about everything, how much he was in control of his own destiny, and I loved him for this. But I couldn’t hold back choking up, even though I expected to be harangued about blubbing. Hooker gave me rope and said nothing, waiting for me to recover.

“When?” I asked.

“You tell me.”

“It might be safer at night. Can you hang in that long?”

“Hard to say. I’m okay now. Why night?”

“The day-use fishermen will be gone. The shot will attract less attention.”

“Good thinking. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Again he managed to smile. The bad teeth had never looked more beautiful.

“We’ll play it by ear,” I said. “That’s all we can do.”

By late afternoon, it was time. I decided this myself because Hooker was too far out of it to tell me anything. His breathing was heavy, difficult, his face a contortion of pain. He was stretched out on his right side in the sleeping bag, the wrong side, facing me. Though his eyes were open, I couldn’t tell if he saw me or not. His eyes looked out of focus.

I knelt down next to him.

“I’m turning you over. Here we go.”

I thought I saw a slight nod, as if he’d heard, as if he agreed, as if he was ready. The question was whether I was ready.

When he was on his left side, facing the wall of the tent, I fetched the pistol. All I had to do was release the safety, point at his temple, squeeze the trigger. I’d gone over the sequence many times in the past few hours, sitting outside the tent as Hooker moaned and groaned inside.

Holding the pistol, I leaned close to him.

“Goodbye, brother. I love you, man.”

I kissed him on the cheek.

To my shock, Hooker replied, although his voice was so low I could barely make out what he said. What he said was, “Lovely.”

His eyes were closed. His breathing became softer. His mouth dropped open enough for a bit of drool to spill onto his chin.

I changed my position and squatted over him. I positioned the pistol. The moment felt like an hour, a day, an eternity. My hand was shaking, so I repositioned myself again, straddling him, this time positioning the gun with both hands gripping it.

I thought I heard my heart beating, as frantic as the pumping wings of a bird. I closed my eyes and squeezed the trigger.

Once, when we were in the Army, Hooker told me a story about suicide as an act of courage. We were parked overlooking a vineyard in Germany, near the base in Frankfurt, passing a bottle of the Mosel valley’s best. Often when our work schedules gave us days off together, we’d cruise the German hills in Hooker’s Rambler, which he called the white stallion, passing the bottle and talking.

“Song of the Turkey Buzzard,” said Hooker. “That’s the name of the poem I was trying to remember. By Lew Welch. One of the obscure Beats. It’s an incredible, true story.

“Welch is a drunk. He’s staying in Gary Snyder’s cabin in the mountains in California, trying to sober up. When Snyder comes by to check in on him, he’s gone. So is Snyder’s shotgun. And in the typewriter is a long poem, the Song of the Turkey Buzzard.

“It’s a poem about how we, society, won’t let a man die the way he chooses to. So Welch takes the situation into his own hand. He takes the gun and climbs into the mountains. If the poem is right, he reaches a peak, strips naked and shoots himself. He does this as an offering. He presents himself as raw meat to the buzzards. And then, after the birds eat his carcass, he enters his new form. He becomes the bird. The poem ends in celebration, Welch sailing the sky in his new incarnation, the poet as turkey buzzard. O reeling beautiful bird! Talk about recycling.”

Hooker laughed. Then we passed the bottle in silence for a while.

Hooker said, “I wonder if I’d have the balls to do something like that.”

I was knocked back by the recoil, which had been much stronger than I anticipated. Worse,

Hooker's head exploded, some of it splattering up onto me, a mess of stench and slime. I struggled to get out of the tent, running into a pole, falling outside under sagging canvas. I made it to the nearest tree before I threw up. Above me was the sign of our homestead. Camp Thanatos.

I moved away from the stink of my own puke. I dropped to the bench at the table, which was when I realized I was still holding the pistol.

I heard an engine in the distance.

I hurried back to the tent. I dipped under the canvas and stuck my torso inside. The odor was unbearable. I tossed the gun toward the body and quickly backed out. I made it to the riverbank before I got sick again. I moved to a shallow pool to clean myself up.

A pickup truck appeared, speeding toward the campsite.

I climbed up from the river, meeting the truck as it pulled up.

"Was that a shot?" the driver asked, climbing out.

"I think so! I was downstream fishing."

After that, I felt like I was moving through a fog. The police arrived, took away Hooker's body, and secured the area as a crime scene. I was driven to the police station in Grangeville. I answered questions and made a formal statement. I was told not to leave the area.

Over the next several days, I was driven back to Camp Thanatos several times and asked to tell my story again, where I was fishing when I heard the shot, what state of mind Hooker had been in and particularly was in when I talked to him last. Why I didn't do something to stop him if I knew him so long and so well. Didn't I see it coming? If I did and didn't stop him, I was the accessory to a crime.

Hooker was right, better to climb to a mountain top and offer oneself as buzzard meat. The law enforcement bureaucracy expressed its cannibalism with less honesty.

The police detective in charge wanted me to call him Cal. He wanted to be chummy. He had the warm, sympathetic eyes of a marriage counselor, which seemed to say, Trust me. Consequently I didn't trust him at all and kept my guard up.

"What's the sign?" Cal asked during one of our visits to the campsite.

"Camp Thanatos? It's what Hooker named our site."

"What's it mean?"

"It means he knew he was dying."

"If he was dying, why would he kill himself?"

"Because it was quicker and less painful."

"He was taking pain medication. We found the bottle."

"It was gone. He didn't have a prescription to refill it."

"Why would he do it in the tent where he'd make such a mess? Why not on the river? You said he wanted his ashes spread in the river. Why not just do it there, let the river take you away?"

"I don't understand all these questions."

"Do I detect a note of being defensive?"

"You make it sound like I'm being accused of something."

"Should you be?"

"I was his best friend."

"So you'd do anything for him. Am I right?"

I felt like he was setting a trap. The earlier softness had been a mask. Now he looked

determined, his expression hard. I bet he could play good cop or bad cop at will.

I looked out toward the river. Maybe we should have talked about doing it there.

Cal said, "Which would explain why your prints are on the gun."

I stared at him.

"I bought the gun. It's registered to me. Of course my prints are on the gun."

"It's your gun?"

"Haven't you checked?"

"I haven't seen the results."

"It's my gun."

Now it was Cal's turn to look out at the river. He turned back, looking like a man with a second wind. Or a new strategy. He had a face for every occasion. He smiled.

"If he was my best friend and too weak to pull the trigger himself, I'd do it for him. It's the only decent thing to do."

After an awkward silence I said, "Is that supposed to be a question?"

"An admission. If something like that is what happened, I just want you to know I'm on your side."

"Good." I stood up. "I'm ready to go back to the motel."

On the drive, Cal told me about his family, his collection of old farming tools, his love of fishing and hunting in God's country (north Idaho). I kept waiting for him to sneak back to what he really wanted to talk about, the possibility that I pulled the trigger. I wondered if he could prove I did and if so what this meant exactly. I didn't feel like a murderer. I felt like a mourner.

In less than a week, the police threw in the towel. The official verdict was that Hooker shot himself in the tent. I took the news as no cause for celebration. My friend was no less dead because I wasn't being accused of murdering him.

At the mortuary in Grangeville, I picked up the ashes in a square cardboard box covered in absurd golden paper. All it needed was a bow, and a Christmas tree to drop it under. I put the box on the seat where Hooker usually sat.

The yellow tape was gone from the campsite. I parked near the picnic table and fetched the box of ashes.

I stepped into the river. The water was freezing without wading boots on. The river was higher than before, thanks to several days of rain. I'd spent them in the motel, watching streaks form on the window, numb, waiting for the phone to ring. By the time it did, the sun had come out again.

I looked up and down the river. There wasn't a fisherman to be found. A dense forest of pine and fir rose from the bank across the river. Far upriver, a bird circled overhead, perhaps a hawk. Song of the Turkey Buzzard, I remembered.

The contents of the box didn't surprise me like they did the first time, with the ashes of my mother. Ashes was a misnomer. The contents were more dense than that, small chunks of bone and teeth, pulverized humanity. I saw a yellow fleck and concluded it was a sliver from Hooker's bad teeth. I imagined him grinning, getting the last laugh.

I dropped the cardboard lid, which quickly was swept downriver by the cold current. Bon voyage.

I tipped the box. Most of the contents were heavy enough to fall straight to the bottom and what wasn't floated away like gray dust on the water. I stood in the river, holding the empty box. Finally I dropped it. I watched it disappear downstream.

Once out of the river, I realized how cold I was. I hustled up the bank, which was when I

saw the sign in the makeshift fireplace, an offering of kindling to the next camper. I retrieved it. The nail was still in the tree trunk, and I pushed the sign into it, off-center since the original hole was ripped, making the sign hang at an angle as if it had weathered a passing storm.

Camp Thanatos.

There was nothing more to do here. I sat behind the wheel, staring out at the river. Finally I started the car. I had a long drive home.

“Hello?”

“Mary? It’s Robert.”

“Robert! I’m been thinking of you. How are you? How is your friend?”

“I put his ashes in the Salmon River today.”

“I didn’t realize it would be so soon. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in Lewiston. I’ll get an early start tomorrow and be home in the afternoon.”

“Why don’t you come to dinner? I’m at my daughter’s.”

“But I dialed you in Seattle.”

“I have call-forwarding.”

“I’m not sure I’d be good company for you two.”

“I’m here alone. I’m house-sitting while she’s on a business trip. Feeding the dog, mainly. I could use some company. I’d love to see you.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Very sure. Could you make it by six? Is that too early? I’ll make dinner.”

“Don’t go to any trouble.”

“I’m cooking for myself anyway. Six then?”

“Six should be fine.”

Mary gave me the address.

“Robert? Thank you for calling me. Feeling you can, I mean.”

“I shot him myself.”

“Excuse me?”

“He was out of pain pills. He asked me to shoot him, and I did.”

There was a silence.

“Still want me to come over?”

I tried to laugh but it came out sounding like a gasp.

“Of course I do. Robert, he had terminal cancer. You did him a favor. No one can blame you for that.”

No one? I wondered if that included me.

PART FOUR:

TETHER

Lately I think a lot about the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology. He was a king who was noted for his cunning. Near the end of his life, Hades showed up to claim him personally for the underworld. Sisyphus, however, didn’t want to go and got out of it by tricking Hades and locking him in a closet. But with Hades out of commission, nobody could die, and the whole universe went out of sync, which got Sisyphus in even more trouble. Finally Hades got free and tried again to bring Sisyphus to the underworld. This time the trickster got his wife to neglect burying

him, then complained to Persephone, Queen of the Dead, that he hadn't been given proper funeral services and an unburied body had no business in the underworld. In this way, Sisyphus bought some more time in the world of light and sunshine. Finally the inevitable caught up with him, and Sisyphus was punished severely for his tricks. He was condemned to roll a huge boulder up a hill, which would get loose just before the summit and roll downhill so Sisyphus would have to start all over again. In this way, he would labor throughout eternity, futilely trying to roll the rock up the hill. For Albert Camus, the existentialist, this predicament became a metaphor for the human condition. Camus concluded that Sisyphus must be happy! Why? Because the effort itself, the struggle itself, was enough to fill a man's heart.

24: Pearl Harbor

As soon as I returned to Portland, Mary and I began dating. I'd kept my dinner date, after which she returned to Seattle, and immediately we started talking on the phone several times a week. Soon I went to Seattle to see her, and she came to Portland to see me. We never talked about a formal future together. What we had, which was enjoying one another's company, was enough. Fidelia. Eros, of course, was lurking in the shadows soon enough, but Mary's wit and common sense took care of the stress of sex early on. She said she didn't enjoy intercourse any more, but she would enjoy cuddling with me at night. So we cuddled. We hung out together and laughed a lot.

I suggested a trip to Hawaii for Christmas but Mary suggested postponing it until after New Year's in order to avoid the holiday rush and maybe catch some travel bargains as well.

We made the trip in late January. Of course, one of the first things I wanted to do was to visit the U.S.S. Arizona memorial in Hooker's stead and pay respects to his biological father.

Gathered on the dock was a long line of Japanese tourists waiting to board the small boat to the memorial, which was built around the partially exposed hulk of the sunken battleship. Mary and I took our place at the end of the line.

I leaned close to Mary.

"I didn't realize so many Japanese would be here."

"Some Chinese, too, I think. Koreans."

"And so many cameras."

"It's a major tourist attraction."

"This feels weird. They sunk the ship, a lot of ships, and here they are. Are they gloating?"

"Do we gloat when we go to Hiroshima? I think not. You're here for a reason, Robert. Focus on that."

I tried to but it was difficult. Staring at the name of Hooker's father on a large bronze plaque, I realized that flashbulbs were going off all around me. The cramped quarters of the ship's deck resounded with chatting in a language I didn't understand, and I wondered what these visitors, these Japanese tourists, were talking about. Were they gloating?

"I think it bothers you because you're putting your grief for your friend into a convenient distraction," Mary said at dinner. "It's like when you feel bad about something and kick a chair. Did the chair do anything?"

I studied her, waiting for more.

Mary said, "I know. It's none of my business. I just hate seeing you torture yourself."

I shrugged.

“Robert, have you cried yet? I mean, really let loose with the grief you feel?”
I hadn’t – but I said nothing.

“You need to do that. I have a very comfortable shoulder, by the way. You’ve been there a few times to know. I give great hugs, as you also know. Maybe you should take advantage of both while we’re here. Just a thought.”

That night the dam of my grief burst. I’d fallen asleep cuddling next to Mary. The next thing I knew, I was weeping, my body pulsating in great heaves, and Mary was holding me.

Later we took a walk on the beach to watch the sunrise. I felt like I’d run a marathon, drained and relieved that it was over. Maybe now I could recuperate and be my old self again.

We didn’t talk for a long time. When I broke the silence, I spoke spontaneously, having rehearsed nothing, as surprised to hear my words as Mary was. I told her the story of Stephanie, the full long version, and it must have taken me almost an hour before I stopped.

“I have a close friend who teaches high school,” Mary said, “a lesbian, who was accused of seducing a student. So I know something of what you’ve been going through. Of course, what I know is just the tip of the emotional iceberg. But to have this happen on top of your friend dying. I don’t think I could have handled everything as well as you are.”

“Handling it well? Give me a break.”

“Well, you are. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“You know why I was a lousy parent? Two reasons. Main reasons. I was a drunk, and partying came first. And I was a writer, and my work came before my relationship with anyone else. Wife, daughter, friend, teaching – the work came first. I wasn’t human until I got my day’s quota of writing done.”

“Did the work come before Red?”

“Yes, actually it did. But he came to closest. He was the only one who could get me to put off the work for a moment.”

And then I told her the story about our drunken drives to Winnemucca so I could “talk to him” before he left his wife, and how in fact precious few words were exchanged between us at all, my sheer physical presence, after having driven so far to meet with him, being more than ample testimony to my friendship and concern for him. I expected, of course, to get the usual female response, a shake of the head, a rolling of the eyes, a change of subject.

Mary said, “I envy you that kind of friendship. You’re really fortunate to have had this in your life.”

“You get it?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I’m used to women dismissing the story as drunken male escapades.”

“Your friend was in need of your company, Robert, and you didn’t let anything stop you from meeting him a thousand miles away. What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“I don’t think it’s hard to understand. Men don’t think it’s hard to understand. I’m just not used to hearing a woman who understands it.”

“Maybe it’s because I have three brothers.”

“A woman who gets it. Maybe I should marry you.”

Mary laughed.

“You’re a writer, which makes you unlivable by definition, and I’m not much better. We can enjoy anything marriage has to offer without any of the pitfalls.”

Later in the hotel we made love for the first time, and although the experience was pleasant enough, it wasn’t passionate or particularly lustful. Sex, at our ages, at least for us, was rather

like scratching an itch.

For the rest of the week, we played at being tourists, and Mary did her best to distract me from myself. Now and again we'd pass the harbor and I'd glance out at the U.S.S. Arizona sticking up out of the water and wonder how many Japanese were at the memorial, punctuating the day with their flashbulbs, capturing the evidence of victory – or whatever it was they were doing out there. Their presence made me uncomfortable, and I didn't feel like apologizing to anyone for the way I felt. I was certain that Hooker would feel the same way.

I pictured him leaning close to me, whispering, "Can you believe this shit? They pull a sneak raid, bomb us to oblivion, but finally lose the fucking war – and then end up coming over here so they can gloat about their early good fortune. It's sick."

And I would reply, "Don't be a racist, Red. They're just tourists. Don't hold them responsible for what their grandparents did."

Imagining this conversation, I realized that Hooker's extreme opinions were something I usually met by playing devil's advocate, just as he did with me, and that in this way we smoothed over one another's rough edges. I realized that each acted as tether to the other, keeping us from following the instincts of our worst selves – Hooker leaving Jennifer before "talking to me" in Winnemucca, for example – and that each of us alone would be considerably less than what we had become together, bound by the tether of our friendship. Hooker was – had been – my conscience, and I his.

With Hooker gone, where was my tether?

25: Three stories

The following spring, as the winter snows were melting in the mountains, I took Mary to White Bird and the Salmon River. I wanted to show her Camp Thanatos. We rented a room in a motel out of White Bird and, after getting settled, drove to the river with a late picnic lunch. I easily found the spot where Hooker and I had camped less than a year ago. The log overlooking the river, Hooker's perch, was still there, and I sat on it while Mary set out the food we'd selected together at a deli. We ate at the picnic table. Nearby was the flat ground on which I'd managed to erect the tent and the adjacent pine on which we'd hung our shingle, Camp Thanatos.

"Tell me more about Hooker," Mary said. "I wish I'd met him."

"I'm not sure what else you want to know."

In my grief, I'd talked about him a lot in recent months.

"Tell me stories about your adventures together."

"Some of them would be x-rated."

"Oh, goody! I like hearing about what men do together."

"Even when we act like animals?"

"Especially then."

I laughed.

"Please," she said, "I'm serious. Tell me three stories."

"Why three?"

"It's our culture's magic number. This, That and the Other. Beginning, Middle, End. Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis. God, Son, and Holy Ghost. "

I said, "Eros, Fidelia, Agape."

"Exactly."

“Okay. Three stories.”

*

1/

In April, 1959, Hooker sent Jennifer home to the states with the boys to set up their new civilian home in Moscow, Idaho, where the university was, while he finished out the several months remaining on his tour of duty. After she was gone, Hooker and I took a two-week furlough to Spain, spending most of it in a town on the southern coast called Benidorm. Construction was going on everywhere. This was the Spanish Riviera in the making, but few tourists were around at the time and only a handful of hotels were open for business. Our intention was to stay overnight and then take the boat to the island of Majorca but on our first night in the hotel bar we got more or less hijacked by two middle-aged women from Madrid who, although married, were on vacation together and looking for boy toys. The pickings were lean, and we fit the bill. We were in our twenties, virile and horny, Hooker with red curly hair and bright eyes, my own large frame still suggesting athleticism rather than the laziness and dissipation that middle age would bring.

I didn't speak Spanish at all and Hooker only a little, but somehow the women communicated that they had a nearby beach house into which they wanted us to move for a few days, which we did. The few days turned into a week.

Hooker was paired with the extrovert of the two, a small bleached blonde named Aqualina. Her friend, Juana, was dark and on the plump side, a woman whose eyes sparkled and who laughed a lot, sometimes (it seemed to me) from nerves, as if she were not quite comfortable with what her girlfriend was getting her into. Both women loved to drink, as we did, and so we settled in for a week of partying and dancing, hand-gesturing and laughing – and of course sex, which always happened behind closed doors in one of the two bedrooms in the small house on the beach.

Juana and I didn't let the language barrier keep us from having a good time. I tried to teach her English, and she tried to teach me Spanish, but most of the time we laughed at the other's mispronunciations. In the small living room we danced to records of Spanish pop music and flamenco, ate wonderful meals prepared by the women, took strolls on the beach, and retired to a bedroom for sex. Mid-week Juana started her period, and the sex stopped. I marveled at the extraordinary, thick belt she wore for protection.

We were near the end of the week when the women went off together to restock our supplies of food and wine. It was the first opportunity Hooker and I had to be alone since the hijacking. We were drinking, of course – the days began with bloody Marys and ended with brandy, with lots of beer and red wine through the day. When the women left, we were sitting in chairs on the small porch with a bottle of red Spanish wine on the floor between us. Ahead of us bare sand stretched to the sea under a perfect blue sky. I'd decided this was what paradise was like.

“If Sgt. Malinowski could see us now,” Hooker said. Malinowski was our trick chief in the Operations Section at the I.G. Farnum Building in Frankfurt, where we worked.

“He's not the only one who would lift an eyebrow.”

I regretted this as soon as I said it. Hooker shook his head.

“You asshole,” he said.

“It just came out.”

“Don't pretend to know everything there is to know about my marriage.”

In fact, I idolized what he and Jennifer had together, or by my lights seemed to have together. I was old-fashioned enough to wonder how Hooker could cheat on his wife so easily and apparently so joyfully. I was single and almost two years from learning by experience that the reality of marriage was different from its romantic image in the minds of lonely bachelors.

“It’s none of my business,” I said.

“Damn right it isn’t.”

But the damage was done. We drank in silence, and when the bottle was empty, Hooker took it inside. When he didn’t return with a full one, I went looking for him. I found him in the kitchen with a beer.

“I really didn’t mean anything by it,” I said.

“I’m only in the marriage for the boys.”

“I had no idea.”

“We put on a good front. Well, actually, we do like each other. We just don’t have much happening between the sheets.”

Many years later, during their reconciliation after Hooker left school to repair his marriage, again for the sake of the boys, I would learn something of what he was getting at. Hooker, Jennifer and I were out to dinner during my brief stay at their Central Oregon ranch after Sally and I had split up. Jennifer, who didn’t hold her liquor well, drank too much and started nagging Red about one thing or another. Excusing herself to the bathroom, Jennifer wandered about twenty feet from the table before turning around to shout, loud enough for all the restaurant to hear, “Just because you don’t like the way I suck your cock, doesn’t mean you have to treat me like dirt!” After which, she staggered on her way.

I said, “I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

Hooker smiled and slapped me on the arm.

“I know you think the world of Jennifer. She’s the best mother the boys could have. I feel fortunate for that. There’s just more to life than raising kids.”

Soon enough after the army, my reaction to fatherhood would be the opposite of Hooker’s. He made personal sacrifices for the sake of his boys, and I would make selfish choices at the cost of losing the opportunity to raise my daughter. Hooker stayed with Jennifer despite everything, and I would drive Helen away as soon as I realized that Stephanie represented a tempting reason to stay in a bad marriage. I wouldn’t be willing to sacrifice myself for fatherhood.

The women returned, and the party continued. When the week was over, we saw them off with embraces and smiles, then rented a hotel room again to get the second wind we would need to drive back to Germany and the army.

At the hotel bar that night, Hooker said, “We went through the Kama Sutra. She showed me positions I wouldn’t have thought of in a lifetime. It was amazing.”

He went on and on about his sex with Aqualina, but I stopped listening. Hooker could be overbearing when he was full of himself. I didn’t want to admit how ordinary my own sexual experience with Juana had been in comparison, making love always in the missionary position, always fully under the covers because she didn’t want me to see her naked body. In fact, I was too inexperienced to realize what I was missing, that there was more to sex than excitement, an almost desperate plunge, quick relief – and a nagging feeling that I’d missed something along the way. Juana was not the teacher that Aqualina apparently was. Despite her being on vacation with a boy toy, she was a rather traditional and inhibited woman, though at the time this was exciting enough.

“She didn’t teach you anything?” Mary asked after I’d finished the story.

“Not that I remember. Maybe she did.”

“I’ve fantasized about teaching a much younger man about sex. I suppose it’s the power that’s so attractive. I bet she felt it with you, and you just forgot.”

“Or didn’t know enough to realize what was happening. I was practically a virgin.”

“Your friend was more experienced then?”

“Much. He grew up in Orofino, which had legal prostitution.”

“In Idaho?”

“Right. It’s a county option. Clearwater County had it until the fifties, I think.”

“So men go to a whore house to learn about sex, and women who dare to learn on their own are ostracized for being sluts.”

“Pretty old story.”

“Pretty old double standard. So tell me another story. Not about sex, about your friendship. Something special you did for one another.”

“I have lots of those.”

“Whatever comes to mind. A story I haven’t heard before.”

*

2/

After my ill-conceived act of revenge upon learning that Sally had taken romantic interest in a woman, which was to ball one of her students as quickly as possible, I fled Chesapeake, the east coast, and my life – and ended up in “the bunk house” on Hooker’s ranch in Central Oregon. He was at the top of his game, at least financially, and agreed to put me up while I got my life back together. Jennifer, it turned out, was not enthusiastic about having me as a house guest because of the extra partying Hooker and I would be doing together, and as soon as I realized this, I made plans to get the hell out of there. I ended up staying less than two weeks before heading to California to look for a teaching job.

On my first night with the Hookers, I remarked at dinner that on the flight west I’d realized an extraordinary thing: I did not own a key. I couldn’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t own a key. Even as a kid I had a key to my bicycle lock or to my locker at school. But now, at age 41, my world shattered by Sally’s decision to explore what would become her lesbian orientation, as much a mess professionally as personally by the failure to get a play on the boards in New York – in what was a classic midlife crisis, I found myself coming west without a plan for the future and without a key to my name. I said it in passing, and nothing much was made of it.

The next night Hooker presented me with small wrapped box, a gift. We didn’t often exchange gifts, so I was surprised and delighted.

“You have a morbid sense of celebration,” I said.

Hooker showed his bad-toothed grin.

“Open it,” said Jennifer. She had a gleam in her eye.

I ripped off the red ribbon, tore away the green-patterned wrapping paper, and was left with the box. I pulled loose the tape and opened it.

Balls of cotton filled the interior. I removed them to reveal a key chain filled with a dozen keys. I lifted it out.

“You wanted keys,” said Hooker, “you got keys.”

“What are they to?”

“Who the hell knows?”

“We rounded up every abandoned key we could find,” said Jennifer.

Hooker filled our wine glasses. Since he could afford it, he liked to serve expensive wines. Especially Petite Sirahs.

“A toast,” he said. We all raised our glasses. “To keys for everyone! Keys, keys and more keys!”

“Hear, hear!” I roared. And everyone drank to start what would be a very long night of partying.

“I like that story,” said Mary. “I can’t remember when I didn’t have a key to something or other. It must have felt really strange to have none at all.”

“I can’t remember what it felt like. Depressing, I’m sure. Everything felt depressing at that time of my life.”

“But you recovered. You went on.”

“Oh, yes. I went to Southern California and found a job teaching at a community college easily enough. I sold a screenplay and began a new career. A few years later I took the job at Portland State, which is where I ended up putting down my belated roots.”

“I’m glad you got over Sally. I know it must’ve been hard.”

We were sitting on the same side of the table, and I leaned forward and kissed her.

“One more story,” said Mary, pulling away. “Something deep and profound now. Or mysterious. You said you were soul brothers. Something about that.”

I had to think a moment.

“I have just the story.”

3/

“Bear, for God’s sake! Couldn’t we have driven up here?”

Hooker stopped and bent forward to catch his breath. When he straightened up, he reached into his pocket for a cigarette. I waited with a box of ashes in my hands. Hooker blew out smoke and took a deep breath. Then he coughed.

I said, “I had to park below in case someone is patrolling. What we’re doing is illegal.”

“How much farther is it?”

“Not far.”

“That’s a relative term.”

“A little more and we reach a curve, and then we’re almost there.”

“Almost.”

I’d parked near the water reservoir below Washington Park, which overlooked Portland. Our destination was a small alcove below the sprawling, layered rose gardens, named the Shakespeare Garden. I was scattering the ashes of my dad there, but I’d been told that to do so was an illegal act, which was why we were walking up the road into the park at three in the morning. In my backpack was a bottle of Petite Sirah.

By the time we reached the Shakespeare Garden, Hooker had smoked another cigarette and was puffing so much that I worried he might be close to cardiac arrest. There was a stone bench in the alcove, and I led him to it. He didn’t need an invitation to plop down.

“Downhill will be easier,” I said.

Hooker looked around. A bright moon cast the grounds in subdued light.

“Where are you putting him?”

“I thought here,” I said, gesturing to the bushes nearby.

“Give me a minute more.”

“No problem.”

I sat on the bench beside him.

“It probably is illegal,” said Hooker. “Remember Song of the Turkey Buzzard?”

“How could I forget?”

“Fucking government. Social institutions. The whole ball of wax. Won’t let a man die the way he wants.”

“I thought the Shakespeare Garden would be appropriate.”

“He liked Shakespeare?”

“Not that I know of. Because I’m a writer. A playwright. It seems appropriate.”

“For you.”

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“Wasn’t your mom put in her favorite fishing hole on the Applegate?”

“Yeah, but they flooded it.”

“You could put your dad in the lake. I mean, it’s not too late to do that.”

“Maybe you’re right. Shit. He’d want to be with her.”

“The Applegate’s in southern Oregon, isn’t it?”

“Their favorite fishing spot outside of Medford. Man, it’s three hundred miles from here.”

“Well, let’s not leave tonight.”

“We came all this way for nothing.”

“Not necessarily. Put some here and some in the Applegate.”

“Right. Why not?”

I stood up. Hooker stood up.

I put the box on the bench and carefully opened it.

“So what do you think? About half here?”

Hooker said, “Sounds good to me.”

I picked up the open box and stepped to the arrangement of rose bushes. It was off-season, so there were no flowers or blooms, just skeletal branches.

“God bless,” I said and tipped the box.

A gray stream of heavy ashes fell from the box, more like crushed rock than the cigarette-ash consistency I had expected. With difficulty, I guided the flow around and between the stark bushes.

“Okay,” I said.

“Any profound thoughts?”

“I should have brought a copy of Turkey Buzzard to read.”

“That would’ve been cool.”

“Do you know it by heart?”

“Not really. It ends O bird, o magnificent reeling bird. Something like that.”

“Next season they’ll be new buds and flowers here, and his atoms will be a part of it.”

“O rose, o magnificent rose.”

“O magnificent rose,” I repeated.

The tears came without further provocation. I moved quickly to the stone bench and set down the box. I put the top back on. Then I grabbed my handkerchief and blew my nose.

Hooker said, “If we’d driven up here, we’d be at the car by now.”

“Right.” My voice had broken.

“You gonna be okay?”

“I just need a moment. Shall we open the wine?”

“You bring a corkscrew?”

“Shit. No. I can’t believe it.”

“We’ll drink it later.”

There was a silence.

Hooker said, “At least you know where they’re buried. I have no idea where my real dad’s grave is. Mom said she never found out but sometimes I think she’s hiding something from me. She feels really bitter about him.”

“He died in the war, right?”

“The big one. Maybe he’s in one of those monstrous graveyards in Europe. I wish I knew. I’d go pay my respects.”

“You barely knew him, right?”

“He’s my dad, man. I carry his genes. That’s what matters. You can’t escape biology, Bear. No way.”

This wasn’t the end of the story but I stopped. Telling it had moved me, and when I spoke about Hooker saying you couldn’t escape biology, I choked up. Mary put her arm around me.

I took a deep breath.

“Shit,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for anything.”

“When I said you can’t escape biology, I suddenly thought of Stephanie. She thinks I’m a monster.”

Mary held me tighter but didn’t speak.

“I guess I have to learn to live with it. Are you getting chilly? Maybe we should head back.”

“Did you ever put the rest of the ashes in the fishing hole?”

“Yeah, we did. We drove down the next day. Rented a boat and dumped him out in the middle of the lake. Maybe some of him found mom out there.”

26: Voices

I dropped Mary off in Seattle, spent the night (cuddling, no sex), and returned home to find voice mail, which was rare unless Mary was calling. I expected her to say she’d left something in the car. But the message was from Stephanie, recorded several days ago, while we were in Idaho.

“This is Stephanie,” the message began. Her voice set me back. She had one of those whispery voices used by femme fatales in what used to be called grade-B movies. Was this her natural voice? Did she have a cold? By the time I recovered from the surprise of her voice, and the shock of hearing from her at all, she was well along, and I had to rewind and start over.

“This is Stephanie. Last year I got a letter from your friend, Stacy. I don’t have to tell you what she told me. I really don’t know how to respond. I remember what I remember. In my memory, it was you. But I have been reading some things and realize that no one’s memory is infallible, maybe it actually was someone else, her former husband or whatever, and so maybe it wasn’t you. But it happened while I was visiting you. It happened in your home. You didn’t protect me.”

There was a long silence, and I waited for her to hang up. But she went on.

“I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know why you wanted to see me all of a sudden. Why I suddenly matter to you after all these years. I’m willing to listen to you if you have something to say to me.”

She provided her phone number and hung up.

It was late, almost midnight my time, when I finally phoned my daughter. Three in the morning on the east coast. I was too obsessively focused to worry about such details as common sense and good manners, the sudden need to call her promising to bring a great release of psychic energy. When my courage finally arrived, I had to use it before it left me again.

No one answered, and a recorded voice identified Stephanie’s office. Her work number. I was invited to leave a message.

“This is your—...This is Robert. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I guess it’s late.” I looked at my watch. “Jesus, I didn’t realize what time it is. I’m sorry. Well, I guess this is an empty office. I’ll try again at a more decent time. I really appreciate your message. I—...well, I’ll call again soon.”

I rose late and avoided phoning her back through most of the morning. When I finally dialed, I was shocked that she picked up the phone herself.

“This is Stephanie.”

“It’s Robert.”

I stood in the living room, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, unable to keep still. After a silence, she said, “Was there something you wanted to say to me?”

“I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I lost track of you. I’m sorry I never came to California to see you. I’m sorry I was so scared and confused when you visited. And I’m mainly sorry for not protecting you when you were in my home. Our home. It’s horrible what I put you through. I don’t expect your forgiveness. I truly don’t. But I—...well, I think it’s important that your disapproval of me is accurate. I am not a pedophile. I have many failings, God knows, but this is not one of them. I’ve been selfish and neglectful and irresponsible. I’m the world’s worst parent. I failed you as a father in many ways. But I am not a pedophile.”

I could hear her breathing.

“Stephanie, I know this must sound, I don’t know, insincere or something, but I do love you. I’ve always loved you. You’re my daughter. Nothing can change that. We share the same genes. There’s something basic and mysterious about such a connection. I know it’s too late to have a relationship with you, but you’ve been in my thoughts more than you realize. You asked why I have this sudden interest in you. I suppose because I’m an old man. When you’re my age, the frivolities of youth are far behind you. You begin to understand, if you haven’t understood before now, what is important in life and what isn’t. You’re important to me, Stephanie. That’s why I tracked you down. I wanted to know how you were doing, who you had become. You’re my daughter. You’re the only family I have. I suppose this sounds selfish, but there you have it.”

Again Stephanie said nothing.

“Thank you for listening to me.”

After another silence, I hung up.

And immediately regretted doing so. I stood frozen in the room, staring at the phone, as if expecting it to ring. It didn’t.

The phone didn’t ring for days, and when it finally did, the call was from Wanda, alias Angel.

“Red gave me your number,” she said. “I was wondering how he was doing.”

I told her I'd tried calling her but the number was disconnected, which was true. Then I gave her a condensed version of our camping trip, sparing the details about my role in the final moment.

"Well, sometimes sooner is better," she said. "Especially if he was in a lot of pain. Did he have a big funeral?"

I lied and told her yes.

"I had fun with him," she said.

"Obviously he had fun with you, too."

"I know. At first I thought it was a little weird and sad, you know? Being with somebody that old, who can't get it up and all. But eventually—"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You said he couldn't get it up. You were screwing in the back seat. I saw you."

"That time the creeps followed us? I was just riding on him. I tried everything I could think of to get him hard, believe me, but it never happened. He called it his perpetual soft-on."

And all this time, I thought he'd been resurrected as an old stud. Son of a bitch. Angel went on.

"He said he had the mind of a horny teenager and the body of a corpse. He took it in stride, actually. I mean, he didn't whine about it or anything. He made jokes. Actually he'd come sometimes, even without a hard-on. I never have trouble getting off, and he liked to watch, so I figured what the hell. I did whatever he wanted me to do. I got to liking it, actually, him watching me and all. He was such a gentleman and always so attentive. He made me feel like someone special."

"Like an angel."

"Or a queen."

"I like angel better."

We made small talk. I almost asked her about her experience of being abducted by aliens, so I might suggest what Hooker had not told her, that she see a doctor about sleep paralysis, but then I remembered this had been a secret between them, and she wouldn't appreciate his sharing it with me. Let Angel keep her memory of him. She told me she was working as a bartender, trying to get her act together enough to go back to school but frankly she missed the money she used to make and often thought about returning to Nevada. If she did come west, she'd give me a holler.

The phone didn't ring for several days after Angel's call. Then Mary phoned to tell me she was getting married.

Several months later I went to the wedding. As it turned out, her husband, a retired history professor from the University of Washington, was someone she'd known for years, having first met him at conferences when she was teaching at Chesapeake. They'd been seeing one another casually in Seattle, just as Mary and I had been seeing one another, but the history professor was more goal-oriented and determined than I was. He'd proposed shortly before our trip to Camp Thanatos, on which she had planned to tell me about him.

Because Mary had become the most important friend in my life after Hooker's death, I felt a momentary loss, but at the reception the bride took me aside to assure me that we still were close friends and that I should phone her whenever I needed to talk. I called her only a few times after that. Later I bought a dog, a rat terrier pup, which I named Idaho – and over time I found myself talking to the dog as if he were Hooker.

“Idaho,” I would say, “one of these days I’m going to start that novel I’ve been meaning to write. What do you think? Sound like something I should do? Or should I just accept that my writing days are over. You think my writing days are over, Idaho?”

No matter what I said, Idaho would give me his full attention in that wonderful fawning obedience of the canine race, which was pretty much what I needed. I concluded that I’d reached the age at which my best friend was a dog.

I never did start the novel. I eventually lost track of Mary. And I never heard from Stephanie again.

27: Memory

“Bear, you asleep?”

“Nope. You okay?”

“I’m good. I like hearing the river.”

“Me, too.”

“Makes me think of all the fish I’m going to catch tomorrow....Bear?”

“Yeah?”

“Thought you might have fallen asleep.”

“Still awake.”

“Thanks for doing this with me. It’s exactly the way I need to have this happen.”

“No problem.”

“I know you probably don’t approve—“

“Bullshit.”

“It’s not the way you’d do it.”

“That has nothing to do with it. Turkey Buzzards, remember? You’re the boss here. It’s your way or the highway.”

“I still think it’s hard for you.”

“Well, it is. Especially if— ... you know.”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that. I want to go out feeling good. I almost could do it right now.”

“Jesus.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t want to be hurting and delirious and all that shit. Like in all those rest homes where they hide folks to die. There ought to be a law against indignity like that. They wanted to stick me in a hospice, Bear. Watch me waste away. Thanks for rescuing me from that, man.”

“You’d do the same for me.”

“Damn right. I’m going out feeling good. I don’t expect you’ll have to help me.”

“Whichever way it goes, I’m right here for the duration.”

“Big Bear. We’ve had a hell of a half-century together. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

“Me neither.”

“I’m glad we got to drive across the country together. Even though I know you’re pissed about Angel. Don’t deny it.”

“I’ve gotten over it.”

“She was good for me, Bear. She was just what the doctor ordered. She made me ... I don’t

know how to explain it.”

“Feel like a man.”

“That’s not really it. I’m built like a stud field mouse, Bear, you know that. I just liked touching her skin. Fuck she had soft skin. Youth is something else. We sure throw it away, though, don’t we?”

“Like it never ends.”

“What’s the cliché? Youth is wasted on the young. How come most of the great wisdom in the world ends up being a cliché? Then nobody pays any attention to it any more.”

“How come we never listen to our parents? We end up bitching about the same things they bitched about.”

“The good old days are gone forever. Et cetera.”

“Et cetera.”

“Bear, I think I’m ready to sleep now. How about you?”

“I hope so. It must be late.”

“My guess is two.”

“I think it may be later.”

“Your watch handy?”

“It doesn’t glow in the dark.”

“Cheap bastard.”

“I’m sure we have a few more hours before sunrise. Let’s get some sleep.”

“Goodnight, Bear.”

“Night, Red.”

“Red, you all right? ... Red?”

“I’m okay.”

“You need a pill?”

“No. I think I swallowed wrong or something.”

“You were snoring, then you sounded like you were choking to death.”

“I’m okay. You get any sleep?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“What time is it?”

“I’d guess close to five. Looks like it’s getting light outside.”

“If I had any energy, I’d hit the river early.”

“You want me to put on coffee?”

“Get some more sleep.”

“I don’t think I can. Might as well put on coffee. You hungry?”

“No. I’m having trout for breakfast.”

“I could use some scrambled eggs before then.”

“I think I’ll wait.”

“I worry when you don’t eat.”

“You’d worry if I did eat.”

“That’s the truth. Pretty fucked, huh?”

“Not at all. You can’t distance yourself from this the way I can.”

“You can really do that?”

“Mind over matter, Bear. It helps that I have nothing to complain about. If you’d told me twenty years ago that I’d live past seventy, I would’ve wondered what drug you were on. The

way I abused my body over the years, no way. Who can figure? If I didn't smoke, I'd probably live to a hundred. But who's complaining? It would be bad form to start complaining this late in the game."

"I feel the same way sometimes. The gods have been kind to us. I've never even gotten a drunk driving ticket."

"Oh, I've gotten a few of those."

"Never with me in the car, though."

"You bring me good luck, Bear."

"Three divorces is great luck. Your boys dying before you do. One day you're rolling in dough, the next you have to declare bankruptcy. Your brother screws your wife. What would you have done without my good luck?"

"You know what I mean, asshole."

Memory is the scroll that defines the landscape of a life. What has happened in this territory can bring joy or pain. I remember Hooker and smile, remembering the many good times. I am constantly reminded of how much my life was shaped by knowing him so well for so long. Then I remember Stephanie and my failings as a father. But this, too, has shaped who I am. Her own memories have shaped who she is, and I suppose she'll go to her grave, presumably long after I have, believing that her father is a monster. She is wrong. I'm an old man who once was a young writer, so focused on my work that I neglected my daughter and just about everything else. I'm also an old man who was blessed to have a close and intimate friend, a soul brother, for half a century.

In retrospect, it feels like I hallucinated much of my life. I hallucinated the enduring love of my years with Sally. I hallucinated the expected heights of my literary career. I hallucinated future possibilities, however vague, with Mary. But I never hallucinated my friendship with Hooker. He was my buddy, and the gods can't take him away from me.

Lately I spend my days reading and walking with Idaho. I watch a lot of movies, some of which I worked on. I write occasional letters to former colleagues and students. Mostly we keep to ourselves, Idaho and I. I have no energy to make new friends at my age. Hooker is a hard act to follow.

In memory I walk along the scroll of my life the way a native returns after many years to visit his homeland. I remember this! I remember that! I wander the hills and valleys of my past and marvel at the scenery. So many memories!

Then Idaho leaps up on my leg to demand attention, I find a ball or, if we are outside, a nearby stick to toss, and we spend time focused only on the immediacy of our game, and the past falls silent. And this is my life, an old man playing with his dog, as the present pulls against the past and becomes the tether for the future.

END

About the author

Charles Deemer is a playwright, screenwriter, playwright, novelist, filmmaker and teacher. He teaches screenwriting at Portland State University. He is the editor of *Oregon Literary Review* and the artistic director of Small Screen Video.

*(I hope you enjoyed **Kerouac's Scroll**. You can follow my activities at my blog at <http://cdeemer2007.blogspot.com>. See you online. Charles Deemer)*