THE WAR WE KNEW

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We played with dark and light as children should.

--Theodore Roethke

CHAPTER ONE

When the summer of 1969 began, I was certain it would be as uninspiring as the land I'd been hired to farm. I was sixteen then, and certain of many things.

In May my uncle, Roy Taylor, broke his leg, and when Aunt Margaret called to ask if I could help out for two months, I was suddenly confronted with the kind of summer I wasn't sure I wanted any part of. Living in a suburb of Kansas City, I found it hard to imagine throwing away my vacation on a farm tucked among the rolling hills of central Kansas, but I felt I had no choice. My aunt, uncle, and cousins needed me, and my father, a kind but firm man, made it clear I would not spend the summer in front of the TV--not if he was going to share the cost of sending me to college. I had to do my part, and so, over Memorial Day weekend, I moved to the farm.

The turmoil the country suffered that year seemed far away as my family and I drove through the farmland west of Milford Lake. The fields of ripening wheat stretched beyond the horizon, and the pastures of bluestem and buffalo grass were sprinkled with the brown and black shapes of cattle. In the distance, ponds looked like dewdrops beading the green land. Dusty gravel roads intersected

the highway, sectioning the land and leading to farms and the country church my relatives attended. Looking down them was like viewing a path receding into the past, where the air was as fresh and sweet as a hundred years ago, when my ancestors first breathed it. There were no billboards or skyline, no overpasses spray-painted with peace symbols and anti-war slogans, only the land, as endless as the sky. I watched it glumly, feeling my summer had ended before it had a chance to get started.

The highway curved back toward the lake, and just before the turnoff to Crystal Cove, we entered the lane of my aunt and uncle's farm. A little orchard of peach, apricot, and cherry trees grew on one side and a clover field on the other, where bees circled lazily among the sprays of white blossoms. Rounding a bend, we came into the farmyard, scattering the chickens, and stopped in front of the white frame house, shaded by oaks and elms and brightened by bursts of color in the flower beds. Built at the turn of the century, it had a wood-shingled roof and two gables, and a screened porch in back that faced the trees lining the pasture. I'd visited that house all my life, but couldn't imagine living there.

Getting out of the air-conditioned car, I was greeted by the heat and the ripe odor of soil and manure. I looked around at the various buildings and sheds. Between the barn and the grainery, I could see the fence of the

hog pen and, beyond it, the tin roof of the hay barn glinting in the sun. The baler and one of the hayracks sat by the pasture gate, reminding me my first job would be baling alfalfa. My gloom deepened as I thought of the interminable weeks spread out ahead. My cousin Woody and I were too old for the games we used to play here; there seemed little to do but work. The only thing of interest was the helicopter that suddenly flew overhead, thumping an urgent, staccato beat, as if it intended to attack before retreating to Fort Riley, the military installation on the other side of Milford Lake.

Amid the noise my relatives came out to greet us. Aunt Margaret led the way, as she always did, and gave me a quick hug. She was my mother's older sister, a tall, angular woman with features made stern by her life on the farm. She was a devout Christian, firm in her beliefs but not dour, a woman with whom I was never quite sure where I stood. I suspected the feeling was mutual. She ended her hug with a smile, and gave me an appraising gaze. She told me she was glad I was here, and then moved on to my parents and sister, Emily.

Behind Aunt Margaret were my grandparents, who lived on a farm along one of the country roads we'd passed. My grandmother was short and plump, with a cherubic face and steel-framed glasses silvery in the sunlight, matching the color of her hair. My grandfather was a tall,

stoop-shouldered man whose quietness masked his intelligence. He could answer any question I asked about baseball, and listening to games with him was one of the few things I had to look forward to that summer. Like Aunt Margaret, my grandparents were deeply religious, and though I loved them, I sometimes felt uncomfortable with them. My family and I were not regular churchgoers and I seldom thought about God; He was an abstraction bearing little relation to my daily life.

My cousins, Woody and Cheryl, were my age, and as different as night and day. They were twins, which sometimes seemed to be the only thing they had in common. Cheryl was a sweet, pretty brunette who wanted nothing more than to be like her mother, a farm wife active in the church. Woody, on the other hand, could hardly wait to graduate and leave. Named after our great-grandfather Woodrow, he was a good-looking boy with sun-bleached hair, a light smattering of freckles, and the sensibility of a city kid. He was impatient with his life, which sometimes made him reckless, eager to see the world beyond the farm. We frequently talked about going to college, more for the drama of the anti-war movement than for an education, and about starting our own band. He was the one reason I wasn't entirely reluctant to spend the summer on the farm.

After greeting each other, we went inside and said hello to Uncle Roy, who sat in his easy chair, his leg

propped with pillows. He was a big man with a red face, blustery voice, and crew cut, and it was strange to see him looking so helpless, his face having lost some of its color. He was the least religious of my relatives; I supposed that what faith he had was due to the efforts of Aunt Margaret. He could be temperamental, especially now, confined to the house, but his spirits were good that day. After I'd signed his cast, he rapped it with his knuckles and whispered in my ear, "I haven't been this hard since my wedding night." Our laughter was cut short as Aunt Margaret suggested we go out and unload the car.

We took my things up to Woody's room, in a gable facing the farmyard. It was a small room with twin beds set against opposite walls, over which the ceiling sloped down to almost touch the knee-high windows. I felt comfortable in it, for it mirrored my room at home, decorated with Peter Max art posters, incense burners, a beaded curtain hanging in the doorway of the walk-in closet, and a strobe light Woody built himself. I added my collection of albums to his own, and put my drum set next to his electric guitar and amplifier.

After the others had gone downstairs, Woody smiled and motioned me over to the closet. Drawing back the beaded curtain, he pulled the string on the light bulb and we crowded inside.

"Got a surprise for you, John," he whispered. He

took a baggie down from a ledge. "Panama Red, some of the best stuff you can buy."

I'd smoked marijuana a couple of times, but it was still new enough to my experience that a thrill raced through me. I opened the baggie and sniffed, then rubbed a pinch of the resinous leaf between my fingers. "Looks good, all right," I said, though I really had no idea. "Where'd you get it?"

"Over at the cove. I've been going there a lot since I got my license. It's totally cool, man. We're gonna spend a lot of time there."

He was referring to Crystal Cove, the largest cove at Milford Lake, just a mile off the highway from the farm. It had a campground, a beach, and a marina, and, he told me, a lot of GI's went there, as well as girls camping with their families. We'd gone swimming there the past few years, after the dam was completed, but now that we could drive and Woody had his own car, it suddenly offered new possibilities. I began to think the summer showed promise after all.

My other relatives, however, hated Milford Lake, and at supper that evening they voiced their resentment. We sat crowded around the table in the small kitchen, and at one point I commented on how lucky I felt, living so close to the lake.

Uncle Roy, who ate from a tray in his easy chair

just inside the doorway, put down his fork and glared at me. "Lucky?" he said in his blustery voice. "Yeah, it was real lucky the Army Corps of Engineers didn't have enough work and decided to build a lake. Said we needed one. Threw us right off the land and said we'd take the price they offered or none at all."

"At least **we** didn't have to leave our homes," Aunt Margaret said. "Remember the Hettenbachs' place? And the Geists' and the Gfellers'?" She paused, looking at a memory. "Whenever we'd go to town, we'd drive by the lake and see how far the water'd come up. It was so sad, seeing the farms disappear . . ." She blinked rapidly, looked at my mother, and said, "And the grade school we went to, Elaine . . ." She shook her head.

My mother nodded, sharing my aunt's memory. "I always thought it would've been nice if John and Emily could've gone to a country school like that."

I was surprised, for my mother was rarely sentimental about her rural upbringing. She left the farm for college, where she met my father, and after they married, he got a job with Bendix in Kansas City. She found the world she'd wanted: a city of restaurants, theaters, and art galleries.

She went on, "I remember in winter the ice was so bad the bus had to stop at the top of the hill and we had to walk the rest of the way."

"What was this place called?" asked Emily, who was

ten and knew little about this part of our mother's past.

"Alida," my mother answered. "There was a school and some stores and a stockyard, and a train that took the livestock to Junction City. Back then there wasn't a highway, so if it rained and you wanted to go to town, you had to take the train. You could ride it both ways for thirty cents."

"And there was a grain elevator where we sold our wheat," my grandfather said. "When they started the lake, they thought they could bring the elevator down with three or four charges of dynamite. Took thirty-three."

Everyone paused, gaining some satisfaction from this fact, but then my grandmother said, "They didn't have to dig up the cemetery. I'd as soon have motorboats ripping over Wes's grave." Wes was her younger brother, shot down over France in 1944. "You don't bury the dead only to tell them they've got to move. It's indecent."

"It was a terrible waste," Aunt Margaret concluded.

I wanted to point out the benefits of the lake, but a look from Woody told me to keep quiet. So I shrugged the matter off. Believing my relatives and even my mother had let the past blind them to the present, I failed to realize the past they spoke of was also my own.

My family had a company picnic to attend the next day, and they left shortly after supper. The past was still very much on my mother's mind, for she kissed me

good-bye and said, "At first I wasn't sure about you staying here, but now I am. I want you to know both worlds, even if you know this one for only two months."

"Plus I'll come back with a lot of money," I said.

She smiled and looked about the shadows of the farmyard, as if searching the twilight for some part of herself she'd left behind long ago. After a moment she got in the car, my father honked the horn, and they drove down the lane. Emily stuck her hand out the window and waved, but I didn't return it. I wasn't yet ready to say good-bye.

That night, when the others were in bed, Woody and I smoked cigarettes on the roof outside our window. Except for the wind in the trees and an occasional car passing by on the highway, everything was silent, the farm deep in shadows and loneliness. I began to feel homesick. I thought of my friends and the girls we'd planned to pursue, the drive-ins and movie theaters and swimming pools, the first summer of Royals baseball in the old Municipal Stadium, the manicured lawns in my neighborhood, freshly washed cars in driveways, the glow of the porch light when I came home late, my room, my bed, my mother's call every morning. It would be a summer without any of those things, without anything I could call my own. Not even the stars were mine.

I was suddenly distracted by a sight in the eastern sky. Three bright yellow balls shone abruptly, followed

by three cold blue dots with shimmering white rings. They were eerie to watch because they appeared from nowhere, as if they'd just winked on in the night; the blue dots with white rings reminded me of unblinking eyes staring in our direction.

"Flares," Woody told me, whispering since Cheryl's window wasn't far away. "They shoot them off almost every night, sometimes the artillery too, when they're out on maneuvers."

"How do you sleep?" I asked.

"You get used to it. Sometimes it's hard **not** to sleep unless you hear them, you get so used to it. It sounds a lot like thunder, except for the big guns. They shake the ground way over here. That's when Mom starts bitching. She says it's all a show to prove the war isn't a lost cause."

"Your mom's against the war?" I was pleasantly surprised.

"She says we should either win it or get out."

"What about your dad?"

"He never talks about it. He went to Korea, you know, and he never says anything about it."

"What're the GI's like," I asked, "the ones who hang out at the cove?"

"Different," he answered. "They're pretty cool, the ones I know, they're just different. They'll help you

out, though. I got the grass from Bill Flannery. His dad's in the army, and they've got a cabin cruiser at the marina. Bill doesn't have a mom, it's just the two of them and man, do they have the life. There's a bunch of them hangs out together, and Cap--that's Bill's dad--he's the leader. The rest of them aren't a whole lot older than us. They'll get us grass, beer, whatever we need. We'll probably go out in the boat with them next weekend, if they're there." He took a final drag on his cigarette and stubbed it. "Come on, we'd better get to bed. We've got to get up early."

Taking a final look at the flares, I crawled through the window after him. As I tried to fall asleep I thought not of home or the hay baling we'd start in the morning, but of Crystal Cove and the GI's who would get us whatever we wanted.

The week moved slowly, yet quickly. We baled the alfalfa in the fields north of the farm, and then our grandfather's fields, reporting our progress to Uncle Roy every noon and evening. While our grandfather cut and raked the alfalfa, Woody and I took turns driving the tractor and stacking the bales on the hayrack. The work was hot and heavy, alfalfa dust thickening our lungs, the sun burning our arms and faces brown. It seemed to take forever to hook and drag the bales from the baler chute and stack them on the hayrack, then load them onto the elevator that carried them up into the hay barn.

And yet each day seemed to end just minutes after it began, as if it passed in three momentary stages: a cool burst of morning air, a hot breath of afternoon breeze, a warm exhalation of the tired evening. One minute my muscles were stiff and sore, the next loose and supple, then heavy and satisfied. The sun rose pink, burned white, set gold. Even the land passed through stages, altered more by an inexplicable force of its own than by our hands. The alfalfa fields began as undulant, blue-green patches splashed with purple flowers, then fell into dry and faded windrows snaking back and forth across the terraces, and finally lay bare in stubble crackling beneath our feet. It happened before my eyes, the fields transforming because of me and yet in spite of me, as if the land had a will of its own.

I felt myself changing too, my view narrowed to the simple and the particular. I found pleasure in everything, from the last heavy bale I lifted onto the elevator to the aching cold water I drank from the jug. Supper became a feast of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and thick gravy, buttered sweet corn and steaming rolls, sweating glasses of ice tea. The day's work could be measured by the ring around the bathtub, the length of the evening by the Royals' ball game, which we listened to on the back porch. Sleep came quickly, easily, induced by the lengthening shadows. There was no time to think or worry, to plan beyond the

next day. There was only time to work, to eat and sleep, and watch the hay barn fill. If not for the rumble of the artillery and the helicopters which intermittently flew overhead, it would have been hard to believe the country was at war.

If there had been no lake nearby, I might have passed the summer in the new contentment I'd found, my life bounded by the farm and structured by routine, rewarded by the changes in the land. But the week ended, the hay barn was full, and suddenly there was the weekend and, most of all, the cove, to which Woody and I were drawn.

Neither my aunt nor uncle liked us going to the lake, especially Crystal Cove. When Woody mentioned our plans at lunch Saturday, Aunt Margaret got up from the table to pour herself another cup of coffee. She stood at the counter with her back to us, an intentional move, to keep from confronting us directly.

"You know I don't like you going there," she said.

"Where else is there to go?" said Woody.

"How about the softball games in Chapman?" Cheryl suggested.

He glared at her. Chapman was the little farm community ten miles away, where they went to school. He sometimes referred to it as one of the ten most boring places on the planet.

"What's wrong with the cove?" he challenged Aunt

Margaret.

She sat down with her coffee and looked at Uncle Roy, who had returned to his regular place at the table with the help of a leg rest we'd built for him. Eating, he didn't catch her gaze, but I knew he listened. "What's wrong with it?" Woody repeated.

"The wrong kind of people go there," she said.

"Families who take their kids camping?"

"I'm talking about the soldiers. You know that."

"Dad was a soldier. You married him."

"Your father didn't do the things they do at the cove."

"Like what?"

Aunt Margaret paused. "Drugs and alcohol," she said. She looked as if she'd been forced to swear.

"How do you know that?" Woody said. "You got spies at the cove, or you go there yourself?"

"Hey," Uncle Roy said. His loud voice unnerved me. "You behave to your mother, you hear me? Don't think because my leg's broken I can't straighten you out."

Realizing he'd pushed them too far, Woody said, "I'm sorry, it's just I promised John we'd go. Besides, we'll be with Bill and his dad."

"Who?" Aunt Margaret asked.

"Bill Flannery, a guy I know. Captain Flannery's got a boat, and he told us he'd take us skiing. He's a cool guy. He's a captain in the armored division and he's

been to Vietnam twice. You don't mess around with him." He looked at Uncle Roy and then Aunt Margaret. "Isn't it all right if we're with him?"

Exchanging looks with my uncle, Aunt Margaret said, "Just be careful."

"And don't talk back to your mother," Uncle Roy said. "Understand?"

Woody nodded and so did I, though I hadn't spoken a word. Later I realized this was simply a routine we had to endure for my aunt and uncle's benefit. They knew we were too old to be stopped from going to the cove, that if we wanted something badly enough we'd find a way to get it. And so they had to satisfy themselves by giving us a permission we'd already granted ourselves, hoping we were not yet deaf to their warnings.

A half-hour later we left the farm in Woody's dusty old Ford, driving east on the highway until we came to the turnoff. We followed an asphalt road which meandered through a park on the hill and swooped down to the base of the cove, where the woods were so thick they looked like a jungle. Curving sharply away from the woods, as if it wanted no part of their darkness, the road took us along the north side of the cove, past a mile of campground to the beach and the marina, near the mouth.

In the parking lot, which overlooked the marina on one side and the beach on the other, we got out and

looked around. Beyond the cove, the lake stretched out so far that the sails jutted from the water like markers on a map. Behind them, the green hills along the far shore melted into the sky. The dam was a glittering speck in the distance, behind which the Republican and Smoky Hill rivers met, separating Fort Riley from Junction City.

In the cove, boats entered and left the marina while campers and GI's stepped from the cool dimness of the bait shop, carrying bags of charcoal and six-packs of beer. At the beach, kids splashed in the water and gathered around the concession stand. Along the south shore, fishing boats floated beneath the overhanging branches of the woods. Looking at everything, I sensed good times.

As it turned out, the afternoon was uneventful. Cap's cabin cruiser wasn't moored at the marina, and we saw none of the GI's Woody knew. Disappointed, we went swimming at the beach, hoping to meet some girls. Again, we had no luck.

Still, it felt good to loaf away the hours, alternating between the sun and the water. There was time to catch up on each other's lives since we'd last seen each other at Christmas, time to think and remember, and look ahead. Closing my eyes, I smelled the breeze from the lake and the sweet tang of suntan lotion, heard voices and the lap of the water and the hum of boats, sounds distant and unconnected until I opened my eyes. Then the

world came back into focus, sunlight shooting through the trees and glazing the water where swimmers pitched in the waves stirred up by boats. Kansas City seemed far away and unimportant. Nothing mattered. I felt free and unambitious, wrapped in the luxury of waiting for something to happen.

When evening set in, we bought hot dogs and french fries and took the food up to the car. We ate sitting on the hood, watching the beach. Shadows began to grow and the breeze was cooler, the sunlight shrinking back into the cove, leaving the twilight in its wake.

We searched the marina again, but still didn't find Bill, Cap, or any of their friends. Woody grew restless.

"We can't waste the day like this," he said when we got back to the parking lot. "We'll have to ask someone we don't know."

"Why do we need beer? We've got the grass."

"We can't have grass without beer," he said. "Look, here's what we'll do. We'll find somebody to get us a case, and we'll hide part of it in my cooler back in the woods. That way we'll have some in reserve in case this happens again."

"Who do we ask?"

"How about that guy? He's been sitting there since we came up from the beach."

I followed his gaze to a man sitting on the hood

of an old pickup truck dull with primer. He looked the size and age of a college football player, but his hair had a GI cut and he wore khaki fatigues and dog tags, which looked small and insignificant against his broad, bare chest. He sat motionless, intent on the beach, while the truck seemed ready to collapse beneath his weight.

"I'll do the talking," said Woody. "If he says no we'll just walk away."

We went over and said hello. He said nothing, keeping his eyes on the beach. After a moment he gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. Standing this close to him, I sensed his tremendous physical power.

"How's it going?" Woody said.

"Okay." His voice was soft, starting too deep inside him to carry much sound by the time it left his mouth. He was so preoccupied with the beach that I looked to make sure I wasn't missing something. There was nothing unusual I could see.

Woody cleared his throat. "Reason we came over, we're in a bind. Somebody was supposed to buy us some beer, but he didn't show up. We were wondering if you'd help us out."

He looked at us for the first time, and I was startled by the brilliance of his eyes. They seemed capable of seeing things no one else could see, things at a great distance, both spatial and temporal. And yet they didn't appear to register what they saw. He looked at Woody and me, but

I had the impression we weren't quite within his focus.

"Beer," he said. "How much you want?"

"A case," Woody said, giving him some money. "Keep the change."

The truck shuddered as he jumped off the hood. We watched him walk down the slope to the bait shop.

"Think he's high?" said Woody.

"Could be," I said. "Maybe it's shell shock."

"Maybe. One thing's for sure, I'd hate to get in a fight with him."

He returned a few minutes later, carrying the sack of beer like a loaf of bread. He gave it to Woody and sat down again on the hood. We thanked him, but he didn't hear us.

We went back to the car and got the cooler from the trunk, only to realize we'd forgotten the ice. While Woody went to get it, I put some of the cans in the cooler.

Excited about the beer, I momentarily forgot about the GI. Then I sensed I was being watched. I looked over at the truck, but he wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere in the parking lot, and the beach was empty except for the growing shadows. Lanterns glowed at the marina, and the lights at each end of the parking lot suddenly winked on. It was almost dark.

I put the cooler and the rest of the beer in the back seat and got in. I couldn't figure out where the GI had

gone. He might have lain down in the truck bed, or walked down the rocky slope at the far end of the lot. I wasn't about to check.

I wasn't afraid exactly, but all of a sudden I felt lonely and empty, even though I knew Woody would be back in a minute. I wondered what my friends in Kansas City were doing tonight, and it occurred to me they had gone on without me. I felt I no longer knew them, no longer existed except in their memory, taken from them for a reason I couldn't understand. I was 150 miles from home, sitting in this car in this parking lot overlooking Crystal Cove at Milford Lake, but I didn't know why.

Woody came back with the ice and dumped it into the cooler. He asked where the GI had gone. I told him I didn't know.

"Well," he said, "he can't go far without his truck." He gave me a beer and we drove out of the parking lot. Looking back, I saw the truck hadn't moved. "You scared he'll come after us?" he said.

"No, it was just sort of creepy, the way he disappeared like that."

"Don't worry, we've got this."

He reached under the seat and pulled out the huge crescent wrench we'd used on the tractor earlier in the week. It was as long as my arm and weighed five pounds.

He grinned. "I'd hate to be on the receiving end

of that."

"No shit." Holding the wrench, I felt a power from its sheer hardness and weight, not unlike the power I'd sensed the GI had.

We drove through the campground, parking along a low embankment close to the water. Above us, lanterns glowed among the trees and voices trickled through the underbrush. Once in a while a car door slammed. The moon was bright and clear, its surface scratched with mountains and craters. Moonlight glazed the water like silver scales, and a cool breeze blew in from the lake.

We hopped down from the embankment and sat among the rocks. We were quiet for a while, drinking our beer and smoking cigarettes. I felt better now, but couldn't forget the moment of loneliness I'd experienced. It followed me like a shadow, a reminder that I was somehow vulnerable, though to what I didn't know. It was as if the sudden disappearance of the GI had awakened in me a doubt about myself and the summer ahead.

Thinking it was a case of homesickness, I tried to make light of it by telling Woody I hoped the GI's he knew weren't as weird as the one we'd met.

"You'll like 'em fine," he assured me, "especially Candy Carrera. Bill got the Panama Red from him. You can get anything from Candy. Speaking of which . . ."

He went to the car and came back with a joint. We

passed it back and forth, watching the orange glow of the tip, and drank more beer.

Time began to slow, minutes lasting hours. I thought of time and how it was supposed to be relative, and suddenly I understood how it worked. I tried to explain it to Woody, but couldn't find the words. And then it was gone. I tried to remember it, but it was like trying to catch a handful of light.

Across the cove, the woods looked frosted in the moonlight. Gazing up at the moon, I thought of the first moon landing less than two months away. It was as hard to imagine men standing on it as it was to imagine what my life would be like then. By that time, my summer on the farm would almost be over.

The more I wondered, the sleepier I grew, until finally I lay down, the rocks warm and smooth, melting to the contours of my body. My eyes grew heavy, and soon the moon was covered by darkness.

It was almost midnight when Woody woke me. Everything was quiet, the lanterns extinguished. The breeze was cool and damp, and I shivered as I stood up and tried to shake off my lethargy.

"Come on," he whispered, "we're gonna be late."

We gathered the cans scattered about the rocks and put them in a sack, careful not to make any noise.

"How much we got left?" he asked.

"Over half. What do we do with it?"

"I know a place."

In the stillness, the abrupt start of the engine sounded unnaturally loud. Woody turned on the headlights and we followed the tire tracks up the grassy slope past darkened tents. We stopped to dump the empty cans in a trash barrel, careful to leave no evidence, and turned onto the road.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Groggy," I said, "and hungry."

"It's a good thing I woke up when I did. We might've crashed there all night." He shook his head. "How do you like that? We smoke some terrific grass and fall asleep. That's not supposed to happen till you get old."

At the base of the cove, where the road swerved up the hill to the park, he turned off into the tall grass and stopped. Before us, the woods swallowed the beam of the headlights.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"There's supposed to be a path that leads to a clearing. We'll stash the beer there."

Taking a flashlight, he tramped through the grass toward the woods. When he reached them I turned off the lights. No cars passed by, but I felt slightly paranoid from the marijuana.

I got out and sat on the hood, waiting, letting the

breeze clear the fuzziness from my head. I felt more tired than high, and dreamed of eating huge slices of Aunt Margaret's cherry pie before I went to bed. I wondered if there was any ice cream in the freezer.

Woody came back and we got in the car. "It's not really a path," he said, "but we can get through. There's a clearing on the other side. We stay in the car till we get there." He turned on the light and showed me his arms, covered with welts. "Stingweed all over the place."

He started the car and we edged toward the woods, the lights flattening out against the trees and underbrush. Then we were inside, weeds and ferns rising in front of us. I couldn't see a path, but there was a parting in the trees wide enough to guide the car through. Weeds bent before the hood, snapped and scratched under the floorboards. They sounded alive, crawling beneath us. Branches scraped against the doors and windows, but I kept my eyes fixed straight ahead.

The woods ended and we came into a small, moonlit clearing set at the bottom of a slope. Above us, trees rose along the side of the hill. Woody turned off the lights and the engine and we got out and looked around. It felt good to stand in the fresh air again. "Over here," he said. "See?"

He pointed to the remains of a fire, a circle of rocks containing charred wood and blackened beer cans. "It's

old," he said, poking a stick in it. "At least a few days." He looked around, pleased with his discovery. "This is a great place to party. We can bring girls, or Bill and the guys, get some music . . . it's perfect."

"Where do we leave the beer?"

"I don't know. Someplace away from the water, in case it rises."

"How far back are we?"

"Probably the very tip," he said. "I've never been in this far. Let's check it out."

We started into the trees and had gone only a few steps when the air grew dense with the smell of something I couldn't identify. At first I thought it might be a skunk, or a dead fish washed onto the shore. I wasn't sure.

"What is it?" I whispered.

Woody shook his head and we went a little farther, the stink growing stronger.

Then it hit us, a stench so thick and suffocating it was like a fog, clinging to our skin. Gagging, we didn't have time to turn around. The smell knocked us backward, pushing us through the underbrush until we reached the clearing. We drank in the fresh air, trying to clear away the awful stink from our mouths and nostrils. My stomach lurched and I was afraid I'd vomit, bile rising in my throat. But the feeling passed and my breathing slowed, leaving me with an intense thirst.

I loped over to the car and drank from the melted ice in the cooler, cupping it in my hands. I drank until my chest began to ache, then grabbed a handful of ice and sucked hard on it, numbing my cheeks and tongue. Feeling better, I sat down in the grass and waited as Woody took his turn. Images raced through my mind, clear and sharp, my senses suddenly keen. It was as if I'd left my high back on the road.

Woody squatted beside me and stared at the spot in the trees we'd run from. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he said quietly.

"I don't want to think anything," I said. "Let's get out of here."

He gripped my arm. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he repeated.

"I can't read your fucking mind," I snapped, pulling loose from his grip.

"Something's down there," he said. "That smell . . . something died down there."

"It's probably an animal."

"I can't remember an animal ever smelling like that. Whatever it is, we've got to find out for sure."

I stared at him. "You're crazy."

"I want to see it."

"No way, man. No way we even get close."

"We've got to be sure," he said. "If it's what we

think, we've got to report it."

"Sure," I said, "we just hold our breath five minutes and march right on down."

He paused, gazing toward the trees. His face was damp from the water he'd splashed on it, drops clinging to his nose and cheeks like silver beads in the moonlight. He looked at me, and there was a pleading in his eyes and voice. "Listen to me, John. We can't walk away from here without knowing. Don't you feel it?"

I did feel it. We were trapped in that clearing until we saw it, knew for sure.

I took a deep breath and let it rush out. "How do we do it?"

He thought for a moment, then began unbuttoning his shirt. I asked him what he was doing.

"We'll douse our shirts with after-shave," he said, "and hold them to our faces. Maybe it'll keep the smell away."

He went to the glove compartment, where he kept a bottle of English Leather he used to cover the smell of cigarette smoke. We bunched up our shirts, and he poured most of the bottle on them. We slapped the rest on our faces.

"We'll be breathing this shit for a week," I said.

"Better than breathing what's down there." He grabbed the flashlight and looked at me. "Ready?"

"Let's get it over with."

The woods seemed thicker, darker this time. The beam of the flashlight only heightened the effect, casting a light the darkness absorbed. There was no point in looking for anything moving, in trying to define shadows, for everything melted into the blackness. It was hard to believe a place could be so dark.

We crept deeper into the woods, peering at the ground our light uncovered. It was damp, spongy beneath our feet, and covered in a tangle of slick grass and ferns. At the base of a tree, toadstools sprouted from the moss, moist and rubbery in the light.

Then the smell engulfed us, as if it had been waiting for us to cross a certain line before it struck. Despite our readiness it startled us, freezing our feet to the ground. We held our shirts bunched up to our faces, took a step, then another. Keeping my nose buried in my shirt, I couldn't tell if the stink grew worse. My lungs felt saturated with the after-shave and I was afraid I'd choke. I wanted to fling the shirt away, but knew what would happen if I did. Afraid I'd panic, I paused, shut my eyes, and tried to control my breathing. I'd come this far, and wasn't about to give up now.

As we crept forward the ground began to slope and the trees thinned, moonlight filtering through the branches. We pushed ahead, the ground growing softer, the light

brighter. I thought I could see the water, and felt a sudden urge to run for it and jump in. But the ground turned to mud and we stopped. Woody swept the light across it, back and forth in widening arcs, until it uncovered what we'd been searching for.

It lay about twenty feet away, face down in the mud, legs in the water. One arm was folded beneath it and the other extended, as if reaching out to us. It was bloated, straining to burst out of the muddy clothes; it reminded me of a partially inflated balloon.

Woody jerked the light away, pointing it off into the bushes away from the body. We made our way through them, and when we reached the other side we were standing at the base of the cove, the water spread out before us in the moonlight. Woody snapped off the light and we drank in the air, letting the breeze sweep across our faces and chests. I felt grateful for the view, and for a long time I gazed at the trees and the water, the moon and the stars.

Finally I sat down in the grass, confused because I felt no particular emotion about our discovery. My fear was gone; there was no longer anything to be afraid of. I thought I should at least be sad, but I wasn't.

"I wonder what happened," Woody said. I could tell he too was no longer afraid.

I shook my head. "Who knows? Maybe he drowned or--" I couldn't bring myself to say he'd been killed.

"Could you tell it was a man?"

"No," I said. "I just figured it was. You don't think it's a woman, do you?" The possibility seemed even worse.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe we'd better check."

"What good would it do?"

"None," he said. "No good at all."

We were quiet for a few minutes, and then I said, "What do we do now?"

"Go home and call the sheriff."

I looked at him. "They're going to ask what we were doing here."

"We just say we were scouting out a place to have a party. We found the clearing and looked around, and that's how we found it."

"I don't know," I said.

It was his turn to look at me. "You think we should just go home and forget all about it?"

"That's not what I'm saying. But think about it. Once we tell someone, we're right in the middle. The cops'll want to know every last detail."

"Come on," he said, "they wouldn't suspect us. If we did it, we sure wouldn't be telling anyone."

"But they're going to want to know what we were doing, Woody. What if they search the car?"

"We hide the stuff in the woods, just like we planned."

"Use your head, man. That's the first place they'll

look for evidence."

He stared at me. "You don't give a damn about anything but yourself."

Angry, I said, "I'm trying to use my head and keep us from getting into worse trouble than we're already in. You still don't get it, do you? Once we tell, everything's going to change. Who knows what'll happen?" I paused, suddenly frightened by a new possibility. "Listen, Woody. What if it **is** murder, and whoever did it finds out we're the ones put the cops on the trail?"

"Shit, don't say that."

"I've got to. We've got to think about it."

"So you really think we should keep quiet."

I didn't answer because I didn't know. Things had grown so complicated that I felt overwhelmed, as if I were lost in an endless equation. Any answer only provoked a new, more difficult question; each question referred back to the previous answer. It was like trying to look backward and forward at the same time, like trying to count stars, only to wonder which ones I'd missed, which I'd counted twice.

I stuck my hand in the water and drew it across my face, silently blaming Woody. There were a thousand places we could have hidden the beer; why did we have to come here? Why did we have to be the ones? We hadn't asked for it; we'd done nothing wrong.

I looked at him and saw he waited for an answer, that he would agree to whatever I decided because it was most important we stick together. I hated him for placing the responsibility on me, hated myself for my reluctance to do what was right.

Standing up, I said, "I'm going back to look at it. Give me the flashlight."

I made my way back into the trees, Woody following, and when the smell surrounded me I mechanically put my shirt to my face and kept walking until I reached the mud. I found the body with the light, bloated and obscene and pathetic, exposed for the world to see. Its arm still reached out.

I felt Woody's hand on my shoulder, heard his muffled voice say, "Don't touch it."

Looking down, I saw I was standing in the mud. I'd started toward the body without realizing it, as if its arm beckoned me.

I paused, uncertain. I probed the body with the light, trying to recognize it, memorize it, understand what had happened. I shone the light on its head, wanting, needing, to see its face. It was only a muddy, misshapen shadow. I trained the light back on the arm, on the pale, dough-like hand, the swollen fingers barely recognizable, still reaching out, still waiting. I wanted to take that hand, but knew I couldn't. There was only one way I could

correct the indecency. I snapped off the light and we went back to the car.

In the kitchen, I waited while Woody woke Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy. I'd taken off my muddy shoes but hadn't thought of washing off the after-shave; I could only sit at the table, my shirt bunched in my fist, and feel the change that had taken place while I was away.

In a week's time I'd come to feel almost at home here, but now that feeling was gone. Everything was in its place, down to the note on the bulletin board next to the stairs, reminding Woody and me what time to get up for church. And yet it had all changed, as if there were no longer any sense to the room's order, no reason for the cannisters to line the back of the counter according to size, for the coffee pot to sit clean and ready to brew the morning coffee. Everything had a slightly unreal look, purposeful yet artificial, like props on a set.

When Aunt Margaret came in, I was startled at how old and thin she looked. Her figure was lost beneath her housecoat, legs like white sticks, face pale and eyes puffed with sleep. Uncle Roy followed her, helped by crutches he'd reluctantly started using. They nullified his physical power, reduced his tremendous bulk to the frail figure of an old man. He sat down with a grunt, Aunt Margaret standing behind him. As they waited for us to speak, tension drained the sleep from their faces.

"What's that smell--after-shave?" said Aunt Margaret. Her voice was as sharp as ever. It was a relief to hear it, for it provided a familiar base in a scene growing more unreal.

"Something awful happened," said Woody. His tone was apologetic, and I knew how he felt. It was impossible to escape a feeling of guilt.

My aunt and uncle held their breath. It was clear from their expressions what they thought: we'd been drinking and wrecked the car, drinking and been in a fight--drinking and gotten into the kind of trouble alcohol caused. For a moment I felt like laughing.

"We think somebody's been killed," Woody said. "We found a body, over at the cove."

Their expectations dissolved into uncertainty, then incomprehension. So strong was their disbelief that I too began to wonder about the logic of Woody's words, of our gathering here in the middle of the night.

"I'm not lying," he said almost desperately. "Tell them, John."

"Call the sheriff," I said, hardly recognizing my voice. "We can't leave it there like that."

Uncle Roy was the first to snap out of his disbelief. "Where?" he asked. "Where in the cove?"

"The woods," said Woody. "Back where the cove ends."

"You're sure," he said.

Impatient, I repeated, "Call the sheriff. Call him now."

Uncle Roy paused, watching us, then looked at the phone hanging from the wall.

"Wait," Aunt Margaret said. "Have you boys been drinking?"

"Yes," I answered. "It doesn't make any difference. We saw it."

Woody got up, kicking his chair back against the counter. "Mom, will you lay off for five minutes? You want me to make the call?"

"Sit down," Uncle Roy shouted. "Sit down and don't talk to your mother that way. I'm calling." He scooted his chair over to the phone, pain wrinkling his face, and took down the receiver.

Aunt Margaret slumped into a chair. She stared at the patterned tablecloth as if trying to chart a new course on a map proved unreliable. I watched the emotions at work on her face. I wanted to reach out to her, say something, but didn't know how.

Staring at the table still, she said, "This is what happens when you go to the cove."

I was stunned. At the moment when I most wanted to say I was sorry, I could only draw back in anger.

Woody shook his head slowly, sadly, smiling in disbelief. "We didn't kill him, Mom."

She looked up at him, eyes hot with anger. "Don't you ever say that again," she whispered.

He leaned forward. "You're treating us like we did it. It's not our fault!"

At that moment the door to the stairs creaked open and Cheryl came in, squinting in the light, still half asleep. "What's wrong?"

"Mom thinks we killed someone."

"Stop it!" Aunt Margaret cried. "You're my boy and I'm afraid. Afraid of what's going to happen to you. You won't listen to me." She turned to me and said, "I told your mother I'd take care of you, John. I'm responsible for you. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

I had no answer.

"What's going on?" Cheryl pleaded. She stood at the head of the table and stared at us, frightened by the melodrama of the scene.

Before anyone could answer, Uncle Roy hung up the phone and said, "The sheriff's on his way."

No one spoke. The event was official now, and arguing was pointless. We had to be ready for the sheriff, and there wasn't much time to prepare ourselves.

The sheriff's arrival was nothing like I'd expected, like I'd seen on TV. There were no red lights whirling through the kitchen windows, no sirens or the urgent static of police radios splitting the silence of the farmyard.

There was only a solitary car, a quick bark from our collie Bingo, a soft knock at the door, and the sheriff and his deputy sitting now at the table, watching us.

Though my aunt and uncle knew Sheriff Peterson slightly, I was afraid because I had no idea what to expect from him. It never occurred to me he might feel a similar way toward me. I could view him only through the lens of my own fear and guilt, and I saw a man in complete control, neither believing nor disbelieving, impossible to bargain with. He looked at us calmly, his gray eyes as steady as his hands, which lay folded on the table next to his Stetson.

Lynch, the deputy, was twenty years younger than Peterson and, unlike the sheriff, he seemed to relish the situation, not for its human suffering, but its potential drama. His eyes shone like his badge, and he tapped his finger softly on the table in a jittery beat I felt rather than heard. Peterson glanced at him and he stopped, folding his arms as if to contain their energy.

Woody and I told our story, making no mention of the marijuana or beer, which we'd hidden in a culvert along the highway. I was afraid Aunt Margaret or Uncle Roy might be angry enough to say something about our drinking, but they never interrupted, only listened with grim resignation.

When we'd finished, Sheriff Peterson said, "You boys were out pretty late. Why'd you wait so long to go

looking for this place?"

"We forgot till we were on our way home," Woody answered. "When we drove by, I remembered somebody telling me about it, so we decided to stop. We thought maybe we'd find a party."

"Who told you about this place?"

Woody shrugged. "Somebody at the cove, I don't remember who. I don't think it's a secret, probably a lot of people know."

The sheriff looked from us to Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy, then down at the table. It was impossible to tell what he thought.

"So when you got there," Lynch spoke up, "you decided to go down to the water, and that was how you found it."

"That's right," I said, my voice shaking. "We'd never been that far into the cove. We wanted to see what it looked like. We didn't know it was there. The body, I mean. Really we didn't."

"Understand," said Peterson, "we're not accusing you of anything. We just want to make sure we've got the story straight." He paused, looking at us, and said, "You're sure it's a man?"

"A man or woman," said Woody. "We couldn't tell which. A man, we think. The smell was awful, that's why we used all the after-shave. Even then it was pretty bad."

"Okay," Peterson said slowly. He stood up. "You'll have to show us where."

Aunt Margaret insisted on going with us, and rode with Woody and me in the back of the sheriff's car. In a way, it was the strangest thing that had happened yet, sitting with my aunt in a police car as we stared ahead through the mesh partition, listening to the crackle of the police radio, feeling as if we were suspects apprehended for a crime we didn't understand. Aunt Margaret had changed into her work clothes, ready, it looked, to go out and feed the chickens. Woody and I still smelled of after-shave, though we'd changed shirts and tried to wash it off. I felt sleepy yet wide awake, afraid yet eager, solemn yet silly. It was absurd, like a dream both horrible and funny. There we were: my aunt and cousin and I riding off with the cops to look at a body on the first night Woody and I got stoned.

We followed the road through the park and down the hill to the base of the cove. Woody showed Peterson where to turn off, and the sheriff carefully guided the car into the woods. Whatever fears I had, my safety in those woods was not one of them, not with the presence of the sheriff and his deputy, guns at their sides, and the vigilance of the police radio.

We reached the clearing and got out, and immediately Peterson and Lynch began to look around. They inspected

the remains of the fire and walked along the perimeter of the clearing, shining their flashlights across the ground and into the trees.

Finished with their initial search, they came back to us and Peterson said to my aunt, "I'd like you to wait here at the car. I'll send the boys right back." In the moonlight, his expression remained as stolid as ever, but there was an edge to his voice now. I wondered if he'd found something.

We started toward the trees when Woody suddenly said, "What do we do about the smell?"

"We can handle it," Lynch said. "You point the way and we'll let you go back." He sounded as if he were bragging, and I hoped I'd be able to see his face when we got into the woods.

I wasn't afraid of the darkness this time. Sadness replaced my fear; I could think only of the pathetic form lying in the mud, reaching out for help like a man sinking in quicksand. There was an unfairness to it. For all I knew, the person had led a life as ugly as the body that remained. Perhaps he deserved to die, whether it was an accident or murder. But no one should have to suffer this indignity.

We stopped, the smell stronger. I looked at Lynch, but it was too dark for me to see his expression.

Woody took the sheriff's flashlight and pointed it

into the underbrush. "Straight ahead," he said.

"All right," Peterson said, taking the flashlight. "Go on back."

I wanted to stay, felt it was my duty.

"Go on," Peterson said to me. "There's nothing you can do here."

I gazed into the darkness, then turned and followed Woody back to the car.

Aunt Margaret looked at us expectantly, but we didn't have anything to say. We leaned against the trunk, breathing the cool air, while she stood with her arms folded, hugging herself to keep warm.

Finally I said, "I'm sorry about all this."

"So am I," she said. "I wanted everything to be good this summer."

"It'll get better," I said. "It can't get any worse."

"I hope not." There was no anger to her words, no implied warning. Telling us she was getting cold, she got into the car, shutting herself away from the reality there in the clearing.

When Peterson and Lynch returned, they were breathing hard and sweating. Their boots and hands were muddy, and the smell of death hung in the air. There was an urgent, business-like manner to their actions as Lynch got on the radio and Peterson spoke to Aunt Margaret. Then the sheriff came over to Woody and me. The look on his face

told me he'd discovered a lot more than we had.

"It's a man," he said, "a GI. He's got dog tags."

"How did he die?" Woody asked.

Peterson shook his head. "We'll have to get the medical examiner out here."

"You mean you don't know, or you won't tell us?" I said.

"Son, I can't tell you anything more. I'm sorry."

He looked over at Aunt Margaret, who'd gotten out of the car when Lynch got in. He said, "She tells me you fellas're running the farm this summer, says you've been working hard all week. That's fine. I can understand how a person would want to take a break and have a good time and not much care what he did so long as it's fun. I grew up on a farm myself, ten miles north of here. I know what it's like when the weekend comes." He paused, then went on, "What all you did tonight, we're not going into it. But let me give you some advice: be careful what you do out here, especially at night. This isn't the first time I've been called to the lake and it won't be the last, not with all the GI's we've got. I'm not knocking all those boys, not these days. But some of them're bad as they come. It don't even have to be a GI, there's plenty others in Junction City fit the bill. The point is, you could've walked into something a lot worse tonight. That's why I'm asking you to think about what you're going to do before

you do it."

He studied us to see if he'd made an impression. He had. Though he'd treated us fairly, I resented his warning. I felt I was being told I had no authority away from the farm, no ability to take care of myself.

Indignation filled my voice as I said, "If things're so bad, why don't they patrol this place better?"

"You know how big this lake is, plus all the other ground we've got to cover? Nobody can patrol it all every minute of the day. Not anywhere."

I nodded, realizing the foolishness of my question. Still, I felt bitter.

"Well," Peterson said with finality, "that's all for now. George'll drive you home and tomorrow somebody'll be out to take your statement, and that'll be the end of it for you fellas."

We kept the windows down on the way home, the smell still clinging to Lynch like the after-shave to Woody and me. I thought of Sheriff Peterson staying behind with the GI, and felt sorry for both of them.

It was almost four when Woody and I climbed the stairs to our room, silently undressed, and went to bed. It seemed impossible that the summer was still ahead of us, as expansive as the lake we'd viewed from the parking lot, impossible that our lives could ever move forward, recapturing the rhythm of the days and the land.

CHAPTER TWO

None of us talked about the event in the days that followed. We held a silent agreement that it was best to get on with our lives and the business of the farm. Aunt Margaret encouraged this approach, her voice cheerful each morning as she spoke of the weather, the day's work, the good job Woody and I were doing. The more she talked around the event, the more foolish I felt we were for trying so hard to avoid it. The death of the GI obviously weighed on our minds, and yet we refused to do anything about it. Even Woody and I couldn't bring ourselves to discuss it, and a wall began to rise between us.

Now that the hay baling was finished we had fence to mend and thistles to cut in the north pasture. It was slow, tedious work which offered us more time to think than we wanted. We tried not to think, but to keep moving from one fence post to the next, one flowering thistle to another, concentrating only on our work. We tried to keep busy in the evenings, giving up Royals baseball for rock'n' roll. We carried the drums, guitar, and amplifier to an empty shed, strung an extension cord across the farmyard for power, and defiantly blasted away the silence. At night we smoked on the roof and talked about college,

trying to ignore the flares burning in the eastern sky. We tried, but it was impossible not to think of the GI, to see an image of him wherever we went. Tangled in the barbwire fence, sprawled among the thistles, sinking in the mud in the hog pen--he was everywhere on the farm.

We also tried not to think of the manner of his death, which we learned from the coroner when he came out to take our statement. His name was Heldstab. He was a tall, soft-spoken man whose job seemed to have left him with little interest in anything. I doubted he was aware of our emotional shock; perhaps he'd trained himself to ignore it.

After we'd given our statement, Woody and I followed him out to his car. We wanted to know how the GI had died, and he had no reservations about telling us.

"Homicide," he said. "His intestines were ruptured by a sawed-off pool cue. They found it in him at the scene."

I remembered the look on Sheriff Peterson's face when he came out of the woods, his refusal to tell us anything. I was grateful the body had been half submerged in water, that Woody and I hadn't taken a closer look.

Heldstab lit a cigarette and loosened his tie. It was a hot, still day and he was beginning to sweat. "It's probably drug-related," he said. "Cases like this usually are."

"Have they got any leads?" Woody asked.

"Not that I've heard."

"When did it happen?"

"Sometime Wednesday night," Heldstab said. He got into his car and started it. I tapped on the window and he opened it.

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Johnson. James Johnson."

James Johnson. It was a name as vague as our knowledge of his life. We learned from the newspapers that he was nineteen, white, single, a PFC, born and raised in Little Rock, and scheduled to leave for Vietnam within a week of his death. That was all. If Sheriff Peterson knew why he'd been murdered or had any suspects, he didn't say. My and Woody's names were not made public, and we were relieved.

I clipped the newspaper reports, reading them again and again until finally Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy grew worried. Both they and my parents suggested it might be good if I went home for a while, but I told them no, I wasn't going to run away. Besides, there was too much work to do. They finally agreed, partly because Woody and I hadn't ventured from the farm; I think they believed we'd come to our senses, recognizing the dangers of the cove. To some extent they were right, for we had no desire to return to the cove, at least not right away.

We were still trying to come to terms with the event, to cope with our fear. As the days passed, however, we grew more uncertain, more obsessed with the murder. It was apparent in our silence, in the moments when our eyes met and we looked away.

I felt most of all a responsibility for James Johnson, as if in uncovering his death I accepted the duty of explaining it. But I had no control over the matter; it had been taken from my hands the moment Uncle Roy called the sheriff, leaving me to wonder about Johnson's life and square it with his death. What had he done to deserve it? What had he looked like? What had it been like for him there in the woods, confronting death and the awful means by which it would occur? What had the pain been like, the length of his suffering, his last conscious thoughts?

I felt I should do something, and the only way I could think to begin was to talk to Sheriff Peterson. I was certain he knew more than he publicly revealed, and I wanted a chance to convince him that I too had a stake in the matter.

Almost a week passed before I broke the silence between me and Woody. It was Friday afternoon and we were mending fence along a ridge in the north pasture, the farm spread out below us. To the east, the lake looked like a blue sheet. The artillery guns rumbled, pounding the hot, humid air. It was so dense it was hard to breathe. Our gloves

were wet with the sweat that trickled down our arms, our moods as prickly as the barbwire we grappled with.

"Fuck this shit," he muttered after a strand of wire whipped across his arm, laying open a long but shallow cut. He threw down the wire cutter and sat in the grass, reaching for the jug. He took a long drink, then poured water on his face. "Wish I had a cigarette."

I sat down beside him, took a drink, and gazed at the lake. After a while I said, "It's Friday. What do we do tonight?"

"Hell if I know."

"Woody, let's go see the sheriff."

He looked at me. "What for?"

"You know what for. We've been thinking the same thing all week, we just haven't said anything. Now it's time."

"Time for what?"

"We've got to find out what happened," I said. "We can't just sit around doing nothing."

He picked up the wire cutter and slapped it against his palm like a nightstick. "You know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking we need to be ready the next time we go to the cove. You heard what Peterson said. We could've walked right into it, got a pool cue rammed up our asses."

"So what do we do?"

"Arm ourselves. That wrench we got under the seat won't cut it. It's stupid. We need switchblades, better

yet a gun."

"Shit, we can't buy a gun, we're not old enough."

"We can get anything we want. It might take time, but we'll get it. We've got to."

"How?"

"I know a pawn shop in town, I went there once with Bill. We can't get a gun, but switchblades for sure. We can go there tonight."

"What about the sheriff?"

"Fuck the sheriff. You think he'd tell us anything? We're on our own, man. It's what I've been thinking all week. We've only got ourselves."

"I don't know, Woody, it could get us into more trouble."

"Hey, man, I'll take it if it means the difference between living or getting dumped in the mud with a cue shoved up my ass."

Listening to him, I sensed the irrationality that must have been growing in him all week. I wanted nothing to do with his plan, with the fear and anger eating inside him. What in the world was I supposed to do with a knife or a gun? It was unthinkable. And yet I shared his emotion, realized that unless we took action of some kind I wouldn't feel right returning to the cove. It was as if I'd spent my life learning a set of standards, only to be told they meant absolutely nothing, the rules had

changed. And so I agreed to his plan.

At supper, when we told Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy we wanted to see a movie, they were relieved, as if we'd made a constructive decision.

"That's fine," Aunt Margaret said, smiling. "What movies are playing in Chapman and Abilene?"

"We're going to Junction City," Woody said.

"I don't see why you can't go to Chapman or Abilene," she replied. "You'll probably see your friends there."

"We're going to Junction," he repeated. "We want to see **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.**"

"It's got Paul Newman," I said in support of Woody. "We can't miss a Paul Newman movie."

"Well, I guess it's better than the cove," she said. It was an indication of her irrational dislike of the cove, because Junction City was notorious for its crime.

"If that's where you're going, be home early," Uncle Roy told us.

"After the movie and we get something to eat," Woody promised.

"Would you like to go, Cheryl?" Aunt Margaret asked. My heart sank.

"No, she doesn't want to go," said Woody.

Cheryl glared at him and said, "Even if I did, I sure wouldn't go with you."

That ended the matter; we left for town.

We stopped along the highway and got the cooler we'd hidden in the culvert. The beer was warm but we drank a can anyway, priming ourselves for the evening. The air was still humid, and in the west, thunderclouds gathered like a bruise along the horizon.

We drove through the countryside and passed the south side of the lake, the water stretching north as far as we could see, following the route the river once took. We dipped down a hill to the bottom of the lake, heard the faint roar of water bursting into the spillway, and drove along the tree-lined river.

The landscape changed as we approached the north edge of town, passing a sand plant, automotive repair shops, and a mobile home factory. A gray pallor hung over the lots, the air thick with the smells of diesel and asphalt. Turning east onto 18th Street, we drove a few blocks until we came to the stoplight at Washington. To the north lay the bridge to Fort Riley, to the south the business district.

We drove south, cruising through the bleakest part of town, five blocks of bars, filling stations, pawn shops, liquor stores, used car lots, and a row of cottages called the Stardust Motel. Children, mostly black, played along side streets, darting across dirt yards and broken sidewalks. There was a uniform ugliness to everything, a tension swelling the air. Cars sat rumbling at stoplights, rock'n'

roll blasting from radios. GI's lingered on the sidewalks and sat on car hoods, while prostitutes and pimps paraded across intersections and beckoned to drivers.

I'd witnessed similar scenes in Kansas City, but now, in every face, I saw the eyes of a murderer. The GI in the Camaro next to us, his gaze fixed straight ahead as if upon some disturbing vision--was he the one? The GI who crossed in front of us, grinning as he slapped the hood--was it a warning or a sign of brotherhood? The pimp slouching at the taxi stand, the red-headed prostitute strolling from the motel--even they seemed possible, sneaking through the woods in their gaudy clothes and jewelry and reeking perfume. And in the bars, though I couldn't see them, I imagined pool hustlers holding their cues like swords, waiting for someone to make a mistake.

Even as we sat in the darkened movie theater, watching Butch and Sundance run for nowhere, I imagined the murderer close by, thought I heard him laugh and cheer just as I did. It disturbed me to think he too could sympathize with the outlaws, that his emotions could approximate my own.

After the movie we stood beneath the marquee, watching the stream of headlights. Tires screeched in the distance, and across the street two prostitutes called out to a passing car. The door to the Playboy Lounge swung open and three GI's stumbled out, doubled over with laughter.

Thunder rumbled through the sky. The air smelled of rain, reminding me of the country, of pastures and ponds and hills. I thought of Butch and Sundance and the thrill of jumping into a river and being swept helter-skelter through the water.

"What a cool ending," Woody said. "They didn't show them die. You knew they were going to get killed, but they didn't show it. They came out shooting and--" he snapped his fingers, "everything froze. What an ending."

"It was great," I agreed.

We lingered, reluctant to let go of the movie, until he said, "The pawn shop's across the street two blocks down. You ready?"

"I guess so."

I felt raindrops as we hurried down the street. People began moving toward cars and doorways. Here and there, a voice cursed the rain.

When we reached the shop he said, "Let me do the talking."

We went inside and the tinkling bell brought the proprietor out from the back room. He was short and fat, with faded tattoos and a burr haircut, and thick-lensed glasses giving his face a myopic look. I watched him nervously.

"We want to look at your blades," Woody said boldly.

"Over here." He waddled behind a showcase and slid

open the rear panel. "Any special kind?"

"Switches."

He set two trays on top of the showcase. "All lengths," he said, as if he might be selling us jeans. "Three to seven inches with assorted handles."

"Stilettos?" Woody asked.

"Them too."

We gazed at the knives, blades unsheathed for display, clean and shining and wicked in the light. The handles were of various types, some wrapped in leather, others boned, a few cast in designs. One was shaped in the profile of a naked woman.

"Pimp knife," Woody said, grinning at me. "How'd you like to wrap your hand around that?"

The proprietor gave it to me, and I looked at it to be polite.

"Try it," Woody said. "Here, let me show you." He demonstrated how to hold it so the blade wouldn't slice my finger when it swung from the handle. "Hold it like that, and press the release."

"Get a good grip," the proprietor said, "the spring's tight."

Squeezing the handle, I pressed the release. I felt a jerk and saw a blur of metal, and just like that I was holding a knife with a three-inch blade. "Not bad," I said.

"Let me try a seven-incher," Woody said.

"Going on safari?" the proprietor said.

Woody laughed. "I just want to try it." Holding it out in front of him, he touched the release and the knife nearly jumped from his hand despite his tight grip. "Damn!" he said. "Let's see that stiletto."

The proprietor gave it to him and Woody said to me, "Watch how it works." I watched, and saw the blade shoot straight from the end of the handle. "See?" he said. "If you're real close to a guy you just shove the handle against him, say against his stomach--"

"Okay, okay," I muttered, "I get the idea." I watched him handle the knife, unnerved by his behavior.

I bought a knife with a three-inch blade for twenty dollars, and he bought the stiletto for twenty-five. It was all very simple: the proprietor rang up the prices and we gave him the money and pocketed the knives. It was so easy I was caught off guard. The proprietor didn't ask us our names, didn't ask how we intended to use the knives. He hardly looked at us. Despite my relief, I felt vaguely indignant at his lack of interest. For all he knew, we might have pulled the knives on him and robbed the store.

"No one better mess with us now," Woody said as we went outside.

I didn't reply. The weight of the knife in my back pocket made me feel more vulnerable than secure.

A light rain fell, and we ran for the parking lot.

Cutting through an alley, we came into the lot, only to stop and quickly back into the alley again. A fight had started among the cars, and we crouched in the shadows, watching.

A street light shone over the lot, illuminating a group of men. I counted five--GI's, I guessed--and it looked as if two were fighting against the other three. There was a fury to their battle I felt threatened by.

One of the men tried to run away, stumbling toward us, and two others grabbed him, kicked him down, dragged him over to a car, and slammed his head against the fender. It made a sound like a small explosion. Hearing it, I felt I'd been electrocuted. The sound of a bottle breaking followed, then shouts as one of the others tried to get away. He made it to the far end of the lot before he was tackled behind a car. Three men converged on him, but I couldn't see what they did. Moments later they ran down the street.

Except for the soft patter of the rain, the lot was momentarily silent. Then the man thrown against the car moaned, rolled over, and slowly got to his feet, leaning against the hood for support. He began to curse, then cry. Finally he stopped and looked around, as if he didn't know where he was. Suddenly he wailed, "Hey, man, where are ya?" He weaved his way through the cars like a drunk, repeatedly calling out, "Where are ya, man?" When he

found his friend at the other end of the lot, he cursed so violently it didn't sound like the same man.

"Let's make a run for it," Woody hissed.

"Wait till they're gone. We can't get out of here unless we drive by them."

"What're they gonna do to us in the car?" he said. "We'll run 'em down."

I realized then that he had his knife out, blade unsheathed. Mine was still in my pocket.

I told him to wait, but he scooted off toward the car, and there was nothing I could do but follow. As we darted between the cars, the man shouted, "I'm gonna kill those motherfuckers!"

We made it to the car and Woody raced the engine, peeling out of the parking space toward the exit. As we sped past the GI he screamed at us, his face a blur. His friend was sitting against the side of a car, but I couldn't tell how badly he was hurt.

Woody slammed the brakes and we skidded into the street, nearly hitting a car. Wrestling the wheel, he got us turned east, and we drove into the darkness away from Washington. The car we'd almost hit honked angrily and sped after us.

"Shit," Woody muttered.

He made an abrupt turn and shot the car south, running every stop sign we came to. The car still followed us,

honking. Once it tried to move alongside us, but we made a quick turn and it slowed again, staying close to our bumper.

Woody said, "Where's a fucking cop when you need one?"

"You think it's the guys we saw fighting?" I asked.

"Hell if I know. Just be ready."

I tried to plan what we'd do if we were forced to stop, but it was hard to think, do anything but wait. I remembered the knife in my pocket, but couldn't bring myself to take it out.

I didn't know where we were until we came to the main intersection in town, 6th and Washington. We had to stop for the light, and the car, a red Cutlass, pulled up beside us. Two black men were inside. The driver yelled something at us, motioning for me to roll down my window.

"Don't," Woody ordered, but I was too afraid not to.

The driver glared at us. "Why didn't you stop, man?"

"We're sorry," I blurted out.

"Sorry don't mean shit, man, you almost hit us back there."

"I said we're sorry."

"You fuckin' be sorry if you hit us back there."

"Some guys were after us," I said, my voice shaking.

"We be after you too, you hit our car."

"Assholes," Woody muttered.

"Shut up," I hissed.

"What's that, man?"

"Look, we're sorry," I said. "We just want to go home."

The driver laughed and said to his friend, "White boys scared." He took a drag on his cigarette, flicked it through my window, and turned onto Washington as the light changed.

The cigarette landed on the seat, and I flung it out the window.

"Bastards," Woody said, "let's get 'em." But we were in the wrong lane, and the traffic forced us west on 6th.

Arguing with Woody, I finally convinced him we should go home, and we fell silent as we followed the highway toward the lake. The rain picked up, slapping against the windshield, and Woody had to slow down despite his anger.

After a while he said, "There's a joint in the glove box."

"Wait till we get home."

He shook his head. "Boy, are you a pussy."

"I'd be a dead one if we went after those guys like you wanted."

"They just wanted to scare us, that's all. Saying we're sorry. Shit. Don't apologize for me."

"And you were never scared," I said, "not the whole time."

"Not with this," he said, and held up his knife.

"Shit, they would've cut your nuts off with it."

He looked at me. "We're supposed to be on the same side."

"I know."

We said nothing more.

I had every reason to be frightened, and yet I was angry at myself for it. It was easy now to think of all the things I might have done, to replay the danger and know exactly what action to take. I remembered Butch and Sundance and couldn't help thinking how differently they would have acted. The contrast stung. It wasn't as if my courage had deserted me, but that I had none to begin with, quaking in an alley, apologizing to men I didn't even know--men who laughed at me, knowing a coward when they saw one. I couldn't have jumped into the river as Butch and Sundance did, or confronted certain death as they, proud, defiant, guns blazing.

It was only ten-thirty when we got home, but everyone was in bed, the house quiet except for the creak of the stairs as we went up to our room. The rain continued to fall, thunder rumbling like the sound of the artillery.

I sat on my bed and watched Woody roll a joint. I said, "I guess you're right. I lost my cool."

He didn't look up at me, but nodded. "Yeah, I was pretty scared myself."

"You sure didn't show it," I said, "the way you handled the car."

"I was, and that's what gets me. I had my knife out, but it's like it wasn't enough, you know? Like I needed something more."

"A gun?"

"Maybe," he said, his eyes still on his work. "The thing about a knife is, you've got to fight close. And chances are the other guy's got one too. Hell, everybody's got a knife. And I don't know enough about fighting with one to feel good about it. But with a gun, well, you're in control. Total control, even at a distance."

"Unless the other guy has one too," I said.

"At least you've got an even chance. Better than no chance at all."

I couldn't argue with that. Even so, I said, "You know we're talking kind of crazy, a gun and all."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. Let's not talk about it anymore."

He finished the joint, and I lit a cone of incense and turned off the light. We raised the window and sat down in front of it, passing the joint back and forth. We tried to blow the smoke outside, but the damp breeze pushed it back into the room. We didn't care. The breeze felt good, and we held our hands out into the rain, cupping them to catch trickles of water. It felt good to be home again,

safe in our room, listening to the rain. Junction City seemed far away.

My mind wandered, then returned to the movie. I thought of Sundance's girlfriend, the schoolteacher, how beautiful and sweet she was. Maybe Butch and Sundance got their courage from her, a reason to fight against the odds. I wondered what it would be like to love such a woman, share her with Woody. I asked him what he thought.

"Sure I would," he said. "I'd share her with you. We're cousins, right?"

"Best friends."

"And best friends stick together."

"Always," I said.

The patter of the rain seemed an affirmation, and we listened to it on into the night.

CHAPTER THREE

Woody and I woke with colds the next morning, having forgotten to shut the window. We were confined to the house all weekend, and Aunt Margaret let us skip church, saying she wanted us well by the time the rain stopped and we started work again.

We spent much of the weekend locked in our room, practicing moves with our knives. We grew adept at pulling them from our jeans in a quick, smooth motion, flicking open the blades an instant after they left our pockets. When the weather cleared, we planned to practice fighting with them in the fields.

We didn't discuss Friday night's events, but I thought about them a great deal. I was impatient to confront the world, to prove myself in some way. I wanted to return to Junction City, go to the cove--do anything but sit in our room and think, held captive by the rain.

Sunday afternoon, while Woody was watching TV with Uncle Roy, Aunt Margaret came up to talk. I was sitting on my bed, balancing the point of my knife on my finger, when she knocked. I hid the knife under my pillow and told her to come in.

She entered, looking out of place among the posters

and beads, and sat down on Woody's bed. "Is your cold any better?" she asked.

"A little. I wish it'd stop raining."

"It's supposed to clear off this evening." I nodded, waiting for her to say what was on her mind. "You've been here two weeks now," she said. "It doesn't seem possible, how fast time flies."

"We've been pretty busy."

"And you're doing a good job," she added. "And now that it's been two weeks, I thought I should check on you, see how you're doing. We've been so busy, we really haven't had time to talk."

"I'm fine, Aunt Margaret."

"I'm glad. It must have been hard for you to adjust here, especially after what happened at the cove."

"That doesn't bother me," I lied. "I like it here, really. It's fun staying with Woody."

"He's glad you came. We all are. I just want to make sure you're happy. I know we don't have much in common. I'm sure our way of doing things is a lot different than what you're used to. Your mother and I, we chose different worlds to raise our children in. And Woody--" she looked around the room as if trying to make sense of her son's life. "Woody's almost left our world. Pretty soon he'll be in yours."

"You mean when he leaves the farm?"

"Yes. He'll go off to college and start a new life. Farming won't be any part of it, we realized that a long time ago."

"Is that wrong?"

"No, it's what happens when your children grow up."

We fell silent, and I listened to the rain, wondering what the point of the conversation was. I felt I was supposed to say something.

Finally she stood up and said, "Well, I guess that's all. I just wanted to make sure everything's all right."

I thanked her but she looked far from satisfied, as if she'd expected more from both of us. Perhaps she realized it was too late to establish a rapport, if one had ever been possible in the first place.

The sun shone the next morning, and by the middle of the week the temperature had climbed into the nineties. It was nearing the middle of June, and now that the fields were dry Woody and I planted milo. We also serviced the combine and trucks. The wheat was turning, and we guessed it would be ready to harvest in two weeks if there was no more rain.

We took our knives to the fields, and during breaks we devised tactics and practiced moves, feinting and jabbing at each other while Bingo whined uneasily as he watched from the shade. It was unnerving at first, hearing the click of the blades as we faced off and pointed them at

each other, eyes steady and intent; it was as if we'd lost all sense of ourselves, aware only of the knives and their purpose. But soon it became a game, a choreographed dance whose thrill blurred the consequences of a mis-timed thrust. We gained a sense of power and control, a courage I felt I'd lacked.

The game was stopped one afternoon when I accidentally cut Woody's forearm. He dropped his knife and held his arm, panting as he looked at me in disbelief. I stood frozen, shocked at what I'd done.

"Jesus, man, I'm sorry."

He picked up his knife and put it in his pocket. "It's okay, I wasn't paying enough attention. Serves me right."

"I should've been more careful," I said. "I lost control."

"It's not your fault. Really, it's a good thing it happened. In a real fight there won't be any holding back. We need to remember that."

We sat down in the grass and looked at his arm. The cut ran across his forearm but wasn't deep; he'd managed to pull his arm back enough to get just the very edge of the blade. Even so, there was a lot of blood. I felt sick.

"Pretty lucky," he said as he washed the cut with water from the jug. "I'll tell Mom I cut it on a fence."

I cut a strip from my shirt and tied it around his arm in a tourniquet. Then I took a drink of water and

splashed some on my face. Suddenly, the day was too hot, the sun too bright. There was too much sky and open space. I felt weightless, at risk of being swept away by the wind. Lightheaded, I took a deep breath and focused on a patch of grass before me.

"You okay, John?"

I managed a smile. "You're the one gets cut, and here I am ready to faint."

"It's bad, I know, but we need this. Need to be ready."

"I know, just don't talk about it."

I felt better in a few minutes, but there was something I still had to say. "Look, Woody, if you want you can cut me, to make it even. I can stand it."

He smiled. "It's okay, man, it was an accident. I trust you."

Saturday morning Bill Flannery called, inviting us to go skiing that afternoon. We told Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy of our plans, assuring them there wouldn't be any trouble since we'd be with Captain Flannery. Aunt Margaret gave us a look of warning, and told us to be home by midnight.

I was eager for an outing at the lake, but uncertain what to expect. It dawned on me that I was about to spend the day with a group of men who were involved in a war I opposed. I mentioned this to Woody as we drove to the cove, and asked if they'd fought in Vietnam.

"Yeah," he said, "they're regular army. You have to be if you want to be on Cap's crew."

"Crew?"

"That's what he calls it. He doesn't let just anybody on his boat."

"Why us?"

"We're friends of Bill. The other guys, they know Cap from Fort Riley. Some of them train under him in the armored division. He got them together to be his crew, and they come out here on weekends and go on patrol. That's what they call it. Basically it means they cruise around the lake looking for a good time. At least that's what we did the time I went out. It was too cold to ski and there wasn't much going on, but we drank a lot of beer and got high. It was a good time."

"Cap got high?" I said. "A captain in the army?"

"No, but he's cool. You can do just about whatever you want, as long as you remember he's in charge. Don't worry, it's not like being in the army or anything. Hell, that's the last thing it's like. Cap's real laid back, and the other guys're pretty cool. One thing, though, you might have to do something to show you belong on the crew, like chug a can of beer or try buying a case at the bait shop. It's no big deal, just a way to show you're not some pussy scared to try something, you know?"

"I'm not scared," I said.

He smiled, glancing at his arm. "Don't I know it. The ace with the blade."

We arrived at the marina and ran into Bill and a stocky Hispanic as they were carrying armloads of beer from the bait shop.

"Help us carry this shit," Bill said.

We took some of the six-packs and Woody said, "A sight for sore eyes."

"Long as you got the bucks to chip in," Bill said. He was a muscular kid with an arrogant manner I didn't like. I wondered what his father would be like.

"This your cousin?" Bill said. Before Woody could answer, he went on, "I'm Bill Flannery, and this is Candy Carrera. Come on, we're ready to shove off."

We carried the beer to the far end of the marina, where Cap's twenty-eight foot cabin cruiser was moored.

"That's Joe Kidd," Bill said, nodding at the tall, lanky GI standing in the prow. "Everyone calls him Holy Joe."

"Wait till you hear his scripture," Candy said, grinning. "Hey Joe, look at all this beer!"

Holy Joe looked at us with dark, sad eyes. He smiled. "God's gift," he said.

"Everything's God's gift," Candy explained to me.

"Yeah, man, God's gift," a black GI said. "Bring it over here."

"That's Connie Brown," Bill said as we carried the beer aboard. "The dude with him's Eddie Pace."

Eddie saw me staring at his guns, and he drew them from his holster and spun them on his fingers. "Tom Mix six-shooters," he said. "Gave to my grandpa by Tom Mix himself, when they was in silent westerns. When I ain't fightin' for my country, you'll find me ridin' the range."

"Yeah, man," said Connie, "they got lotsa ranges in L.A."

"These're my good luck charm," Eddie said. "They got me home safe."

"Pretty cool," I said, though my attention had turned to the man sitting in a swivel fishing chair mounted at the rear of the stern. It was Cap, his back to us as he gazed across the cove.

When Bill introduced me, he slowly swung around, smiled faintly, nodded once, and held out his hand. His handshake was firm yet oddly gentle, as if his strength extended no farther than his hand. "My pleasure, John," he said. His voice was smooth, almost a monotone. He let go of my hand but continued to gaze at me, or at least I thought he did; his mirror sunglasses gave the impression of blocking his view, reflecting images away from his eyes. It was hard to tell how old he was. He didn't seem more than thirty-five, though the dark hair his khaki cap left uncovered was flecked with gray.

"I hear you're joining my crew," he said.

"If it's okay with you."

"Wouldn't want it any other way, John." He eased out of the chair and put his arm across my shoulders. "Son, you look ready for a beer. Connie, get this man a beer. Woody too."

Connie tossed us ice-cold cans and Cap watched as I popped mine open. Remembering what Woody had told me, I took the initiative and chugged the can. Breathless, I tossed the empty can away.

Cap nodded his approval and said, "Let's move out, boys. Where's Hawk?"

"Hey, Hawk!" Candy shouted into the hatchway. "Let's go!"

Moments later, the huge GI who'd bought Woody and me beer came up into the stern. I looked at Woody, who was as surprised as I was. We stared at him, but he didn't recognize us.

Pulling off his shirt, Cap returned to his chair and swung around to the water. "Take her out, Hawk."

Hawk started the motor and Holy Joe cast off the lines.

"We're on patrol!" Bill shouted. "Kick ass!"

Cap paid no attention. It was hard to believe he was Bill's father. He was nothing like the military man I'd expected.

Going on patrol consisted of drinking beer while we cruised through the cove, as close to the shore as we dared in the big boat. The GI's bantered with each other and called out to the teenage girls we passed on the beach. Summer was in full swing, the campground crowded. Trailers and tents stood among the trees, and children played along the shore, trying to skip rocks across the water. Through a break in the trees we saw a line of traffic creeping toward the marina.

Despite our proximity to all that was happening on shore, I sensed a feeling of alienation among the GI's. It was as if they were separated from the land by more than water, drifting along the edge of humanity, members of a tribe banished from the circle. They felt it, yet pretended it made no difference. They assumed a superiority over all that they saw, yet never took their eyes from the shore. Even their jokes and insults didn't ring quite on key, the bravado forced. They knew something no one else did, something about themselves and what the world had done to them, but they had no one with whom to share it. Their only means of expression was to go on patrol, keeping their eyes peeled toward shore, waiting for something to happen.

We moved deeper into the cove, the crew still talking about the girls on the beach.

"You see that girl look at me when I yelled?" said Connie. "That little white girl scared a nigger gonna

stuff her box."

"You ain't got nothin' to stuff her **with,**" cracked Eddie.

"Shit, man, the only guns you got're in them holsters."

"Wish I had Hawk's eyes," Candy said.

"Why's that?" Woody asked.

"Eyesight like you can't believe. He take one look at those girls and tell you the color of their eyes."

Bill boasted, "I'd bang those girls so hard they'd be pickin' sand out for a week."

"That's why you on the boat, man," said Connie.

Candy said, "Hey Joe, Holy Joe! What you think of them girls?"

"One of God's gifts," he said from the prow.

"Everything's God's gift," Candy told me. "You break a virgin it's God's gift, you get the clap it's God's gift."

"Balance," said Holy Joe, looking at the sky. "Knowledge and innocence, pain and pleasure, lust and love, the good and the bad, it all evens out in the end, comes into balance. God's greatest gift of all." He continued to gaze at the sky, lost in the words he'd spoken.

"Is he serious?" I asked Candy.

"Who the fuck knows? He's good for laughs."

I looked at Cap, facing us in his chair, but his expression told me nothing. His sunglasses gave his face

a mask-like quality; it was impossible to tell what he saw, what he thought--if anything at all. For a moment I thought he might be asleep, but then he lit a cigarette.

We reached the base of the cove, the woods dark and cool. Branches hung out over the calm water, so close we could almost touch them.

"This is where they found him," Eddie said, "that guy Johnson."

"Yeah?" said Connie. "Stop the boat, Hawk. What you see?"

Hawk looked back at Cap, who nodded. He shut off the motor and we waited in silence as he squinted toward the trees. I wondered what they thought he might see. After a minute he shook his head. "Nothing." It was the first time he'd spoken, in that soft, distracted voice I remembered from the parking lot.

"Man, what a way to go," Candy said.

"I seen worse ways," said Connie.

"He had it comin'," Eddie said. We all looked at him.

"How you know that?" Connie asked sharply.

"You don't get reamed for nothin'."

"What about it, Joe?" Candy asked. "This one of God's gifts, a cue up the ass?"

"'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,'" quoted Holy Joe as he stared into the trees.

"Shit," Connie said, "you losin' your touch, man."

"All evens out in the end," said Joe.

Bill rolled his eyes. "What do you think, Dad?"

Cap smiled and said, "I think we should ski. Start her up, Hawk."

Everyone laughed, and the subject would have been forgotten if Woody hadn't suddenly said, "We found him."

Even Hawk paused, his hand on the starter.

"You shittin' us, man?" Connie said.

"No way. Two weeks ago tonight we found him, right over there." He pointed and everyone looked again. "Right inside the underbrush. See where the water seeps in? That's where we found him, half in the water and half in the mud." Enjoying the attention, he went on to describe our discovery in detail. Everyone listened intently.

"Were you scared?" Bill challenged me.

I couldn't deny it, no matter how brave I wanted to appear. It was impossible to lie about something that had affected me so deeply. I said, "Damn right I was. It was so dark in there you couldn't see your hand in front of you. We didn't know **what** we'd run into."

"I can dig that," said Eddie.

"Fuckin' A," agreed Candy. "Don't mess in no woods, too much like the jungle."

I noticed Hawk watching me. Our eyes met, and then he looked away.

"Let's get outta here," Connie said. "I had enough

of this shit."

Cap flicked his cigarette in the water. "I got a bunch of pussies on my crew?" He spoke without emotion, but he might as well have shouted. The question hung in the air.

"What you talkin' 'bout?" Connie said.

"Scared of them woods," Cap said. "What are you--pussies?"

"Hell no," Bill said.

"That's what I'm hearing, a lot of pussy talk."

"We ain't no pussies," Connie said.

"Prove it."

"How?"

"Aqua duel," Candy said, and to Connie, "I take you, man!"

Connie grinned. "Like shit!"

Cap smiled. "Break out the skis."

Before I understood what was happening, Candy and Connie had stripped to their swim trunks and jumped in the water. Holy Joe tossed them each a ski, and Eddie unwound the ski ropes. I asked Eddie what we were doing.

"Aqua duel," he said. "You try to knock the other guy off his ski."

When Candy and Connie were ready, Hawk pushed up on the throttle and the boat plunged forward. I was surprised at the speed we got out of the big boat, and Eddie told

me Cap outfitted it with a special motor. He said there was no one on the lake who could catch us.

As we sped through the cove, Candy and Connie took turns veering toward each other, ducking under the other's rope at the last second. Eddie told me they were showing off, the duel wouldn't begin until we'd left the cove and all the traffic.

We reached the main body of the lake and Hawk sounded the horn, signalling the duel to start. I held my breath as Candy and Connie skied straight toward each other, a collision imminent. But at the last moment they pulled away, keeping their balance in the churning wake. They veered out on either side of the wake, then tried it again, moving toward each other with such speed a collision seemed certain to knock them out. Again they pulled up short, and Connie almost lost his balance. Changing tactics, they stayed in the wake, skiing side by side, trying to knock the other over with their free arms. Unsuccessful, they separated, swinging wide of the wake, then sped back in. As they approached the center of the wake they dug in their skis and leaned away, throwing up a line of water across each other. Their skis bumped, they staggered, and Connie fell, smacking the water.

I cheered with the others on board, then dashed for the cooler. My hand trembled as I reached for a beer.

When Candy and Connie climbed aboard, Cap slapped

their rears like a coach whose team had driven the length of the field for the winning touchdown. It was the closest I'd seen him to emotion. "No pussies on **my** crew," he said among the shouts of approval. "No losers either. Who's next?"

As Eddie and Holy Joe dueled, Cap watched intently, leaning forward in his chair. His face had no expression, but his hands were balled into fists, his body tense. When Eddie and Joe collided, hitting the water with tremendous force, he smiled and slumped back in his chair.

Eddie and Joe were unhurt, and Bill and Candy dueled next. I asked Connie who would be unlucky enough to have to duel Hawk.

"Nobody crazy enough to duel Hawk, man," he said. "He just drives the boat."

"What about Cap? Who's he duel?"

"He don't have to duel nobody, 'less you crazy enough to ask. Nobody else will."

When Candy had defeated Bill, it was my and Woody's turn. I asked where the life belts were and Cap said with a smile, "You might find some at the bait shop."

Bill laughed, and I almost challenged him to a duel. Instead, I kept quiet and jumped in the water.

My father, a swimmer in college, had taught Woody and me to ski a few summers before, but he'd never prepared us for anything like this. To make it easier, we used two

skis, crouching in the water as we waited for Hawk to start. We looked at each other but didn't speak. I began to think of him less as my cousin, more as my opponent. I wanted to win and look good doing it.

The duel ended just moments after it started. Wasting no time, we skied slowly toward each other and reached out our arms. He grabbed my wrist and I tried to pull free, upsetting us.

The boat swung by and there were shouts of encouragement.

"You sure don't waste no time," Connie said, grinning. "Like Bill when he smell pussy!"

"Don't rush it," Candy advised us. "Take your time, get used to it."

We tried it again, staying in the wake, moving carefully toward and away from each other, trying an occasional grab as we fought to keep our balance. I felt awkward and foolish, and decided I'd had enough. I veered off to one side of the wake and Woody the other. We skied back toward each other, going faster than I'd expected. Even as I tried to slow down, I realized we were going to collide. Strategy was the last thing on my mind. There wasn't time to think. I never even thought to let go of the rope.

Just as we were about to hit, I crouched on the skis and hunched my shoulders. The collision happened so fast I hardly felt the impact. We slammed into each other and

plunged into the water. The next thing I knew, I was treading water, searching for him. He was right behind me, spitting water.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. You?"

"No sweat."

"I tried to slow down," he said.

"So did I. I saw you coming, I thought, 'Oh, shit.'"

He smiled. "Same here."

Relieved it was over, we waited for the boat to pick us up. We were cousins again.

Suddenly he said, "Hey, I just noticed. See where we are?" He pointed toward land, where an old gravel road swooped down a steep hill to the water. It was the road that had led to Alida, where my mother and aunt had gone to school, where the grain elevator once stood.

"We're right over it," he said. "Right where Alida used to be."

I looked down at the water, trying to imagine what, if anything, had been left to the darkness of the muddy bottom, frozen forever by the pressure of the water.

"Weird, huh?" said Woody. "Our moms going to school down there. This was the sky to them. They would've freaked out to know their own kids would be dueling in the sky."

I didn't like the idea of dueling above my mother's

past. I imagined her standing in the school yard in a sackcloth dress, gazing at the sky as she dreamed of a future that knew no Great Depression, one in which she could give her children everything they wanted. I felt I'd somehow betrayed her, and was glad to get back on the boat and speed away.

I should have been angry there were no life belts or jackets on the boat, angry I'd dueled in the first place. No one had forced me, but I felt compelled all the same. If I was to be a member of the crew I had to prove myself, at the risk of drowning. I should have realized how lucky Woody and I were, and seen Cap for the man he was.

Instead, I welcomed the handshake Cap gave me, basked in the praise from the crew. **One wicked crash. Balls, man, real balls. No pussies on this boat.** I accepted the beer and cigarettes they offered me, joined in their banter, sang to the music blasting from the radio. I felt free on the water, the wind in my face, the land far away. I felt perfect, intoxicated by more than beer. I was a member of the crew.

That evening we grilled steaks on a strip of sand along the eastern shore. We found a place deep enough to bring in the boat, and secured it to a tree. With Cap giving the orders, we set up the grill, brought out the T-bones and sauce, beans, and more beer. When the steaks were cooked and our plates full, we sat on the sand and Holy

Joe gave a prayer.

"We thank you for all things, Lord," he prayed, looking to the sky, which was streaked with the colors of the sun. "For the sun and the air, fire and water, the thickness of meat and lightness of bread, the bitterness of beer and sweetness of sauce, we thank you. Amen."

"And the sweetness of pussy," said Candy, and everyone laughed. Holy Joe only smiled at the sky.

When we finished eating we stretched out on the sand and smoked cigarettes. Hawk abruptly got up and walked along the shore, stopping to gaze across the water toward the setting sun. He looked magnificent, his tan, finely ridged body poised at the water's edge, as if he waited for something to set him in motion. Lightheaded from the beer, I felt inspired as I watched him, a lone figure standing watch over the waves; I felt drawn to his strength and silence. His sudden disappearance from the parking lot only added to the romantic aura surrounding him.

"That's one strange dude," Connie said as we watched him.

"No shit," said Eddie. "First time Joe brought him out here, I tell myself, 'Don't mess with him.'"

"What is it with him anyway?" Woody asked.

"He lost it in the jungle," Candy said.

Holy Joe shook his head. "He found the Devil in the jungle."

Connie sneered. "How you know that, man?"

"That's how he got his eyes. It was a blessing and a curse. The Devil came to him in the jungle and gave him the power to see what no one else can."

"And you was there, huh?"

"Yeah," Joe said, "I was. Hawk and two others got sent out on recon one night. He was the only one came back the next morning. He saw the Devil, you could see it in his eyes."

"So where's God's gift in all this?" Connie said.

"In the balance, the blessing and the curse. Even in the Devil's work we see God's gifts."

Connie laughed. "Tell that to my old lady back in East St. Louis, man. She run you outta town."

"Hey, Cap," I said, "what do you think?"

"I think he'd be a good man to have in a jam," he said.

"I believe that shit," said Candy, looking at Hawk. "Press his button and get out of the way."

"Fearless," Cap said. "That's the kind of soldier gets on my crew. Two tours in Nam, my crews were fearless. They ripped the shit out of the slopes. All this talk about the Devil don't mean squat to me."

"I hear you, man," said Connie.

Holy Joe said nothing.

We fell silent, watching Hawk, until Candy said, "Listen. You hear music?"

We heard it, the faint, steady beat of rock'n'roll. It came from farther inland, somewhere around the bend in the shore.

"Dig it," said Connie, "that's Jimi playin'."

"Sounds like a party," said Candy.

"There's a cove back there," Cap said. "Let's check it out."

Hawk took the wheel and we shoved off. Following Cap's instructions, he guided the boat around the bend and into the cove. It was almost as big as Crystal Cove, but there was no marina or campground, only trees and dense underbrush. At the far end, the gray, broken trunks of trees jutted out of the water. We stayed along the north shore, watching the trees, above which rose a smooth, green hill. The twilight was growing, but it was still light enough to see clearly.

We found the party halfway into the cove. There was a break in the trees and we saw a clearing which led to the water. Cars rimmed the upper half of the clearing, and a bonfire blazed in the center. The music was loud, mingled with the voices of at least twenty people, a few of whom swam just off the shore. We passed the swimmers closely enough to get a good look, and they stopped what they were doing and watched us go by. They were about the age of the GI's, the men with long hair and sideburns, the girls fresh and pretty with their faces wet and hair

sleeked back.

"She-it," said Connie as we drove slowly by. "I know college pussy when I smell it."

"God's gift," Candy agreed. "Hey, Hawk, watcha see, man?"

"Ain't our kind," he said tonelessly, his eyes fixed ahead.

"How's that?"

"Ain't our kind," he repeated, shaking his head.

"They're college," Connie said. "Flower children, man. Love and peace and all that shit."

"I'll take a piece of those chicks," said Bill.

Connie grinned. "Reel it in, man, you hangin' in the water."

"What you think, Cap?" asked Eddie.

"I think," he said from his chair, "we ought to say hello. Turn her around, Hawk. Take her in close and turn off the motor."

When we got to the clearing the swimmers had left the water, watching us uncertainly from shore. Farther up the slope the music stopped, all eyes on us. A few of the men drifted down to the shore, including a shaggy-haired one who looked in charge.

I expected Cap to do the talking, but he was content to sit and watch.

"Hey, man, that's some good sound," said Connie.

"Turn it back on."

No one on shore moved.

"Whose party?" Candy asked.

"Mine," the shaggy-haired man said. He stepped forward and the others gathered behind him.

"What's your name, man?" Candy asked.

"Dennis."

"Invite us to your party, Dennis."

"I'm sorry, it's a private party." His politeness was both funny and irritating.

"Hey, Dennis, don't be a menace," said Eddie. Bill laughed.

"This ain't private land," Candy challenged.

"No, but it's our party."

"Where you all from? I ain't seen you around town."

"We're home for the summer."

Connie grinned. "I knew it, man. Nothin' smell like college pussy."

There was a murmur behind Dennis.

"What's that?" Candy said sharply.

A girl stepped forward, one who'd been in the water. She was tall and slender, a towel wrapped around her shoulders. Her eyes were big, dark as her hair, and a drop of water hung from her pale chin. Despite the heat she looked cold, almost shivering in her towel. Watching her, I felt my stomach go hollow.

"We don't want you here," she said, gazing bravely at each of us as if to make the words sink in. When she came to me I looked down at my feet. "Please leave us alone," she said.

"What you got against us?" asked Candy, smiling at her.

"You're fuckin' baby killers, that's what!" a bearded man shouted brutally. "Get the hell out of here!"

Everyone on the boat tensed. Suddenly Eddie stepped forward and in one smooth motion had his guns from his holster and spinning on his fingers. They came to a stop with a soft slap of palms against pearl handles. "Your ass is grass," he told the bearded man flatly.

"Look at the cowboy," another man sneered. "The grunt thinks he's John Wayne."

Eddie smiled. "Watch me light a fire under you."

"Stop it!" the pretty girl screamed. "Just stop it, all of you!"

Bill stepped forward, holding his crotch. "I can't stop when I think of you, babe."

"You little shit," Dennis said. He took two steps into the water before he was pulled back.

"Fuck you!" Bill shouted. He leaned over the side of the boat, giving Dennis the finger. Then he lost his balance and fell in.

Dennis broke away from his friends and splashed

toward Bill. The pretty girl and the bearded man came in after him. On board there was a mad scramble. Connie jumped over the side and Eddie dropped his holster and jumped in too. I saw Candy disappear below deck, but there was too much confusion for me to check the movements of Holy Joe, Hawk, and Cap.

"Your knife, man, your knife!" Woody yelled at me.

I looked at him blankly, then realized he was holding his stiletto. We'd changed back into our jeans, and I'd forgotten about the switchblade in my back pocket. I fumbled for it, at the same time trying to keep Woody from jumping over the side. It was all happening too fast; I needed more time to think, plan a course of action.

Then I saw a hand grab Woody's arm and toss him back into the stern as if he were filled with straw. Sprawled on the floor, he looked up in surprise. It was Hawk, come down from the wheel.

"Stay in the boat," he ordered Woody, and then to me, "get the ladder." The big boat rocked as he jumped into the water.

I hung the ladder over the side, watching as Hawk strode into the free-for-all. There were a dozen people in the water, with more running down from the bonfire. The fight was a confused jumble of bodies and swinging arms--until Hawk stepped in. Then the mass quickly dispersed. Hawk yanked Connie back against the side of the

boat, then punched the bearded man in the chest so hard he sank into the water, gasping. Dennis swung at him, grazing his temple, only to have Hawk spin him around and push him on the back with such force his head snapped back as he collapsed into the water. Seeing what was happening, the others backed off, including Eddie, who stumbled toward the boat. Only Bill was left, bleeding and sputtering blindly. Hawk grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the ladder.

Leaning over the side, I was so intent on the fight I didn't realize the pretty girl was standing right below me. Her eyes were frightened, water clinging to her cheeks like tears.

"Why are you doing this?" she screamed at me. "We haven't done anything to you!"

I was too stunned to speak. She thought I was one of them, one of the GI's. I tried to explain I wasn't, but couldn't find my voice. Then it was too late. Hawk brushed her aside and nearly threw Bill up the ladder.

Suddenly, Candy appeared with a revolver in his hand. Standing at the side of the boat, he held the barrel pointed at the sky and said to the people on shore, "You want a fight, you got one."

No one moved, all eyes on the gun.

"It's over," Hawk said softly, helping Connie into the boat.

"I tell you when it's over!" Candy looked at the pretty girl still standing in the water. "Get in the boat, bitch." She didn't move, frozen like a statue in the half light. "I said get in the boat!"

"It's over," Hawk said. He started up the ladder.

"Take one more step I shoot you off," Candy threatened, pointing the gun.

Hawk paused, then climbed another rung.

"I'm warnin' you, man."

Hawk seemed not to care. He climbed the last three rungs and jumped into the stern. He stared at Candy, the rest of us watching. Then, as if nothing had happened, he went to the wheel and looked back at Cap, who gave the nod. It dawned on me that Cap never left his chair.

Hawk started the motor and I hauled in the ladder. The girl still watched us, nudged by the waves from our wake as we sped off. I looked back at her, the wind whipping at my face. Finally I turned away.

The trip back to the marina began quietly, awkwardly. After a while Candy and Connie went into the cabin. Eddie and Bill followed, and Woody said to me, "Candy's got some grass."

Telling him I'd be there in a minute, I gazed at the water lit by the searchlight Hawk had turned on. Up in the prow Holy Joe stood motionless, staring ahead as if divining the way home. In the stern Cap sat in the

shadows, looking back across the lake.

He must have sensed I was watching him, for he said, "Have a beer, John. Get me one too."

I gave him a can but didn't take one for myself. He'd finally removed his sunglasses, but it was too dark for me to see his face clearly.

"Saw you looking at that girl," he said. "Don't blame you a bit. A girl worth looking at."

"She was pretty scared. Pretty brave, too."

"Uh-huh."

"Somebody could've gotten hurt," I said. I tried to keep my voice neutral.

"I would've said something if I thought we couldn't handle it." He took a drink of beer. "The boys can handle themselves. They're damn good men. If they weren't, I wouldn't have them on my boat."

He shook a cigarette loose from his pack and offered it to me. I leaned close to him as I lit it from the flame he held cupped in his hands. The gesture seemed calculated on his part, to draw me into the sphere of his influence. My cigarette lit, I stepped away.

"**You** wouldn't be on this boat if I didn't think you were a good man," he said. I didn't reply. He said, "I give my boys what they want. They've earned it. Know what I mean, John?"

I thought of Hawk standing along the shore, and of

what Holy Joe had said about him seeing the Devil. I remembered the hatred in the eyes of the college students. I thought of our patrol through Crystal Cove and the GI's' wistful looks as they gazed along the indifferent shore. I wondered what I had done to earn a place among them, and to stir such fear and anger in the girl.

Moored at the marina, we drank beer and smoked more of Candy's marijuana. We gathered in the stern, the moon our light, and I watched the tip of orange ember float through the darkness as the joint passed around. After one hit I felt lighter than air. It was hard to believe the others could smoke so much.

Only Cap and Hawk didn't smoke. Cap sat in his chair, watching and listening; at times I thought I could see him smile. He didn't care that his son was stoned. Hawk stayed at the wheel, gazing at the moonlit water. He reminded me of a lonely sentinel, and I felt grateful for his watch. I wanted to thank him for all he'd done, tell him I admired his courage, the way he'd stopped the fight and stood up to Candy without regard for his own safety. But he was unapproachable, his duty or curse to remain at a distance, seeing what no one else could see.

The more we smoked and drank, the more our camaraderie grew, the tension blown away by the wind during our trip across the lake. Even Candy held no grudge against Hawk. The incident became a cause for boasts, revised to suit

our desires, to become what our imaginations convinced us was the truth. Bill, with an ugly cut above his eye, claimed to have knocked out Dennis, while Candy said his threats to Hawk had been a test, which the big GI passed with flying colors. Eddie spoke of the fear in the hippies' eyes when he drew his guns.

Through it all Cap listened, waiting for his moment. When everyone grew silent he said, "You all did good. You kept the boat proud."

We stared at him, stoned and ready to believe.

He swung his chair around to face the lake and motioned with his arm. "Out there," he said quietly. "Look at it. It's all yours. Whatever you want, you own it." He turned to us again, but I couldn't see his face; it was as if the darkness had absorbed it. He said, "Nobody pushes you around, nobody owns you. You're my crew and you take what you want. You stay my crew and you own this lake. Hear me?"

We heard him. Cap had spoken and we believed, because our hearts could not stand otherwise.

CHAPTER FOUR

I woke suddenly the next morning, not sure where I was. Rubbing my eyes, I looked around and realized I was back in our room, in bed. Woody was still asleep, sprawled across his bed, wheezing like an old man. Between our beds the fan blew a cool breeze across the sheets. A weak, gray light shone through the windows, and birds fussed in the branches. In the kitchen, a skillet rattled.

Sitting up took all my effort. My head didn't hurt, but the marijuana left me drained of energy. When I coughed, my lungs seemed to crackle. I wondered how we'd gotten home, what happened during the time I couldn't account for. Easing down on the bed, I tried not to think of it, only of going back to sleep.

There was a sharp knock on the door, followed by Aunt Margaret's no-nonsense voice, as clear and penetrating as if she stood over our beds. "Time to get up," she said. "We leave for church in an hour."

Woody rolled over with a groan and sat up. "God, I feel like shit."

"God's gift," I said, remembering. "Balance, the high and the low."

"This is the lowest," he said.

"How'd we get home?"

"Cap drove us. Hawk took him back in his truck. You don't remember?"

"All I remember's sitting in the boat."

He smiled weakly. "You were really out of it. When we got home you kept mumbling something about that girl and how you wanted to bring her here to show her who you really were. What was that all about?"

"Hell if I know," I lied. "Just stoned, I guess."

"Well, I wasn't stoned enough to forget about checking on a gun. I talked to Candy and he said he'd see what he could do."

"Why do we need a gun?"

"You forget everything that's happened?"

"We don't need a gun, Woody."

"Scared?"

I was too tired to argue. Too much had happened the day before and I hadn't had time to recover.

I stayed in bed while Woody took his turn in the bathroom, imagining what it would have been like if we'd had a gun on the boat and one of us had aimed it at the girl, like Candy. In a way it would have made no difference; she couldn't have feared or hated us any more than when she screamed at me. It was hard to believe I'd wanted to bring her to this room. The symbols of peace and love were meaningless, a joke. I wondered who I really was.

Woody and I were late getting dressed for church, so the others went without us. We left the house just minutes before Sunday school classes were to start, and as we sped down the highway he said, "I'd better warn you about Sheila Lutz, our teacher. Just keep quiet and you'll be okay."

"What's the deal?"

"She nuts, that's what." He shook his head. "I don't know whether to hate her or feel sorry for her. She was okay till Dan Lutz got her pregnant, on prom night in the back of his truck. They got married but she had a miscarriage, and that's when she got religion big-time. Some couple. A redneck and a Jesus freak. Anyway, she was given our class to teach because she's supposedly in touch with today's youth. What a joke. One thing's for sure, she takes her job seriously. She's hardly twenty-five and she thinks we're all her children and she's got to get us into heaven."

"Great," I said, "I have something to look forward to."

The Alida Methodist Church stood on a rise a half mile off the highway, surrounded by wheat fields. It was one of the oddest churches I'd ever seen, a Gothic-like structure set in the serene countryside. It had an ugly brown stucco finish, high stained-glass windows, a steep roof, and a square parapet set high above the front door.

Together with the parsonage, it stood on a rectangular plot of ground lined by monstrous oaks and elms. At a break in the trees, the driveway led into a gravel parking lot which curled around the west side of the church to the cemetery behind, where many of my ancestors were buried. Beyond it, the wheat fields spread out to the woods which hid Crystal Cove.

Sunday school classes had already started, so we went directly to the minister's study, where the high school class was held. The room was small and hot, and lined with bookshelves and a map of the Biblical world. The windows were open to let in the breeze, and a fan hummed on a corner of the desk. The class sat in folding chairs along the walls, forming a half circle which faced Sheila Lutz, who sat behind the desk in a high-back chair which made her appear smaller than she actually was. Whatever I'd expected, it wasn't the demure woman I saw, fair-skinned with wide, serious brown eyes and soft brown hair. She might have been beautiful if not for her self-conscious manner; she sat behind the desk as if using it for protection.

"Good morning," she said with more formality than friendliness. "Woody, I understand you have a guest for the summer."

"Yeah, this is my cousin John Swenson," he said to no one in particular. "He's from Kansas City. He's

helping us out till Dad gets his cast off."

"Yes, we're all praying for your father to get well." She spoke slowly, choosing her words with care. She looked at me and said, "It's nice to meet you, John, and I know we're all looking forward to having you in our class this summer. I'm Sheila Lutz. Please call me Sheila, we're very informal here. Let's go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. Everyone's here except your cousin Cheryl, who's working in the nursery this morning."

There were four boys and four girls, the boys in shirt sleeves and open collars, the girls in light summer dresses. They looked as shy as I felt, and I wondered what they thought of their teacher, if they felt comfortable calling her by her first name. I could think of her only as Mrs. Lutz.

When the introductions were finished she said, "That's fine." She looked at us intently, with special hopes for us both individually and collectively, then turned her gaze to the windows and said in her measured voice, "We were talking about salvation. I think this subject is especially relevant now that Woody and John are here. We've all heard about the terrible experience they had not long ago, and I think it should give us pause to consider our lives and how we conduct them." She turned to me and Woody. "Woody, John, perhaps you could begin by telling us what that experience means to you."

I could sense Woody's anger. He smiled and said, "It means, don't go in the woods after dark."

Everyone sat in stunned silence, though I saw a couple of the boys trying not to smile. Mrs. Lutz looked as if he had reached across the desk and slapped her.

After a long minute she asked softly, "Is this something to joke about?"

"No," he said. "It's something we don't want to talk about."

"Would you like to discuss it, John?"

I shook my head.

She looked toward the windows again and said, "I'm sorry. I should have realized how difficult it must be for you to talk about it."

"It's not difficult," said Woody, "it's just there's not much to say. The guy was killed and we found him."

She turned to us again, her look imploring. "But doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It means," I spoke up, "anything can happen at any time."

"Go on, John," she encouraged me, leaning forward in her chair.

"You've got to be prepared, know who to trust."

"And how do you do that?"

She was leading me, but I refused to give her the answer she wanted. On the other hand, I could hardly tell

her about my and Woody's way of preparing ourselves. I said, "I don't know."

"Don't you prepare yourself by placing your trust in God?"

"How will that help?"

"He'll watch over you, John. All you have to do is ask Him."

"He never watched over that GI."

I expected her to get angry, but she only leaned back in her chair, a look of regret saddening her face. "Perhaps that man never asked for God's help."

"What if he did ask? It still didn't save him. Just because you ask for help doesn't mean you're going to get it." I was beginning to regret saying anything at all. It troubled me to talk about God, and I felt I'd been forced into a position I wasn't sure I agreed with.

"Yes," she said, "asking God for help doesn't always mean you'll receive it." There was a slight change in her tone, and her eyes had a distant look. I remembered what Woody told me about her pregnancy and miscarriage. She said, "But we have to put our faith in Him no matter what. And that's the point I want to make this morning. If we put our faith in God, accept Him as our savior and live by His commandments, we'll be given salvation. And when we sin, we ask Him for forgiveness and if we're sincere, He'll forgive us. We **have** to believe that."

She spoke with a quiet intensity, leaning forward as if being pulled by the spell of her message. As she looked around the room, her eyes pleaded for us to believe. She said to me, "Do you understand, John?"

"Yes," I said, wanting to be done with it.

"Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your savior?" she asked me.

My face began to burn. Suddenly the room was too hot and oppressive. I glanced at the others and saw they were embarrassed for me, their eyes focused on the floor. I felt sorry for them and all they had to endure with this woman.

"Have you, John?" Mrs. Lutz asked.

"That's none of your business," I said.

"It **is** my business," she said with sudden passion. "I'm responsible for you, **all** of you."

"Not for me you aren't," I said.

"Me either," said Woody.

"I **am**. I was given this class, asked to set an example."

Somewhere a bell rang, and the class gave a collective sigh of relief.

"Stop," Mrs. Lutz commanded. "Everyone sit down. We're not finished." When we were seated she said, "I want you to take hands, right now." I held Woody's hand and the hand of the girl who sat to my right. Her palm was

perspiring--or perhaps it was mine. "We're going to pray," Mrs. Lutz went on, "and I want you to listen hard to what I say."

We bowed our heads and waited, but nothing happened. I heard voices in the lobby, and the urgent footsteps of children as they tromped up the stairs from their classes in the basement. Still Mrs. Lutz didn't speak, and the girl next to me began to squirm.

Risking a peek at Mrs. Lutz, I saw she was standing now, her delicate hands up to her chin, clasped in prayer. Her eyes were closed so tightly she seemed to grimace. She looked like a frightened little girl praying for forgiveness.

"Dear God," she began in a whisper, "forgive and protect us. Help us to see Your ways and do Your work. Help me be a better wife and teacher, help the students of this class find a direction to happiness and good works. Help us keep faith and be thankful for Your love, always and forever. We ask these things in Your name, dear Lord, amen."

The prayer finished, everyone crowded to the door. Looking back, I saw Mrs. Lutz had sat down again, resting her head against the high back of the chair as she gazed out the windows. I wondered if there was something special she could see; when I looked I saw only the trees and the wheat fields beyond.

There was a ten-minute break between classes and the worship service, and Woody and I went out to the front lawn for air. It was almost eleven and the sun bore down, a dry wind rattling through the trees and stirring the faded bluegrass. Across the road, the wheat whispered in the heat.

"I told you she was nuts," Woody said. He sounded apologetic.

"Let's forget it," I said, but it wasn't that easy to shrug off my anger. Mrs. Lutz had no right to speak of James Johnson as if she understood the meaning of his death; she hadn't been there, hadn't seen what Woody and I had. The matter of faith wasn't as simple as she thought, and I wished I'd explained that better to her. And yet, in spite of it all, I felt a mixture of awe and pity for her. I'd never known anyone whose faith was so strong, who struggled so hard to keep it and instill it in others.

In the sanctuary, Woody and I sat in the back row. Mrs. Lutz and her husband sat across the aisle two rows in front of us. I half expected her to give me a look warning me to repent, but her gaze was held by a stained-glass window showing Christ knocking on someone's door. His face was solemn, almost sad, as if He were uncertain He'd be invited in. I looked away, wondering what business I had here among this congregation of farmers, much less

in a house of God. Only the rumble of artillery at Fort Riley kept me from feeling completely lost.

Not long after the service started, two girls entered the sanctuary and quietly sat down across the aisle from Woody and me. They wore jeans and wrinkled blouses, their hair brushed haphazardly, and were clearly not members of the congregation; they looked as if they'd been camping, perhaps at Crystal Cove. I glanced at Woody and he raised his eyebrows.

The blonde was in her early twenties, tall and full-breasted, with the hardiness of a peasant girl, her face full and pretty. Eyes averted to the floor, she looked sad, very deep in thought. In contrast, the other girl reminded me of the prostitutes I'd seen in Junction City, whose prettiness had deteriorated into cheapness. Thin and wiry with dark hair tumbling to her shoulders, she chomped on a piece of gum and glanced about the room with bright, bitter eyes. Despite her hardness, she didn't look much older than Woody and I.

The sermon that morning had something to do with the upcoming wheat harvest, but I hardly listened. Instead I fantasized about the blonde, imagining myself meeting her at Crystal Cove and being invited to spend the day with her. I imagined her lying on the beach as I rubbed suntan lotion across her back, while Cap and his crew watched from the boat in envy. I saw us standing along the shore,

gazing across the water as she revealed why she was so sad, some tragic secret I shouldered as my own, assuring her of my help, thinking of the rewards that followed . . .

I didn't realize I was staring at her until she smiled at me. I quickly looked away, embarrassed. Her smile was an act of self-assertion, a sign of character, and it told me I had no right to such thoughts about her.

When everyone rose for the benediction, the girls left. Woody and I went outside in time to see a maroon Mustang leave the parking lot and speed down the road, raising a cloud of dust.

"Think they'll be back?" I asked.

"I hope so," he said. "They definitely make church worth it."

"God's gift."

He smiled. "I'm a believer. Lutzy would be so proud."

We left it at that, glad to leave church on a cheerful note.

We ate Sunday dinner at our grandparents' house. I was worried that Mrs. Lutz might have spoken to Aunt Margaret about our argument, but if she had, my aunt said nothing about it, only asked me if I'd enjoyed the class. I told her it was interesting.

After dinner Woody and I helped Uncle Roy into the living room, where we listened to the Royals game with my grandfather. The door to the veranda was open and Woody

lay in front of it to catch the breeze, his eyes growing heavy until he fell asleep. By the third inning, Uncle Roy was asleep too.

The lake seemed far away as my grandfather and I sat in our rocking chairs listening to the game, while in the parlor Cheryl practiced the piano and my aunt and grandmother talked. It was hard to believe, the things I'd done the day before, and my grandfather's presence made me feel guilty. He was a man who had known hardship all his life, but never lost his faith in God. We were of the same blood. He was my past; I was his future. If I loved and respected him, how could I go to church and question God's ways? How could I sit here, rocking in the same slow, steady rhythm as he, knowing he believed I was good, when the day before I behaved in a manner he would have found disgraceful, incomprehensible?

Losing interest in the game, I went out to the veranda, greeted by the scent of my grandmother's flowers. The farmyard was still, the trees casting dappled shadows across the faded red barn. A bluejay perched on the old windmill, then swooped down to the stone water tank, where goldfish flashed in the clear water. It was hard to believe there was any world but this one, where time seemed to have stopped, unwilling to keep up with the passing years.

My mother said she wanted me to know both worlds,

the country as well as the city. And I did. My first week on the farm, standing on the hayrack in the rolling fields, I had become a part of this world. I worked the land, watched it change. I learned the rules, followed the traditions, felt the satisfaction of a completed job--only to find it was not enough. I could not stay within this world, and neither could Woody. Given a world of light, we sought the darkness, moving back and forth until the light faded to an uncertain gray.

CHAPTER FIVE

One evening the following week, Woody and I returned to the clearing where we'd found the body of James Johnson. Except for a roadblock placed at the edge of the woods, forcing us to walk the rest of the way, it looked as if nothing had happened. The clearing was empty, the smell gone from the woods. Sunlight filtered through the branches, lighting our way. The mud along the shore revealed no footprints or the outline of the body. Beyond the underbrush, the water lay smooth and deep-blue in the shadows, rippled once by a fish. Meadowlarks sang in the branches. The land had healed, leaving no scar, causing us to wonder if we looked in the right place.

We felt cheated as we walked back to the car. We had heeded the danger this place symbolized, let it dictate our lives, only to find upon our return that the danger was gone. Suddenly, the road we'd started down had no destination, and it was impossible to turn back. The starting point had vanished, leaving us stranded.

We relied upon Cap and his crew for a direction. We called Bill, expecting to go on another patrol on Saturday, but he told us his plans were uncertain. Cap was about to go on maneuvers at Fort Riley, and Bill didn't know if

we'd get to use the boat. He told us to meet him at the beach, that Candy and Hawk would probably come along.

Woody and I went there early Saturday afternoon. We spotted three girls our age and spread our towels not far from them, making sure they had a clear view of us. We tried to appear indifferent and so did they, though occasionally we caught each other looking.

"If we're lucky," said Woody, "Bill'll have a wreck and never get here."

"We need one more guy," I said, "to make it even."

"Not Bill, he'd gross them out."

"Well, we need **some**body."

"No we don't," he said. "I can handle two at one time."

"Gosh, you're generous."

We laughed, suddenly nervous and excited. Going on patrol was the last thing on our minds.

A few minutes later the tall girl got up and went to the concession stand, passing close by us. We pretended not to notice each other.

"Better turn over or you'll scare her off," Woody said.

"Very funny. Remind me to laugh sometime."

"Maybe one of us should go over and get something," he suggested, though we still had the Cokes we'd bought when we arrived.

"Good idea. You thought of it, you go. Yell when you need help."

"You wish. Cool it, here she comes."

She passed by carrying three Cokes, and sat down on the blanket with her friends. She said something and they laughed.

"You see the way she twitched her ass?" Woody said. "She wants it, all right."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm the silent type," I said.

"Okay, then, you go get cigarettes. We're out."

"I'm not your slave."

We argued and finally flipped a coin. I lost. He smiled. "If we're gone when you get back, don't wait up."

"You'll be here," I said, "squeezing your dick." He laughed as I started off.

We had no trouble buying cigarettes at the bait shop; it was like a gesture of good will on the part of the owners, Doc and Myra Connell, to make up for not selling us beer. But as I went inside, I wondered if I should take a chance at buying some beer. The girls might be impressed if they saw us drinking it. Myra sat behind the counter; the worst she could say was no.

I slouched toward the cooler, pretending interest in the leaders, sinkers, and other fishing supplies I paused

to inspect. Water splashed softly in the minnow tanks in back, and music played on the radio Myra kept by the register. A song by the Carpenters came on, like a bad omen. Hearing the register's urgent ring, I looked up and saw Myra busy with a rush of customers. No one paid any attention to me, so I hurried to the cooler and put my hand on the door. But I couldn't open it, only gaze at the brightly colored cans, cursing my hesitation and my age, wondering if the day I turned eighteen would ever come. Then I realized someone was watching me.

It was the young woman who'd smiled at me in church. Now, as I looked at her, she smiled again. She wore a halter and cut-offs this time, her hair pulled up in a loose bun. She looked very pretty, unaware of the impression she made on me.

In a conspiratorial whisper she asked, "Want me to buy some for you?"

I was so surprised I froze, and began to suspect a plot against me. "I was just looking," I said. It sounded absurd.

"Oh." She smiled again and started away; for a moment I wondered what had happened.

"Wait," I said.

She turned back, giving me her attention again, her gaze so direct I peered into the cooler to escape it. It was similar to the way she'd looked at me in church,

friendly and honest, as if she liked what she saw.

"What's the deal?" I asked quietly.

"Deal?"

"You know," I said, glancing at the counter, where Myra was still busy with the customers. "How much money you want extra?"

After a pause she said, "Fifty bucks." Not afraid to look at her now, I saw she meant it as a joke. "I don't want anything," she said. "I just thought I'd help you out. Do you want any or not?"

"A case," I quickly answered.

She looked doubtful. "Isn't that a lot?"

"It's not just for me. There's my cousin."

"It still seems like a lot. How about two six-packs?"

Not in a position to argue, I told her that would be fine, and held the door open while she took out the beer. "I'd better carry it," she said, enjoying herself. "You carry the stuff I came for."

I followed her around the shop, picking up the charcoal, lighter fluid, and suntan lotion she pointed to. At the counter we laid the items before Myra, who said hello and rang up the prices. Just like that, I had two six-packs.

Outside I thanked my new friend and repaid her, offering her a few extra dollars, which she refused. We walked back up to the parking lot and she put her sack of

things in the Mustang I'd seen at church the week before. The car looked as if it had just rolled off the assembly line, impervious to the dust thrown up from the gravel, the sun casting a dazzling glare off the windshield.

"Where's your cousin?" she asked.

"Down at the beach. He'll be surprised."

"You'll be careful, won't you? That's the deal. I get you the beer, you be careful with it."

She said it in a nice way, and I promised her we'd be careful. She got in the car and I asked, "Do you remember me?"

She smiled up at me. "You were sitting in the church. You looked like you wanted to be somewhere else."

"**Any**where else," I said. I wanted to ask her why she'd gone; suddenly, there were many things I wanted to ask. But I felt too shy. All I could ask was if she'd be in church tomorrow.

"I don't know," she said. "My friend's not too crazy about it."

"The one you were with?"

She nodded.

"Tell her I'm not crazy about it either," I said. "But Woody and I have to go, and if you guys come we can all sit together. My name's John."

She told me her name was Hilde, thanked me for the invitation, but said she couldn't promise anything.

Starting the car, she said, "Oh, we heard there's a keg party tonight, up in that meadow." She pointed across the road, where a meadow overlooked the marina. "Maybe we'll see you there."

"Sure," I said, "we'll be there."

We said good-bye and she drove away. Elated, I hurried to the beach, slowing when I saw Bill, Candy, and Hawk. They were watching Woody, who was over talking to the girls.

"Yeah, man," Bill said when he saw me with the beer. He took a six-pack and passed out cans.

"What's with Woody?" I asked.

"He's askin' them to go skiin' with us. I got the keys to the boat."

Candy grinned. "We just know you got your heart set on skiin'."

Bill leered at him. Hawk said nothing, gazing across the beach.

When Woody returned he said, "They say their folks won't let them."

"Shit, their folks ain't even here," Bill said.

"Whatever, they won't come."

"I'll persuade 'em," Bill said, but Woody stood in his way.

"Forget it, Bill, they're too leery."

"Prick-teasers," Bill said. "We're better off

without 'em."

"Just forget it," Woody said. I could tell he was angry. "Where'd the beer come from?" he asked me.

"Some guy I asked. So what do we do now?"

"Go on patrol," Bill said. He added, loud enough for the girls to hear, "Forget those bitches."

"You've got a big mouth, you know that?" Woody said.

"Maybe you'd like to stay here while the rest of us ski," Bill said.

"Maybe I would."

"Cool it, you guys," said Candy. "The doctor has a cure." He pretended to take a hit on a joint, sucking in air.

"I can dig it," Bill said. "Let's go."

Candy bought more beer and we went to the boat. I was impatient to tell Woody about Hilde, but didn't want to say anything in front of the others.

Hawk took the wheel and we patrolled the cove, but it wasn't the same without the others, especially Cap. There was a lack of direction on board, Bill trying to take charge, Candy teasing him. Woody sat drinking in the stern, still disappointed the girls hadn't come along. Even Hawk was restless, occasionally looking back at Cap's empty chair, as if waiting for orders. I kept a close watch on the shore, but didn't see Hilde or her Mustang.

We passed the campground and reached the end of the

cove, the woods rising before us like an impenetrable wall. Hawk shut off the motor, suddenly intent as he gazed at the trees, awakened by something within them. His eyes were bright and body tensed, poised for something to happen.

"What's wrong, man?" Candy asked, but he didn't hear him.

"Move it, Hawk!" Bill ordered.

"Shut up," Candy said. "Don't nobody talk."

Everything grew silent as we watched Hawk, waiting. No one moved.

Suddenly he leaped over the side, hitting the water with the sound of a thunderclap. We rushed over and looked at the spot where he'd gone under. Ripples spread angrily through the water, slapping against the boat.

"Fuck, man, what happened?" Bill said.

Candy shook his head.

We watched as the water grew smooth again. Still Hawk didn't come up.

"Shit, we better do something," Bill said.

"You got a plan?" said Candy.

"There he is!" Woody shouted, pointing to the shore.

We saw Hawk crouching in some tall grass growing out of the water. He paused, facing the woods, then disappeared inside.

Calling to him, we scanned the trees but didn't see

him.

"Now what?" Bill asked.

"What, the captain gotta ask his crew what to do?" said Candy.

"This is serious, man. What happened?"

Candy shrugged. "Flashback maybe. Who knows? Could be a joke."

"I don't think so," I said. "You see the look in his eyes?"

"Maybe we should go after him," Woody suggested.

"Fuck that shit," Bill said.

"You wanna go after him, be my guest," said Candy. "I'm stayin' on the boat." He lit a cigarette and passed the pack around. "We wait a while and see what happens."

We watched the trees and waited. Ten minutes passed.

"Maybe he's looking for the place me and John found the body," Woody said.

"Maybe," Candy said.

Just then we saw him come out of the woods at the place he'd entered. He swam toward us, using one arm, holding the other under water.

"I'll do the talkin'," Candy said. "Somebody throw down the ladder."

I hung it over the side and stood with the others as Hawk climbed aboard, holding a water moccasin near the head. It thrashed wildly in his grip, sleek and deadly,

mouth opened wide in a hiss. We couldn't have been more astonished if he'd drawn a gun on us. We took a step back.

"Where'd you get that, man?" Candy asked. His voice was calm, amiable.

"Over in the grass," Hawk said, as if there were nothing unusual about it.

"That why you went in?"

He didn't answer, only looked at the snake as it tried to squirm free. It was a good three feet long.

"You sure gave us a scare when you jumped in like that," Candy went on. Hawk looked at him, then at the snake. Candy said, "That's poisonous, you know."

"I know. Get me a knife."

Woody held out his stiletto at arm's length. Taking the knife, Hawk held the snake over the water and began to cut through it, just below the head. The snake went into a frenzy. Blood spurted into the water and trickled down Hawk's wrist. The head fell into the water, floated momentarily, and sank. He held the body until it was still, then flung it toward the grass. It spun through the air like a boomerang and dropped into the grass with a soft splash.

He went back into the water to wash his hands and the stiletto, then climbed aboard and gave the knife back to Woody. Woody looked at it as if it were made of gold.

"You okay, man?" Candy asked.

"I'm okay." He went back to the wheel, looked at us and said, "Where to?"

Candy smiled, shaking his head. "Anywhere you want, man."

With Hawk driving, no one wanted to ski, so we sat in the stern and drank beer, keeping an eye on him. I still marveled at the incident, wondering how anyone could catch a poisonous snake bare-handed.

"Why'd you have to bring him along?" Bill quietly asked Candy.

"You told me to, man, in case we got in a fight."

"He's liable to fight **us**," I said, "and do what he did to that snake." I meant it as a joke, but no one laughed.

Woody said, "Got your gun, Candy?"

A look passed between them. Candy said, "I left it in the car."

Woody stood up, restless. "This is great. No girls, no nothing. I want to **do** something."

"Let's check out the cove where the hippies were," Candy said.

"You think Hawk'll go?" I asked.

"One way to find out. Hey, Hawk, let's go back to that cove, the one we went to last week, remember?"

Hawk glanced back at us, then abruptly turned around. He stared at Woody, who had sat down in Cap's chair. "Out

of the chair," he said. "Now."

Woody jumped out and sat beside me. Hawk watched him a moment longer, then took the wheel again. No one spoke as we sped across the lake.

We didn't find anyone in the cove. We decided to go swimming, so we moored the boat along the sandy shore where we'd grilled steaks the week before. We spent the afternoon there, and Candy, Bill, and Woody got high. I sipped at a beer, wanting a clear head in case I saw Hilde later. Hawk was content to stay on the boat, and we forgot all about him.

As evening approached I grew impatient, afraid that if we stayed out too late I might miss seeing Hilde again. I finally told the others about the party, but didn't mention her. I said I'd heard some people at the bait shop talking about it, and that we should check it out.

Everyone agreed, and as we got ready to go, Woody said, "Where's Hawk?"

We looked around but didn't see him. Candy checked the cabin, but he wasn't there.

"What do we do now?" I asked. "He could be anywhere."

"We oughta leave him here," Bill said.

Candy yelled Hawk's name a few times and we waited, listening. There was no reply.

"Shit," Bill said.

"Maybe we should use the boat to look for him," I

suggested.

"Worth a try," Candy said.

We'd just finished untying the lines when Hawk came running around the bend. "On the boat!" he shouted. "Everybody on board!"

"What is it, man?" said Candy.

"Move!" Hawk ordered, pushing him into the water.

We scrambled up the ladder and he started the motor. We lost our balance as the boat plunged backward. He turned the wheel hard and shifted to forward, and we sped away from the shore.

"What happened, Hawk?" Candy asked.

Hawk shook his head, still panting. Panic brightened his eyes.

"Let me drive, man."

He tensed, as if Candy had threatened him.

"Okay, okay," Candy said, "you drive. Where we goin'?"

"Marina," the big man said. "Hold tight."

He gave the motor full throttle and we tore across the water, the eastern shore shrinking in the distance. He glanced back at it, as if afraid we were being followed. The rest of us couldn't see anything unusual.

He was calm by the time we reached the marina, giving no indication anything had happened at all. When the boat was secured in the slip, he sat down with a can of beer

and gazed across the cove.

"You gonna stay here, man?" Candy asked him. He nodded. Candy said, "We might be back later, we don't know. You got your truck, right?" Again he nodded, and we left him there to watch the water.

"No more," Bill said as we went to the parking lot. "We ain't takin' him out no more."

"I want to be there when you tell him," Candy said.

"I'll talk to Dad. He'll handle it."

"You think we should've left him there?" I asked.

"Better than going with us," Woody said.

"He ain't goin' anywhere," said Bill. "I got the keys."

"Look," I said, "we should do something. The guy's psycho, he belongs in a hospital."

"I'll talk to my dad," Bill said. "For now let's check out that party. I gotta get high again."

We took both cars, Woody's and Bill's, so we wouldn't have to come back and risk running into Hawk. Twilight had begun to fall as we turned off the road and followed a dirt path set along a line of evergreens. The ground sloped upward, then leveled off as we reached the meadow at the foot of the hill. A large bonfire blazed in the center of it, enclosed by cars, the air tinged with smoke. Rock'n'roll blasted from two speakers set on the hood of a car. Beneath a tree, a crowd gathered around a pickup

loaded with kegs of beer. There must have been close to a hundred people, most of them young, not long out of high school.

Candy learned the party was being thrown by a group of bikers, and two dollars would buy us all the beer we could drink. We stood in line at the kegs, then walked around. Bill saw some people he knew from school and went to talk to them.

As soon as he was gone, Candy put his arm around Woody and said, "Got a surprise for you."

We went to Bill's car and got in. I sat in the back and watched as Candy took a .38 revolver and a package of bullets from a sack.

"This what you want, man?" he asked Woody.

Woody inspected the gun, throwing open the chamber and snapping it shut. Aiming at the floor, he pulled the trigger quickly, six times. The clicks sounded deadly. He passed the gun to me and I stared at it dumbly. I'd never held one before. It was heavier than I thought, and smelled of oil. I gave it back to him, trying not to show my uneasiness. Despite all his talk about getting a gun, I'd never quite believed he'd actually do it.

"Deal?" said Candy.

Woody looked at me. "What do you think, John?"

"Whatever," I said, at a loss for anything else.

"Deal," Woody said. He gave Candy some money; I

couldn't see how much.

Candy counted it carefully and grinned. "Let's party."

I went with Woody to our car, where he stashed the gun under the seat. I asked him why we needed it.

"It's only for an emergency," he assured me. "Just in case."

"In case what?"

"In case we need it. You've got your knife, don't you?"

"So?"

"It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"A gun's different, Woody."

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll keep it in the car and not even talk about it. We'll probably forget we even have it. It'll be there just in case, okay?"

"You never even talked to me about it."

"Sure I did, last Sunday. Look, I paid for it so it's mine. You don't want to go half on it, then don't."

I decided then not to tell him about Hilde.

Night fell and we separated. Woody and Candy went to look for Bill, and I walked back to the car and sat on the hood, keeping a lookout for Hilde. Though the Fourth of July was still two weeks away, firecrackers exploded in the distance, and every few minutes a bottle rocket hissed through the air. Across the road below, the lights

from lanterns and fires speckled the campground. I wondered if one of those lights belonged to Hilde, if she'd decided not to come.

I'd just returned from getting another beer when the Mustang pulled up behind me. Hilde and her friend got out and I said hello.

"John, you came." She sounded pleased. She introduced me to her friend, Joleen, who looked at me as if she hadn't decided whether to hate or tolerate me. "Joleen never misses a good time," said Hilde.

"Something to do," Joleen said bitterly.

"Are you camping?" I asked Hilde.

"Farther back in the cove. I hope no one bothers our tent."

"Quit worrying," Joleen told her. She looked at me and added, "That's all she does is worry." I didn't like her, but Hilde only smiled, apparently used to her friend's abrasiveness.

Joleen went to get some beer, and I thanked Hilde again for buying me the six-packs.

"Today was one of my good days," she said. "I felt ready to embrace the world and help my fellow man."

"So how do you feel tonight?"

"Tonight it's every man for himself." She sounded bitter, like Joleen. "I hate the night, it's lonely and depressing. That's why we came here."

"At least you're old enough to buy beer."

"I'll try to remember that," she said. The bitterness had left her voice. "Whenever I get depressed I'll think of poor John standing there by the cooler, desperate as a bank robber. You know, you reminded me of myself, when my best friend and I used to go to the grocery store and hide cans in our purses. Till we got caught. The manager took us to his office and gave us a lecture that scared us so bad we never went back--not till I turned eighteen. I marched inside and bought a six-pack, and you know what? They never asked for my driver's license. I was so disappointed."

Joleen came back with the beer and said, "Same old thing, I got hit on twice. A guy drinks a few beers and he thinks he's God's gift." She looked at me, challenging me to deny it, but I said nothing. "Well," she said, "I've got my beer and I've got my grass--everything a girl could hope for these days. Anyone care to join me?"

Hilde didn't want to, so I said I didn't either. Joleen got in the car, and marijuana smoke drifted from the window.

"You have to be patient with her," Hilde said quietly. "Her husband got sent overseas and he's all she's really got. She met him in a bar she used to work at in Junction City, and I guess it's a pretty rough place. She's scared she'll lose him and have to go back there."

"How'd you meet her?" I asked.

"We work together in the PX and rent a house in town."

"You're in the army?" It was the last thing I'd have guessed.

"My husband is," she said. "He's missing in action."

She expected the stare I gave her and didn't avoid it, watching me with the directness that had made me so uncomfortable in the bait shop. I looked away, off toward the trees at the edge of the meadow, which flickered with shadows cast by the fire. I didn't know quite how to feel.

"How long?" I asked.

"May twenty-fifth."

It was the day I'd moved to the farm, and when I thought of all the things that had happened since then, it seemed like a long time.

"It works on you in strange ways," she said. "Take getting high, like Joleen. I won't do it, not because I think it's wrong, it's that I got this idea if I don't take drugs God'll reward me by giving me back my husband. It's crazy, I know, but you start thinking that way, start making all sorts of deals till you wonder if maybe you really **are** nuts. But you keep doing it anyway, like last week. I'd been to church only once in five years, and that was to get married. I thought if I started going, God would take care of Tim."

"Are you going tomorrow?" I asked.

"I don't know. I feel like such a hypocrite, you know? It's like, 'Save my husband, God, and I'll go to church for the rest of my life whether I want to or not.'"

I understood her conflicting emotions, having felt much the same way when I argued with Mrs. Lutz. I liked listening to her, and it occurred to me she must be very lonely to speak so personally to someone she knew nothing about.

"It's hard to know what to do," I agreed.

"And it doesn't get any easier as you get older," she said. "I sure found that out, and I'm barely twenty-two."

"What's your husband like?"

"Perfect. He gets more perfect every day. I can't remember any of his faults." As she watched the fire, her smile turned bittersweet. "We never had a fight except when Tim enlisted. I did everything I could to convince him not to, but nothing worked. Anyway, to make a long story short, he went into the army and we never fought after that. There wasn't time, you know?"

I wondered why Tim had done it. If I had been her husband, I would have done anything she asked.

"So what about you?" she said. "Do you live around here?"

I told her about my relatives and the farm, and how much Woody and I liked to come to the cove. I referred to Cap and the crew vaguely as friends, not mentioning our

patrols. I wanted to present a certain image of myself, one she would like and trust. I also wanted to impress her, show her the summer had been difficult for me as well, so I told her about the night Woody and I found James Johnson. But as I spoke I couldn't help thinking I was using James Johnson's death selfishly. It didn't mean as much anymore; somewhere along the way, I'd stopped feeling responsible for him. I was glad when I finished the story.

"I read about it in the paper," she said. "We almost stopped coming here, but we had to get out of the house. The thing is, we never really can get away. Wherever we go, even here, we're reminded how bad things are. It's partly our own fault, I guess. We bring our problems with us."

"How do you keep going?"

"I don't know what else to do," she said. "If I gave up, well, what would I do then?"

We fell silent, and she went to check on Joleen. Suddenly a voice spoke from behind me and I jumped. It was Hawk.

"Jesus, man, you scared me," I said. "When did you get here?"

Ignoring my question, he said, "Get your friend. He's out of it."

"Drunk?"

"Something he took."

"Wait here," I said, "I'll be right back."

I ran over to Hilde, who smiled as she looked up from the car window. "She's crashed out," she said. "I'd better take her back."

"Something's happened to my cousin," I told her. "Wait till we get back, okay?"

"Want me to go with you?"

"Stay here."

I ran back to Hawk, who took me to a car parked on the other side of the fire. Woody and Candy were sitting in the back and Bill and someone I didn't know in the front. They stared at the fire as if hypnotized.

I touched Woody's shoulder. "Woody, you okay?"

He nodded, but didn't take his eyes from the fire. The others didn't hear me.

"What did he take?" I asked Hawk, but he only shook his head. "How long's he been like this?"

"A while."

I wanted to curse them all. I asked Hawk if he thought Woody could walk. He reached in, pulled Woody from the seat and stood him on his feet, holding his shoulders in case he fell.

"Woody," I said, "can you walk?"

"Uh-huh." He took a step toward the fire.

Hawk steered him in the other direction and we started off, Woody turning his head to watch the fire. People

laughed at us as we passed.

Hilde was waiting for us, and she helped me put Woody in the front seat. As I checked his eyes, I felt Hawk's stare. I turned to him and he said, "You don't know, do you. You really don't." His eyes locked onto mine. I felt powerless, at his mercy. It was as if he could see inside me, grab hold of my will.

"What don't I know?" I managed to say.

He didn't reply. His eyes softened, lost their hold, focusing on some new vision I wasn't a part of. He shook his head; it was beyond explanation. And then he was gone.

"Who was that?" Hilde asked.

"His name's Hawk," I said, trying to regain my composure. "Keep away from him, he's crazy. Something happened to him in Vietnam." I was sorry the moment I said it. I'd forgotten about her husband. I fumbled for an apology, but she dismissed it.

"It's okay," she said. "What happened to your cousin?"

"He took something. I don't know what, but I'm scared. What should I do? I can't take him home like this."

"You can stay with us a while," she decided. "Follow us back to camp and we'll wait for him to come down."

I followed her onto the road and we drove farther into the cove. Woody sat in the exact position we'd placed him, staring at the headlights. The gun was out of his reach,

but he still had his knife and I was anxious to get to the camp and take it from him.

Hilde turned off the road and we drove down a grassy slope toward the water, following no path I could see. We stopped at a grove of trees, inside of which was a clearing big enough for their tent and campfire. Hilde turned on a lantern and we sat Woody in a lawn chair. Then she woke Joleen and asked her to look at him.

Joleen trudged over, stared at him and smiled. "He's cute."

"Can you tell what he took?" asked Hilde.

Joleen rubbed her eyes and blinked. "Hard to say. Could be windowpane."

"LSD?" I said.

"Yeah. If it is, he'll be wrapped up a while, depending on how good the stuff is. Watch him and he'll be okay."

I took the knife from his pocket and hid it in the car with the gun. Hilde watched but said nothing. Joleen looked ready to fall asleep again.

"Maybe we should take him down to the water," I suggested, "where there's a breeze."

"Good idea," said Joleen, her eyes shut. "I need to wake up."

We guided Woody through the trees and down an embankment to the shore, where the water glittered in the

moonlight. Looking at the woods, I thought of Hawk and our crazy afternoon. I wondered what he meant when he told me I didn't know.

"Look," Woody said, "the currents beneath the surface, the way the light catches them flowing above and beneath each other, through tons of water. They never collide. It's always . . . fluid."

"Sounds like acid, all right," Joleen said as she lit a cigarette.

"The light goes to the bottom," he went on. "I can see the schoolhouse. The currents're ringing the bell, but you can't hear it way up here." He shivered. "Something awful in the window. This fish with a mouth . . . could swallow you."

"Look away," I said.

Leaning back, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After a moment he opened them and looked at the sky. "Moon," he said, "I can see where they're going to land." He sounded inspired.

"You okay, Woody?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"It's John."

"I know," he said, and continued to watch the moon.

Joleen laughed. "He'll be okay, just give him time." She went to get us some beer.

My concern about Woody had given way to embarrassment.

I was afraid I'd somehow disappointed Hilde, fallen from her favor. "I'm sorry about all this," I said. "It's pretty stupid."

"That's okay," she said. "I've been like that myself."

"You've tried LSD?"

"No, but I've done my share of things. Sometimes, when I think how good it would make me feel, I'm tempted to smoke a joint, sit back and watch the stars and forget everything."

"What about all that stuff you were telling me?" I said.

"What stuff?"

"About not doing drugs to help your husband."

"You really think that makes a difference?"

"I don't know, maybe not. I just don't think you should do it. You should stick to your decision."

"Why?"

"Because it's the right thing. You wouldn't feel guilty."

She smiled. "You know what you are, John? You're my conscience."

"Don't lay that on me," I said. "I've got enough trouble with my own conscience."

"That's why I trust you."

"Why should you trust me?"

"You're a good person," she said. "I can tell."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Don't worry, you are."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do."

She had more faith in me than I did. But I liked being persuaded; it was like having a weakening belief in myself suddenly strengthened.

Joleen came back with the beer and the conversation turned to other things. I did most of the talking, energized by my talk with Hilde. I told them about the schoolhouse Woody spoke of, about Alida and the farmland underwater, and my family, and Kansas City. Hilde seemed glad to listen, as if it were a relief to focus on something other than her husband.

It was late when we walked back to the camp. Woody was coming down from his high, speaking coherently, and I knew he'd be all right. We got in the car and I told the girls if they came to church in the morning we'd sit together.

"We're not sure," Hilde said. "But we'll be here next week."

I told her we'd be cutting wheat, and gave her directions to the house in case they wanted to stop by. "Really," I said, "you should come see us."

"We'll see you again," she said. "Don't worry."

And so I had to be satisfied with that. We drove

home and I helped Woody up the stairs, afraid to think what time it was. He undressed and got into bed, and I asked him one more time if he was all right.

"Yeah," he said. "You have to tell me all I missed."

"You missed plenty. Serves you right."

"Tell me."

"Tomorrow," I said. "Get some sleep."

I turned out the light and got into bed, wide awake as I thought about Hilde. Falling asleep was impossible, so I put on my jeans and went out to the roof. I felt attuned to the stars and the shadows, connected to the world, following a road with a destination. I did not stop to think of all that happened this day, and of what lay hidden in the car. It was forgotten, like a bad dream that would not be remembered in the morning light.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning I explained to Woody what happened, and on the way to church I told an altered version to Aunt Margaret, Uncle Roy, and Cheryl. I said Hilde and Joleen were nice girls and very worried about their husbands, that if they came to church today we should do the right thing by inviting them to dinner.

"How was it you met them?" Aunt Margaret asked.

"At the beach," I said. "We got to talking with them and they invited us to grill hamburgers. I think they're kind of lonely."

"I can imagine." My aunt shook her head sadly. "Young women with husbands fighting that mess. All right, John, invite them to dinner. That would be nice."

Church attendance was low, many families having started the wheat harvest. Half of the high school class was absent, but Mrs. Lutz struck a positive note.

"Well," she began in her measured voice, "I see our ranks have grown thin this morning. We can all be thankful for the good weather." She smiled at us from behind the desk, but she looked tired, as if she hadn't slept well. I wondered if visions of another confrontation with Woody and me kept her up. It was strange to imagine her pacing

anxiously through her house while I sat talking to Hilde in the cove, faith and salvation the last things on my mind.

She said, "I thought we'd try something different this morning, an experiment, we might call it. If it works, we'll try it again when everyone's here." She paused, unsure how to begin. "In the past I've always prepared a lesson and, well, I'm not always sure they work. Sometimes they seem as stuffy as this room, even to me." She smiled. "So this morning I thought I'd let you do the talking. About whatever you want, whatever's important to you."

She waited for one of us to speak, and as the silence grew so did our embarrassment. She seemed sincere, but I couldn't help suspect she was setting some sort of trap.

Finally Cheryl said, "I was just thinking about something John told us on the way here. He and Woody met two girls at the lake, and their husbands're in Vietnam and one of them's missing in action. It's so awful. I mean, we think we've got problems, think how bad it is for them."

"That's right, Cheryl," said Mrs. Lutz. "We don't always appreciate what we have until we see the misfortune of others." She looked at Woody and me cautiously. "John, Woody, would you like to tell us about it?"

I appreciated Cheryl's sympathy, but didn't know what to say. Looking at Woody, I saw he was waiting for me to answer, so I repeated the story I'd told in the car. Mrs.

Lutz was sympathetic, but far from satisfied.

"This girl Hilde," she said, "the one whose husband is missing. How does she feel about it?"

"Terrible," I said. "Who wouldn't?"

"What I mean is, how does she cope with it?"

I couldn't repeat what Hilde told me without violating a trust. Discussing her at all was unfair. How could we know how she felt, decide what was best for her?

"I don't know how she copes with it," I said. "She just does. She said you can't give up hope."

"What about the other girl?"

"She didn't say anything. She's pretty bitter. Look, they never brought God into it, if that's what you're after."

"They must believe in Him," said Cheryl. "They came here last Sunday."

"I remember," Mrs. Lutz said. "No one knew who they were."

"Look," I said angrily, "it's none of our business. We don't have any right to talk about them behind their backs."

"We're not gossiping, John," said Mrs. Lutz. "We're concerned about them."

"You want to use them as an example and you don't even know them. It's not fair."

"You must care a great deal for them."

"I do. And I don't think we should talk about them when they're not here--especially when we're not in the same situation."

"Then we'll change the subject," she said. "Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

"I'd like to talk about minding our own business," I said. I could feel everyone's stare.

Mrs. Lutz stiffened, but she asked patiently what I meant. She was trying so hard to be nice that I felt like a bully.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't feel right talking about God in front of other people."

She nodded. "A lot of people feel that way. Sometimes I do. It's not always easy to sit here in front of you and talk about it."

"Then why do we do it?" said Woody.

"Because it's part of our faith. You know that, Woody. We come here to strengthen our faith and reaffirm it, witness it before each other. That's how we become stronger and survive the problems we face. We should never be ashamed to talk about God, especially in His house. There's a passage in the Bible . . ."

And she went on to talk about the importance of worship, her voice growing fainter as I thought of Hilde's own struggle with faith, her refusal to believe in simple answers. Surely, I thought, she was as good as any of us

who came to church.

She and Joleen didn't attend the service, and the day lost its purpose. There was nothing I could do but endure the sermon, worshipping Hilde as the congregation did God. Already I was in love with her, though I would not have admitted it, even to myself.

That afternoon, while Woody and I listened to music in our room, he told me about the drug he'd taken.

"It was windowpane, all right," he said. "Candy had enough for four of us, me and him and Bill, and some guy I don't remember. It comes in this tiny little piece of Scotch tape, and you chew it and swallow. Then you're on your own."

"What was it like?"

"Different, not like grass. With grass you **know** you're stoned, feel it in your whole body. But with this you don't even feel stoned. I don't know. It's like it's all in your head, everything's sharp, magnified, like sounds and colors. You start seeing things in ordinary stuff you never saw before, only you don't realize it till afterwards. It's great."

"Maybe for you," I said, "but you had me scared."

"Next time we'll do it together."

"Not me."

"Why not?"

"I just don't think we should. Something might

happen."

"Like what?"

"That's just it," I said, "you never know. You could get some bad stuff, anything. You were so out of it you didn't know what was going on. You didn't even know Hawk was there. The guy could've gone nuts and driven you off a cliff."

"He doesn't scare me anymore, not with the gun I got."

"Yeah, like you'd really use it."

His eyes met mine. "I would if I had to."

"What's happening to you, man? It's like I don't even know you anymore."

"I could say the same about you. All of a sudden you're afraid to do anything."

"I'm not afraid, I'm smart."

He smiled. "Maybe the girls'd like to take a trip with me."

"Leave them alone. They've got enough problems."

"You really like them, don't you," he said, "especially Hilde. You sure told Sheila off."

"Hell, what was I supposed to say? It's none of her business."

"Maybe I shouldn't have gotten stoned after all. Looks like I missed some interesting developments. Sure you've told me everything?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

"You've got it bad for Hilde. Maybe you're not telling me the whole story, leaving out the good stuff?"

"She's married," I said. "Nothing happened and nothing will."

"But you wish it would, right?"

I didn't answer because I didn't know. To wish for an affair with Hilde was cruel and selfish, and not a little unrealistic. And yet I couldn't stop thinking of her.

We started the wheat harvest the next morning. We drove to the west field in a caravan, my grandfather in the combine, Woody and I in the trucks, Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy in the pickup. At the edge of the field we got out and looked across the ocean of wheat undulating in the wind. Its magnitude staggered me. It seemed an impossible feat of the land, equally impossible that we could cut it all. The longer I looked, the more I realized the importance of our work, not in terms of money but completion. The money earned was essential to the farm's survival, but the harvest itself was more important. Unless the wheat were cut, the cycle of the land could not continue.

"Damn leg," said Uncle Roy as he leaned on his crutches. "First harvest I've missed since I went to Korea."

"You're not missing it, Roy," Aunt Margaret said. "You're right here with us."

"But I can't do anything except watch. This is my land, I'm supposed to take care of it."

"We **are** taking care of it," she said. She put her arm around him in a rare display of affection. "It's going to be a good harvest. I know it."

"Well, then," he said, "let's get to it."

My and Woody's job was to drive the grain to the elevator in Chapman. I rode with him the first time, and he showed me the best route to take, one that stayed mostly on highways where the traffic consisted mainly of other trucks. One of the gravel roads we took passed the Lutz farm, and he slowed so I could get a good look.

The house was as old and large as our grandparents', fronted by a wide porch with wind chimes hanging between the columns, and a trellis of bright red roses. Flowers of all kinds grew everywhere in the yard, a symmetry to their planting which suggested a planned orderliness, but no actual design. Behind the house, the weather-beaten buildings in the farmyard provided a sharp contrast to the color in the front yard. Evergreens formed a windbreak on three sides of the farm, which gave it a look of seclusion. We didn't see anyone about.

"Her and Dan live with his folks," Woody said. "They'll take over in a few years when they retire and move to Chapman. How'd you like to be married and live with your mom and dad? No fucking on the kitchen table

for them."

When we got to the grain elevator in Chapman, we fell into line with the other trucks waiting to dump their loads. Our turn came and a man waved us into the tunnel at the bottom of the elevator. There was an office with an open window on Woody's side, and he said hello to Marge, the woman inside. He signed some forms and sat back, waiting. I asked him what happened next, but he only smiled.

There was a clank as someone raised the tailgate. Suddenly the truck lurched, followed by the high-pitched whir of a hydraulic lift. The front end of the truck began to rise, the weight shifting to the rear. I was startled until I heard the hiss of the grain pouring out the back end. Then I realized the truck had been locked onto a ramp whose front end raised, allowing the wheat to pour into a hole below. The front end continued to rise until we reached a forty-five-degree angle, stopped a moment, then was lowered.

"Tough work, huh?" Woody said, smiling.

Marge gave him a receipt, and as we drove out the other end of the tunnel, I asked him where the wheat went.

"Conveyors carry it up into the elevator," he told me. "That's all there is to it."

By the time we got back to the field, our grandfather had filled the second truck with wheat, and I drove it to

Chapman while Woody waited for the next load.

That was the procedure we followed all week, working until dark, rising at dawn. The driving was monotonous but it was a job I liked. There was a rhythm to the work, constant in the shifting of gears on hills and turns, a familiar beat to the bumps in the road. The rhythm was part of a larger pattern of coming and going, emptying and loading, meeting Woody driving the other truck, always along the same stretch of road. The only change occurred in the fields as the wheat turned to stubble, but this too was a part of the pattern, swath after swath pulled into the combine by the reel, which turned through the golden ocean like a paddle wheel.

As I followed my route that week, Milford Lake receded into the distance, as if the miles I covered carried me farther and farther from the place which had become the focal point of my summer. There was nothing to remind me of the lake and the people I knew there, only the passing countryside. Even Hilde, though I thought of her often, seemed far away, my loyalty to her eclipsed by my new sense of duty to the land. I felt drawn to it, a part of its process. Once, on a hill north of Chapman, I stopped the truck and got out, looking into the valley where the varied colors of the fields were laid out in an intricate geometrical pattern, through which Blue Creek curled like a life-giving vein. I stopped because I wanted to memorize

that view and be able to recall the exhilaration it gave me, long after the summer ended.

One afternoon my routine was interrupted when the fan belt broke, worn so thin it finally snapped. I couldn't believe Woody and I missed checking it. Cursing, I slammed the hood shut and looked both ways down the road. The closest house was the Lutzs', a half mile back. I wasn't eager to go there, and considered waiting for Woody to come by on his way back from the elevator. But that might take close to an hour. The best option was to go to the Lutzs' and call Aunt Margaret.

It was a hot, dusty walk, and I was grateful to enter the shade of the porch, the air sweetened by the scent of the roses. Everything was quiet save for the chimes tinkling in the hot breeze. Four wicker chairs stood in line against the wall, two on either side of the door. Their positioning looked permanent. I imagined Mrs. Lutz, Dan, and his parents sitting in them, each couple on one side of the door, staring out into the yard.

I knocked and waited, then knocked again, louder. I heard footsteps inside, then Mrs. Lutz's voice.

"Who is it, please?"

"John Swenson."

There was a pause, as if she were trying to place my name. Then she unlocked the door and opened it. We looked at each other through the screen door.

"John," she said. "How are you?"

Apologizing for the interruption, I explained what had happened and asked if I could use her phone. It was a simple enough request, yet she needed time to consider it, to get over her surprise at seeing me.

A little impatient, I said, "You have a phone, don't you?"

She started at the sound of my voice. "Of course," she said, "of course we do. Come in."

She took me back to the kitchen, a narrow room with a high ceiling which diminished her physical presence, much like the chair she sat in during Sunday school class. The makings for lunch were spread out on the counter, and the smell of baked cookies lingered in the air.

"I was just getting lunch for everyone," she said. "They're out in the field." Her eyes flickered as she realized what she'd said--that we were alone in the house. Motioning me to sit down, she asked if I was hungry. I told her I'd already eaten.

"Are you thirsty? I've got some tea made."

"If it's no trouble."

"No trouble at all," she said eagerly.

I sat down and watched. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her figure boyish in the jeans and sleeveless shirt she wore. She looked more comfortable in these clothes than the dresses she wore to church, or perhaps

she felt more at ease here at home, away from the collective gaze of her pupils.

She poured me a glass of tea and watched as I drank it. "Would you like some more?"

"Thanks," I said, "it's good."

She poured another glass and said, "It's strange, your truck breaking down right by our house."

"How's that?"

She smiled. "I don't know, it's just strange, the way things happen sometimes."

I could feel her stare as I drank, and it suddenly dawned on me that she thought I had planned my visit.

"Who knows why things happen?" I said defensively. "They just do." I quickly finished my glass.

"Would you like another?" she asked.

"I'd better call my aunt."

She put the tea in the refrigerator and said, "I was just thinking, we might have a belt you could use. What size do you need?"

"I don't know," I said, my face reddening.

"We'll get some from the garage and see if one works."

"I can call," I said. "It looks like you're pretty busy."

"It might save time if we try," she insisted.

She put the food away and we went out to the garage. She found a couple of belts she thought might work, and

we started off in a pickup. I was relieved to get out of the house. If she had any doubts about my reason for stopping, they would soon be gone.

When we got to the truck I looked around for the broken fan belt. I remembered flinging it into the ditch in anger, but I couldn't find it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Looking for the belt. I threw it in the ditch somewhere."

"What do you need it for? It's no good."

I couldn't tell her I wanted it for proof. I walked back to the truck and raised the hood, and we looked inside.

"This one'll work," she said, handing me one of the belts.

Using a screwdriver for leverage, I stretched the belt over the pulleys and made sure they were secure within the flanges. I started the engine and the belt turned smoothly. I shut the hood and thanked her, asking how much I owed her.

"For a belt?" she said. "It's nothing. Glad I could help."

"Well, thanks. For the tea too."

"You're welcome." She waited, expectant of something beyond our business with the truck. I told her I'd better get going, and climbed into the truck.

"John," she said, looking up at me, "is there something

you wanted to tell me?"

"No, there's nothing--except thanks, thanks for everything."

"If you need to talk to me about anything, you can. Call me or stop by."

I told her I would, and pushed in the clutch. As I started down the road I looked back. She stood where I left her, watching me. Picking up speed, I crested a hill and escaped her view. My hope was we'd be cutting wheat on Sunday and I wouldn't have to attend her class. I didn't know what she thought I wanted to tell her; perhaps she hoped for an apology for arguing with her in class. I wanted to believe it was as simple as that, but every time I passed her house that week I kept my eyes on the road and my foot on the gas.

Friday evening, having taken the day's last load of wheat to Chapman, I returned to the house and saw Hilde's car. She and Joleen were in the kitchen, eating pie and ice cream with Woody and Uncle Roy.

Hilde gave me a smile and said, "We decided to take you up on your offer. We didn't realize it included supper. I'm eating like a pig."

"Gotta fatten you up like me," said Uncle Roy.

Aunt Margaret told me she'd get my supper while I washed up. She was clearly pleased by the girls' visit.

While I ate supper, Hilde told me about the tour

Cheryl gave them of the farm. She and Joleen had never visited one before, which astonished my relatives. We talked about the harvest and the girls told us about their jobs at the PX. They didn't speak of their husbands and we didn't ask.

"Are you camping out?" I asked.

"We've got to work this weekend," Hilde said.

"It's just as well," said Aunt Margaret. "I don't think you should stay at the lake all by yourselves."

Hilde smiled. "You sound like my mother."

"Not **my** mother," said Joleen. "She'd tell me to get out of her way."

"Well, then," my aunt said, "I'll tell you what she should have: young women have to be careful these days. We live in a mixed up world and you have to look out for yourselves."

"If you say so," Joleen said. She didn't seem to mind being lectured.

Hilde said, "Don't worry, Margaret, we'll be careful. If we run into trouble John and Woody can rescue us."

"Or vice-versa," I said, remembering the weekend.

When the girls were ready to leave, Aunt Margaret gave them a sack and said, "I thought you might like some things from the garden. I put in a dozen eggs too."

Touched, Hilde said, "This is very nice of you. Thank you all for having us."

"You're welcome any time," said Uncle Roy.

Aunt Margaret said, "Do you have any plans for the Fourth?"

"Not really."

"Then celebrate with us. Our family's getting together at my parents' house. The boys'll tell you how to get there."

She said good-night, and Woody and I followed the girls out to the car. He and Joleen stood talking on one side, Hilde and I on the other.

"I'm glad we came out," Hilde said, stooping to pet Bingo. "Your aunt and uncle are so nice, it's like we've got a connection, a place to turn to, you know? Before, it was just the two of us."

"What about your families?"

"You heard what Joleen said about her mother. She doesn't say much about it, but I guess it's pretty bad, especially with her father."

"What about you?"

It was the first time she was unwilling to look at me. She gazed across the dark farmyard and said, "My father's dead. My mother's alive, but when my father died something in her died too. It's been that way a long time now."

I said I was sorry. She smiled at me and changed the subject. "What happens on the Fourth of July?"

I told her about my family's traditional gathering at my grandparents' house, where we spent the day eating, visiting, watching the fireworks display Woody and I put on. "My family's coming from Kansas City," I said. "I want you to meet them."

"I'd like that," she said, "very much."

I gave her directions, and she and Joleen said good-bye. Woody and I watched the taillights move down the lane, and when we couldn't see them any longer we went inside. Uncle Roy sat alone at the table, waiting for us. He asked us to sit down.

"You've done a good job with the harvest," he said. "You've shown a lot of responsibility, and I hope you'll show it with those girls."

Woody and I looked at each other. This was a side of Uncle Roy we weren't used to seeing.

"Come on, Dad."

"Listen to me. It'd be real easy for you to take advantage of them. Their husbands're gone and they're lonely and scared. Something could happen if you're not careful."

"We're too young for them," Woody said.

"You're almost seventeen," my uncle replied. "You're not too young."

"They're not that type," I said, embarrassed. I felt as if Uncle Roy had a direct line to my thoughts.

"I'm not saying they are. But sometimes things

happen. Nobody means them to, they just happen. And you have to pay the consequences." He paused, watching us carefully. "What I'm saying is, you need to keep their interests in mind, not yours. And theirs aren't the same as yours. You might think they are, but they aren't. You know the difference between right and wrong, so treat them right, understand?"

We nodded.

"All right, then, that's all."

As we went upstairs, I felt a new respect for my uncle.

Neither of us spoke as we got ready for bed. Our voices might betray us, make public those thoughts we could not yet share even with each other. Suddenly, after a week of detachment, the distance was closed. Hilde was back in my life, as real and compelling as my uncle's warning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I was sorry the wheat harvest ended. The rhythm faded, the cycle completed. It was like reaching a destination only to find the reward was the journey itself. The golden wheat fields seemed like a passing dream, and in its wake lay the brown stubble, ready to be plowed back into the earth.

For Woody, the harvest had been a diversion from more important matters, and now that it was over he redirected his attention. Early Friday morning, the Fourth of July, he woke me and said we were going to take target practice. I asked him why.

"We've had the gun two weeks and haven't even used it," he said. "We need to practice."

"What for? You planning on robbing a bank?"

"We might have to defend ourselves. What if we're at the lake with the girls and run into trouble?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know, maybe a bunch of GI's or the guy who killed James Johnson. Think what they'd do to us, especially Joleen and Hilde. We have to take care of them, like Hilde said."

"She was joking, Woody."

"Well, I'm not."

Careful not to awaken anyone, we went out to the car. He got the sack with the revolver in it and gave me a string of firecrackers, our excuse for the noise. The morning air was cool, the grass damp as we walked down to the gully that ran between the house and the highway. Inside the cover of the trees and underbrush, he took the revolver from the sack and loaded it, while I stood watching nervously. The shiny black barrel brought home a reality I'd managed to escape the last two weeks.

The gun loaded, Woody aimed at a stone he'd placed in the crook of a tree branch. "Ready?" he said.

I nodded.

He fired, the sound reverberating through the gully. The morning quiet seemed to shrink back into the trees.

"Jesus," he exclaimed, "what a noise!"

We stared at the gun as if we expected it to go off on its own. It gleamed in his hand, acrid smoke wafting from the barrel. Then we remembered the stone. It hadn't moved.

He aimed and fired again, and then a third time. Bark splintered and the leaves shuddered, the noise ringing in our ears with a force of its own. The stone remained unhit.

"It's harder than it looks," he said. He blew the smoke from the barrel and gave the gun to me. "Watch it, the barrel's hot."

I held it loosely, impressed again by its weight, and not a little intimidated. It felt so hard and compressed, so heavy with its own force, that I feared it might explode in my hand, like a furnace unable to contain its heat.

Squinting, I aimed at the stone, trying to hold the gun steady, and fired. The gun recoiled, jerking my arm. A tingling ran from my hand to my shoulder and spread through my chest. It felt like an electric current surging through my muscles.

I missed the stone but didn't care; hitting the target was beside the point.

Woody grinned. "Pretty cool, huh? Just like Butch and Sundance."

I smiled. Hardly before I realized what I was doing, I fell into a crouch and shot at the stone, an enemy hiding in the tree. Bark exploded, the impact knocking the stone to the ground. I quickly looked around. At the end of the gully lay the culvert where we hid our beer. It was empty now and I shot at it, the bullet passing through to the pasture on the other side.

"That's it," said Woody, "it's empty."

"Reload it."

"Better save our bullets till we get some more."

I gave him the gun reluctantly, and we shot the fire-crackers we'd brought. It wasn't the same as shooting the gun, and we soon grew bored and went back to the house.

But my unexpected elation stayed with me, the experience as seductive as a drug.

We celebrated the holiday at my grandparents' house. It was like every other Fourth of July I could remember, my mother's side of the family reunited for a day of visiting and a picnic in the yard. I'd looked forward to seeing my parents and Emily again, but now that we were together, I found I had little to say. The walk we took through the farm was like a question-and-answer session. **Did you learn to run the combine? Yes, it wasn't so hard once I got used to it. Did you get Royals tickets for when I come home? Yes, they're waiting in your room. Are you getting along with Woody? We get along fine. Have you seen Tom and Mike? No, they haven't been over since you moved.**

Finally, as we came to the end of our walk, stopping for a look at the garden, my mother said, "Are you still upset about finding the soldier?"

"I hardly think about it. Don't worry."

She looked me in the eyes, not quite convinced. "Are you sorry you moved?"

Thinking about it, I told her I wasn't. And it was true. For all the uncertainty, frustration, and anger of the summer, I couldn't imagine it any other way. Most of all, I couldn't imagine what the summer would be like without Hilde.

It was Hilde I most looked forward to seeing. She and Joleen were supposed to come for the picnic, and when they didn't I grew worried. Shortly after we'd eaten, my grandmother called me to the phone. It was Joleen. She told me they wouldn't be able to come, and I asked why not.

"It's been a bad day," she said. "Tell your aunt and uncle we're sorry. We really wanted to come but we can't." She sounded more tired than disappointed.

"Let me talk to Hilde."

"She can't come to the phone right now."

"Is she all right?"

"She's pretty bummed out. A lot of stuff caught up with her."

For a moment my heart stopped. "Did she get news about her husband?"

"No, it's just been one of those days."

"What's your address?" I asked. It suddenly occurred to me I didn't know their last names. It made them slightly unreal, like fantasies I'd hoped would materialize in the yard where my relatives gathered.

There was a pause at the other end. She said, "I don't think you should come here."

"Tell Hilde I want to see her, just for a few minutes. Please, Joleen."

She told me to hang on. While I waited, Woody came inside and I told him what had happened. A minute later

Joleen spoke again.

"The address is 502 West Third."

"We'll be right there," I said.

We went outside and explained the situation, and Aunt Margaret asked if we should try to get hold of Reverend Peters. I told her Woody and I should check on them first.

We hadn't brought Woody's car so we took my parents' station wagon. Boats were sprinkled across the lake, and we passed a line of traffic moving slowly toward the Rolling Hills Park exit, where a fireworks display was to be held. It looked like an exodus, and Junction City was all but deserted when we arrived.

We came to the corner of Third and Webster, where a white frame cottage stood in a weed-tangled yard. Two large tree stumps rose above the weeds, gray-black and stark in the empty yard. One surviving tree stood behind the house, spreading its branches over a one-car garage, outside of which sat Hilde's Mustang. That was all there was. Except for the car, the cottage looked as deserted as the neighborhood, as silent as the town.

We went to the door and I checked the names on the mailbox: Hilde McFarland and Joleen Hooper. They had been printed on a strip of adhesive tape secured to the box, as if it were only a matter of time before the house would be vacated and the tape peeled off.

Joleen opened the door and we went into the living

room. The curtains were closed and a somber atmosphere had settled in, shadows slanting across the floorboards, which creaked beneath our feet. The furniture looked as old as the cottage, the couch sagging from use. But despite the gloom, the room looked lived in, given humanity by the framed art prints, shelves of books, and potted plants. Magazines and newspapers littered the coffee table and the throw rug, pages lifting in the breeze from the floor fan. An Otis Redding album played softly on the stereo.

Rather formally, Joleen had us sit down and asked if she could get us something to drink. She stood with her arms folded, like a guardian at the gate which would lead me to Hilde.

"Can I see Hilde?" I asked.

"I'll check."

The record ended and I heard voices from another part of the house. I looked at Woody and he shrugged.

Joleen came back and told me it was okay. She showed me to Hilde's bedroom at the end of the hall, closing the door behind me. It had the atmosphere of a sickroom, mired in hopelessness and inertia. The light was dim, the shade of twilight, and the smell of alcohol hung in the air.

Hilde sat on the bed, leaning against the headboard, a pillow in her lap. Around her, the sheets lay bunched and twisted as in the aftermath of a nightmare. Her figure

was lost beneath her peasant blouse and skirt. She looked old and defeated.

I stood near the door, uncertain what to do. I said, "One of those bad days, I guess."

"Pretty bad," she agreed softly. She didn't look at me, her gaze fixed on the wall opposite the bed, as if the circumstances of her life had locked it there.

"I'm sorry."

"Did you go by the lake?" she asked.

"Yes. Looks like the whole town's there."

"Independence Day. It's a lie." She put her hands to her face. I thought she was going to cry, but she didn't. "I got stoned last night," she said, "stoned out of my mind. I just couldn't take it anymore. But it only made things worse. It was awful, worse than being sober. All I could think of was Tim, imagine all the horrible things that might've happened to him."

She reached for a bottle and a glass on the night-stand. She poured a drink, spilling some on her blouse. I realized then she was drunk, her pain so great it masked her drunkenness.

She looked at me for the first time and said, "Why'd you come? Think you could help me? Or are you my con-science come to haunt me?"

"I was worried about you."

"He's dead, you know."

"Tim?"

She nodded. "**MIA** is just a polite way of saying it, a way of torturing wives and families. The military's special that way." She took a drink. "I don't need some shit-for-brains army creep knocking on my door with condolences to know he's dead."

I pulled a chair next to her bed and sat down. "You give up hope," I said, "then what's the point in going on? That's what you told me."

"I said that on one of my good days." She managed a smile. It was small and painful, but it brought life back into her face. "I feel so terrible, you know?" Her voice rising, she blinked back the tears.

"I know."

She took a deep breath and set her drink on the nightstand. "So. How was the celebration?"

I told her about our picnic in the yard, and described my grandparents' farm and their big house. She relaxed as I spoke, the coils of tension unwinding inside her.

"I still want you to see their farm," I concluded. "Not today but soon, when you're ready. I want you to get away from here and not have to worry about anything. You can even stay with us if you want."

She watched me for a moment, then held out her hand. "Sit beside me."

I sat down on the bed and she ran her hand along my

arm. She smiled and said, "I was just thinking. I was thinking you could be my boyfriend. Pretty crazy, I guess."

"You don't need a boyfriend," I said gently. "You've got Tim."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do."

She searched my face for traces of doubt. I didn't waver beneath her gaze. Finally she said, "I've got him for a while anyway." She paused. "Will you do something for me, John?"

"Anything."

"Lie down with me and pretend, okay? Just pretend."

I lay down and she straightened the sheets and pulled them over us. She moved close to me, head against my chest, and asked me to put my arm around her. I did. She sighed, succumbing to the pretense. She'd been given back her husband and could sleep now, the nightmare over.

As I lay holding her, I was painfully aware of the irony. She was in my arms but her heart was half a world away, and I could no more ask for her love than I could bring Tim back. I did not have to think of Uncle Roy's advice to understand my responsibility. But I had no idea what to do. I had come here with empty hands, without any purpose except to see Hilde, satisfy my longing. My hands were still empty. I could not work magic.

Sometime after dark I left her, still sleeping, and went to the kitchen, where Woody and Joleen sat talking over cups of coffee.

"How's she doing?" Joleen asked.

"Asleep. That's good, I guess."

"You were in there a long time," she said. It wasn't quite an accusation.

"I stayed with her a while after she went to sleep."

I expected a sarcastic reply, but she didn't say anything.

"How're **you** doing?" I asked her.

"Me? I'm fine."

"It must be hard on you too, your husband fighting over there."

She shrugged. "They say no news is good news."

Woody changed the subject. "You won't believe what she's been telling me," he said. "I can hardly believe it myself. It's about Hilde. Tell him, Joleen."

She poured me a cup of coffee and said, "I figured you ought to know, but you better not say anything to her. It's about her father."

She told me Hilde's father served in the German army in World War Two, that he wasn't a Nazi but was forced to fight. Captured, he was sent to work in a prison camp in Wisconsin. He escaped to Milwaukee, where a German family sheltered him, gave him a new identity. There he married

Hilde's mother and lived for eight years, until he was caught and sent back to Germany. Hilde and her mother wanted to go with him, but he made them stay, believing life would be better for them in the States. Two years later, he died.

Those were the only details Joleen knew, real and inadequate. Absorbing the story, I tried to read between the lines, imagine all the things left unsaid.

"Hilde's not ashamed of it," Joleen said. "And she doesn't keep it a secret. But she doesn't like people feeling sorry for her, so don't say anything."

I told her I wouldn't. Incredible as the story was, it made sense in terms of Hilde's reluctance to talk about her parents.

"The reason I'm telling you this," she said, "it's because she told me something once. She told me she's afraid Tim's alive but they'll never find him. She's afraid he'll get left in Nam and start a new life, and she'll never see him again."

"She told me she's afraid he's dead," I said.

"It amounts to the same thing, if she never sees him again."

She left us to go find a photograph. When she returned with it she said, "That's Tim and Hilde a couple of years ago, right after they were married."

I was shocked at the change in Hilde. It was like

looking at someone I could recognize only by her basic features, a girl photographed in a different era, in her time of youth and optimism. It was hard to believe she and the woman in the bedroom were the same person. The picture wasn't quite a close-up, the sun glinting through the leaves of a tree in the background. She and Tim stood with one arm around each other, smiling with a bold confidence that made them seem more like old friends than demure newlyweds. In Tim, I saw a young man who found strength in laughter, who relished the company of others. He had curly hair and a moustache, and I commented that he looked as if he belonged in college, not the army.

"He was," Joleen said. "Hilde too. They had another year to go at Wisconsin. I don't know what made him enlist, he must've been crazy. He got sent to Riley for basic, and Hilde followed him. They didn't have much time, though, before he shipped out. I never got to meet him."

I couldn't take my eyes from the picture. I was in love with the image, felt strengthened by it; as long as I looked at it, I was a part of that moment, that mood. Finally I gave it back to Joleen, the waves of the intervening months carrying me back to the shore of the present. I looked around the kitchen in sudden despair.

"I don't know what to do," I said.

Woody put his hand on my shoulder. "We came here, didn't we?"

"It's not enough." I gestured at the picture in Joleen's hand. "How do we get that back?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe we don't."

"Don't go soft," Joleen warned, "it won't do you any good."

I stared at her angrily, wondering why she insisted on denying her own emotion. But I realized she was right; I couldn't sink into despair.

We left a few minutes later, but not before I checked on Hilde. I leaned over her and listened to her breathing, afraid her unhappiness might suffocate her. I was grateful for her sleep.

There was an endless line of traffic returning from the lake, headlights throwing a steady glare across our windshield as we drove home. The light made me feel naked, my emotions exposed for everyone to see. I resented the light, the cars, and the people, their celebration of what Hilde called a lie.

"Some story about her father," Woody said. I didn't reply. After a moment he asked, "What did you talk about?"

"Tim, how she's afraid he's dead."

"Did she say anything about Joleen?"

"No."

"I don't think Joleen's got much of a marriage," he said. "She sure didn't act like it anyway."

"What did she say?"

"It was pretty strange. She didn't come on to me, but I got the feeling she was thinking about it. The way she kept looking at me and smiling, and the way she spoke, like everything she said had a double meaning I was supposed to pick up on."

"You're just imagining things," I said.

"I don't think so. She definitely had something on her mind. I mean, I could **feel** it. When I asked her how long her husband would be gone, she said, 'Don't worry, he won't be back tonight.'"

"She was joking, Woody," I said, more in hope than belief.

"That's not all. She said she's not used to sleeping alone. She said she gets lonely."

Angry, I said, "So you're going to keep her company?"

"Hey, I'm just telling you what she said."

"Jesus. Hilde's worried sick and Joleen wants to drag you to bed. Bitch."

"She's had a rough time too."

"Oh, yeah, I can tell she's worried sick about her poor husband."

"You don't know anything about her," he said, "what her life's been like."

"I know what Hilde told me. Joleen met this guy at the bar she used to work at, and the only reason she's scared is she doesn't want to have to go back there."

"What's wrong with that? How would you like a bunch of GI's pawing you?"

"Sounds like that's what she deserves."

"Lay off her, John, I'm not kidding. And lay off me. I didn't do anything. I'm telling you this because I thought you ought to know."

Nothing more was said. Though I couldn't admit it, part of me was envious of Woody. And part of me worried. Things were happening too fast, our emotions being stretched, alliances divided. It was as if Junction City brought us bad luck, split us apart. It had happened our first trip there, the night we bought the knives. The fight and the car chase left us angry and afraid, separated by our sense of helplessness. We resolved our bitterness that night, believing that, like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, we would remain loyal to the end, sharing whatever we had. Such a bond seemed impossible now, as we came to a fork in the road.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Before my family left for Kansas City the next day, my mother reminded me that in four weeks I'd be home. By the first weekend in August, the second hay baling would be finished and Uncle Roy would have his cast removed. The implication was that I would no longer be needed, and the unfairness of it angered me. Too much had happened to be resolved in four weeks. I had invested a great deal of hope on a satisfactory outcome to the summer, only to be told there might not be one.

In Sunday school class the next morning, I saw Mrs. Lutz for the first time since the day my truck broke down. I was afraid she would use the incident as a means for debate, see it as some mysterious work of God from which there was a lesson to be learned. For all I knew, she believed God sent me to her doorstep in search of faith. But she never mentioned it, never asked for my opinion, as she always had before. It was evident in the way she looked at me, however, that she had not forgotten that day. She seemed to be waiting for me to come forward and admit the real purpose of my visit, and her closing prayer provided encouragement.

"Dear Lord," she said, "we are often hesitant to come

to You, to put our trust in You. Help us not to be afraid but to turn to You in our need. Let us seek out Your loving embrace, Your warmth, Your kindness and understanding, so that we may glory in it for all eternity. Give us the passion of faith, the spirit of truth, the joy of love, now and forever. Amen."

The bell rang and I escaped with Woody to the lawn.

"Boy, she was really slinging it," he said. "At least she didn't pick on us."

I wondered if I should tell him about my visit to her house. I didn't know why I'd kept it a secret, but it seemed too late to reveal it now. I felt guilty, coerced into silence for a reason I couldn't understand.

"There she is," Woody said.

Mrs. Lutz stood watching us from the top of the steps, a Bible in her hand, like a school teacher about to end recess and continue the lessons. She watched us intently, as if afraid we were going to play hooky. Her gaze was diverted by a car entering the parking lot. It was Hilde and Joleen, and Woody and I went to meet them.

They were dressed for church, lovely in their crisp summer dresses, and Hilde wore white gloves and a wide-brimmed hat. Her simple elegance moved me, gave me reason to believe my summer was not lost. It was as if her suffering had been nothing more than a bad dream from which she had recovered and blossomed. I was so happy to see

her that I gave no thought to Joleen.

"Hello, John," she said. "I decided it was time to come."

I told her I was glad. Suddenly, I was at a loss for words. Then the second bell rang, signalling the start of the service. I took her hand and we went inside.

Mrs. Lutz didn't look at us as we came in. She sat with Dan across the aisle from us, her gaze frozen on the pulpit. I gave her no thought. Hilde was here, the day fresh with promise, and as I sat impatiently through the service, I thought of all the things we might do that day. Not until the end of the sermon did I stop to think why she had come.

It was then, as we bowed our heads in prayer and I happened to glance at her, that I realized her need for faith. Her face was raised toward the ceiling, eyes closed, hands clutched together so tightly the veins rose against the skin. I had never seen such a passionate, earnest look, one that made me feel empty by comparison. After her days of doubt and anguish, she was willing to believe, to ask for God's help.

I was not the only witness. Across the aisle, Mrs. Lutz watched as if hypnotized, her face swept clean of emotion. Blinking, she caught my gaze. Her face came to life, eyes pleading--for what I didn't know.

I looked at my hands, thinking I should pray too.

But I didn't know how. It was a stunning self-revelation. I didn't know how to pray. I didn't know where to begin, what to ask for.

After dinner at my grandparents' house, Hilde and I and Woody and Joleen took a walk through the farm. Walking up the ridge against which the barn was built, we rolled back the door to the hayloft and grain bins. Though they were still wearing their Sunday clothes, Woody and Joleen went wading in the wheat bin, while Hilde and I stood at the door, gazing across the east pasture, dry and faded in the sunlight. Everything was quiet except for Woody and Joleen's laughter, and the pigeons cooing in the rafters.

"You're awfully quiet," Hilde said. "Is something wrong?"

"No," I said, though I was still thinking about my inability to pray. I felt guilty. I should have at least been able to pray for Tim.

"Are you worried about Joleen and Woody?"

I looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

More laughter erupted from the wheat bin, and she stepped from the doorway to escape it. I followed her over to the fence.

She said, "Joleen's decided she has to have Woody."

"She told you that?"

"In a roundabout way." She glanced at the barn.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? When I told her I wanted to go to church, I didn't think she'd come. But she was all for it. I asked her why, and she said she'd get to see Woody again. She acted like something happened Friday night. Did it, John?"

"Not that I saw. Woody told me she didn't come on to him, but she acted like she had it in mind."

"You'd better have a talk with him. He's headed for trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. Anything could happen." She touched one of the barbs in the fence as if to emphasize the danger. "I like Joleen," she said slowly, "in spite of the things she does. Or maybe I just put up with her because she's had such a hard life. But I know what kind of girl she is, and it worries me. She'll use Woody because that's what she's learned to do, use men before they use her."

"What about her husband?"

"She used him to get out of the bar."

"Just what did she do at this place?" I asked.

"Sometimes she was a waitress, sometimes what they call a hostess. Men paid to sit and talk to her, among other things. She thought if she got married, she could be like other people. Marriage would change things, make her life stable and respectable."

"Except it hasn't."

"She's lonely and angry. Nothing's turned out the way she hoped, and she's looking for something to make up for it."

"Woody," I said.

"She knows what kind of boy he is," she said bluntly. "Nice and not very experienced. She won't have any trouble at all."

"Woody's not dumb," I said, a little defensive. "And who are we to say they shouldn't?"

"It complicates things, John. Like Friday night. I don't know what you think of me."

"I don't think anything bad. I like you."

"But I used you," she said. "In my own way I used you. Sometimes people get so unhappy they take advantage of others without meaning to, and it complicates things."

"What're you saying?"

"I'm saying I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me. I'm not like Joleen."

"I know that."

"Nothing can happen between us."

"I know," I said angrily. "You don't have to preach to me."

She looked helplessly about, as if overwhelmed by the expansiveness of the land. "It's just I don't want things to change," she said. "I want them to stay the way they

were that night at the lake, or the night we drove out to see you. We were just getting to be friends, you know? We were still in that stage where it doesn't take much to be friends. You don't have to give a lot, and you don't have to receive a lot and worry about what you owe. It's like a diversion. You just enjoy yourself and don't have to worry about consequences. The problem is, it's never enough. After a while you need more, even if you don't always want it. It's not a diversion anymore, but something you count on, start planning for. And that's when things get complicated. Before you know it you're getting a lot more from someone than you ever intended, and you're not sure how much to give back."

"You make it sound like I've done something wonderful," I said. "I haven't. You don't owe me anything."

"But I **want** to owe you something, John. I want to return your kindness. That's what a friend does. But I don't know what to do, and I'm afraid. Everything gets so **complicated.**"

I hadn't realized until then the extent of her dependence on me, her need for a friend, anyone, even a sixteen-year-old boy whose life was as free of tragedy as hers was ensnared by it. Even then, I had no illusions. She had lost her father and probably her husband to the consequences of war, and looked for solace in anyone kind enough to listen. Her suffering was the basis for our friendship,

a fact which angered and saddened me. But the bond was there, waiting for a direction. Hilde said so herself.

As these thoughts passed through my mind, I grew conscious of her watching me. And then it struck me. She was waiting for a decision, or at least some signal, some word or gesture to tell her what to do. But I had no answer. My voice had left me. All I could do was wait out the silence.

Finally she suggested we check on Joleen and Woody. Her voice was heavy with disappointment, but no greater than my own.

They sat on a beam above the hayloft, looking down at us with eyes bright with intensity, their breath shortened by the precarious height to which they'd climbed. Until that moment, I hadn't fully believed Woody would have anything to do with her. But as our eyes met, I realized I was wrong. He had gone ahead without me. The immensity of the change loomed over me like the barn itself, dim and silent.

"Come on, Joleen," Hilde said, "it's time to go home."

"Go on ahead," said Woody. "We'll catch up."

"Get down **now**," I said. "What're you doing up there anyway?"

Joleen laughed. "Adventure. We need something to liven up the summer."

"Get down or I'll leave without you," Hilde warned.

"Aw, you're no fun," Joleen pouted. She took Woody's hand and said, "Ready?"

They slid off the beam and fell into the hay, Joleen's dress billowing about her legs. Laughing, they got up and brushed the hay from each other.

Joleen giggled. "I think I got some in my dress."

I turned and walked out of the barn, Hilde following. As we walked to the house she said, "I'll have a talk with her."

I didn't reply. I was sick of all of them, even Hilde, and wanted to be left alone.

Hilde went inside to say good-bye. I waited by the car, watching as Joleen and Woody came out of the barn and strolled across the farmyard in the late-afternoon light, their voices softly urgent. I turned away, but didn't know where to go. The farm seemed tainted, the scent of my grandmother's flowers bittersweet.

As Woody and I got ready for bed that night, a tension filled the room, thickening the air with the threat of a confrontation. It drew in the walls and the ceiling, crowding us against each other.

"You're asking for trouble," I said.

"Yeah? How's that?"

"You've had a hard-on ever since you came out of the barn."

He laughed. "You would have too."

"So what happened? Did you fuck her?" I said it with all the ugliness I could.

He got up from his bed and stood over me, eyes dark and glaring. "Watch your mouth."

"Well, what happened?"

He sat down again and smiled. "You're jealous."

"I'm watching out for your ass, man."

"You worry too much," he said. "That's your one problem. You worry about everything and miss out on all the fun."

"What about what your dad told us?"

"He said it because that's the kind of thing a father's supposed to say. Mom probably told him to. You believe everything they say?"

"I believe what Hilde told me--that you're headed for trouble. She's worried."

"What Hilde's afraid of is her own feelings. For you. When she sees me and Joleen together, she sees what it could be like with you."

"That's crazy."

"It's not crazy to Joleen," he said. "She told me Hilde's right on the edge, could go either way. It wouldn't take much to get her."

It sounded cruel, the way he stated it, as if Hilde would fall from a high ledge by a touch of my finger.

"Look, John, we don't have to argue. We ought to be

happy. Joleen likes me, Hilde likes you. Think of everything we can do before you go home."

"They're married, Woody."

"Yeah, and their husbands're fighting in a war that's wrong."

"That doesn't make any difference. It wouldn't be fair."

"Since when was anything ever fair? Was it fair that GI got killed? Was it fair we had to find him? Look, this kind of thing happens all the time. It's not like we're the first guys to do it. Think about it. In a way we're helping Joleen and Hilde. They need us."

I stared at him. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. What's happened to you? What did Joleen do to you?"

"She made me promises," he said, his gaze level with mine. "And she's going to keep them."

He looked at me a moment longer, then turned off the light.

Lying in the darkness, I wondered what would happen. We all must have wondered that night, tried to peer through the curtains for a glimpse of the next act. Had we actually been able to see the outcome of the summer, we would not have believed it.

CHAPTER NINE

It rained the next day and on into the week, washing away the heat and the dust, and the burned-out Fourth of July weekend. The farm turned green and new, softening under the balm of cool, wet air. It seemed almost that the summer had started over.

Woody and I spent more and more time apart. If one of us wanted to stay in our room and listen to music, the other went downstairs and watched TV. We did chores together, always in silence, and at meals we listened to the others talk. Neither Aunt Margaret nor Uncle Roy noticed the change.

I wished we could return to the time before we'd met Hilde and Joleen. I missed the lake, even Cap and the crew. I wanted the diversion of another patrol, to be a member of the group. Even our discovery of James Johnson had acquired a nostalgic touch; together, Woody and I had braved the dark woods.

Two days after the rain started, Cheryl and I went on a search for Bingo. The collie had been missing since the weekend, and we were worried he'd been hit by a car or killed by coyotes. We didn't find him, but in the pasture across the highway we discovered that part of the

pond's dam had broken away, flooding the area below it. The pool was filled with bullheads, and when we told Aunt Margaret, she suggested we invite Hilde and Joleen out for a fish fry.

Quick to agree, Woody made the call. I could tell by the sound of his voice that Joleen had answered. Hanging up, he smiled victoriously and said, "They just got off work. They'll be out in an hour."

They arrived under a heavy gray sky that promised more rain. We were waiting for them on the hayrack, including my grandparents and Uncle Roy, who sat with his leg propped on a straw bale. Hilde sat down beside me, and Joleen climbed up on the tractor behind Woody. Uncle Roy warned her she might fall off, but she said she'd hang on tight.

Woody put the tractor in gear and we started down the muddy lane. Despite the gloomy evening, my relatives were full of good cheer. Aunt Margaret began to sing "In the Good Old Summertime," and everyone joined in but me. Watching Joleen, I thought how alien she looked on the tractor, like a misplaced immigrant. Even Woody seemed out of place, and I was reminded of what Aunt Margaret had once said: it was only a matter of time before he left the farm. I wondered what he would leave it for.

We crossed the highway and passed through the gate Hilde and I opened. Below us the pond lay gray and swollen. The woods rose up against the south edge of the

pasture, blocking our view of the cove. They looked dark and misty, like a jungle, tangled with secrets.

Hilde must have seen my look, for she said, "That's where you found him?"

"Somewhere over there," I said. I pointed, but the gesture was meaningless. The woods looked the same everywhere, an unbroken wall shrouded in anonymity.

"They still haven't solved it, have they?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm beginning to think they never will."

Arriving at the pool below the dam, we saw the ripples the fish made. Everyone began talking at once, and I forgot the woods as I focused on the job ahead, which quickly became a game to see who could catch the most fish. Rolling up our jeans, we waded in, careful not to step on a fin as we trailed our arms through the knee-deep water. My grandparents stood watching, keeping count of the fish each of us caught, while Aunt Margaret passed on the fish to Uncle Roy, who put them on a stringer. We left the net on the hayrack; using it would have taken away the fun. There was a challenge in having to rely only on our hands, an anticipation in groping through the muddy water, our senses keyed toward touch, as if to make our hands see and hear. We competed, yet worked together, equalized by the blindness the cloudy water forced upon us, intent on nothing else. For a half-hour we forgot who we were,

ignored our divided loyalties. The world went no farther than that pasture, and we had no past or future to dwell on.

Woody won the game, catching eleven bullheads. We caught forty-five altogether, some weighing over a pound. We threw the smaller ones back in the pond, leaving us with enough for supper and for Aunt Margaret and the girls to freeze.

It was while Woody and I were putting the smaller fish back that I had the feeling we were being watched. It was so strong that I stopped what I was doing and looked around. The pasture was completely still in the approaching darkness, as if it too had sensed a change and were holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. As I looked toward the woods, a shiver ran through me. I was certain someone was there, watching us.

"What's wrong?" Woody asked.

"We're being watched."

"Where?" His gaze darted about.

"The woods."

He squinted. "I don't see anyone."

"I feel it," I said. "I really **feel** it."

He stood unmoving, polarized by my certainty and his own doubt.

"I know it's crazy," I said, whispering now, "but I feel it. Don't you?"

He didn't answer, his gaze fixed on the dark, wet trees. Finally he said, "Yeah. I **do** feel it."

"Let's get out of here," I said. Fear tremored my voice, setting us in motion like a starting gun.

He started the tractor and I jumped on the hayrack, where the mood was festive. Hilde sensed the change in me.

"What is it, John?" she asked. "What's wrong? You're trembling." She reached for a blanket and spread it across my shoulders.

"I don't know," I said. "I had this feeling we were being watched. It's gone now, I think."

But even as I spoke, I shivered again. Darkness was falling fast, and I wanted to get home while we could still see.

Her gaze went immediately to the woods. "Someone in the woods?" she asked. I nodded. "Maybe," she said, "you feel that way because it's a bad place for you. You've got that horrible memory."

"Maybe," I said, but I wasn't convinced.

We bumped across the pasture, twilight melting into the darkness. I looked ahead, across the highway to the pale yard light glowing through the trees, and tried to think of the happy commotion of supper, the warmth of the kitchen. Still, I couldn't help but feel there were ghosts at my back, hanging in the darkness like a mist.

The feeling left me when we got back to the house. We cleaned the fish on the back porch, listening to the Royals game as we worked, and then we sat down to a meal of fried fish and potatoes. After my grandfather said the blessing, our voices rose in a wave, forks scraping plates, fish spattering in the skillet like static. Steam rose from our cups of coffee, heating our faces as we sipped. We basked in each other's company and the fun we'd had, warmed by the afterglow of our outing. The darkness seemed far away.

It was late when we finished eating, and Hilde said it was time she and Joleen went home. I supposed she didn't want Woody and Joleen to see each other any longer than necessary. Or perhaps she was uncomfortable with me. At any rate I was disappointed. As much fun as the evening had been, I'd expected something more.

Woody and I walked them to the car and watched as they drove down the lane. Inside, Aunt Margaret turned off the yard light, plunging the farm into darkness. A thought suddenly came to me: if there really had been someone watching us, maybe he'd done something to Bingo. I was going to mention it to Woody, but he'd already started for the door, silent now that the girls were gone.

Later that night, I was still awake when I heard him get out of bed and quietly leave the room. It was almost midnight, and it had started to rain again. I went to the

door and heard the creak of the stairs, and then the tentative squeak of the door as he stepped into the kitchen. The stealthiness of his movements told me something was up.

I crept down the stairs and listened at the open door. I heard him dial a number. When he spoke, he lowered his voice to a whisper. I caught only snatches of the conversation, enough to tell me he was talking to Joleen, and was supposed to meet her tomorrow night.

I sneaked back to bed, and when he came in, I heard the quiet rush of his breath, as if he'd brought Joleen with him.

I pretended innocence the next day, wanting to find out for myself what would happen that night. I looked for signs of guilt or impatience in him, but the mask he wore was as fixed as mine. My only satisfaction came as I planned various forms of revenge. Whatever happened tonight, I would be there to stop it.

At eleven-thirty, I listened as Woody got dressed and crawled out the window. I got up in time to see him climb down the oak tree along the side of the house and run to the car. Throwing on my clothes, I went out to the roof and saw him pushing the car down the lane. The door was open so he could steer, the dome light shining hopefully in the night. The weather had cleared but the lane was still muddy, and half-way to the highway the car got stuck.

I wanted to laugh. Fate had handed me my revenge.

He was pushing the car so frantically he never saw me coming. When I started to whistle, he jumped so hard he nearly slipped and fell.

"Hi there," I said casually. "What's up?"

"Jesus, man, you scared the shit out of me." He leaned against the trunk, breathing rapidly, his face flushed and sweating. He looked so agonized that I felt a twinge of sympathy. It wasn't enough to keep me from tormenting him further.

"Now what could you possibly be doing?" I said. "Don't tell me, let me guess. You're running away from home because no one understands you. Or could it be you're going for a drive to contemplate the meaning of life?"

"Listen, John--"

"Or could it be you've got a date to get your brains fucked?"

The harshness of my voice made him wince. I expected him to get angry but he didn't. He folded his arms and looked at the muddy ground that had trapped him. "Okay," he said softly, "you've had your fun. Now leave me alone."

"Why didn't you tell me, Woody?"

He stared into the darkness, as if I would find the answer there if I only looked. "You would've tried to stop me."

I had no answer to that. Knowing it, he dismissed

me by turning his attention back to the car. There was a pathetic quality to him as he slopped about the mud, helpless to do anything.

"Didn't you realize you might get stuck?" I asked. "I mean, look at it, the lane's a fucking swamp."

"Don't you think I know that?" he said bitterly.

"Then why're you doing this?"

"I have to see her."

"She means that much to you?"

He didn't answer; he didn't have to. I could see the desire and frustration tightening his face. I suddenly felt cold and empty, like an old man whose passion had withered away.

"So maybe it's wrong," he admitted. "I don't care. I'm not going to think about it. All summer long, it's like I've been waiting for something. Something to make me different." He looked down the lane as if it led into the past, back to a place he could no longer go. "What I have, who I am, it's not enough anymore. I need something else." He shifted his gaze to me. "I'll get to her, John, one way or another."

I looked down the muddy lane, feeling that I too had reached a turning point. "Okay," I said. "I'll help you."

He looked at me with hope and disbelief. "You don't have to."

"I will, but I want to know what's going on first."

"I'm supposed to pick her up," he said eagerly. "After that, well, she says she knows a place we can go."

"Does Hilde know about it?"

"No way. And don't tell her."

"Damn right I won't," I said. "And don't you tell Joleen I helped you. I don't ever want this getting back to Hilde."

"It's a deal," he said. He actually shook my hand.

We got planks from the barn and laid them under the car. With my added strength, we managed to roll the rear wheels onto them. We pushed the car free, moving it down the lane, and as we neared the highway Woody jumped in and started the engine. He turned onto the highway and got out. "What about the planks?"

"I'll take care of it," I said, waving him away. "Get going."

I carried the planks back to the barn and climbed the tree to the roof. It was almost one-thirty when I crept downstairs and put my muddy jeans in the washroom. I was wide awake, so I went out to the roof and smoked a cigarette. It felt strange, smoking alone, and I understood then why I'd helped Woody: I was afraid of losing him. I didn't realize I'd lost him long ago, on the night we found James Johnson.

It was Woody who woke me the next morning, and I sensed the change in him right away. He had a new

awareness of himself, a confidence gained only by being with a woman. Now that he'd reached that plateau we were friends again, but I was left with the painful feeling I would be forever trying to catch up to him.

"When did you get back?" I asked.

"An hour ago. I couldn't sleep."

"You'll be dead by noon."

"Maybe. Right now I'm wide awake." He looked wide awake, refreshed and vigorous. Only his eyes were heavy, cut off from his supply of energy.

Looking out the window, I said, "I see you made it back okay."

"It was easy. I had the strength of a thousand men." He waited for me to ask him for all the details, but I didn't want to hear them. After a moment he said, "Thanks again for helping me, John. It means a lot to me. Joleen too."

"Sure. No problem." I put on my bathrobe and went to the door.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Since we're sort of in this together, I figure I should tell you what's going on."

"I've got a pretty good idea."

"I mean about tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah. I'm meeting her again tonight. Don't worry, you won't have to do anything. I just wanted you to know."

"How're you working this so Hilde doesn't find out?" I asked.

"Easy. Joleen sneaks out of the house and meets me on the corner."

"When do you guys find time to sleep?"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow's Saturday. I'll sleep late."

"How long's this going to go on, Woody?"

His eyes averted mine. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Maybe you should," I said. I felt like his father. "Maybe you should think about everything this could lead to."

He told me he'd give it some thought, but I doubted he would. Given his situation, I wasn't sure I would have either.

Woody was exhausted by the end of the day, and went to bed right after supper. I was watching TV when Hilde called.

"I thought you and Woody could come in for supper and a movie tomorrow night," she said. After a pause at my end of the line she said, "You don't have to worry. I had a long talk with Joleen and she promised she wouldn't encourage Woody. She went to bed early, that's why I called you now, so we could talk. Everything's okay, John, there won't be any more trouble. I really feel good, and I want us to get together. It won't be much longer before you

go home."

"Sounds fun," I heard myself say.

"It will be. We didn't get to talk much the other night, but we'll have plenty of time tomorrow. Is five-thirty okay?"

I told her it was, and we said good-bye. I went back to the TV, hardly aware of the show that was on.

I was asleep when Woody left the house that night. I wanted no more involvement in the affair, and sleep seemed the only absolution.

The sky was clear, the breeze fresh and warm as Woody and I drove to town the next evening. From the highway, the land looked rejuvenated. The plowed wheat fields were black and smoothly ridged from the rain, the pastures washed and fluffed. The lake looked crisper, as if the rain had cleared away the sluggish top water to reveal a new, bright-blue surface.

Only Junction City remained unchanged, strained by the congestion of rush-hour traffic. It depressed me to think of Hilde living here, among the huckstering and quick sales of a military town, a last, indifferent reminder of home for the soldiers sent to Vietnam. I wondered what she'd thought upon arriving here, light-years from college life.

Woody was silent during the drive. He didn't act enthusiastic about seeing the girls, and I assumed it was

because his lack of sleep had caught up with him. Or perhaps he'd originally made other plans with Joleen. I wondered if they'd had a fight. He'd been preoccupied all afternoon.

Joleen met us at the door. She gave us her lopsided smile and kissed Woody. "Come and get it," she said. "Supper, I mean."

I looked at Woody but he carefully avoided my eyes. The guilt written on his face made it clear he'd told her I knew what they were doing, even after I'd asked him not to. I was more worried than angry. The three of us had formed a pact whose purpose was to deceive Hilde, and I was dependent upon Joleen not to give it away.

In the kitchen, Hilde was taking a loaf of garlic bread from the oven. She looked happy to be cooking for us. Mixing bowls cluttered the counter, and the air was sweet with the aroma of garlic and spaghetti sauce.

"I thought we'd see **Easy Rider**," she said as we started on the tossed salad. "I've heard a lot about it. It's about three guys who take a cross-country motorcycle trip, trying to find a place to belong. Finally we're getting movies about what's going on in this country."

We talked about the recent films we'd seen, and I was impressed with Hilde. She'd seen films I'd never heard of.

"How'd you see so many?" I asked.

"In college." She looked surprised. "I never did tell you, did I? Tim and I went to the University of Wisconsin. That's where we met."

She hadn't told me, but of course Joleen had. I pretended innocence, hating myself for it. Our deception of Hilde was growing, and I felt helpless to stop it.

"I was majoring in history," she went on, "wanted to be a teacher. I also took some courses in film. That's where I learned most of what I know. Plus there was a little movie house near the campus. It showed movies you couldn't see anywhere else. Tim and I went there all the time." She smiled, her eyes holding a glimmer of the past.

"What was it like, going to college?" I asked.

She thought for a moment and said, "There was this great desire to prove ourselves, to do well in everything, whether it was getting an A in a class or making a speech on campus. We wanted to show the country we were mature, that ours was the voice of reason. The government had gone insane and it was up to us to do something about it. But a lot of the things we did . . . I don't know. They got distorted. It was hard to keep our motives straight, know what was right."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing really bad--not me personally, though I knew people who set fires and things like that. I got arrested once at a sit-in, and it was scary, how good it felt being

a martyr. I was so right and the cops were so wrong. I can understand how it obsesses some people. They start out believing in a cause and end up believing in themselves. It becomes personal, and you can't help it--not when you've got a cop shoving you around. You're being persecuted for doing what you're convinced is right, and a lot of the time you **are** doing the right thing. But sometimes the distinction blurs. You blind yourself to the difference between right and wrong. You let your emotions persuade you, and you believe whatever you do is right because it's all for the cause. Sometimes I think that's where the real battle is, more inside yourself than against **them.**"

Her words lingered in the air like a challenge to all of us. Though she and I were friends, I sensed a widening gulf between us, measured in knowledge and experience. I had yet to learn the lessons she had, though the summer had forced me to take the first painful steps.

Easy Rider disturbed all of us, and afterwards we walked back to the car in depressed silence. I felt shaken loose from reality, as if the film's narrative had spread from the screen to encompass my life. It was hard to forget the bizarre montage sequence in the New Orleans cemetery, and Dennis Hopper's death at the hands of the rednecks.

"I couldn't believe the movie ended like that," Woody

said. "I mean, something more had to happen. Those god-damn rednecks had to be caught. You can't end a movie like that. What's the point?"

Hilde said bitterly, "The point is, things like that happen. No one said life's fair."

"Well," he said, "I'll take Butch and Sundance. Now that's a good movie."

We returned to the house. Hilde put on some music, trying to keep the evening going, but we'd run out of things to say.

Finally Joleen said, "We need some beer to liven things up."

"We're out," Hilde told her. "You drank it all last night."

Joleen smiled. "I'll go to the store. Come on, Woody, go with me."

Hilde didn't seem to mind their going off together. Apparently, she trusted Joleen to keep her word. After they were gone, she said, "So much for **Easy Rider**."

"It wasn't bad," I said, "just . . . depressing."

She sighed. "I used to not mind movies like that when Tim was here. But now, they just remind me he's gone. It doesn't even have to be a movie. Anything can set me off, like a song or a TV show, or waking up in the morning alone. There's always something to remind me of him."

I hesitated, wanting to ask her a question I'd had

since we first met. "Hilde, why did Tim go? Wasn't he against it?"

Her silence told me it was a question she didn't want to answer. But she did. After a long wait she said, "He went for his brother Terry, who died in Nam a year ago. He said he couldn't sit back and do nothing, he had to go and fight for the memory of his brother. He felt guilty because Terry wasn't in college, didn't escape the draft like he did. I never believed he'd really do it, or maybe I just kept hoping he wouldn't. But he did. He wasn't the last of the sons in his family, and the army was glad to take him. We had a terrible fight and now I regret it. Of course we made up, but I feel guilty, like I didn't support him enough."

"You can't blame yourself for that," I said.

She smiled at me, but a memory blocked her way. "That's what he told me. He knew how guilty I felt, and he told me it was okay. He said the fight was proof of my love. But . . ." her voice grew soft, "he loved his brother enough to die for him."

I couldn't tell if she believed Tim was actually dead, or meant only that he was prepared to die for his brother. In a sense, it was beside the point. Tim had made his choice, just as her father had years ago, when he returned to Germany alone. I wondered what kind of love could make these men leave Hilde, and how she managed to accept it.

I wanted to ask about her father, but couldn't bring myself to.

We said little after that, as if waiting for the disaster about to descend upon us, altering the course of the summer.

It came with the sound of slamming doors and Joleen's angry voice. "Let go of me, you bastard!"

Hilde and I rushed to the door in time to see Joleen slap Woody. The porch light froze them.

"Turn it off!" Joleen shouted.

Hilde switched it off and we went outside.

Mindful of an audience, Joleen cursed Woody and said, "No more, man, you ain't getting no more from me. You won't play with me, I won't play with you."

"What's going on?" Hilde asked. The truth hadn't quite broken through her surprise.

"Come on, John," Woody said, his face an angry red. "We're getting out of here."

"That's right," said Joleen, "get out of here and don't come back. Go find someone else to fuck."

"What's going on here?" Hilde repeated as she left the porch. Her voice rose with each step she took.

"Tell her, Woody," Joleen said.

He said nothing. He leaned against the car and looked at the ground, hands jammed in his pockets like objects that needed to be hidden.

Joleen turned to me defiantly. "Tell her, John. Tell her about me and Woody."

"John?" I heard Hilde say. I couldn't face her.

"Go on, tell her," Joleen taunted. "You little pricks thought you could pull something over, didn't you. Woody gets some action, you have a big laugh over it. You think you were next, Johnny boy?"

The force of my lunge knocked us both to the ground. I grabbed for her throat, calling her every dirty name I could think of. It sickened me to touch her, her corruption like a disease spreading over me. I wanted to kill her, drive it from her. I tightened my grip on her throat, choking her as hard as I could.

"Stop it!" Hilde screamed. "Stop it, you're killing her!"

It took both her and Woody to drag me off. I turned my fury on him and we wrestled in the weeds, grunting and swearing. I felt a sharp pain in my side, then another--it was Joleen kicking me, shouting hoarsely. I grabbed her ankle and she fell on top of me and Woody, beating her fists against us until Hilde pulled her away.

A voice shouted from a darkened window across the street, threatening to call the police.

"Fuck you!" Joleen screamed back. She turned to me, her voice trembling with rage. "You're dead, man, you're fucking dead."

"Shut up," Woody said. "You're nothing but a whore. I'm sorry I ever laid eyes on you."

Hilde looked back and forth among us, her gaze coming to rest on me. I had nothing to say. She looked at Woody and Joleen, smiling in something between disbelief and disgust. Shaking her head, she went inside.

I said to Joleen, "I see you again, I'll kill you." And with that I started down the street, anger boiling inside me.

Woody caught up with me in the car. Ignoring him, I moved down the sidewalk, staring straight ahead, as if events had forced a tunnel vision upon me.

"I'll give you a ride," he offered, like a stranger on a highway. "You can't walk all the way home."

I said nothing. I wondered where my home was. For the first time since I'd moved to the farm, I felt displaced. The farm was not my home, but neither was Kansas City.

"Please, John, I want to talk to you." His voice was close to breaking.

Realizing the impracticality of walking home, I got in the car. A sack of beer sat between us on the seat.

"She forgot it," he said. "Serves her right. Let her get her own beer. Least we came away with something, right? You want one?" I shook my head. He opened a can and we drove slowly through town.

When we reached the highway he said, "I'm sorry, John, I don't know why I told her you knew. That first night, it was like . . . I was so happy. There I was, stuck in the lane, and everything was crashing down on me, and then you helped me, and I was on my way and everything was okay. It was all taking shape. Going into town, I felt so good, so perfect, I felt like celebrating. I can't explain it, I'd never felt that way before. I knew exactly what was going to happen when I got there, and I felt grateful to her. I trusted her. I wanted to tell her everything because I thought she'd understand. And she wanted me to. She wanted me to tell her anything I wanted. And I did. It was like I couldn't stop talking, before and after. I mean, I can tell you things, but it's different with a girl, you know?"

We had picked up speed while he spoke, the impetus of his words accelerating the car. Slowing a little, he said, "That first night was so perfect. But last night--" he shook his head in amazement. "She told me she needed money. Like an idiot I asked her why, and she gave me some song and dance about needing the money in case her husband got killed. So I asked her how much she needed, and she said however much I had on me. I had thirty bucks, so I gave it to her. It didn't really dawn on me what was going on, or maybe I just didn't want to see it. But then, when I dropped her off, she told me to ask you if you were

interested. That was it, man, right then and there I knew what it was all about. But I was afraid to say anything. I didn't want to make her mad enough to tell Hilde. I couldn't see why she would, because Hilde wouldn't like what she was doing, but I couldn't be sure. I didn't know what to do. She set me up and I felt trapped, you know? The crazy thing was, I kept thinking about that time you and I talked about sharing a woman, like Butch and Sundance. Some joke that turned out to be."

I lit a cigarette and offered him one. "So what happened tonight?"

"We bought the beer and she asked me how much money I had left. I told her I didn't have any, and she didn't believe me. She said I had more, I just wouldn't give it to her. Then she gave me all this shit about how I was using her, how I didn't give a damn what happened to her if her husband didn't make it home. I got mad and called her a whore. I know I shouldn't have said anything, but I couldn't help it. I was so pissed. I called her a whore and a traitor and all kinds of things. By this time we were back at the house, and I was getting worried. I told her to keep quiet, but she wouldn't. You know the rest."

We left the highway and stopped in a parking lot above the dam, the lake spread out before us in the night. Far to the west, pinpoints of light shone at the marina in Crystal Cove. I felt I was looking backward in time, the

distant lights the last remaining fragments of the summer, which was receding into the darkness.

"I just don't understand it," said Woody. "She seemed so nice. Remember all that stuff she told us about Hilde? It was like she was trying to be nice, help us understand what was going on. Then all this happens, and Hilde gets the knife just like the rest of us. I just can't figure it out."

I remembered what Hilde had said after the movie, about things just happening, without reason or fairness. It was hardly an adequate explanation.

As a peace offering, he gave me a beer and said, "I'm sorry, John. I wish I could do it all over again, but I can't."

"It's okay, Woody."

"If you want I'll call Hilde, try to explain things. Want me to?"

I said I didn't know. I gulped my beer, wanting to get drunk so I could forget Hilde and everything that had happened. I was afraid to think I might never see her again.

"We were better off without them," he said bitterly. "She called me a coward. She said my guts were in my dick, can you believe it? Fucking whore. I should've shown her this." He took the revolver from under the seat. "I was so mad I never thought about it. This would've shut her

up."

"Forget it, Woody."

He stashed the gun and drank some more beer, drunken anger building in him. "I don't even know what anything means anymore. What happened to the summer?"

I wondered myself. Only a week ago, I worried I wouldn't have time to resolve the summer. Now, it was suddenly behind me, pulled from my grasp by forces I couldn't understand.

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning I stayed in bed, telling Woody I wasn't going to church.

"What do you want me to tell Mom?" he asked.

"Whatever you want."

Minutes later Aunt Margaret came up, bringing the aroma of bacon and eggs with her. "Are you sick?" she asked. It was nothing more than a prelude; she knew I wasn't.

"I don't feel like going," I said. "I've gone all summer, this time I'm not. My mind's made up," I added for emphasis.

"Why not?"

"I don't feel like it."

She sat down on Woody's bed and said, "I'd like a better reason."

To give her a reason would be to recount the entire summer. I said nothing.

"Does it have something to do with Hilde and Joleen?"

I realized that unless I gave her an answer, she might call the girls. She might call anyway, to invite them back to the farm. And so I gave her the story Woody and I had decided on. As I told it, I wondered if I no longer knew

how to tell the truth. As the summer progressed, I had either heaped one lie on top of another, or simply remained silent to the truth, brushing away the footprints revealing the course I'd taken.

"Hilde and Joleen are leaving town for a while," I said. "It was kind of sudden. They got some time off, so they're going to visit Hilde's mother. I don't know if I'll see them again."

"I see." She looked hurt that the girls would leave without saying good-bye.

"I'm too depressed to go to church," I said. "I need some time alone."

"I understand, John, but don't you think you should go for Hilde and Joleen's sake, say a prayer for them?"

"I can do that here."

"Sheila Lutz will miss you. She told me you make the class interesting."

"What did she mean by that?"

"That you care, have lots of challenging questions. She said you've helped strengthen her own faith." My aunt smiled wryly. "I didn't think it was possible Sheila Lutz's faith could get any stronger. At any rate, she'll be sorry you weren't there."

I wanted to laugh. Mrs. Lutz was another reason I refused to go. I couldn't stand to listen to her anymore.

Aunt Margaret stood up. "All right, then, you can

stay home. But it would be nice if you went next week. It'll be your last time, you know."

I listened to her walk down the stairs, suddenly angry with her and my uncle for being so gullible, for standing on the periphery of the events that occurred that summer. They had given Woody and me the freedom we'd always wanted, and now I could only resent it.

The rain had passed, the ground was dry, and it was a relief to return to work, plowing the last of the stubble fields and cultivating the milo. I felt connected to the land as I had during the wheat harvest, and wished I'd never set foot in Crystal Cove. If only I had remained here, among the sun, the crops, and the soil. I felt I missed something, hadn't paid close enough attention to the land. Already the alfalfa fields blossomed again, the cycle repeating itself, returning me to the beginning even as I felt the end approaching. When the alfalfa was cut and baled, I would return home.

Woody said little during this time, and I supposed it was because he felt guilty. I didn't realize how much the incident had affected him until I caught him sneaking out of the house one night.

I was awakened by a noise on the roof, and when I looked I saw him climbing down the tree. For a moment I wondered if I had dreamed his fight with Joleen. Dressing, I followed him down to the car. He stood looking at it

uncertainly, as if unable to decide what to do.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He started, so preoccupied he hadn't heard me approach. He seemed as confused as I was.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

He looked at the moon for an answer, then lowered his gaze to the lane, where I had sent him on his way a week ago. "I've got to do something," he said. "It's not right, the way things turned out."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. Joleen's got to be punished. She ruined everything."

"It wouldn't do any good, Woody. We should just leave her alone."

"What about you and Hilde?"

"Maybe she'll call me."

"She would've by now," he said.

"Then maybe I'll call her."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"You won't call her," he said. "I'll have to do it for you."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow. Come on, let's get some sleep."

"No, man, it's not right. Joleen started this and I'm going to finish it."

His bitter determination worried me; the last thing we needed was more trouble. "There's nothing we can do, Woody. It's okay, I'm not mad."

"I am," he said. "I keep remembering what you said to her, that if you ever saw her again you'd kill her."

"I didn't mean it, it was just something I said."

"We could do it, you know. I could."

I put my hands on his shoulders, wanting to shake some sense into him. "Listen to what you're saying. It's crazy. We have to forget them."

His shoulders slumped beneath my hands. He leaned against the car and said, "Nothing's gone right. It's like that GI we found gave us bad luck. All the things I thought would happen, none of them have. I don't even know anymore what I expected."

"We had some good times on the boat."

He smiled for the first time. "Crazy times. Good crazy times."

"Maybe we can go out again," I said encouragingly. "Forget everything else, go back to the way things used to be."

"I guess so," he said. "We've got to do something."

We went back to bed, but I stayed awake until I heard his breathing fall into the steady rhythm of sleep. I felt responsible for him, like the parent of a dangerous and unpredictable child.

We tried calling Bill, but there was never an answer. When Saturday came we drove to the marina, hoping to find the crew assembled for another patrol.

The cabin cruiser was moored in its slip, and Cap was at work on the motor. Connie Brown and Holy Joe Kidd were with him.

Cap smiled faintly when he saw us, his dark glasses reflecting the sun. "The lost crew finally returns," he said in his even voice.

As we stepped into the stern, I felt the change. There was no mood of anticipation or camaraderie, no sense we'd entered a world without rules except those we made. An emptiness pervaded the boat.

"Where is everyone?" Woody asked.

"Gone," Cap said. "Deserted the boat."

"Take it easy, Cap," Connie said. "They had reason." He told us Bill was laid up in the hospital after a car accident, and Eddie got his orders. "Right now he's defendin' his country with a smile, the send-off we give him. We got some girls from the Playboy Lounge. Dancers, man, we had tail shakin' in our nose all night." He grinned with the old enthusiasm. "Holy Joe here, he prayed real hard for pussy and damned if we didn't get it."

"The money helped," Cap said.

"Money and prayer," Connie chanted, like an incantation. "They do for you every time, ain't that right, Joe."

Holy Joe smiled. "Not for Candy."

"What's with Candy?" I asked.

"He's doing time for stolen goods."

"What kind of goods?" Woody asked, and I knew he was thinking the same thing I was: the revolver.

"Anything he could get his hands on."

Woody and I must have looked worried, for Connie gave us a knowing smile. "Don't worry, man, they ain't after the stuff. They know it's long gone. That ain't the real news anyway. You hear about Hawk? He went AWOL."

"You're kidding," I said.

"They won't be kiddin' when they catch him, man. They got him a reservation at the stockade."

"**If** they catch him," said Holy Joe.

"Shit, they catch him sooner or later. He can't run forever."

Holy Joe's eyes were lit by a secret knowledge. "He can do whatever he wants. He has the vision."

"Fuck that shit," said Connie.

"Why'd he do it, Cap?" I asked.

Turning his attention from the motor, Cap lit a cigarette and pushed the sunglasses up the bridge of his nose, as if to focus his vision on the mystery of Hawk. "All I know is he deserted the crew. He ain't getting back on."

"He went over the edge," said Connie. "The night of Eddie's party he 'bout killed one of the girls. We're on

the other side of the lake, that place you was with us before, and she starts comin' on to him. Shit, he'da strangled her, man. Took us all to pull him loose. No sooner we get him loose an' he takes off for the hills."

"Is that when he went AWOL?" Woody asked.

"That was later. But he ain't been on the boat no more."

"Remember the snake?" Woody said to me.

"Yeah, man," Connie said. "Bill told us. You were there, you saw it. He's psycho."

"How long's he been AWOL?" I asked. Suddenly, I had a disturbing thought.

"He disappeared during the rain," Cap said.

"Then that's what it was," I said. "Hawk was watching us, that night at the pond." I told them about my feeling that someone was watching us from the woods.

"Bingo," Woody said softly, more to himself than us. "He must've killed Bingo."

"Who's that?" Connie asked.

"Our dog," Woody said. "We can't find our dog. We haven't seen him since the rain." His eyes clouded over in anger.

"We don't know for sure," I said. "Why would he kill a dog?"

He answered with a question: "Why would he kill a snake?"

"It all fits," said Cap. "Somebody broke into the bait shop last weekend. Didn't take money, just food and supplies."

"He's hiding in the woods," I said.

"What if he is?" Connie said. "You gonna look for him?"

"I'd call the cops, the MP's."

"What for? What he ever do to you?"

"He's crazy," I said. "He might hurt someone."

Cap got a beer from the cooler and sat down in his chair. He looked at Woody and me and said, "What if he did kill your dog? What would you do about it?"

"Call the cops," I said. "We know the sheriff."

Cap smiled, almost a jeer. "Call the cops. He kills your dog and you'd call the cops."

"What else could we do?" I said defensively.

"Go after him. Find him."

"In them woods?" said Connie. "No way, man. Them eyes of his, he'd spot you a mile away."

"Scared of him, Connie?" Cap said. There was a trace of goading in his voice.

"I ain't scared, I'm **smart**. I got brains enough to stay outta them woods, 'specially after that dude got killed. The place is bad luck."

Cap shook his head slowly. "What happened to my crew?" The question sounded more like a pronouncement. "You fight

in the jungle but you're scared to go in the woods. You don't own it, it owns you."

"Come on," said Connie, "this is crazy. I bet he ain't even there no more. He's long gone by now."

Holy Joe, who had listened silently, finally spoke up. "Leave Hawk alone. He's suffered enough."

"That an order, Joe?" Cap said. "You giving me an order?"

Holy Joe didn't waver. "Leave him be. He's suffered enough."

Cap flicked his cigarette butt in the water. "I hope you ain't scared to go on patrol."

He finished his work on the motor and we patrolled the cove, Connie taking Hawk's place at the wheel. No one spoke as we watched the shore, the silence reminding us that, like the passing summer, the crew was dissolving. I wondered how long it would be before Cap was left to command a deserted boat, moored at the marina in wait of a new crew.

When we reached the end of the cove, Connie stopped the boat and we scanned the trees. The air was still and not a leaf moved. Unwilling to break the silence, no one said a word. As I gazed into the shadowy branches, I wondered if Hawk had found himself there, recovered the pieces of his soul. More likely he'd given himself up to the nightmares only he could see.

I was glad when Connie started the boat.

It was not the kind of day Woody and I envisioned. We drove aimlessly around the lake, as if we'd lost our direction, searching for something we couldn't define. Our aqua-dueling was pointless, and even Cap couldn't muster much enthusiasm as he watched from his chair. We went to the cove where we'd found the party, but no one was there. Suddenly, I wanted to find the pretty girl and apologize, somehow explain the summer to her so I could understand it myself. I urged Connie to take us into every cove we came to, but we found only fishermen and campers. Finally, darkness ended our search.

During the drive back to Crystal Cove, Holy Joe took the wheel and Connie, Woody, and I smoked a joint. We had no boasts to make, no adventures whose truth we could embellish. Everyone was aware of it, most of all Cap, who silently watched us get stoned, waiting for the moment to order his crew into action.

As we approached the marina he said, "Take her into the cove, Joe. All the way back."

Holy Joe looked questioningly at him, then veered away from the marina, its lights growing smaller as we moved farther into the cove. Along the north shore, campfires glowed behind the trees and underbrush, throwing shadows onto the water. My senses heightened, it looked as if the shadows moved independent of any source, flitting across

the water to dance among us.

Passing the campground, we followed the path of the searchlight, which looked like a tunnel cut into the darkness. When it rose against the woods, Cap told Holy Joe to cut it and slow the boat.

We came to a stop so close to the shore that we could have jumped onto it--or so it seemed to me in the darkness. Branches hung over our heads, reaching across the water to snag anything that ventured too close. The trees and underbrush formed their own darkness, blacker than the night, the same blackness in which Woody and I had discovered the body of James Johnson. No one spoke or moved, the minutes passing like hours. I began to feel paranoid.

Finally Connie said, "What's the deal, Cap?" His voice was a whisper, but sounded loud in the stillness.

Cap didn't answer. He sat looking at the trees, then swung around to face us. A cigarette glowed between his fingers. He'd taken his sunglasses off, but a permanent shadow had fallen over his eyes.

"Cap?" Connie said.

Cap took a drag on his cigarette, the glowing ember throwing a brief orange light across his face. It made his features look mask-like. He said, "Now's your chance."

"Chance?"

"To prove I still got a crew."

"I don't get it, man," Connie said, his voice uneasy.

"Find Hawk."

Connie tried to laugh. "Shit, I can hardly walk."

"What are you, a pussy?"

"I'm **stoned** is what I am, man."

"Hey, Cap, let's get out of here," I said.

"You a pussy too? What've I got, a crew of pussies?" His voice was still even, almost a monotone, but the words were harsh.

"This is crazy, man," said Connie. "Goin' in them woods is crazy."

The water hissed angrily as Cap threw his cigarette away. He got out of his chair and stood over us. "I'm not afraid."

"I'm not going," I said.

"So I'm going alone," he said.

"No," Holy Joe said, one hand frozen on the wheel. "Let Hawk be."

"Someone on this boat's gotta prove he belongs."

"Let Hawk be," Holy Joe repeated. "He's suffered enough."

"You quittin' my crew, Joe?"

In answer, Holy Joe swung his legs over the side and eased himself into the water. He waded ashore and started off in the direction of the marina. We watched until the darkness swallowed him.

Cap said, "You're the last of my crew. You three,

right here. You gonna walk out on me, or stay and prove something to yourselves and me?"

Woody stood up. "What do you want me to do?"

"Don't, Woody," I said.

"I'm going. What do I do?"

"Walk a hundred paces into the woods. Prove you ain't afraid of Hawk."

I didn't know whether to laugh or be afraid. It was absurd.

But Connie was relieved. "That's all? We go a hundred and come back?"

"That's all," Cap said. "We don't have the weapons to fight Hawk on his own turf." He looked at me. "You still on the crew?"

I wanted no part of it, but I couldn't say no. If Woody went, I had to go too. "Yeah," I said, "I'm still on the crew."

"Then move it, everybody ashore. Connie, I'll throw you the line."

He snapped his fingers in a rapid staccato, and we went into action. Pulling off our shirts, we climbed down the ladder into the dark, warm water and sneaked ashore. Cap threw the line to Connie, who knotted it around a tree trunk. There was no sound except for our heavy breathing and the plashes Cap made as he came ashore.

Crouching beside us, he held out a .45 automatic and

said, "Who wants it?"

"I do," said Woody.

Cap gave it to him and issued instructions. "Spread out and go a hundred paces straight in. Don't bunch up. Keep your eyes and ears open. When you've gone a hundred, head back." To Woody he added, "Don't get trigger-happy on us. Make sure you know what you're shooting at."

Woody nodded, staring at the gun.

"Okay. Connie, start in fifty paces to the right, Woody twenty. John, fifty to the left, I'll go twenty. Everybody squared? Then move out."

He snapped his fingers again and we started off.

Everything happened so fast that I had no time to think until I'd taken my fifty steps. On the south side of the cove now, I squatted in the tangled underbrush and splashed water on my face, trying to clear my head. Across the way, the rocky shore where Hilde and I had talked lay white and broken in the moonlight. There were memories everywhere I looked. Our discovery of James Johnson, my first talk with Hilde, the patrols--it was all there, the events and the people which had shaped my summer.

Standing up, I turned and faced the woods. I had nothing to gain by venturing into the darkness; there was nothing to prove. I took out my knife and pressed the release, the blade clicking open. I'd almost forgotten it. I'd had it so long it had become a part of me, a

useless appendage to my life. I couldn't remember why it was so important I buy it. I knew only that if I threw it away, a part of me would go with it. Closing the blade, I dropped it in the water and started back to the boat.

I was half way back when I heard a noise ahead of me. I froze, thinking it was Hawk. It had to be. There hadn't been time for the others to return.

Crouching down, I peered around a tree trunk and saw Cap sneak out of the woods not ten yards away. He looked around, making sure he hadn't been seen, and sat down in the tall grass growing along the water. Hugging his legs, he rested his head on his knees and hunched his shoulders against the woods. He seemed to withdraw into himself, seeking the comfort of an inner light.

I couldn't have been more surprised if it had been Hawk. I watched breathlessly as the truth sank in. Then a shot sounded from the woods.

Before the echo died, Cap sprang from the grass and ran for the boat. A second later I tore after him, his fear setting mine in motion.

By the time I reached him, he'd composed himself enough to order me into the bushes. We hid there, watching and waiting, our breathing ragged, loud enough to give us away. He was shaking as hard as I. I couldn't see his face clearly, but I sensed a transformation, an explosion of repressed fear which shattered his cool exterior.

Off to the right we heard someone running toward us.

"Cap!" Connie hissed. "Cap!"

"Over here."

Connie landed in the bushes with us, caught his breath and whispered harshly, "He's out there, man, he's out there!"

Cap signalled him to be quiet, and we listened. Ahead of us we heard the urgent crackle of leaves, and then a voice.

"Cap!" It was Woody.

Jumping up, Cap told Connie to untie the line and head for the boat. As Connie started off, Woody came crashing through the branches.

"I saw him, I saw him!"

Cap grabbed the gun and shoved him into the water. We splashed to the boat, Cap reaching the ladder first. He climbed aboard and started the motor, the noise splitting the silence. Woody and I helped Connie aboard and hauled in the ladder. The boat lurched forward as we sped away from the shore. We hadn't gone far when Cap abruptly swung us around and switched on the searchlight, playing it along the trees. We didn't see Hawk.

Acting as if nothing had happened, Cap drove slowly back to the marina. All but a few lights had been turned off, the boats resting in their slips like slumbering animals. Passing through the shadows, we moored the boat and

dried off. Cap took his place in his chair and we gathered around him, towels draped over our shoulders. From a distance, we must have looked like ghosts. Connie lit a joint and Woody passed out cans of beer. I didn't smoke and only sipped at my beer. My nerves were still jangled, and so were Woody's and Connie's. Only Cap appeared unaffected, his mask firmly in place, but I knew now it was a pretense. He waited silently for us to tell our stories.

"So what happened, man?" Connie asked Woody. "I heard that shot, I thought the shit hit the fan."

"I thought I saw him," Woody said. "But now, now I'm not so sure. It was so damn dark and quiet, like that night me and John found the GI. I don't even remember how far I went, I lost count. But it was quite a ways, 'cause I was thinking I should turn back. Then I heard this noise." He paused, and a shudder ran through him. "It sounded like a twig snapping, like someone stepped on it, you know? Man, I froze like ice. I didn't even breathe. Then I saw something move, least I **think** I did. It was like this big shadow coming straight for me, so I shot at it and ran."

"Hit it?" Connie asked.

"Hell no. I was so scared I pulled the trigger without even aiming. It was like a reflex, the gun went off."

Connie turned to Cap. "What you think, Cap?"

Cap paused for effect. "It was Hawk."

A thrill passed through Woody, as visible as his shudder. "You think so?"

"Absolutely," Cap affirmed. "I heard him myself. I went about seventy paces when I heard someone in front of me. He must've heard me too because we stopped at the same time. I decided to see if I could flush him out, so I threw a rock. I heard him take off, running in your direction. He must've run smack into you."

"Jesus," Woody said, "I was right. It **was** him."

"Too bad you didn't aim, man," said Connie.

Cap said, "He did the right thing, fired a warning shot."

Woody smiled. "Hell, the gun just went off."

"It amounts to the same thing. You fire a warning shot to let him know you mean business. That way you scare him off without hitting him."

"I did it right then?"

"You did it right. You all did. I've got a damn good crew."

"No shit," Connie said. He sucked on the joint as if to inhale the praise.

"Why'd you want to flush him out?" I asked Cap.

He lit a cigarette. "Why? I wanted to see if I could take him."

"Sounds dangerous to me," I said.

"Sometimes you got to risk it, face up to danger and

own it. Like we did tonight."

I looked at Woody and Connie to see if they were buying it. They were, their eyes wide with euphoria. I wanted to snatch the joint and flick it overboard.

I said, "Maybe it wasn't Hawk. Maybe it was Holy Joe."

"No way," Woody said in a distant voice. "He's crazy."

"Maybe he was crazy enough to warn Hawk we were after him."

Connie said, "You heard what he said, man, **let Hawk be.** No way he went in them woods."

"Joe doesn't have the guts," Cap said. "It wouldn't surprise me if he shows up here with his tail between his legs."

"What if he does?" Woody asked.

"Throw him overboard." Cap stood up for emphasis. "He ain't on my crew, I got my crew right here. Two tours in Nam, I always had a crew. They followed orders and never let me down, not once. And I never let them down, and everyone knew it. They all wanted to be on my crew, and when I go back it'll be the same. They can't keep me here playin' war games, I got ways to get back."

His voice had grown loud yet retained its monotone, the volume simply turned up. His words died away and he stood motionless, poised like Hawk, listening, waiting for

an answer. At that moment I saw his eyes, gleaming in the dark, a fire burning behind them, melting away his mask. And then, like his words, the fire died and he sank into his chair, the mask back in place. The transition was so quick and smooth that I almost doubted I'd seen it. Cap himself was unaware of any change. He had become the mask he wore, indifferent to the part of himself that still lived.

"My crew," he said softly. "You're my crew."

Connie smiled. "Always was."

"My crew," Cap repeated. "You've earned it. Whatever you want is yours. Whatever you find. Like the time my boys took a village. We rolled the tanks in . . ."

I didn't listen to the story. It might begin in truth, but it would end in a lie, distorted by a man who could no longer tell the difference. And I had no desire to challenge him. I didn't know how. I feared Cap, hated him, grieved for him.

It was far into the night when Woody and I left. As we stepped off the boat Cap said, "Next weekend." I waved but said nothing. Next weekend I would be moving home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I went to church the next morning with the consolation it would be the last time I'd have to endure Mrs. Lutz's class. And yet, as I sat with my classmates in the study, a feeling of regret passed through me. I knew none of them; the summer passed and we were still strangers. I wondered what rewards and disappointments the summer brought them, if their lives had taken a new direction or followed the same familiar road. I wondered about the direction my own life had taken, if there were other routes I could have chosen. I took little comfort in Mrs. Lutz's belief that God had a plan for each of us.

Toward the end of class she said, "Your aunt told me this is your last time with us, John. We'll miss you, but we're glad we got to know you. I knew your aunt and uncle are especially thankful for your help this summer. You've been a blessing to them." She smiled at me as if I were proof of God's goodness. "Let us pray," she said, and we bowed our heads.

"Dear Lord, we thank You for bringing John into our midst, for his help in a time of need. We thank You for the bounty of the summer, and ask that it continue, even as John leaves us. We ask that You guide and direct not

only him but all of us, keep strong our faith and desire to do Your will. For everything we thank You, Lord, amen."

As we started out the door, she asked me to stay behind. Woody gave me a look and said he'd wait for me on the lawn.

When everyone had gone, she told me to close the door and sit down. She leaned forward, hands clasped on the desk. Her gaze was directed inward, eyes reflecting disappointment in herself. "I've failed you."

I wanted to get up and leave. Instead I said, "How have you failed me?"

"You have no more faith now than you did at the start of the summer. It's my fault. I haven't gotten through to you."

I tried to protest but she shook her head firmly, refusing to hear any view but her own. Her eyes were focused on me now, intent upon the object of her failure. She reveled in the tragic implications.

"I know you're suffering, John, I can feel it. I've felt it all summer, every time I see you. I felt it that day you came to the house. You were reaching out to me and I didn't help you. I didn't know how. I let something stand in the way. I was afraid. I don't know what of, but I was. And now I've failed you."

"Stop saying that," I said sharply. "You haven't failed me."

She didn't hear me. She came around the desk and sat down beside me, taking my hand in hers. "I know what you're going through, John, I went through it myself. There was a time in my life when my suffering was so great I wanted to die. And then one day, when it got so bad I couldn't take it anymore, God spoke to me. I could hear Him as clearly as I can hear my own voice right now. He told me to ask forgiveness and put my faith in Him, because He was my true father in heaven. And I did, John. I put my faith in Him and my whole life changed. Since that day He's given me the strength to accept whatever comes. All the times I feel despair, I accept it because I know I'll be rewarded in heaven."

She was as much an audience as I to her words, reciting them like a child who had learned her lesson well and was careful not to forget it lest she lose her conviction. She spoke without zeal, without the light of faith shining in her eyes. But the faith was there. She had willed it. Without it, her life would be defenseless.

Suddenly she smiled. "You'll find him too, John. I know it with all my heart. In my failure I can take comfort in that. The Lord works in mysterious ways, and I'm not the one He's chosen to guide you. But He'll reward me for my efforts, just as He'll one day reward you. We can be thankful for that."

I expected her to say a prayer. Instead, she squeezed

my hand and stood up. "God be with you."

Murmuring a thank-you, I left the study and didn't look back.

Woody was waiting for me on the steps. I passed him without a word and went to the car. I sat behind the wheel, ready to drive away. Woody got in and asked what was wrong.

"I'm not going," I said. "I'm never going again." It was an oath, and I didn't feel any better for having made it.

"Why? What did she do?"

I shook my head. I didn't know where to begin. In her own way, Mrs. Lutz evoked in me the same emotions that Cap had, and I could only respond by running away.

"What did she say?" he asked. "She give you a lot of her shit? She did, I'll give it right back to her."

"Leave her alone, Woody, just leave her alone."

"Hell, she's picked on you all summer. I oughtta let her have it. Crazy bitch."

"It's over. I don't have to listen to her anymore."

"I wish it wasn't over," he said. "I mean, what's going to happen when you're gone?"

I didn't know, but I was beginning to look forward to going home. It occurred to me I was waiting for the summer to end more than I was the service.

I secretly tried calling Hilde later that day, not

entirely on impulse. After my talk with Mrs. Lutz, I needed to hear a voice of reason, even if it was coupled with anger. I wanted to be lectured, set straight, forgiven--anything that would carry me through my last week on the farm. But there was no answer.

That night Woody and I sat on the roof and watched the moon. The Apollo 11 rocket had lifted off the week before, and tomorrow the LEM would land. A few hours later, the first astronauts would set foot on the surface. I expected the event to move me in some way, but it didn't. Already the moon had changed, its spell weakening, held hostage by the orbiting spacecraft. Something would be lost forever when the capsule landed, and I felt I would never be able to look at the moon in the way I always had.

"Maybe," Woody said, "you could stay another week, so we could go out with Cap again."

I'd avoided the subject all day, but now I decided to tell him the truth. He should know what to expect if he went on another patrol. I told him what I'd seen the night before, and he listened with growing anger.

"You mean you never went in?" he said. "You stayed right by the water?"

"How else could I have seen him? He was there too."

"I'm not talking about him, I'm talking about **you**."

"It wasn't my idea," I said. "He's the one who said

we had to prove ourselves. He's a damn liar, Woody. A coward."

"You're one to talk."

"It was stupid. I never wanted to do it in the first place."

"How do you know for sure he didn't go in?" he demanded.

"There wasn't time. No way he could've gone a hundred paces. He sat there all curled up like he was scared to death. And when you fired the gun he ran like hell. He's crazy as Hawk."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't want to believe the truth," I said. "No way am I getting on that boat again."

"So you're quitting the crew."

"There **is** no crew. It's a joke."

He was silent for a moment. "Why didn't you go in?"

"There wasn't any reason."

"**I** went in."

"And what did it get you?"

"I saw Hawk," he said, but his conviction had weakened.

"You didn't see Hawk, Cap was making it up."

"Then what did I see?"

"It wasn't Hawk."

"At least I tried," he said. "Even if he wasn't

there, I tried."

"Tried to what? What was the point?"

If he knew, he refused to say. But he was no longer angry with me. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he said he was calling it a night. I didn't feel right sitting alone, so I took a final look at the moon and followed him inside.

There was a celebratory mood the next morning as Uncle Roy, Aunt Margaret, and Cheryl left for the doctor's office. Finally, my uncle would get his cast removed and, as Aunt Margaret said, things would return to normal.

After they'd gone, Woody and I drove the tractor up to the hay barn and hitched it to the baler. Our grandfather had cut and raked the alfalfa and we were ready to start baling again, my summer on the farm ending as it began. It seemed for a moment that nothing had changed, the last two months burned away by the sun, leaving me back where I'd started, working without expectation in the heat and the dust.

And then the summer came rushing back, changing our lives forever.

We were standing in the hay barn, planning how we'd fill the remaining half, when I noticed a small can lying on the ground. Picking it up, I saw it was canned heat.

"What's this doing here?" I wondered aloud.

Woody took a look at it and said, "Cap's got some

just like this."

The realization hit us at the same moment. We stared at each other, open-mouthed.

"Oh, Jesus," he said softly.

Our gazes darted about, mine coming to rest on the elevator, leaning against the wall of bales. Directly above it, near the roof, bales had been knocked loose to create an opening. It was large enough for someone to crawl into. My heart leaped into my throat. Woody saw it too, and we slowly backed out of the barn, keeping our eyes on the hole. At any moment I expected to see Hawk jump out of it.

We crouched down behind the tractor and Woody shook his head, dumb-founded. "He's been hiding there all the time."

"We gotta call the sheriff."

"Not yet. Let's scout it out first."

We made a wide arc through the pasture, sneaking up to the north side of the barn. Just below the tin roof, a bale had been knocked loose for air.

"He's there all right," Woody whispered. "Right there at the top, he moved the bales to make a room. Can you imagine how hot it must be in there when the sun hits the roof? If he wasn't crazy before, he sure as shit is by now."

"Maybe he's not even there," I said hopefully. "Maybe

he goes someplace cool in the daytime, like the woods."

"Yeah, he couldn't stand it up there all day." Woody looked at me suddenly. "What if he's dead? Maybe the heat killed him."

I didn't know which would be worse: confronting Hawk or finding him dead, as we had James Johnson. I could feel the nightmare starting all over again.

"Why'd he come here?" I asked. "How'd he find us?"

"He was here once before, the night him and Cap brought us home. It was after the first patrol, remember? We were too stoned to drive. He must've figured he could hide here."

As I watched the barn, the realization sank in: Hawk was living among us on the farm, the one place I'd always considered safe. How often had he watched as we went about our daily chores? Had he watched and listened the night Woody got stuck in the lane? I felt a touch of pity. He hadn't harmed us. Perhaps he'd only sought refuge, searching among the fields and pastures for that part of himself he'd lost. Perhaps he was close to recovering it, at peace with himself, healed by the land.

Whatever pity I felt, it couldn't replace my fear. "We gotta call the sheriff," I said.

We ran to the farmyard and Woody went to the car. "Go on and call," he said. "I'll be there in a minute."

I watched as he took the revolver out and started

loading it. I didn't waste time arguing. I wanted to get the sheriff, if not to catch Hawk, then to stop Woody.

Sheriff Peterson wasn't in his office, but the dispatcher said he could be reached if it was an emergency. I explained who I was, where I lived, and that the sheriff knew me in connection with the death of James Johnson. I said he should come to the farm immediately; it was a matter of life and death. I'd hoped for reassurance from the dispatcher, but he said only that he would contact the sheriff. To him it was just another call.

I went outside, my pulse quickening when I saw Woody was gone. I started for the hay barn at a jog. When I heard a shot I ran.

It was over by the time I got there, finished with the one shot. Hawk lay dead in the barn, a bullet hole in his bare chest. Woody sat on a bale, holding the revolver. He stared at Hawk as if he were in silent communication with the dead GI.

Speechless, I knelt down in the loose hay, the weight of the moment too heavy to carry. I looked back and forth between them, waiting for an explanation. I half expected Hawk to jump up and replay the scene. I couldn't believe he was really dead.

I found my voice and asked Woody what happened. I might as well have asked Hawk. My cousin was oblivious to me, undergoing a metamorphosis as he absorbed Hawk's

death. I could see the change taking place, invisible fingers molding his face, hardening his expression. His eyes were like Hawk's, staring at something I couldn't see. The longer I watched, the more uncertain I grew. It was like learning a terrible secret about a best friend, discovering a life kept hidden. He was someone I didn't know.

I pried the gun from his hand and took a closer look at Hawk. He wore only fatigue pants and boots, his face unshaven, arms and chest smudged with dirt. The bullet hole was little more than a puncture in his skin; it hardly seemed enough to drive the life from such a big man. I forced myself to look long and hard at his face, as if in the hope of finding some answer in it. I didn't. His expression was blank, as it had been in life, and his powerful eyes were closed, blinded by death. His suffering had ended; ours had begun.

Woody was in shock and I should have been worried, but I was close to being in shock myself and had no room left for emotion or clear thought. I covered the gun with hay, as if to blot out its existence, then lay down and shut my eyes, waiting for Sheriff Peterson to come. I almost wished he wouldn't. I wanted to go to sleep and never wake up.

Sometime later a horn sounded in the farmyard. The sheriff was waiting there with Lynch, his deputy. They looked the same as before, Peterson calm and objective,

Lynch ready for action.

"Another death," I told them dully, "up at the hay barn."

Lynch started to speak but Peterson cut him off. "Where's your aunt and uncle?"

"In town. My uncle's getting his cast off."

Seeing my condition, he said, "Let's you and me go inside where it's cooler. Deputy Lynch'll take a look."

"No. I don't want to leave my cousin there."

Lynch started, and even Peterson stiffened. It took me a moment to realize they thought Woody was dead.

"It's not Woody," I said. "It's a GI named Hawk. He was AWOL." I didn't know why I mentioned Hawk's status; perhaps I'd half-consciously begun to prepare a defense.

The sheriff studied my face and came to a decision. "All right," he said, "we'll take a look."

I didn't explain what little I knew, and they didn't ask. We walked in silence to the barn, Lynch straining like a dog on a leash. Peterson wasn't in any hurry.

In the barn, they went into action just as they had the night at the cove. They examined the body first, and then took a look at Woody. I showed Lynch Hawk's hiding place, and he climbed the elevator and slid into the opening.

Getting no response from Woody, Sheriff Peterson said, "Your cousin needs to go to the hospital. You should go

too."

I stared at him, indignant. We couldn't just leave; things had to be explained.

"We've got to figure out what happened," I said. "That's your job."

"Don't you know how this man died?"

"I wasn't here. I was calling you when it happened. I heard a shot and found them like this."

"Where's the gun?"

I uncovered it from the hay and gave it to him. "All I know is--"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "If you're involved in this man's death, you've got to be careful what you say. You don't have to say anything at all, not right now."

"I want to tell you."

He looked as if he didn't want to know. After a moment he said, "All right. But before you say anything, I'm going to read you your rights. It's important I do that."

He gave them to me, reciting from memory, speaking slowly to make sure I understood. I wondered how many people he'd said these words to, which were innocent and which were guilty, and to which group Woody and I belonged. A panic awakened inside me.

As Peterson finished, Lynch crawled out of the hole, his face streaked with dust and sweat. He brought with

him an M16, the kind of gun I'd seen soldiers shooting on the news. "It was loaded," he said. "I took the shells out." He looked up at the hole and shook his head, his eagerness gone. "It's a disaster in there. Junk all over the place, hardly room to move around. Hot as a sweatbox, stinks like one too."

Peterson turned to me and said gently, "All right, son, what did you want to tell me?"

I told them what I knew of Hawk, and how we'd happened to find his hiding place. "We ran down to call you, and while I was inside Woody got the gun and came back. Then I heard the shot and . . . I don't know. I don't know why it happened." I shook my head in wonder.

"All right," said Peterson, "that's enough for now." He paused, looking at Hawk, trying to make up his mind about something. He took Lynch aside and whispered to him. The deputy's eyes grew hard and bright as they locked onto Peterson's. He looked away, first at Hawk, then at the M16 he held. "Sure," I heard him say. "No problem."

Satisfied, Peterson said to me, "The deputy'll stay here while we go to town." He turned to Woody and sighed. "Come on, son, it's too hot to stay here."

He hooked his arms under Woody's and pulled him to his feet. Once he was standing, the sheriff had only to take his hand to get him to walk.

No one spoke as we walked down to the car. Woody's

face was grim, as if he were being led to jail rather than the hospital. I wondered if he knew what was happening.

We got in the car and started for town. Given the situation, I expected Sheriff Peterson to turn on the siren and race down the highway. Nothing like that happened. He kept our speed within the limit, and the only sound was the occasional crackle of static over the radio. In the distance, the windrows of alfalfa snaked across the terraces, waiting to be baled.

I sat in the back with Woody, remembering our first trip in the sheriff's car. It seemed like a long time ago. I held Woody's hand, not so much for his benefit as mine. Now that we'd left the farm I'd begun to awaken from my stupor, frightened by the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

"I want to tell you what happened," I said.

"You already did."

"It wasn't enough, there's got to be more. I want you to understand."

"I understand things a lot better than you think. Let me handle this and you'll come out okay."

"It's not just Hawk," I said, "it's everything--everything that's happened since I moved here."

He looked into the rearview mirror and said, "I'll listen."

Spurred into an explanation, I told him more than I intended, and he drove slowly to give me time. I told

him everything about the summer, and as I neared the end I realized I was making a confession. It was a confession of guilt and ignorance, for a summer I did not understand.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I returned to Kansas City in the custody of my parents that same day. While they went about the business of hiring me an attorney and making long-distance calls to my relatives and various authorities in Junction City, I stayed in my room, feeling like a half-interested by-stander. I had no control over the matter, and I didn't care. My life had in effect come to an end, and since I saw no future for myself, I wasn't afraid.

I had no future, only a past, to which I returned again and again. I was hardly aware I'd returned home. Emotionally, I hadn't left the farm; my summer there was still with me, like an equation waiting to be solved. I thought of everything that had happened, and tried to add up the parts in the equation: James Johnson, Cap and his crew, Mrs. Lutz, Hilde and Joleen, Woody and Hawk. I tried to weigh one person against another, see which side tipped the scales. I looked for combinations, similarities and contrasts, opposing forces. And nothing worked. One force cancelled another. Darkness and light joined, weakening to gray. I could find no person or thing to blame save for the war, which had brought us together. And I couldn't stop the war any more than I could save the moon from being

invaded. The first men walked on it during my ride to Kansas City, and when I looked out my window that night I saw no triumph, only a transfer of suffering from one sphere to another.

As it turned out, there wasn't a trial, not even a hearing. The district attorney didn't file charges of any sort. When we received word the next day, I was astounded. The investigation hardly started before it ended; it was as if nothing happened.

When I asked my parents for details, my mother said, "Sheriff Peterson took care of everything. He had a talk with the district attorney, and they decided it was in your own best interests to let the matter drop."

"What do you mean, **let it drop**?"

"They're on your side, John," my father said. "The sheriff told us you gave him a lot of valuable information on those soldiers you knew at the lake. Given that information, he says you and Woody aren't at fault."

"We had a stolen weapon," I said. "Woody killed Hawk with it." I felt angry and indignant. It wasn't fair. We had to be put on trial; it was little enough price to pay compared to the one Hawk had paid.

"It was self-defense," my mother said. "Hawk Foley had a gun. Woody had to shoot him."

"Who told you that?"

"Sheriff Peterson."

"What did he say?"

"The soldier had an M16," my father said, "and it was loaded. He threatened to kill your cousin, had the gun aimed at him."

I remembered then the gun Lynch had found, and the private agreement between him and Peterson. I wanted to tell my parents it was a lie, but my mother's look warned me not to argue. If I was smart, I'd keep my mouth shut and be thankful nothing worse had happened. I wondered how much Peterson had told her and my father about my summer. I didn't ask, and they never told me. It was our task now to put the event behind us, to wipe the slate clean.

The matter was concluded, but I couldn't stop wondering what really happened. The only way to find out was to ask Woody, and I got my chance a few days later when I returned to the farm to pack.

It was the first time I'd seen him since Sheriff Peterson and I left him at the hospital. In the wake of his recovery he'd changed; like me, he'd grown silent, subdued. His eyes spoke for him, and they communicated a bright, hard bitterness I didn't feel.

We went upstairs and tried to decide where to start packing, how to transfer my life from the room and make it his again. My drum set sat in a corner next to his guitar, untouched since early in the summer and gathering

dust. They were toys now, not instruments on which our futures would depend, and I knew we'd never play them together again.

Setting the drums next to the door, we went to work boxing my albums. I wanted to ask what happened in the hay barn, say anything, but it seemed that events had spoken for me, and all I could do was pack up my summer and go home.

After a while Woody said, "By the way. The cops found Bingo in the hedgerow behind the hay barn. Hawk buried him there."

"I'm sorry." I meant it as a sort of blanket sympathy, and hoped he would take it as such.

He shrugged and said, "That stupid dog was too trusting for his own good."

We finished packing the albums and sat down on our beds. I asked him what he planned to do until school started.

"Work around here, I guess," he said. "One thing's for sure, there won't be any more patrols, not after everything you told Peterson."

"Are you mad I told him?"

"It helped us get off the hook. They blame him and the army more than us. Candy too. He's the one sold us and Hawk stolen weapons. Course, Mom and Dad helped too."

"How's that?"

"They had a talk with Peterson. He's from our neck of the woods, an old farm boy at heart. He likes us. Plus him and the D.A. get along. The way they see it, it's the GI's who cause all the trouble. You and me, we happened to get mixed up in it. It's not our fault." He looked at me with eyes like stones. "I killed a man and it won't even show on my record. Like it never happened."

"Why did you do it, Woody? What happened?"

His smile was grim, ironic. "Like the sheriff said, Hawk threatened to shoot me. It was do or die."

I knew at that moment that our friendship had ended. He must have known it too, seen my hurt look, for he said softly, "I thought it would count for something. It sure ain't like Butch and Sundance."

He picked up my snare drum, and I watched through the window as he carried it out to the station wagon, impatient for me to leave so he could start his life again, moving in whatever direction his anger pushed him. I wondered what he would do, what I would do. Mrs. Lutz's belief that God would reward me was hardly an answer.

Aunt Margaret came in, shutting the door behind her, and sat down across from me. Her face looked haunted, dark circles under her eyes. It hurt me to look at her, at any of my relatives or family and see the pain we'd caused them. And yet it also angered me to know of her part in suppressing the truth.

"It looks like you're about packed," she said.

"Just about."

She handed me a check and said, "I hope it's enough."

It was more than enough. I tried to give it back to her, saying, "I can't take this, Aunt Margaret, not after what's happened."

"That has nothing to do with it. You earned it. We hired you to do a job and you did it. You and Woody kept the farm running."

"I don't deserve it."

She took the check, folded it, and stuck it in my shirt pocket. Almost angrily she said, "This is for the work you did on the farm, not the things you did at the lake. They're separate."

I wondered if that were true. Somehow, they seemed inextricable.

"I guess you're glad to see me leave."

"It's not as if it's all your fault," she said. "If your leaving meant things would return to normal, then I'd be glad to see you go. But things won't be the way they were before this happened, and I accept it. If I start looking for someone to blame, I might as well blame everyone, even people I don't know. There'd be no end to it."

"Haven't you already put the blame on Hawk?" I said. "I know it didn't happen the way everyone's saying it did."

She sat perfectly still, then said, "I did what I

thought was best. Woody's my son, you're my nephew. I told your mother I'd look after you."

She got up from the bed, her eyes bright but tearless, her emotions coaxed near the surface, as far as they would ever venture. "I'll help you carry something," she said, and together we took the box of albums downstairs, the weight heavy in our hands.

And so I left the farm, as reluctant as I'd been to move to it. We passed the fields and pastures and the deep-blue sheen of the lake, headed for a city as alien to me as the countryside in May. I didn't know where I belonged, what I should do. The future reflected the past. It was like looking out a window which held an image of the room behind me.

My return to Kansas City was worse than I expected. I felt as if I suffered jet lag. I stayed indoors, sleeping much of the time and refusing to see any of my friends. Time moved slowly, as if to balance the rush of the summer. The house, my bedroom, my family, the driveways and lawns along the block--everything was alien. Even my skin, burnt a deep brown by the sun, was foreign, a layer of my physical self I would have to shed.

And then Hilde came back into my life.

It was a Friday afternoon and I was sitting at my window, watching the children across the street set up a lemonade stand, when Hilde's Mustang turned into the

driveway, pulling a U-Haul. For a moment I thought it was a mirage unfolding in the heat. I blinked, but the car was still there. When Hilde got out the children across the street called to her. Smiling, she went over and bought two paper cups of lemonade. She chatted with them for a minute, then turned and looked at our house. I moved away from the window so she wouldn't see me, and sat down on my bed. I wondered why she was here, and if I really wanted to see her.

The doorbell rang. My parents were at work so Emily answered it. I heard my sister's voice, happy but not surprised, as if the visit had been planned.

There was a knock at my door, and before I could respond Emily opened it with a smile and said, "Surprise."

Hilde came in, bearing the lemonade like an offering of friendship. Despite the three-hour drive, she looked fresh and beautiful, reminding me of the lake and the cool breeze that blew across the water at night. A lump grew in my throat. Once again, I felt myself being drawn into the past, into the dreams and anguish of the summer.

"Hello, John." She held out one of the cups and said, "Would you like some lemonade? The kids across the street have a stand. I couldn't resist being their first customer."

I took the cup and returned to my bed. From the doorway Emily watched me like a nurse, then quietly shut the

door so Hilde and I could talk.

Hilde sat down in my desk chair and said, "I heard what happened. I wish I could have been there for you."

"There's nothing you could have done." I didn't mean to sound bitter, but it came out that way.

"Sometimes just being there helps," she said. "You do what you can for your friends."

"Am I your friend?"

"Of course you are."

"Then where were you?"

"With Joleen. She got word about her husband. He was wounded and shipped to a hospital in San Diego, so she went to be with him. I couldn't let her go alone, you know? She needed someone."

"I thought you were mad at her, at all of us."

"Not any more, John. Some things you have to put behind you when more important things come up."

"How's Joleen's husband?"

"His leg's pretty bad. He'll be crippled from now on, but at least he's alive and won't have to go back. Joleen's staying with him till he's shipped back to Junction City. I hope it works out for them."

"How did you find out what happened to me and Woody?"

"I called your aunt when I got back and she told me about it. Then I called your parents. They're worried about you."

"And they thought you could help."

"I wanted to see you one more time, John. I'm on my way back to Wisconsin."

I almost couldn't ask it: "Is Tim dead?"

"I haven't heard. But with everything that's happened, it's time to make some changes. There really wasn't any reason for me to stay in Junction City. I haven't given up hope, but I've got to get on with my life." She smiled. "So, I'm going back to college."

"It sounds right," I said. "That's where you should be."

"In another year, you'll be there yourself."

"I don't know if I'm going."

"Why not?"

I shook my head. How could I explain to her that my future had given way to the past? It hardly made sense to **me**.

I expected her to lecture me, but she said nothing. Moments later we were interrupted by my mother, home early from work. She greeted Hilde and looked at me hopefully, to see what effect Hilde's presence had on me.

"Were you surprised to see Hilde?" she asked.

"Very," I said. "Glad too."

It was the answer she wanted, and she nodded with satisfaction. "We'll eat an early supper, and then you two will have all evening to talk."

Nothing was said at supper about Woody, Hawk, Tim, or Joleen and her husband. Instead, Hilde talked about returning to the University of Wisconsin, and my parents reminisced about their years at Kansas State. It was a happy occasion, and my parents looked relieved to have their attention diverted from the drama of the past week. I realized they suffered as much as I; because they were my parents, my suffering was theirs. And now they were giving me time, giving me space, waiting for me to get on with my life so they could get on with theirs.

After supper Hilde asked me to take her for a drive. She said I could drive her car, so we unhitched the U-Haul and started through the neighborhood, the eastern skyline reflecting the evening sun. I asked her what she wanted to see.

"I'd just as soon get out of the city," she said, "go someplace quiet."

We drove west of the city, beyond the suburbs and construction sites to Arrowhead Lake. Compared to Milford Lake, it was hardly more than a pond.

"It's not Milford," I said, "but it's all we have."

"Do you miss the lake?"

"Yeah, I do."

We stopped in the park and took a walk down to the water. There were no boats on the lake and everything was quiet, just as Hilde wanted. From where we stood, the sun

touched the tree tops, setting them on fire.

After a while Hilde said, "I tried to talk to Woody two nights ago. I went for a drive around the lake and stopped to say good-bye. We didn't have much to say."

"Neither did we."

"He seemed so hardened. I guess that's understandable, but I'm worried. So are your aunt and uncle. They're thinking about getting him counseling."

"What about my parents? Do they think I need it too?"

"They didn't say. A lot of it depends on you."

"I know, I know, get on with my life."

"There's nothing else you can do, John."

"I feel so guilty," I said, "and I don't know why. I mean, I wasn't even there, didn't have anything to do with it. But I feel like I should have done something. Maybe I feel so guilty because we didn't have to answer to it. It's like Woody said, a man died and it doesn't make any difference. And Woody, I still don't know why he did it, what really happened. I'm not sure **he** even knows. I keep trying to put it all together, but nothing'll fit."

"There aren't any easy answers," she said. "There probably never will be."

I shook my head angrily. "I need a reason."

"Things **happen**, John. There doesn't have to be a reason."

"Like with your father?"

Her surprise lasted only a moment. She looked steadily at me, without hurt or anger. "So Joleen told you."

"It was the one considerate thing she did. She cared enough to tell us the story."

She turned her gaze to the water, across which shadows had fallen. "I never thought of it that way--as being a story. I guess it is. A story that repeated itself in some ways with Tim, except I don't know what the latest ending will be. However it ends, I've become an expert at looking for reasons and not finding them. That's why I'm telling you not to look too hard, because they're not there. You've got to move on to something else."

"Just forget it, pretend it never happened."

"That's not what I'm saying and you know it. Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"A man died, Hilde. Twice this summer I've seen what it looks like."

"I'd trade places with you in a second. If it meant I could have Tim back, I'd walk in your shoes."

It was my turn to be surprised, but it quickly passed. I didn't doubt her for an instant.

Twilight had fallen, and she peered through it as if trying to see into the past. She said, "What Joleen never told you was my father turned himself in. She couldn't

have because she didn't know. You're the first person I've told. My father loved us in his way, but we were never quite real to him. None of the years he spent here were real. This wasn't his home, and he was forced to live a life he didn't want. Finally he couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to go home, back to his family and friends, and help rebuild his country. So he turned himself in without telling any of us. He just up and did it one day. When he got deported, he wouldn't take us with him. He said we were better off here. And how my mother hated him. I hated him too, until he died a few years later. Then I was sorry for hating him. It took me a long time to get over the guilt."

She grew silent, darkness falling across the lake like curtains closing on a play. I wasn't ready to leave my seat.

She provided the epilogue. "That's the story of my father, John. He had his reasons for what he did, but they don't seem like very good ones. Tim had his reasons for going to Vietnam, but they don't seem very good either. People do things, and you have to live with it."

The drive home was a quiet one, the only sound the swish of passing cars. The sky was clear and the stars were bright. Somewhere a new moon had begun, covered in darkness as it moved between the earth and the sun. As we approached the city lights I was tempted to take a

detour and drive endlessly into the night, charting a course by the stars, Hilde at my side. I did not want her to leave me.

When we arrived at the house I abruptly said, "I wish you weren't going."

"I have to."

"Yeah, I know. Hilde, don't worry about me. I'll be okay."

"I know you will, John. So will I." She took my hand and said, "There may not be time in the morning to say good-bye the way I want to, so I'll say it now." She kissed me, a long, tender kiss that was equal to any words she might have said, carrying with it the force of the summer.

She went inside then, but I lingered on the doorstep, gazing at the dark lawns up and down the block. Closing my eyes, I thought of the lake, the farm, the fields and pastures, waiting for the summer to retake me. It didn't. It was behind me now, and when I opened my eyes they were cast toward the future.

EPILOGUE

When Woody and I discovered the body of James Johnson, I believed his murder would be solved by the time I moved home. It never was, and by summer's end I had learned some things could never be resolved, only accepted. Acceptance itself was sometimes the only resolution.

Such was the case with Woody, who enlisted in the army after he graduated, and later fought in Vietnam. It seemed a death wish, and none of us understood what compelled him. He offered no reason, and even if he had, we probably would not have been satisfied. I sometimes think he enlisted because he felt he owed it to Hawk, possibly even owed it to Cap and his crew. Perhaps he owed something to himself, needed to prove something in a way he could not during that summer I spent with him. Whatever his reasons, he went to Vietnam and we had to accept it, just as I had to accept his silence about Hawk's death. When he returned, he began the long ordeal of adjustment which, as with many Vietnam veterans, has lasted to the present. He never talked about the war and I never asked. Time and events separated us, as they did me and Hilde.

She and I wrote to each other often the first year, but once I was in college our letters became fewer. Though

we talked about visiting each other, we never did. College gave new direction to our lives, new friends, new purpose; we no longer had the summer to keep us together.

In 1972, after not hearing from her in months, I received a letter and a photograph. The photograph made it clear why she had written me. It was a picture of her and Tim. Tim looked thin and haunted by memories; he was not the same man I'd seen in the picture Joleen had shown me, and never would be. His smile was gone, or rather it had changed from one of optimism to one of cautious hope. And he gained his hope from Hilde. The picture showed him looking at her, the source of all his strength, of everything he wanted and needed. Hilde changed too. Facing the camera, she looked older, worn by her emotional battle of the last three years, and her eyes held the knowledge that the months ahead would be difficult ones. But the knowledge couldn't keep her from smiling. It was a smile of faith, a smile I recognized, and I felt old emotions rise within me. It was a long time before I could look away and read the letter.

Dear John,

If you've seen the picture you know what's happened. Believe me, I'm as surprised as you must be. All this time, Tim was a P.O.W. We had no idea he was alive until his name appeared on the list of prisoners released as

part of the peace talks. It was like he'd suddenly come back to life, and when I got the news I didn't feel the way I thought I would. Of course I was happy and relieved, but I'd grown so used to living without him that it was a shock to learn he was alive and coming home. Everything I've built for myself the last three years seemed to come to an end. I didn't live those years in a vacuum. I made a life for myself, so much of it centered on graduate school, and now a lot of that's going to change. It already has. It seems to me now that in spite of my accomplishments, the last three years were a time of waiting, a life within a life, starting in 1969 and ending now in 1972.

I used to think that if only Tim would come back alive, everything would be fine. Now I see we have a tremendous adjustment to make, especially him. He was a prisoner for so long it's hard for him to imagine being anything else. He won't talk about what happened to him. Mostly he wants to listen to me, to learn what he's missed the last three years. It's his way of coping, I think, of finding his way back home, and so I talk for hours as we try to find our way back into each other's lives. We're strangers in a way, and we have to fall in love again, partly on memory, partly on hope.

I don't know how our life together will turn out, but I believe it will be both a victory and a defeat. Life

was always that, yours, mine, Tim's, everyone's. Once you accept that, it isn't so bad.

Love,

Hilde

I read the letter and looked at the picture many times that day. I wanted to call her, try to reconnect myself to her life, share in her struggle as I had in 1969. I wanted to relive the defeats of that summer so that the victory of this day would taste sweeter. I did none of those things.

Her life within a life had ended, and with it our last ties to the summer and to each other. It wasn't so hard to accept.

DARK AND LIGHT, NARRATIVE CHOICE:
AN AFTERWORD TO **THE WAR WE KNEW**

The War We Knew began as a short story I wrote when I moved to Oklahoma in 1984. It was a much different story than the novel it eventually became, and wasn't a good piece of fiction. At the time, I knew little about the fundamental role a narrative persona plays in a work of fiction, being more concerned with developing symbols and metaphors and subtle themes for the reader to ferret out, focusing on the parts rather than the whole. As a result, the story had no controlling voice, and without it, the parts had no framework.

Over the next few years, I learned a great deal more about the necessity of a narrative persona, which led to a new, more successful version of my story, now called "Summer Victory, Summer Defeat." Its strength lay in its consistent first person narrator, the mature voice of a man looking back to the summer of 1969, when he was sixteen. Given his maturity and hindsight--the emotional and intellectual distance between his telling of the events and their occurrence--the narrator is able to articulate the story in a way the sixteen-year-old boy could not, recognizing themes and ironies the boy is still in the

process of discovering. The man has learned the lesson while the boy has not; the story has a framework in which to fit the parts.

Finishing "Summer Victory, Summer Defeat," I realized the story had much more to tell, that it was asking finally to be a novel. Every aspect would have to be rethought, reworked, depending on my intentions. Plot, character, setting--they were all important, but my first decision involved the kind of narrator I would use. If it is true that **how one tells a story determines what that story means**, then the creation of a distinct narrator, or voice, is necessarily the first step in realizing the intentions of a novel.

The choices, as Wayne Booth reminded me in **The Rhetoric of Fiction**, are nearly limitless. I might employ an undramatized, or third person, narrator, ranging from complete objectivity to a deep inside view of one or more of the characters. Or I might use a dramatized, or first person, narrator, one who either observes the events or is involved in them to some degree. I would also have to consider whether or not the narrator is self-conscious, aware of himself as a writer, and whether he is reliable or unreliable. What, finally, was to be the sensibility of this narrator, its effect on the telling of the novel and thus on the reader? As Booth points out, "No narrator or central intelligence or observer is **simply** convincing:

he is convincingly decent or mean, brilliant or stupid, informed, ignorant, or muddled. . . . usually we find our emotional and intellectual reactions to him as a character affecting our reactions to the events he relates" (273). In other words, an implied dialogue occurs in a work of fiction, one that may contain any type or degree of distance, depending on the kind of narrator chosen:

> Whether or not they are involved in the action as agents or as sufferers, narrators and third-person reflectors differ markedly according to the degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story. In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (155)

I had only to think of **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, **The Great Gatsby**, **Lolita**, and the stories of Flannery O'Connor to see the various kinds and degrees of distance an author may establish.

In terms of this implied dialogue, I wanted to create

a reliable narrator, one whose norms would be in general accord with the reader's, and who would not draw attention to his ability to tell a story. Since I did not want a great distance separating the narrator from the reader, I chose to tell the novel in the first person. While the moral and intellectual sensibilities of a narrator go a long way in determining the degree of distance, it seems to me that at one level, a certain kind of distance--or closeness--can be established according to whether the reader is told the story by a character, or is given a privileged view of a character without that character's knowledge or consent. If a first person narrator is used, the story is confessional in the sense that the narrator implicitly says, "Here is a story I have to tell, about myself and others, and I **want** to tell it." There is no intermediary, no omniscient narrator; rather, an illusion is created in which one person speaks to another (narrator to reader).

By virtue of his "choice" to reveal information about himself, the narrator to a degree closes the distance between himself and the reader--at least until he acts in such a way as to extend the distance. On the other hand, no matter how much we might learn about or come to care for a character whose story is told by a third person narrator, we are always reminded that, for certain reasons, it is the narrator, not the character, who tells the story.

This is not to say there will always be a greater distance in a third person narration than in a first person, or that first person narrators are somehow "better qualified" to tell a story. Ring Lardner's "Haircut" demonstrates the moral gulf that can separate a first person narrator from the reader, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" shows how a third person narrator can evoke a great deal of reader sympathy for Charlie Wales. Simply put, a character telling his own story can achieve **one** kind of intimacy with a reader that a third person narrator cannot.

An author's choice of a narrator depends in part on a character's ability and willingness to tell a story. Depending on the author's intentions, some characters are suited to be narrators and others are not. In **The War We Knew**, the sixteen-year-old John is emotionally and intellectually unreliable. I could have solved the problem by using a third person narrator capable of articulating the story through John's consciousness, but I wanted the voice to be John's. I chose an older, mature version of him, a man with the necessary distance between himself and the summer of 1969 to serve as a reliable narrator. In turn, this mature perspective allows for dramatic irony, shared by the narrator and the reader. As Booth says,

> Could we ever really prefer a reading of **The Great Gatsby** cleansed of the knowledge given us in the opening? . . . After

> reading [it], we know a good deal that no one in the story will know as it progresses. The younger Nick as a "lucid reflector" in the James manner would be an unreliable witness to the events. As it is, the older Nick provides thoroughly reliable guidance. (176)

Though **The War We Knew** does not contain the amount of dramatic irony **The Great Gatsby** does, it attempts to establish an ironic distance in the opening paragraph: "When the summer of 1969 began, I was certain it would be as uninspiring as the land I'd been hired to farm. I was sixteen then, and certain of many things." Looking back on this time, the narrator implicitly says the summer was anything but uninspiring, that at sixteen he did not know as much as he thought. Not only does he understand what his younger self cannot, he brings to the narration a maturity the sixteen-year-old lacks. When, in Chapter Three, John gives in to the recklessness of Cap and his crew, the narrator recognizes the danger:

> I should have been angry there were no life belts or jackets on the boat, angry I'd dueled in the first place. No one had forced me, but I felt compelled all the same. If I was to be a member of the crew I had to prove myself, at the risk of drowning. I should have realized how lucky Woody and I

were, and seen Cap for the man he was.

Such commentary helps to establish the narrator's reliability, he and the reader in agreement on the foolishness of John's actions. This reliability is especially important in keeping the reader's sympathy. While the young John is essentially good at heart, some of his actions are questionable, such as his drinking, his association with the GI's, and his lying to his aunt, uncle, and Hilde.

Lest the moral distance between John and the reader become too great, the narrator, by virtue of his own moral reliability, reminds the reader that, whatever mistakes his younger self made, he became a wiser person for them. Though he does not excuse himself, the narrator is careful to provide explanations for his younger self's behavior. Much of what happens in the novel follows a cause and effect pattern. In response to finding the body of James Johnson, John and Woody buy knives for self-defense; after witnessing a fight and being chased, they discuss the merits of buying a gun. Within this framework, the narrator takes pains to reveal John's mental and emotional processes, his uncertainty, guilt, and desire for answers. He cannot always square his actions with his conscience, which I hope helps to hold the reader's sympathy.

Because of the attention paid to John's internal conflict, the narrator is not given over to much overt commentary and irony. In one sense, everything he says is

a commentary; it is especially evident in his use of "as if" and "like" to describe things in a way John wouldn't. But the commentary arises from John's response to the events. While the narrator does establish an ironic distance, I wanted to focus on the tale more than the teller, on the moment itself. The narrator interprets John's responses to events, but he does not interpret those events as a whole, providing a moral to the story or giving away too much too soon. The potential success of this novel depends partly on an element of suspense, a working out of a causal chain of events which culminates in meaning for both John and the reader. I could have opened the novel by having the narrator say, "It was Hilde who taught me that acceptance is sometimes the only resolution, the reasons for tragedy of little help." Such a beginning would be appropriate if I wished to impart the message so early in the novel--and had a narrator inclined to do so. Instead, I wanted a narrator who, for the most part, would let the story unfold of its own volition.

Once I chose a narrator, I was ready to focus on other aspects of the novel. From the outset I wanted to write a maturation novel, with the Vietnam War as the backdrop. I conceived the idea of a broad tension existing between two worlds, which would in turn create specific conflicts for John. There is the world of the lake and the world of the farm, initially defined in the epigraph, taken from

Theodore Roethke's "Four for Sir John Davies." Milford Lake represents a world of darkness, the death, violence, chaos, and moral ambiguity of the 1960's. The lake is a sign of the changing times, invading the world of light, a pastoral world which values tradition, order, the land, and Christian faith, and refuses to acknowledge the world of darkness. Once I had established these worlds and the people inhabiting them, I wanted to test their influence on John.

He recognizes certain virtues of the world of light, such as working the land and feeling the satisfaction of a completed job; he marvels at the cycle of the land itself, the changes it undergoes during the hay baling and the wheat harvest. He also perceives certain corruptions, such as Aunt Margaret and Uncle Roy's self-imposed isolation from the changing world, and Mrs. Lutz's twisted version of religious faith, which offers no hope or alternative for a happy life. As a child of the sixties, raised in the city, he is more drawn to the world of darkness, initially for its promise of good times--beer drinking, pot smoking, and girl chasing, opportunities not available on the farm. When he and Woody discover the body of James Johnson, they become trapped in this world, initiated into the fear and violence which underlies the glamor of rebellion. By the end of Chapter Four, after his patrol with Cap and the crew and his first argument with Mrs. Lutz,

I wanted him to have experienced enough of both worlds to feel ambivalent about his place, his identity, sensing the gray that dark and light have faded to.

At this point in the novel I felt it necessary to introduce a character who would offer, in Holy Joe's words, "a balance, God's greatest gift of all." John needs someone he can rely on and identify with, a person more mature than Woody, with a sensibility more attuned to the times than Aunt Margaret's or Uncle Roy's. Unlike Mrs. Lutz, this person must share John's belief in the impossibility of easy answers, but be strong enough to withstand the uncertainty of such a position. In effect, she should be both friend and teacher, speaking from experience, willing to befriend John because she herself is lonely and afraid. I chose a young woman partly because of the influence she would have on a sixteen-year-old boy, and the sexual tension that would result. I also wanted to include a female perspective on the war, to have a woman deeply involved because her husband is missing in action. And so I created Hilde.

It was appropriate, I thought, to have her appear first in church and then at Crystal Cove, because she serves as a moral equilibrium to certain elements in both worlds, balancing Mrs. Lutz's religious fervor and the GI's amoral behavior. Early in Chapter Five, greatly influenced by the world of darkness yet uncertain of his place within

it, John realizes that the road he and Woody "started down had no destination, and it was impossible to turn back. The starting point had vanished, leaving us stranded." It is Hilde who offers him a ride, the relationship they establish comprising a destination of its own.

Within the framework of the two worlds in opposition, I saw a focus emerging: the characters' need to properly define their relationships with each other. For John to understand his relationship with the two worlds, he must define his relationships with the people who inhabit them. Defining them, in turn, helps him discover his identity. Gaining a sense of identity is a challenge he and Woody face from the start of the summer. In one respect they are men responsible for maintaining the farm; in another they are boys looking for a good time at Milford Lake; in still another they are both victims and seekers of violence. By involving them in a chain of events, acting and reacting, I hoped to bring them to a clearer sense of their identities.

I created Woody to serve as John's friend and, increasingly, his opponent, seduced by the world of darkness. At one point he says, "'What I have, who I am, it's not enough anymore. I need something else.'" Searching for something he does not have, something that will make him different, he does not consider the moral and practical implications of his actions, which leads him into an affair

with Joleen and on a dangerous hunt for Hawk. He identifies with violence and romanticizes it according to the film **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.** Violence is a way of proving himself, gaining identity through action; death is not quite real, or at least more heroic than in the murder of James Johnson. Only after he kills Hawk does disillusionment set in. He tells John, "'I thought it would count for something. It sure ain't like Butch and Sundance.'" However, he has embraced the world of darkness to such an extent that he cannot escape it, eventually enlisting in the army.

I wanted Woody to serve as an example to John, forcing him to finally reject much of what he finds in the world of darkness. In fact, many of the characters help John define himself by showing him what he should not be. Mrs. Lutz, Cap and the crew, Joleen--all are people who live by standards he cannot accept; he learns who he is by first learning who he is not. Once his various relationships have given him a clearer sense of his identity, he is able to end them and, consequently, his association with certain elements in both worlds. Only his relationship with Hilde allows him to define himself in a positive way. Such values as responsibility, loyalty, and honesty are reinforced; whenever he fails to live up to them, he is painfully reminded of it. In a very limited sense, I intended Hilde to serve as a Christ-like figure, suffering so that John

might mature. By virtue of her own pain and goodness, John is able to look beyond himself, respond to her needs in a morally correct way.

Despite the positive nature of this relationship, the narrative chain of events leads to a necessarily negative climax: John's temporary estrangement from Hilde, and Hawk's death. John's education cannot be completed until he has suffered a spiritual paralysis, from which he will finally be freed by Hilde. I left the facts surrounding Hawk's death purposely vague in order to emphasize the theme of acceptance, which John must learn. Human motivation is not always fathomable, as in Hawk's decision to hide on the farm and Woody's reason for killing him. The truth is not always decipherable, as in the murder of James Johnson, which is never solved. If reasons are available, they are seldom satisfactory, which Hilde impresses upon John with her stories of her father and Tim. "'People do things, and you have to live with it,'" she tells him; if there is any truth to be known, it is exactly that, and he finally accepts it: "by summer's end I had learned some things could never be resolved, only accepted. Acceptance itself was sometimes the only resolution."

Acceptance in this regard means not the adoption of a passive stance in a world which so often demands a response. Rather, it suggests the ability to forgive one's past. By forgiving (not forgetting) the past, one frees

oneself to assume the burdens of the future. This is the creed Hilde lives by, the reason she is able to transform her anger toward John, Woody, and Joleen into charity: "'Some things you have to put behind you when more important things come up.'" Setting an example for John, she enables him to put the summer behind him and look to the future.

Ultimately, my intention was not to have John choose one world over the other; such a choice would be restrictive, if not impossible. Rather, through the events and people he encounters during the summer of 1969, I wanted him to arrive at an understanding of both worlds, to realize that in fact they comprise one world, the world in which he must find his way. Playing with dark and light, he has come of age to learn the world is mostly lit in gray, and to accept that knowledge.

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