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Deserters

Stephen Henighan

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Deserters

Stephen Henighan

This thesis contains eleven short stories. About half of these stories are set in rural Eastern Ontario; the remaining stories are set in Latin America, primarily in the Andean region. They are united by a concern with the dislocation resulting from social change. The characters in these stories react to social change in a number of ways: some cling to beliefs and lifestyles that have become anachronistic, while others embrace new faiths; many flee their changed environments, either aimlessly, or in pursuit of dreams they may or may not come to recognize as illusions.

Due to the overarching theme of the effects of social change on individual consciousness, many of these stories rely on the techniques of flashback and mildly jumbled chronology to counterpoint past and present experience.

"What you were fell away: customs, worn
phrases, the blinding identities of light."
Pablo Neruda: Heights of Machu Picchu, VII

"Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
the other powerless to be born...."
Matthew Arnold: Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse

CONTENTS

ROADS TO HUANCHACO

I

"A sigh, a refusal would suffice
to start the day in another way...."
-- Julio Cortázar

Nine years, Mary thinks, her fingers racing over the keys of the electric typewriter. She steals a gulp of coffee from the styrofoam cup at her side, then sets the cup down on her magazine. The chatter of the uncarpeted office reverberates around her. The office is a wide room lighted by fluorescent bars in the ceiling; desks, fenced off by padded chest-high partitions, have been fitted together across the floor-space like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. There is a perpetual clatter of coming and going: people cart paper from one desk to another, answer telephones, consult computer terminals. The men work with their jackets off, in dress shirts and ties; the women, confined in high

heels and stiff-jacketed suits, never look quite as wholly at ease as the men. What would they all look like, Mary wonders, after two thousand years in a bog?

The feature article in the magazine on Mary's desk is about bog people: corpses buried in European marshes two thousand years ago and dredged up today in a nearly perfect state of preservation. Photographs of shriveled brown faces portray a living death: flesh without life. Mary bought the magazine to read on the bus this evening, but having dipped into it at lunch-hour she cannot get the bog people's faces out of her mind. She drains the last swallow of coffee from the styrofoam cup. Nine years, she thinks again. She is thirty-one now; Alan is thirty-two. They have been together since they were twenty-two and twenty-three respectively. Neither of them has changed jobs in five years, since Mary left the health food store and came to work at this downtown advertising agency. Alan seems utterly settled at the trust company. We could live like this forever, Mary thinks. Then she thinks: I'd go crazy, how did we ever slip into <u>this</u>?

*

Mary met Alan during a summer visit to her sister Julie on Vancouver Island. Alan, who was working out west for the summer, had got to know the man that Julie was living with.

Alan would come by in the evenings to listen to music. Julie would turn up the volume on the stereo and play records by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, Fairport Convention and Joni Mitchell; the four of them would sit on the porch, drinking white wine and rolling pencil-thin joints. Alan and Mary became friends and by July they were lovers. Mary had always found that her friendships with men disintegrated when they crossed the border into sexual involvement; sex seemed to breed something adversarial in a relationship. Mary never felt at ease with a man once she had made love with him: in her late teens and early twenties she had run through a series of short-lived involvements. The pattern broke when she met Alan. The days that followed their first mildly drunken lovemaking in the room that Julie had lent Mary for the summer were peaceful: a long dream from which Mary recalls pale sunlight lancing tufted clouds, the pull of Pacific waves on the beach, the leaf-dark green of the hills surrounding Julie's house. Mary felt no discomfort: no sense of being dominated or invaded. In August Alan quit his job. They traveled south for a month, getting as far as southern California. They turned around and headed home only after glimpsing the Mexican border through the dust on the highway south of San Diego: a glance into the Third World through a smeared

windshield. At the time they had barely paid attention to it. That fall, however, illustrating their route for friends with the help of Mary's old high school atlas, they realized how close they had come. From then on, the central goal of their relationship had been to cross that boundary: to reach the other world. Beyond that dusty curtain, they felt, was a place where they might be able to get to the root of things. Rather than spending their money on furniture, a color television or an extravagant stereo system -- stupid middle class luxuries, Mary thought; "things that can wait," said Alan -- they resolved to live frugally, save their salaries and, in a year or two, take off on a long trip around Latin America. They knew other couples who had done this -- disappeared for months and returned with wondrous tales of Peru or India, Bolivia or Afghanistan. Julie had spent six months in Nepal a few years earlier. But Mary and Alan weren't interested in Asia. When they pored over Mary's atlas together, it was South America they looked at; the continent's tapering profile, both like and unlike the outline of their own continent, entranced them. "A year and we'll be there," said Alan, his forefinger sliding up the bulge of the Brazilian coast. "Two years at the most."

*

Nine years, Mary thinks, riding back to their Centretown apartment in the red-and-silver municipal bus. She leafs through the magazine; staring at the photographs of the bog people. She arrives home before Alan, changes out of her working clothes into bluejeans and a sweater, and collapses onto the mattress on the living room floor. The fluorescent lights in the office have left her with a headache. Sprawled on the mattress, she looks slowly around the room, taking in the shag carpet, the stereo, the color TV, Alan's collection of jazz records, the imitation Group-of-Seven landscapes on the walls. The old mattress looks out of place now; the gaudy covers that Mary sewed for the cushions clash with the rest of the room's furnishings. Alan is right: they should get rid of the mattress, replace it with a sofa. But Mary won't let it happen. The mattress is the last reminder of their old dreams. It is also the only remaining touch of Mary's influence in the living room; the rest of the room is Alan's -- his records, his taste in painting, his stacked video-cassettes of old Ottawa Rough Riders football games. In the bedroom Mary's style predominates. Her crocheted wallhangings are suspended over their bed; her batiked T-shirts lie piled in the closet; her paperback Doris Lessings and Margaret Atwoods spill over the bedside table. The dresser, its

mirror held between two ornate wooden uprights, belonged to Mary's grandmother. The bedroom is as much her room as the living room is his; only the mattress mars this symmetry.

The mattress was the first purchase she and Alan made together; it became the central furnishing in their first, tiny apartment. They bought it at a fire-sale in Lower Town two weeks after returning from the west coast, prospecting among stacks of water-damaged merchandise until Mary stopped, taken by the mattress's coloring: robin's-egg blue with white trim. "Look, Alan," she said. Alan traced the mattress's seams with outstretched fingers. "You can hardly see the damage," he said. "There's just one tiny little smudge in the corner here." "We can turn it over," Mary said. Alan nodded. "D'you want to take it?" he asked. "Yes," Mary said, relieved that they had been able to agree with so little fuss. She and Alan had been together only two months: they knew each other as lovers, as travel partners. The complexities of living together remained new to them. As they walked out of the store, having arranged for the mattress to be delivered to their apartment, they smiled, clasped hands and kissed. <u>It's going to work out</u>, Mary remembers thinking, as warm September air washed against her; <u>it's really going to work out</u>.

Mary runs her hand across the mattress. She feels tugged

by two currents, adrift between a past she can't live up to and a present she is reluctant to accept. At the office she is bored by her own competence; on weekends the energy she once lavished on planning a trip to South America is channeled into bicycle-riding, cross-country skiing, expeditions to restaurants in the Glebe or the Byward Market. None of her experiences measures up to her dreams of travel; unlike Alan, she does not wish to concede that their plans of nine years ago will never be realized. She writes letters to Julie describing her frustration. Julie explains away Mary's anxieties by referring to various branches of learning of which she herself possesses scant knowledge. Astrology, that's the answer. You're a Gemini, you're always heading in two directions at the same time. When this response depresses Mary -- how can she remedy being a Gemini? -- Julie mails her a brown manila envelope containing a folded chart; three computer-printed lines stretch across the chart. Biorhythms, Julie has written; you can only deal with your moods if you can anticipate them. Mary tapes the biorhythm chart to the bathroom wall: Alan pronounces it silly. After a couple of weeks Mary decides that biorhythms are meaningless and takes down the chart. She writes to her sister that she has given up on biorhythms. I don't get it, Julie writes back. What's

wrong with you? Is everything okay between you and Alan? Are you menstruating regularly? You're a puzzle, honey.

*

Two weeks later Julie writes again to announce that she is coming east. Autumn is the slow season in the handicraft co-op where she works, and Julie and her new lover, Doug, have decided to take advantage of the hiatus to fly in from the west coast for a vacation. They will be able to stay with Mary and Alan for about a week.

"We've got to get rid of that mattress," Alan says, when Mary tells him about the visit. "The least we can do is get one of those sofas that folds out into a bed."

"Alan, this is Julie you're talking about. My-sister-the-old- hippy, remember? She's not going to care if she has to sleep on a mattress on the floor."

"Right, I forgot. She's probably going to want us all to get high together."

They are making supper. Alan stands at the sink, his back turned to her, his shoulder-blades moving slowly as he washes carrots.

"What's wrong with getting high?" Mary says.

"It makes me feel like an idiot. For Christ's sake, we're almost thirty-five years old."

He turns around as he says this. Mary steers away from

him, picking up a wooden spoon and beginning to stir the stew. She shakes her hair out of her eyes. "You used to get stoned all the time."

"That was years ago."

"I know, but...."

"But what? Don't you like having a decent job and an apartment that doesn't have cockroaches? You can't have those things if you're stoned out of your skull all the time, you know."

"I know. I like those things. But...."

"But what?"

Bog people, Mary thinks. A year and we'll be there, two years at the most. "Forget it," she says. "I guess I just don't know what I want."

She hears him turn off the faucet, take two steps toward her. She shivers as his arms wrap themselves around her, his damp hands fretting at her shoulders.

*

The first night of their stay Julie and Doug light up a joint. "Want a toke?" Doug says to Mary and Alan. They shake their heads. Doug, a lean, bearded man, draws deeply on the joint. He exhales. The old sweet smell fills the living room. Doug passes the joint to Julie. With the years, Julie has become increasingly ample and motherly.

Sprigs of grey seem to have made her long hair thicker; her skirts billow wider than the skirts Mary remembers; her face is rimmed by the outline, spare but definite, of a nascent double chin. "Sure you don't want a toke, honey?" she says to Mary.

"No, thanks," Mary says. She can feel Alan, beside her, beginning to withdraw. Alan rarely gets angry, rarely shows much emotion. When they work out their differences it is Mary who must supply the emotional fuel. If they reach a moment of seemingly irreconcilable disagreement, Alan will wither, fold in upon himself, stalking silently around the apartment in a manner that might be considered sulking in a man more overtly emotional. Mary, who in moments of anger sees Alan's withdrawal as a ploy --if he is silent, she must make concessions -- now finds his reaction completely understandable. She doesn't know whether to sneer at Julie and Doug or to join them. She reaches out to take Alan's hand, to reassure him and feel reassured; but he is gone. He jerks to his feet, paces around the apartment, goes into the kitchen and fixes himself a drink. He returns to the living room, wrinkles his nose at the smell of the pot smoke, then disappears into the bedroom. Mary, who has settled herself on a stool in the corner of the room, stares after him but does not follow.

"Come have a seat, honey," says Julie, patting the mattress, on which she and Doug lie half-sprawled.

Mary shakes her head, remains perched on the stool. The next few nights Julie and Doug leave their pot stashed in their luggage and stick to beer. The last night of Julie and Doug's stay, Mary and Alan finally break down and get stoned.

That last night the four of them eat out together at a restaurant in the Glebe. They sit at a table by the window, watching the traffic nosing down Bank Street, drinking glasses of white wine -- "Just like the old days on your porch," Mary says to Julie -- and talking about the places they have traveled to and the people they have met. Midway through her third glass of wine, Mary's senses lurch. Feeling abstracted from the conversation, she thinks: Are we all so old then, that all we can talk about is the past? What have I done with my time? She sees Julie yakking furiously, her sleek pre-middle-aged cheeks puffing like a bellows as she completes her anecdote, slaps the tabletop and laughs, setting off a ripple of laughter in Doug and Alan, and even in Mary, who has not been following the story. Julie leans forward. "Hey," she says, touching Mary's arm; "remember how you guys were going to go around South America? What ever happened to that? How come you

never went?"

Mary and Alan look at each other.

"Doug's been to South America," Julie says.

"How was it?" Alan asks.

Doug smiles. "I'll tell you about it later."

Later, in the apartment, they sit on the living room floor -- Julie and Doug squatting cross-legged on the mattress -- play old records and continue to talk. Doug's low, droning voice unreels anecdotes about South American travel. Julie, mouthing the words of the song on the stereo, rolls pencil-thin joints. "Now it's <u>really</u> like the old days on my porch," Julie says, leaning toward Mary and passing her a joint. Mary holds the joint between her teeth and inhales as Julie's lighter flares. She tokes deeply and hands the joint to Alan, who draws on it without hesitating. Mary watches him toke. He holds in the smoke for a long time.

"Peru's the best of those countries," Doug is saying. "Man, you could spend your whole life trying to see everything in Peru." His voice grinds out a steady, drugged mumble that grows heavier each time the joint comes round. "If you ever make it down there," he says, "go and say hi to Huanchaco for me."

"What's Huanchaco?" Alan asks.

"Huanchaco's a place I had some good-times," Doug says. "It's this town on the Pacific Coast in Peru, about ten hours north of Lima. The desert just kind of drops off into the ocean there. The town's all down along the beach, then up above, on the desert, there's this big old church and a cemetery. That cemetery's a crazy place. The town's so poor people go up there and dig up the coffins just to see what they can get. So there's always these bodies lying around; the climate's so dry they hardly rot at all. The place was almost levelled by an earthquake a few years back and some of the fishermen gave up and left. But the beach is great -- the town's on this beautiful bay. The water's too cold for swimming, but there's all kinds of cool people drifting around. You should go there. Just watch out for the cops: they get their jollies planting drugs on gringos. Aside from that, it's definitely a must-see. Definitely...."

"We'll go there," says Mary, drowsy, folded against Alan's shoulder.

Alan gives her a squeeze. "We should have gone there years ago."

"We've still got time," Mary murmurs. She looks up into his face. His firm mouth twitches. The record ends and the room grows quiet. It is late, and Julie and Doug's

flight leaves early the next morning: the two couples go to bed.

In bed, Alan's pot-heavy breath grazes Mary's lips, and her limbs, which she has thought deadened by booze and dope, are suddenly alive. This is how he smelled the nights he came to her on Vancouver Island. Nine years of Alan's head slumping beside hers, the tang of fresh toothpaste on his breath, dissolve, and they are back there, twenty-three and twenty-two, pale sunlight lancing tufted clouds, the pull of Pacific waves on the beach, the leaf-dark green of the hills surrounding Julie's house, she wraps her legs around him, he is hard, then inside her, no sense of being dominated or invaded -- "We can still make that trip," she gasps, "can't we, Alan?" "Yes," he says. "Promise?" "Yes." -- and she giggles. He stifles her laughter with his mouth, they roll together against the darkness; then sunlight fills her eyes and it is morning. Mary eases herself out from under Alan's weight, pulls on jeans and a sweater and peeks into the living room to find Julie and Doug awake and quietly packing.

They all have light hangovers that morning. When Julie and Doug have left for the airport in a taxi, Alan disappears into the shower, black coffee in hand. He steps out of the bathroom twenty minutes later, gangly,

shaven, his dark hair moist; he ambles into the bedroom and begins to pull on his clothes for work: dress pants, dress shirt, medium-wide tie, light jacket. He looks at Mary, blinks. He seems miles away, only distantly related to the man whose sweat mingled with hers during the night. He ponders her bluejeans and lumpy sweater. "You're not going to work dressed like that?"

The space he can put between us, Mary thinks. "No, I'm calling in sick. Tomorrow I'm going to tell them I'm quitting."

"Quitting?" He gropes toward this world, his shirt half-buttoned.

"Not right away. I mean in six months' time, when we leave for South America. But I'll let them know tomorrow to give them time to find a replacement."

Alan swallows, blinks. "Mary," he says.

She waits out his silence.

"What about me? What about my job? And the apartment? We'll never find another place this close to Centretown. I'll miss the football season...." He laughs; then his smile fades. "We can't go running around like a couple of kids."

"If we don't do it now we never will." Mary pauses. "You didn't have any objections last night." I must be out

of my mind, she thinks, do I really want to force him into this? Do I really want to go to South America?

"Oh, for God's sake." Alan's face tightens, then sags with a resignation which seems, paradoxically, to brighten his features, lighten his pacing stride. He stops pacing and stares at her. "I don't know, maybe you're right, maybe it's not too late -- "

"Of course it isn't!" Mary says.

Alan stares at her, frowns. "Six months, eh?" He is smiling now and pacing once more. "Six months," he murmurs. He snaps to a halt, looks her in the eyes, his gaze meeting hers for the first time that morning. "Let's give ourselves a year," he says.

II "Good travelers are heartless." -- Elias Canetti

Looking out through the open doorway of the hole-in-the-wall café, Mary sees Indian women, crouched under heavy bundles, shuffling against the sloped street. Quito in the rain, she thinks, sipping the black, sweet coffee. The stone floor holds the cold and a faint but insistent draught chills the back of Mary's neck. During their six days in Quito she and Alan have learned that it is

impossible to dress comfortably in the city's cold rainy season. Light clothes don't provide enough warmth; heavy ones soak up the rain. They have devoted most of their six days in Quito to assimilating this sort of detail; to adapting to the restaurants, the altitude, the toilets, the language. Although they have been spending longer together than they're used to -- whole days in one another's company, for the first time in years -- Mary feels that it is only in the last few hours that she has swum free of the tide of new sights and surfaced into an awareness of Alan once again. His face looks harder in the mountain light; the line of his mouth seems to have contracted, giving his lips a pinched, clasp-like appearance.

Mary averts her eyes from Alan's face, looking across the café at the tiny Indian girl who brought them their coffee. The girl slouches at the next table in a grimy dress that brushes the floor, picking at her ragged black braids and staring out at the rain. Mary wishes that she could match the girl's expression of bored resignation. The perpetual rain is driving her crazy; every time she steps out the door of their hotel her clothes get drenched. Since they are traveling light -- a medium-sized backpack each -- they are are now each down to their last set of clothes. The wet clothes never really dry in the damp,

stuffy air of the hotel room, which is so small that it barely allows them space to stand between the two single beds. There is nowhere to hang anything; they have spread bluejeans, socks and shirts over their backpacks and their beds. As the rain keeps falling -- an unassuming, relentless spattering that persists day and night -- the hotel room has begun to smell.

"I'm not leaving this café," Mary murmurs into her black coffee, "until this damned rain stops."

"You're going to be here until the end of the rainy season," Alan grunts, sliding the guidebook into the pocket of his raincoat. "You'll be here forever."

"I feel like I've been here forever already."

"It's only six days."

"I know, but I want to leave." She stares into his face and is unable to achieve eye contact; he has withdrawn. He looks down into his black coffee.

"I'm serious, Alan. I can't take any more of this <u>rain</u>."

Her voice breaks on the last word, rising to a shrillness that sounds artificial in Mary's own ears. Alan sets down his mug. "It was your idea to make this trip. Don't you want to see the city now that we're here?"

"There are so many other things to see," Mary sighs, hating the whine in her voice, the unchanging clash of her

emotion with his dogged reason. This much has not changed, she thinks, despite their new surroundings. "I've seen enough of Quito. Can't we go somewhere where it isn't raining?"

"Sure, of course. I just thought that...."

We're here! Mary has written on a post card to Julie. Our flight arrived right on time. We're adjusting to the rain and the altitude and in a few days we'll be leaving for Peru and Bolivia...

"When do you want to leave?" Alan asks.

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow, I guess, since you have to buy the bus tickets a day in advance."

The rain continues to fall. When they have finished their coffee they wend their way through narrow, steep streets to a sloping plaza where the water pouring down the side streets spills into rippling grey puddles. On one flank of the plaza stands a large old building fronted by a raised stone porch. The bus company office is inside the building. A bus stands before the porch, its roof piled high with luggage.

Mary and Alan climb the steps onto the stone porch. Dozens of people have crowded into the dank shelter. Passengers clutching tattered bundles queue confusedly, jostling one another; small children selling stale buns

thrust their wares, gripped by grubby fingers, at Mary's face. Mary and Alan fight their way through the crowd; the enclosed space of the porch, with its hard stone surfaces, magnifies the jabber of voices. The door to the bus company's office is practically sealed off by Indian women peddling handicrafts. Alan elbows clear a path and Mary quickly follows him. When they have bought tickets on the next evening's bus to the Peruvian border, the struggle is repeated. Caught in the dense crowd, Mary falls. She throws out her hands and breaks her fall, grazing her palms. For a moment, shaken, she sits on all fours on the moist gritty stone. Massed bodies press their weight against her shoulders. Alan, reaching forward, is trying to drag her to her feet. She cannot move; she is crouching eye-to-eye with a beggar-boy. The boy's eyes light up at the sight of Mary sprawled on the stone; he is sitting on a board, an old tin can jammed between what little remains of legs hacked off at the thigh. "Gringa!" he shouts, laughing. "Gimme money, gringa!" He makes as if to grab at her clothing; but, lacking hands, he can only swish his stumps before her eyes. Mary recoils, feels the crowd's weight bearing down on her. Alan at last succeeds in yanking her to her feet. He hustles her out into the rain.

She is crying. The rain makes her shiver; her tears

course faster.

"Don't get so emotional about it," Alan says. "They chop up the kids to make them better beggars -- it's just a trick to get your sympathy."

"I know," Mary says. She feels divided, angry, uncertain. The mistake, she writes to Julie in a letter that evening, was to think of South America as a lifestyle. I mean, we're not twenty years old any more, we bring the last nine years with us when we come here.... Mary lays down her pen. She watches Alan counting their money. He sits on his bed, arranging the bills in neat stacks: traveler's cheques in one pile, U.S. dollars in another, Ecuadorean sucres in a third. In a few minutes he'll tell her how much money they have and they'll discuss their travel plans. Mary will flip through The South American Handbook and South America on a Shoestring, read aloud passages describing nearby sights and write up an itinerary for the next day. Alan will clean the camera and in the morning they will follow Mary's itinerary to cathedrals, views, ruins. This is the routine they have slipped into over the past six days, prevented by the rain from going out in the evenings. The first night of their stay Mary began to worry about their finances, so Alan piled the money on his bed and counted it. When he had finished, he

said: "Enough for another four months. Enough to get to Buenos Aires, maybe. Now what are we going to do tomorrow?" In response, Mary reached for the guidebooks. Now she thinks: It become a habit, a routine, his side of it growing out of my worries, mine out of his question. We wanted to come here to get to the root of things: to smash the windowpane between people like us and people who live differently from us. God, we were so young. Only a couple of kids in the first blush of love could be that naive. Such secretly self-centered idealism: a fascination with ourselves disguised as a yearning to understand others. We weren't interested in South America; we were interested in Mary and Alan---in who am I as I express myself through this relationship? Would I be anyone at all if this relationship didn't exist? But that was nine years ago: what does this trip mean to us now?

*

The weather clears as the bus rolls out of Quito the next evening. Mary glimpses the green slide of a valley slicing through the mountains south of the city. Alan touches her shoulder: the summit of Cotopaxi has broken free of clouds. Through the window she sees it standing against the sky, reflecting the sunset like a tower of piled sherbet. The bus stops in villages and women in sack-like dresses climb

on board, accompanied by hordes of children. The women drag hemp bags behind them; live chickens make the bags wriggle and squawk. The aisle clogs up with passengers, and bag after bag of chickens is loaded into the luggage rack above Mary's and Alan's heads. Then darkness comes on and the chickens fall silent. Mary leans herself against Alan's chest. He loops his arm around her shoulders and they try to doze as the bus slams southward over unpaved mountain roads. The cold makes them snuggle closer together. Mary kisses Alan, holds his lower lip between both of hers. "Sorry about yesterday."

"That's okay," he murmurs, as though taken aback. "I can see why you were upset. I just figure you've got to get used to these things or there's no way you can enjoy your trip."

"Weren't you upset, too?" she whispers, easing her head into the crook between his cheek and his shoulder. The bus lurches, rubbing his stubble across her cheek. "Seeing a little boy with all his hands and feet chopped off? Isn't that how come you got so cold and angry with me -- because you were upset too, but you didn't want to show it?" Her voice is a faint caress in the nocturnal rattle of the bus. They are south of the equator now, tunneling through the night into a new hemisphere.

"No," says Alan. "I've learned to accept that kind of stuff. It's just something you've got to get used to. I want you to get used to it, too. That's all."

"You're a big fake," Mary says, rumpling his hair. "You act like a tough guy," kissing him, "but inside you're as soft as a marshmallow."

Alan says: "All right. Believe whatever you want."

Why does he have to be so cold? Mary wonders. In six days of traveling we have yet to hold a real conversation with a Latin American. All Alan wants to do is see the sights. Bog people, she thinks. I came here for more than that, I came here -- for what? Mary settles against Alan's side; then wakes suddenly scarcely realizing she has slept. Her body is lathered in sweeat. The bus has plunged into the hot coastal lowlands. Shadowy banana groves stand in close-packed blocks reaching to the edge of the road; in the clearings Mary can make out the silhouettes of small houses jacked up on stilts. She and Alan disentangle themselves, groggily pulling off their sweaters. Mary thinks of the families sleeping in the jacked-up houses. "Alan," she says.

He grunts.

"Alan, we've got to talk to more people...."

"What time is it?"

"Did you hear what I said, Alan?"

"I agree, you're absolutely right."

They fall asleep crumpled against each other. Shouts tear them awake: the bus has stopped, the driver's assistant is tugging their shoulders. "Control! Todos los extranjeros afuera!" he barks: control post, foreigners get off. Mary peers out the window. There are soldiers everywhere: tiny, dark-skinned teenagers, shaved almost bald. A concrete booth squats at the edge of the highway. Mary and Alan stumble off the bus. Soldiers carrying guns and flashlights ask to see their passports. They stand in the blinding glare of the bus's headlights, baring their passports to the soldiers; a haze of insects thickens against the light. The soldiers examine Mary's and Alan's passports with great care. Then they are allowed to stumble back onto the bus. The ritual is repeated twice more before the bus rolls into Huaquillas, the Ecuadorean border town. Mary and Alan doze in their seats until daylight.

The sun rises quickly, breaking the day open against a shell of pale dust. Alan cranes his neck and twists slowly, as though trying to evade the sunlight. "Well," he says, "we sure got away from the rain."

Mary looks out the window at a wide, sandy street, a row of shanty-like shops. She leans back in her seat and dozes

off again. When she wakes, Alan is browsing through The South American Handbook. He asks her where she thinks they should go once they have crossed the border into Peru. They settle on Trujillo, Peru's second largest city, located far down the curve of the Pacific coast, only ten hours north of Lima. They climb out of the bus, shoulder their backpacks and trudge onto Huaquillas's littered main street. The way to the border is lined with tables and stands that overflow with tape decks, tiny electronic soccer games, sports bags stamped with North American brand names. Posters depicting sprawled blond women and T-shirts monogrammed with Miami or New York hang in the doorways of lean-to shops. Crowds shuffle through the dust, studying the merchandise. The sunlight and the heat deepen Mary's exhaustion, slowing her stride, dulling her perceptions. She and Alan queue up in the Immigration Police office to secure their Ecuadorean exit stamps. A large sign posted on the office wall announces in Spanish and English: THE ECUADOREAN IMMIGRATION POLICE TAKES GOOD CARE OF YOU. Alan pulls out his camera and snaps a photograph of the unlikely declaration. "Isn't that great?" he says. Mary smiles. A wave of angry depression pours over her. He just wants to see the sights, she thinks. As if that's the only reason we came here.

The Immigration officer's fist slams down, stamping Mary's passport. She and Alan walk through the dust, passing the booths where the long street ceases to be Huaquillas, Ecuador and becomes Aguas Verdes, Peru. There are more piles of shiny manufactured junk on the Peruvian side of the border; more soldiers, more Immigration officials. Mary and Alan take a short bus ride to a garrison town called Tumbes. Staring out through the window of the bus, Mary sees that the lushness of the Ecuadorean coast is behind them. The terrain is shorn of vegetation and beaten hard; the desert clasps bleak earth to hazy sky. In Tumbes they wait for the overnight bus down the coast to Trujillo. The heat in the Tumbes bus station holds Mary in a daze of exhaustion. She feels remote from everything around her; she is edgy, uncertain.

Mary and Alan spend a second consecutive night sleeping lightly in bus seats. This night, as the terrain is flat and the road, for the most part, paved, they get more rest than before. Mary dreams of roots plunged into briny marshes, trees bifurcating at the crotch, waves breasting a beach, spinning themselves out and retreating, leaving silt deposits like shriveled brown faces as evidence of their passage. She and Alan stagger out of the bus at six o'clock

in the morning, drunk with exhaustion. They book into a hotel that is slightly more comfortable than the hotel where they stayed in Quito. There is easily space to stand between the room's two single beds. Mary and Alan undress and go to bed. Pure delight at being able to shed her stale clothes, at having room to lie down, drags Mary into a blank, giddy unconsciousness deeper than sleep. She wakes to see Alan's upturned face on the other side of the room, to hear his familiar snores. The transom casts a parallelogram of light over Alan's pillow; in the faded illumination she sees the outline of his sleep-tousled black hair. A two-and-a-half-day beard darkens his face. When he wakes, she thinks, he will shave, holding his plastic-framed mirror in his left hand and scraping his face with the razor held pinched between the thumb and forefinger of his right, humming softly as he turns his wrist at each stroke. Years ago she used to tease him about this motion, parodying the odd wrenching twist with which he ended each stroke of the razor. The memory brings her no warmth, no feeling of intimate connection with the past. Weren't you upset? No, I've learned to accept that kind of stuff. I want you to get used to it, too.

Alan wakes and begins to talk. Distracted by her confusion, Mary strains to concentrate on his words. She is

only peripherally aware of his body swinging out of bed, of the tentative paces his long pale legs are making through the gloom. When he lays his hand on her shoulder the strength of the pulse in his fingertips causes her to catch her breath. His hand begins to descend across her skin, kneading her gently, signalling that he wants to make love. Three minutes ago she couldn't have imagined deriving any pleasure from this. For a moment, though, pleasure throbs through her. Then it is over and she lies beneath him, mute, a speck of Alan's come turning cold against her thigh. The gratification has been all his. They don't speak again until they are out on the street, walking in the direction of the Plaza de Armas.

*

Trujillo is a white, dry city of cleanly colonial architecture and trembling desert light. The second day of their stay Mary and Alan travel up the coast to visit the ruined city of Chan Chan. They arrive at noon. There are few other visitors and Mary and Alan wander through the ruins without speaking. The city is surrounded by high, thick walls, blurred by years of erosion. The ruins within the walls consist of a complex of passages, streets, courtyards, all shrunken and worn by time. Mary tries to imagine the city in its prime: the walls complete, the

streets crowded with people, the canal full of water. She can't: it is as impossible as imagining the bog people alive and talking. She sees Alan walking in front of her, his head down, flipping through the guidebook as he stumbles forward. "It says these walls are nine meters high.... How many feet is that?" he asks, looking at her expectantly. Mary shrugs her shoulders.

They turn a corner and come upon twin rows of stone booths in which, Alan says, Chan Chan's leaders used to stand for the purpose of debate. Alan hoists himself up onto the waist-high lip of one of these pillar-boxes, lifts his legs over the edge and drops down inside. He examines the weathered stone. Puffing out his chest, he proclaims: "Friends, Chanchanians, countrymen! Lend me your ears!"

"Alan, aren't you ever going to grow up?" Mary stiffens, startled by the bitterness in her voice. It's not me, she thinks; it's the combination, what we bring out in each other.

"Jesus Christ," says Alan, choking off a peal of laughter, "what am I supposed to do? When I try to be reliable you think I'm cold and when I try to make you laugh you tell me I'm acting like a kid." His face flushes, his right hand hacks at the air. Framed by the stone booth, he shouts: "What the hell do you want from

me?"

"I'm sorry, Alan." Mary thinks: telepathy. How can he be so conscious of the way I'm feeling? How can he be so conscious and just snipe instead of responding? "We've been planning this trip for so long. I don't want it to be just sight-seeing."

"Maybe you want the impossible then," Alan grunts, clambering out of the stone booth. Neither of them speaks all the way back to Trujillo.

When they return to the hotel in Trujillo late that afternoon Alan buries his head in a paperback that he has already read. He does not spend the evening counting their money. Mary recognizes an old tactic in Alan's actions: she has seen him do this dozens of times before. He will renounce a relatively trivial part of his routine, modify his behaviour in some inconsequential way, then demand that Mary "match" his reforms with concessions of her own. Alan never yields anything of substance in these tugs-of-war and Mary often finds herself -- cornered and nagged by guilt -- at Alan's mercy. Determined to prevent this happening again, Mary pulls the guidebooks out of her backpack and sets about her habitual evening chore of writing up an itinerary for the next day. I'll establish something I can give up without pain before he starts asking for my soul.

"Where do you want to go in the morning? The beach or the Huaca El Dragon temple?"

"You don't have to do that kind of shit," Alan grumbles into his paperback. "Do you want this trip to become nothing but sight-seeing?"

"You're one to talk!" Mary says. "You and your neat little piles of money. No wonder it took us ten years to get here. You'd still be sitting in your office counting money if I hadn't -- "

"Jesus!" Alan says, throwing down the paperback and swinging his body around, "what kinda trip are you trying to lay on me, Mary?" He sits facing her, his legs dangling over the edge of his bed. "If we'd done everything your way we'd be selling beads for a living and spending all our money on dope. We'd never have made enough money to. come down here -- "

"That doesn't mean you have to keep acting like an accountant!"

" -- we'd be just like Julie and her drugged-out boyfriend."

"Leave my sister out of this, you asshole. Cold, ignorant, sonofabitch," she says, reaching for words she knows will hurt him. It won't even change anything, she thinks, despairing; it's so bloody bourgeois, a marital

squabble, bog people. "Who have you ever been close to?" she sneers. She is frightened by her anger and the way it impels her to keep pushing him. For the first time in years she cannot predict how Alan will react to what she is saying. "You don't know what emotion is! What do you know about feelings?"

"I know lots about feelings," Alan says. "I mean it, Mary. And don't start giving me this bullshit about how I'm cold. That's just crap and you know it. I've felt lots -- "

"Emotion," Mary hisses. "I said emotion, you asshole. Not just wanting to fuck. They are different, you know."

Alan goes over the edge. He lunges forward across the room, his arms flailing. Part of her can see he's not really trying to hit her, that it's less an assault than a thrashing-out of his anger; but she feels scared and furious. She leans away from him: her hair falls in her eyes. As she clears her hair back off her face, Alan's fist clips her elbow. Pain shoots through her. She springs to her feet and shoves him in the chest. "Get away from me, you bastard!"

Alan stumbles backward, sits down on his bed. Mary hunches on her bed, cradling her right elbow in her left palm. She hears Alan's labored breathing. Her elbow stings; she massages it. For a moment rage washes away all

her uncertainties. "Perhaps," Mary hears herself saying, "we need to get away from each other for a while."

"Sure," Alan sneers. "Just tell me when you're leaving."

*

Two hours later, Mary thinks: Do I really want to be alone in this crazy continent? Would I be anyone at all if this relationship didn't exist? She looks at Alan, sitting hunched on his bed, glaring at a wrinkled paperback. Mary draws a deep breath against the silence. "Remember that village Doug told us about? The little place on the beach with all the cool people -- Huanchaco? The South American Handbook says that it's just up the coast from here. I'm going to go up there tomorrow. I want you to leave me alone for a few days, okay?"

"What's the matter? I'm not cool enough for you? I'm cold so I can't be cool, is that it?"

"Alan. I just want some peace."

His eyes don't flinch from the paperback. "How long do you want?"

Mary thinks. It is now Sunday evening. "Till next Saturday," she says. "Come up to Huanchaco on Saturday and we can talk."

*

Early the next morning, while Alan feigns sleep, Mary wakes, packs and slips out of the room. Out on the wide street, walking past the sand-colored buildings, she thinks: I'm free, I can go anywhere, I could get on a bus to Chile and he would never find me again. She makes her way through the colorless Pacific light to the street corner, where the microbus to Huanchaco stops. When she arrives at the corner she unslings her backpack from her shoulders and sits down on it while she waits for the bus. A man whistles at her. This is a new experience for Mary. It never happens when she's with Alan: Latin American men respect other men's property righ[redacted] The man whistles again. To the tune of an American pop song, he croons: "Ah lugh yoo."

The microbus -- an old van in which wooden benches have been bolted to the floor -- rattles up to the street corner. Mary climbs in, hauling her backpack behind her; she crouches among women wearing layers of unwashed dresses. The women stare at her fair hair and giggle among themselves. Their Spanish is different from the Spanish Mary heard in Ecuador. She longs to enter into their giggling, or to share with them the experience of being whistled at on the street, but the gap that separates her from these women is wider than the chasms of ignorance in

her faulty Spanish. When these women look at me, she thinks, it's barely another woman they see: it's fair hair, white skin, expensive hiking boots. My being a woman is unimportant to them, scarcely a footnote. She stares out the window of the microbus as it whines through the desert. She wishes she were not alone. If you ever make it down there, go and say hi to Huanchaco for me.

The microbus jolts into a small village of low, weathered buildings and creaks to a halt in a gash of a plaza bordered on one side by a long sea wall overlooking the beach. Mary steps out of the bus and stretches. Shades of worn brown surround her: the dun-colored buildings, the dark grit of the plaza, the lighter sand of the beach, the pock-marked almond facade of the church on the cliff above the village. As Mary is pulling on her backpack, a man whistles at her. She walks away, takes a room in the first cheap hotel she can find; closes the door, drops the backpack in the corner of the room. She lies on the bed, exhausted. She has not realized how much of a toll the traveling and tension of the last few days have taken on her. She dozes away most of her first day in Huanchaco, trying to sleep herself into some sort of distance from Alan. She doesn't leave her hotel room. She eats cheese and meal from her backpack, and stitches round and round the

circle of possible outcomes to the crisis between her and Alan. None seems appealing, or even bearable. No exit. She falls asleep.

The next morning she feels better. She wakes early, and as she steps out the door of the hotel the wind driving down the beach stings her with microscopic particles of sand. She eats a light breakfast in a wicker-walled restaurant and tramps the length of the sea wall to walk it off. Looking out to sea, she spots a balsa boat struggling against the waves. Gulls circle overhead. The waves pour in like sliding grey walls, skidding up the beach with a roar, running lower and faster as they mount the sloping sand. Tongues of water lap and withdraw, retreating into the hurly-burly of the next wave. Farther down the beach, two men stand waist-deep in water, pushing a third man's balsa boat out to sea. Scattered among the local people, Mary sees the drifters: thin, bluejeaned men with light, sunburned skin and long, bleached hair. <u>There's all kinds of cool people drifting around</u>. The drifters sit on the beach in ones and twos, gazing out at the waves. They are tough-looking men; men who have never worked in an office, Mary thinks. She shies away from them, walks to the end of the sea wall, stretches out on her back in the sand. The wind combs her with fine, salty grains. When the first

drifter approaches her, she smiles at him; he sits down and they talk. He is Swedish and speaks good English. After twenty minutes' conversation, he offers to sell her cocaine. When she turns down this offer, he makes a pass at her. Mary feels herself flush. Confused and afraid, she says: "Get lost, you creep. Get away from me." The Swede retreats. Mary climbs to her feet, walks back up the beach to the restaurant. Hispanic men, sitting on the sea wall, whistle at her. Mary eats lunch in the restaurant. In the afternoon she returns to the beach. Other drifters wander by, harass her. She snaps at them. She feels herself growing edgy and nervous; too tense to enjoy lying on the beach. The European men approach, talk and then grab, she thinks; the Peruvians keep their distance and whistle. The former act out of desperation, the latter out of habit. Mary finds the Europeans by far the more disturbing of the two groups. These are the people I wanted us to be like, she tells herself; these are the wanderers, the free spirits, the ones who never sold out to the system and became bog people -- a bunch of creeps. One by one, the European men take their turn at drifting past and speaking to Mary. By the end of the afternoon she has become so tense that she snarls at them almost before they come within shouting distance. Practically the only European man

in sight who does not make some sort of approach to her is a muscular man in his mid-thirties who lies on his back on a blanket, staring out to sea. She notices the striking combination of his white-blond hair and heavy brown mustache. He lies quite near to her, clearly has seen her, but keeps to himself. Mary licks her lips and tastes a salt tang. Off on her left a gaggle of brown children is playing soccer. The afternoon seeps away, then dies quickly as the sun begins to slip into the ocean. Mary jumps to her feet, brushes the sand off her clothes. Darkness falls as she returns to her hotel. Huanchaco goes black: the town has no electricity. Thumping generators pump the hotels with weak light. The only open restaurant resembles a Chinese lantern, seeping light into the darkness through loosely-bound wicker walls. When Mary steps in the door the place is crammed with groups of dark-skinned fishermen drinking beer, knots of gringo travelers eating fish dinners. Mary finds a spare seat, orders a fish dinner, eats with her head down. Everyone in the restaurant is staring at her. She eats quickly. On the other side of the room, the man with the white-blond hair and the thick mustache eats by himself at a small table. Mary finishes her meal and returns to her hotel room.

When she wakes the next morning it is Wednesday. The day

lies before her like a dull wave of sand. She feels flat, too placid for her own liking; in the absence of a foil, her personality fades away into grey. She becomes less interesting to herself; less conscious of her own complexities and contradictions. Before, relating constantly to Alan, she felt geared to his every breath. But now, she thinks, it's like I'm out of gear: I'm coasting. Alan and I are so good at doing things together. And all that's left of my hippy memories is those creeps on the beach. Did I ever really hang out with people like that? After yesterday's harassment by the men on the beach, the prospect of getting dressed and walking out the front door of the hotel is too threatening to think about. Mary lies in bed until noon. She remembers the curious motion Alan makes with his razor when he is shaving. She remembers him dressing for work in the morning, chatting about his day at the office over supper, persuading her that the living room of their apartment is incomplete without a color television, then buying the VCR to tape football games. She remembers him dragging her to her feet outside the bus company office in Quito. It's impossible, she thinks. How can the same couple live two separate lives?

Mary lies in bed until she gets hungry. Then, slowly,

she rises and dresses. She walks out the door of the hotel and scuffs through the sand to a nearby restaurant. Mary walks through the open doorway and seats herself at a table by the door, where she can see the ocean. She orders a fish lunch. The restaurant is nearly empty; two fishermen are drinking beer in the back corner of the room; three or four foreigners sit alone at scattered tables. One of them is the man with white-blond hair and a dark brown mustache.

The restaurant's proprietor arrives carrying Mary's lunch. He sets the plate of fish in front of her. "Gracias," Mary says.

"De nada," the proprietor replies. Rather than leaving, however, he seats himself at her table. Mary feels herself stiffen. Is this a Peruvian tradition? she wonders. Am I overreacting because of what happened yesterday? The proprietor begins to speak to her in a soft voice. He seems to be talking about the town and the beach. The words come tumbling out in a meaningless streak. Then one word, carefully enunciated in a low whisper, strikes her ears clearly: "Cocaína." The proprietor illustrates by drawing his palm up to his nose and sniffing loudly. "Barato," he says; it's cheap. And the best. Direct from the Andean coca fields and refined right here in Peru. "Número uno."

"No," Mary says in Spanish. "I don't want cocaine."

The proprietor doesn't seem to hear her refusal. He blunders on in lavish persuasion. Mary shakes her head. The proprietor keeps talking, his hands molding the air. Every few moments he stops, makes an exaggerated sniffing sound and imitates an expression of bliss. Mary shakes her head again, but the proprietor says: "You try just a little bit, no? Just a tiny little bit. Un poquitito."

The third chair at Mary's table scrapes back and the man with the white-blond hair and the thick mustache sits down. "This is a set-up," he says in soft, clear English.

"A what?" says Mary, bewildered by the intrusion. The cops: they get their jollies planting drugs on gringos.

"A set-up," the man repeats. "This man works for the police. They pay him to sell drugs to people so that the police can arrest them."

The proprietor leans toward the man with white-blond hair. "Usted también quiere cocaína? Es de la primera." Do you want cocaine, too? It's first-rate stuff.

"No," says the man with white-blond hair. "No quiero nada. La señorita tampoco. Es una señorita decente. Váyase, pues. Déjenos en paz." I don't want anything. Neither does the girl; she's a decent girl. Now get lost, leave us alone.

The proprietor shrugs himself to his feet. "Bueno," he

says. "No saben lo que pierden." You don't know what you're missing.

The proprietor shuffles away.

"Thank you," Mary breathes.

Two uniformed police officers walk into the restaurant. The tanned runnels of flesh bulging over the collars of their uniforms ripple as they turn their heads, looking around the room. The gaze of one of the officers settles for a moment on Mary. "Hay cerveza?" he shouts at the proprietor; is there any beer?

"No, cerveza no hay," the proprietor responds. No, no beer.

The police officers grunt and walk out of the restaurant.

"You see," says the man at Mary's table, "they ask him if he's got any beer. If he says yes, that means you bought it. If he says no, that means you didn't."

"My name's Mary."

"Jos," he says, pronouncing it deep in his throat. Yohss.

"I feel like I owe you a favor. Can I buy you, uhm, a beer?"

They both laugh. "Of course."

Mary calls the proprietor back to the table. He looks at

her expectantly. "Two beers," she says in Spanish.

The proprietor blushes. "Of course, señorita."

Mary and Jos laugh. Jos tells her he is Dutch. "I enjoy traveling," he says. "I work for a year or two, then I take a long trip." This is his second trip to South America. He hopes to go to Asia in two or three years' time.

"How do you pay for all this?" Mary asks, as their beers arrive.

"In the summer I am a lifeguard and in the winter I work for a...a personnel agency. They send me to offices where other people are on vacation."

"You save enough from that to travel?"

"Oh yes, it can be done. Amsterdam is not a cheap place to live, but one can save. It takes me one or two years to save enough money for a six- or eight-month trip."

When they have finished their beers, Jos suggests that they take a walk. "Have you climbed the hill behind the town yet?"

"No," Mary says. "Men kept whistling at me on the beach. I didn't know what they'd do if I went into the back streets. I was afraid I'd get raped or something." She hears a sureness in her voice that pleases her. When was the last time she spoke with such confidence? Thank God, she thinks, that he's had the sense not to ask me what I'm

doing here.

Jos says: "The view of the bay from up by the church is very good."

"I'd like to see that."

They walk outside, turn away from the ocean, wander through the sandy streets of Huanchaco. Mary sees houses whose walls have been cracked by the earthquake. Brown children stand silently in the doorways, watching her and Jos with enormous eyes. Farther back, they come upon houses which the earthquake destroyed: piles of rubble choked with ragged weeds. The ground begins to slope upward. The houses grow sparser. Underfoot, the sand deepens. The church rears up at the top of the hill, seeming to grow taller and heavier as they approach it.

"This personnel agency," Mary says, her head bowed against the glare of the sun, "when they send you to work in offices where people are on vacation, what is it you do?"

"I look after the money," Jos laughs. "I'm a bookkeeper."

Bog people. "Isn't that awfully boring?" says Mary.

"Pardon me?" She can see him blinking at her through the dazzle of light.

"I mean, don't you find that spending your whole life

with columns of numbers makes it difficult to relate to people? I mean, don't you think it makes you cold?"

Jos laughs nervously. "I...I don't think I'm cold," he says. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry," Mary says. "Forget it."

They have reached the top of the rise. The sand breaks the sunlight into jagged beams. Mary looks down at the smooth curve of the bay, picking out the frill of white foam that separates grey ocean from light-brown beach. "It's very pretty," she says.

The church behind them is a large dark-brown building. Its doors and windows are boarded up. One side of the bell-tower has fallen away. Children are playing on the steps, boys and girls teasing each other in shrill voices. With a shriek, four or five of them come running across the sand toward Mary and Jos. "Propina! Propina!" they shout, holding out their hands. A tip! A tip!

"You have to do something to get a tip!" Mary snaps at them in Spanish.

The children shrink back, clustering together. One small boy gets pushed forward, while the others hang back. The boy holds out his hand, palm up. "Por favor," he says: please. The hand is missing three fingers.

Jos reaches into his pocket.

"Don't," Mary says. "It's just a trick to get your sympathy."

"What do you mean? Look at the poor little fellow -- he's hardly got any fingers." Jos hands the little boy two coins.

"Yes, I know. They chop up the kids to make them better beggars. It's just something you've got to get used to."

"Gracias, señor!" says the boy, accepting the coins with his good hand. He turns tail and runs.

"Gracias! Gracias!" echo the other children, bolting away across the sand.

"You are a hard woman," says Jos. His smile is thin and uncertain.

"I...I've been living with a hard man for nine years...." Mary swallows. The sun beats down on her; she feels close to tears.

"A man?" Jos says. "I have not seen any man with you."

"He's right here. We're traveling together."

Through the first tears, Mary sees Jos's face twisting in confusion. "Perhaps you wish to be alone," he murmurs. "Can I walk you back to your hotel?"

"Yes," Mary says. "I mean no. Go away. Leave me alone. I can get back to my hotel by myself."

"Are you sure you are all right?" Jos frowns, his

mustache wrinkling.

"Of course I'm all right," she says, swallowing her sobs. "Just go away. Please." Nine years, Mary thinks. Whether with Alan or anybody else, it's still nine years. We aren't who we were.

Jos shrugs, backs away from her. He continues to walk backward until the sand starts to slope downward beneath his feet. Then she sees him turn, give her a half-wave and begin to descend toward the village. Mary watches him until he grows small and disappears among the flat-roofed brown buildings of Huanchaco.

Alone, Mary rubs away her tears. She becomes aware that the children are watching her. To escape from their sight she walks briskly around the side of the church, passing under a wooden arch. She stops. She has walked into a cemetery, nearly tripping over a pair of broken, unearthed coffins. Two bodies lie under the sun, one male and one female. She finds herself drawn to the sight, yet unable to look at the bodies squarely. She can only glance at their heads and feet; cannot focus on their bared limbs and midsections. The grave-robbers have stripped the corpses naked and dumped the bodies side by side, leaving the woman's and the man's arms entangled. Mary's hasty glances reveal long lank hair dripping from tar-colored scalps

flayed of skin by the wind; strips of black flesh webbing the corpses' feet; small bones protruding from the flesh like toes poking through old socks. Mary struggles for breath. She wrenches herself away from the corpses. She turns around and walks out of the cemetery. The sunlight reverberates off the sand; below her, she sees the village, the beach, the ocean. She stops walking. Wind-driven sand drifts against her hiking boots. She stands looking out at Huanchaco, her tears seeping slowly; behind her, in the lee of the church, the children tease each other in whispers.

NIGHTS IN THE YUNGAS

We were friends immediately and for the next five nights it was impossible not to get drunk with them. It was my first day in the Yungas, I was battered and gasping from the crazy plunge down the mountain from La Paz: four hours in the back of a truck, waterfalls spilling liquid ice on our spines from cliffs overhanging the single-lane track wrapped against the mountain-face; there was a woman who shrieked and curled herself around her baby like a snail's shell each time we rattled toward a waterfall. The one moment I dared to look down the dark green void below was unmarred except for a gouged path that stopped short at the scarred skeleton of a truck.

"How did you travel down here?" they asked me. I told them. They wrinkled their brows and shook their heads. Roberto said: "Twenty-six trucks crash this year, four buses. The bus is better."

I could scarcely believe this was Bolivia: the bright colors, the heat, the view from this hilltop town. The long vertebrae of the mountains, their dense soft green lofting white mist above them, wrinkled toward me from the distant wall of the valley. After weeks of denuded altiplano, thin air and chill drizzle, I had descended into paradise. I sat in a chair on the balcony of the hotel, looking out over the broken, drooping leaves of the the coffee plants, wafts of polyglot conversation settling on me from the balcony above, where travelers of various nationalities were chewing coca leaves and discussing the effects as their gums and jaws turned numb. Out on the street that evening I met the musicians.

They were playing in an open doorway off the central plaza. I joined the crowd that had gathered to listen to them. The group consisted of five young men: none looked more than eighteen. They played the Andean flute, the guitar, two quenas -- instruments comprised of flutes of different lengths bound together in ascending order -- and a charango -- an armadillo-shell guitar. Their music was keening, monotonous, compelling; but, perhaps because I was no longer in the highlands, the tunes they played sounded less morose than other Andean music I had heard. The flautist and the two youths who puffed on the quenas were

dead serious, but the guitarist cavorted for the crowd and the charango player, the group's leader, a strong-faced, sleek-haired youth named Roberto, would interrupt his playing to tap his fingers on the armadillo-shell belly of his charango.

We started to talk during one of the breaks in their performance and by the end of the evening I was their devoted follower. Three or four nights a week they would trail around the town, stopping into hotels and restaurants, their brave haunted music piping fiercely. If the owner requested it, they would stay for the evening to entertain the customers. The price they charged for their labor was a generous and unbroken supply of hard liquor. The instant the restaurant owner or hotel manager nodded his approval of their music they would lower their instruments and erupt into a spate of bargaining. What was there to drink? Rum? Aguardiente? Vodka? Offers and reactions would volley back and forth. When the musicians received an offer they considered acceptable they would all look at Roberto and Roberto would nod. The waiter would scurry into the back of the restaurant and return carrying a pitcher of potent spirits. The musicians would seat themselves around a table, the waiter would pour the first round of drinks and the music would begin.

They could play for hours. The hollow pumping of the quenas, the almost metallic plucking of Roberto's armadillo-shell guitar, the silkier chord-changes of the wooden guitar and thin trill of the flute would weave together, the flowing give-and-take among them almost imperceptible. Whenever the music seemed to be on the verge of sinking into monotony one of the musicians would strike out on his own, and the others would respond to the changed course, following it, resisting it or mocking it with bursts of sound and sidelong glances. Drink took no observable toll on their playing. As I had become their friend, I was supplied with a glass at the beginning of the evening and was offered a fill-up at every round. At the rate of one glass of aguardiente or vodka to every two or three of theirs, I was smashed by the end of the performance. Muddled recollections come to me of dragging myself arm over arm up the wooden outdoor staircase of my hotel, staggering across the balcony to my room, laughing giddily at the twitching tropical night, and waking to the morning glare with a head scoured as clear as crystal. I never got a hangover from those nights. Perhaps I was spared because I did not usually drink; or perhaps it was the influence of the sad, supple, resilient music.

The musicians asked me what I did in my country. I began

to list some of the jobs I had held. Roberto interrupted me. "Are you an artist?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, on the basis of a few adolescent poems. "Of course." Well, why not? Wasn't I as much an artist as they were?

Roberto strummed a chord on his charango and the piping symphony died away. "The goal of any artist," Roberto said, without pretension or anxiety, "is to be heard among the people, to make himself known among the people."

"Like Víctor Jara," said the guitarist. "Compañero Víctor, playing to keep up the people's spirits in the stadiums in Chile, until the military cut off his hands."

As if moved by Jara's ghost, the musicians slipped as one man into a somber rendering of half a dozen of Jara's songs. It was two o'clock in the morning and the restaurant was nearly empty. The customers had left and the waiters and kitchen staff, sipping aguardiente at the back of the dining room, constituted the musicians' only audience. They leaned back in their chairs, watching and listening. A sea of empty tables stood between us and them. The sea swayed in time with the music. I was very drunk.

It was my last night in the Yungas. We had spent the evening in a restaurant on the outskirts of town, down

the hill from the center, where the streets were deep trenches of loose dust and the stone sidewalks flanked the trenches like knee-high causeways. When the musicians had completed their rendition of Jara's songs we drained our glasses and swayed into the street. I toiled uphill. At the edge of the central plaza the streets turned to tightly-locked cobbles, the sidewalks sank. The walls of the plaza were plastered with faded beige posters declaiming the virtues of General Torrelio, Bolivia's current dictator. The photograph in the center of each poster showed a heavy mustache, a peaked military cap, braided epaulettes.

The plaza was deserted; the streetlights cast a wan light. Roberto danced to the wall of the plaza, insinuating the end of his charango under the dog-eared fringe of a poster of Torrelio. He dragged the end of the instrument across the rough adobe, ripping the general's face from ear to ear on three identical posters plastered side by side. The tattered posters gaped in the night shadow. Roberto examined the end of his charango, caressing with his palm the tip that had scraped across the adobe. "No damage," he announced, and smiled. He looked at the shredded posters and said: "The artist makes himself known among the people."

I felt myself breaking into laughter. I laughed and

laughed. The musicians howled. Their laughter fed mine and I said goodbye to them with an effusiveness they seemed not to have expected from a gringo. They embraced me firmly. "Artista!" cried Roberto.

Before catching the bus to La Paz the next morning I steeled myself for the terrifying mountain trail with a hot breakfast in the small restaurant beneath the hotel. A teenage boy was taking orders; he stood behind a counter, listening to music from a tapedeck. As I sipped coffee and ate a warm bun it came to me through the haze (for the first time my drinking had made me groggy) that I had heard the song before. I caught the boy's attention, pointed at the tapedeck and said: "A song by Víctor Jara, no?"

The boy's brow wrinkled.

"The music," I said. "It's Víctor Jara, right?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, señor. I know of no such person."

I apologized, embarrassed that either my Spanish or my tin ear for music had failed me. A tall German who had been staying in the room beside mine entered the restaurant, sat down at my table and ordered breakfast. The boy disappeared into the kitchen. The music I had mistaken for that of Víctor Jara continued to flow from the tapedeck. The cassette cover lay face-down on the edge of

the counter. Curious, I bent forward, closed my fingers around the plastic cover and turned it over. The cassette had been bought blank and used to tape a record. An unformed hand had scrawled a single word across the cardboard liner: Víctor.

"This damned boring music of theirs," said the German, as I returned to my seat. "How can you listen to it? It all sounds the same."

That afternoon, during the long climb, waterfalls beat a somber tune on the roof of the bus. The valley below was dense unbroken green and the mountain trail spiralled cloudward toward the chill bleak altiplano.

THE SUN OF CORICANCHA

The rivers in Cuzco run underground now. You can hear their trickling through grilles implanted in the streets. You, who are from an industrialized society, might mistake them for sewers. In the Inca era, however, the River Huatanay shivered in the sunlight, a current of chilly water and silvered reflections that divided the city's central plaza in two and sustained the people's ability to see both the physical world and the world beyond objects. But the Spaniards did not understand the language of water. Their vision was limited to the tangible world: they saw in Cuzco only the masonry and the gold. Needing a plaza only half the size of that required by the Incas, they buried the River Huatanay beneath buildings. Now it flows underground, throwing its echoes and quick shadows into the darkness under the white adobe facades and the colonial stonework at the edge of the Plaza de Armas. When the tourists began to

arrive -- a few seconds ago, it seems -- the plaza started to grow inward with the rinds of the new souvenir shops. Every day now, the Plaza de Armas is smaller, encloses less of the universe. And the River Huatanay is louder and brighter for those who can see and hear it.

No, it's not there that the sun is hidden, although your guess is a little better than most people's. It's always fascinated you, hasn't it, to try to recover the physical remains of the Empire: the gold and silver, and the "lost cities," as you call them. But the fate of the sun was different. For you, the huge golden disk of the sun was the greatest treasure of Coricancha, the Court of Gold. It was the supreme prize in a continent of new riches. The conquistador Cieza de León described the sun as "very large, made of engraved gold, heavily coated in many precious stones." According to León's description, the sun hung at the focal point of the curved, gold-plated walls of the inner temple and was perpetually bathed in a hazy light. For León, the golden sun was a magnificent object. For us, the sun of Coricancha was the fusion of heaven and earth; it was, if you understand, the reason that our plaza was twice as large as yours.

But you've never stopped seeking our sun. You seem to feel its loss more keenly than we do ourselves. You can

tell me that the first three Spaniards to enter Coricancha, sent by Pizarro from Cajamarca to secure Atahualpa's ransom, left the sun, like the mummified bodies of the past emperors, intact. To me it seems amazing that such crude and rapacious men, who tore seven hundred sheets of gold from the curved walls of the temple and raped the Virgins of the Sun, should have left the greatest, most tempting prize of all hanging peacefully in its strange haze -- but that is how your history books have dictated that the events occurred. It is undeniable that the sun disappeared later on, after the main body of Pizarro's forces entered the city of Cuzco; but you have even invented a myth to account for this disappearance. According to your myth, a Spaniard named Sierra de Leguizano gained possession of the sun, but lost it the same night in a game of dice. The myth entered your thought, and even your language, and today I hear Spaniards talkiug about "gambling away the sun before it rises." Little by little, however, it came to be known that all the Inca art which had fallen into the Spaniards' possession had been melted down into bricks: the silver llamas, the fields of maize cast in gold, the numberless and varied statuettes. The myth that the sun had passed from Sierra to another Spaniard became less comforting to you. Had you inadvertently melted down the sun in a

crucible? A new myth was needed. Thus, in 1553, Cristóbal de Molina was driven to write: "The Indians hid this sun so well that it could never be found to the present day." It was decided: you had given our sun back to us. But where had we hidden it?

I see from your eyes that you are surprised that I know these things. Yes, I'm an illiterate old Indian with broken sandals and grey feet, and I chew coca leaves and blow my nose on my fingers; but I have lived in this city since the reign of Sinchi Roca, the second Inca, and I know how things happen between the earth and the sky. I may not be able to read Molina's words as he wrote them down, but I remember the way people were thinking in 1553, and I know that their needs then weren't very different from their needs today. Historians are criticizing us now for not having transformed our Quechua into a written language. They don't understand that, José María Arguedas notwithstanding, writing in Quechua would have been like slicing the central plaza of our city in half, like burying the River Huatanay underground.

Thus the fate of the sun. By now you have read of the location of the sun in the temple, of how it hung hazily at the focal point of the gold-sheeted lens of the inner room. Well, you have the answer then. Once the first three

Spaniards, sent by Pizarro from Cajamarca, had torn the seven hundred sheets of gold from the walls around the sun and the mummified emperors, the sun was no longer there to be plundered: for they had destroyed the chamber of mirrors that had created the illusion.

MIST

Alberta, thought Ned Andrews, rubbing his running shoe against the lamppost, is the pits.

Ned had expected to attract attention when he bought the baggy white jumpsuit. He had been ready for stares, giggles, smirks. But he was totally unprepared for what had happened just now, when a heavy-chested man in a stetson had veered around the corner onto Seventh Avenue, sized up Ned's ankle-to-collar jumpsuit and shoulder-length blond hair, and shrieked: "Faggot!" Ned jumped out of the man's way. The man spat, and the ball of spit looped down and smacked the toe of his running shoe.

Ned wiped his running shoe across the lamppost; he continued walking. Low cloud muted the reflections thrown back by the shop windows on either side of the street. Alberta is the pits, Ned chanted under his breath; Calgary is the pits of the pits. Ned had been in Alberta for more

than a year. He'd driven out here with Chuck. After getting laid off from his job at the plant in Hamilton, Ned had gone home to the Ottawa Valley. He found Chuck pumping gas at the station where he'd worked ever since dropping out of high school in Grade Eleven. Chuck had been saving up for years to get a car. At the time of Ned's return he had just bought one, not the silver Camaro he had longed for, but a second-hand Dodge pick-up truck. Ned, who had dreamed of going out west since the days when he and Chuck were in high school together, said: "Hey, you wanna drive out to Alberta? I bet you we could make a pile of money out there."

Chuck shook his head; but Ned could see that the idea had taken root. The newly-acquired Dodge pick-up demanded to be driven. Three days later Chuck quit his job at the gas station, and he and Ned left for Alberta. They took turns driving. The one who wasn't driving would man the tapedeck and roll the joints. Perhaps it was just that they were stoned most of the time, but the trip seemed to go on forever. From Ottawa they drove flat out for two days, most of it through bush, before they even got out of Ontario. West of Winnipeg the prairie turned to green monotony punctuated by towns with other-worldly names like Moose Jaw and Swift Current -- names Ned and Chuck simply

could not cope with after too many days of potsmoking. They ridiculed the names, continued toking up, pulled off the Trans-Canada and ate ravenously in diners in the impossibly-named towns. They lost track of time: Ned never knew precisely how many days the journey had lasted. Their throats were raw and their minds were addled by the time they saw the new highrises of Calgary and the prairie running up against the mountains behind them. The first few nights they were in Calgary, Ned and Chuck slept in the truck. It took them a week to find an apartment and two weeks to find work. Ned got a job as a nightwatchman, and came to know the boredom of sitting around all night doing nothing more than staying awake and holding onto a large key-ring. He began to carry a hash-pipe in the pocket of his uniform. Life became more interesting then, and a whole lot crazier. Ned would stumble in from work at six in the morning, too buzzed to think or see, to find Chuck, who worked days at a pizza parlor, winding down a party for Hainey, their drug-dealer. Hainey (whom Chuck called Horny) brought girls to the parties. Chuck and one of the girls were soon hooked up on a regular basis. The girl's name was Shelley; like Ned and Chuck, she was from Ontario. Shelley said that she had come out west to look for work, although, so far as Ned could judge, she seemed to be doing

everything in her power to put off finding a job. She ate at parties and in restaurants where someone else was paying; slept where she could; and picked up spending money selling the pot Hainey gave her and panhandling on Seventh Avenue. When she and Chuck became involved, Shelley moved into Ned and Chuck's apartment. Ned was miserable. He had never had a girlfriend, and listening to Chuck and Shelley fucking breathily behind the partition they'd put up to divide the apartment in two was enough to drive him wild. Ned took to spending the evening downtown, leaving the apartment a good six hours before he went on duty at midnight, in order to avoid Chuck and Shelley. One night Ned smoked too much hash on the job and the janitor arrived in the morning to find him collapsed on the concrete floor, his hash pipe a small silvered knot in the middle of his upturned palm. Ned was fired. He did part-time jobs until the spring, when he began to work construction. Shelley's unending presence in the apartment became more and more of a strain. She invited her friends in, and friends of her friends, and people she had met in record stores. She moved Ned's Yes, Genesis, Jethro Tull and Blue Oyster Cult albums into a cupboard, and played heavy metal music all day. She tied up the bathroom for hours and ridiculed Ned in front of the first girl he had

managed to lure back to the apartment. Ned grew furious with Shelley; but her sharp tongue, combined with his awkwardness with women, stifled him each time he felt on the brink of telling Shelley exactly what he thought of her. It was easier for Ned to get angry with Chuck: he nagged Chuck about Shelley's domination of the bathroom, bitched at him about her taste in music and the fact that she didn't pay any rent. Finally Ned and Chuck had a screaming argument, during which Shelley cowered behind the partition. At the end of the month Chuck and Shelley piled their belongings into the back of the Dodge truck, tied a tarpaulin over them, left Calgary and headed east.

Thrown back on his own resources, Ned could barely afford the upkeep on the apartment. The days on the construction site wore him down. When he went to see Hainey to buy half an ounce of pot, Hainey gave him the cold shoulder. He finally agreed to sell Ned the drugs, but charged him more than he had been charged Chuck. Ned rolled joints from the stash; he smoked a couple for breakfast, before arriving at the construction site. Afterwards, Ned realized that Hainey must have laced the pot with PCP -- what Chuck used to call angel dust. His last memory was of walking onto the site that morning. He woke up in a ditch. It was dusk. The site was abandoned. Ned felt a pain in his

chest; his face stung. He went to a doctor and learned that he had three broken ribs, a fractured jaw, heavy bruising and possible intestinal damage. He pissed watery blood for a week. He spent the entire week lying in bed in his apartment, listening to the radio and eating almost nothing. Later Ned tracked down a young Indian from north of Edmonton who was the only man in the crew with whom he had managed to get onto speaking terms. The Indian told him what had happened: "Man, you walked onto that site and you went crazy -- throwing things, yelling, I don't know what-all. So the guys there, they get pretty mad. They say you're a danger to the rest of thems, so they gang up and beat the shit out of you. Man, I didn't think you'd come out alive."

"That fucking outfit still owes me money," Ned said. "They owe me a week's pay plus doctor's bills."

"Man, if I'm you I don't go back there," said the Indian. "You show your face, they kill you for sure."

Ned took the man's advice. At the end of the month he loaded his belongings into a backpack and walked out of his apartment, leaving no notice. On Seventh Avenue he stopped walking long enough to look at himself in a shop window. Who did he see there? He didn't know; he'd never thought about it before. Now he thought: twenty-two years old, no

job, taped ribs, bad digestion, likes pot, hates Calgary, no girlfriend, no buddies. Yeah, he thought, it's time to get out of this hole. Ned had come to Alberta to be somebody: to find a steady job and make money. And look at me now, he thought. Goddam, he wanted to be somebody! He stepped into a shop and splurged on crazy clothes: a white denim jumpsuit scarred with an elaborate array of zippers, a red knit cap with a far-out transparent blue peak. He wore the clothes out of the shop and strolled down Seventh Avenue, grinning at the stares he drew. For a few minutes, until the man in the stetson spat at him, Ned felt great.

His head down, he trailed past the Downtown Mall: an empty cavern plastered with "space for rent" signs: a testament to the fizzling of the Alberta boom, to the fact that there were no more jobs for people like Ned. Alberta is the pits, he thought, turning north onto Centre Street. He shrugged his backpack into the middle of his back and looked up at the grey sky. In the Fourth Avenue bus depot (depot, he thought; back home it was a terminal), Ned spent most of the money remaining in his wallet on a ticket to Ottawa. "How long does it take?" he asked the man at the ticket counter.

"Two and a half days."

Ned stored his backpack in a locker, walked back up

Centre Street and bought food for the trip. He bought pretzels, Ritz crackers, two Mars bars and a forty-ounce plastic bottle of Coca-Cola. When he returned to the bus depot a line had formed for the cross-Canada bus. Ned hauled his backpack out of the locker and joined the line. Twenty minutes later, as the bus wound out of Calgary, a thick, grainy mist hung over the Bow River. Looking back, Ned saw the city dissolving like a mirage in a grey desert. The mountains were blotted out, invisible.

From Calgary to Winnipeg Ned sat next to another young guy who had had enough of Alberta and was on his way home. The other guy had done two years of engineering at the University of Toronto before heading out west; he was going back to Ontario to finish his schooling. "Gotta get that piece of paper," he said. "Without that piece of paper you're a zero." The other guy was breaking his trip at Winnipeg, where he had friends. When the bus pulled into the Winnipeg terminal, Ned tugged on his red knit cap and followed the other guy down the steps. He laid his hand on the other man's shoulder and said: "Hey, you want to go someplace for a drink?" The other declined. In his fixed stare, Ned read the other's view of him: dregs, trash, a hanger-on. Ned didn't understand it. He had left Ontario an ordinary guy; how had his Alberta experiences made him into

such a nothing? Had he really changed, or was it just that others saw him differently now? Or was there no difference between what others thought of you and what you became? Shaking his head, Ned turned away from the man.

He took advantage of the stopover in Winnipeg to buy more food. During the long haul out of Manitoba and into northern Ontario he sat munching Fritos and cheesies, wondering what he should do when he arrived in Ottawa. Ned came from an Ottawa Valley farming village named Ankara. He hadn't warned his parents of his return; hadn't communicated with them at all since he had been fired from his nightwatchman job. Showing up on their doorstep unannounced to tell them that he'd given up on Calgary might amount to hitting them with too much news all at once. Ned remembered his last visit home: the whitewashed kitchen cabinets, the flickering black-and-white television on the counter, the calendar on the wall decorated with a color photograph of a tractor and the name of the farm machinery dealership down the street. It had been Christmas then. Ned was working at the plant in Hamilton, making good money. His dad, sitting at the kitchen table puffing his Player's plain, had greeted Ned with a hoarse, barking monologue, half of it directed at Ned and half at the TV on the counter. Ned's dad was the village postmaster; his mum

helped out in the local grocery store and taught Sunday school during the summer. Ned was an afterthought -- the youngest of five children -- and his parents were in their sixties. They'd never asked to know very much about his life. "Work hard and don't be a goddam bum," his dad had told him when Ned was leaving for Hamilton. Ned's parents' only demands on him were that he hold down a regular job and, at some point, marry and have children. So it wasn't fair, he thought, to burst in on them now, when he was out of work and didn't know what he was going to do: his dad would probably kick him out of the house for his own good. This would be the third time that Ned had disappointed his parents. First he'd given up on the job his mum had helped him get at the hardware store in Ankara, then he'd gotten laid off at the plant in Hamilton and now he'd spent six months out west and come back empty-handed. Naw, he thought, better break it to them slowly. I'll go to New Dundee first and see if Chuck's around.

When Ned woke the next morning the bus was approaching Sudbury. The glacier-scraped lakes he'd seen the day before around Thunder Bay had given way to a softer landscape. When he asked the middle-aged woman sitting next to him for the time, she responded with a shrug and a burst of twangy French. After the bus had passed through Sudbury and North

Bay, Ned was hearing more French than English from the seats around him. It was a sort of homecoming. Ned didn't understand much French, but he had grown up seeing French on street signs, hearing French on the sidewalks in Ottawa, listening to French in bars across the river in Hull. It struck him that Calgary's unilingualism was one of the things that had made the place so foreign to him. Late that afternoon, the windshield wipers beating back a light drizzle, the bus rolled into Ottawa.

*

Home sweet home, Ned thought, holding out his thumb in the rain. The cars roared past, soaking the legs of his jumpsuit with the spray from their tires. Raindrops beaded the transparent blue plastic peak of his cap. The straps of his backpack cut into his shoulders.

A car stopped, crackling onto the gravel on the shoulder of the road. Ned ran after the car, an old Impala loaded with chrome and rust. The middle-aged man inside grunted as Ned climbed in, asked him where he was going and drove in silence, the windshield wipers swishing. New Dundee, fifteen miles west of Ankara, was a town of two thousand people gathered on both banks of a boggy creek. A little-used railway branch line cut across the town's outskirts. The high school, the beer store, the bowling alley, the

Liquor Control Board of Ontario outlet, the indoor hockey arena and the Inn were enough to draw people in from the surrounding countryside and prevent the town from dying. Ned had met Chuck at the high school in New Dundee; together, they had broken into other students' lockers, skipped classes and smoked pot under the stone bridge that spanned the creek. Ned had completed his Grade Twelve, but Chuck had dropped out during Grade Eleven. He had started working at the gas station on the corner where the highway intersected New Dundee's main street, remaining there until Ned had persuaded him to go out west. The rain slackened as the Impala approached New Dundee. A heavy mist descended, covering the flat, scrubby farmland. The sign marking the town limits flashed by. The driver let Ned out of the Impala at the intersection of the highway and the town's main street. When the car had sped away, Ned shrugged his backpack into place, turned onto the sidewalk of the main street and walked across the stone bridge into the oldest part of town. The stoned bridge, he thought. That was what he and Chuck used to call it when they skipped classes to smoke up under the bridge's arc, down by the banks of the boggy creek. The creek ran a murky brown-green that gave off no reflections. Ned and Chuck went down there to dissolve their boredom into a haze, to talk about

girls, tell stories and dream about their futures. On good days, the bridge, arching above them, looked as promising as a rainbow. It was under this bridge that Ned had announced to Chuck that he wanted to go out to Alberta. "Your old man'll have a fit," Chuck had said, twisting his head to suck the last toke from a withered roach. Chuck was growing a beard that spring; his face looked dark and forbidding, hemmed in by the black hair that fell tangled to his shoulders.

"My old man doesn't give a shit where I live, as long as I'm working," Ned replied; "it's my old lady that'll try and get me a job in Ankara."

He had been right: his mum, through her Sunday school connections, had arranged for Ned to be taken on at the hardware store. Chuck was already working at the gas station by that time, having dropped out of school the year before Ned managed to squeak through with just enough credits for his Grade Twelve diploma. When they met at the New Dundee Inn on Friday or Saturday nights, Chuck, his beard trimmed and his hair snipped off to the earlobes, would talk about how he was saving up for a Camaro. Ned talked about Alberta; about how he wanted to work on an oil rig. When Ned had come back from Hamilton for Christmas, at a time when it had looked like the job at the plant would

last forever, Chuck had said: "Now you ain't never going to make it to Alberta. You get one of them plant jobs, you join a union --you're there for the rest of your life."

"No way," Ned said. "I'm going out west any day now. You just watch me."

"Sure," laughed Chuck. "And I'm going to have a silver Camaro and a good-looking girl to sit in the front seat beside me."

"I mean it!" Ned protested.

"So do I," said Chuck, "but only when I'm drunk or stoned."

*

Before he had gone out west with Ned, Chuck had lived in a four-room apartment on the third floor of his parents' red brick house on one of the oldest streets in New Dundee. An extension added to a black metal fire escape provided the apartment with a private entrance through the house's back yard. If Chuck was in New Dundee, Ned thought, he would be living in that apartment.

Ned left the bridge and the creek banks where he and Chuck had hung out as teenagers. The mist was growing thicker and settling close to the ground. Ned could smell the moisture in the air, feel the dampness on his cheeks. Yeah, he thought, if I can crash with Chuck, then I can

phone my parents, pretend it's long-distance, and tell them I'm on my way back and I'll be home in a couple of days. Break it to them gently. Tell them I've flubbed up again. "A man needs steady work," Ned's dad used to say. "And a man that can't hack steady work ain't a man." From Grade Eight to Grade Ten, Ned had held down a part-time job after school, delivering the Ottawa Citizen in Ankara on his bicycle. He had attended every class of each of his courses in high school, done all his homework. Ned's marks had never been high but, until he had met Chuck in Grade Ten, he had worked hard. After he and Chuck became friends, Ned gave up his paper-route, started to skip classes, spent his savings on drugs, potpipes, roachclips. For the first time, he imagined the possibility that he might one day go out west. The next year, Chuck, working long hours at the gas station, unable to afford a car -- any car, let alone a Camaro, the mirage that had enticed him to quit high school -- had become the realist, the pessimist; Ned, the new-found dreamer, kept Chuck hopeful through that first winter of late-night shifts at the gas station. Still the dreamer, he had come back from Hamilton two years later, undeterred by the plant's having laid him off, to convince Chuck that they could both find happiness out west. Yet it was Chuck who had met people once they were living in

Calgary; Chuck who had got them jobs; Chuck who, in the end, had found a girlfriend. Ned felt lost after Chuck's departure: his dreams, frustrated, turned to doubts. He remembered the man in the stetson, Hainey's sneer as he sold Ned the spiked pot, the look in the eyes of the guy he had asked to have a drink with him in Winnipeg.

The late summer day was ending. The gathering darkness turned the smoky mist from grey to white. Ned rounded a corner and looked across the street at the three-storey house that belonged to Chuck's parents.

A Dodge pick-up truck was parked in the laneway.

Ned crossed the street. His feet slipping on the wet grass, he walked into the back yard. Big withered elms enclosed the yard like a stockade. In the window at the top of the fire escape, a light was shining.

Ned hauled himself up the narrow fire escape, his running shoes squelching against the damp metal. His backpack dragged at his shoulders. Looking down as he stopped to catch his breath, he saw tongues of mist curling around the trunks of the elms, veiling the lawn below with a near-luminous whiteness. The elms, stripped of leaves, barely looked like trees: they were gnarled hands reaching up through the mist, wooden claws trying to latch onto something solid in the evening gloom. Ned climbed the last

few steps of the fire escape and knocked on the door. "Hey, Chuck!" he called. "It's me!"

The door opened: Chuck's brushmark-thin mustache didn't move. Chuck wore a plaid shirt; his black hair was cut short; he had put on weight under the jaw and around the waist. Chuck looked straight: non-druggy, boring, employable. "Ned," he murmured.

"How you doing, man?" Ned asked, reaching out his right hand for a glancing, thumbs-up handshake. "Long time, no see."

"You just get back from Alberta?" Chuck said, shaking Ned's hand firmly.

"Yeah. Just got off the bus this afternoon. Okay if I crash here tonight?"

"Sure," said Chuck. "How come you left? I thought you loved it out there."

"Naw, man, Alberta's the pits, there's no work out there. Every day there's more assholes and less jobs." Ned swung the backpack off his shoulders and leaned it against the kitchen wall. He pulled off the red knit cap with the blue plastic brim: his hair fell in his eyes. Stroking his hair back over his shoulders, he thought: Jeeze, Chuck looks straight; he looks like he wouldn't know me on the street.

"Where'd you get that thing you're wearing?" Chuck said.

Ned looked down at the grey, crumpled, mud-splattered jumpsuit. "This place on Seventh Avenue. It was on sale. Pretty cool, eh? It looked better when it was clean."

"You want something to eat?" Chuck said. "We've got a chicken leg left over from supper."

"Sure," said Ned, following Chuck into the kitchen, "thanks." He remembered the small, box-like kitchen with its unvarnished wood panelling, its low square table, its gas stove. But the red drapes in the kitchen window were new. The naked light bulb suspended over the table had been covered with a flower-patterned shade. The array of dishes drying on the counter was larger than the selection of dishes that Chuck had owned before. "What you doing now, Chuck?" Ned asked, seating himself at the table. "You working someplace? It looks like you and me's going to be working in the same place again, eh? Just like the old days -- the both of us right here in this Ottawa Valley."

"Right," Chuck said, opening the fridge door. "Just like before."

Behind him, Ned heard the bathroom door snap open. He turned around in his chair.

"Hello, Ned," said Shelley.

I don't believe this, Ned thought, Shelley's a city person, she'd never live in a place like New Dundee; she's probably never even stayed with the same guy for six months before. How the hell can they still be together?

Shelley walked into the kitchen, pulled up a chair and sat down next to Chuck, who had just set the chicken leg in front of Ned. Shelley's hair, which Ned remembered as long and tangled, was short, straight, neatly-combed: a glossy brown helmet that extended to just below her ears. She wore pressed dress slacks, a blouse from a clothing-store rack, a necklace as thin as snare-wire. The plastic dimestore bangles were gone from her wrists, her lurid lipstick had been replaced by a more modest shade, sparingly applied.

"I'm working in a lumber yard in town right now," Chuck said. "In the fall I'm going to start Grade Twelve at night school. Then maybe I'll go to community college and do data processing. Shelley here's working as a teller in the bank. She's only part-time now, but they told her she might be on full-time in the fall."

Ned was silent. "You ever gonna get your Camaro out of this?"

"Jeeze," Chuck sighed. Shelley ran her hand through his hair. Chuck said: "I guess I've got as good of a chance of getting a Camaro by working as you have by dreaming."

Ned felt tired and angry; the light over the table was hurting his eyes. The aggressive plainness of the kitchen's unvarnished wood furniture bothered him. "Okay," he said, "you don't have to get hostile. Anyway, I never wanted a Camaro: I wanted to go out west. That was always my dream, remember?"

"Looks like it came true."

"Yeah, right," Ned grunted. He thought of telling Chuck about the bad pot Hainey had sold him; but they were past the stage where they told each other everything. Ned picked up the chicken leg and began to gnaw. Although the meat was cold, Ned found himself salivating: he hadn't realized how hungry he was.

When he looked up, Shelley had moved into the living room and was setting a record on the stereo. Chuck was poking around in the fridge: "There's leftover potatoes, Ned, if you like potatoes. How about a beer? Anybody else want a beer?"

Chuck opened three Molsons and set them on the table. Soft rock began to flow from the stereo: acoustic guitar, female lead singer and gentle drumbeats.

"You guys got any pot?" Ned said, sipping his beer. "You wanna get high?"

The three bottlecaps tinkled like coins as Chuck dropped

them into a garbage pail under the sink. Ned saw Chuck and Shelley smile at each other. "Sorry, Ned," Chuck said, "we don't smoke any more."

*

"Where the hell are you?"

Ned winced as his dad's rough voice coughed down the telephone line. "I'm in Winnipeg," he said.

"Winnipeg?" His dad's voice shot up. "What the heck yuh doing there?"

"I'm coming home."

"How come? Could yuh not hack it out west?" Ned told his dad to expect him in a couple of days. When he put down the receiver, Chuck said: "You better get a haircut before you go see your old man."

Ned snorted. "I ain't gonna get no goddam haircut."

"There's a lot less guys with long hair now," Chuck said, shrugging his shoulders. "Nobody's gonna give you a job the way you look now."

"So what?" Ned said. "Who needs a fucking job?"

Chuck said: "You do." He was silent for a moment. "I'm going to bed. We have to get up early for work....Take a bath if you want, eh. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Ned murmured, as Chuck walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

Ned stretched out on the livingroom couch. Through the closed door he heard Chuck and Shelley talking quietly. Their murmurs coughed into soft laughter. Ned wondered what a man and a woman might say to one another as they were undressing that would cause them to laugh. He remembered the partition in the tiny apartment in Calgary: how Shelley had hidden behind it while he and Chuck yelled at each other.

"Could you turn out the light?" he heard Shelley murmur to Chuck behind the wall.

Ned walked into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Years seemed to have passed since he had stared at himself in the shop window on Seventh Avenue. He closed the door and drew himself a hot bath: the mirror misted up with steam. Haltingly, Ned unzipped the long front zipper of his mud-splattered white jumpsuit. His fingers were trembling. When the jumpsuit lay crumpled around his ankles, he stepped out of it, slid his underpants down his legs and wiped the mirror clean. Naked, shivering despite the hot steam, he stared into the mirror as it slowly misted up again, layer by hazy layer, until his face was blotted from sight.

COMEDIAN BOB GOES TO PERU

Sipping his Cuzqueño beer, Bob Denison looked out the window of the train at the Peruvian altiplano. His weak eyes made the grey sky and the flat, drab altiplano merge, and for a moment he had the sensation that the train was soaring through space. "Look," said Lygia, pointing out the window. "Llamas."

Bob looked. He saw the hot springs at the edge of the railway track casting steam into the cold air. Everything else was a blur. "I don't have my contacts in."

"My God, Comedian Bob, the things you don't see."

"I can see fine up to about fifteen feet...I saw that rainbow on the trip up here, didn't I? I'm falling asleep and suddenly over your shoulder out the window the rain's stopped and there's this incredible rainbow. I think, Wow! a beautiful red-headed Brazilian woman and an incredible rainbow on the same trip. You don't get that back in the

States."

Lygia's laughter rippled. Their hands clashed and held beneath the table between them. They had met in Bolivia a week ago, the four of them: Comedian Bob, Gerhardt the architect, Lygia and her cousin Ana Clara. They had traveled together to Cuzco. Now, after five days drinking in the old Inca capital, staggering up the hill to Sacsayhuamán for the view of the puma-shaped city, dodging pickpockets in the market, and turning down mass-produced handicrafts and small bags containing white powder touted as cocaine, they were on their way back to Puno. It was over: they had seen Machu Picchu. In Puno they would go their separate ways. Gerhardt would return to Lima for his flight home; Lygia and Ana Clara would head back across Bolivia to Brazil. Bob Denison did not know where he would go. Unlike the others, he was unconstrained by time or money. For the past three years, ever since his career as an entertainer had taken off, releasing him from financial worries, he had traveled seven months out of twelve, wandering through South America and the Caribbean in search of new sights, loud parties, sexual satisfaction. At thirty, Bob Denison devoted his time to living the good life.

Next to Bob, Gerhardt and Ana Clara, who for the length

of Bob's carefully-nursed beer had been hunched toward each other across the low table, pulled themselves upright. Their murmurs trailed away into silence. All along the first-class carriage pairs of people faced each other across low tables. Gerhardt sat next to Bob; Ana Clara next to Lygia. The train rattled across emptiness; Bob drained his beer. Peering at the notebook on the table in front of him, he cleared his throat to read a selection from the comedy routine he had been writing. In South America, he had just scribbled, happiness is a good shit in the morning and comfortable shoes the rest of the day. The phrase troubled Bob, causing him to pause, and before he could begin to read, Ana Clara had rolled her elbow against Lygia's arm, whispered in Portuguese and announced in her wobbly English: "Lygia and I go make line for the toilet."

"You probably don't need to make a line," Bob said. "There's probably a line there already."

The women slid into the aisle. Gerhardt's face -- droop cheeks and wide, sallow mouth -- careered round at Bob. "What can I do? Ana Clara and I talk and talk, but we resolve nothing."

"Take it as it comes," said Bob. "Enjoy yourselves."

"But what does it mean?"

Bob's palm slipped on the neck of his bottle of Cuzqueño

beer. He looked down at the label: a depiction of the famous fourteen-sided stone in Cuzco. Bob had taken a photograph of the stone, with Gerhardt and Ana Clara standing to the left of it to allow Bob an unobstructed view of all fourteen edges. Gerhardt's arm had been thrown around Ana Clara's shoulders, flattening her braids against the nape of her neck. Bob had promised to send each of them a copy of the photograph.

"What should I do?" breathed Gerhardt.

Bob fingered the beer bottle. He had no idea what Gerhardt should do. He barely knew Gerhardt. He had learned during the passport-trading session the four of them had engaged in on the train to Machu Picchu that Gerhardt was thirty years old, and that he was an architect from Cologne. Silting-down memories from a night when they had all had too much to drink in a restaurant on Procuradores in Cuzco reminded Bob that Gerhardt was of Rumanian origin, and restored to him scraps of an involved story of the shifting homelands and allegiances of Gerhardt's family through two world wars. Jesus, Bob thought, what does he expect me to say?

"It's so different," Gerhardt said. "With the last woman it went on for two years. We were going to be married. But Ana Clara and I have only known each other a week. Tomorrow

it's all over. We don't even know if we want to see each other again. She's got money: she could come to Germany. Or maybe I could go to Brazil in a year or two...."

"Sometimes," Bob said, "you just have to move on."

Gerhardt puffed out his cheeks, running the tips of his long fingers over the coarse, tightly-woven vest he had bought in Bolivia. He frowned. Ordering his English with great care, he said: "If only I could know what it was I was moving on <u>from</u>."

Before Bob could reply, Lygia and Ana Clara had returned, laughing, Lygia's fingers playing over Ana Clara's black braids. Bob decided to postpone the reading from his comedy routine. He closed the notebook, slid it into his travel bag and hauled out his short-wave radio. Yanking open the window above his seat, he ran up the radio's aerial and poked it outside the train. He began to fiddle with the dial. "Up here at fourteen thousand feet," he said, falling into his patter, "you can pick up signals from all over the world. Short-wave bouncing off the ionosphere...you just gotta angle the set right to pick up the bounce." Phrases of an oriental-sounding language slashed through the first-class carriage, succeeded in a twist of the dial by slow, chanting music. "Pretty good reggae, huh?" Bob said. Lygia laughed. "Yup," Bob said,

"bouncing right off the ionosphere....."

"What's your name, gringo?" Lygia had asked him the night they met in La Paz. She lingered on the last word, teasing him. Bob told her his name. She laughed. As if reciting a ditty, she asked: "What's your job, Bob?" Bob Denison replied that he was a professional comedian.

"You work in night clubs?"

"I do clubs, I do bars, I do children's birthday parties. Sometimes I do a bit of TV -- anything that pays, so long as I can keep traveling seven months a year."

"Is this your first time in Latin America?"

"No, I come down here every year. When I was in college in Texas I came down to Peru to research this big paper I was supposed to write to finish my degree. I took one look at South America and said, This is the life. School can wait."

"I went to college in the States, too," Lygia said; "but I finished my degree."

Bob said: "My business is as an actor, a talker. Nobody gives a hoot what kind of education I've got. I just have to keep them laughing."

"And I'm so rich I have nothing to do with my life but laugh at comedians," Lygia said. She drained her beer and prompted Bob to buy her another one. They drank languidly

for another hour. The rest of the tables in the restaurant were occupied by short, squat Bolivian men, their chairs shifted around so that they could watch the soccer match being broadcast on the black-and-white television behind the bar. The men drank beer from bottles and ate *sálteñas* -- hot rolls that spilled a lava of spicy meat stew at the first bite -- wrapped in brown paper napkins. When they got up to pay, Bob overheard voices commenting on Lygia's red hair, calling her a *gringa*. "Hey," Bob said, as they stepped out onto the slanting square-cobbled street, "they think we're both gringos."

Lygia didn't reply. Silent, plump-faced Aymará women wearing porkpie hats and broad, stiffly-pleated skirts glided uphill past Bob and Lygia. The gloom was overspread at irregular intervals by soft ovals of light spun out by the lamps that street vendors perched atop their stalls. In the wash of light that raised every crease in his face, the vendor would offer buns, candy, the use of a weigh-scale, old coins, and trinkets cast from low-grade silver. Bob, who had arrived in La Paz only that afternoon, felt dizzy from the altitude. A grinding headache had forced him to remove his contact lenses, and before his eyes the glow of successive lamps merged, transforming the street into a smudged chain of light posed against a broader swathe of

darkness.

Bob walked Lygia back to her hotel. She invited him up to her room to meet her cousin Ana Clara. The attendant at the front desk objected, but his resistance softened when Bob balanced a few pesos on the counter and promised to leave within half an hour. When they opened the door of the room, Ana Clara was sitting on the bed. She was small, dark, pensive; her braids were roped together at the ends. Lygia spoke to her in a Portuguese too rapid for Bob to follow. Then she said in English: "Bob is a rich gringo."

Ana Clara asked him about his wealth: what did he do? Her shaky English confused Bob. Was she asking him what he did for a living, or what he did with his time? A line of patter crested in his throat -- the capsule biography he produced on such occasions -- but the beer took a grip, preventing the elegant formula from unfolding. Bob stammered. "I get kind of weird when I talk about it...."

Ana Clara was watching him. Bob felt uneasy; he had had too much to drink. He asked the women when they were leaving for Peru. They arranged to travel to the border together. Soothed by the promise of renewed contact, Bob said goodnight and left the hotel.

On the bus to the border Ana Clara sat next to a thin European with large eyes who introduced himself as

Gerhardt. He and Ana Clara, clawing through verbal thickets of English and Spanish (Gerhardt spoke English and some Spanish, Ana Clara Spanish and some English), managed to sustain a confused flirtation over the two-day trip to Puno, on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca. The four of them caught the train to Cuzco together. During the day-long journey to the old Inca capital, Bob glanced out the window of the train a moment after the passing of a rare rainstorm on the altiplano and saw a strikingly bright rainbow sinking into the clouds beyond the toss of Lygia's loose red hair. In the middle of the afternoon the train stopped in a drab station. Children swarmed around the windows of the first-class carriage, thrusting bits of charred meat speared on sticks in the passengers' faces and yelling out prices. Lygia opened the window, leaned outside and began to bargain. Comedian Bob looked out at the eruption of people. He grabbed a handful of long, thin balloons from his travel bag, inflated each balloon with a series of quick breaths and folded it into the shape of a llama. He pinched the head of each llama to tease out tiny, pouched ears. Then, leaning out the window, he started to toss the llamas to the children. The children shrieked, forgot the dry meat on their wooden sticks and fought each other for the balloons. The balloons floated down through

the cold air: elements of the washed-out altiplano remade in gaudy rubber. Comedian Bob drifted one balloon to the left, one balloon to the right; he watched the shoving mass of children buckle and flow with each flick of his hand. He was a conjuror, showing them an image of their own world that they had never seen. When the train jerked away from the platform and began to haul out of the station, the children rushed after it. Bob could see them straining to catch up with the first-class carriage; could hear their voices beseeching him for one more balloon, one more pretty llamita. The track curved and the children were wrenched from sight. Bob wasted one balloon on empty space and sat down. Blowing up the balloons at high altitude had made him dizzy. His head throbbed and his contact lenses felt dry against his eyeballs. Through the smeared confusion of his vision, Bob heard laughter. He blinked. Lygia was doubled over in her seat. That evening, when the four of them arrived in Cuzco, they signed into their hotel as two couples.

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Comedian Bob snapped off the short-wave radio and slid the window shut. The first-class carriage was getting cold. Gerhardt and Ana Clara sat huddled together over the low formica-topped table that separated them, speaking with

eyes and hands as much as with with words. Opposite Bob, Lygia sipped her beer slowly.

Bob turned and looked out the window of the train. The hot springs at the edge of the railroad line had vanished. The altiplano had weathered to a grey-brown color and had telescoped open into a wide, arid vastness. The train threaded across gaping horizons. Bob was glad he had not put in his contact lenses that morning. On the journey up he had been able to see clearly the endless stretch of the plateau, and the shock had left him gasping for breath. There were times when Bob disliked the mountains, longing for the tropical areas of South America. Two months earlier he had spent some time in Santa Marta, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. He could still feel the residue of the silky coastal heat on his skin, the warmth of the sun, the slow gyration of Judy's palms on his shoulder blades. He had met Judy in a café; had entertained her with part of one of his comedy routines. She was thirty-four, an old hippy who had started out on a long trek through the Americas with her boyfriend, only to be dumped for a younger woman in Panama City. By the time they had been together a week, Bob realized that he had underestimated Judy's loneliness. More than physical passion inspired the desperation with which she clung to Bob in the sagging

double bed in his hotel room. When Judy began to use the pronoun "we" in speculating on future travels, Bob decided to leave her. He booked a seat on a bus to Bogotá, telling Judy nothing of his plans until the morning of his departure. He rolled out of bed, dressed and began to pack. "Time to move on," he said; "I'm going to Bogotá." He saw the outline of Judy's body stiffen; but, not having put in his contact lenses, he didn't realize she was crying until he heard the first sobs. She said: "Do you think you're being funny, or what?" The next day Bob was strolling through Bogotá's emerald-vending district, a cool rain was falling; he told himself he had saved his freedom by a hair. But the echo of Judy's quavering voice continued to ring between his ears, the blurred outline of her body, stiffened in dismay, refused to erase itself from his memory.

He heard a click and a cascade of laughter. Lygia had taken his photograph. Bob lunged as if to wrest the camera from her.

"Thief!" she said in Spanish. "Ratero!" The steward, passing in the aisle, veered around. Lygia laughed harder. A wave of long cinnamon hair fell in a tangle across her face. She cleared her hair from her eyes and asked Bob to buy her another beer.

"Puede traerme dos cervezas más, por favor?" Bob said to the steward. The steward nodded and strode away. When he returned with bottles and plastic glasses, which he passed across the hunched forms of Gerhardt and Ana Clara, Bob overtipped him. "The secret to any language," he said, filling Lygia's glass, "is to know how to politely order one more beer, no matter how drunk you may be."

"Can you do it in Portuguese?" Lygia asked. Bob tried and Lygia made a mockery of his pronunciation. He wasn't expressive enough, she said; he had to speak more with his hands. She demonstrated. Bob aped her movements, waving his arms around like an exhausted boxer. The disturbance broke the spell of Gerhardt's and Ana Clara's intimacy. Gerhardt's fingers fell away from Ana Clara's dark braids. They pulled apart, straightened up in their seats.

Gerhardt stared into space. "This is crazy," he said quietly to Bob. "When I speak English she doesn't understand; when she speaks Spanish, I don't understand. And when we speak our own languages it's hopeless...you don't know how to say 'casual relationship' in Spanish, do you?"

Comedian Bob shook his head.

"I'm trying to explain to her that this kind of thing isn't normal for me. I can't find out if she has had

relationships like this before."

Comedian Bob said: "Does it matter?"

"I want to know how much this means to her," Gerhardt said.

"I could ask Lygia to translate."

They were almost whispering. Gerhardt shook his head. "It wouldn't be the same. We must work it out ourselves. You understand?"

Bob drank a deep swig of beer. "Nope. I don't understand a goddam thing."

Gerhardt's cheeks stiffened. "I don't believe that," he said. "You travel all the time. This kind of thing must happen to you."

Comedian Bob shrugged his shoulders. "I take it as it comes. I enjoy myself. Who cares what things mean?" He reached down into his travel bag, pulled out his short-wave radio, tugged open the window and ran up the aerial into the blurred distances. A chill wind funneled in his face. He could feel it dragging at his hair and stinging his cheeks. He turned on the radio and spun the dial. Riffs of static, unexpected chords of music, languages that were immediately comprehensible or comically foreign, flowed through his fingers. "...Sounds like Mongolian to me. That's what you get being up here at fourteen thousand

feet. You catch the waves bouncing off the ionosphere, all the way from the land of Genghis Khan...." He drained his beer and said: "Buy me another beer, Lygia. I paid last time."

Lygia laughed and refused. "You're drunk enough already."

"You won't even buy me a beer?" said Bob

"No."

"Will you share a room with me in Puno tonight?"

Lygia laughed again, her eyebrows arching. "Wait and see."

The needle of Bob's radio clashed with a language he recognized immediately. He held the dial taut as the radio unreeled a stream of rounded vowels and resonating nasals. A single male voice was speaking, evidently a newsreader. "Hey, Lygia, Ana Clara," Bob said. "News from home! It's a Brazilian station."

Ana Clara was shaking. "Turn it off! It's government propaganda, it's nothing but lies...."

Bob looked at her, startled.

"Turn it off!" Ana Clara said. She shook her head. Her braids thrashed her cheeks and left glistening welts of tears. She stumbled out of her seat and careered down the aisle to the end of the carriage. Lygia went after her.

Comedian Bob sighed, snapped off the radio, lowered the aerial, closed the window and slid the short-wave into his travel bag. "Now what the hell was that all about?"

"She was upset," Gerhardt said.

"No kidding. Just because of a bunch of hogwash on the radio."

"No," Gerhardt said. "Not just because of that. Because of what you and Lygia were saying. Yelling about whether you were going to sleep together in Puno.... When you interrupted us, Ana Clara and I had just decided that it would be better if we didn't share a hotel room in Puno tonight."

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The night in Cuzco that they had first shared a hotel room, Comedian Bob had spoken to Lygia in a manner that was buoyant, extravagant, overly loud. The room in which they had found themselves had reminded Bob of Lygia and Ana Clara's hotel room in La Paz. It brought back to Bob the embarrassing drunkenness that had befuddled him the night he and Lygia had met. To drive memories of that night from Lygia's mind, Bob had played brash American, telling tales and laughing loudly at his own jokes. Seeing him naked for the first time, Lygia said: "My laughing little boy...." Her arms closed around his waist. They bantered their way

through five days in Cuzco. Their laughter was armor: a protection against the intensity and seriousness of Gerhardt and Ana Clara. Bob and Lygia hurled empty chatter at the other couple's groping, lived their own brief involvement in defiance of meaning. They kept to the surface of things. So now, when Lygia returned from the end of the first-class carriage guiding a subdued, fragile Ana Clara, Bob found himself lacking a language in which to talk to her: they had never discussed emotion. They sat facing one another, their conversation withering before Ana Clara's tear-veined eyes.

Bob looked out the window. The clouds were sinking, growing thicker. He watched the darkness gather, until the train was rattling through the night. In the first-class carriage the lights came on. Gerhardt, Lygia and Ana Clara sat without speaking among the debris of a day-long journey; Bob felt himself beginning to doze.

The cold woke him. The train was slowing. He reached under his seat, lifted his alpaca sweater out of his travel bag and pulled it over his shoulders. Lights outside the train muted the reflection of Bob's face in the glass. They were entering a station. "Juliaca," said someone across the aisle. A dimly-lighted platform slid into view. The train stopped. Bob watched a woman, swaddled in a poncho,

walking along the platform. She clutched a bulging plastic garbage bag against her stomach. Bob had seen similar bags in markets, the edges rolled back to reveal dried, mounded coca leaves. The leaves were sold by weight at a negligible price; people chewed them to stave off hunger and haze their misery.

Two youths drew past the pacing woman, one passing on either side of her. They were barefoot; their trousers were bunched with twine around their thin waists. Each one whipped a glinting point along the underside of the plodding woman's garbage bag. Coca leaves cascaded onto the platform. The woman froze. Spreading her poncho, she fell face first onto the loosely mounded coca. The two youths clawed at the woman's flanks, scooping handfuls of coca leaves into woven pouches hastily unslung from their shoulders. The woman came to her knees, flailing her short arms, and hacked at one youth's shins with the side of her hand. The youth hauled back his fist, brought it forward and cracked his knuckles against the woman's forehead.

The woman fell hard on her back, her legs twisted under her at an impossible angle. The two youths dived at the mound of now exposed coca leaves. Half a dozen other people rushed forward, burrowing into the heap of dark green leaflets, trying to scrape the coca into bags and pouches.

They fell against each other, toppled over into a pile of heaving limbs: eight or ten people trying to wrestle and gouge each other as they rolled on the hard platform.

Bob remembered his balloons. He pulled them out of his travel bag and began to inflate them, folding them into small dolls that resembled llamas. Comedian Bob heaved open the window of the first-class carriage. "Llamas!" he yelled at the wrestling bodies on the platform, as the night chill flowed around his face. "Get your llamas!" He tried to think of a more enticing cry, but he couldn't remember the Spanish word for "balloon." "Llamas! Llamas! Llamas!" he shouted. He threw an orange llama balloon out the window. The balloon twirled into the dark and landed on the railway tracks. The shouts of the grappling people on the platform invaded the first-class carriage. A gust of wind flipped the orange llama on the rails onto its back. The balloon skidded down the railway line into the darkness. "Stop fighting," Bob said. "Look at the llamas." His voice faltered. "Llamitas americanas para todos."

The struggle continued. Comedian Bob stared in silence. The chill breeze sent Bob's extra balloons skidding across the tabletop; they fell into the aisle. Gerhardt and Ana Clara began picking them up off the floor.

After a few minutes the struggle waned. People

shouldered their bundles and started to plod toward the train. Figures rolled clear of the pile of bodies, climbed to their feet, shrugged their clothes into place and joined the queue shuffling toward the second-class carriages.

The stream of people -- small figures hunched beneath bundles, women wearing layers of filthy skirts, broken men with spindly legs -- blocked Bob Denison's view of the section of the platform where the struggle had occurred. As the front of the line arrived at the second-class carriages, the queue ground to a halt. Shouts echoed from farther down the train as the second-class carriages started to fill up.

When the queue had filed past, a single figure remained sprawled on the platform. The woman whose coca bag had been slashed lay on her stomach, her face turned toward the train. Her layered skirts were torn; she had been stripped of her poncho; her hat was gone; her lips were bloody and her hair spilled in a tangle across her shoulders. Her arms were flung out in front of her and her clenched fingers gripped a shredded dark green tassel that was all that remained of the plastic garbage bag in which she had carried her coca. Her lips stumbled, making no recognizable sound.

The train gave a jerk and began to roll out of the

station.

The lights of the Juliaca platform receded into the night. Icy wind slashed at Bob's cheeks. He turned from the window, glancing at the llama balloons that Gerhardt and Ana Clara had piled on the tabletop. Reaching across the table, Bob Denison gathered up the balloons in his arms and dumped them out the window into the darkness.

For the duration of the trip Bob sat huddled against the window. The cold seeped into him, setting off shivers that climbed his arms and prickled across the nape of his neck. He felt immobilized. It was more paralyzing than the stage fright that used to attack him in unfamiliar clubs. The woman's face, pressed against the railway platform an arm's length from his first-class seat, snapped into focus every time Bob closed his eyes. He could hear her bloodied lips mumbling: "Do you think you're being funny, or what?"

Lygia stretched toward him beneath the table. Her fingers, which until a moment earlier had been poised against the window pane, were cold to the touch. She massaged Bob's knuckles until both his hands and hers had grown warmer. They sat holding hands under the table, Ana Clara and Gerhardt murmuring in the adjacent seats, until the train rolled into Puno. Snow scarred the ground

outside the Puno station. The dirt streets, furrowed with deep ruts, set Bob off stride. Without warning, rain began to fall. In an instant the bars of snow vanished; hat-brims sagged, ponchos drooped, thick heads of hair were beaten to wet strands. The rain fell relentlessly, a tropical downpour turned icy by mountain air. The passengers who were streaming from the train began to run. Sheet lightning flashed, polishing the surfaces of the puddles that were filling the ruts and softening their edges. When the lightning had passed darkness closed in, dented by shafts of weak light from crowded hotel doorways.

Bob, clasping Lygia's hand, stepped around a corner, into a street that led toward the center of the town. Puno was the hub of the Andean travel wheel: there were hotels everywhere. Glancing back over his shoulder, Bob saw Ana Clara and Gerhardt following him. Their heads were bowed together; they seemed to be talking. Would they be able to hear each other over the downpour? Bob and Lygia marched through the storm in silence, holding hands. Bob could feel the ridges below Lygia's knuckles. The rain bewildered him. Looking for a hotel where he had stayed on a previous stopover in Puno, he got lost. By the time he found the hotel, it was nearly full.

"Cuatro camas. Sí señor. Hay un colectivo con siete

donde faltan cuatro."

"What was that?" Gerhardt said.

Bob said: "He's got a room with seven beds in it and four of them are empty."

"Take it," Gerhardt said. "We're not going to find anything else -- all the other places looked crammed."

Bob turned to the desk clerk. There were no double rooms? No, sir: none. Bob asked him the price of the beds in the room for seven people, bargained for a few moments, but made little headway. "Okay," he said; "we'll take them." The clerk asked them for their passports. Bob made a movement toward the button-down breast pocket of his shirt and realized that he was still holding hands with Lygia. They shook free of one another. Speaking to Lygia for the first time since before the train's arrival in Juliaca, Bob said: "Goddam, I'm real sorry I couldn't get us a double room.

Lygia shrugged her shoulders. "It's only for one night."

"One last night...." Bob's voice resounded tinnily in his own ears. He didn't trust his own patter anymore. He felt isolated: a performer unable to break through to his audience. Lygia's face hung before his eyes, her forehead glistening from the rain, her cinnamon hair beaten to a silky mat. In a rush, the need to hold her hard against him

seized Bob's senses.

"Last nights are never any fun anyhow," Lygia murmured.

"Yeah," Bob said. "You've just gotta take it as it comes."

*

"Morning," Gerhardt said, propping himself up in bed, when the grey light had become undeniable. "Time for me to leave for Lima. Next week I will be back in my office designing garages and none of you will exist."

No one replied. The three Peruvians with whom they had been sharing the room -- middle-aged soldiers stationed at an outpost on the altiplano, who had come into Puno for the weekend -- had already dressed and departed. Outside, rain was still falling.

Bob grunted and rolled out of bed. He dressed and packed briskly. In a few minutes the four of them, subdued and rumpled, were standing in the street.

Rain had been falling all night. The street outside the hotel, paved with interlocking stone, had become a broad gutter, channeling a shin-deep torrent of muddy water. Low-slung intercity taxis were pulled up onto the narrow curbs and men stood beside them shrieking out destinations. The yells made Bob's head throb.

They ate breakfast in a café crowded with travelers

complaining about the rain. In English, German, French, Brazilian Portuguese and Argentine- and Chilean-accented Spanish the refrain was the same: everyone was getting out of this damned wet country, crossing the border into Bolivia. Bob ordered a large breakfast; the others had only coffee. Gerhardt and Ana Clara held hands on the tabletop, the polished black formica reflecting the image of their clasped fingers.

Gerhardt said: "Where are you going next, Bob? You're the only one who doesn't have to go home right away."

"As long as it keeps raining, I'll probably try to hole up in a decent hotel and work on that routine I started on the train. Then down to the Chilean coast. Arica. You ever seen the beaches there?"

They all shook their heads, cradling empty coffee cups. No one spoke. Then Gerhardt pushed back his chair, and the others stood up. They paid for their coffee and stepped out onto the street.

Outside, the sky was pale grey. Water sloshed over the cobblestones; rain continued to fall, languidly, without the crushing force of the night before. At the end of the street, half a dozen blocks distant, the pale mass of Lake Titicaca sponged up the rain. Far out on the horizon, blurred by mist, Bob could distinguish a small launch.

This morning he had put in his contact lenses.

The first taxi they came across had three unclaimed seats. Lygia and Ana Clara stashed their luggage in the trunk. Bob found himself saying goodbye to Lygia. "Time to move on," he said, staring into her pale blue eyes. He reached forward and closed his arms around Lygia's shoulders. Beyond the fall of Lygia's red hair, Bob saw Gerhardt and Ana Clara pressing against each other. Ana Clara sobbed as they came apart; Gerhardt was scribbling on a scrap of paper. Bob released Lygia. "You've got my address," she said. "Send me a postcard of those beaches at Arica if you're not too busy with the next woman you meet. Look me up the next time you're in Rio and I'll show you some real beaches."

Bob dug into his pocket and handed Lygia his business card. "If you're ever passing through Texas and you want to meet a real Texas long-horn...."

Lygia smirked, took a half-swipe at his face and ducked into the back seat of the taxi. Bob overheard the taxi driver snickering with the man recruiting passengers: which would be better in bed, the darky or the redhead, goddam gringos had it easy, rich as emperors and women went crazy over that white skin, goddam Brazilian women went crazy over anything, they were <u>easy</u> to lay: "<u>Fáciles las</u>

brasileñas...."

Bob scowled at the men. Seeing he understood them, they cackled. "One more seat!" yelled the recruiter. "One seat left for Yunguyo and the border!" A well-dressed middle-aged man walked up and climbed into the front seat; the recruiter slammed the door on him. Before Bob could take account of what was happening, the taxi had rolled off the curb, hissed down the flooded street, turned a corner and disappeared.

*

Bob and Gerhardt walked together through the last spattering drops of rain. They came to a stop in a street near the lakefront where the bus companies that traveled to the Peruvian coast had their offices. The rain had turned Bob's hair to lank wet strands; he pushed it back off his forehead. "Are you and Ana Clara going to see each other again?"

"We'd like to," Gerhardt said. "We're going to write. We hope to meet in a few months -- maybe in Germany, maybe in Brazil."

"That sounds good," Bob said.

"It's not good!" Gerhardt shook his curly dark hair. "It's terrible. If we make this commitment, one of us will be uprooted. God, I wish I could be like you, Bob! Take it

as it comes, enjoy yourself and move on. That's the best way."

"I'm not that happy-go-lucky," Bob said shortly. "I'd like to see Lygia again."

"But you're not going spend days worrying about it," Gerhardt said. "That's what I admire in you, Bob.... You've been a real example to me." He extended his hand.

Bob shook the hand. Barefoot Indians, bowed under heavy bundles, padded along the muddy street. Bob stared at them, realizing that in weeks of traveling through Peru he had never looked hard at Indians, never wondered what they carried in their bundles.

"Have a good time in Arica," Gerhardt said, turning away in the direction of the nearest bus company.

"Thanks," Bob said, as the tumult of the crowded street filled his eyes, "I will."

INSIDE

You tell the guard that you have come to see the prisoners. He searches you, heavy hands tracing the inside seam of your trousers from ankle to crotch. He nods. You pass through a door, behind a screen, where another guard holds a microphone. You repeat the two names you have been given. The guard speaks the two names into the microphone. You meet them at the bars, two men in T-shirts and jeans that don't join at the waist, flowing mustaches and identical center-part haircuts. They shout through the bars, pure release of energy and emotion, so fast you can barely catch it, I've been here four years and three months now. Around you, families press against their prisoners, children dripping tears between the bars onto their kneeling fathers' chests, Indian women looking at their husbands and not speaking. More visitors press in behind you, pushing you along the bars. Man, I've seen these kids grow up, I

got a call from home, my parents called last night, my two little brothers they're over six foot now, I traveled around South America a fair bit before I got busted, I got a four-year-old kid in Brazil I ain't never seen, not like Jacques, he ain't never even seen La Paz, arrived in this town and got busted the same night. How are you, you manage to shout, how's it going? We're not too bad now, moving along the bars as more visitors stream in, our Honorary Consul's been a bit more decent to us lately. In here you get up, you have to eat breakfast whether you want it or not, then you have the rest of the day to bore yourself to death. There used to be like forty-some gringos in here; thirty-nine Americans, it was a party. I mean MONEY! Every day somebody was getting a hundred dollars, two hundred dollars. Then the U.S. recognized Bolivia, now there's only six of us -- us two and a Norwegian and a South African and a German and some other guy, the old slow-mover. Yeah, says Jacques, the old slow-mover there. We gotta buy everything in here, John shouts, clothes, food, we gotta pay for the use of the room. And the shit they give us for food! They put lotsa sodium on it to make yuh swell up an' feel like you're full, then an hour later you shit and you're empty again. There's no calcium in the food, my teeth are falling apart. You know how the dentist works in

here? He doesn't use an anesthetic; he drops acid on your teeth to kill the nerve, then he goes in and does his work. He pulled this tooth out on me, I just had a little cavity and he yanked out the tooth. No anesthetic, I'm yelling my head off and he says don't scream, everybody's looking. I say use an anesthetic then. We don't get many visitors, says Jacques. Just old Father Bill, Father B., we call him. He's a great guy, none of this holy crap, and big, yeah, he used to be a football player. Sometimes we say come on Father B., can you give us a hundred pesos? we need a steak, and he always comes through. This altitude, this is a bitch of a climate, the temperature goes down and everybody has runny noses for two days and gets bronchitis. Between these two walls, all around the prison, there's a space about seven feet wide; you're a bad boy, they put you in there. You're cut off, eh, it helps to know the sergeants then, they're all real old guys, real easy-going, you can get a friend to get them to take some food in for you. But all along the wall, right inside it, there's these little cells. They found a hole in one, they decided it was an escape attempt. That guy was mad, we had to stand up against the wall like this, spreadeagle, and the guy starts hitting us with a pole with two hands. Two hands. I was blue for two days, couldn't hardly get up the next morning

and you ask, elbowed along the bars by the inflow of visitors, what are your chances? Does anybody get out? Naw, John shouts, you can't pay people off 'cause the governments get changed too quickly and everybody gets shuffled, all the way up. I got twelve years, in Canada you serve one-third of your sentence, if we got sent home I'd be on the street, they'd just keep me in the clinic for a month to look me over. Yeah, Jacques shouts, me, I got my sentence on my birthday, after I'd been in here a year and a half -- ten years. Crying children, murmuring wives in ponchos and scarves, dozens of conversations din against your hearing. Jacques presses his face toward you, the bars deform his cheeks. My father died while I was in here, he died seven months ago, I got the news a month after he died. Father B. comes in, says sit down Jacques, I've got to talk to you. Cut the crap, Father B., who died? And then he says my father. I never expected that, I thought it'd be my mother, I thought she'd be the one to die, and the crowd sweeps you to the end of the bars. Come back, they say. Come visit us again. The crowd carries you forward until there's nothing in front of you but stone. The guard smiles at you and says buenas tardes and you're out in the hard sunlight of the Plaza San Pedro, dazzled by the silence.

THE HOUSE IN ANKARA

"Them kids," Nyle said.

"Eh?"

"Them damn kids. Jeeze, are they ever loud today!"

Ida's hands barely stirred on the armrests of her wheelchair. As she sank deeper into deafness, her complaints about the noise from the schoolyard dwindled. Nyle wondered whether she could hear the kids at all anymore. All that seemed to matter to Ida now was food. Nothing was more important to her than that Nyle serve up her meals right on the dot of when she'd eaten them all of her eighty-six years: breakfast at seven, dinner at noon, supper at five-thirty. The times harked back to farm routines the house no longer lived by: breakfast had come directly after morning milking and supper directly before evening milking, with dinner halfway between the two. Nyle was still learning his way around the kitchen, and

sometimes meals took longer to cook than he expected. Then Ida would grow irritated, claiming that he was taking advantage of an old woman, reminding him that she'd worked hard all her life, that it wasn't her fault she was too feeble now to shift for herself. She'd cooked for him for long enough.

That last barb was the one that stung Nyle the worst. Ida was Nyle's aunt; his mother's eldest sister. She had lived in the house in Ankara as long as Nyle could remember. She had come to stay with Nyle and his parents as a thirty-six-year-old widow, when Nyle was still a baby. Nyle's parents had hoped that Ida might remarry in three or four years' time. But she had never looked at another man after her husband had died. A few men had come to call during those first years, and Ida had turned them down flat, ignored every one of them. Word soon got out; the men stopped calling. Ida pursued her gardening and her housework undisturbed. Fifty years had gone by: Nyle's parents had died, the farm was no longer a farm, Nyle himself was unemployed and old before his time. But Ida was still there, her ruddy freckled hands cupping the armrests of her wheelchair.

She had worked hard, in her time. Nyle remembered her going at the housework with a vengeful fury, her hair

scraped back in a bun, her dustrag thrashing, as if hard work alone could redeem her for having stayed on in her sister's house when she had been expected to remarry. It was thanks to Ida that the Donaldsons had the largest and most productive garden in the village of Ankara, thanks to Ida that scuff-marks on the kitchen tiles disappeared before they could be noticed. She had continued to honor her debt after the death of Nyle's parents: had cooked for Nyle, kept house for him, done the shopping. When Ida's health had broken down, confining her to the wheelchair, Nyle felt that it would be a betrayal to send his aunt to the Seniors' Lodge. Unable to look after her alone, he engaged help. Kathy, the neighbors' girl, came over mornings and evenings to help Ida dress and undress, and to ease her in and out of bed. The homemaker, Mrs. Shannon, a strong-faced Irishwoman who wore a crucifix, came three afternoons a week to help Ida take baths. Ida had been reluctant to allow herself to be bathed by a Catholic -- the Donaldsons had always attended the Standard Church -- but when Nyle pointed out to her that it was this or the Seniors' Lodge, Ida relented. Nyle, with plenty of time on his hands, did the rest of the housekeeping. Sweeping floors and making beds wasn't Nyle's kind of work; in the end, though, he decided that it was better than sitting on

his ass all day. He'd even taught himself to cook. There was nothing wrong with a man learning to cook. Not when he didn't have an alternative. And Ida had cooked for Nyle for years; now it was his turn to cook for her.

Nyle scrubbed potatoes under a trickle of lukewarm water at the kitchen sink. He sliced out the eyes, but left the rest of the skin intact for baking. He remembered a time when this kitchen had no sink; when the house had no plumbing. As a boy he used to trek up onto the bluff where his father's grandfather had dug a ninety-foot well outside the original house on the property back around the time of Confederation. Nyle would haul water back to the house in wooden buckets -- no plastic, in those days -- moving with the overly deliberate, slowly zigzagging strides of a drunk man as he fought against the weight yanking down on his thin right arm. He would arrive at the house with a white, bloodless trench cut into his palm. Nyle was willing to bet that the kids hollering outside his kitchen window had never had to haul water by hand in their lives; they probably thought that water had always come from taps.

"Jeeze," he said, flattening tinfoil against the bottom of the baking pan, "don't them kids ever quieten down? When I was a young lad, school was <u>inside</u>."

"They'll be out for noon-hour now," Ida said. "It's almost time for dinner. Is my dinner gonna be done by noon, Young Nyle Donaldson?"

"I'm doin' the best I can, Ida."

Nyle glanced at the dried-out cobs of calico corn hanging next to the cupboards, at the flat stone containing fossilized sea-shells that sat in the unused spice rack. Nyle had dug up the fossils as a boy. He looked out the window at the kids playing in the sunlight. Their noise bothered him much more than he'd expected it to. After the steady grinding of machinery that had droned through the house for months while the school was being built, Nyle had looked forward to the arrival of the children with a sense of approaching relief. Their playing, he thought, would be a low hum compared with the bulldozers' grumbling. He had forgotten the shrill, personal quality of schoolyard noise. There was nowhere in the house where Nyle could escape the shouts and shrieks of the children. Between the long noon-hour and the various recesses, the kids seemed to spend a large part of their schoolday out of doors. On three or four occasions Nyle had been driven to leaning out the kitchen window and yelling at the kids to quieten down. Finally, when he decided that his shouts weren't making any impact, he tramped over to the school to talk to the

principal.

The principal's name was Mr. Simpson. He was a young, pale, city-bred man with small white hands that sprouted fingers as fragile-looking as splints. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt with no T-shirt underneath, a red tie and a gold tie-clip; he greeted Nyle with a handshake and offered him a seat in his air-conditioned office. "Gidday," Nyle said. He looked at the principal's hands. He wondered how they went about choosing principals these days; he couldn't imagine any kid fearing the strap when the hands that wielded it were as feeble as Mr. Simpson's. Could he trust this man to move the kids out from under his kitchen window? Would the kids pay Mr. Simpson any mind?

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, sir," Mr. Simpson said. "I understand this land's been in your family for more than a hundred years...."

"A hundred and fifty-two, until they took it away from us to build this school o' yours."

"Yes." Mr. Simpson was silent. He glanced briefly at the studio-framed color photograph of a blond woman and two small children that stood on his desk. "I was wondering, sir," the principal resumed, "what you could tell me about hunting around here...."

"Hunting?"

"Yes," Mr. Simpson said. "I'm a hunter. I love it. Always carry the old equalizer in the trunk of the car...."

Jeeze, Nyle thought, can't this guy even see that the land in Ankara Township's been cleared for more than a hundred years? There's no hunting around here -- one or two deer left in the swamp maybe, but no real hunting.

"Farmers ain't hunters," he said. "I never had no time for none of that stuff." He sat quiet until Mr. Simpson was quiet, too. Then he told Mr. Simpson about the kids yelling and screaming under his kitchen window.

Mr. Simpson listened. "Well, legally, you know there's no reason those children should have to move." He fiddled with his tie-clip. The school, he explained, owned every stitch of land right up to Nyle's kitchen window; it was only the "front lawn," the little rectangle of dirt between the door and the street, that still belonged to Nyle. However, if the noise was bothering Nyle and his aunt, Mr. Simpson would encourage the children to play in a different area of the schoolyard. It would be a good lesson for them in learning respect for others.

Nyle went home satisfied. The next day there were no children playing under the kitchen window. Two days later a game of tag darted past the window. After a week, the noise was as bad as it had ever been. "It's that goldarned

principal they got over there," Nyle said to Ida. "All he ever talks about is hunting, but he ain't nothing but a weakling. No kid's gonna listen to a guy like that. Remember old Mr. O'Malley? You'd be black an' blue for three days if you acted up on him."

Ida nodded, her big hands shifting on the armrests. "O'Malley smartened yous lads up in a hurry."

"Yeah. That's what them kids over there need." Two weeks after his first visit to the school, Nyle was back in Mr. Simpson's office. "Ain't there nothin' you can do to quieten them down?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Mr. Simpson said, "but legally the boundary of the school's property is the wall of your house. The pupils have as much right to play there as anywhere else in the schoolyard. If you'd like, I can make another announcement over the P.A. system and ask the pupils to play in a different part of the yard. But I'm afraid that's about all I can do for you...."

"Don't bother yourself," Nyle had growled. Now when the kids' squalling became unbearable Nyle would go outside and yell at them himself. The first time he had done this the children had jerked to attention and fled. Lately, though, he had begun to realize that each time he let rip a few of the kids would start to giggle. They were provoking him, he

saw; it was a game; when they were bored they would go and make hell's own racket under the kitchen window to see if they could get the old man to come out and yell at them. The thought made Nyle clench his fists and feel like he wanted to pound something. It wasn't so long ago that people had respected Nyle Donaldson. Now he had to listen to backchat from a bunch of smart-assed nine-year-olds who had never done a lick of work in their lives. The next time he went out there to quieten them down, he thought, the first kid that sassed him would get a swift kick in the rear.

Only two summers ago, Nyle had been farming. He had hoped to be able to farm until he was seventy. There had been barely a year in the last thirty when the Donaldson place didn't start haying before any other farm in Ankara Township, when the Donaldsons' corn didn't grow faster than any other corn in the neighborhood. "Here comes the go-getter," Keith in the village co-op would say whenever Nyle arrived to buy seed or cattle-feed. With the rise in the price of land, however, Nyle's compensation money from the appropriation of his fields for the site of Ankara Public School simply wasn't enough to buy him a new farm. He and Ida lived off the compensation money, while Nyle looked for a job. It was a bad time for a forty-eight-year-old man who

had never worked for anyone but himself to be looking for work. Farms were going bankrupt all over the Ottawa Valley, and the village co-ops, the livestock merchants and the farm machinery outlets all seemed to be deluged with applications from hard-working, scantily-educated men boasting "agricultural expertise." Nyle had looked for a job for eighteen months. Toward the end of this time, as he grew more frustrated, his jobhunting days tended to finish up at the New Dundee Inn, or down in Jackson's Rapids where there was a strip show on Friday nights. Six months ago Nyle had given up looking for a job. He stayed at home now, and took care of Ida. He was drinking less than he had been during the time he was jobhunting. He now understood, although he did not accept, that he would probably never work again.

"Young Nyle Donaldson," Ida said. "How come you never got married? Always too busy working, eh? Never met any girls except at church where they didn't hardly talk to you. How come you never married that Robertson girl? You had the hustles for her something fierce."

"Jeeze, Ida, don't you remember nothin' no more? She married that McTavish lad. They been married thirty years now. How come you never married again after Garnet died? There was more than one that was interested in yuh."

"Oh, one man was enough for my life. One was more than enough. But you Nyle, would yuh not of liked a wife?"

"Be quiet, will yuh, Ida?"

Ida was quiet for a few moments.

"Nyle."

"Yes, Ida?"

"It's comin' up to noon, Nyle. It's quarter to noon right now."

"Jumpin', Ida, I can't make the potatoes bake any faster."

He opened the door of the oven and lifted the tinfoil with a wooden-handled serving fork. The potatoes were browner, but not yet baked. The two small steaks looked done; so did the creamed corn and the gravy that were bubbling on the front burners of the stove. Nyle told Ida that dinner would be ready at noon.

Ida nodded in approval. Her hands lay still and her eyes drooped half shut behind the lenses of her glasses. Ida and her meals, Nyle thought. Since taking to the wheelchair Ida had put on a lot of weight. The doctor had cautioned her to cut down on her eating. Looking at her, Nyle could see the outline of the fat that had gathered on her stomach and chest, merging them into a single bulky curve. He scanned back through his mind, remembering the changes that he had

watched overtaking Ida's face. His childhood memories were of a woman who was severe and sharp-featured; later, excess flesh had begun to smudge her jawline; the flesh had thickened to soft dewlaps, a downward extension of the sags of skin beneath her hard blue eyes. Next had come the glasses; then Ida's hair had turned white and the Ankara Beauty Salon had taken to giving her the hairdo they reserved for "old ladies" -- a tight bunching of white curls meant to conceal the patches where a woman's hair might be thinning. Now Ida's collar of wrinkles had grown into the seamed flesh above and below it. A creased bib of skin hung from her mouth to her collarbone, making it difficult to distinguish where her chin gave way to her throat, and where her neck joined her torso. The creaky clarity of her voice seemed to be the only source of definition that remained to Ida.

Nyle looked out over the spice rack containing the fossilized sea-shells, past the dangling ears of calico corn. Outside, beyond the hordes of kids brandishing skipping ropes, soccer balls and baseball bats, the front wall of the school had squared off the outline of the bluff. Nyle could read the big letters ratcheted to the brick: ANKARA PUBLIC SCHOOL. The school had been sunk into the hillside in such a way that the ground-level entrance

at the back, on the crest of the rise, was on the second floor. The front door, tunneled into the shoulder of the bluff, looked like the mouth of a cave. Nyle had gone into the school one afternoon to take a look around. Delmer, Nyle's old hired man from when this land was still the Donaldson farm, had become the school's janitor. At four-thirty in the afternoon, the pupils and teachers gone home but the doors not yet locked, Nyle found Delmer pushing a large vacuum-cleaner over a stretch of blue carpet. "Some kid puked here today," Delmer cackled. Nyle couldn't see why a person would want carpets in a school, especially fancy wall-to-wall carpets like these. Wouldn't they just get dirty...and puked on? What surprised Nyle more than the carpeting, however, were the classrooms. They weren't really classrooms at all, just a series of big, L-shaped spaces, each one containing three clusters of desks. He thought of the eraser-fights kids would have in a space that big. And three different teachers falling over each other trying to stop it! It would be bedlam.

ANKARA PUBLIC SCHOOL. The silvered letters shimmered at Nyle through the glass of the kitchen window. The school provided kindergarten to Grade Four for every kid within a ten-mile radius. There were nearly four hundred pupils. So many kids.... Nyle hadn't realized that there were that

many five- to nine-year-olds in the world. Three-quarters of them were faceless and nameless to him: he didn't know who their parents were or where they lived. This was the first school in Ankara that had drawn pupils from more than a mile or so outside of Ankara. And even Ankara itself wasn't the same town it had been until five years ago. Everything had changed since one of the guys on the town council had taken advantage of his position to sidestep the law and get a special severance order to subdivide his farm into fifty two-acre lots. The result was Ankara Estates, a sprawling subdivision of suburban bungalows full of people who had moved out from the city. The radio called them "commuters." Every morning you could see their cars roaring up the highway, drag-racing the twenty-five miles into Ottawa to work. Nyle rarely met commuters; they did most of their shopping in the city, were never seen in the village co-op, and appeared in church only at Christmas and Easter. It was the commuters' children that Nyle saw. They played under his kitchen window: boys with hair so long they looked like goddam sheepdogs, girls who dressed like they thought they were princesses, dark-skinned kids from foreign countries whom Delmer called "Pakis." The language that the commuter kids used was enough to make Nyle thankful for Ida's deafness. Swear-words came rocketing in

the kitchen window every recess and noon-hour. Nyle had never heard half the names these kids called each other.

Turning down the heat under the gravy, Nyle looked out the window. The lettering on the school wall blurred before his eyes, taking on an almost watery appearance. Nyle tried to imagine his ancestors floating down the river in 1826 on the bulky raft that would run aground at a shallow bend, forcing them ashore to found the town of Wellington, later Ankara. He tried to imagine the land coated with virgin bush, the first clearing, the first farm. But it was all slipping away. He could scarcely recall what the place had looked like two years ago, before they began building the school, when the crumbling foundations of the original house on the property had been lying in an overgrown rectangle on the top of the bluff.

Nyle set the table, surrounding two of the plates that his parents had been given as a wedding present with newer stainless steel knives and forks, glasses and a pitcher of water chilled in the refrigerator. He slid his hands into oven mitts, opened the oven door and lifted out the tray in which the potatoes had been baking. "Ida. Dinner."

Ida's eyes flickered open. Nyle saw her focusing on the polished wooden clock that hung over the couch. "Noon," she said. "Remember how hungry you and your pa used to be

when yous came in off the tractor at noon? You'd have eating contests, gobble up everything on your plates an' then see which o' you could eat the biggest seconds. Haying time, that was the worst. No matter how much your ma and me cooked, it was never enough for yous."

"We worked like dogs," Nyle said, spearing baked potatoes with the serving fork. He dropped two potatoes onto his plate and one onto Ida's. He gave them each a small, charred steak, a heap of creamed corn and a couple of dollops of gravy.

"More gravy," Ida said. "You know how I love gravy, Nyle." She wheeled herself toward the table, which Nyle had raised to allow the arms of Ida's wheelchair to slide under it. Ida ate with her plate at chest height.

"Okay," Nyle said, drowning her steak and baked potato in gravy. "But don't eat it too fast, eh. That gravy's still boiling."

He set the pan back on the burner and turned down the heat. Out the window, beyond the boys throwing softballs and the girls skipping rope, the legend on the brick face of the building winked at Nyle through the mid-June heat: ANKARA PUBLIC SCHOOL. It was Nyle's great-grandfather, the man who had sunk the ninety-foot well on the top of the bluff, where the original house on the property had

stood, who had named the town Ankara. In the 1850s, when there had been so many towns named Wellington in Ontario that mail delivery had become impossible, all but the largest of the Wellingtons were ordered to find new names. Nyle's great-grandfather, fresh back from the Crimean War and aglow with the wonders of Turkey, had suggested Ankara, and the town council had adopted the name unanimously. Nyle's pa had told him that story when Nyle was a boy. He had told Nyle how, after his success in naming the town, the old coot had set out to build a house with an onion-dome roof at the top of the bluff overlooking the town. Two years' harvests were sacrificed in order to complete the place, but the onion-dome never fully satisfied Nyle's great-grandfather. The house had stood for forty years before burning to the ground and being replaced by the smaller white clapboard building at the bottom of the hill where he and Ida continued to live. Nyle had once seen a brown-and-white sepia photograph of the old place. The photograph had shown a brick fortress two stories high, with a standard steepled roof in the foreground, white wooden trim, white picket fence, a rickety unpainted porch and, toward the back of the photograph, a second section of the house, rising above the first and capped by a roof shaped like a squashed mushroom. During his childhood -- in

the summer, when it was still light when they finished milking -- Nyle would climb to the top of the bluff and sit in the foundations of the old house, watching the sun set on the river that wound through the town. His pa had shown him a spot in the lee of the bluff (it was buried now beneath Ankara Public School) where, if you dug down a few feet, you would turn up tiny leaves of white stone in which were stamped the imprints of seashells. You could trace the pleats of each shell with your fingers. "How come?" Nyle had asked, looking at Pa.

"Cause they're fossils," Pa said.

"What's fossils?"

"It's something from way long ago that's frozen solid so you can see exactly what it looked like. The whole Ottawa Valley used to be under an ocean. The river there, that's the trickle that's left, like the trickle in a creek-bed in August."

Nyle emptied the last of the gravy onto Ida's plate. He set the pot in the sink, ran the water a second, then turned to sit down at the table. He heard, but did not see, the crash, followed by tinkling and a spray of broken glass against the back of his shirt, as a softball smashed through the kitchen window and bounded onto the table. The softball thumped onto Ida's plate, spattering her neck and

shoulders with hot gravy and smearing most of the contents of the plate against her chest. The softball rebounded off the plate, struck Ida's shoulder a glancing blow, hit the kitchen tiles and rolled into a corner of the room.

Gravy and creamed corn seeped into Ida's lap. Ida gasped.

Nyle hurried to Ida's side. She was sobbing. "Are you okay, Ida? Jeeze, is some smart-assed kid ever gonna get a swift kick to the rear. Son of a bear.... It didn't hurt you too bad, did it?"

Ida's dress was soaked in gravy and creamed corn. Her sobbing died away, as though she lacked the energy to sustain it. Her body grew still, overflowing the wheelchair, her bulk pegged in place by the grip of her broad hands on the armrests. "I want a bath," she creaked.

"Okay," Nyle said. "I'll run it for you. I'll call the neighbors and see if Kathy can come over and help you, okay?"

Nyle crossed the kitchen, opened the door of the double-width bathroom he had enlarged to accommodate Ida's wheelchair, found the plug and began to run a warm bath. He would have to telephone the neighbors, he thought. Kathy probably wouldn't be home yet; Ida would have to wait for her bath until the girl returned from high school. He

looked back into the kitchen. It wasn't Ida that caught Nyle's attention, but the room as a whole, the mess that had suddenly appeared there: a fat old woman in a wheelchair wearing a dress splattered with gravy and creamed corn, a baked potato at rest on the floor among glinting splinters of glass, a softball in the corner. A handful of months ago Nyle would have been outside on his tractor on an afternoon like this. In a couple of weeks it would be haying time. Nyle leaned forward and turned off the tap. He stared across the kitchen and out the window. The schoolyard was quiet: the children had scattered at the sound of breaking glass. For an instant the day seemed so still that Nyle saw the bluff rise in front of him, green and undisturbed, to a tall redbrick house, surrounded by a white picket fence; the rear section of the house's roof ballooned upward into a not-quite-full-blown onion dome. Then the illusion vanished and Nyle again heard the children's voices, saw the metal lettering clamped to the school's windowless front wall.

"Nyle," Ida creaked from behind him. "Young Nyle Donaldson.... Is my supper gonna be done by five-thirty?"

THE MONEY-GRAB

I'm not the one in my family that wanted to be a farmer. Pa there, he'd of stayed on the farm anyways. He ain't never done nothing else. Neither had I, but I seen that farming wasn't good for my health. Things were changing in the Valley: half the kids I went to school with, their dads worked in the city. Pen-pushers, Pa called them. Sure they're pen-pushers, I told him; but it's a hell of a sight easier for them kids to get their homework done when they ain't out in the barn after supper every night. What's the matter with yuh? said Pa. You wanna be one of them slackers that ain't never done no work? Do yuh not want to be a farmer, Neil?

Pa was fixing to make me a farmer right from the time I was a little wee lad. He learned me to drive the Massey Harris when I was five years old. He always figured I'd take over the old place when the time came, or maybe get a

place of my own before then. He bought the best brand-new equipment, my pa, no matter how dear it was -- I'm buyin this one to last you, Neil, he'd say. That went on until I was nine or ten years old. This was before milk quotas and metric and high interest rates. The milk quotas were the damn stupidest thing you ever seen: they told you exactly how much milk your herd was supposed to give. If the herd didn't give enough milk they fined you, and if the herd gave too much milk they fined you again. Then the whole damn thing went metric and you didn't know what-all they wanted you to do. Pa got this letter one day telling him they'd fined him for giving the milk truck too much milk. Jesus Murphy, did you ever hear tell of anything so stupid? Pa let them know what he thought about that fine. He told them all right. They just sent him another letter, all about how the quota worked. The letter talked about liters; liters here, liters there. That did Pa a lot of good. What the heck's a liter?

Hard times got worse. Pa fell into debt with the bank over in Ankara. It's all a big money-grab, he said. That's all this goddam world's got to say for itself. It ain't nothin but one great big money-grab. It didn't used to be that way. I know that's what guys always say when they start gettin creaky and the lumbago's aggravatin them, Pa

said, but it really is the honest-to-God-cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die truth. This world did not used to be one great big money-grab.

Pa stopped buying the best brand-new equipment. Now when he got grumpy he'd talk about the stuff like it all belonged to the bank. Hey, Neil! he'd shout. Get on the bank's tractor there and bring that wagon over here. I was sixteen then and it was getting pretty obvious to me that the old place might not be there for me to take over when the time came. I reckoned I better start learning how to do something besides farming. Like what? said Pa. Some soft pen-pushing money-grabbing job in the city? You ain't never done nothin but farmwork, Neil. It doesn't care, I said. If there ain't gonna be no farm here for me when the time comes, then I gotta find something else. Pa yanked off his hat and I seen the sharp line between the white skin on his forehead and the sunburn on his face. No way, he said.

It took the brucellosis to start him changing his mind.

The herd got the brucellosis after we had four of Johnson's Holsteins in the barn for a couple of weeks. We didn't know that Johnson's herd had the brucellosis when we said we'd take them in, and neither did Johnson at that time. Them four Holsteins grazed right alongside our herd; they licked at the same lick our cattle did. Later that

summer Johnson's whole herd was destroyed. A couple of guys from the Health Department showed up and said we had to let them look over the herd or else we'd lose our goldarned milk quota. Go right ahead, said Pa, I ain't stoppin yuhz. The guys from the Health Department wore gloves and long coats. They walked into the barn and looked over the animals. They tagged eight head, said they'd come back in a week to do some more tests, and left. Next day there, me and Pa went out and moved the tags onto different animals. It didn't do a damn bit of good. The two guys from the Health Department came back and did their tests, and a couple of days later they phoned us up and told us the herd had to be destroyed.

After that, I knew I didn't never wanna be a farmer. It was worse than the blasted milk quota -- two guys wearing gloves walk in and wipe you out with one little phone call. Seeing the cattle have to get put down wasn't the bad part -- you never do get real friendly with a cow the way you do with a dog, or the way girls do with horses -- it was Pa that was ailing me. One afternoon Pa said he was going down to the co-op for some nails and when he came back he was weaving so bad you had to wonder how he'd kept the half-ton on the sideroad all that way. Sure as shooting he'd been over at the Inn in New Dundee. Pa was cut so bad

that night he couldn't hardly do the milking. Mum damn near killed him: gave him one hell of a talking-to. Was she ever mad! It got Mum and me talking; we didn't usually talk much. Mum was the one that talked to me about my report card and cleaning my room and washing the dishes. It was Pa I was out in the barn with; Pa was the one that learned me how to be a farmer. Now Mum started askin me how could we stop Pa drinking liquor? Jeeze, I said, how do I know? Pa's the one's doing the drinking, not me. Neil, she said, you ever come home like Pa's been comin home these last few days, you'll wish you never been born. Pa there, it's pitiful, she said, coming home so cut he can't do a darned bit of work. Two nights later Mum tried to stop Pa going out the door. Holy God, said Pa, I'm just gonna take a look at a herd I'm debatin on buyin. He was telling the truth, too: I heard him on the telephone asking about the herd that was for sale. But when he came home he was drunk as a skunk again. Every time Pa left the old place these days he came back cut. This world ain't nothin but a money-grab, he said; it's all just one great big money-grab.

Then one day he said: I ain't gonna buy that herd. I'm gonna quit milking and get some beef cattle. I guess I been milking long enough. I guess so! I said. I saw my chance. Now that Pa wasn't milking there was gonna be less work

around the place. Pa could hire some kid to help him and I could go out and get a different job for the summer: a job that wasn't farming. I was seventeen now; this was my last summer before I got my Grade Twelve. I'd always figured I'd just stay on the farm and work with Pa after I was done school. But now, between the debt and the drinking, I didn't know how much longer that farm would be there for me. I figured I'd be crazy not to try something else. I knew one thing: after farming, any other job would be good money and not much work. That was for damnsure.

The only problem was Pa. He didn't want me to do it. This summer's the most important one there is, Neil, he said. By the end of this summer you'll be as good as a man on a tractor. You slack off and do something else and all them other young lads'll have the advantage on you. It ain't nothing but money-grabbing greediness and it's just goddam stupid. Mum didn't agree with him, though. Lucky for me Mum was on my side. She turned Pa around. She made him see he could hire a young lad to take my place for a lot less than he'd have to pay me. And on top of that, there'd be the money I'd be bringing in from my job. Did she ever tell <u>him</u>! After that, Pa didn't give me a hard time no more.

I went down to the co-op in Ankara there to ask the guys

down there about where a person could find a job this summer. All they could talk about was farming jobs -- this guy needed a hired man, that guy wanted help getting his haying done. How come you don't want a farming job? they asked me. Do yuh not want to take over your dad's place for him? Jeeze, I said, how do I know there's even gonna be farming jobs around here in a few years? I just wanna try something different. Some of the lads looked at me like I must be cut, but others nodded. A farmer has one hell of a time getting by, one man said; it just keeps getting harder and harder. Keith behind the counter said: I heard tell of a guy from down by Kingston or Brockville or one of them places that bought that old gas station on the Jackson's Rapids road. I bet yuh he'd have work. Thanks, Keith, I said. I had my license now, and Pa let me drive the old Nova if I paid half the insurance, so I got in the car and drove down the Jackson's Rapids road to the old gas station that had gone bust three times in five years. Sure enough, there was a guy out there repainting the store that stood back away from the pumps. I went up and introduced myself, and he looked at me over the dripping wet paint brush and told me his name was Frank. He was a skinny, nervous guy. He looked like he hadn't shaved in two weeks and his stubble was so black it shone blue. We talked a fair piece,

then we went into the store and he wrote down my name and telephone number on a scrap of paper, stuck the piece of paper in the brim of his baseball cap and told me I started Monday morning at minimum wage.

The first thing I found out about the gas station was that Perry was working the other shift. I worked days and Perry was there Monday to Thursday evenings plus Sundays. Perry and me went to school together up to Grade Four; then Perry quit. He went one grade farther than his old man and that was good enough for him. Perry's old man was quite the alky. Did he ever have a reputation -- Pa must have had ten different stories about the cars Perry's old man had written off driving when he was cut. I hadn't seen Perry since we was both nine years old. He still looked the same: dark eyebrows and that bony face. His hair was a lot longer now and he was starting to get a belly on him, but that was the only difference. Perry showed up for work at six o'clock, just when I was headin home. He pulled in with the radio squallin and a case of two-four on the seat beside him, and brought his big old boat of a Chevy around to the pumps, and asked me to give him a fill-up last thing before I went off duty. That Chevy was so old the gas-cap wasn't even on the fender; you had to get behind her and flip down the rear license plate to fill her up. The car

was plastered with brown dust. What you do before you got this job here at the gas station, Perry? I asked him. He gave me a big grin: I was an artist, he said; I was drawing unemployment. Perry paid for the gas with a twenty. Thanks, Neil, he said when I gave him his change, that was real nice of you givin me that fill-up right when you're all done for the day. I guess I owe you a little tip. He handed me a dried-out dark green leaf. I knowed it was a pot-leaf. I'll give yuh one o' them leafs every time I see yuh in here, Perry said; come September, maybe you'll have a whole joint! He laughed with his mouth open: saliva made his crooked teeth shiny. No way, Perry, I said, I don't touch that stuff. I remembered what Pa said about dopesmokers: their eyes looked like two pissholes in the snow. Near every kid I knew that smoked pot ended up dropping out of school. Me, I wanted to get my Grade Twelve. I wanted that for damnsure. There wasn't no way I was gonna touch none of Perry's dope. The reputation I'd get! Jeeze, if that got around I'd be done for! If you're too much of a suck to take a tiny little pot-leaf, Perry said, then how come you don't come on down to my place in the swamp some time, eh? I have these parties every Friday night. Lots of goodlookin girls come to them parties. Real nicelookin ones, eh. Just come on down some Friday, eh? I

dunno, I said. Jeeze, said Perry, what's the matter with yuh? Afraid your old man won't let yuh go? Are you ever a little suck, Neil. Holy Jumpin, I never would of believed you were so sucky. Whereabouts in the swamp do you live? I asked. Perry told me how to find his place. So, he said, are yuh comin on Friday? Jeeze, I dunno, I said. Maybe. I gotta think about it.

That was Tuesday. On Wednesday and Thursday I pulled out of the gas station right when Perry's Chevy came slidin into the yard. I thought about them parties of his. I'd never been to a party where there were girls. Besides the girls, I figured there'd probably be liquor. It sounded pretty good. Mum wouldn't like the idea of me going to a party at Perry's place, but I figured I could just tell her I was goin bowlin with Maloney or somebody. As for Pa, well Jeeze with the way he'd been actin, who was he to tell me anything?

I thought about Perry's party most of the day when I was working in the gas station. The gas station sure was easier than farmwork. I didn't hardly have to do nothin at all. I just hung around, filled up cars, wiped the windshields, carried boxes of food into the store, mowed the lawn once in a while -- it was no sweat. A cinch. No aching muscles, no sore back, no headaches like you got working in the sun

all day on the tractor. It was easy as pie. But it sure was different from farmwork. For one thing you had this here dealing with the public. Frank, my boss, he learned me that part real quick. On Wednesday morning, third day I was working there, Frank came walking out to the pumps. How's it goin? he asked. I said: Okay, but people sure do get mad about you puttin the price up. What you tellin them? Frank asked. I tell them it ain't none o' my business, I said; it was the boss's decision and it weren't nothin to do with me so stop bitchin at me about it. Jesus effing Christ! Frank said. What you tryin to do? Run me out of business? Don't tell them it was me that raised the price; tell them it was the government. You tell them the government raised the tax on gasoline, understand? You tell them I raised the price and they ain't never gonna come back here again. You wanna lose your job? Okay, okay, I said. I ain't never thought about it like that before. Well think! said Frank. Think about your goddam wallet! He kicked through the dust and looked at the pumps. Then he looked down at the wire rack where we stacked the cans of motor oil. You ain't sold too many o' these, eh? Naw, I said, nobody's buyin oil today. Jesus Christ! Frank said, spinning around so I could see the blue stubble on his chin and the scrawl of hair on his skinny chest where his shirt was missing a button, it's

not up to them to fuckin buy it -- it's up to you to fuckin sell it! That's what I'm payin you for. Understand? Yes, sir, I said. The rest of the day, every time a car pulled in, I said: Check the oil? Need a little oil? Quart of 10W30, sir? Between cars, I muttered Frank's words under my breath: it's not up to them...it's up to you.... I figured I was starting to learn what work that wasn't farmwork -- what Mum called business -- was all about: sell sell sell. Frank there, that was all he ever thought about. It was one big money-grab, just like Pa said when he was cut.

That afternoon Maloney came in driving his pa's truck. Maloney and me had been in school together ever since Mrs. MacAlister's nursery school in Ankara. I seen that Maloney's pa's truck was freshly painted. The old O. Maloney had been painted out and O. Maloney & Sons, Dairy Farming had been painted in. Maloney was following in his old man's footsteps.

Gidday, he said, climbing out of the truck. Is it hot enough for yuh? Then he looked at the pumps and said: Holy Jeeze, the new boss ain't wasted no time raisin the price, eh? It wasn't the boss, I said, it was the government. The government raised the tax on gasoline. You want the oil checked? But Maloney didn't give a care about the oil; there was just one thing that guy wanted to tell me: They

served me at the Inn on Saturday night! I took in my brother's I.D. and the checker there, he just looks at it and stamps my hand and they served me. Holy Jeeze, they were serving me Singapore slings like anything! I was cut so bad I couldn't hardly walk to my car. They ain't never served you at the Inn, eh Neil? You ain't never gone drinkin there, eh? I tried a few times, I said, but they ain't never served me. I wiped the windshield of Maloney's pa's truck. I couldn't hardly believe that they'd served Maloney at the Inn, even with his brother's I.D. Maloney was seventeen, same age as me; he was bigger than me, but with his freckles and his light hair he looked like he'd never have to shave in his life. You goin back to the Inn next Saturday night? I asked. Naw, said Maloney, I gotta go out with the wife. She'll get mad if I don't go out with her. You goin out with Caroline? I said. That's right, said Maloney. I remembered when Maloney first got the hustles for that Caroline: he used to make a damn fool of himself every time she came near. Jeeze, we used to make fun of him. But now he was goin out with her. You better watch out, Maloney, I said, she'll get yuh hooked. Then what yuh gonna do? Eh? Maloney grunted and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. What about you? he said. What you gonna do on Saturday night? Sit at home and watch TV? I

don't know about Saturday, I said, but I guess on Friday night I'm gonna go to a party. A party? said Maloney. What party's that? Perry there, I said, he's havin a party at that place of his down in the swamp. He invited me, eh. Holy Jumpin, said Maloney, you ain't gonna go, are yuh? I heard about them parties of Perry's. I heard tell there was about twelve guys and one girl down there last Friday. You can bet that girl got fucked that night. You seen that place o' his? It ain't hardly even a house -- just some little old shack that some guy in the swamp left to the mosquitoes a few years back. It's a great place if you like bein itchy. I dunno, I said, I gotta think about it. I <u>guess</u> so! said Maloney, paying over the money for the gas. There'll be a lot of dopesmokin at a party at that lad's place. I said: Okay, okay. I told yuh -- I ain't decided yet if I'm gonna go or not. Now do you not want me to check the oil? Uh-uh, said Maloney, I done that myself, the oil's fine. What's the new boss like here? How's he to work for? He's goddam bitchy, I said; sell sell sell, or else he gives yuh a swift kick to the rear. He's <u>hungry</u> for money, that lad. Maloney looked at me. How come you ain't workin for your pa, Neil? Do yuh not want to be a farmer no more? I'm not the one in my family that wanted to be a farmer, I said. That's all cuz of Pa. But you are one, said Maloney.

You ain't never gonna be nothin else. Get lost, will yuh? I said. Don't give me none of your bullshit," Maloney, I can be anything I wanna be. Now are you plannin on rentin this property, or are you just gonna stand here all day? Okay, okay, said Maloney, I'm going. Holy Jeeze, you don't have to get hostile. He climbed back into his pa's truck with the fresh O. Maloney & Sons, Dairy Farming on the side and pulled out of the yard. That was one customer I was happy to see leave that gas station.

The rest of the week I kept thinking about Perry's party. I figured all that stuff about twelve guys for every girl was just Maloney bullshittin me; he was just jealous, stuck with that Caroline. Perry'd told me there'd be some goodlookin girls at his party. That set me thinking. I thought of all the girls I knew, decided which ones were goodlookin and which ones I wanted to be at Perry's party. It gave me enough to think about for the whole day. I thought about girls while I pumped gas and I thought about girls while I took the scrubber to little wee insects plastered on windshields and I thought about girls while I set credit cards in the compressor and pulled the handle across the carbon paper. I remembered a girl called Marjory I'd danced with at a Young Farmers' Dance last winter. By Friday I knew exactly which girls I wanted to be at

Perry's party. And I knew exactly what words I was gonna try out on each girl.

On Thursday evening, as I was pulling out of the gas station and Perry was pullling in for his last shift of the week, I honked the horn of the Nova at him. Perry honked back and waved. When I got home I told Mum and 'Pa that Maloney and me were gonna go bowling on Friday night, so I wouldn't be home for supper. I told them we were going right from work. Mum frowned and said: You be home by midnight, Neil. Yeah, Mum, I said. Pa said: You should see this young lad Shawn I got helpin me. Is he not too swift? I asked. Holy God, you're not joking, said Pa. Jeeze, the guy that learned him to drive a tractor musta thought he was teachin him to chop wood. Does he ever grind them gears! And fast! Jumpin, every time I got my back turned he shifts the Massey up into fifth gear. And he can't control it, eh, he's not experienced enough to drive that fast. I'm tellin yuh, Neil, the way that young lad drives a tractor he's gonna get himself killed one of these days. Pa kept talking about this Shawn all through Thursday supper. As Mum got up and started to clear away the dishes, Pa said: I'm tellin yuh, Neil, it's goldarned tough to find another young lad's as good on a tractor as you are. I said: I wanna try different jobs. You never know what's gonna

happen in the future. You wanna be one of them slackers ain't never done no work? said Pa. I think it's just dandy that Neil's learning what it's like to do another job, said Mum. Pa said: I just wish to hell that lad Shawn could drive a tractor.

I worked late on Friday. Frank kept me there until nine o'clock because nobody else wanted to work Friday night. All through the day I kept thinking about Perry's party and all the goodlookin girls I was gonna meet there. I thought about the paycheck I'd be gettin from Frank at the end of my shift and how someday I'd make it down to Toronto or out west, and then I'd make a pile of money. I'd buy a real nice car that every girl would want to take a ride in. You could bet there'd be some good times then. And old Maloney, he'd still be stuck in Ankara Township with that Caroline. They'd probably get married when they were eighteen and have five kids by the time they were twenty-five. Jeeze, I thought, would I ever laugh hard then.

When I was done work and I'd picked up my paycheck from Frank, I drove down through the swamp to Perry's place. Gravel popped under the Nova's tires and clumps of bullrushes poked up in front of the headlights every time I rounded a corner. Finding Perry's place was easy as pie: it was a tiny little one-storey shack set back in the trees

and there were about six cars parked along the sideroad in front of it. I pulled the Nova in at the end of the line-up and got out. The night was cool. The moon cut through the trees so that I could see water glinting between the spindly trunks a few yards back from the sideroad. Mosquitoes started to buzz around my neck. Maloney was sure right about one thing: this here would be one goldarned unpleasant spot to live in.

First thing I saw when I started towards Perry's house was a girl. She was wearing bluejeans and a T-shirt, and the guy walking beside her had his arm around her waist. The two of them were walking towards Perry's house. The guy opened the door and they went in; in the flash of light between the door opening and closing I saw the outlines of bodies moving around inside and heard the rock-and-roll come screeching out into the swamp. Then the door closed and the music softened. I scrambled up Perry's rutted laneway, arrived at the door and knocked. Some guy I didn't know stuck his head out and said: Yeah, whaddayah want? The reek of potsmoke smacked me in the face; behind me I could hear the crickets chirping. I work with Perry at the gas station, I said. Perry invited me down here. The guy shrugged and let the door fall open. I walked into Perry's house.

I looked around the one room which was almost all of the house. There was old wooden crates all over the place, cases of empty beer bottles, couches with the springs jabbing through, a Jimi Hendrix poster peeling off the wall. In the corner of the room there was a big shiny radio and a pile of cassettes. There were about fifteen people in the room. Two of them were girls. Most of the guys I'd never seen before. They were real longhairs, shaggy as sheepdogs. They were passing around a shiny little thingamajig about the size of a can of tuna. It was horned and coiled, and I knew it was a potpipe. I'd never seen anybody smoking pot before. The guys kept taking drags on the pipe and slapping each other on the back and calling each other man. Hey, man, lemme have a toke. Man, I got the munchies like you wouldn't believe! They were eating a boxed of Stoned Wheat Thins and making jokes about the stoned part. Perry came up and slapped me on the back. Hey Neil, he said, you see that girl in the corner there? That there's Annie. You just watch her, eh. She comes to every party I have down here. Three tokes and her clothes come off and that's how she stays until the morning. You watch her. You just see if she don't. Okay, I said. I was looking for someplace to sit down. I remembered all the stuff I'd thought of that day to say to girls. It made me feel like

an arsehole. What the hell would I ever have to say to a girl like Annie? What the hell would I have to say to anybody here? I felt like a goddam fool. Some guy started shoving the potpipe in my face and the reek damn near knocked me off my feet. What's the matter, farmer, scared to take a toke? Afraid it'll stunt your growth? They all laughed. They were all bigger than me. Even Annie and the other girl were taller than I was. Jeeze, one of them said, that guy looks like he's been tokin for a few years already. Mice don't breed rats, I answered him. Ain't yous guys got nothin to drink? Ain't yuhz got no rye or vodka? There's rye, said Perry. Then give me some goddam rye, I said. I don't need none of your weed; I wanna do some serious drinkin. Hey man, said one of the longhairs, let's see how much this farmer can drink. I can drink more than any o' yous guys anyday, I said. Perry handed me a small bottle of rye. I bet yuhz I can drink this whole bottle, I said. I bet yuh you can't, one of the longhairs said. I looked around the room. They were all staring at me out of the shadow. Even them two girls were staring at me. The one of them, Annie there, she had real nice eyes. She had dark pupils and big wide lashes. With them eyes lookin at me there wasn't no damn way I could chicken out. I didn't give a care what Annie did after she'd had three tokes. All that

mattered to me was not looking like a fool in front of them eyes.

I gripped the bottle, turned her bottom-up and took a long swig. The rye went down like liquid heat. A strong warm feeling started to spread through me. Yous just watch me, I said. I poured more of the rye down my throat. Whooppee! yelled one of the longhairs, look at that farmer swallow! They all started shouting at me like they were on my side. I grinned and swigged again, and in half a second I'd drained that whole little bottle Perry gave me. I told yuhz so, I said. Eh? Didn't I tell yuhz I could empty that bottle? Some of them laughed, but most of them weren't looking at me anymore. One of them longhairs was trying to light up the potpipe; he was too stoned to hold the cigarette lighter steady and he kept droppin it on the floor. They were laughin at him and smackin him on the back. The longhair kept reaching over and picking up the cigarette lighter and trying again. He was grinning like a goddam fool. They were all looking at him. They didn't give a care that I'd won the bet on them. Even that Annie didn't care: she was just staring at that longhair that kept dropping the lighter. The other girl, the one in the T-shirt, she was off in the corner necking with the guy who'd had his arm around her waist. They were the only two

people in the room who weren't looking at that idiot trying to light the potpipe.

The strong warm feeling turned over in my belly and started moving upwards. I looked around again for someplace to sit down. My throat got clogged up with muck from my belly for a second, and all of a sudden I knew I was going to puke. I headed for the door. I shoved my way outside, heard the door slam behind me and felt the cool swamp air closing over my face. After the reek in Perry's house, the swamp didn't seem to have any smell at all. The night was full of mosquitoes and I could hear the crickets chirping. I jammed my lips together to hold the puke down and stumbled over the ruts of Perry's laneway. I arrived at the end of the laneway, climbed up onto the sideroad and breathed in the swamp smell of rotting lily-pads. That finished me. I glimpsed a big bay of light off through the trees about half a mile down where some guys had turned their headlights on the water to attract fish, then the top half of my body lunged forward and I started to wretch. I stood bent over, puking my guts onto the shoulder of the sideroad. When I couldn't puke no more I breathed deep and tried to get back my wind. I was leaning forward and hanging onto my knees; I felt as shaky in the legs as a new-born calf. Sweat was drying into cold from my chest to

my forehead. I started to shiver like crazy. Then I lost my balance.

I couldn't believe it. I'd done a fair bit of drinking for a lad my age and I reckoned I knew how to puke right. I must have been really weak this time, or maybe it was the dark. One second I was leaned forward, starting to get back my strength, and the next thing I knew I'd fallen smack on my face on the shoulder of the sideroad. As soon as I hit the ground, I began to slide down the embankment. Gravel bit into my chin, my hands reached out too late and I went arse-over-tit ten feet down into the bottom of the ditch and hit the ground with a thump. I had this idea that just before I went over I'd seen a pair of headlights come waving up the sideroad. Now I was seeing lights everywhere. I lay on my back in the long wet grass; the ground underneath me was soaked. My face stung and my stomach was gurgling like pipes unfreezing in a thaw. I was weak and wet and bloody and miserable, and still cut pretty bad from that rye. I felt sicker than a dog.

I heard a car come down the road and saw headlights cutting into the darkness above me, lighting up the air and the swarms of insects. Then the machine pulled to a stop and from my angle in the ditch I could see that it was a half-ton pick-up. A door slammed. I heard someone climb out

of the truck and walk away. Another one of Perry's pothead friends, I thought. The damp from the ground was starting to soak through my clothes and meet up with the almost-dry sweat from my puking. I was shivering like anything. A thick-tasting trail of blood slid over my lip and into my mouth. I knew that if I was smart I'd try to get up. But I didn't give a care no more. I didn't give a care about Perry or Annie or their party or my job or Frank or his goddam gas station. I just wanted to lay there in the swamp and forget about everything.

Then a voice way up above me on the sideroad yelled: Neil...! Neil...! Can yuh hear me, Neil?

It was Maloney. For a second I just lay there. I couldn't figure out what the frig Maloney was doing in the swamp. Then I yelled: Down here! I'm in the ditch.

He walked over to the shoulder of the sideroad and looked down at me. I could see him outlined against the black treetops. Holy Jeeze! he said, climbing down the embankment, what you doin down here? He landed in the bottom of the ditch and reached out his hand to pull me to my feet. Shit, Neil, do you ever reek! You been smokin dope with Perry and all thems? Uh-uh, I said, I just drank some rye. That's what they told me, said Maloney. They told me you went outside to puke. Jeeze, the way you reek, it's

like you been smokin up all night. We were climbing the embankment. I could hear the difference between how Maloney was talking and how I'd talked. I realized I was still cut pretty bad.

When we got up onto the sideroad Maloney looked at my scratched-up face and started to laugh. Then he swung open the door of the passenger side of his pa's truck and said: Get in. It's okay, I said, I got the Nova here. Forget the Nova, said Maloney, we can pick it up tomorrow. Get into the truck. I said: I gotta take the Nova back. I told Mum and Pa you and me went bowlin. I know, said Maloney, your mum called our place and I answered the phone. She knows we ain't bowlin. Holy God! I said, how come she phones around like that? How's she ever expect me to tell her anything when she acts like a friggin cop? She wanted to find you, said Maloney. It's that Shawn, that hired lad o' your pa's. He put the Massey in reverse when your pa was on the wagon this evening. Your pa, he fell off and went right under the wagon. He's got two busted legs and a concussion.

I climbed into the truck. Maloney drove like the b'Jesus. Gravel came spitting up from under the tires each time the sideroad curved. The headlights were carving out the corners in front of us.

Where we goin now? I asked. Jackson's Rapids General,

said Maloney. That's where they took your pa. Your mum's there, too. Your pa's gonna be okay, eh. He just ain't gonna be able to do much work for a few months.

We came to the end of the sideroad. Maloney turned his pa's truck onto the tarmac of the highway. We had seen the last of the swamp: there were no more crowds of bullrushes in front of the headlights, no more skinny swamp trees growing at the sides of the road. Here there was open spaces in big enough stretches for the moon to light them. Maloney pushed the truck up to a hundred and twenty kilometers. Looking out the window, I saw the fenced-off edges of smooth flat fields laid out in perfect rectangles. The hay had been cut and baled, and the stooks stood scattered around the fields under the moonlight. Farms, I thought.

I said to Maloney: I'm gonna hafta quit at the gas station there to go back and keep the farm goin.

Yeah I know.

If Pa takes more than a couple of months to get his strength back, I'll be workin too hard in September to go back to school. I won't never get my Grade Twelve. I'll be a goddam farmer for the rest of my life.

Well shit, said Maloney. What's so goldarned terrible about that? You ain't never been nothin else.

THE BORDER

Flashlight beams swayed through the undergrowth like giddy signposts. Edward wavered, dropped to the ground. The beams yawed, then steadied, probing the foliage above Edward's head like long, diffuse fingers. Supple leaves and smooth bark turned waxen in the white light. Edward listened, trying to catch some sound of the men who were carrying the flashlights. He heard the whirring and chirping of insects, disruptions in the foliage, the unsteady rhythm of his own breath.

His hands sweated against the AK-47. The flashlight beams cut back and forth, back and forth. Edward, tensed, lifted the butt of the gun snug against his shoulder. His eyes strained. How many of them were out there?

He glanced around him. The men and women in his patrol were scarcely breathing. Many of them were adolescents; none was over twenty. He thought of Norma, who sat in his

math class during the long hot days, completing her exercises faster than anyone else in the dirt-floored room and peppering him with questions about the world beyond Nicaragua: "Why don't they have a revolution in the United States, Don Eduardo...? What kind of car do you drive...? Are North American students fighting to end imperialism?" At night Norma, Javier and the rest would go to the outskirts of Latargo to do armed vigilance, waiting for the contras to come through the bush. Edward's students were at home with guns, had buried murdered classmates; they worked in their parents' houses, gave up school days to work in the fields; the girls slept with their boyfriends from their early teens and often had two or three children before they turned twenty. They all, constantly, asked Edward questions about capacitación -- about improving themselves and learning new skills. After more than a year in Latargo, Edward still tried to regard these youngsters with detachment. He had come to Nicaragua to escape a collapsing marriage: fleeing commitment rather than seeking it. When visiting foreigners asked him why he was here, he would shrug his shoulders and say: "Look, I'm just here. It's no big deal, okay?"

On Edward's right the bush twitched. Edward pivoted, bringing around the levelled barrel of the AK-47. Then he

lowered the gun. He could see the man who had moved. It was Javier, in whose mother's house Edward was living. Javier picked his way through the undergrowth, padding forward in a crouch, his lips pursed. Shadow lacquered Javier's Mayan face so that when he stopped, poised, scanning the night, Edward saw him as a mask, a hunter from another era incongruously outfitted in fatigues, digital watch and thick black hair that pushed from under his military cap and hooked around his ears.

Edward held his breath, watching the flashlight beams sawing through the humid darkness. Only a few minutes had passed since they had been jerked awake, scooped up their AK-47s and begun to creep quickly up the rough path leading from their encampment through the coffee plantation and on into the bush that ranged up to the Honduran border. The contras had turned on high-powered flashlights and waved the beams around, as Javier had warned Edward they might. It was a trick they used to give an exaggerated impression of their numbers; they would try to deter attack with a confusion of swinging beams until they had doused the coffee plants with gasoline and were ready to retreat behind a wall of flames. Edward remembered something else Javier had told him: one person in three turns and runs at the first sight of combat. Edward had never before been

this close to battle. He looked across at Javier, but Javier had disappeared. Edward lowered himself into a duckwalk crouch and peered through the leaves, his AK-47 pointed into the darkness.

*

Javier's mother's house was built of splintered grey boards that ran vertically from floor to ceiling; the front door closed in two wooden leaves, as did the shutters on the lone window. One of the shutters hung slightly askew, so that even when they were closed a crack of light crept in. A partition of pitted concrete ran three-quarters of the way across the floor, dividing the house into two rooms. Edward slept in a corner of the front room, his cot veiled by a sheet draped over a length of string. The floor was hardbeaten black earth, interrupted by the crowns of a few large boulders. The smaller back room gave onto a tiny yard where Javier's mother, Luisa, cooked on an open fire under a lean-to surrounded by unkempt grass. Luisa was a dark-skinned middle-aged woman who wore threadbare dresses hung over a bony frame. She could silence her family -- she had two sons and a daughter at home in addition to Javier -- without raising her voice above a whisper. Luisa's husband had been a heavy drinker; five years ago, shortly after beginning to work as an organizer for a newly-formed

women's cooperative, she had chased him out of the house with a smoldering stick from her cooking fire. She spoke of her victory over her husband and the revolution's victory over the dictatorship in the same breath, frequently in the same words, as "el triunfo." "Since the triumph many things have changed," she would say, and Edward never knew whether she was describing her private life, or the world around her.

Edward stopped short. A flashlight beam had snapped to life directly in front of him. This shaft of light was much closer than the others. He could see the glare diffusing through the dank night, the humidity picking the beam apart particle by particle. A mistiness wrapped the limbs of the trees. For a moment Edward was dazed. He dropped to his knees, lifted the AK-47 to his shoulder and reached his finger around the trigger. The weapon's unremembered weight made Edward's shoulders ache.

On his right, Edward half-heard half-saw Javier sliding, rolling, stealthy as an uncoiling snake, toward him. Javier covered the half-dozen paces that separated them without making a sound. Arriving alongside Edward in a deep crouch, he pressed his mouth to Edward's ear and whispered in a barrage of hot breath: "We can surround this one, cut him

off from the others."

Edward shook his head. He whispered into Javier's ear: "Won't that scare them? They'll start burning the coffee, no?"

"They'll do that anyway." Javier paused. "Okay, let's wait a minute."

Javier slid away through the leaves. Edward released a long, half-smothered sigh: he had bought himself a few seconds. He breathed greedily, his finger balanced against the trigger of the AK-47.

When he looked up a second flashlight beam had joined the beam closest to him. He watched the two fraying channels of light dousing the bush; the other beams remained farther back, a glowing haze deep in the undergrowth. Two beams, Edward thought. Did that mean two contras or twenty? Should he wait or attack? He sat breathing in a deep crouch. The men and women in his patrol seemed to be drawing closer together. On his left, amid shadow made denser by contrast with the sweeping flashlight beams, Edward could make out Norma's silhouette, her peaked cap and heavy curls. He had seen that silhouette one evening in the window of the house -- recently overhauled by a government home improvement project -- where Norma lived with her mother. The project was taking a long time

to reach Luisa's end of the street. Luisa was outspokenly, cuttingly, envious of Norma's mother's good fortune: brick walls, a stone tile floor, steel sheet roofing, even a battered television set that Norma and her mother had somehow saved the money to buy; on the wall above the television hung a garish plastic bust of Jesus Christ and a somber red and black portrait of Sandino, Nicaragua's national hero, wearing the inevitable broad-brimmed hat. In the house, Norma helped her mother with her younger brothers and sisters, looked after a child of her own by a boy who had died the year before in a contra mortar attack, and convened meetings of the local Sandinista Youth. Now her silhouette dissolved, bowed low, disappeared. She pulled herself alongside him, her eyes liquid in the darkness. "What d'we do?" she hissed, her mouth close to Edward's ear.

"Wait," Edward mouthed. Drawing his face close to Norma's hair, he whispered: "Wait till others join these two. Unless they start burning the coffee."

Norma slipped away. She knew infinitely more about fighting than Edward did, but because he was her teacher, her *profe*, she came to him for advice. Norma, like his other students, conceived learning as part of the revolutionary process; as their *profe*, Edward found

himself accorded a kind of mystical authority that was completely foreign to him. He watched Norma's shadow slowly sliding from view. Her profile popped into sight a short distance away, then melded into the night. The smell of her body lingered in the humid air. It was the smell of crowded Nicaraguan country buses: the musty, almost honey-like odor of poverty, unwashed flesh, caked sweat and dust-impacted clothing. Ahead of Edward, the flashlight beams continued to swivel silently. Edward shuffled three half-steps toward the source of the light, keeping his head low, achingly conscious of each tiny scuff of sound that his boots pawed from the earth. The humid night air insinuated itself like oil between Edward's hands and the AK-47: his palm slipped on the barrel; the trigger grew slick beneath his finger. The silence was unbearable. He could feel his testicles contracting until they were as small and hard as acorns. He padded forward on hands and knees, brought himself to a crouch and waited.

*

The year before, a few weeks after his arrival in Latargo, Edward had worked in the coffee harvest for the first time. The harvest was grueling. The people around Edward worked with a stamina he could not hope to match. They seemed impervious to the staggering heat, oblivious to the

weight of the sun and the pricking, buzzing and biting of a multitude of insects. Edward slogged through each day, determined not to quit before the week was up. The fiery pesticides with which Nicaraguan farmers drenched their crops made Edward's head spin and put him off his food. Each night two or three members of the harvest crew would do vigilance, everyone else's safety depending on the ability of these two or three individuals to remain awake and alert through the night after spending the day in the fields. Edward, who had no militia training, was excluded from this duty. To compensate, Javier did double vigilance, going an extra night without sleep. After the harvest had ended and Luisa had dispatched the lice from his hair by shaving his skull almost bald, Edward enrolled in a militia training course. He spent three weeks waking early, hiking up and down hillsides in the heat, taking apart, reassembling and firing AK-47s, practising hand-to-hand combat with peasant women and students. Edward's instructor in the course, a stocky young man in combat fatigues, reinforced his lectures by flourishing an instruction manual which, it soon emerged, he could barely read. But at the end of the three weeks Edward felt at home with a gun in his hands. This year, during his second January in Latargo, Edward was again working in the coffee harvest in

the hills above the town. The hand-over-hand movement required to pick the beans still wore him down; his sole attempt to heft a full bag of undried coffee beans ended in back-straining failure. This year, though, he would be able to take his turn doing vigilance.

*

The humidity was suffocating him. He faltered forward, his back hunched. The flashlight beams seemed only inches away.

He was knocked off his feet. A detonation lifted the earth around Edward's boots: his ears stung, wet foliage slapped him in the face. He lay on the ground, winded, his cheeks stiff with pain from the fall. A volley of shots erupted, like the beating of a jackhammer; Edward's eardrums recoiled. More shots exploded: there was a cry, then another and a prolonged moan that rose to a whimper. More shots: one of the two flashlight beams in front of Edward toppled like a felled tree. The haze of beams farther back in the bush was extinguished: the contras were no longer trying to ward off attack. Now they were shooting to kill. Edward felt his flanks, clapped his hands over his forehead, touched his face anxiously until he was certain that he had not been wounded by the grenade explosion that had knocked him off his feet. He slithered forward, poking the AK-47 awkwardly in front of him. More gunfire: he could

hear the bullets tearing through the leaves above his head. He had lost his sense of direction, didn't know where the contras' flashlights had been or where the men and women in his patrol had gone. Then, off to his right, he saw a crouched figure that looked like Javier. He heard Javier's AK-47 unleash a whining barrage of shots, setting off a chaotic, earsplitting response. The bush resounded with a furious, confused pounding. Edward ducked through a veil of leaves and staggered as automatic rifle fire exploded around him. He dropped to the ground, clapped the butt of the AK-47 against his shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The gun buckled against his shirt. Edward kept shooting until the gunfire around him began to subside; a moment later it kicked into life again, harsher and angrier, deeper in the bush.

Keeping his body low, Edward stumbled forward. He tripped over something heavy and soft, and forced himself to keep moving through the dark wet foliage. He stumbled against Javier, who sat crouched over another stretched body. He stopped.

It was Norma. She lay on her side, twisting in pain.

"Profe," she moaned. "Mi profe."

Javier, crying, turned toward Edward.

"Profe...." Norma murmured, her black curls darker

than the ground beneath her.

"I'm here," Edward said. "Look, I'm right here." He crouched beside her, shaking his head. Only a few minutes ago, he had been asleep. Now he was wide awake. A spasm of pain wrenched Norma's body away from him; she ground her face against the earth. The sprig of a coffee plant overhung her shoulders and head, veiling her with long, ruffled-edged leaves flowering from soft bark. Edward laid his hand on Norma's shoulder, steadying her. He felt her muscles knotting with pain beneath his palm; the musty smell of her body enveloped him. She blinked, her eyes suddenly clear in the darkness. "Mi profe, she said.

Gunfire hacked through the matted branches, cutting closer. Edward strained to locate the path over which they would have to carry Norma, down through the coffee plantation to the encampment. But the undergrowth had folded shut behind him in a wall of silent leaves; the way back had disappeared.

COCHABAMBA

Peter first saw Helga standing on a dusty streetcorner where a connecting bus to La Paz had been meant to arrive half an hour earlier. She was a willowy, fair woman, perhaps three or four years younger than he was. "There's no point in waiting out here," he had said, walking over to where she stood. "The people in the restaurant say the bus may not be here for hours. Why don't you come inside?"

She turned, thin and sunburned in heavy bluejeans and a plaid shirt. "Okay," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "Thanks for telling me." Peter saw her glance toward the end of the street, where the single-storey stucco buildings gave way to the flat, arid stretch of the high plateau. Then she hefted her backpack and followed him into the restaurant.

"Where are you going?" she said, stacking her pack next to his inside the door of the restaurant.

"All around Bolivia," Peter said. "When I get to Cochabamba I'll head back to La Paz, then return to Peru. What about you?"

"I am also going to Cochabamba," Helga said. She seated herself at a table; Peter sat down opposite her. A waitress arrived and they ordered the standard lunch, the only meal this small, dirt-floored restaurant was serving: a bowl of soup and a plate of rice, accompanied by two baked potatoes and one lettuce leaf. Sipping her soup, Helga explained to Peter that she had been traveling in Peru and Bolivia for two months. She had been buying gold and silver, which could be bought cheaply in these countries, for her uncle to sell in his shop in Asunción, Paraguay. Peter listened to Helga's voice. She was the first woman traveling alone he had met in many weeks; most of the other travelers he'd met had been single men, pairs of men, or couples. He listened to her with attention. In the flat English of a European who had learned the language at an early age, Helga said: "So now I am going back to Paraguay, by way of Cochabamba."

"How long have you been in South America?"

"A year -- a little more than a year, in fact. It is all thanks to my uncle's shop. My uncle has a good business in that shop; it makes him prosperous and it allows me to

travel."

Nearly three hours passed before the bus to La Paz arrived. Peter and Helga sat in the restaurant and talked. Peter told Helga how he had come to South America in the hope of establishing himself as a freelance journalist; how, realizing that he lacked the drive that made a good journalist, he had eventually given up on this idea.

"So what are you doing now?" Helga asked.

"Just traveling and getting to know the country. I'll travel as long as my money holds out." After all, there's nothing for me to go back to, he almost added, stirring his soup spoon in the empty bowl. The gap between Peter and his parents, with their small-town values, seemed unbridgeable; his friends from university had scattered; he had broken up with his girlfriend a few weeks before his departure. He had no idea where he would go or what he would do once his traveling money was gone.

When the bus arrived, Peter and Helga rode together to La Paz. That night they shared a narrow room in a hotel on a steep street in the Indian Quarter. The room contained two single beds. When they were ready to go to sleep Helga turned out the twenty-five-watt bulb that hung from the ceiling and they undressed with their backs to one another. Peter heard the sharp intake of Helga's breath as her bare

feet touched the cold stone floor. They fell asleep in their separate beds without saying goodnight. In the morning Peter woke early, gathered his clothes together, slipped out of the room for a shower and dressed in the shower-stall. When he returned to the room Helga was awake and dressed. She sat on the edge of her bed, brushing out her long thick hair.

"Good morning," Peter said. "Ready for some sightseeing?"

"You haven't been here before?" Helga asked.

"No," said Peter.

"Then you should see the witchcraft market," she said, sliding her hairbrush into a side pocket of her backpack. "Also Avenida Buenos Aires. And take a look at the presidential palace -- there's a lamppost in front of it where one of their presidents was hanged by a mob. I'll meet you back here for supper if you like. We can eat out somewhere."

"What are you doing today?"

"I have to do some business for my uncle, who is paying for my trip." Peter nodded. He spent the day wandering through the crowded, steep streets of La Paz. He followed Helga's advice, visiting the witchcraft market and Avenida Buenos Aires, and looking over the lampposts in front of

the presidential palace. That evening he and Helga ate supper in a small, inexpensive restaurant. They drank the local beer and agreed to catch the afternoon train to Potosí the next day. Next morning, as they were leaving the railway station after buying their tickets, they ran into a group of Brazilian students. Peter was surprised by the Brazilians' height and fair complexions, and by the long hair worn by both the men and the women. Helga began to speak to the Brazilians in rapid Portuguese. Peter stood watching Indian women, who wore red or pink shawls and brown felt hats, walking over the cluttered, stone-paved street.

"Where did you learn Portuguese?" he asked Helga later.

"I was in Brazil for a few months. I had a Brazilian boyfriend."

"Really? How was Brazil?"

"Brazil was fine. The boyfriend -- oh, I don't want to talk about it. We'll start telling each other everything and then we'll feel we have to sleep together."

They turned into Calle Tumusla, one of the widest and steepest streets in the Indian Quarter. Indian women lined the sides of the street, squatting behind colorful blankets on which combs and mirrors were displayed.

Helga said: "That's okay, isn't it? I just think it

would be better if we didn't talk about ourselves. It'll only cause problems.... I'll talk to you about anything you want, except my life and your life. All right?" Smiling, she met Peter's eyes.

Peter laughed. "Sure," he said. "That's cool. I don't have any problems with that."

Peter and Helga had been traveling together for thirteen days the night they reached Cochabamba. They had learned to respect each other's privacy and avoided discussions which risked leading them into the past. When other topics of conversation failed them, they talked about politics. There was always something to talk about because they always disagreed with each other. Helga was from Hamburg in the north of Germany; her father owned a factory. She disliked the left, equating it with the Baader-Meinhof gang, with terrorism. When they first began to argue about politics, Peter tried to get her to see that she was interpreting everything strictly in terms of her own experience -- his girlfriend had done this, he thought: all women did this -- without making allowances for a number of significant differences between West Germany and Latin America. "People are hungry here," he said. "Just look around you. These countries are crying out for more

equality. And only the left has the political will to make those kind of changes."

"That never works," Helga said. "It just becomes Stalinist. You're better off with free enterprise. At least that way everybody has a chance."

They would argue like this for hours, refining their arguments by flinging examples at one another. Peter was never convinced that they were really avoiding their pasts when they talked about politics. It often seemed to him that it was less their principles than their backgrounds -- her dislike of the left, his rejection of his parents' conservatism -- that were coming into conflict.

The evening that they arrived in Cochabamba, they had spent spent the entire day on a bus. After checking into a hotel, they decided to go for a stroll before turning in. They stumbled onto the city's main plaza. White streetlights hung in the eucalyptus trees. Under the lights, young Indian women wearing crisp, factory-made clothes in traditional style -- silk shawls, stiffly-pleated red skirts -- paraded around the plaza in clusters, smiling and laughing. Indian men, dressed in their best shirts, sat on benches and watched the women. The women marched round and round with the jerky grace of a merry-go-round, sneaking glances over their shoulders to see which

men were watching them. They strutted a ragged circle around the perimeter of the plaza. Then Helga touched Peter's arm and said: "I'm tired. Let's go back to the hotel."

Peter woke in darkness. He reached for his watch: it was quarter to five in the morning. He had an erection. He rolled onto his back and watched the dawn break. He could hear Helga's breathing, slowed by sleep, in the other bed, on the other side of the room. The dawn came in soft glimmers that broke suddenly into full daylight. Peter's erection subsided. The daylight grew stronger. At seven o'clock he climbed out of bed, pulled on his clothes, slipped his feet into his shower sandals and padded down the hall to the shower. When he returned to the room Helga was still asleep. He walked to the window and looked out at the morning. Their room was on the sixth floor of the hotel, which appeared to be one of the tallest buildings in Cochabamba. Looking out, Peter could see most of the city and, beyond, the mountains: he could see the dark green indentations in their flanks, the powdering of snow near their blunt summits. He continued to gaze out at the mountains as Helga woke, slid out of bed and left the room. She returned twenty minutes later, dressed in

bluejeans and a T-shirt, her skin gleaming moistly from the shower, her hair brushed out to her shoulders. By eleven o'clock, when Peter and Helga left the hotel and walked downtown to explore the city, a heat-haze had erased the mountains from the horizon. There were few people on the streets. Peter and Helga skirted the market -- the largest market in the Andes, they had been told -- and found most of the stalls boarded up. On the main streets, large shops stood locked and empty.

"What's going on?" Helga said. "Everyone said Cochabamba was such a lively place."

Peter bought a newspaper on a streetcorner. "What's happened?" he asked the vendor. The vendor grunted and looked at his feet.

Peter and Helga sat down on a bench in the plaza and opened the newspaper. They saw immediately what had happened. Overnight, the government had devalued the country's currency by more than one hundred per cent. Prices had doubled, but wages were to be frozen. Headlines warned that anyone caught buying United States dollars at higher than the official rate would receive a long jail sentence. Alternate pages of the paper were given over to full-page exhortations to remain calm. A photograph of a small, frail-looking girl covered the top two-thirds of

each of these pages. Below, in large black letters, were the words: PARENT! ACCEPT TODAY'S AUSTERITY SO THAT HER FUTURE MAY BE PROSPEROUS!

"Please, señor. Have you any dollars to change?"

Peter looked up from the newspaper. A well-dressed man in his thirties stood in front of him. The man was fiddling with his tie-clip; black polish made his shoes gleam. "Dollars?" the man tried again, as though attempting to pronounce the word in English.

"At how much?" Peter said in Spanish.

The man made an offer. Peter began to bargain. He bargained hard with the man. "Please, señor," the man said, "I need dollars to get my wife and children out of the country."

"Don't exploit him," Helga said to Peter in English. "You do need to change money."

"But he's offering me the same rate I got two days ago, and all the prices are going to double."

"The prices are going to double for everyone."

Peter said: "What's the matter? Have you become a dirty socialist?"

"No. Have you become a filthy capitalist?"

The man standing in front of them pinched his tie-clip nervously and said to Peter: "Perhaps your wife also has

dollars to change?"

"She's not my wife," Peter said.

Helga said: "I don't have any money to change."

The man shot a look over his shoulder. Peter followed the man's look and saw a uniformed policeman standing on the street corner. "All right," Peter said. "Twenty dollars, okay?"

"Yes, yes," said the man, pushing a wad of pesos at him. Peter unfolded the wad and counted the pesos before he handed the man the twenty-dollar bill. The man grabbed the twenty, nodded and took off across the plaza. The policeman on the steetcorner broke forward quickly and intercepted him with a few swift steps. Peter saw them standing together next to the base of a eucalyptus tree, the policeman stiff-waisted and tall, the man wearing the tie hunched and jittery.

"I don't like Cochabamba," Helga sighed. "What do you think's going to happen?"

"If the peso keeps dropping," Peter said, "the government might fall. It might even mean the end of military rule."

The policeman seized the shoulder of the man wearing the tie. He shook the man back and forth. The man's head snapped back, then swung forward. Peter glimpsed a stitch

of light as the man's tie-clip fell to the ground. The policeman shook the man again and this time the man's tie thrashed like a loose cord.

"My uncle says that military rule is the best rule in these countries," said Helga. "That's what he says after twenty-five years in Paraguay."

"Your uncle," said Peter, "belongs to the tiny minority that benefits from military rule."

The man bent over and picked up his tie-clip. Peter could see him cleaning the dust off it with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. The policeman stepped forward again, and the man backed up until the eucalyptus tree stopped him. People sitting on nearby benches began to climb to their feet and shuffle away. The policeman looked down at the other man. The man reached into his pocket and came up with a dark green ten-peso note. Then another. He offered the notes to the policeman. The policeman took them, pocketed them and walked slowly away across the plaza. The other man fled, his tie swinging as he ran.

"So you haven't become a capitalist," said Helga. "You still can't forgive my uncle for owning a shop."

"And you're no socialist," Peter replied. "Come on. It's our anniversary -- we've been traveling together for two weeks. Let's go find somewhere to celebrate."

They left the plaza and walked toward the market. The streets became wider and dustier. Sunlight struck through the dust in an opaque sheet. The thin mountain air was saturated with glittering particles of dust. Their breathing grew arduous. On the right-hand side of the street a sprawl of scrubby grass interrupted the pattern of white stucco buildings and red-brown dust. Peter and Helga veered out of the road and stepped onto the grass. A wooden sign attached to a tilted pole told them that they had entered a park. Cages sat dotted around the park. Inside the cages were birds and small animals: parrots, anteaters, various types of monkeys. In a larger cage in the middle of the park, settled atop a pile of sand-colored rubble, Peter saw two scruffy black lumps.

"Condors," Helga breathed, walking toward the cage.

"Really?" said Peter. "They look so ugly."

"Oh, they're just vultures when you see them close up, but when they fly...have you ever seen a condor flying?"

"No," said Peter. Helga was leaning against the cage, her fingers poking through the wire mesh. Her arms were bare and sunburned, and her hair fell loose to her shoulders.

"I wish I could see them spread their wings. But they'll never do it in this cage. They don't have to, to move

around."

Helga turned, smiling, the sun on her face. The suppleness of her movements caused Peter's gaze to linger on the curves her thighs made moving against the tight denim of her bluejeans. It had been a long time, he thought, since he had broken up with his girlfriend. Then, seeing that she had noticed his scrutiny, he looked away. They walked out of the park and back onto the street, continuing in the direction of the market. In a sidestreet near the market, Helga found a shop that had not closed. Inside the shop it was cool and dark. A middle-aged woman in a dress stood next to the counter and a young man, who might have been her son, crouched before shelves of merchandise. The young man was coloring over the prices stamped on boxes and bags and was writing in new prices with a felt-tipped marker.

"I was just about to close," said the woman. "Nobody's buying. They won't buy again until they get hungry."

"Do you have something sweet?" Helga asked.

The woman handed her a plastic bag of small, spicy cookies sprinkled with sugar. Helga bought the cookies and tore open the top corner of the bag. "Here, have a cookie," she said, as she and Peter walked back out onto the street. "Here's to two weeks of traveling together."

"Thanks," Peter said. He bit into the cookie; it was hard. "When are you leaving for Paraguay?"

"I don't know," Helga said. "I was going to wait a few days, but now I don't know. What if there's a coup? I don't want to be stuck in the middle of it."

"Afraid you'll be thrown in front of the firing-squad by bloodthirsty revolutionaries?" Peter asked.

"Just let it drop, will you?" Helga said.

They walked in silence until they reached the market. Peter's throat was dry from the dust. Small whitewashed stalls that sold refreshments stood on the edge of the market. A handful of people sat at shaded makeshift tables gathered around each stall. Behind the refreshment stalls Peter could see the beginning of the market's main grounds: other, larger stalls, spaces marked off under awnings, symmetrical lengths of bare earth. The market was nearly empty. No goods were laid out for sale; no one was buying. There were only the few people sipping soft drinks at the tables next to the refreshment stalls.

"Let's get something to drink," Helga said, breaking the silence between them.

They walked up to the nearest stall. "Two cokes, please," Peter said in Spanish, leaning over the whitewashed counter.

"There isn't any;" replied the woman inside the stall. The shelf behind her was lined with bottles of Coca-Cola.

"Two cokes, please," Peter repeated, enunciating the words with care. He gestured toward the shelf.

"There isn't any Coca-Cola," the woman said. Like most of the people in the market, she was Indian. Her brown skin was stretched over high, rounded cheekbones. Her black braids hung lank. She stared through Peter.

"She's crazy," Helga said. "Let's go somewhere else."

They walked to the next stall. The response was identical. At each stall they saw bottles ranged on shelves and people sipping soft drinks. At each stall they were told that there were no soft drinks. No hay, no hay -- it beat through Peter's head like a taunt. The longer they talked, the hotter and dustier and thirstier and more short-tempered he became. Finally, he snarled at one of the stall-keepers: "You're lying.... I can see the bottles right there!" He caught himself, and fell silent. Behind him, he heard a scraping noise. Two men who had been sucking on soft drinks had pushed back their chairs and risen to their feet.

"There is no Coca-Cola, señor," the woman behind the counter said.

Peter nodded. "Of course, señora, my apologies. Buenas

tardes."

A hand weighed on Peter's elbow. It was Helga. "I don't understand. How can you let her lie to your face like that?"

Peter blew out a gust of air. His throat felt blistered. He was exhausted. He remembered the cool darkness of the hotel room that morning, the soft glimmer of the first light. "They're not going to sell any more drinks until they know how low the peso is going to drop," he said, turning away from the stall and heading out of the market, drawing Helga's arm against his hip as he turned. "The drinks are the only thing they've got that will keep pace with inflation. So there are no drinks -- none for sale. Except for a few old friends. It's not really lying."

"I still think it stinks," Helga said, shaking her arm free of Peter's grasp. "If I want a drink and I've got the money to buy it, who are they to tell me I can't have it?"

This morning if Helga had spoken like this Peter would have ridiculed her. Now he said nothing. They walked back to the plaza without speaking.

The plaza looked hotter than it had earlier in the day. The heat bore down on them. Groups of men dozed on benches under eucalyptus trees. There were more policemen than before. A man in a battered hat stood in the middle of the

plaza, reading aloud from scraps of newspapers. He was reading the government announcements that Peter and Helga had read that morning. "Parent!" he declared. "Accept today's austerity so that her future may be prosperous!" He repeated these words six or eight times. Then he shouted: "This has been my first official speech as president and general-in-chief of the new capital of the republic -- Cochabamba!"

The man's voice was strong and ringing; his words echoed around the plaza. Peter waited for the police to arrest the man. But they just looked at one another and snickered.

None of the shops in the plaza were open. There was nowhere to buy anything to drink. Peter and Helga walked back to their hotel without speaking. Their room felt cool after the street. Then it grew stuffy. Peter and Helga lay on their separate beds, their clothes loosened. Peter began to doze.

A knock on the door woke him. He sat up on his bed. Helga opened the door and the desk clerk walked into the room. Behind him came a slim man wearing dress slacks and a short-sleeved white shirt. The slim man had a small, clipped mustache. He showed Peter a laminated card bearing his photograph. "Immigration Police," he said. "Your passports, please."

Peter and Helga pulled their passports out of their money belts. The Immigration man examined the passports and checked them against a list he carried on a clipboard. He made a note in the margin. "Traveling together?" he asked, without looking up.

"Yes," Peter said.

"Destination?"

"Peru," Peter said.

Helga said: "Paraguay."

The Immigration man looked up from his clipboard. His cheeks gave off a light sheen. The desk clerk was looking at Peter and Helga with new interest. The Immigration man said: "Are you going to Peru or are you going to Paraguay? You must tell the truth. The situation in this country is very unstable."

Helga said: "I'm going to Paraguay and he's going back to Peru."

"This is impossible," the Immigration man said. "You have just told me that you are traveling together."

"We have been traveling together," Helga said. "After Cochabamba we will go in different directions."

The Immigration man sighed. "When will you be leaving?"

"In a few days," said Helga. "Three or four days at most."

"And you?" he said to Peter.

"In three or four days."

"Thank you," said the Immigration man. "Good afternoon." He and the desk clerk left the room.

"That's it," Helga said, when the door had closed. "I'm leaving tomorrow. I can't take any more of this tension. At least in Paraguay you don't spend the whole time worrying that there's going to be a coup in the next five minutes."

"That's true," Peter said. "The repression is much more efficient in Paraguay."

Helga didn't respond. She squatted at the foot of her bed, folding her clothes and sliding them into her backpack. She was muttering about Guaranies and bus schedules to Santa Cruz. She made a joke about her uncle and how he would react to her return. Peter wanted to answer her, but found himself at a loss for words.

When he woke from his siesta the room was dark. The air had grown cooler and a clammy humidity had set in. Helga was asleep. Peter lay in the dark and listened to her breathing. The hotel, and the street outside, were silent.

They celebrated their anniversary -- two weeks of traveling together -- at the only restaurant in the main plaza that opened that evening. It was one of Cochabamba's

more expensive restaurants. The supper menu included fish. The potatoes had a tangy aftertaste and the rice arrived in delicate heaps. There was ice cream for dessert. The prices on the menu had been stroked out and new, higher prices penned in.

"When are you going to leave?" Helga asked.

"Perhaps Thursday," Peter said. "I'd like to stay for market-day on Wednesday. Then I'll probably go back to La Paz. At least there I'll be close enough to the border that I can get out of the country if anything serious happens."

"I don't want to take any chances," Helga said. "The sooner I can leave the happier I'll be."

Outside, rain had begun to fall. Some of the streetlights had failed to come on and the eucalyptus trees stood twisted against the thick shadow. Peter recalled their first glimpse of the plaza the night before -- the Indian women marching round and round in an unbroken circle and the men watching them. It was still raining when they finished their supper. They were drenched as soon as they stepped out the door. Peter felt his trousers turn heavy; they chafed against his legs. Men in tattered clothes slept under the overhang of the buildings that fronted onto the plaza. The men slept clasped together in pairs, the head of one drawn against the ankles of the other. The rain fell

harder, and Peter and Helga began to run.

Their breathing was harsh and shallow in the thin air. They staggered around a corner into a sidestreet that looked like it would provide a shortcut to their hotel. Ahead of them, obscured by shadow, figures bended and stretched, working rapidly in the darkness. Rain beat into Peter's face. He was lunging forward, no longer able to run. Helga grabbed his arm and he stopped. He peered at the bending and stretching figures. They were pasting posters to the wall; moving down the street quickly, methodically. What was on the posters? Anti-government propaganda? Peter didn't want to know. Helga was tugging on his arm. He nodded, and they turned and headed back the way they had come. A young man in uniform rushed toward them out of the darkness, nearly brushing Peter's arm as he sprinted past in the direction of the figures pasting up the posters. Slung over his shoulder, he carried a gun with an air-cooled barrel.

Peter and Helga stepped back out onto the main street and hurried toward their hotel. Rain slammed against the paving stones. Their clothes were sodden. Peter felt his stamina waning. Helga reached out and took his hand. They stopped trying to run and walked back to the hotel hand-in-hand. Still holding hands, they climbed the six floors to

their hotel room, dripping water on old tiles. Helga closed the door behind them and shook out her hair under the pale light. A crescent of fine drops of water sprayed against Peter's chest. "Look at me!" Helga said. "I'm all wet! This is ridiculous. When I was a little girl I used to complain about the rain and my parents would say, When you're grown up you can go and visit your uncle in South America. So I come to South America and what happens? I get soaked!"

She smiled lopsidedly at Peter, her hair all over the place. Peter looked at her ~~wide~~ pale eyes, her moist eyebrows, a rivulet of water sliding down her neck. He pulled her against him. They were kissing, their mouths open, their heads turning to meet the sliding pressure of their tongues. The warmth of Helga's kiss carried through Peter to his spine and spread across his shoulder-blades like a pair of wings unfolding. They pressed their bodies together at the waist.

A burst of automatic rifle fire cracked through the sound of the rain, rocking the hotel.

Peter felt his limbs stiffen, Helga's body go stiff against him. The gunfire exploded again, shattering in its loudness. Peter's arms fell to his sides. He and Helga drew apart. They sat down heavily on their separate beds, each

unable to meet the other's eyes.

Peter lay awake the rest of the night, listening for the sound of gunfire. But the night was silent except for the rain. By morning the rain had stopped. Peter fell asleep as day began to break. He woke at noon to find Heiga tightening the straps on her backpack. She left for Paraguay an hour later and Peter, fearing that the trains might soon stop running, returned to La Paz the next day.

DESERTERS

Tanks advancing under aircraft fire, thought Dekker. He stopped and listened again to the roaring through the trees. He blundered forward, the bush broke away and he stumbled and fell. Picking himself up, brushing fluff from fraying bullrush-heads off his shirt, he saw that he was standing in a ditch at the edge of a highway. La belle province, read the license plates of the cars and trucks that hurtled past. Safety, thought Dekker. The contained tension of days snapped. Exhaustion flooded his limbs, and he climbed onto the steep, grassy embankment of the highway and lay down on his back. He breathed fumy air and gazed at the clouds, while moist blades of grass nuzzled the back of his neck. Finally he stood up, walked out onto the shoulder of the highway and began to hitch-hike.

A trailer-truck stopped for him. The driver said he had been behind the wheel all night and his plaid shirt was

rumpled. He chain-smoked. The radio played sentimental pop music that Dekker knew from home, but the advertisements and the disc jockey's patter were in French. The driver asked Dekker where he was going. Dekker shrugged, clueless. He had crossed the border: nothing else mattered.

"I let you out someplace where the girls speak English," the driver said. "Okay?"

Dekker nodded. The past swamped him. He had been living in a state of perpetual anxiety for almost a week. It was a relief to relax: to lean back in the big seat of the cab, close his eyes and allow the pop music and the driver's cigarette smoke to swirl around him. The vibration of the truck's engine lulled him to sleep. When he woke, the driver was gearing down. The driver brought the truck to a stop in a wide, muddy parking lot and told Dekker that he was going to eat breakfast.

Dekker climbed down out of the cab. The town in which the driver had stopped consisted of a single street lined with red brick houses made over into shops -- a grocery store, a barbershop, a hardware store, a beauty salon. At either end of the street the red brick buildings gave way to white clapboard houses and finally to scattered bungalows and fields of hay and corn. Dekker shivered. The sky was grey and the air was much cooler than it had been

at the beginning of his journey. The dampness that had gathered on his shirt during the night clung to his skin and chilled him.

"Come and take a hot coffee," said the driver.

Dekker followed him into the red brick diner. Inside, a man with short, slicked-back hair stood behind the counter wearing an apron. An older man in overalls sat at one of the stools and drank coffee. The driver and the man behind the counter greeted each other. The man behind the counter was called George; the driver's name was Jacques. The man in overalls nodded at Jacques but did not greet him.

"I got a passenger today," said the driver.

George looked at the wet splotches on Dekker's shirt. He nodded curtly.

"Bacon and eggs with toast," said the driver. "Lots of butter. Black coffee. Three lumps of sugar."

"I remember," said George. "How about you?" he said to Dekker.

Dekker hesitated. He was very hungry, but he had only United States currency and he didn't want to start the other men asking questions. "Nothing, thanks."

George shrugged his shoulders. Jacques, the truck driver, said: "Hell, I didn't know you're broke. How come you don't tell me? Bring two coffees, George. This guy

needs a hot coffee. He's freezing. How you like your coffee?"

"With milk," said Dekker. "Thank you."

"With milk," the driver said to George. "Jeeze, don't thank me. A guy needs a coffee in the morning. I know about that."

"Two coffees," said George, scratching on a dogeared pad. "One with milk." He pushed through a swinging door into the kitchen. As the door opened, country music filtered out.

"You on the road?" the man in overalls asked Dekker. He leaned forward with one elbow on the counter and studied Dekker across the speckled white formica. His face was tanned and weather-riven, and he wore a long-billed cap tilted back on his head.

"Yeah," said Dekker. "I'm on the road." He hadn't thought about it this way before.

George came through the swinging door carrying two coffees.

"You lookin' for work?" the man in overalls asked.

"Mel here just had his hired man take off on him," George explained, setting Dekker's coffee in front of him. "He's been here all morning complaining about it."

"Went back to the wife and six kids in Rimouski," said

Mel. "He was one of your people, Jacques."

Jacques said: "It's not my fault he left."

"I didn't say it was your fault," said Mel. "I just said he was French and he went back to Rimouski."

"Anyhow," said George, "Mel here's looking for a hired man."

"I still ain't done half my haying," said Mel.

Jacques turned to Dekker. "You ever work on a farm?"

"Sure," said Dekker. He had worked for his uncle for part of a summer when he was fifteen.

"Can you work hard?" said Mel, leaning low over the formica-topped counter.

"If you feed me."

"Hire him, Mel, " said George. "You ain't gonna find nobody else right away. Not without going to the Farm Labour Exchange."

"I don't know who he is," said Mel. "I don't know a single thing about him."

"He looks okay to me," said George. "He sure as hell ain't one of them hippies. Not with the haircut he's got."

"Yeah, you don't see too many nowadays with it that short." Mel looked at Dekker. "You ain't escaped from jail, eh?"

"No," Dekker said. "I've never been in jail."

George said: "What's your name?"

"John Dekker," said Dekker.

Mel said: "Dekker? What kinda name's that?"

"Dutch, originally, I think," said Dekker.

"Dutchman!" said George. "Them guys work real hard, Mel."

"Every farmer that's making money around here is Dutch," Mel allowed.

"Hey, Mel, you could be the first guy around here to have a Dutchman for a hired man," said George. "Usually it's the other way round."

"Usually the hired man's a French guy," grunted Jacques.

Mel looked at Dekker. Concentration furrowed his brow and polished his soft brown eyes. "You want the job?" he said. "You can start work today."

"If I don't eat some breakfast," said Dekker. "I'm not going to be able to work."

"Shake?" said Mel. He slid a big weathered paw along the countertop. Dekker shook Mel's hand. Mel grinned. "Bacon, eggs and toast for my hired man, George. And another cup of coffee."

"Way to go, Mel," said George. He pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen.

Jacques reached over and shook Dekker's hand.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks to you," said Dekker.

After he had finished his breakfast, Dekker went outside and removed his shoulder-bag from Jacques's trailer-truck. He shook hands again with Jacques. Jacques cuffed him goodbye on the shoulder.

"That all the luggage you got?" said Mel, sitting at the wheel of his half-ton pick-up. Dekker nodded and hopped in. Mel gunned the engine and the truck roared down the street and out into the country. A tiny plastic tiger jiggled on a chain suspended from the rearview mirror. Mel shifted gears with a long bar that grew out of the floor. When Mel shifted into third a patch of daylight opened in the floor and Dekker could see the racing tarmac below.

"My haying needs doing something fierce," said Mel. "That's two, maybe three days' work. If we're both happy when that's done we can talk about you working here permanent."

The cloud thinned and the day grew warmer and brighter. To Dekker's surprise, Mel asked him nothing about his background or how much farming he had done.

Mel's two-storey white clapboard house stood at the end of a long, rough laneway. Behind the house stood a red barn in need of a fresh coat of paint. Grey, sagging sheds

flanked the barn. Mel parked the truck next to a tractor in front of one of the sheds. Climbing out of the pick-up, he said: "Get up on that tractor and get her started up for me."

Dekker looked at the tractor. It was an old model, as old and uncomplicated as the tractor that Dekker's uncle had owned when Dekker was fifteen. Dekker climbed into the driver's seat, pushed his shoes tentatively against the two pedals, clutch and brake, and rattled the gearshift. He started the engine and felt the steering wheel vibrate against his palms as the machine growled. The smell of gasoline swirled before his face. He drove the tractor around the barnyard in a loose circle. Mel watched Dekker with folded arms; when Dekker returned to his starting-point Mel waved him to a halt.

"Okay," he said. "You can drive a tractor."

Since the departure of his hired man, Mel had been haying alone. His daughter, who usually worked with him, had been away looking after her grandmother and had returned only last night. With no one to work on the skid to make the seven-bale stooks, Mel had been circling the fields with his tractor and baler and leaving the bales where they dropped. The back of his farm looked like a battlefield, he said: four big fields scattered with

uncollected bales. And more than half of Mel's hay remained to be cut. But all they would worry about today was gathering the hay that was already baled. The rest would have to wait. They would have to hope, said Mel, glancing skyward, for a couple of sunny days.

Dekker lifted his shoulder bag from the seat of Mel's pick-up, and he and Mel walked toward the house. They took off their boots in the mudroom. Mel opened the door into the kitchen, which became the dining room and was tiled with grey linoleum.

"Meet the wife," said Mel.

Dekker exchanged nods with a stout woman with iron curls and steel glasses. "Gidday," she said.

Dekker said: "How do you do."

"This here's John Dekker," said Mel. "He's gonna help us with the haying and maybe take over as our hired man. He's a Dutchman."

"Dutchman, eh?" said the wife. "Most Dutchmen's bigger."

"And this is my daughter," said Mel. "Sharon, John Dekker."

Mel's daughter was unremarkable. She was three or four years younger than Dekker, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. Her face was even and regular, her hair long and fair and straight, gathered in a pony tail. She wore bluejeans that

farmwork had thinned and faded. Looking at her struck Dekker motionless. Sharon's mouth and cheeks, not yet quite adult in their firmness, mixed contradictory signs of recent adolescence and future motherhood. The flow of Mel's life, from young man to grandfather, stood embodied before Dekker's eyes. All the questions that the last week had forced him to stifle began to drum through Dekker's brain. It occurred to him that he could not go home. He might really have to live out his life in this country. A sense of urgency stirred in him, and with it a rising confusion. He must organize himself, make plans; but where was he and what sort of plans must he make?

During the moments that these thoughts were passing through Dekker's mind, he continued to look at Sharon. She blushed and looked away.

"Are you a married man, Mr. Dekker?" asked the wife.

"No, I'm not," said Dekker.

"John can sleep in the room the Frenchman had," Mel said. "Next to Sharon's room upstairs."

"That room ain't ready yet," said the wife.

"Eh?" said Mel. "What ain't ready about it?"

"The room ain't ready. If he stays here tonight he'll have to sleep in the shed."

"We'll talk about it later," said Mel.

"What is ready," said the wife, "is dinner."

"John here just ate breakfast," said Mel. "George in the village serves breakfast until eleven o'clock."

Dekker said: "I can eat again. I don't usually say no to good food."

"I'm sure," said the wife.

Dekker dropped his shoulder bag onto the dining room sofa and joined Mel and Sharon at the kitchen table. The wife carried the food to the table in steaming pots that she handled with oven mitts. Before they ate, Mel muttered a prayer. That was all anyone said during the meal. The food left Dekker feeling sluggish. Breakfast had revived him, but eating again had simply reminded him of how little sleep he had managed to get during the last week. When the meal was finished, Sharon and the wife began to clear up the dishes. Dekker got to his feet and looked out the window. Outside, the cloud cover had frayed to scattered white ribbons and the sun beat down. Mel allowed himself and Dekker a twenty-minute rest after lunch. Then he stood up, tugged at his overalls and said: "Time to get workin'." Picking up the bales would be easier with three people, Mel said, so Sharon would come with them.

The sun struck Dekker an almost palpable blow. He felt drained. He bowed his head against the heat and stabbed at,

and missed, a pair of workgloves that Mel tossed him. He picked up the gloves off the ground. Sharon climbed onto the tractor and backed it toward the hay wagon. Mel hitched the wagon to the tractor, and he and Dekker climbed onto the wagon. Sharon drove the tractor through a gap between two sheds and onto a rough, narrow path flanked by dense cornfields. Mel, his legs swinging over the edge of the lurching hay wagon, talked to Dekker about his farm, about the weather, about the salary (minimal) that Dekker could expect in addition to room and board if he became Mel's hired man. The cornfields gave way to smooth, scraped hayfields littered with bales. The shade of the tall cornplants was gone, and the sunlight struck them again, intensifying the white-yellow glare of the freshly cut hayfields. Sharon turned into the first hayfield, directing the tractor slantwise through the gate so that the wagon was drawn smoothly between the gateposts. She brought the tractor to a halt.

"This is where you get off," said Mel. Dekker slid to the ground. Sharon slipped the tractor into first gear and the machine putted forward. Dekker dog-trotted behind, picking up the bales one at a time and running them toward the back of the crawling hay wagon. He heaved each bale up onto the wagon. Mel grabbed the bale, carried it to the

front of the wagon and stacked it against the wooden siding. Dekker jogged to fetch the next bale. After the first bale Dekker was gasping. After the third, his shirt discarded, his bluejeans dank with sweat, he couldn't take another step. But he forced himself on. By the fifth bale he had found his rhythm. The plodding trot came naturally to him, the muscles in his back, arms and shoulders were supple and strong as he swung the bales onto the wagon. The sweat felt good on him, beading his stomach, trickling down the small of his back. Sharon steered the tractor around the field in narrowing loops that kept Dekker moving, reducing the distance he had to run with each circuit. When the first field had been cleared of bales, he felt beat. He sat next to Mel on top of the wagon-load of hay as Sharon drove back to the barnyard. Sharon stopped the tractor in front of a low shed. Mel jumped down off the wagon and slid back the shed door, revealing a raised wooden platform that served as a loft. The three of them unloaded the wagon by hand, pitching bales into the loft, stopping at intervals to allow Mel to climb up into the loft and stack the bales in symmetrical piles. The effort of heaving the bales underhand bared new muscles in Dekker's back. The binder twine that secured the bales cut into his fingers, despite the workgloves he was wearing;

sweat lathered his armpits. When the wagon had been unloaded, Sharon climbed behind the wheel of the tractor and they drove back along the path between the cornfields. Dekker was still loping when the second field had been cleared. The third field was an ordeal. Dekker could feel the strain in his shoulders and back that would become tomorrow's stiffness. His lungs scraped for breath in the hot air smeared with gasoline fumes and specked with dust motes jerked loose from thrown hay bales. His calves ached. When he tried to run and throw a hay bale at the same time, his stride became giddy. "Jeeze, yous Dutchmen work like the b'Jesus," said Mel. They were sitting on the loaded haywagon, rolling back to the barnyard for the third time that afternoon. Dekker's only reply was a dry gasp. Mel cackled as Dekker struggled to speak. "Don't worry," Mel said, "only one more to go."

Dekker drove himself through the last field. He chanted to his own unbelieving mind that the lowering sun, the thickening light, meant that the temperature was dropping. But he knew that late afternoon was the hottest time of the day. He staggered after the moving wagon, hefted bales with a grunt and a gasp. Sweat soaked his eyebrows, dripped onto his lids, slicked the sides of his nose, cascaded down the back of his neck, drenched his socks and underpants. At

last they were finished.

Mel took the wheel of the tractor on the last trip back to the barnyard. Dekker and Sharon sat on the load of hay. The sinking sun -- the heat really was waning now -- hauled the blue sky very close to their heads. The wagon swayed. Dekker sprawled across three bales, propped up on his elbows, his shirt crumpled in one hand, his chest rising and falling deeply from his afternoon's work. "I don't think I've ever been so hushed in my life," he said.

Strong thighs rippled against the denim of Sharon's jeans as she turned to face him. The sunburned red of her face raised a faint blond mustache above her upper lip. She gazed flatly at Dekker's chest and shoulders. "You look like you been doing some kind of work. Or gettin' a lot of exercise anyhow."

Dekker laughed. "Oh yeah, I've been getting plenty of exercise."

"What you been doing?" said Sharon.

"I've been in the Army," Dekker heard himself confess. "A well-known health and fitness club."

Sharon giggled like a schoolgirl. But she was a schoolgirl, Dekker thought. She might still be in high school. She asked: "Were you in the Forces for a long time?".

"Long enough to figure out I didn't want to stay there."

"A boy over on the third line joined the Forces. His ma says he really likes it. They sent him to Halifax. Were you in Halifax?"

"No," said Dekker. "I never made it to Halifax." Jesus Christ, he thought, she thinks I was in the Canadian Army.

Mel stopped the tractor in the barnyard. Dekker pulled on his shirt against the cool shadow cast by the barn. They threw the bales from the last load of hay into the loft of the shed. When they had finished, Mel looked at his watch and said that it was five o'clock: the wife would have supper ready. They uncoupled the wagon from the tractor and Mel parked the tractor in a shed. Over supper, Mel told the wife that John Dekker could work like the b'Jesus. The wife nodded. She and Sharon discussed Sharon's grandmother's health. The wife said that she would visit Granma later in the week. Dekker observed that his shoulder bag had disappeared from the dining room couch. Had it been moved upstairs to the room where the Frenchman used to sleep? Or would Dekker have to spend the night in the shed? Twice during the past week he had slept outside. Never in his life had he been so cold. He did not suppose that a shed would be much warmer.

"Milking time," said Mel, when he had finished eating.

He headed for the door and nodded to Dekker to follow him. Dekker fell into stride with Mel as they crossed the barnyard. Dekker was apprehensive. Milking had been the bane of his existence the summer he had worked for his uncle. No matter how he tugged, squeezed, caressed the cows' teats, they had refused to yield a drop of milk. He was relieved to discover that Mel owned a milking machine. Dekker had only to clamp the metal cups to the cows' teats, keep the cows supplied with hay while they were being milked and hose down the small, scrubbed room at the end of the barn where the milk was stored in steel vats until the arrival of the milk truck. Two hours after dinner they were back in the house and Mel, after looking Dekker over, offered him the use of the bathtub. Dekker hadn't bathed in a week. The wife told him that his shoulder bag, which contained his towel, was on the bed in the room where the Frenchman used to sleep.

Security and contentment, thought Dekker, sitting in the bathtub. Screw your war. If that's what it takes for me to live at home, I'll live somewhere else. Steaming water lapped at his knees. He could feel bunched muscles uncoiling through the length of his body. Once he was established as Mel's hired man he would write to his parents. Sorry Dad, he thought, you're not going to have a

war hero for a son. But you will have a son who is alive. Isn't that better? In his father's eyes, it might not be. Dekker could only explain. He would write to his parents and he would write to his old girlfriend from high school. Perhaps she would come up and visit him. Or perhaps it wouldn't matter if she didn't....Drowsiness swarmed over Dekker. For the first time in a week he felt unthreatened enough to sink into utter lethargy. Despite the unfamiliar tub, the austere bathroom decor, the bilingual labels on the bottles on the shelf, he felt no confusion, no sense of menace. He could take control of his life again, he thought. He climbed out of the tub and began to dry himself.

He was sitting on the bed in the Frenchman's room, pulling a fresh shirt around his shoulders, when Sharon appeared in the doorway. "Pa says you got to sleep in the shed tonight. This room ain't ready yet. Pa says maybe it'll be ready tomorrow night. He says I got to show you where you're sleeping."

Dekker sat without moving, his hand posed on the zipper of his shoulder bag. "Okay," he said at last, zipping the bag shut. He stood up, buttoned his shirt and tucked it into his jeans.

"I'll get your blankets," said Sharon.

Dekker picked up his shoulder bag and walked downstairs. Neither Mel nor his wife was anywhere to be seen. Steps thumped down the staircase and Sharon reappeared, her arms managing a pile of coarse blankets. "Where are your parents?" said Dekker.

"In their room. Talking." She brushed past him on her way to the front door. "Right out here."

Dekker followed her through the mudroom and out the front door. The night sky was clear. The stars glinted. The horseshoe of sheds and barn layered the yard with shadows. Sharon led Dekker into the most sturdy-looking of the sheds, groped through the dark toward the back, opened a rusty-hinged door and, to Dekker's surprise, turned on a light.

Dekker walked behind Sharon into a small room. In the pallid light he could see that the room had been insulated, all the chinks in the walls plugged. Sharon tossed the blankets onto a bed of loose straw. "This used to be the chicken coop," she said, "when we had chickens. That's how come it smells like that. But Pa says if you been on the road you prob'ly don't give a care where you sleep." She turned and stood braced upright in her tight, worn bluejeans. Her hands were thrust into her pockets and Dekker could see gooseflesh pimpling her sunreddened arms.

Her eyes moved jerkily, scanning Dekker's face and shoulders.

Dekker said: "Yeah, I had to sleep outside a couple of times." Then: "I hope it doesn't get as cold in this shed as it did those two nights."

"You prob'ly just felt cold because of the dew," said Sharon. "You'll stay dry here in this shed."

Dekker did not know how they had come to be standing so close to one another. His awareness of the weight and warmth of Sharon's body was crowding out everything else in his head. His mind seesawed. His hands were moving over Sharon's shoulders, pulling her against him. He kissed her. Sharon kissed like a child. First her lips then her teeth resisted the pressure of Dekker's tongue. Then their tongues touched, glided across each other, and she pressed herself against him. Sharon emerged from Dekker's embrace gasping, her cheeks flushed over her deep sunburn. She shook herself free of his hands and backed away from him in the watery light. "I don't even know who you are," she said. "I don't know your pa, I don't know your ma, you could be anybody." Her voice trilled. The shoulders of her shirt were shaking. "I should tell my pa."

"Don't do that," said Dekker. "I can move on, but you've got to stay here."

"I ain't done nothin' to be ashamed of. You done it to

me, I couldn't help it."

"We hardly did anything, Sharon."

"I guess you try that with all the girls you meet, eh? You Army guys. Well, I ain't that kinda girl, I'll tell you right now to save you the trouble." She kept shuffling backward. He saw the beginnings of tears staining the corners of her eyes, and took a half-step toward her. Sharon bolted out of the room. The door of the chicken coop banged shut behind her, then swung creakily ajar.

Dekker looked at the floor when she had gone. He grunted, sighed. Dropping to a crouch, he began to straighten the blankets Sharon had left him. The smell of old chicken droppings filtered through stale straw rose into his nostrils. It was less unpleasant than he had expected. He kicked off his boots and stretched out on his back on the three thick blankets. He looked at the blistered boards that formed the low ceiling. Twenty-four hours ago, he thought, he had been sitting under a tree in the Vermont woods, shivering too hard to fall asleep and wary of every twitching in the bush. Now he was comfortable. He got to his feet to turn out the light. There was a cursory knock on the chicken coop door and Mel stumped in.

"How are you? You all settled in?" Mel sidled into the

middle of the room. He had pulled a wrinkled barn jacket over his shirt and overalls. He had left his cap in the house. The watery light of the bare, musty bulb hazed his wispy hair and blurred the wrinkles that sagged his forehead. "Just been havin' a talk with the wife there," he said. "She's not too crazy about the idea of you sleepin' in the room right next to Sharon's, you not being a married man and all. The wife reckons it won't do Sharon's reputation no good. As if anything's gonna happen with the wife and me sleepin' in the room right on the other side o' her! Jeeze! I don't give a hang about my reputation with anybody who's got a mind that dirty. I'm tryin' to talk some sense into the woman so's you can sleep in the Frenchman's old room. Unless," he said, eyeing the unevenly mounded straw on the floor, "you prefer this here chicken coop."

"I think I'd like the room in the house better," said Dekker. "Thanks a lot." He sat down on the rough blankets. Dekker had expected Mel to leave, but Mel remained standing in the middle of the room, shifting from foot to foot. He straightened his overalls and seated himself stiffly on the straw. Dekker looked at Mel. "You been on the road a long time?" Mel asked.

"It seems like a long time," said Dekker.

Mel broke a shaft of straw between his fingers. "How come you didn't want to go and fight?"

Dekker caught his breath. There was a long, hoarse silence and then Dekker heard the sound of his own voice.

"I was on this base in Florida...there was this asshole redneck sergeant that kept picking on me. Every goddam thing I did, he'd give me shit. He made me do things he didn't have any right to. I got more and more pissed off, and one day I hauled off and hit him. So they locked me up in solitary. It was like being in jail. Finally they let me out, but they still wouldn't let me off the base. I couldn't get off that base for weeks. When they finally gave me a pass, the first thing I did was go A.W.O.L. I just got on a bus and kept going. I bought some warm clothes when I got to Philadelphia, I slept on buses, I ate in bus stations. When I got to Vermont I got off the bus and walked into the bush. I just kept walking north until I got picked up by that truck driver, Jacques."

Mel's fingers closed around a fresh stalk of straw. "I met one fellow," he said, "an American tourist up here, who told me all yous draft dodgers was communists...but I reckon you don't got to be a communist to want to be treated like a human being."

"Communist?" Dekker said. "No, I'm no communist. I don't

know squat about politics. I couldn't even tell you why we're fighting in goddam Nam. Say, did you know I was a deserter when you offered me the job this morning?"

"Sure did," Mel laughed. "With that bean shave and the way you talked. What else could you be?" Dekker laughed. He was happy to have confessed to this man. For a week he had been unable to trust anyone. Now he could talk. And Mel understood what he had been through.

Mel reached into his barn jacket and pulled out a bottle of beer. He opened the bottle on a wedge of concrete in the corner. Mel shared the bottle with Dekker. They took turns swigging from it. "The wife'd kill me if she knew I had this liquor on the property," said Mel. "I have to hide it out in the shed here."

"We'd better finish the bottle," said Dekker, "since you can't take it back to the house."

Mel laughed. He threw an arm around Dekker's shoulders. "You and me's gonna get along real good, John," he said. "Better than that goddam Frenchman always talking about his wife and six kids in Rimouski. And you can work, too. Jeeze, what am I gonna do when the war's done and all yous draft dodgers go home?"

"You're gonna have to wait for the next war," said Dekker. He stared into the straw. "But I'm not a draft

dodger. I'm a deserter from the United States Army. It's going to be years before they let me come home. Maybe my whole life."

"You need another beer." Mel got up. Dekker heard him rummaging around on the other side of the shed. Mel came back into the chicken coop carrying two more bottles of beer. He handed one to Dekker. They drained the bottles and Mel fetched two more. When these were finished, Mel disappeared into the dark again. He returned and handed Dekker an opened bottle. Dekker took a long swallow. His head spun. He had worked hard today. He had slept little during the last week. He wanted to go to bed and sleep for eighteen hours.

"...can't take Canadian beer, eh? Not like that low-alcohol stuff yous drink down in the States, eh?...I'm learnin' you to be my hired man, John. You gotta learn to drink Canadian beer...."

Dekker groped among the blankets Sharon had left him. Sharon. How would she look at him tomorrow? Dekker hauled his shoulder bag toward him. He could use it as a pillow, he thought. There. He had a pillow. Now he could go to sleep. He had meant to take off his bluejeans, which he had not taken off, except during his bath this evening, for over a week. But it no longer seemed worth the effort.

"Good sleep...we got a pile o' haying to do tomorrow...."

Dekker slept with one blanket beneath him and two above. Only his feet, which stuck out the ends of the blankets, were cold, despite the socks he wore. And his shoulder bag was lumpy. It twisted his head at an impossible angle. Goddam useless pillow, he thought, waking in the middle of the night. He shoved the shoulder bag away. The chicken coop was dark. Mel must have turned out the light when he left. Dekker had to piss. He creaked to his feet and shuffled out of the chicken coop, out of the shed. The muscles in his shoulders and back were like a net gone rigid. His legs ached. He spattered water against the side of the shed. He shuffled back inside. His eyes refused to open. He was almost sleepwalking. He found the blankets. Rolled back under them. Fell heavily asleep, despite the lack of a pillow.

The cold. Dekker dreamed about the Frenchman's room standing empty, his room in his parents' house standing empty, his bunk in the Florida barracks empty, or more likely occupied now by a new recruit on his way to a distant war. Phrases from the television news sculpted themselves against Dekker's chilled lips: Ho Chi Minh, Gulf of Tonkin, the Tet Offensive. He woke abruptly and

strained his eyes against the darkness. He thought of the men with whom he had done his basic training. In a few weeks some of them would be dead. Dekker, barring an accident, would not be. Did that make him smart or a coward? Or something more complicated? Dekker had refused to become cannon-fodder, as Mel had refused to become a guinea pig. But Dekker's father had fought in the Second World War. He had killed Krauts. He had probably been bullied by sergeants, too, but he had never gone A.W.O.L. Dekker tugged the blankets around his chin and rolled onto his side. The straw crackled beneath him. The sergeant's red face popped up before his eyes; for a moment he was in Florida again. No, he thought, don't make me go back. Dad and the government: neither of them's ever going to forgive me for this. At least I ran into Mel. I can make a new start here. I don't have any obligations to anyone, I can do what I like...Dekker shivered toward sleep...as long as Sharon didn't tell her parents anything about what had happened in the shed. That would be the end of him. Dekker would be back on the road with nowhere to go. He wasn't ready for that; he didn't think he would be able to stand it. He had been running too long.

He woke with a headache, thick eyes, a hangover. He sensed that it was very early. Nothing moved, but the light

was like a knife, hard and cutting. Dekker closed his eyes, rolled from beneath his blankets and leapt up and down to warm himself. He beat his fists against his chest. He blinked against the raw, unyielding light that drained through the wire mesh covering the upper half of the chicken coop door.

Dekker opened the door and walked through the shed into the barnyard. A heavy early morning dew darkened the ruts and polished the fields of uncut hay to a wet whitish sheen. The house and the horseshoe of sheds was silent. Sharon emerged from the door of the red-painted, weather-roughened barn and walked across the yard to the house. She was wearing a black barn jacket, her head was bowed and her hands were thrust into the pockets of her bluejeans.

She trailed past Dekker, averting her gaze. Dekker stepped in front of her. She stopped and stared at her feet. For a moment neither spoke.

Sharon said: "You got my pa drunk as a skunk last night."

Dekker shrugged his shoulders. "He offered me the beer...."

"Just when Ma had got him to quit," Sharon flashed. "That was when he got real bad before, the last time we had a hired man that drank with him. That was one good thing

about that Frenchman: he never touched a drop. Now you come along, he's gonna be just like he was before...."

"Don't blame me," Dekker said. "How the hell was I supposed to know?"

"I don't give a care if you knew or not. 'Cause of you, Pa's gonna start drinking again. And don't tell me it won't happen again, because it will, you watch, you won't be able to say no when he offers you a snort and even if you only have a drop he'll keep right on drinkin'...he's just gotta have somebody with him, that's all it takes to get him started.... I sobered him up last night. I washed his face and made him smoke his pipe to cover up the smell so Ma wouldn't know. You expect me to do that every time he ties one on?" She was looking at the ground, speaking angrily into the rutted earth. "I got half a mind to tell Ma. She'd have you out of here so quick if she knew...and the next hired man would be a guy that never touched a drop."

No, thought Dekker. He grabbed the shoulder of Sharon's barn jacket. "You lose me my job," he said, "and I'll tell your ma you came out to the shed and asked me to fuck you. And I'll tell her I did it."

The swear-word struck Sharon rigid. Dekker could see her blinking as she looked at her feet. He let go of her jacket. "How can you be so mean?" she said, glancing up at

him through eyes turned as small and prudish as her mother's. "How come? What made you say that?"

She was a hick schoolgirl, thought Dekker. He wondered how he had ever felt attracted to her. She was sobbing. "I mean it," he said. "You get me fired and just see what I say to your ma."

"Don't you see how bad you'll be for Pa?" Sharon said. "Don't you see what you're going to do to all of us if you stay here?"

"I have to stay here," Dekker said, feeling the panic gripping his chest again. "I can't go anywhere else."

"Eh?" Sharon looked at him in incomprehension. When he didn't reply, she said: "I got to go wake up Pa to do the milking. If he sleeps in, Ma'll know he's been drinking." She pulled her hands out of her pockets and walked away from him, her head bowed, in the direction of the house.

"Wash your face first," Dekker called after her,

Sharon kept walking without breaking stride. She opened the front door and disappeared into the house.

Dekker stood in the middle of the barnyard and looked at the softening shadows, the glimpses of fields wedged between the sheds. Security and contentment, he thought. Screw Sharon's objections. He swung his arms furiously and jumped up and down to loosen his stiffened muscles.

The front door of the house slammed. Dekker turned. Mel was stumping across the yard, his stride stiff but vigorous, his wispy hair splayed across his brow. "Goodday, John," he said. "I got some good news for you. I got the wife to see sense, you'll be workin' here permanent now. Go get your bag out of the shed. Starting tonight you're sleeping in the Frenchman's room." He lurched against Dekker's flank, clapped Dekker on the shoulder and said in a low voice: "Jeeze, did I ever hold my liquor good last night. The wife never even guessed I had a drop. Not too bad, eh?"

For a moment Dekker held himself silent. Then he turned toward the shed. "Nope," he murmured. "Not bad at all."