HIGH ON A HORSE

A Thesis

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by

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Date
This thesis consists of four short stories set in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. These stories do not attempt to represent the culture of the region in the sense of James Still or Chris Offut; rather, they tend to focus on the psychological aspects of character and themes of inner conflict. In this respect, the collection would be closer to the work of Elizabeth Maddox Roberts: The central characters are aware of a kinship with the mountains; they know that they are in some way bound to them, that to be born among them is to be born into the shelter of a third parent.

I have tried to develop these stories using different techniques in order to display my skill as a
writer. One story is written in the form of a personal journal, one relies almost entirely upon dialogue, and two of them utilize straight narration but from different points of view. The conflict found in these stories is resolved primarily through resignation; but resignation on a hillside is not so bad, is the suggestion.

Accepted by:  

[Signatures]

George E. Eldred
Teresa Beery
The phone out in the living room had rung a long time before stopping. Howard, lying on his stomach, had let his legs slide off the edge of the bed onto the floor putting him in a position of prayer. Had he been conscious, he could have appreciated the irony of this pose. But he was far from conscious. His brain had merely responded to the phone by triggering a movement, that then lost its impetus when the ringing stopped, leaving him on his knees at the side of the bed. A narrow beam of sunlight coming through an opening in the curtains of the east window fell across his broad shoulders and thick neck. Now there was a sensation of warmth in his brain.

His new wife, Rosalind, lay naked facing the wall under a sheet; her large head of glossy black curls was all that showed of her. With each breath, a soft cooing issued from the back of the throat as though a small hurt animal was hiding somewhere in the room. The telephone had not penetrated her profound sleep.

Howard was fully clothed except for one missing shoe, which he would never find, although he would look for it in all the usual places thinking it had to be there somewhere. Later on, he would think of the lost shoe as a sign, relating it to Rosalind, after she had gone.
Suddenly the phone started ringing again. He turned and dropped his hands to the floor and began crawling slowly toward the living room with enormous effort. But after only a few feet he changed direction and turned toward the bathroom trying to increase his speed. But to no avail—he barely reached the doorway before he began retching, heaving and heaving but producing only a small stream of yellow liquid for all his effort.

After the convulsions stopped he slumped to the floor beside the small glistening pool taking quick shallow breaths. He opened his wet eyes, seeing only gray at first, then hundreds of tiny black hairs wiggling past his vision—as if the souls of dead brain cells were racing into the void, victims of the combustion in his head. His one comfort was that the phone had stopped ringing.

After a moment it occurred to him that he was dying, that he would not recover, and he accepted this as his fate without regret. He collected himself once again into a crawling position and proceeded with all the urgency he could muster toward the living room. He reached the coffee table in front of the sofa and groped about the bill and magazines for a pencil. Then he grabbed an envelope at random, but rejected it in favor of a stiff piece of paper in the center of the table which he held up before his eyes with a shaky hand. It was their marriage certificate. He looked at it sadly thinking it was the last thing he would
ever read; then he turned it over to the clean side and began to write. After scribbling a few short statements he dropped the pencil and rolled over on his back heaving deep breaths. "Help me!"

A few moments later Randy Whitt opened the front door and called in:

"Hard! Where y' at? We been tryin to call---" Randy was a short, muscular young man dressed in paint-stained jeans and a clean white T-shirt. He stood by the door a moment taking a sip from a can of pop, then he came on into the room and saw Howard lying on the floor; he went over alarmed, his face drawn tense with concern. "What's a matter, man?"

"Help me," Howard whispered, not yet comprehending Randy, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Randy bent over him and looked him directly in the face. "Help you? How?"

"Not you..." Howard mumbled painfully, flicking an unsteady finger toward the ceiling, "...God!"

"What's a matter with you, Hard? Your eyes are red as far."

"Don't makemetal talk," Howard replied in one quick breath.

"Want us to lift you up on the couch? Lemme go get Mousey and we'll help you on the couch."

Randy went over to the door and yelled for Mousey, who came in similarly dressed though his T-shirt wasn't as
clean. But...Mousey was conscious of entering forbidden territory; he was being allowed into Howard's house for the first time. He was a little surprised by the opportunity but not humbled; he quickly assumed a bemused attitude: "What a you want, man?"

"Hard's got a bad hangover," Randy said, finishing off the pop and setting the can down on the coffee table. "Grab his feet and let's lift him up on the couch."

"He's got one shoe on and one shoe off," Mousey said. "What a you want me to do?"

"Just pull it off an grab his feet."

As they lifted him onto the couch, Howard began to moan. He squeezed his eyes so tightly shut that they almost disappeared between his high cheek-bones and forehead. When he opened them there were tears running out the corners.

"Don't cry on us, Hard--jus cause you can't take it," Mousey said, grinning at Randy.

"Shut up, Mousey," Randy said. "Can't you see he's in bad shape!" He pointed to the bedroom door. "Go in there to the bathroom an wet a tal."

Mousey turned and went into the bedroom as Randy bent over Howard and began patting him on the shoulder.

"Don't cry, Hard. You'll be aw-right."

Howard spoke with quick forceful breaths: "I thought—I was goin—to die—"

"Really, man...?"
Mousey came out of the bathroom into the bedroom with a wet towel, and began looking for something to steal, something small and expensive, something in the back of a drawer of jewelry box that Howard wouldn't miss for a while in order to leave a cold, ambiguous trail. But he stepped in the puddle and was scraping his foot across the carpet when he looked over the other side of the room and saw Rosalind. She was still lying on her side facing the wall in a deep coma-like sleep.

He stood there staring at the curve of her body beneath the thin sheet. He started to ease over for a closer look when he heard Randy call his name. He backed away silently and returned to the living room, throwing Randy the wet towel. Randy folded it neatly and laid it across Howard's forehead.

"This'll help you Hard."

"Nothing can..."

"I never seen you this bad. What'd you do last night?"

"Don't--make me talk," Howard said feebly, reaching up and pulling the towel down over his eyes, then pressing his palms hard into the sockets.

"You want some asburn?" Randy asked.

Howard nodded faintly.

"I'll git 'em," Mousey said, already turnin toward the bedroom door.
"Naw," Howard grunted, reaching up blindly, touching Randy's arm. "Randy git 'em."

Randy went into the bedroom and Mousey sat down in a chair opposite the couch, putting his feet up on the long, low coffee table and lighting cigarette. "Don't want a smoke do you, Hard?"

"No. What a you doin in here?"

"I just came in to help you up on the couch, man. Anything wrong with that?"

"Don't bother nothing—"

Randy found the aspirins in the medicine cabinet and quickly filled a water glass. When he came out into the bedroom he looked over and saw Rosalind. He crept over to the foot of the bed trying to get a look at her face, but it was obscured by the soft tangle of black curls. Nevertheless, Randy was certain he had never seen that head of hair before. He returned to the living room.

"Here's the aspirins, Hard."

Howard moved the towel back and raised his head just high enough to lay the aspirins on his dried-out tongue and take a sip of water. But after it all hit his stomach it came right back up spilling down his chin. He set the glass down and wiped his chin with the towel, then folded it over to a clean side and placed it back over his eyes. "Sick, man. Sickest I've ever been—"

"You want me and Mousey to stick aroun awhile?"
"No. Go on to work."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll be awright. What you-all got done, anyway? Finish that scaffold yet?"

"No. We still like the back side cause Jimmy ain't showed up in two days."

"Shit. Well, you two go on. No, wait! Take this tal an put ice in it. Hurry."

Randy took the towel and went through the hallway that led into the kitchen. Mousey finished his cigarette and coughed into his fist as he squashed it out in an ashtray.

"What was you drinkin las night, Hard?"

"Never mind."

"Moonshine?"

"Hushup, Mousey."

"You had you a good'n didn't you? Bout killed yourself from the looks of it. Bout died, huh? You know what I always wondered about, man? Where to 'y go after Heaven?"

"I wouldn't worry bout that if I was you Mousey,"

Howard said faintly.

Mousey put his hands behind his head and recrossed his legs, then he looked over at Howard as if he was trying to solve a hard math problem.

"When you goinna gib me a raise, Hard?"

Howard did not respond, so Mousey continued.

"Say, Man! When you goinna gib me a raise?"
"Shut up, Mousey."

"You know I'm worth it. I need the money. Mommy wants me to move out on my own."

"I don't doubt that—"

"Come on, Hard. Gib me a raise. You know I'm worth it."

"You ain't worth what you're gettin now. So shut up!"

"The hell with you then," Mousey sneered. "I'll just hit you over the damn head with this ashtray and take all your fuckin money. How's that suit you?"

"Try it."

"You thank I won't don't you?"

"You're fard, Mousey! Now leave me alone! My head's fuckin killin me!"

Mousey stood up without a word and started for the front door as Randy came back in with the ice-filled towel.

"Where you goin?" Randy asked, frowning.

Mousey stopped and turned around, putting his hands on his hips. There was a little pout on his face. "Poolroom."

"What for?" Randy's frown deepened. "We're gettin ready to go to work."

"I ain't."

"Whata you mean, you ain't?"

"Hard fard me."

Randy took the towel over and handed it to Howard.

"What's he talkin about? You far him Hard?"
Howard placed the towel over his face and pressed it firmly into his eye sockets. "Yeah."

"What for?"

"Said he was goin to rob me."

Randy looked over at Mousey. "Said what?"

"I was jus kiddin him," Mousey said.

"This ain't no time to be kiddin him," Randy said in disgust.

"He can still take a joke, can't he?"

Randy looked down at Howard. "You know how he is, Hard. Give him his job back so we can go to work, okay?"

Howard pressed the ice-filled towel deeper into his sockets; the pain of the cold against his eyes seemed to lessen the pain behind them, like fighting fire with fire. He was afraid to move or speak for fear of losing this seeming sense of relief, of holding the pain at bay while it held him at bay. For the first time in his life he had total concentration. He could hear but not comprehend Randy's words: "Hurry, Hard. Them people are already mad cause you ain't been there this ho week. If I show up late aw by myself cause Jimmy ain't here neither they're really goin to be pissed."

"See!" Mousey exclaimed, stepping over to the couch.

"He needs me but he won't gib me a raise."

"Whata you say, Hard?" Randy went on, ignoring Mousey.

"Let us to go work?"
When Howard did not respond, Randy threw up his arms in disgust. "Ah, Lord! You all argue about it. I don't care!"

"I ain't arguin," Mousey said defiantly. "I'd jus as soon go to the poolroom anyway. He can pay me off."

"Well, do what you want," Randy said. "I'm goin to call Donetta."

"Donetta?" Mousey said, rolling his eyes. "You jus left the house ten minits ago!"

"You better be talkin to Hard, not me," Randy shot back. Then he looked down at Howard. "I'm goinna call Donetta, Hard. I thank I'll jus go on back home."

Howard moved his lips but no sound came out. Randy shrugged and picked up the phone and carried it over to the large picture window over-looking the town. He dialed home and it rang several times before his wife answered. "What took you so long," he said low into the receiver, looking out the window in the general direction of his house. She said she was out sitting on the back steps and didn't hear the first few rings. Then he started telling her about what was happening, how Howard had fired Mousey and that he didn't think he would get to work today. She didn't like all this and told him to keep pestering Howard, that sooner or later he would give in. He told her he didn't think so because of how sick Howard was, but that he would try one more time anyway. Then he turned around and noticed that
Mousey had disappeared, and realized he hadn't heard the front door open or close. He told her to hold on a minute.

He went over to the doorway of the bedroom, looked in and saw Mousey squatted down beside the bed. He glanced back over his shoulder to see that Howard still had his face covered with the towel. "What the hell you doin," he whispered frantically, sticking his head in through the doorway. "Get away from there."

Mousey put his finger up to his lips to hush Randy, then spoke in that low breathless whisper thieves use in a darkened house, almost a sucking in of air. "I bet she ain't got nothin on." He turned and lifted the edge of the sheet slowly and carefully until he could see part of her back and hips.

"You goin to wake her up," Randy whispered. "Get away from there."

Mousey motioned him over with a sideways jerk of his head. "She's passed out cold. Come over here and take a peek."

The temptation was too much for Randy and he eased toward the bed bending low to get a look. "God..."

"Told you she didn't have nothin on," Mousey said out of the side of his mouth. "This is killin me." He reached down with his free hand and rubbed his crotch.

"I bet that's Rosalind," Randy said into Mousey's ear. "That girl Hard met in Florda."
"Yeah," Mousey replied, his eyes as wide open as he could get them. "Jus look at the sweet thing. I wish I could see'er tits."

He carefully lifted the sheet a little higher; Rosalind smacked her lips with a negative groan and jerked it out of his hand. Both of them fell silently to the floor beside the bed. They waited and listened with fearful expressions but she didn't move again. Soon they could hear her soft snoring, and they slipped quietly back out of the room. They immediately looked over at Howard, who was breathing deeply, the towel still over his face.

Randy motioned for Mousey to stay put and went back over to the phone. His wife wanted to know what took him so damn long? He told her they were trying to beg Mousey's job back. Then he said he had to go, but that he would call her later or else be home in a few minutes. He told her twice he loved her before hanging up.

Just then he was startled by Howard's voice, which was low and mean sounding: "What are you—all doin? Why aren't you gone? I heard you messin around—"

"I was just talkin to Donetta," Randy said innocently, going back over to the couch. "I had to tell her we won't goin to work today. I can't go down there without some help. Give Mousey's job back so we can go, okay? Them people are wantin to see a showin. Besides, I can't afford to miss work
jus because of everbody else—Jimmy not showin up and Mousey runnin his mouth, and you—"

Mousey came around the back of the couch and looked down at him. "You know I was jus kiddin, Hard. If it wun't for you I'd still be servin my time. They'd probably send me back. So you know I was just jokin."

Howard reached up and adjusted the towel, shifting the load of ice toward the bridge of his nose. "Okay, go on. Just watch your mouth from now on."

Mousey grinned. "I knew I could do it—I'm a con. I knew I could beg my job back. There's a sucker born ever minit." He reached over and gave Howard's foot a shake.

"Get the sonofabitch outta here, Randy, before I kill him! Go! Now!" Howard tried to raise up but fell back with a groan.

"Let's go Mousey; you dumbass," Randy said, pushing him toward the door. He opened it and let him out, then turned back to Howard. "You want me to tell them you'll be there tomorrow, Hard? They've been askin why you ain't been there. Where you been anyway?"

"Don't worry bout it."

"I saw the weddin rang on your finger. Is that it? Did you get married?"

"Yeah, I got married," Howard said, flatly. "Went over to Clintwood for one of those quickies, took thirty minutes."
"You don't seem too happy bout it."

"Goddamn my head hurts so bad how in hell you think I can be happy!"

"Well, congratulations anyway. I'm glad for you, man, I really am."

"Okay, thanks."

"Maybe we can get more work now too," Randy added.

"Whata you mean?"

"Cause people won't be thinkin you're trying to screw their wives anymore. You got one of your own."

"Yeah. That's a good one. Go on. I can't talk no more. I'm about to die."

"No, you ain't, man. You jus wish you was," Randy said, closing the door.

II

The sun had moved across the sky to the other side of the house and was shining through the front door glass, almost reaching the couch where Howard still lay. The ice in the towel had melted hours ago and had been soaked up by the pillow beneath his head. He had not tried to get up all day; in fact, he had urinated into the empty lemonade can while turned on his side, then set it back under the coffee table. He couldn't remember if he had slept or not, and took this as an indication that he probably had, some. But for the most part, it had been a long day of constant throbbing,
sickening pain. It was only now that it was momentary relief as it ebbed. He removed the towel from his face and opened his eyes. He was relieved that the tiny black, pubic-like hairs that had danced before his vision all day were gone.

He was thirsty. He reached over on the coffee table and picked up the glass of water and brought it to his lips, downing it in big gulps. It stayed down and he thanked God and sighed.

He lay there several more minutes before suddenly remembering something—something that seemed to have happened over a hundred years ago. He reached over on the coffee table and picked up the piece of paper he had written on earlier that morning and brought it over before his eyes.

_To Jake Clark my pistol Randy Whitt everything else—cremate me without ceremony put ashes in river—Howard D. Parade._

He turned it over and read the bold print on the other side: CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE. It was dated May the third—yesterday. He turned it back over and read the will through again, then laid it back over on the table just as he had found it. "Goddam," he said aloud. "Ain't that something!"

He put the damp towel back over his eyes and lay there quietly while another wave of pain came and went. Then he opened his eyes beneath the towel and stared into the
darkness. Tiny points of light twinkled here and there and disappeared, then reappeared in different places in the vaulted blackness inside the towel. It was the tiny universe of Howard D. Parade. He wondered if his mother and father were somewhere in this night sky looking back at him, yet not revealing their presence, just purposely wanting to be elusive--the dead are still alive somewhere. Right?

He tried to picture his own obituary, blocked out in front of his eyes, just as it would appear on the back page of the Cumberland County News:

Howard D. Parade, 35 of Edgewater,
died early Tuesday morning at his residence apparently of--No!

No, that was too easy. He began again: Howard Dexter Parade. Now everybody would know that the D. did not stand for devil. Age 35. But he didn't look it. That little boy grin did not look a day over 26 or 27. So why should he admit he was 35—even to his new wife Rosalind. He would tell her the truth later on when they were married a good month or two.

_Died early Tuesday morning of alcohol poisoning as a result of his wedding reception._ But it had not been reception. It was a spur-of-the-moment party thrown together by his cousin Jake. No ones leaves until all the booze in the house is consumed was Jake's motto. This is a major event! The marriage of my cousin, Howard—who is like a
brother to me. Everybody get drunk. Real drunk. That was easy for Parade to do.

*Parade was a graduate of Edgewater Junior College, and was in business for himself* (ain't that the truth) *as a building contractor. He will long be remembered for the porch roof that collapsed at 301 Carolina Avenue. Miraculously no one was injured in the incident. Parade blamed faulty building materials, the unusually heavy snowfall, and possibly termites. On the other hand, his most noted achievement is the beautiful ornate facade on the front of the Cumberland County Library building. Most noted achievement a facade.*

*Parade is survived by a sister, Mrs. Ruth Gusman of Columbus, Ohio. She comes back to visit every Memorial Day with her three materialistic children and hero-of-the-assembly-line husband talking through their nose in that Ohio accent. When they were little, she and Howard had a secret—a naughty secret. *Parade is also survived by a first wife, Margaret Ann Stanley of*—the little bitch of Burning Fork Road, enough said.*

*His current wife, the former Rosalind Jones of Daytona Beach, Florida was in residence at the time of death. He met her at the Surf Side Club on the strip. She was celebrating her 21st birthday with her roommate, Rita. They were playing "golden oldies" and he fell in love with her while dancing*
to "Lonely Teardrops". I think I've finally found something exotic he whispered in her ear at closing time.

Parade was preceded in death by his parents: Henry Parade, a Kentucky Power company retiree; and Verda "Verdie" Parade, a former 5th grade teacher in the Cumberland County School System. Parade himself had found their bodies. There was disbelief and panic and confusion. His mother lying peacefully on the bed would never awaken from her sleep. His father out in the garage in his pajamas, slumped over in an old rocking chair, the pistol still gripped in his hand. His father had asked him to stop by the night before, there was a subtle urgency in his voice. But Parade had put off going by in favor of fucking someone he could not now stand to see on the street, and whom he would remember and hate for the rest of his life.

There will be no service for Parade, as requested in his last will and testament. The body was shipped directly to Lexington for cremation. In lieu of flowers, send nothing.

Well that was about it except for imagining Jake standing on the middle bridge throwing his ashes in the river, saying he was like a brother to me.

He pulled the towel from his face and stared at the ceiling. Could it be possible that—could it be simply that I never made it past the fifth grade. Could it possibly be just as simple as that? I never really got out of my
mother's room? The cock of the walk. What an embarrassment I must have been to her...

He replaced the towel and began thinking about Rosalind, wondering why she wasn't up yet. He was glad she had gotten drunk too; at least he wouldn't have to take all the blame. But still, he dreaded facing her. If Mommy was alive she'd put a stop to this whole thing right now. He lay there for a long time on the verge of tears, tenderly missing his mother and father. Finally, he dozed off again.

III

Rosalind came out of the bedroom wearing a long flowing blue silk robe trimmed in white lace. She came over and sat down on the arm of the couch at Howard's feet, sat there looking down at him with a broad smile, then she gave his foot a tug. "Howard. Ya okay?"

"Mousey-you-son-of-a-bitch-I---" He raised up on one elbow and removed the towel from his face. He saw Rosalind and slapped his forehead with his palm. "Shit! I'm sorry baby, I thought---" Then he began rubbing his forehead. "Ow, that hurt!"

"You must have been dreaming," she said, blowing a loose curl away from the corner of her mouth. Howard loved to see her do that.
He continued rubbing his forehead, pinching it between his finger tips and thumb. "Yeah, it was terrible. I was dreamin about Jake."

They both laughed.
"You aw right?" he then asked seriously.
"I'm okay," she replied. "A little woozy maybe."
"What time is it?"
"It's almost four."
"Four! God!" He shook his head and sighed. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to get that drunk last night."
"I know. Neither did I. Jake kept toasting and toasting---"
"That bastard!"
"Is there anything I can get you, Howard? You hungry?"
"Yeah, I'm hungry as hell but I don't think I can eat anythang."
"How about a cold beer then? That always helps. I think I'll have one."
"Yeah. Bring me one."

She got up and went through the hallway into the kitchen. Howard groaned and slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position, producing a small tremor in his head as if it was going to erupt again. He pressed the warm damp towel to his face and sat there bent over the coffee table for a moment, then he straightened the towel out and draped it around his neck. He sat there staring down at the piece of
paper. When he heard her coming he reached down and slid it beneath the pile of bills with one finger, as if it was a discard in a hand of poker. Then he leaned back against the couch and tilted his head toward the ceiling. She returned with two cans of beer and handed him one with a cheery smile. "Here you go." She bent over and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "Did you want a glass?"

"No, can's fine, thanks."

He took a drink and contemplated the sensation as it went down. "Ah."

"Sure you're okay?" she asked, looking at him intently as she sat down in the chair opposite the couch.

"Yeah. I think I'll make it now."

"You didn't make it to bed last night," she said, raising the can to her lips. "You must have passed out on the couch. I waited for you."

"But I did make it to bed. I know that because I woke up there this mornin."

"You've still got your clothes on."

"Yeah, I know," he said trying to look baffled. "But I still came to bed. I had to get up this mornin to answer the phone. I laid down on the couch and dozed off I guess."

"You don't remember coming home last night?"

"I don't remember drivin, no."

"Some people from the party brought us."

"Yeah?"
"They helped you inside and you kept wishing them a merry Christmas," she said, grinning.

"Goddamn...its May."

She reached up to scratch her head, her hand disappearing into the mass of black curls. "It's funny. It was our wedding night." She looked a little squeamish. "Don't you think that's strange?"

He pinched his brow with his fingertips and thumb, closed his eyes; when he opened them they were full of guilt. "Yeah, I don't know what to say."

"It's okay, I guess..."

"No. No, it's not okay; it's ironic. I can't believe it. I couldn't wait for you to get here. I worried myself to death that your plane would crash or something. Now this--"

"We can make up for it. We're married; we're married now and that's what counts, isn't it? You know Rita kept kidding me, saying there's lots of guys in Daytona—why can't you fall for one of them? Or, looks like I'm going to lose another roommate. But she did think it was very romantic the way you sent the money, and wrote get a one-way ticket and let's see what happens. She'll flip when she finds out what happened!"

"Yeah, you'll have to call her. And your parents too. Wonder what they'll say? Haven't even met me."

"Oh, I'm not worried about them." She reached into her pocket for a pack of cigarettes and lit one. The steel blue
smoke turned pale gray as she exhaled into the shaft of sunlight above her head. "Want one?"

"Yeah, give me one."

She got up and kissed him again, then placed the cigarette between his wet lips. He inhaled and exhaled without touching it. "Thanks baby doll," he said out the corner of his mouth.

She lit another for herself and strolled over to the picture window and looked out. "What's that big yellow building down there with the clock tower?"

"Courthouse. Middle of town."

"It says nine thirty."

"Clock hasn't worked in years."

"The hills are so pretty, Howard."

"Redbuds and dogwoods are in bloom, trilliums are up in the hollers."

"What exactly is a holler?"

"See where two hills come together and form a kind of cleavage that runs up between them? That's your basic holler."

"There's lots of them."

"Now you're getting the picture."

"You've got a beautiful view."

"We," Howard corrected. "We—got a beautiful view."
"Yes—we." She turned around and slowly opened the front of her robe and held it apart. "You like this view, Howard?"

He looked her up and down. "I always did like mountains and valleys." He took a sip of beer and continued looking at her over the top of the can.

"You didn't last night." She closed her robe and tied it.

"I just wanted to stop at Jake's so he could meet you. Have a few drinks to celebrate. I didn't know it was going to turn to a party. Even though he's my cousin and best friend we still cut each other's throat occasionally. Used to take girls away from each other, shit like that. We try to out-do each other for some reason. Out-drink each other sometimes. When he brings out a bottle of tequila it's a sign, a challenge." He shrugged.

She moved back over to the chair and slid into it. "I tried to get you to stop."

"I know. I'm sorry. It was just too late for me to understand by that time I guess."

"When we first went in and you showed him the marriage certificate he said it had an expiration date on it. I know he was just trying to be funny, but the way he said it seemed—"

"Don't pay any attention to that. He thinks he knows me—he don't. This time it's for good, Rosalind. Because I
want it to be. I want to change my life. I really love you. Last night may not be such a bad sign. We'll look back on this someday and laugh." He smiled to indicate future laughter.

She put out her cigarette and leaned back in the chair. "I just want to know that I'm not like Margaret. You once said you married her because you felt sorry for her."

"Well, that's the only reason I can think of. But she didn't even appreciate that. The little bitch of Burnin Fork Road. God! do I have to have a hangover and thank about her at the same time."

"Sorry," she said grinning.

"It's just that I could of had some money today if it wasn't for her breakin me up all the time. I used to have first-class carpenters workin for me--now all I got is fucking jailbirds! Margaret was the blacksheep of my life, nothing but trouble."

"I'll bring you good luck."

"I know you will." He finished the beer and sat the can down on the table. "I can't wait to walk into Marlow's Country Palace with you on my arm. You're probably the talk of the town awready."

"Well, that's something I've never been—the talk of the town."

"Me and this town feed off each other, you know. They're bored and I'm outrageous."
"Is that why you have to do everything in such a big way?" she asked, lighting a cigarette, then handing him the pack and lighter across the table.

He smiled bashfully, lighting up. "I have to keep up my image."

She looked at him thoughtfully through the haze of smoke in the shaft of afternoon sunlight. "Sure I'm not just someone helping you cultivate your image? That's not all I am is it?"

He sat back and took a puff, watching the smoke as he exhaled. "I can't say that that's not part of it. There ain't a girl in this town that can hold a light to you. But that's not the reason I married you. We're just alike, Rosalind, you and I are just alike, cut from the same cloth. I fell in love with you the night I met you. Since then I've made three trips to Florida. And I hate to fly; put my life in somebody else's hands. Then one day I knew you were the one, the one I really wanted. That's when I sent the money for a first-class one-way ticket. End of story."

"I didn't get one-way," she began hesitantly. "I got a regular round-trip just in case."

"You did? Well, I can understand that, sure."

"It was Rita's idea, really. We talked it over. Rita's sensible like that."
"Oh, Rita's sensible, huh?" he said a little derisively, squashing his cigarette. "Then what does that make us?"

"I don't know," she said softly. "What do you call people who don't make love on their wedding night?"

"We made love at the airport motel twenty minutes after you got off the plane at Blue Grass Field. Twice before going to sleep and once when we woke up. That was my wedding night! That's when I knew I would never let you go. Rosalind listen. Listen to me a minute, okay? The biggest mistake people make with me is that they don't listen, they don't believe what I'm tellin them. What we should be talking about here is the fact that I almost died this morning."

"Died?"

"Yes, I almost died."

"But how?" She leaned forward.

"Your body can just take so much liquor. What I had last night nearly killed me. You understand?"

"Oh, Howard." She got up and went around the coffee table and sat down beside him. "You're scaring me."

"I'm sorry. I love you."

"I love you too." She blew a curl away from her cheek, knowing he liked to see her do that. She pushed him gently back against the couch and kissed him. He reached around her and pulled her closer, then slipped his hand inside her robe. They started sliding down the couch together but then,
he started getting dizzy. "Wait! Let me up a minute! Hurry! I'm gettin dizzy." They both raised up and parted. He sat there blinking his eyes and breathing heavily. "Shit!"

"You okay, Howard?"

"Yeah." He took the edge of the towel and wiped his face. "You know, I hope Jake feels this fuckin bad."

"I'm sure he does, if not worse. If it's any comfort to you, I think you won, you got the last drink and the worm. Now you can quit winners. Okay?"

"Never again, I promise."

"I don't want to see you kill yourself," she said automatically. Then she cupped her hand over her mouth and her voice was muffled. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about that. Forget it. They could have died of cancer or heart attacks, anythang, they're dead, I've accepted that. We all have to die."

"I almost drowned once," she said. "It was when I was a little girl. We were out to Echo Park at Easter time. I was chasing this duck, and was so intent on catching it that I went right on in the lake after it. My mother said that for a moment all you could see was my little hat floating on top of the water. They had to pump me out."

"That's an interesting story." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "You sure I'm not just a duck in Echo Park?"
She wrinkled up her nose. "Can I think about that while I use the bathroom? I have to go pee."

"Sure. Think about it while you pee."

She got up to go but he reached out and grabbed her hand. "Why don't you run some water in the tub. I need to soak for a while. I'll bring us two more cold beers."

"Sounds great. I'll bring the smokes."

"And another thang. I'm glad you didn't drown in the lake."

"I'm glad you didn't die this morning either." She bent down and kissed him, then turned and went into the bedroom.

Howard raised himself up off the couch and took a few unsteady steps around the table. He threw the towel back on the couch, glad to be shed of it, like a yoke he had worn all day. He began unbuttoning his shirt as he walked over to the window to look out. The sun was still high above the tree line on the distant ridge. He was surprised that there was so much daylight left. He felt calm and easy, almost serene. There was something about the end of a bad hangover that was almost as good as the beginning of a drunk. But you had to have what was in between to make it so.

Just then the door eased open and Randy stuck his head inside. "Hard."

"You're goin to have to start knockin, son." Howard said, without taking his eyes from the window. "What is it?"
"I was jus goin to tell you what we got done today," he said, coming on in. "We got the scaffold built all the way around. Jimmy finally showed up. I just dropped him and Mousey off at the poolroom." He reached in his back pocket. "I had to get some more lumber. Here's the bill."

"Put it over there on the table with the others," Howard said, removing his shirt, watching the rush hour traffic on the by-pass across the river.

Randy went over to the couch and sat down, unfolded the bill and placed it on top of the pile. "Shoo, I'm tired."

"Well, don't plan on restin there. We're gettin ready to take a bath."

"Where's she at?"

"In the bathroom."

"You feelin better?"

Before Howard could answer the phone rang. He turned around and looked at it, then turned back to the window. "Get that."

Randy picked up the receiver and said, "Hello," then he looked over at Howard. "It's your cousin Jake."

"Ask him what he wants."

Randy did so and listened for the reply. "He wants to know if you want him to bring you car by?"

"Not now. Tell him after while."

Randy spoke into the phone again, then listened. "He said to tell you that you was one of a kind, Hard."
Howard looked back over his shoulder and smiled. "Tell him I said he would crawl over his dead mother's body to get to a two-bit whore, then hang up before he can answer back."

Randy shook his head reluctantly but nevertheless repeated verbatim everything Howard had said into the phone, then hung up. "You thank he'll call back?"

"No, I know him like a book."

"Well, I was goin to tell you what the Wilsons said today," Randy said, as he began straightening the pile of bills. "They want to leave off some stuff now. They were wonderin if you were goin to be there tomorrow to talk about it?"

"What do they want to leave out?"

"The outside stairway for one thang. I overheard them talkin about it."

"Shit!"

"You'd better come down there tomorrow, Hard."

"Okay." He was watching a hawk circling above the bypass. It always did the same thing each time he noticed it. It would glide on the updraft, swaying from side to side trying to keep its balance in the current. Once it got high enough above the ridge it would fold back its wings and dive, shooting straight across the river, disappearing behind Town Mountain. It was one of Howard's favorite sights. Someday, he thought, someday I'll rise with you.

"Hey, Hard, you really did get married!"
"What?"
"You really did get married."
"Thank I was lyin, did you?"
"No, but I jus found your marriage certificate."

Howard turned from the window and walked over as if he were merely going for a cigarette, leaned over and delicately jerked the certificate from Randy's hands. "I wish to God that people would leave my damn stuff—the hell alone!"

"I was jus lookin at it, man. What's wrong with that?"

"When it's framed an put on the wall you can look at it all you want."

Howard stood at the window looking at the certificate. Then turned it over. Suddenly it struck him that he had left his wife out of his will. He heard Randy's voice: "You'll get tard of her—jus like you do all the rest of 'um. But if she's got any sense she'll get tard of your hatefullness first—"

"Yeah? You know I almost died this mornin, son."

"I don't thank almost dyin is goin to help you none, Hard. It's goin a take livin, man."

Howard looked out at the river, the mountains and the sky, looking hard for a sign.
JOHN BUTCH PRESTON

SYMPTOMS OF A SICK CAT DYING

It is a quiet morning in July in a small southern Appalachian town. At 308 Caroline Avenue the doorbell is ringing, and Mrs. Mattie Riddle is rushing through the dining room archway into the living room wiping her hands on her apron, which she stops to smooth out before opening the door. The person standing there is a heavily madeup drag queen who smiles without showing her teeth: "Hello. Are you Mrs. Riddle? Kenneth’s grandmother?"

"Yes, I am. Can I help you?"

"I’m Marcy Brite. I’m here to see Kenneth."

"Oh, well, please come in. He’s in his room. I’ll go and get him. Please have a seat."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Riddle goes back through the archway and turns left, softly calling his name. Marcy smiles to herself as she takes a seat on the sofa and smoothes out her blue, ankle length dress, similar in style to Mrs. Riddle’s. Soon, Mrs. Riddle returns to the archway. "Hold on, let me check the back porch." This time she goes to the right. Marcy takes out her compact and applies more makeup, reaching up under the rim of her glasses. Mrs. Riddle returns again. "I thought maybe he was on the back porch with the cat. We have a sick cat."

"I’m sorry to hear that. But Kenneth...?"
"I don't understand. He was here just a while ago. His car is still in the driveway, so he couldn't have gone far."

"Well, do you mind if I wait? I really do need to see him."

"Of course you can wait, Honey. Maybe I could get you something; some coffee or tea?"

"Oh, no thank you, Mrs. Riddle. I'm all right."

Mrs. Riddle sits with a grunt in a padded rocker nearby and gently begins to rock. "Well, he can't be gone long. I think he was expecting you. Have you known Kenneth long?"

"Yes, I've know him a long time."

"Well, you do look familiar. I bet you knew him as a boy here in town, before he went to Flow-da?"

"No, mam. I'm from Florida too. I just arrived here on the bus this morning."

"Oh, my goodness! I'm sure he'll be surprised."

"I'm his fiancee, Mrs. Riddle."

Mrs. Riddle stops rocking. "What? He's never spoken a word of this to me! What did you say your name was?"

"I'm Marcy Brite, from the Miami area."

"No, no, he's never mentioned you. He's never mentioned a Marcy Brite."

"I've found him to be quite secretive at times too."

"But he would have told me Honey. I'm sure."
"You shouldn't feel slighted, Mrs. Riddle. It's been a very uncertain engagement. I haven't really told my parents either, to be honest."

"I'm sure Kenneth is more certain than that. He always said he wouldn't get married until he was sure, absolutely sure. That's why he's waited so long."

"Yes, well—I'm afraid he's going to have to wait some more. You see—I can't marry him after all."

"Can't marry him? But I don't understand...?"

"Kenneth will understand, Mrs. Riddle. Believe me. We've had a very understanding relationship."

"This is all very hard to get straight. I'm afraid you're going to have to start all over."

"It's really quite simple, Mrs. Riddle. Kenneth and I have been engaged for the past six months. But now I want to end it. And I think maybe he does too."

"But does he love you? Do you love him?"

"We just weren't meant for each other after all. I think we both realize that now."

"But you've come all the way from Flow-da, Honey. It must be more serious than that."

"I like to travel. I don't mind. Besides, I never expected Kenneth to stay so long on his visit home. It's been almost a month; I couldn't wait for his return."

Mrs. Riddle, although still somewhat in a state of shock, begins to gently rock again. "Yes, he's never stayed
this long before, even though I always beg and beg him to stay longer. He's always been in such a hurry to get back there, like Flow-da was the center of world or something."

"There's a lot more to do in Florida, Mrs. Riddle."

"Yes, Honey, I know. All we do around here is just live and breathe, I guess. But my husband Joe and I used to go there on vacation years ago. He was high-up in the bank here. We would usually go sometime in January; and we would take Mary Ann out of school for two weeks so she could go too. Mary Ann was Kenneth's mother. She's gone now, I guess you know."

"Kenneth said she went—fast."

"Yes. She just shrugged off all the warning signs. I begged her and begged her to have herself looked at. She was just so frivolous. Then it was too late."

"But she hid it from Kenneth until the last—it wasn't fair."

"Maybe not. It was her decision. What good would it have done?"

"He was hurt."

Mrs. Riddle sits forward in the rocker, gripping the curved arms. "I was hurt too; she was my daughter; but that's that! Why have you come all the way from Flow-da to marry her son?"

"But I don't want to marry him, Mrs. Riddle. I've come all the way here to tell him that in person."
Mrs. Riddle leans back and begins to gently rock again. "Kenneth is a good person. He comes from a good family. Although we've never really been what you could call church people, we've always been respected here. Caroline Avenue is right on the river; all the best families live on the river here."

Marcy smiles without showing her teeth. "But every person is divided. Every person has two families—a mother's family and father's family. I can see that Kenneth's mother's family live on the river here, but that's only half the story."

"I knew you were going to bring up Dan sooner or later. Dan was well educated; that was his in here. There are people here who will tell you that education can sometimes be a substitute for money. But still, Joe and I were against it—and as it turned out, rightly so. We begged and begged her not to marry him. She made such a fool of herself after he left; trotting after him everywhere he and that other woman went. I sometimes think had he not left her so hurt and vulnerable..."

There is a moment of silence. Marcy folds her hands in her lap and finally speaks: "And where was Kenneth all this time?"

"Here with me and Joe. That was when he was a boy, of course. We kept him while she followed Dan all over the
country. It's little wonder that Kenneth left home as soon as he was old enough."

"Kenneth kind of ran off too—wouldn't you say—like his father?"

"No, no, Honey, he was never like Dan. Kenneth was his mother made over again, running after elusive dreams. I don't think he has amounted to much in Flow-da. I have to help him out from time to time."

"He's been waiting to be discovered, Mrs. Riddle."

"Discovered? For what?"

"Oh, nothing quite definite—just some vague notion that some agent will come along, see him on the beach or somewhere, make him a star or something—"

Mrs. Riddle scoffs at this. "But he's almost thirty, Honey."

"Yes. You don't know how he used to fear thirty."

"What do you mean, used to?"

"He just doesn't anymore—he's changed."

Mrs. Riddle emits a tiny giggle. "You could be right about that. He's started a beard. It's practically grown out since he's been here. In fact, he's already trimming it. He asked for scissors this morning."

"Well—I can't wait to see it. He's never done anything like this before—afraid it would make him look too old. But still, I don't think it would be impressive enough to make me change my mind."
Mrs. Riddle shifts in the rocker and looks toward the archway.

"I do wish he would come back soon; I hate knowing all this before he does."

"I'm pretty sure he knows why I'm here. It won't be a shock, I can assure you."

"But Kenneth doesn't handle disappointment very well. I know he still loves you. He won't eat a bite and just mopes around. And he claims the cat won't survive. It's a bad outlook."

"The cat has symptoms?"

"Well, he throws up. We've changed his diet but it doesn't help. The vet thinks it's just old age. I know we got him the year Joe retired from the bank, so I guess he is getting up in years."

"Is your husband deceased, Mrs. Riddle?"

"He died of a heart attack about five years ago; not more than a year after Mary Ann passed away. He never really got over her death. So that just leaves me with my sister Hazel and her children, who are grown, of course, and have children."

"But you have Kenneth too."

"Oh, yes, I know. But he lives in Flow-da, Honey. He calls from time to time, and comes back each summer in July for a visit. His birthday's in July you know. Ha, Ha."

"You're not resentful?"
"Oh, no, no. It's Kenneth's life. We've always let him do what he likes."

"I—I don't think he wants to go back to Florida, Mrs. Riddle."

"Oh, he'll pack up in a few days and leave; he always does. Like you say, there's a lot more to do in Flow-da."

A sadness comes into Marcy's voice. "Yes, it's easy to have fun in Florida. After a while that's all you want to do—have fun."

"I'm sure Kenneth has lots of friends."

"Yes, lots and lots of friends. But there's very few you can really depend on. It's not like having a close relative there, I suppose."

"Well, you've got to have people you can depend on in this world. I guess blood is thicker than water, Honey."

"Yes, that's what they say. Blood is a bonding agent, water a universal solvent. One thing about Florida is there's plenty of water."

Mrs. Riddle's tone becomes slightly confidential. "The sea always scared me to death, to tell you the truth. The closest I could ever get was to sit at the edge and let it wash over my legs. Joe tried to pull me out in it once but I started crying like a baby. Men will let go of you if you cry hard enough, Honey. But, Mary Ann, all she wanted to do was lie on the beach from morning till night. We had to
take her to the emergency room down there once. She was just awful to look at."

"The beach can be a dangerous place sometimes, Mrs. Riddle."

"Yes, if you're not used to it. I supposed it's quite hot there this time of year."

"Oh, yes."

"I don't see how it could be any hotter than it is here though. We have the mountains, the air doesn't circulate good."

"No, you don't have the breeze. But, you're close to the river; that probably helps."

"The river's not clean anymore, Honey. They say people won't even eat the fish. But Kenneth says it's not that bad, so I don't know. He goes down and sits by the river some, down by the deep hole where people used to swim. But I don't think that's where he is now; he usually goes down there in the evenings."

"What else does Kenneth do while he's here?"

"He sleeps a lot. He sometimes goes back to bed and sleeps all afternoon. But that's okay, I guess. After all, he's here on vacation."

"What about his friends here?"

"I don't think he sees any of his old friends. They've grown apart, I suppose. One of them was killed in a car wreck on Town Mountain a few years ago; the Dickerson boy."
But Hazel's grandson, Larry Dale, has been over a few times. They sit on the porch and talk. He's a lawyer here in town now, and going through his second divorce, so I guess he has a lot to talk about. But one thing I can pretty well assure you of is that Kenneth hasn't been out with another woman. So you don't have to worry about that."

"Oh, I'm not worried."

"Well, I thought maybe you were hinting at that."

"No, it's really none of my business what Kenneth does anymore."

"Well, he should be along anytime now, and you all can discuss all this privately. I'll just go back in the kitchen and finish my work. Are you sure I can't get you something?"

"Oh, no thank you."

Mrs. Riddle lifts herself out of the rocker just enough to adjust the pad, then settles back in. "By the way, Honey, I like the dress you're wearing. I have one almost exactly like it, only mine's a little lighter shade of blue, I think."

"It's an old dress I've had for years. But it's very comfortable to travel in. I was on the bus all night, but early this morning in Knoxville I had a chance to freshen up at the station."
"If you don't mind my saying so, it seems you've come an awful long way when you could have simply used the telephone."

Marcy reaches into her purse and pulls out a small envelope. "I brought the engagement ring. It's here in this envelope. I wanted to give it back to him personally. And—and I wanted to see him one last time."

"That's strange. He was just going through Mary Ann's old jewelry box last evening, looking at her old rings. Now you've returned his."

"He bought this ring in Miami for me, Mrs. Riddle. I want him to have it back. I still want him to know how much he's meant to me. We've shared some very good times together."

"I see. Well, could I ask you something rather personal?"

"Yes, I suppose..."

"Were you and Kenneth living together? A lot of people do now days."

"Kenneth still lives with his two roommates, Philip and Brandon."

"Well, let me put it this way: Have you all been pretending you're married already?"

"Pretending?"

"You know what I mean, Honey...?"
"Well...I don't think you have a right to ask that question."

"I think you just answered that question."

"You're a very shrewd woman, Mrs. Riddle."

"I did find out what I wanted to know, if that's what you mean."

"But still, it's our business, mine and Kenneth's, what we do."

"Men need relief—that's for sure. Kenneth's a man and a good looking man too. I wouldn't expect him to do otherwise. Personally, I think you would have fared better had you waited. If you give it up for free why should he marry you?"

"But, Mrs. Riddle, I am the one who is breaking the engagement, not Kenneth."

Mrs. Riddle takes a deep breath and leans back in the rocker.

"Yes, you've told me that. But are you sure that's why you're here?"

"I'm positive. I'm here to give the ring back to him. And to ask him to please not come by the store if he comes back. I don't have to open my door to him at home, but anyone is free to come in the store."

"What do you mean by the store?"

"The liquor store. My parents own a liquor store and that's where I work."
"You mean your parents sell whiskey and beer?"

"And wine."

Mrs. Riddle frowns. "I see..."

"Business is slow in the middle of the week, that's why I could come up here so easily. My parents can handle the store while I'm gone. They enjoy working in the store, they've spent their lives building it up."

"I've never worked myself. Joe left me quite a bit of bank stock, so I can manage quite well."

"Bank stock doesn't yield much return, Mrs. Riddle."

"If you have enough of it, it does."

"Yes, of course, I see what you mean. Didn't Kenneth work in the bank once?"

"Yes, he did. Joe gave him a job in the bank the summer he graduated from high school. Then he went on down to the University of Kentucky that fall, but he never finished out the year. He just didn't like college. We all thought he would go back later on, but he never did. Finally he went off to Flow-da and that's where he's been ever since."

"But Kenneth seems so well educated. You would never know he dropped out of college."

"Oh, Kenneth's a very deep reader; always has been. We have the complete set of Harvard Classics here; we bought them for Mary Ann when she was in school. I think Kenneth has started re-reading some of them. I noticed he's taken
some of them to his room. I've read some of them myself throughout the years. I like Robert Louis Stephenson the best; and I've read *The Count of Monte Cristo* twice—but I can't remember who wrote it."

"It was the elder Dumas, Mrs. Riddle."

"Oh, yes, Elder Dumas. He's one of my favorites. I don't read much anymore because of my eyes, but I do try to stay up on current affairs and politics. I'm quite interested in the news on television. What do you think about what the Russians are doing now?"

"To be honest, I could care less what the Russians are doing, Mrs. Riddle."

"That's like Joe: He used to say he wouldn't worry about the Russians until he saw them coming up the river bank, ha."

"But I do intensely dislike the president of the U.S."

"So does Hazel. You can't even mention his name around her. I just think he's silly. Oh, there's so much going on in the world today that I just don't understand all I know anymore."

"Yes, I know what you mean. But—what do you think about the AIDS epidemic, Mrs. Riddle?"

"Well, they say now that anybody can get it—not just those kind of men. So I don't know. Frankly I don't even know what it is they do to each other, and neither does Hazel."
"They make love just like anybody else."

Mrs. Riddle leans forward and speaks in a low voice.

"Yes, but how? I know they kiss, they show that on television. But just what do they do to each other?"

"I think they do it from—behind, Mrs. Riddle."

"You mean...?"

"In the rectum, Mrs. Riddle."

"Oh, my God! Well, no wonder they get disease!"

"But like you say, Mrs. Riddle, it's spreading into the general population. It's everybody's problem now. Especially us women, since men always push their problems onto us."

"Yes, Honey, you don't have to tell me that—Even though Joe left me well off, I sometimes feel I earned every penny of it. I had to help Joe through some hard times. We had just gotten married when the Depression started, so we held off having children. I had two miscarriages before I finally had Mary Ann. I used to regret not having more children, but I'm thankful now we could give Mary Ann all our attention and love."

"You seem to have a very positive outlook on life, Mrs. Riddle."

"Ha, my secret is very simple, Honey: laughter. I always try and have a good laugh at least once a day. Of course that's sometimes hard to do living alone—but I see neighbors, and then Hazel and I talk back and forth on the
phone. And as a last resort I have the cat. He sometimes
does stupid things."

"The cat's dying."

"That's not stupid."

"No, it's just a fact, Mrs. Riddle. Do you believe there's a Heaven for cats?"

"I would suppose so."

"What about people?"

Mrs. Riddle emits her tiny giggle. "I don't think people go to the same place as cats."

Marcy laughs politely. "Was that the laugh for today?"

"You laughed, didn't you?"

"Yes. But where do people go?"

"Oh, I don't know—just some other place where they'll be judged, I think."

"But what will it be like?"

"Who knows?"

"But, Mrs. Riddle, you're—you're an elderly person. I mean it would just seem to me you would have thought more about it."

"I'm afraid I'm not very deep; I can't imagine what it would be like. I couldn't even imagine what those men do—"

"Well, you certainly can't be expected to imagine Heaven then."

"No. And further more, I can't imagine where Kenneth could be."
Marcy looks at her watch. "Yes, I do wish he would hurry. I don't want to miss the bus back. It will be leaving shortly."

"But surely you're not going back today?"

"I've go to get back to the store, Mrs. Riddle. The weekend is coming up, and that's when we're the busiest."

"But it's unheard of to just turn around and go back; it's such a long trip."

"Like I said, I enjoy traveling, I don't mind. One can read on the bus, and talk to strangers, and look at the countryside."

"The countryside isn't as pretty around here anymore, if you've noticed."

"Yes, I noticed a lot of the mountain tops are gone. It kind of looks unnatural."

"It's the strip miners, Honey. They've ruined it for all of us. If it was vital or necessary I could understand, but it was never really necessary to do what they've done. You know coal eventually turns into diamonds—we've really short-changed ourselves..."

"I suppose so, but it's still nice here in some places. Caroline Avenue hasn't changed much."

"How would you know?"

"I—I meant that as a question, Mrs. Riddle."

"Oh. Well, no, no, the neighborhood hasn't changed much. The people I've known all my life are still here."
Most of the men are gone, of course. Old man Harding died just a couple of weeks ago. He just fell dead in his back yard. I'll miss his tomatoes. He brought some by just the day before he died, poor soul."

"Why did you call him that—poor soul?"

"Well... he was so weak, and just so, so slow to get around. I could look out my window and see him coming and know I could finish whatever I was doing before he got here. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, I guess it is sad to get like that."

"Getting old is a risky business. I guess I'm lucky. So far all I have is a small cataract on my right eye here, and just a touch of high blood. Hazel says I'm getting hard of hearing, but I think she just says that because she is."

"Did you ever think of getting remarried, Mrs. Riddle?"

"If I had lived out in the country. But living here in town with all the conveniences, there was really no need to—"

"But there are other reasons...?"

"I guess I never met anyone who really appealed to me. I was seventy-two when Joe died, and I did get a few offers, but I think they were mostly after my money. No, Honey, I guess there will never be another man but Joe."
Marcy lowers her head and picks at the lint on her dress. "I wish I could say that about Kenneth—but I can't."

"I'm sorry that you all can't work this out. You seem like a nice person. You shouldn't be working in a whiskey store."

"Mrs. Riddle, I have a confession to make; I've been married before."

"Oh...?"

"I was married for almost five years. We got a divorce when I was thirty, that was nearly three years ago."

"I thought you looked older than Kenneth."

"Yes, I'm almost five years older than Kenneth."

"It never works out when the woman is older, I don't think."

"Perhaps not."

"Well, what happened with your marriage—or is that none of my business?"

"He started using drugs, Mrs. Riddle."

"What kind of drugs did he use?"

"Oh, all kinds, just anything. They're easy to get in Florida, you know."

"What about you? You...?"

"No, I never used them, though he tried to make me at times. But he drank too. He would come in the store and
take what he wanted when my parents weren't there. And I would always hate to go home at night after that."

"Did he beat you?"

"No. He—usually he couldn't stand up long enough to beat me. He probably would have though."

Mrs. Riddle leans forward and speaks with deep sympathy. "I'm terribly sorry, Honey. I suppose you were right in divorcing him. A person can't take that kind of abuse, no matter who you are. Joe never said an unkind word to me in his life. Though he pinched me hard on the arm once for interrupting a bank meeting. And I..."

Marcy cuts in, nearly rising from her seat, as if she desperately has to finish her story. "My husband finally ended up in a hospital, Mrs. Riddle. He's been rehabilitated now! He hasn't touched anything in more than a year!"

"Oh. Then you still keep in touch with him, I see."

"I thought I would never see him again, but he started calling a few months ago."

"Does Kenneth know anything of this?"

"No. He only knows I was married once. I never really went into details about Juan and me."

"Juan?"

"Juan LaPaz—he's Cuban."

"Cuban...?"

"Yes, mam. But he was born in the U.S."
"I see...but he's—he's still of colored blood."

"Mrs. Riddle, people spend millions of dollars a year on Miami Beach to get as dark as Juan."

"Yes, I know that."

"The point is, Juan has asked me to marry him back and I've accepted. I love Juan. Not Kenneth."

"Then that lets Kenneth off the hook, so to speak?"

"Yes, this is all very difficult for me. I still love Kenneth in a way. I don't want to hurt him. That's the real reason I've urgently come all this way. You see, Juan has already moved back in with me—about a week ago."

"What makes you think he won't be lying there drunk when you get back?"

"It's just the chance I'll have to take. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Riddle starts to rise. "I think maybe I should call around and see if anyone has seen Kenneth."

Marcy looks at her watch. "I'm afraid it's too late for that, Mrs. Riddle. The bus is due back out at eleven, and it will take several minutes to walk to the station."

"But you can't leave without seeing Kenneth. I can have you put up at the Pinson Hotel for the night. Let me call up there and have them save you a room; it won't cost you a thing."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Riddle. But I'm afraid Juan would suspect something if I did that. He expects me
back on the next bus. I don't want to worry him, if you
know what I mean? I must go."

"But you must wait for Kenneth!"

Marcy rises and straightens her dress. "I'm sorry. I
don't have much time, Mrs. Riddle."

Mrs. Riddle rises and does the same. "Well, at least
let me drive you. I still drive."

Marcy reaches her the envelope. "No, it would be
better if you just stayed and waited for Kenneth, and give
him this. The ring is inside."

Mrs. Riddle reluctantly accepts it. "But you can't do
this, Honey. I don't know what to say to him."

Marcy moves toward the front door. "There's a small
note inside. He'll understand. Kenneth's stronger than you
think." She opens the door, but stands there looking around
the room. "You've got a nice home here, Mrs. Riddle. I'm
sure Kenneth likes it."

"It's always been his home, Honey."

"Yes, Well, good-bye. And--sueños con los angelitos,
Mrs. Riddle."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, may the angels sleep with you. Juan taught
it to me."

Mrs. Riddle watches bewildered as Marcy goes out and
closes the door. Then she walks over to the phone, picks up
the receiver and dials. She shakes the envelope while
waiting for the connection. "Hazel, you just won't believe what just happened. The most dreadful young woman was here—what? Well, I don't care if it is your favorite program. Turn it off and listen to this. Kenny's fiancée from Flow-da was just here. Yes. Well, neither did I..."

While Mrs. Riddle is busy at the phone, Marcy circles the house and enters from the back porch. She silently appears in the archway from the right cuddling an old gray cat close to her heart. There are tears in her eyes but she manages to smile toward Mrs. Riddle, then tip-toes in the direction of Kenneth's bedroom.
As he opened the hood steam billowed out engulfing him in damp rolling clouds and a high-pitched hiss sounded in his ears—he quickly stepped back afraid something would blow. He watched in amazement as the front of the car vanished in the dense steam, boiling out like polished white smoke. The shrill hiss sounding severe in the quiet autumn countryside.

There had been no place to pull off along the curves carved out of the hillsides, so he had to continue for several miles after the red temperature light came on. He had come down into this small valley before finally finding a wide spot at the end of an old iron bridge.

Randall Starnes drove this route every Thursday afternoon to fill orders from the two hardware stores in Clay City. Although this secondary road took longer, he enjoyed the drive through the sparsely populated countryside; it made him feel peaceful. But after filling his orders, he would return home to Fallsburg on the heavily traveled Mountain Parkway, arriving in time for supper and the evening news on tv.

He had a wife and two children but he wasn't sure if he completely loved them, though he provided for them as best he could. He had begun to feel used by his children, patronized even; and for years the only intimacy he shared
with his wife was the automatic lovemaking on Sunday mornings in which they both kept their eyes closed and thought of other people. His only real interest in life seemed to be sports, whatever ball was in season, dividing his life up into quarters and innings and half-times. But lately he didn't really care who won or lost; he was disheartened by the greed and commercialism that now dominated this simple activity.

He heard an approaching vehicle and a small dirty blue car with rusted fenders came down the road and stopped beside him. There were two men in front chewing tobacco, spitting into white styrofoam cups. Three women were wedged in the back seat, hefty country women dressed for town...a row of fleshy bar knees, one big lap all the way across.

The two men speculated that he probably had a busted radiator hose and if it wasn't too bad it could maybe be fixed temporarily with plastic tape, at least enough to get him to a service station at the edge of town. They offered him half a roll from the glove box, but Randall remembered he had a new roll in his toolbox in the trunk; so he thanked them for the offer and told them he had some already. They wished him luck, and as they drove off, Randall noticed one of the women looking back at him.

He turned to face the steaming car again...polished white smoke rising in the autumn haze; the hiss softening now, sounding almost pleasant, like a brisk wind brushing
though the golden red leaves of the trees. He looked at his watch realizing that he would be very late for his first appointment. He thought of getting back in the car and going over some of his order forms while waiting for the engine to cool, but instead decided to walk over to the rusty iron bridge.

It spanned a slow moving creek, the water tea-colored in the autumn slant of sun. He walked to the center and gripped the rail and watched the water flow lazily toward him. The banks were thick with horseweeds and saw-briers, and here and there patches of wild blue astor. Translucent insects zigzagged about in the air above them while the clicking sounds of hard-backed beetles came from within.

After a while he turned and walked to the opposite side to watch the creek flow away from him. On this side it snaked through overhanging willow trees, then bent at the base of a hillside out of sight—except that its winding course down through the valley could still be marked by the ever-attendant willows.

He leaned over the edge a bit taking care not to touch his slacks to the rusty sides. Directly beneath him, in a small eddy by the bank, were two plastic milk jugs bobbing about like white ducks. Although he had a bucket in the trunk, he figured the jugs would be handier in refilling the radiator.
He stomped the weeds down along the side of the bridge making a path before him, watching not to snag his jacket and looking out for snakes. Beneath the shadow of the bridge nothing much grew and the sandy bank was brown and clean. He squatted at the edge of the water rinsing out the jugs, then filled them up and sat them on the sand beside some small animal tracks. Out in the center of the creek was a deep blue hole with an old tire lying at the bottom, a green slime made it look furry around the edges. He noticed a large mottled minnow swimming in and out and around it.

As he stood up he heard a car coming and looked up as it passed overhead producing a low humming sound. He examined the I-beams that supported the bridge and noticed how they were bolted into the concrete embankments at either end. There was something about being under there that made him feel good; it was nice and secluded like a hideout, and he wondered how long it had been since anyone else had been under there. He wanted to sit down on the bank but was afraid of soiling his slacks.

There came a need to urinate and he unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis. He directed the stream toward a nearby crawdad hole and finally managed to hit it. When he finished he shook it off but didn't put it back in his pants; instead he let it lay across the palm of his right hand and rolled it back and forth with his thumb, examining it, running the edge of his thumb along the large blue vein.
that ran the length of it to the base of the head. He bounced it in his palm feeling its weight, then he curled his fingers around it and squeezed sending a surge of blood into the head causing it to double in size almost instantly. When he released it, it returned to normal as the blood flowed back into the shaft. He squeezed once more, tighter, and the head filled again bulging out at the sides, the shape of it resembling the flared out gills of a fish. When he released it this time some of the blood stayed in the head and more blood flowed in from his abdomen filling out the shaft some, thickening it, the weight of it in his hand feeling heavier. He had not really though of doing anything until this moment. But now he visualized the three women, their large hips pressing against one another, the row of fleshy bare knees. He reached in and pulled out his testicles, letting them hang down in front of his pants. He encouraged his penis, stretching it out and thinking about the pressed-together flesh of the women. It swelled and soon it was fully tumescent and he could grip the length of it hand over hand with the head left protruding out. He let go of it and it sprang up stiff nearly touching his belt buckle. He spread his legs to steady himself and gripped it with his right hand down near the base, at its thickest part, feeling the ridged cord that ran the length of it underneath, like the seam in a pair of corduroy pants. He began stroking it, pulling the skin forward up over the
head, then back, stretching it tight away from the head. He visualized the three women with him there beneath the bridge, bending over and pulling their dresses up so that he could give it to them from behind, dog fashion. He stroked it harder and thrust his pelvis forward. Drops of fluid began to seep out and flow down the crevice of the head. Sliding his hand up, he began to spread the slick liquid around the head with his palm, and as more seeped out he spread it back along the shaft and his hand began to slide as he stroked so that he felt the sensation of two separate actions. Now he was getting near, he could feel that tiny-good-feeling begin to develop somewhere deep inside the head. He imagined putting it inside each woman in turn, wanting to feel that splitting sensation of initial insertion three times in succession. He took a step forward as if actually plunging it into one of them and moaned through clenched teeth as it ejected and shot forth into the air, translucent gobs of it flinging out over the sand, falling shorter and shorter with each spurt until finally it was just pumping out and spilling down the underside of the head. His knees felt weak and he stood there panting for breath as if he had just run to the top of the nearest hill and back. He heard a car coming, then the hum of wheels as it passed over. He looked up and sighed, then smiled in his mind, thinking they could never imagine what they had just passed over.
He waddled over and picked up one the jugs and began washing it off. The cool creek water felt good. He took out his handkerchief and dried it, then put it gently back inside his pants. Now that it was over, he felt a little depressed.

He bent down and refilled the jug. When he got to the top of the bank, he saw that the car had stopped steaming and was soundless. Setting the jugs down, he peered under the hood and immediately spotted the trouble, a small split in the seam of the hose. He went to the trunk and got the tape and wrapped the entire roll around the bad place hoping it would hold until Clay City.

The following Thursday a light rain was falling as he approached the bridge and pulled off to the side. His penis was already erect, and had been for the past several miles; he could feel a wet spot against his leg where it had leaked out in anticipation. He reached into the backseat for the old blanket he had rolled up and brought along. The rain made him hurry some as he went down the trail of bent over weeds. Once under the bridge, he spread the blanket out on the sand. It was darker under there this time because of the over-cast sky, almost a twilight air. He looked around for signs of intrusion but saw only his own footprints from the week before. He looked for the mottled minnow and thought he
glimpsed it in the shadowy water but wasn't sure. It seemed cozy with the slow rain falling, making circles in the water outside the shelter of the bridge; there was soothing plopping sounds as drops landed on fallen dead leaves.

He looked around at the blanket which suddenly seemed strange spread out there on the dark sand. His mind told him this was ridiculous; it was pre-meditated, and he became a little ashamed. He had only masturbated before on rare occasions, at the-spur-of-the-moment, when the need was overwhelming. He wondered if other married men did stuff like this? He knew his wife would accuse him of depriving her, of taking something away from her.

He stated to reach down and pick up the blanket when he thought of the extra thirty or forty minutes he had allowed himself. What would he do? Just stop somewhere and have coffee?

He reached down and felt his penis; it had softened but began to stiffen again as he squeezed it. He unfastened his pants and pulled them and his shorts down below his knees. Then he sat down on the blanket leaning back on his elbows, his penis stiff against his stomach, making a wet spot in the thin line of hair that ran up from his pubic area. He reached around with his right hand and gripped it, straightening it out from his stomach, feeling the skin at the base pull taunt. He began working it slowly up and down, then the palm up over the head spreading the slick natural
lubricant back down along the sides. Suddenly he could feel that tiny-good-feeling beginning to spread from the tip of the head back through the shaft and he quickly let go of it, stopping just in time—the feeling receding, recoiling back inside of him somewhere. He gripped it again but this time working it slower, lifting his testicles with each upstroke then flattening them out between his legs as he brought it back down. He thought of the three women, them squatting over him in turn letting it slide slowly inside as they sat down on him. Despite the slowness of his manipulation that tiny-good-feeling returned and he let up enough to hold it for a moment but the intensity was too much: he quickly turned on his side as it spewed forth out of him on to the blanket making a mercurial pool of pearly gray liquid. He continued stroking as if milking it until the last pearly bead clung to the tip and refused to drop off. Reaching up with his thumb he wiped it off then wiped that on the blanket.

He lay back now with his hands behind his head feeling depressed, the same way he felt after sex with his wife, Rhonda. It was a little like dying, he thought. But tomorrow, or the next day, it would stir in him again. It was a cycle, like death and rebirth. He wondered when the fear of dying would cause him to become impotent, if that was the case. Impotence would be a relief, that—or actual death, he thought.
A cold spell had set in after the rains of the week before; the temperature had dropped by half into the lower forties. Randall wore a light jacket as he stepped out of the car and looked around at the hills. The leaves had nearly all fallen and the trees looked skeletal and stark, a surrendering. He walked to the bridge and down what could definitely be called a path now. The creek was running clear and he was glad to see the mottled minnow swimming around the furry tire. There were also fresh animal tracks along the rim of the back which he decided belonged to a muskrat. The secure feeling of being there came over him again.

He pulled out his penis and began urinating, watching it begin to grow in this hand, to fill up even as it emptied out. He heard a car coming from the direction of Clay City and pass overhead at a slow rate of speed. He wondered if it could be the three women in the back, sitting there with all that flesh pressed together, big titties resting on folded arms.

By the time he had finished urinating his penis was nearly erect. He reached in for his testicles and they were shrunk-up from the cold weather, feeling tight, his scrotum having a deep corduroy texture. He liked the way it felt and ran the tips of this fingers all around it—this excited him and his erection seemed to become harder. A drop of fluid
appeared on the tip of it and while he held the shaft in his left hand he rubbed the tiny drop around and around on the head of it with his right forefinger. Another drop came out and he rubbed this down around the rim of the head beneath the flared edges. He then curled his right hand around it about mid-way and started working it up and down, thrusting his pelvis forward thinking about the three women.

Suddenly he sensed a movement! He turned his head to see a small man in a brown uniform standing in the path with his hand resting against the bridge. He saw the glint of a badge before turning away and trying to stuff his penis back in his pants. He felt as if the blood from his swollen penis had been drawn directly up into his cheeks, as if his face had suddenly ignited. There was a long silence. Randall took a quick glance at the man and the man looked away, looked toward the creek. He had not moved, his hand still resting on the bridge. Randall had the sudden silly urge to say excuse me, but he couldn't speak or even look at the man again.

Finally Randall heard the man's voice and it seemed strained: "You want to tell me your name."

Randall stared at the slow moving creek, "I'm Randall Starnes."

"Mr. Starnes...I'm with the sheriff's department. I've been seeing your car parked up there...car way out here and nobody around I just got suspicious. I don't know if there
is any law agin what you been doing down here; I don't reckon there is that I know of you being out of sight this way. But let me give you a little advice: don't let me catch you under this bridge again."

Randall heard the crunch of weeds and turned to see the legs of the brown uniform become shorter and shorter as they ascended the bank. He finally zipped up his pants and shrugged—but then, there were tears in his eyes, and he cried desperately onto the creek bank.

It was true Indian summer and wisps of gauzy filaments floated about in the hazy afternoon air. The temperature was a neutral fifty degrees. Randall got out of the car and walked hurriedly down the path and under the bridge. He stood about calmly on the bank for a moment looking for the minnow but there was no sign of it. Then he unzipped his jacket and pulled out the pistol. He knew he would have to do it quickly.

He knew the officer would find him...today, perhaps tomorrow. He thought of how shocked the guy would be, and how dismayed he would be trying to explain it, trying to find the connection between and man beating his meat and killing himself. He heard a car coming and the hum as it passed overhead—the officer? If so, there was no more
time...but he needed a moment to think. Frantically, he reached down and picked up a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers just to feel it; then all at once, before it all spilled out, he clamped his hand shut and squeezed until his fingers ached. At that moment he knew he couldn't kill himself. But then, what now? He opened his hand feeling relief, the sand packed into some vague shape.
and after that she was easier to catch, turned her back out on the hillside pasture with the other mares. Also, Kip around today, wanting to borrow a hundred bucks. I had to write him a check ($100). Noticed he was smoking Luckys now, my brand. I felt flattered; but it may have been just part of the con.

Saturday 9 July. New halter for the "Dolly" mare (8:50) Sis and the kids away for the weekend.

Sunday 10 July. Just sat around on the porch all day reading the paper. Might go up to the pond and fish some this evening. Went down to the main house last night; soaked in the tub for about an hour drinking daiquiries, got me a steak out of the freezer and watched two pretty good movies (action-packed-thrillers) on the vcr. Cleaned up my mess good before leaving. I have succeeded in creating a luxury from the mundane.

Tuesday 12 July. Brackets and Hinges (6.95). Scorching hot today, seventy-six at six o'clock this morning, a hundred by noon. Blacky stayed crawled-back under the floor all day. Japanese beetles all over the garden (reenacting Pearl Harbor?), went down and threw some Sevin dust around after
the shade came over. Sis sent supper up (hamburger) by one of the boys.

Wednesday 13 July. A round of new shoes for the stud, with dril-tex on the bottoms (16). Dril-tex was invented by the Amish up north somewhere (Pennsylvania?) to keep their buggy horses from slipping on the pavement. It's not really good on a horse's legs but it allows you to feel safe on the blacktop.

Friday 15 July. In to the hardware store for nails, number 16 common (1.75). When I came out saw Kip sitting on the hood of his old Dodge, radio blaring rock music and static. Run your battery down, I said. That's what it's for, he said, his high tenor voice, slurred. When we gonna ride?

He had his shirt off, big summer-browned belly resting in his lap—not really fat except for that and his puffy jaws; but pretty like a girl in the face, long lashes and straight thin nose.

Sunday, I said, come out early—but knowing he probably wouldn't remember to.

When I came to the only stop sign in town, where you turn on to the highway, I realized that to know Kip is to know why all the highway signs in Greene county are full of bullet holes.
Saturday 16 July. Lonz Turner out to shoe the stud (18.00). Afterwards I ride him up and down Sis' driveway showing him off. big red bulk of him hitting that smooth gait on the blacktop (nickel, dime; nickel, dime; nickel, dime), me barely swaying on his back, like riding a slow summer breeze blowing out of the hollow. Mountain horses are naturally gaited, absorbing the bounce of the gait in their ankles, rather than passing that bounce along to the rider. They don't trot.

Sunday 17 July. a rosy dawn, everything glossy with dew. Sis and I rode into town and back. Me on Mingo, she on the "Loretta" mare. I let the kids name them after county music singers. we rode down Sheep Skin branch and through the gap, then back across town mountain, back in time for lunch. She had rented a couple of movies for the kids to watch while we were gone.

Wednesday 20 July. First anniversary on the farm. Took Sis down a dollar (1.00) for another year's lease on the pasture and cabin. Asked me again if I wanted the electric company to come out and run me a line up here. but I gave her a dumb look and said, what's electricity? She said, Never mind Daniel Boone. But this before I left: She had seen Kip's mother at the post office this morning. He had wrecked his
car down by Greene lake, totaled it and walked (crawled?) away. The forest ranger had brought him home.

Friday 22 July. The "Tammy" mare came back in heat today. Noticed her squatting and blinking up on the hillside while I was working on the barn. I kind of expected it; I've bred her twice already this summer.

Saturday 23 July. From my kitchen window this morning: a crow flew over the roof and up the hollow; a few minutes later seven flew back. I wondered what the occasion was?

Sunday 24 July. "Tammy" mare down at the foot of the hill (by the fence), standing in a patch of queen ann's lace; squatting, tail arched over glassy little pink caution light, blink, blink, blink, blink, squirt.

Mingo at the far end of the meadow by the creek, red blur among pale green willow trees. Hasn't sensed the mare yet, up wind from her. I figure two more days.

Monday 25 July. cashed my retirement check from Ford Motor Corporation and made another payment on red chevy pickup (235.) went by Kip's to see if he would come out and help me breed the mare.

He had just gotten out of bed and was out on the back porch in his shorts (big gut lopped over) drinking a pepsi,
first joint of the day going. His voice higher than usual as he talked trying to keep the smoke sucked in. Told me about the wreck, said a deer ran out in front of him; but was sure could have avoided it had he not been so fucked-up.

Then he started coughing and hawked something awful looking out of the back of his throat and let it drop from his mouth, long string of it still attached to his lower lip when the main blob hit the ground. Peeked over at me through his long lashes to get my reaction. It was his way of showing me he didn't care for nothing. But I know better, or think I do. I know he's wasting his life; but he seems to be having so much fun doing it that you envy him in a way. He is so aware that he is being watched, monitored by everyone—we're contributing, we are—I'm sure of it.

I told him I'd be out to pick him up tomorrow about noon.

Tuesday 26 July. Bred the mare today. Couldn't find hide nor hair of Kip, so I had to get the Meade boy from down Sheepskin to help for ten bucks (10). The Meades are very poor and very intrically inbred. The boy's cousin/uncle (this according to common Knowledge) came along for the ride, to watch. There were other curious folks too—the children were snuck-up in the barn loft peeking through the cracks.
For a stallion, Mingo is a very gentle horse, but he sometimes over-reacts during the breeding process. I seen him run a mare down in a field to exhaustion and just take it from her.

I had gotten everything ready on the other side of the barn, Meade boy holding the mare close with the lead strap, her tail tied back with baling twine. Then back around to get Mingo. As soon as I slipped the lead chain through his halter and up over his nose he started getting "nerved-up". He knew what was coming and could no doubt smell the mare. He threw his head back and squealed and I jerked the chain hard causing him to throw his head from side to side, his mane flaring up like fire in a field. He began chopping with his front feet using them to pivot his rear-end around in a wide arc back and forth. I had to watch his prancing hooves to keep from getting stepped on and at the same time open the long wooden gate and pull it to the inside towards us. It started dragging the ground so I had to reach down and pick up on it near the bottom; Mingo bolted through the narrow opening jerking the strap from my hand and flew around the barn as if a tornado had picked him up. I tore out after him hollering whoa!

The Meade boy had let go of the mare and he and cousin/uncle were climbing the fence. Mingo had reared up on her from the side, his legs across her back trying to get a hold on her neck with his teeth. The mare squealed and moved
out from under him and as he came down awkwardly in back of her she thumped him with both hind feet square in the chest, a gruesome meaty sound. He didn't seem to even flinch but nevertheless moved back out of range, then up to her side trying to nibble at her neck. The mare squatting now, pissing, it blinking like going ninety. I figured on going around in front of her and trying to grab Mingo's lead when I saw Kip come bounding over the fence between the two Meade's. He grabbed Mingo's lead and jerked him back hard, whoa, you big sonofabitch! I grabbed the mare's lead but she wasn't going anywhere now, just squatting there with her back legs spread. Kip was holding Mingo back--his mane swirling, big neck bowed, squealing. I looked back underneath of him to see if he was ready. It was out full length, about a foot and a half, stiff up under his belly, bluish black like gun metal. Bring him up Kip! He's ready!

Kip let him rise on her, big red bulk of him up and locking her neck between his knees, his backend starting to hunch at her—but I see it go glancing off to the outside of her against her rump. I let go of the mare and rush back and grab it with both hands, like holding on to the nozzle of a firehose with full pressure on it, but finally centering it and he sumps it up all the way to his testicles, a sharp slicing sound. The mare spreads out more getting her balance, trying to hold his great weight atop her. Mingo grunts then suddenly goes limp, leg dangling along her sides
as he pulls out of her and lands wobble-legged; big swollen head of it swinging between his hind legs, still dripping, but already softening, starting to retract. Meade boy has the mares lead now. I yell, walk her! Keep her moving: If she squats, she'll gush it all out!

The stud unconcerned now, already picking at some grass at the edge of the barn; Kip letting him while he lights a cigarette.

I walked over to him with a big grin on my face, glad everything turned out okay. Where were you? I came out after you a while ago. He blew the ashes off the end of his cigarette. I had to go somewhere this morning. I got Clyde Bently to bring me out.

I put my hand on his shoulder. I've noticed something about you, Kip—you screw up a lot but then you always seem to make up for it double without really trying to—
I could tell this was some sort of revelation to him the way he grinned and didn't say anything. We were both looking at cousin/uncle now, perched over on the fence making up a homemade cigarette, quietly concentrating on getting it packed good. Wouldn't strike a lick at a blacksnake I said under my breath to Kip.

Thursday 28 July. In for oil change and grease job on chevy pickup (18). Indian woman followed me out from town in her Jeep, but went on by when I turned into the driveway.
our love affair is very strange.
Had new potatoes and green beans out of the garden for
supper, with okra fried like fish.

Saturday 30 July. (20) bucks for eighteen metal fence posts.
Kip and a buddy around with them; had them covered with a
tarp in the back of an old flat-bed GMC. They had "found"
them. Tried to get them to stay for supper, but they were
headed to the bootlegger for beer.

Sunday 31 July. Sis up here a while ago; having flashbacks
about the night Les had his heart attack. I tried to comfort
her as best I could. Sis is a pretty little blonde, slanted
green eyes, oriental looking. I got up and got her a paper
towel in lieu of a Kleenex. She said it was meant to be that
I retired and came back to raise horses the same year that
Les died. We need you here now, she said.

Tuesday 2 August. Thunderstorm to end all thunderstorms. I
raced it back from town—a vast flowing mass of black clouds
laying a slate-blue shadow over the land. I made it up here
to the cabin with saddle soap (3.50) just as it broke with
great claps of deafening thunder, flinging itself against
the earth. Lightening flashing through every window at once;
harder and harder it beat against the cabin, shaking it on
its foundation. forty-five minutes of howling madness. Blacky thumping around under the floor.

When it stopped a strange, peaceful stillness came, as if great buckets of silence had been poured out over the hills, and had seeped quietly down through the leaf-wet hollows.

Later I went down to the garden and found the sweet corn laying dead in columns. I resurrected it, up righting each stalk one at a time and stomping around the base with my feet.

Wednesday 3 August. Got a letter from Detroit--Judy. Wanting us to get back together. She must sense how happy I am here. Never marry a Yankee.

Friday 5 August. Down by the road cutting weeds this morning, caught a big snapping turtle in the ditch line. Took most of an hour to clean it; the children watching, Sis out once, looking skeptical. There's seven different kinds of meat in it the kids kept telling her, hearing it from me and passing it along with wonder in their eyes. Can't be, Sis said. You'll see, I said. I boiled the meat for nearly three hours, rolled it in flour and fried it golden brown. We fought over it. Best kept eating secret in the world!
Saturday 6 August. Worm medicine (38.00). Sis and the children leaving this evening to spend the night and Sunday with Aunt Betty in Ashland. Time to do my thing.

Sunday 7 August. I began this ledger to keep account of expenses and note the dates the mares were bred. But somewhere along the line I started adding little details, comments; about the horses at first, then about myself and other people. Today I bought nothing, nor did I breed a mare. Today I have only a comment--Kip is dead.

I woke up sore this morning on Sis' sofa, but good sore--my inner thighs kind of taunt; a sort of sweet pain there as I walked into the kitchen rather straddledged--and naked. I put on some coffee and went straight to the window and looked toward the pastures, afraid one of them had come up lame--like myself--after last night. I spotted Dolly first, grazing with the others up near the tree line; head lowered picking, one leg out in front for balance. While I waited for her to move, I searched the lower meadow for the stud; finally saw him come up over the creek bank and stop to shake himself. He looked fine. The mare had finally moved now, the other leg out, tail swishing at flies.

She was all right too, I figured, as I turned away and went to the refrigerator; but then, remembering the leftover pizza in the living room I shut the door back (not wanting to dirty dishes). I felt that tender sensation again
as I walked back into the living room. I tore off a piece and stood there chewing, feeling good, thinking about last night and how everything turned out. Kip appearing out on the lawn unexpected; how everything happened unexpectedly.

I got the rest in—except the crust—and was chewing again when the phone rang. I let it ring while I finished swallowing, figuring it wasn't for me. When I answered it finally it was Kip's mother's new boyfriend. I didn't know him well enough to recognize his voice, so when he told me who he was I suddenly got this sinking feeling, sensing what he was going to say. He told me everything he knew about it, then speculated on what he didn't know (which wasn't much). I told him what I knew, that Kip had been here last night, that we had rode horses, and that some of his friends had picked him up. I thanked him for calling and hung up.

The coffee was ready so I poured a cup and sat down at the table to smoke. I couldn't believe it—but yes, I could, too. We all knew it was just a matter of time. They had pulled into his driveway just before daybreak to drop him off and were unable to wake him in the backseat. I could imagine their shock.

Tuesday 9 August. We buried him out on his grandmother's farm in the small family cemetery shaded by tall cedars and pine. I was one of the pallbearers, along with a couple of obscure uncles from another county, and a few of his buddies
his own age—the ones he was with when it happened. As we were walking off the hill, one of them said in a regretful voice that it would be nice to know where Kip's marijuana patch was—not meaning to be unkind, but just wishing, like wishing on the lottery or something. I guess Kip only showed me where it was at—probably knowing I wouldn't be interested enough to bother it. But I still felt trusted.

Thursday 11 August. (17.50) New girt for Mingo's saddle, to replace the one that broke with Kip.

I went down and sat on the porch with Sis after the shade come over this evening. She said, Kip was terminally ill on drugs, the way a lot of young people are today. But it was illegal prescription drugs that killed him, I said. He wasn't hooked on drugs; he was hooked on taking drugs.

Saturday 13 August. Birthday. I am one year away from a half century. The one time I made love to Indian woman, she told me that we were getting old, that we needed to settle down and take care of each other. I often wonder if she really means that.

Sunday 14 August. It has been a week. I thought I would put something down about the horse ride as a way of remembering Kip. The sense of it, the feel—get it clearly in my mind.
Someone once said, what's good for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse. I know what that means now.

But to get to that, I have to start way back from it and build up to it. I guess, begin with Sis and the children loading up to leave for Aunt Betty's. I had walked down, feeling the late afternoon sun seeping into me like horse liniment, all the way to the bone. Sis standing there sweating, holding the car door open for Liz who had to go back in and pee. She asks, but knowing I am, you going to
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Thought I might, I said.

Don't make a mess; giving me a look like I was one of the kids.

Don't worry.

Liz comes running back out and hops in the back, (it's a 2-door), Sis gets in and starts the motor. We'll see you Sunday. As they are going down the driveway, Liz and one of the boys wave out the back window. I wave back, but flicking my wrists like shooing chickens out of the yard, sending them into a fit of giggles. One of the great joys of my life is making those three laugh until their stomachs hurt.

After they are out of sight, I get in the pickup and head across town mountain, long double s to the top, then reverse double s to the bottom, and then a long straight stretch where trees arch across the road shading it. Four or five old two-story brick buildings dominate the town,
providing its core more or less, its commercial center. Food Country is on the first floor of one of them. But first, I go down the alley beside of it which is lined with small wood-frame houses and pull up in front of one with a homemade sign in the yard reading, Alethia's Pizza Palace (Alethia, honey, this is far from being a palace). I go in and order a medium with everything, then head back to Food Country.

The movie rental section is in a little partitioned-off room in the back. I went over every rack twice, finally taking the two maybes I had spotted on the first go around. I like anything that's good, especially obscure offbeat films; but I will occasionally dip down to a Clint Eastwood if nothing else is available. I went over to the produce department and took my time picking out a dozen nice ripe peaches. Then while Chuck was weighing them, I picked up two packs of Luckys at the checkout. After getting the pizza, I came back across the mountain; but when I got to the straight stretch in front of the farm, I slowed down to admire the place.

My little band of mares on the hillside, picking, unconcerned; stud, big bulk of him, out in the meadow beneath the shade of the giant white oak, dozing; but raised his head recognizing the truck motor. The fence, four-board oak stained black and admired county wide; nearly a quarter mile of it all together, running exactly parallel with every
dip and rise in the land as if it had grown there. Kip and I were proud of it; one solid month of hard labor, but fun, we had fun at it. Made him wait until after lunch to get a buzz; sometimes talking me into smoking a little of it too, then we would take it easy the rest of the day.

I didn't turn in the driveway but went on down to the iron bridge and turned up Middle Fork to the bootlegger. Mitch's place is at the head of a hollow and he does business out of his barn, the sides of which are covered with campaign posters of local politicians, his among them; he is running for school board member, having eight children of his own. Some of the children were chasing each other around the half dozen or so cars and pickups parked on the flat below the barn. They paid me no mind as I pulled up and got out.

Several (mostly bearded) ball-capped men were standing around in the middle of the hallway drinking beer; a few were paired-off leaning against the vacant stalls. I noticed cousin/uncle leaning against a post by himself. I nodded and smiled as I went by but he just looked at me coldly (the resentment of the poor?).

I walked to the other end; Mitch was just coming out of a darkened stall zipping up his pants; he reached for my hand, How you doing, buddy. He didn't remember my name, or just didn't want to get that intimate. I felt kind of slighted.
I need a quart of shine, I said, low like.

He looked kind of skeptical; little red-faced man, wheezes when he talked. No got, he said. Got likker, vodkie and bure. Sellin moonshine is bad on a feller's reputation.

You've sold it to me before, I said.

I did? Tiny short-fingered hand up to scratch at his head.

It's a game he plays with people he doesn't trust. Then finally, he says, I got one quart I keep fer myself up to the house. I'd have t' have twell dollars ferret. I'll bring her down to ye truck—winking, nodding toward the others at the other end of the hallway.

I didn't look at cousin/uncle as I went back out to the pickup to wait. In a while Mitch came ambling down from the house carrying the quart in a brown bag low behind his left leg (bootlegging?), pretending he didn't want the crowd in the barn to see. I gave him the money and he handed it in along with one of his campaign cards. Don't mention nothing bout this shine now. Then, can I count on ye vote?

You bet, I said.

A wily politician. I headed back to the farm.

Monday 18 August. (15.75) nails and roofing; decided to build a lean-to shed on the back of the cabin for firewood. Sis sent up some meatloaf by Joey for supper. He stayed a while and looked through some of my horse books.
Back to where I left off last night: I came back from Mitch's and brought everything inside in one trip, dropping the movies on the sofa on my way in to the kitchen. The air-conditioning gave me a chill, but that would make my warm bath all the better. I peeled the peaches at the sink and sliced them into a large bowl; then put a double handful into the blender with ice cubes and two spoonfuls of sugar. I shook the jar of moonshine and held it up to watch it "bead", checking its quality by the fineness of them. I poured about half a cup (by sight) in with the other ingredients and flicked it on. The result, a moon-daiquiri.

I filled one of Sis's crystal goblets full and sipped for taste—it was perfect. The Greene County Times was spread out on the kitchen table; I decided to sit down and read it, enjoy my drink and smoke. By the time I had gone through all six pages I was ready for another drink.

It was too early to start everything; I like to wait until around dusk, feel the day has finished and night begun—the intimacy of night. So I thought I would take a little tour of the house (snoop?).

(Carrying my drink) into Sis' room at the foot of the stairs. Large airy room with full bath, dressing room, all in antique white. Queen size bed, made. Picture of Les in suit and tie on the night stand, tabloids, country music magazines. I pulled out the top drawer—envelopes, stationary, photo albums, nothing unusual. I didn't stir
around in it, that is snooping. What was I looking for—condoms, vibrator? Les has been dead for almost a year. What does she do? Open closet door, lots of pink, her color. It's a flirty color, pink. Grief is constraining her.

Upstairs in the boys' room, a mega-world of plastic toys—dinosaurs, soldiers, weird robotic animals coming at you from everywhere. A weedy, overgrown garden of fantasy. Tennis shoe marks on the wall beneath one of the windows, speaks of a big adventure, out onto the roof of the garage while everyone else is asleep. Joey and Freddie, two peas in a pod.

Down the hall in Liz's room, shades of pink, pink furniture, wallpaper, her mother’s daughter. Odor of nail polish, makeup. Signs of puberty, yet still wearing cotton panties (strewn about), no bra. Pre-teen stuff. Poster of a litter of kittens on one wall, crotch shot of Michael Jackson on another—a room in transition.

I went back down stairs to refill my glass.

Tuesday 16 August. Worked all day on the lean-to, just about finished it. Grilled a bantum chicken (banty) for supper. Blacky sat around waiting for the carcass, which I finally threw him—just pretending to throw it at first though teasing him.

More from last night: It was about eight o'clock by then and I was preparing for the night, my date with myself.
I was naked now (old skinny bear in bathroom mirror) checking on the water; tub about half full, faucet disappeared in the foam, mirror begins to fog. Reached in the back corner under the sink for my hidden, fat, black candle; sat it on the edge of the cabinet. Flicked on the intercom, and back through to the living room to tune in my station; a bluesy thing by Bela Fleck was playing— it was going to be a good night for music. Went happily (moonshiney) back into the kitchen, tucked my cigarettes and lighter into the armpit of the arm holding my drink, picked up blender with the other hand— happy as a possum eating' poke berries.

Crossing back through the living room something happened in the corner of my eye which I didn't want to admit: I went all the way into the hall before I started backing up—the backing up itself a kind of denial, as opposed to turning around, a more definite effort to go back and see. something had sprung-up like a mushroom out there, on the lawn. A T-shirted shoulder, sunburned arm curved around a half case of beer resting on a hip, and the belly— or part of it. Head cut off by the angle of the curtains, but I knew he was probably grinning. I stepped back to where I could see the driveway, no vehicle. At the very least I would have to take him back to town or God knows wherever. I couldn't believe it.
I set about undoing everything, water off, blender back in fridge. I slipped on my pants and stepped out on the porch. He hadn't moved, just one arm up, beer to lips. I tried to be as friendly as possible under the circumstances.

Howdy, Kip, what's going on?
Want a beer?
No, thanks, I got this drink, I said, holding it up.
Some kind of mixed drink? came the high tenor.
Moon-daiquiri.
Yeah?
What's going on, I repeated. Sat down in one of the wicker chairs, invitation to him to come up on the porch. He stumbled a little on the steps; sits down beside me; the wicker makes a loud crackling sound as the weaving is snapped tight by his weight. Sets the beer carton down between us (where its handy). We are facing the hillside pasture, beyond it, Laural Ridge in the distance, dark cliff ledges jutting out through openings in the mass of tress; vast fuzzy shades of green.

So, I said, what you been doing, son?
A shrug. Then the high tenor, oh, nothing much. Fooling around. But still, he makes you feel fooling around is important. What you been doing, Bill?

Slaving, I said.

Slaving, huh. Yeah, well—that's good. He crushes his can drops it in the carton and picks up a full one, pops it
open—all this with one hand. Then off-handed as he sips, where's Sue and the young ones?

Went over to Ashland to spend their social security checks, I said.

I see his eyes scanning the pasture, then he looks out toward the meadow. Finally, Want to ask you something.

Ask me what?

Let me borrow Mingo?

What for? I'm suddenly alarmed now, sounds like trouble.

To ride—what else?

Yeah, but where you wanting to ride to?

Up to Indian woman's. He says this with a grin, a hole in his conviction.

Up Indian woman's? It'll be dark in less than an hour, I say, casually. I can be up there in an hour—if you let me saddle up right now.

Yeah, but what about coming back out of there—down through the cliffs at three or four in the morning—no telling what shape you'll be in by then.

Horses can see in the dark. I'll just let him pick his way down. I wouldn't do nothing to get that horse hurt. I'd be responsible; you wouldn't have to worry.

Yeah, but I couldn't help worrying. I'd be walking the floor.
A shrug, long pull on his beer, trying to hide his
disappointment. I swirled the liquid around in my glass
nervously. I look at the sky, pale blue, graying; bottom
half of pasture in shadow now, dark border of it slowly
creeping up the hillside, like water darkening a piece of
cloth.

What do you want to go up there for anyway, I said.
Trying a different tack (trying anything).
Just do—you know—maybe get me some off of her.
Indian woman won't fuck you, son.
What makes you think so?
I just know; just take my word for it.
She likes younger men.
She likes to mother them is all. You know every outlaw
in three counties hangs out up there—you're just asking for
trouble.

I can take care of myself.

I took a long pull on my drink, almost draining the
glass, thinking how I could be easing down in that bubble
bath about now. Okay, I'll let you take one of the mares, I
said.

I watch him look up at the pasture; the mares scattered
out, picking. He considers them for a moment as if trying to
choose one. Then, Let me take the stud, Bill?

Goddamn, son—don't do this to me.
You wouldn't even have him if wasn't for me. I found him for you in the first place.

I know you did. But look—if it was up in the day and you were sober, or just drinking a little beer maybe, you wouldn't even have to ask me.

I am not drunk, man.

No, but you will be, and pills too. Let me take you in the truck. We'll circle around the ridge and go in on the logging road. I'll drop you off and you can stay until the rooster crows or whatever. What do you say?

Naw, I want to know I can leave when I want to—if I want to.

I don't understand where you get the idea you're going to fuck Indian woman, I said.

I been talking to her. Saw her down at the lake the other night. She was coming on to me.

Well, why didn't you fuck her then?

I couldn't get her alone. Didn't have no car to take her somewhere.

So you want to go riding up there on the big stallion (the way I won her heart) like some knight in shining armor—only you ain't got no armor, and when you get up there among those outlaws—

She may be alone—you don't know.

Well, then she'll shoot you. She'll shoot you in the leg just like she shot Bucky Keaton. I'm telling you the
truth son, and you know it. She's just playing with you (damn her hide).

He crushes the can, another full one, pops it. I could see he was a little hurt—sits back in the chair, straightens his legs out in front of him, rocks his feet slowly back and forth on his heels, watches them.

Dark tide of night creeping up the hillsides now; mare almost indistinct up near tree line. Chorus of tree frogs starting up (tuning up), insects singing out in the weeds, creatures that stay up all night making noise (Kip).

Okay, he said, let me ride him over to town, back to Sambo's cookout.

Cook-out?

Yeah, it's his birthday; they got a keg and a whole bunch of food.

Let me just drive you back in the truck, Kip. It's awful hot to be riding. It's going to be pitch dark in a minute.

God, Bill, I want to ride! Didn't you ever just want to ride; sit on a horse? I've done a lot for you, man.

I know you have.

Okay, you go with me.

You mean ride?

Yeah. What else you got to do?

Well, I don't know.
Well--go fix you another one of them dacquiries and get in the mood—let's ride!

Alright, alright, I said. I really don't want to but I'll go if that will satisfy you. But one condition—you catch them and saddle them.

Which mare you want? Dolly?

Yeah, she's the best.

Wednesday 17 August. Emergency today. Liz stepped on a nail; running around barefooted up here where I was working on the shed. I had warned her, twice as a matter of fact. Trail of tears. Sis took her over to the clinic for tetanus shots.

(Is there anyone who has never stepped on a nail?)

I read back over last night's entry. The boy just wanted to ride, maybe had a feeling it was his last time. Now I'm glad (honored) that he took his last ride with me.

We mounted up down at the barn. Kip had transferred what beer he had left into his saddlebags. I had a half gallon thermos almost full of moon daiquiri tied to my saddle horn, wasn't about to go through this ordeal sober. We walked them out to the road; he sitting high on Mingo, me now so high on the mare. A thin mist was rising all along the creek down toward Sheepskin; hills blending into dark shapes around us, night was at hand.

Kip clucked to Mingo and he stepped out down the blacktop at an easy pace, mare followed behind without
encouragement. I watched Kip lean back in the saddle; get in sync with Mingo, in rhythm, easing him out a little more. I nudged the mare to keep up and leaned back myself, swaying to that four-beat gait. Sound of iron shoes hitting the blacktop (nickel, dime; nickel, dime).

I heard a car coming up behind and yelled to Kip; we pulled them over to the edge of the road without losing our stride; car went wide to pass us.

After we turned down Sheepskin, we slowed to a walk—to smoke, talk; take a drink. I pulled the mare up beside them and dropped the reins on her neck. Undid the thermos and sucked from the spout—the slushy mixture cool going down, but turning to molten lava in my stomach. I was starting to feel it pretty good now. The air was hot and muggy and I broke the sweat.

Kip in silhouette now. Beer in one hand, cigarette in other; one elbow up for a drink, then the other—puff of smoke white in the darkening air.

Now I don't want to stay over there all night, I said. Just a little while will do me. Okay?

We'll leave whenever you're ready, he said.

Don't you ever get tired of this shit, I said.

What shit?

You know. Parties, drugs, wrecking cars--don't it get old?

Yeah, but what else is there to do?
Well, there's steady work for one thing.
What—cutting tobacco?
No. If I was you, you know what I would do?
What?
Go up to Ashland on the river; get a job on those coal barges; they push some of those barges all the way to New Orleans I bet. I think that would be fun, maybe become a tug boat captain.
That don't sound that good to me. I don't know if I'd want to get into something like that.
Well, do something you already know about, I said. You know more about animals than anybody I know. Take out a loan at the bank and put some cattle on your grandmother's farm. She'd help you, I'm sure. They'd all help you if you'd let them.
Granny and me don't get along anymore.
I never heard of anybody not getting along with their granny.
She's pissed at me. I let Oakie Charles sneak some timber out of the back side a couple of years ago. We split the money.
That's low.
I'll pay her back someday—maybe.
I hope you do. You know Maggie Brown's dogs are going to run out on us up around the curve. Lets high-gear it around there; maybe we can catch them asleep, get by them.
I see him drain the beer (just barely through the darkness); can swishes in the weeds, then he boots the stud and we're off letting them all the way out now iron shoes hitting blacktop hard.

Kip and Mingo move way out ahead; twenty, thirty yards; me booting the mare every breath, she trying her best to stay up. I can barely see Mingo/Kip, but hear the dogs as we start rounding the curve. Then I can see them--horse and rider, dogs in the yellow glow of Maggie's night light; dogs yapping at Mingo's heels. Kip pulls him up and turns on the dogs, runs Mingo at them; dogs head back up in the yard, Kip/Mingo in pursuit. I go by without slowing down; see them dancing around in the yard, then I'm out of the light, cross the border into blackness again. I slow her down and hear them come up behind me, just dark shapes (two blended into one in the dark).

Damn, son! She'll call me about that tomorrow--messing her yard up.

I didn't hurt it none. That's what you have to do to them dogs, turn on them, then they'll start leaving you alone when you come by there.

I undid the jug and took another snort, heard him pop a beer open. It was pitch black, no moon, no stars. Just sounds; deep-voiced frogs down by the creek, an owl on the hillside somewhere.
You been taking some kind of odd-ball drugs lately? I said.

What do you mean, odd-ball?

You know—stuff that makes you crazy.

Why—you heard something.

Yeah, I have. I heard you called your mother a goddamn whore to her face.

Where did you hear that?

I just heard it.

Who from?

Your granny told Sis. That's why I know it's true.

I heard him take out his cigarettes, flash of the lighter; I could see his profile, eyes closed. I lit up too.

I don't remember saying that, he said, finally.

But you did. Mothers are sacred people you know. I can imagine it hurt her.

You think she ain't hurt my feelings, came the high tenor, sounding sharp and clear, despite all the beer (pills?). You know why I don't know who my daddy is? Cause she don't even know. He could be any son of a bitch in this county.

I thought your daddy was Roy Lee Ison.

That's what they say. But granny slipped and said it was Bobby Dickerson one time.

Which one do you think you favor.
Neither one of the sons a bitches. What's that got to do with it any way—that ain't really knowing.

Well, I think your mother knows. If she says it's Roy Lee, that's who it is.

Well—he damn sure don't claim me, so it don't make much difference one way or the other.

Yeah, I hear you.

You don't understand.

I know. I'm not in your situation. But if it was me, I'd claim you in a minute. You're not eighteen yet, legally I could adopt you. Would that make any difference to you?

Now you're talking out your ass, Bill. It's not the same thing. I want to know who I am.

Well, all I can say is you're Kip, and you'd probably make the best veterinarian this country has ever seen.

You're still talking out of your ass. Let's ride, man. Stay up with me.

I heard a tink, then swish; beer can bouncing into weeds. He clucks to Mingo and we're off again.

Mare trying to keep up as they fade into blackness in front of us. I can't even see the mares head; a blind man riding a horse. I can hear Mingo faintly up ahead (fifty yards, seventy-five?). Mare pouring it on now, me scared shitless. This is crazy; there's pot holes all along this old road. Why did I ever let him talk me into this.
I felt us going up hill now; down the other side was the turn off to town. I could hear nothing up ahead. Then it suddenly struck me—maybe he won't turn off, maybe he'll go on down to the river and cross over and up the cliffs to Indian woman's. Coming down the other side of the hill I could only give the mare her head and hope she would follow the stud in which ever direction they went. She kept going straight, but I wasn't positive we were at the turn off either.

Suddenly I felt her shorten her stride in front and her rear-end come up under in a jerking motion and all at once we were in the air. When she came down I hit the saddle horn and fell forward onto her neck; I grabbed on but when she stopped it slung me down under and I was holding on like a monkey. Then Mingo at her out of the darkness, squealing in my ear; mare swings around to kick at him throwing me to the ground. Now she's over top of me and I scramble to the side and get up; reaching out I feel Mingo's bowed neck and grab at the bridle, finally getting reins in my hands, but being bumped around between both of them. I hold him and the mare moves off out of reach and I holler for Kip. Where you at?

Here on the ground.

Where? I can't see a lick.

Keep walking this way.

I move in the direction of his voice; bump into him, reach for him. What happened?
Saddle girt broke.
You all right?
Yeah, I think.
The mare must have jumped over you.
Yeah, I was starting to get up—she got me with her
hind feet, threw me back down again.
We both hear her now, way up the road, faint click of
hooves. Mingo whinnies for her but she doesn't answer.
She's headed back home.
Yeah, I say, then I start laughing, Kip starts too,
both of us laughing holding on to each other in the dark; we
can't seem to stop, me wiping tears out of my eyes. Finally,
we come back to reality and I ask where the saddle is.
We light our lighters and hunker around looking; I
stumble on it, and call Kip over. The threads holding the
ring had dry rotted. I threw it over in the weeds and said I
would come back after it tomorrow.
We both mounted Mingo, me behind holding around Kips
big belly; the horse warm beneath us, lathered up, steam
rising off him, strong skunk odor. Kip clucked to him.
Was you headed to Indian woman's? I said.
I was just riding, man. I wasn't paying no attention to
where I was going. This horse has got a lot of heart. You
ought to give him to me.
We'll talk about it, I said.
We hadn't gone very far when the headlights of a car flashed on us; Kips's hand up to shield his eyes, me turning my head to the side. The car was parked beside the road and Kip moved Mingo toward it. It was a couple of his friends.

Head out the window, What's happening boys? You fellers lose a horse; it just went by, flying. Kip bends over; Give me a cold beer, son. Arm out the window with two cold ones and we slide off Mingo. Kip over at window, sniffing the air, grinning, you boys been burning one? Driver leans over, Yeah.

What happened to your saddle fellers? We don't need one, from Kip, and; Roll us one up Mike. Smoked our last one, he says, let's go get some. Kip leaning in to look at him; Pick me up over at Bills. I got to ride this horse back. You all take Bill back and wait on me over there.

I jumped up on Mingo. That's all right Kip, I'll ride him back—you go on.

No, I can't let you do that Bill, he said. I rode him out, I'll ride him back.

I can ride him just as good. Save you boys a trip. I wanted to be alone now.

You sure, Bill? I hate to leave you like this.

It's okay. Ain't that far. That mare is probably there already. Go on. But listen—you boys be careful.
Thursday 18 August. Slight chill in the air today, deep blue sky—a hint of fall. Joey ran up this evening to tell me I had a phone call. It was Cindy (Kip’s mother); wanted to know if Kip owed me anything when he died—she would pay me back if he did. I told her no.

Are you sure?

Kip and I were even when he died, I said.

Kip probably owed me a couple of hundred (200), but I owed him a great deal more than that for the ride home that night: They drove off and left me alone sitting on Mingo. I walked him a while, finishing the beer, smoking—tiny glowing ember floating free in front of my face. I felt lonely out there in the black night after all that excitement with Kip. I wondered what was to become of him—there just didn’t seem to be a solution. He thought of himself as an outcast I think. If he could only realize there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s society that’s wrong.

Although I couldn’t see in this vast ink-black darkness, I knew Mingo could. I clucked to him and speeded him up just a little, the rhythm ringing out clear—and echoing from the hillsides (nickel, dime; nickel, dime; nickel, dime; nickel, dime).

Mingo was hearing it too, his cadence; the thing he was born to bring to perfection—bred into him by generations of mountain people who depended on the horse long after the rest of the East had gone to the automobile.
He pulled on the reins and I let a few inches slip through my fingers, and he stepped out a little faster. I leaned back for balance, feeling his power churning beneath me—but in that same smooth measured gait. The night was flying past me now; I felt pure sensation of movement through black space.

Then I did something I hadn't done since I was a boy; it had been in the back of my mind somewhere since coming back to horses, something I didn't think I would ever have the nerve to do again. I dropped the reins on his neck and grabbed a handful of mane. The bit went loose in his mouth and he knew, and I knew as my heart banged against my chest. He collected himself anew and I felt the thrust. I was trusting him with my life now and he knew—it was trust. The faster he went the more I had to give into it, to surrender to this night flight of blind faith. My thoughts were swept from my head by the force of it and tears of joy flew from my face. It was oblivion, I became nothingness.

The light serene, coming at me—or was I going toward it. It is peaceful to my eyes, emanating into my soul—I can see again and it's wonderful. I am beneath it now and everything a blur—a green-grassed yard, porch, dogs on porch, yellowed eyed. And the light fades now (no) and we flee back into the darkness. As one Now, in perfect harmony—horse and rider. Into the night.