

WADING THE CREEK IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by

Chris Turner

July 28, 1997

Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English degree.

Lynne Taetsch
Director of Thesis

Master's Committee:

Lynne Taetsch, Chair
Henry Ekland
Bob Ryan

July 28, 1997
Date

WADING THE CREEK IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

Marvin C. Turner, M. A.
Morehead State University, 1997

Director of Thesis:

Lynne Taetz

The five stories in this collection are unified by theme and setting. All of the stories, except for "Staying at Flo and Floyd's," are set in a small town in the foothills of the Appalachians in Eastern Kentucky. Most of the characters are either poor or working class and most have to deal with the economic hardships of the region. These economic hardships have given rise to a social situation that has given opportunities to unscrupulous coal companies and a burgeoning illegal drug trade. The economic isolation, as well as the isolation of the actual place, influences the isolation of these characters, not just physically, but mentally, socially, and emotionally. These stories attempt to illustrate how these complex issues have affected the culture and life of these Appalachians.

Accepted by:

Lynn Taetsing, Chair
George Oklund
Ra-Rice

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Wading the Creek.....1
Under the Slate Ledge.....16
Staying at Flo and Floyd's.....28
The Sell.....35
Split Poplar.....45

Wading the Creek

Sandy pulled in the driveway in front of the barn. Tommy was rocking on the porch swing when the Oldsmobile came to a stop. Sandy saw him take out a half-pint of red whiskey and take a swallow before she had shut the car off. Tommy then reached into his shirt pocket and took out a cigarette and lit it and took a deep draw. Mike didn't say anything.

"Your dad is drinking," Sandy said.

"Don't worry, you can go on in if you want."

"I'm not worried."

"We won't stay long."

"I'm not worried, let's just get out."

Tommy took another pull off his half-pint before Sandy and Mike reached the porch.

"Howdy," Tommy said in a slightly slurred voice as he got up.

"How you doing, Dad."

"Son, it's about time you came up and seen me."

"I know it. What's Mom doing?"

"She's in there doing something. How you been Sandy?"

"Pretty good, Tommy. You been doing all right?"

"By God, I can't complain."

"Sandy, let's go inside and say hello to Mom," Mike

broke in.

"Come see your daddy and don't even talk to him."

"We'll be back out," Mike said as he opened the door for Sandy. She looked at Mike as they walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Louisa sat at the table drinking a cup of coffee and staring at the coffee pot.

"Mom, what's up? From the way you sounded on the phone, I thought Dad was going crazy or something."

"Just give him time. He got up and left early this morning and didn't come back till this evening. That fucking Oakie Barrett brought him home. They've been somewhere and got some pills is what they've done as sure as we're setting here."

"Is that why he runs with Oakie?" asked Sandy.

"What else would he be with that dopehead for," answered Louisa.

"Do you want to go home with us? I can stay here with Dad and you can come back and get me later," said Mike.

"That man ain't going run me off."

Sandy watched as Louisa lit a cigarette. Sandy's dad had busted up the house enough when she was growing up that she knew how it was. When she was fourteen her mom slit open her dad's stomach with a butcher knife for kicking and punching her little brother Joe. A week later Sandy went

to live with her cousin.

"I'm gonna go talk to him," Mike said.

"Somebody needs to, he won't listen to me," said Louisa.

Mike turned around and walked back out to the porch.

"How you been feeling, Louisa?" asked Sandy.

"All right, my back still hurts a lot."

Sandy heard the sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway.

"Louisa, I think somebody's just pulled up."

"That better not be that Oakie."

Sandy and Louisa got up and walked to the screen door in the living room. Mike was standing at the top of the steps on the porch.

"Mike, where's Tommy at?" asked Louisa.

"He's down there talking to Oakie."

"I've about had enough of that son-fa-bitch. He gets crazy every time he gets with Oakie and gets hold of some of them pills."

Sandy and Louisa came out onto the porch. Sandy saw Tommy standing at the passenger's side of the pick-up. Tommy reached into his back pocket and pulled out the half-pint and took a drink. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was looking. When he saw everyone

staring, he lifted the bottle in a toast. Louisa gave him the finger.

"He starts acting foolish and I'm calling the law," she said.

Tommy opened the door and got in. The pick-up backed out of the driveway and took off spinning gravel and dirt.

"Where's that bastard going, damn him." Louisa said.

"It's untelling Mom, you know how he is, you should have learned by now."

Sandy walked over and sat down on the porch swing. She thought about her and Mike moving to Lexington or Cincinnati and getting away from all this shit. She had been on her own since she was fourteen when she moved in with her older cousin, Jamie. She got a job bagging groceries after school and hadn't asked anybody for anything since.

She could hear the creek flowing beside the house as she gently rocked. She shivered as it caused her to remember the night she had waded out in the creek below the trailer where her parents had lived. Her dad had come home drunk with that wild look in his eye and had started in on her mom. She had heard punching and slapping going on in the kitchen and then her mom screaming that if he was going to kill her to go ahead and pull the fucking trigger. It

was then that she grabbed Joe out of his bed and climbed out the window and ran down to the creek. She had bitten her lip till the blood ran down her chin to keep from crying. Joe was sobbing as he buried his face in her neck. She was ten then and a decade later she could still feel it in her stomach like it was yesterday.

"Well, I'm not hanging around for him to come back. You two probably should head back home, I'm going to my sister's," said Louisa.

Sandy watched as Louisa went into the house and turned on the bedroom light. Mike stood staring down the gravel road.

"Sandy, you about ready?" he said without looking at her.

"Anytime."

Louisa came back out on the porch carrying a brown grocery sack with her clothes in it.

"Run me up to Flo's. Tommy's about pulled his last one on me," she said as she closed the door and locked it behind her. "That fucker is not going slap me around."

They got into the car and headed down the narrow dirt road leading out of the holler. Louisa sat in the back smoking a cigarette looking out the window. Sandy pulled out onto the paved road and pressed the gas. She guided

the car around a crack in the pavement. The engine grumbled as Sandy let off the gas as she approached a steep curve. She knew she was taking it a little fast, but she knew the road well from experience.

"Sandy, for God's sake, slow down, you know Mom is a nervous wreck," said Mike.

Sandy didn't pay much attention. She knew Mike always got edgy when his parents were into it. She found that fact completely understandable. Sandy liked to drive and let her mind drift. Sometimes, when she was driving by herself, she would turn the radio off and try to focus on her breathing to clear her head. She had read about meditation in a book she had found in the small library in town. It was covered with dust and hadn't been checked out since 1969.

No one spoke until they started to pull into town.

"Sandy, circle the square a couple of times and see if we can spot Oakie's truck," said Louisa.

Sandy drove around the court house that was the center of Booneville. Sandy saw some men standing in front of the pool room, but Oakie's truck was nowhere around.

"Mom, it's untelling where they're at. Dad will show up sooner or later," Mike said as they turned and headed out of town toward Flo's.

Sandy hoped that Flo was home. She didn't like the idea of Louisa going home with them, since Tommy would be liable to show up in the middle of the night wanting to start trouble. Flo lived about a mile and a half from town in the low rent apartments. Mike pulled into the complex and circled around and stopped in front of Flo's. As Louisa got out of the car, someone started yelling in front of the apartments across the street. There was a crowd standing in front of it and a couple of women were fighting.

As Louisa headed toward Flo's apartment, Flo came out and met her on the sidewalk.

"See Louisa, see the shit I have to put up with over here. I've called that frigging manager three times today. Of course, that fat asshole isn't going to do anything. He doesn't have to live here. He still get's his check. Louisa, what you doing here, that man run you off again?"

"He's out running around with Oakie again."

"Well, that's no surprise. He's going keep doing that as long as you put up with it. Go on in and fix yourself some coffee, I'll be in a minute."

Flo walked over to the car and said hello to Mike and Sandy.

"You kids get caught between'em again. It's a

God-damned shame that adults act like this."

Before Mike or Sandy could say anything, Flo hollered to the crowd that the law was coming and that they had better get the hell out of there. No one paid any attention, except for one woman who told her to fuck off and mind her own business.

"You kids should take off. The law will be here in a minute."

"If mom needs anything, tell her to just call us."

Sandy saw that another woman was joining the fight as they pulled out of the complex.

"How does she stand it over there," said Sandy.

"She's been there so long, I guess she's gotten use to it."

"No one can get use to that."

"Flo's pretty tough. When I was little I seen her slap some man's brains out. The guy was kicking the shit out of her first husband, Floyd. He was a little short man."

"What happened to him?"

"The guy?"

"No, Floyd."

"Drunk himself to death."

They headed back toward town. Sandy kept an eye out

for Oakie's truck as they went around the square before turning toward their house. They didn't talk until they got ready to turn onto the gravel road leading back into the holler where they lived.

"I hope Dad doesn't show up at Flo's starting trouble."

"It's untelling where they're at. Him and Oakie will be lucky if they don't get put in jail."

Sandy stopped the car next to the footbridge that crossed the creek to their house. As they walked across the bridge, Sandy thought about how Mike had worked extra hard to make certain the bridge was solid. They had both worked hard on the little house to make it liveable and clean. They had gotten the place from Mike's uncle before he went to prison.

Sandy felt the fatigue starting to set in as they headed into the house. She and Mike both had worked that day and all the excitement had made it worse. They headed straight for bed. The full moon shone through the two large windows that were next to the bed. Sandy leaned over and pulled Mike next to her, kissing him fully and pulling him closer to her. They had both been working since they were fourteen and it was reflected in their lean frames. Sometimes, they would make love for hours until the sheets

were wet and cold and then they would lay exhausted, huddling next to each other.

She could taste the salt on his neck. She rolled over and got on top of him, pressing her hands down into the pale skin of his stomach in the white moonlight as she arched her back and stretched the tight muscles. Slow and gently, they made love until they collapsed into sleep.

A banging on the door woke Sandy up. Mike grumbled and slid out of bed and got into his pants and headed toward the door. He talked for a couple of minutes before coming back into the bedroom.

"It's Bill Goodman."

"Who?"

"You know. Bill from up the road. Remember, he gave me the lumber to build the bridge. His cousin wrecked up on Wild Dog and he wants me to help'em get the car out.

"Mike, it's almost four. Wild Dog is on the other side of the county."

"I know it, but he did give me the lumber," Mike answered. "I'll make'em bring me straight back when we get it out."

Sandy never said anything as Mike left the house. She sat and stared out the window for a time. She then got up and walked into the kitchen and got a drink of water and

then sat down in the living room in the dark. She saw headlights stop in front of the bridge, although she knew it was a little too quick for Mike to be back. She knew that it had to be Tommy and Oakie. She went into the bedroom and put her clothes on. When she came back she saw two figures stagger across the footbridge and head up to the door. Tommy started banging on the screen.

"Anybody home," he yelled, "come on and open the door."

Tommy started banging harder.

Sandy cracked open the door.

"Tommy, Mike isn't here. Bill Goodman came and got him for something."

"In the middle of the night? Bullshit, I know he's in there. Come on, open up, I need to get him to take me home. Oakie here says he won't drive back through town on account of the law and I want to go home."

Sandy hesitated and stepped back. Tommy pushed the door open and stepped in.

"Now, Sandy, you know I ain't going bother my favorite daughter-in-law."

Oakie slid in behind Tommy. Both of their eyes were red with black circles under them.

"She sure is a pretty daughter-in-law," said Oakie.

"Watch yourself Oakie. You're talking to my son's wife, even if she is pretty," Tommy said with a grin. He walked over and patted her on the back before sitting down on the couch.

"Tommy, I can take you home."

"No. I'll just wait for Mike."

"Well, you can wait, but Oakie needs to go," Sandy said while looking at Oakie.

"Fuck that," Oakie said as he walked over and sat down on the couch.

"I told you to watch your mouth. Sandy, let him hang around till I get ready to go," Tommy said as he took out a fresh half-pint and started slapping it against the palm of his hand.

"Gotta shake the spirits up," he said before draining half of it and passing it to Oakie. Sandy never said anything as she got up and walked into the kitchen. She got a drink of water and could hear Tommy whispering to Oakie. As she walked back into the room, she saw Oakie pass him a couple of pills. He immediately popped them into his mouth and drained the rest of the whiskey.

"When's that man of yours going be back," Oakie asked.

"He's due back anytime," Sandy responded.

Tommy started dozing on the couch. Oakie brought out

his half-pint and downed two more white pills and chased them with the whiskey.

"You sure are a good-looking thing," he slurred.

"Listen, Oakie, you can stay until Mike gets back, but I don't want to hear this bullshit."

"You think it don't stank, don't you," Oakie said as he got up and started toward her.

"Tommy!" Sandy yelled as she jumped up and backed up toward the door.

"Huh? What's going on," Tommy said as he tried to focus his eyes. "Oakie, what the hell are you doing."

"Shut your mouth and go back to sleep, you old fuck," Oakie said as he took another step toward Sandy. He had that wild look in his eyes that she knew all too well.

Tommy got up and headed toward Oakie. Oakie saw him coming and slammed a bony fist into his stomach. Tommy went reeling across the couch. Sandy picked the lamp up off the table next to the door and swung it. Oakie brought his forearm up and it shattered against it. He slammed his other fist into her mouth and nose and she went flying back into the door. Tommy tackled Oakie from behind and they went down in a tangled mess. Sandy jumped up and ran out the door. She ran across the bridge and down the road leading out of the holler. She stopped twice and puked.

She almost passed out from the pain when the puked forced itself through her bloody swollen nose. She ran out of the holler and down the road. Bill Goodman's dogs started raising hell as she ran into their yard and started banging on the door.

"Sarah, open the door! It's me, Sandy. Oakie Barrett is beating Tommy to death, call the law."

"I don't won't no trouble Sandy. You go call the law from some other house."

"Call the law, you stupid bitch. Somebody's going to get killed."

"I'll call the law, but you get off our land right now and don't come back."

Sandy turned around and stood for a moment. She didn't know what to do. She saw headlights come out of the holler and disappear up the road. She headed back toward her house.

As she came walking up the road, she saw the front door was open and the living room light was still on. She approached the house from the side and peered in the window.

Tommy was laying on the floor, his face and upper body were covered in blood. She ran into the house and over to him. His throat and chest were cut and his head was

swollen like he had been stomped. His breathing was labored and he made a strange gurgling sound with every breath. She ran over to him and sat down next to his head. She stuck her finger in his mouth and tried to clear his throat of the blood, puke, and teeth. She lifted his head up a little and saw that his right ear was hanging by a tiny piece of flesh. She bit her lower lip to hold back the sobbing. She gently put his head in her lap as his breathing became more ragged. She saw the odd way that his chest was shaped, like it had been pounded all out of proportion.

Tommy's body lurched and a bloody foam came out of his mouth and then he didn't move anymore. Sandy pressed her chest against his misshapen head for a moment. She then got up and walked out on the porch and down to the creek. She waded out into the creek and walked downstream. She took off her clothes and washed herself in the icy creek water under the pale moonlight. In a moment, she heard the sirens coming and she dressed herself and walked back up to the house and sat down next to Tommy's body and waited for them to come as she sobbed gently to herself.

Under the Slate Ledge

John Hudson rolled out of bed at his usual time. The sun was just beginning to peek through the windows. He always woke up just before daylight; he thought about how working in the mines and farming had instilled this in him. He staggered to the bathroom and urinated. He walked over to the sink and turned on the rusted faucet. He splashed some water on his face and cringed at the acrid smell of the sulfur. He decided to get a drink from his jug in the refrigerator.

John came back into the bedroom and started rummaging through some clothes piled on a chair. He found his camouflaged pants and a clean smelling t-shirt. He was putting them on when Ruby started stirring.

"John Hudson, can't you sleep in for one morning."

"Now, woman, I got work to do. Ain't got time be lazing around here," he said as he finished buttoning his pants.

"John Hudson, don't try that. You and them fellows shoot the breeze as much as anything."

"Listen at that," John replied, trying his best to act disgruntled as he finished dressing.

"Been married twenty-nine years and you're still sassy," Ruby said.

"You should quit jabbering and roll out of there and fix some breakfast."

"Fix your own breakfast, John Hudson."

John chuckled as he headed out of the bedroom and into the hall. He went into the living room and found his pouch of tobacco on the television. He opened the front door and the early July sun filled the doorway. He took a chew from his pouch and decided to call Bobby to help him top and spray. He heard Ruby go into the kitchen behind him. He walked into the kitchen and found an empty pop can. Ruby was putting on coffee and making toast.

"You going to call Ricky to help you," she said.

"I guess I'll call Bobby Lewis."

"It's a damn shame, John Hudson, that you can't call your own son to help you, up there in that trailer, not doing a thing. He won't come out of that holler. That boy is on something."

"I know it. What can you do?"

"I don't guess there is much we can do."

John walked over to the telephone and dialed Bobby Taylor's number. Ruby poured herself and John a cup of coffee. The toast popped up. John walked back over to the table and sat down and spit out his tobacco. Ruby handed him the coffee and toast.

"Did you get hold of him?"

"Yeah, I'm going run by and get him."

"You going go by and see what Ricky's doing?"

"Yeah, I might. See if he can't help us out."

"John, now don't you go over there and get upset.

You'll have another heart attack. That boy is killing me.

All I do is worry."

"Now, Ruby, who's the one upset? Old girl, remember what the doctor said. You'll have the next one if you don't stop all that smoking and worrying."

"What did we do. Lisa is not like that."

"I don't know, Ruby," John said as he washed his last bite of toast down with coffee. "I got to be going, Bobby's waiting. Be good, old woman."

"Don't work too hard, John Hudson."

John walked out the side door of the kitchen. He stopped and got a bowl of dog food from a bag setting next to the door. John had bought the house because it was set on the side of a hill in front of a small holler. He kept his coon dogs up the holler. He got a bucket of water and walked up the hillside to his dogs. He washed their food dishes and water pans out before filling them.

John had two coon dogs, a red bone and a black and tan. John always took time to pet and talk to the little

black and tan. She was his favorite. He had hunted her for eleven years, and she had never been known to run a bad track. He remembered the night she had run that coon under a slate ledge that him and Lambert Peters had to pull out with forked stick. She broke her lease and tackled the coon. It almost killed her before they got it off her.

John took the buckets back to the side of the house. He walked over to his rusty brown pick-up and got in and backed out of the driveway and blew his horn and took off. He turned the radio to the country music station in Jackson, Kentucky, one of the few stations he could pick up.

John shifted gears and slowed down a little as the road weaved around the hillside. He reached upon the dash and got a pouch of tobacco and put a chew in his mouth. He turned onto the dirt road that went to Bobby's. Five or six barking dogs ran out to meet him as he pulled into the driveway and blew his horn. Bobby came out of the house and stopped at the top of the front porch steps and turned around. Janey stood at the door saying something to him. Bobby said something back and then headed down the steps.

"The old woman lining you up this morning," John said as Bobby got into the truck.

"Told me I better not get drunk today. Guess I passed

out in the driveway yesterday after Shanks dropped me off."

"That woman's going leave you for a good man," John said with a chuckle.

"Probably. What we going do today?"

"Top and spray mostly. Maybe a few other odds and ends, Ricky might help us."

"John, you keep working like this your going keel over."

"I'd like to quit, but we barely make it with me farming and Ruby working at the nursing home."

"Heard from the lawyer yet?"

"That snake ain't going do nothing. I made my last trip to Richmond to see that son-fa-bitch."

"Every cutthroat in the county is on the draw, and the man who needs it can't get a goddamn thing," Bobby said.

"Said I could get it if I have another major heart attack," said John.

"Try to get it on your head. Hell, half of Island Creek draws because they said they was crazy. They said Turkey Smith took a shit in some head doctor's office when he was being evaluated. Right there in the waiting room. Pulled his pants down and shit right there in the waiting room, right in the middle of the floor with roomful watching. Said he got a check from the government two

weeks later, back pay too."

John slowed down as he approached Barrett's Store. Barrett operated the only grocery and gas station on Island Creek. John pulled up next to the pumps and got out and started pumping gas as Bobby went inside. He finished filling up the tank and went inside.

Barrett had filled the little store to the walls. John always shook his head at how Barrett had managed to set up two tables in the middle of the store for the loafers to sit at. Barrett had once told him that the right loafers could make you a lot of money.

Bobby had sat down at a table with Barrett, Bones Banks and Philip Tinchler. Bones and John had once worked together in the mines. They had quit the day they saw John's cousin, Little Rob, killed by a D-9, cut in two when the bulldozer backed over him. John and Little Rob had run together when they were young, drinking red whiskey and chasing the Stamper sisters on Saturday night. John had always wanted to pay the foreman back for letting his drunk brother-in-law drive the dozer that day.

As he bent down and reached into the confines of the metal cooler to get a pop, John thought about how little the coal mattered now. When the seams were exhausted, the company took its equipment and money and left. He thought

about how Little Rob would just shake his head and grin and offer you a drink when faced with something that didn't make any sense.

"How you doing, John?" Bones asked.

"Pretty good, how you been Bones?" John answered.

"I swear, if Ruby don't quit feeding you them soup beans and cornbread, you going get slick fat," said Bones.

"I bet she has got a pot cooking right now, and if you act right, I might invite you over for a plate this evening."

"You men gonna work today?" asked Barrett.

"Yeah, we gonna top and spray that little field over on White Oak," answered John.

"You boys seen the paper this morning? We're famous now. Front page of the Lexington paper. Poorest god-damned county in the United States," said Philip Tincher.

John couldn't remember too many mornings when he had come in here and not found Philip Tincher rattling on about something he had read in the paper.

"I thought we was second or third. Some county down in Mississippi was below us, mostly colored," Bobby said.

"Says they got a shirt factory or something," Philip said.

"Shit, Booneville and the rest of Eastern Kentucky

always gonna be scraping the bottom of the barrel," said Bones.

"Well, boys, ain't got time be setting around here jawing. Let's go to White Oak and work awhile," John said as he headed toward the door with Bobby following him.

"Boys, I've worked all morning, time for a cup of coffee," Philip said with a grin.

"John, you need any help you know where to find me," Bones said as John nodded his way.

They pulled out of Barrett's and started down the twisting road. They turned onto the dirt road that led up White Oak, passing the long tobacco fields where the blooms swayed on top of the plants. They pulled into a spot that was at the end of one of the fields.

"Well, I guess it's just us, Bobby," John said as he stuffed a chew in his mouth and passed the pouch to Bobby. They got out and John got the sprayers out and handed the new sprayer to Bobby and put the rusted one on his back. They started down the rows of the tall plants, pumping the handles of the sprayer with one hand while using the other hand to spray the fine mist over the tops.

By the time it started to get dark, John and Bobby sat on the tailgate of the pick-up drinking from a milk jug that was full of water with a huge chunk of ice floating in

it. John took a long gulp and let the water run down his neck making clean little strips of flesh. He passed the jug to Bobby.

"Glad we got finished before dark. I sure as hell didn't want to come out here tomorrow," John said.

"I know it. It damn sure got hot out there a couple of times," Bobby said.

"What do I owe you?" John asked as he pulled his wallet out.

"Don't worry about it, give me a little this winter after you sell it. You can buy me a half-pint at Zeke's on the way home.

"We'll do. Thanks Bobby, I appreciate the help."

John heard a car and turned around and saw Bones's old blue Grenada come barreling up the road. Bones put on the brakes and the car skidded a couple of feet in the dirt. Bones got out.

"John, Ricky is down at Barrett's. He run his car in the ditch on Fishtrap hill. Now, he is alright, but I believe he's a little out of it. I could smell whiskey on him."

"Are you sure he's alright?" John asked.

"Yeah, he's fine, just a little drunk and shaken."

"You boys care to help me pull it out?" John asked.

"You and Bobby go on up and start pulling his car out, I'll swing back by the store and get Ricky," Bones said as headed back toward his car.

John and Bobby got in the pick-up and started toward Fishtrap hill.

"I swear, if that boy ain't worrying me and Ruby to death. Won't work and drinks all the time, I don't know what to do," John said.

"Yeah, I never thought you'd have any trouble out of him. He was always quiet when he was younger."

They found Ricky's Escort on the top of Fishtrap Hill in a curve. The front end was in the ditch pointing toward oncoming traffic. Bones pulled up and Ricky got out of the car. Bones waved and drove away. John stopped his pick-up in front of the car and turned his flashers on. John shook his head when he saw Ricky stumble and fall as he tried to get up.

"That boy is drunker than hell," John said as he was getting out. "Son, this shit is really getting old."

"Pop, you gonna pull me out," Ricky slurred.

John glared at him and went back to his pick-up and got a heavy chain from behind the seat. He came back and handed the chain to Bobby.

"Hook it to his front bumper, Bobby. I'll turn the

truck around and we'll hook it to the rear bumper," John said as he got in the pick-up and backed it up and turned it around. He left it running while he got out. Bobby had hooked the chain to the front bumper of the car and started wrapping the other end around the rear bumper of the pick-up.

"Pop, I'll get in and guide it while you pull me out," Ricky said as he stumbled around to the car."

"No, by God you just stay out of the way. Bobby you get in and guide it," John said as he bit back his anger.

Bobby got in the Escort and Ricky stumbled to the other side of the road. John got in his pick-up and waved to let Bobby know he was ready. He gave it some gas and the chain went tight, the front of the Escort lurched forward coming out of the ditch.

John backed up and put the pick-up in park and started to get out to unhook the chain. Ricky came running over to unhook the chain when John saw the car coming around the curve in his rear view mirror. The car slammed on its brakes and skidded toward Ricky, catching him between the front end and the chain. John felt the warm taste of blood in his mouth as his face hit the dashboard. He was dazed but he managed to get the door open and stumble out. He felt like he was in a dream as he started toward the rear

of the truck. Ricky was on top of the hood, his leg in the highway.

"My boy, my boy," John screamed as he stumbled over to him and put his hands on the bloody stump, trying to stop the blood that was gushing out onto the hood.

"Daddy, my leg feels funny," Ricky said as he raised up.

John put his arm around him and started to pick him up when his eyes rolled back into his head and his body went stiff and then limp. Bobby came over, blood running down his face from a gash on his forehead. John held Ricky as his life poured out and all he could think about was the first time he had held him on that cold November night.

Staying at Flo and Floyd's

Henry was finishing his beer at the Old Hickory when his brother walked through the door. Henry lifted his glass and motioned him over to the end of the bar where he was sitting. Garland came over and sat down and took out his cigarettes and put them on the bar.

"How's it going, Garland," the bartender said as he brought a shot glass over and put it in front of Garland and filled it with Kessler.

"Rob," Garland said as he raised the glass and drained half of the whiskey. Rob filled the glass up again and walked away.

"You just getting in?" Garland asked as he lit a cigarette.

"Yeah, I got to Flo's about an hour ago," Henry answered.

"How's things down home? Mom doing alright?"

"Yeah, she's fine, said to tell you all hello."

"Where you going to stay?"

"Probably with Flo and Floyd for awhile. I reckon if she can put up with Floyd she can put up with her brother," Henry said.

"Need some work? I got a load going to Cleveland tomorrow. I could use an extra man."

"God-damn Garland, I just got in. Every time I come up here you think I'm broke."

"Little brother, you're too busy chasing them women to work. I know how it is down on the creek."

"Garland, you been in Dayton too long with these Yankees. Making all this money is causing you to get above your raising. If you had any sense you'd sell out and come back to East Kentucky."

"Little brother, a man ain't going make no money in the moving business in Booneville. Why hell, I couldn't make enough money to keep one truck running," Garland said as he finished his whiskey and motioned for another one. "You wanna go on that run tomorrow?"

"I believe I'll just take it easy for a few days. I might help you next week. I made some money on that load of furniture you gave me a couple of months ago," Henry answered as he got out a cigarette and ordered another beer.

"Well, little brother, I got to be heading back to the office, got a load coming in this evening. Come over and stay a few nights with me before you go back," Garland said as he finished his second glass of whiskey and got up.

"Yeah, I will before I go back. I promised Murky and Virgil that I would come over and stay with them a night or

two. I'll probably stay at Flo's for a week or so, but I'll be over before I go back."

Garland paid for his whiskey and left. Henry drank another beer and paid Rob and walked out. He stood on the sidewalk and inhaled the night air. He walked over to the dark parking lot and got in his car. He put the top down and pulled out into the street and headed toward Flo's. He stopped at the red light and was lighting a cigarette when someone jumped into the car with him. He looked over to the black man sitting next to him.

"Man, you going downtown? Let me catch a ride with you," the man said as he leaned back and rested his arm over the door.

Henry hesitated and then said, "I'm just going to Fifth Street."

"Cool, that'll save me some time. Let's roll that light's green."

Henry slowly took off.

"Ain't this some weather. Rained like piss out of a bucket the last week and been nice as hell today," the man said.

"Yeah, it rained all week down home," Henry said.

"Man, where you from? You sound like you come from down south."

"East Kentucky."

"Shit, there's a lot of you briars up here. I worked with a guy over at the Green Derby in Newport who was from Kentucky. He'd get fighting mad if you talked about Adolf Rupp or Kentucky basketball. Brought some moonshine in the bar one night. Damn, that shit would kick you."

"Drunk it myself," Henry said as he switched the turn signal as they approached the next light, "Here's my turn."

Henry stopped the car next to the curb at the corner. The man got out and shut the door and turned around.

"Thanks man, you saved me some walking."

Henry nodded to him and pulled away. He pulled out a cigarette and slowed down as he went down the narrow street of the neighborhood. He reached under the seat and pulled out a pint of vodka and took a drink. He approached Flo's house and slowed down and parked a little ways up the street. He put the top up and took another drink of vodka. He put the bottle back under the seat and got out. He was walking away from the car when someone walked up behind him. Henry turned around and saw a man standing with a baseball bat in his hand.

"You the hillbilly bastard that's been calling my wife trying to get her to go out with you?" the man asked as he walked forward raising the bat.

"What? Man, I don't even live on this street or in this fucking town. I ain't been calling nobody's wife," Henry said as he looked at the man.

"My wife says it's the man that lives in this here house," the man said as he pointed toward Flo's with the bat.

"Look man, I'm from Kentucky. I'm just visiting my cousin who lives up the street. I don't even know who lives here," he said as he started walking slowly up the street away from Flo's.

"Mister, I had better not find out that it's you," the man said as Henry headed up the street.

He got to the end of the block and turned right and kept walking. He reached into his pockets and got out his cigarettes. His hands were shaking so badly that he dropped them. A car pulled up to the curb next to him as he was picking them up. Henry slowly raised up.

"Henry, what you doing walking up the street this time of night," Floyd said as he leaned his skinny frame out the window of the car.

"Damn you Floyd," Henry said as he went around to the passenger's side and opened the door, "wait to we get home. I just might tell Sister Flo that you been calling your neighbor's wife."

"What the hell you talking about Henry?" Floyd asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"You know what the fuck I'm talking about. That neighbor of yours was ready to bust my brains out with a baseball bat. I remember us sitting on the front porch last summer and what you said when we seen her pull into their driveway, 'She sure is a sexy little thing.' You was drunk, so you might not remember it, but you said it."

"We had better not go back there right now," Floyd said as he drove past the street where he lived, "let's go to the Old Hickory and have a beer."

"Flo will kill you if she finds out you been calling that woman."

"I just called her once, hell I was drunk at the time. She told me to get lost and hung up. That was a month ago, I hadn't thought no more about it."

"Well, keep me out of your messes. And Floyd," Henry said as he turned and looked Floyd in the eye, "Flo better not get messed up in something you caused over a piece of ass."

"Henry, you ain't going to tell her are you?"

"No Floyd, I ain't, but you had better watch out for my sister."

Floyd didn't say anything. Henry took out a cigarette

and lit it and took a deep draw and leaned back and watched the brightly lit streets go by in silence. The next day he went and stayed with Murky and Virgil.

The Sell

George paced back and forth. He glanced at the window. The small living room didn't allow him much space. He knew his constant pacing irritated Annie.

"Why ain't he here yet?" asked George.

"You know how he is, has he ever showed up when he said he would?"

"I know it, but all this waiting tears my nerves all to hell."

George paused at the wobbly brown table in front of the window. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He exhaled a stream of smoke through his nose and resumed his pacing.

"Did you weigh it again?" he asked.

"George, the weight is right on."

"I know, but I just want to make sure."

"Look, just settle down, that pacing is driving me crazy."

George reluctantly slumped down into the couch. His thin lanky figure twitched nervously.

Headlights lit the living room causing George to leap to the window. He let out a nervous breath when he saw the car disappear on up the holler.

"Wouldn't him?" Annie asked.

"No. I don't like this. That bastard should have been here."

"You're giving the stuff away for God's sake, that cutthroat will be here."

"I'm getting a beer, want one?" George asked.

"No."

The kitchen that George had remodeled himself was small and neat. He had worked several days on the cabinets and the floor. He remembered how good he felt when Annie bragged on how solid the floor was.

He got a beer from the refrigerator. He drained the first half of it standing in front of the refrigerator door. The phone rang, causing him to jerk and almost drop his beer.

"I've got it," he yelled.

George walked over to the counter and picked up the phone.

"Hello," he said.

"George?"

"It's me, where the fuck are you?"

"I'm over at a buddy's house. I'll be up your way in a hour or so."

"You were suppose to be here ten minutes ago. You've got it, all of it?"

"I got what we agreed on."

"Try to be here as quick as you can. I don't care for having to sit on this stuff for so long."

"I'll be there. I just need to collect some debts. Don't freak out. Just hang till I get there."

"Hurry the fuck up," George said and hung up the phone.

Annie walked in and sat down at the table across from where George stood. He reached atop the refrigerator and pulled out a little tray where he kept his smoking stash. He sat down and began scissoring a green bud that was covered with little red crystals.

"Was that Blue? I bet that punk ain't coming."

"He's coming, just be an hour or so late. I hope he's not bullshitting me about the money. That's a lot of money for a loser like him to come up with."

"George, you know he's got some contacts. Don't worry."

George knew Annie was right. He had a hard time thinking straight with so many pounds around. It made him groan to think of all the hours he had put in since the early Spring. He could hardly think about the fact that it would be over with tonight.

George lit the joint and inhaled slowly. He tapped

the edge of it on the ashtray to make it burn evenly. He offered it to Annie. He watched her firm chest rise as she inhaled and sucked the whitish smoke out of her mouth and up her nose. George felt the effects before they had smoked half the joint. He smiled at Annie whose eyes were glossy and bright.

"Feel it?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's real nice. Blue don't know what a bargain he's getting. My man grows some of the best. Fucking dealers like Blue want you to give it to them."

"Yeah. We'll have it good for awhile, we will."

"At least with me working at the grade school, we won't have to worry about explaining where the extra money is from."

George was constantly worried about the IRS knocking on his door. The nice clothes and two decent vehicles made him uncomfortable at times. He wasn't ashamed of how he made his living, but he hadn't intended for things to end up the way they had. Annie's brother, Doc, had started him in the business the fall he and Annie got married and they were dead broke at the time. Doc had approached George with the offer to make some extra cash. All George had to do was help him pick his crop, a couple of hard days work. Doc had offered him enough to make a down payment on the

little farm he and Annie had their eye on, two years later and he was in the growing business by himself.

He figured that this would be the last sale he would have to make. The profits should give him enough to pay off a good chunk of the farm. He had even thought about getting a job washing cars over at the garage for awhile after this was over, since minimum wage would be enough with the farm paid off.

George was starting to come down when the living room was flooded with light. Annie was dozing and George roused her up.

"Annie, they're here."

"I'm cool," she said in a sleepy voice. "Let's get this shit over with."

"The pistol?"

Annie nodded and pulled the pistol from behind her back and showed it to George and placed it back in her pants under her shirt. George had always felt more comfortable when Annie had the pistol. He admired the cool even manner that she had around guns. Her older brother had started taking her squirrel hunting when she was eleven and taught her how to handle guns.

George went to the door and opened it. He was taken aback to see that Blue had brought someone with him.

George looked at Annie and saw that she wasn't happy about this. The man stood a head taller than George. He had a beard and stringy hair that curved around the side of his face.

"George, Annie," Blue said nodding to each of them as he walked into the living room.

"What's up Blue?" George asked.

"This is Kool-Aid, me and him's in on this deal."

"Where you from Kool-Aid?" Annie asked as she walked up and stood beside George.

"From up on Sugar Camp in Owsley County."

"Yeah. No shit. My cousin Thomas used to run around with a girl from up there, Patty Nooley."

Kool-Aid shook his head, "No, I moved to Winchester about five years ago. I knew Ed Nooley."

"Yeah, I know Ed. What was his wife's name?" Annie asked.

"Sally. She was a Johnson before they got married. She was from up on Wild Dog," Kool-Aid answered.

George saw that Kool-Aid's answer made Annie relax a little.

"You got the money Blue?" George asked.

"Yeah, I got it. I told you I would," Blue said reaching into the inside pocket of his denim jacket and

pulling out several stacks of new twenties, "but, Kool-Aid's got an investment in this and wants to look at the weed before we do the deal."

"What? Dealing with friends you don't trust Blue?" Annie asked looking at Kool-Aid.

George wanted this to be over with. He wanted Annie to just go along and do the deal.

"Annie, let's show it to them. Fellahs, it's out in the shed," George said while he motioned his hand to the kitchen and toward the back door.

George saw Annie look at him as she followed Kool-Aid and Blue out to the shed. When they got to the shed, George took out his keys and unlocked it. George slid back the aluminum doors and turned on an overhead light. The shed was filled with tools and garden equipment. George had put the stuff in garbage bags and stacked it into a corner. George took a step back.

"Boys, there it is. Have a look and let's do this deal."

Kool-Aid walked into the shed and went over and untied one of the bags. He reached in and pulled out a handful of thick green buds.

"Feels like it needs to dry a little more."

"What-" Annie began.

"Roll one up and smoke it," George interrupted.

"I'm gonna, but I mean it's going lose some weight when it dries."

"Listen Kool-Aid, for what you're paying you can't bitch about that. Go somewhere else and get this kinda of weed for this kinda price. This talking shit's getting old," Annie said in an irritated voice.

Kool-Aid had dropped the handful, except for one bud. He fished a paper out of his jacket pocket and started rolling a joint. He stepped outside the shed and lit the joint and passed it to Blue. They finished the joint and stood for a moment.

"It's pretty good," Kool-Aid said.

"Pretty good? listen asshole, buy the pot or leave," Annie said as she glared at Kool-Aid.

Kool-Aid blinked a couple of times and put his hands in his jacket pockets. George got ready to tackle Kool-Aid. He looked at George.

"Where's your scales?"

George went to a corner in the shed and got a set of balance beam scales from under a box. George weighed each bag while Kool-Aid looked at the scale pointer and Annie looked at Kool-Aid.

"Blue, pull your car up and back it up to the shed,"

George said when he finished weighing the last bag. Blue took off around the house. George started handing the bags to Kool-Aid as Blue was backing the car up. Blue stopped the car and got out.

"Let's have the money Blue," Annie said as she walked over to him. George saw Kool-Aid stop when Annie went over to Blue. George looked around for the nearest weapon and saw a hammer laying on a paint can next to his shoe. Blue began taking the money out and handing it to Annie. Kool-Aid started reaching for the bags again. Blue popped the trunk and they loaded the bags in it. They loaded the car quickly.

"Boys, good doing business with you," George said as he slammed down the trunk.

Kool-Aid walked around to the passenger side and got in.

"George, let me know if you have another crop like this," Blue said as he started to get into the car.

"Thinking about quitting. The law stays in the hills anymore."

George walked over to Annie and they stood and watched the car drive away. George thought Kool-Aid was turning around to say something, but Kool-Aid only looked blankly at Annie. George looked at Annie and she turned and looked

at him. They turned and watched the car disappear out of the holler and George thought about where he was going to hide the money.

Split Poplar

Thomas rolled over and looked at the alarm clock that stood on his stereo. The glow of the red digits showed that it was after midnight. He heard the noise downstairs of someone throwing up. Thomas got up and walked out of his bedroom and lay down at the top of the stairs. He looked down into the living room. He watched his dad puke into a small garbage can that his mom held. He listened as she muttered about Dr. Coy.

Thomas got up and looked at the clock again and went back into his bedroom and began putting on his hunting clothes. He reached under his bed and pulled out his rifle. He held it up in the moonlight and pulled back the stainless steel bolt and checked the chamber of the semi-automatic .22 to make certain it was empty. He set the rifle down and went to his dresser and opened the top drawer and pulled out two twenty-five round magazines and put them in his pockets. He went to the closet and got his flashlight and then he opened the window and climbed out onto the roof of the kitchen. He jumped onto a branch of the hickory tree that stood next to the house and climbed down. Thomas looked in the window of the living room and saw his dad sitting on the couch holding his stomach and rocking back and forth. He turned around and went to the

back of the house and got his bicycle. He got on and started down the dirt road.

Thomas pedaled until his undershirt was soaked with sweat and the wind in his ears smothered the sounds of the creek that twisted alongside the road. He raised up in the seat and slowed down as he approached Luther's house. He stopped the bike and got off and pushed it into the yard. He took his time, afraid he might hit something and make noise and wake Luther's parents.

"By God, it's about time," Luther said as Thomas came around the house.

"I was making sure that Mom and Dad wouldn't coming upstairs," he answered.

Luther was standing next to the well, smoking a cigarette and holding onto his coonhound, Jack. Thomas went over and squatted down and started rubbing Jack's ears.

"Your parents out for the night?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah, we're all set," Luther said as he grinned and pulled out a half-pint of red whiskey from his army shirt. "Check out what Ronnie gave me," he said as he put the half-pint back and reached into his top pocket and pulled out a joint.

"Man, your brother always comes through. Damn, it's

going to be a good hunt tonight," Thomas said as he took the joint from Luther and looked at it. "Did you bring us some pop?" he asked as he handed back the joint.

"Honey, you know I ain't going to forget anything," Luther said with a grin as he pulled two cans out of the cargo pockets on his pants, "Let's hit the hills."

Thomas followed as Luther motioned Jack toward the trail that led down behind Luther's house. Thomas took off his rifle and held it above his head as they waded through the dense briar thickets that crowded the sides of the trail. They got to a barbed-wire fence and stopped. Thomas took his rifle and set it next to the fence and grabbed two of the wires and held them together and swung one leg over and then the other. He got out one of the magazines and picked up his rifle and loaded it. He turned on his flashlight and looked around. Luther had crossed the fence and was loading his pistol.

"Where'd be a good place to start?" Thomas asked as he looked up and down the logging road that crossed in front of them alongside the fence.

"I bet we'll hit something on Split Poplar. Ronnie said they treed two coons and a possum up there about three weeks ago."

"Sounds good to me, give me a shot of that whiskey."

Luther took the whiskey out and they passed it back and forth and finished with a long drink of pop. Luther reached into his pocket and took out the joint and they smoked half of it before starting again.

Thomas cradled the rifle under his arm as they started walking up the logging road. He shined the light in front of him to watch for the deep ruts. He had to pick up his pace as Jack lead them on, tugging eagerly on his leash.

They had walked about two miles when they came to a fork in the road. They stopped and finished the half-pint with long drinks. Luther lit the other half of the joint and they smoked and stared silently at the dark roads.

"I guess this be the best place to cross the hill," Luther said as he pointed the beam of his flashlight up the steep hill away from the roads. Jack started up the hill and Luther followed him. Thomas had to sling his rifle and flashlight to climb the steep hill, using the skinny saplings to pull his way up as he listened to the sound of the dry leaves crunching under his feet.

Thomas got a cigarette from Luther when they reached the top and they stood and smoked in the moonlight with their flashlights off. The loudest sound they could hear was the desperate panting of Jack.

"Jesus, it's a good night, I sure hope Jack hits

something," Luther said quietly.

"Yeah, we should let him loose in that first holler on the right. Got any more whiskey?"

"I got another half-pint."

"Give us a drink."

They stood and drank until they felt warm in the cold dark. They started down the other side, taking small jumps, left and then right, back and forth, they moved quickly down the hill. They reached the bottom and came out on a gravel road.

"How far you think that holler is?" Thomas asked as he took off his flashlight and shined it up the road.

"I'd say about a mile. We should make it by two-thirty," Luther answered.

Thomas turned off his flashlight and they headed up the road, their way lit by the moonlight shining off the white gravel. Thomas walked a little behind Luther and Jack, watching the way Luther had to weave back and forth as Jack pulled at his leash.

They reached the front of the holler and stopped. Luther unhooked Jack's leash and whistled and urged him toward the holler. Jack took off and soon disappeared in the blackness.

"Let's walk up the holler a bit and wait," Luther said

as he started up the holler. Thomas turned on his flashlight and shined it on the ground in front of him to watch for snakes in the high weeds as he walked. They stopped at the head of the holler where the trees became too thick to walk side by side. They sat down and finished the half-pint and tossed the bottle in the weeds. Luther brought out two cigarettes and they smoked and listened as they waited for Jack to find a track. He started barking faintly in the darkness.

"He's found one already. I can tell by his bark that it's a coon," Luther said jumping up. Thomas got up and they headed toward the noise in the darkness. They came upon a little creek that cut around one of the hillsides that formed the holler. They followed it around the hillside, the sound of Jack's barks getting louder.

They left the creek and climbed the ridge that formed one side of the holler. They could hear Jack's baying in the distance. They stood on top of the hill and listened.

"Dammit, he's over in that strip mine," Luther said.

"Ain't that the place with that big pond, where Willard took us fishing that time?"

"Yeah, there's still a few trees on the hill that runs around the pond. I bet that's where Jack treed the coon."

They started down the hillside, jumping and sliding

till they reached the bottom. They came out onto a road that led up to the strip mine. Thomas took his time, walking around where the huge washouts had left ruts that were over his head.

They got to the top of the road and the land leveled out and stood bare against the moonlight. Thomas shined his light and saw the pond a few yards in front of them. He walked up to the edge of the pond and shined his light in the yellow and black water. He listened at the steady rhythm of Jack's barking across the water.

"Luther, we're going to have to go around. He's got it treed on the other side."

They started walking, leaning sideways as they went around the steep hillside. Luther missed a step and slid a few feet toward the pond before grabbing a bare pine.

"God-dammit, you scared the shit out of me," Thomas whispered.

"Scared myself, I don't want no part of that pond. Hell, I bet they ain't even any fish in that son-fa-bitch. None of us even got a bite that day."

As they neared the other side, Jack's barking got louder. Thomas caught the reflection of his eyes with his flashlight. He was barking up a tall, thin oak.

"Damn Luther, he's got that thing all the way up that

oak."

They started climbing the hillside toward the tree using their hands to help, sometimes grabbing a tree or a handful of leaves. When they got to Jack they had to stand sideways and hold onto something to keep from falling down the steep hillside.

"Can you see it?" Luther asked as he used his free hand to guide his flashlight through the thick leaves.

"No," Thomas responded as he set his rifle down and used both hands to guide the light through the green underside of the oak.

"I found it," Luther shouted from a few feet away.

Thomas walked over and stood beside Luther.

"By god, it's a coon," Thomas said as he saw the tiny red eyes.

"Let's shoot the fucker out," Luther said.

Thomas took a step behind Luther and turned out his flashlight and slung it across his shoulder. Thomas picked up the rifle and slid the bolt back and chambered a shell. He rested the barrel on Luther's shoulder and laid his cheek against the cold stock and took aim.

"Hold still," Thomas said as he curved his finger around the trigger. He aimed until the sight rested between the tiny red eyes. He squeezed the trigger. The

soft crack of the rifle was followed by a thumping sound. The tiny eyes disappeared from Thomas's sight. He heard the coon falling through the tree. It landed with a thump and Jack ran over and began chewing on it.

"Good fucking shot!" Luther yelled as he stumbled toward where the coon lay.

"Would you look at that," Luther said as Thomas came up beside him, "you hit it right in the head." Luther shined the light on the bloody head.

"That's a funny looking coon," Thomas said as he shined the light across the yellow and gray fur.

"Damn if I ever seen a coat like that," Luther said.

"Looks like that fucker's been in that pond or something," Thomas said.

"Fuck it, let's skin it anyway," Luther said as he pulled Jack off the coon. "Here, hold him while I get it."

Thomas grabbed Jack by the collar and held him while Luther held up the coon.

"I bet that son-fa-bitch don't weigh nine pounds, looks sick or something," he said holding it higher. He reached behind his back and pulled out his lockblade and flipped it open and made a slit down the coon's belly with the knife. He took it by the sides and pushed the hairless purple body out and peeled the coon skin off.

"Damn, if that ain't a crazy looking hide. Willie Terry will give us twenty dollars for a hide like this. I bet he ain't never seen one with a coat like this," Luther said.

"Shit yeah. Hell we'll tell him thirty."

They stood for a moment and then turned out their lights and Luther brought out the cigarettes and they stood and smoked and looked at the reflection of the moon on the dark water of the pond. They finished their cigarettes and started walking in silence back around the hillside. They started back down the road toward Luther's, crossing the hills and the creeks without talking. By the time they reached Luther's, the sky was starting to turn bright and the woods around them was filled with birds singing.

"You going to school today?" Luther whispered as they walked into the backyard.

"Probably not. Why don't we skip and go up Willie's and see what he'll give us for this hide."

"Sounds good to me," Luther said.

"I'll go home and change. We'll met at the bus stop and leave from there," Thomas said.

"Yeah, we'll go get another joint off Ronnie. Hell, we can come back here after while. Mom and Dad are both going to be gone all day," Luther said.

Thomas got on his bike and headed out through the early morning fog. He didn't stop pedaling until he rode into the yard. He climbed up to his room and got his clothes off and was into bed before the sun had started to show through the windows. He fell asleep and didn't stir until he felt his mom shaking him.

"Thomas. Thomas. Wake up. I gotta take your Dad back to Lexington. Do you hear me? We gotta go, he's hurting bad. Are you awake?"

"Yeah Mom," Thomas said as he raised up in the bed. He rubbed his eyes and looked into the red-rimmed eyes of his mom.

"You been up all night? Can't he stop throwing up?" Thomas asked.

"The university hospital will be able to help him. All that doctor did at Richmond was make it worse. Everything he eats comes up," she said as she looked at the sun coming through the window. "Now, you get up and get yourself ready and go to school. I'll probably stay down there tonight. You'll be all right by yourself, won't you?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Thomas said as he swung his feet to the floor.

She leaned forward and kissed Thomas on the forehead

and got up and walked out of the room. Thomas got up and put on his jeans and a t-shirt and walked downstairs. He walked into the kitchen and stopped. His dad rocked back and forth in one of the chairs.

"Dad, you o.k.?" Thomas asked as he looked at the top of the cabinets.

"I'm hurting awful bad. Your mother's taking me to Lexington."

"I can go with you. Mom shouldn't be down there by herself."

"No. You go on to school and Mom will be back in a day or two. You can't be missing no more school."

Thomas sat down at the table and his mom came in carrying a suitcase and they got up and went out the door. Thomas got up and fixed some eggs and toast. He ate and then cleaned up the kitchen and walked out the back door and got on his bike and rode toward the bus stop.