I Never Saw the Llightning, Martin Luther! A Compositional Model

Donald J. Davenport

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Abstract

I NEVER SAW THE LIGHTNING, MARTIN LUTHER!
by Donald J. Davenport, Jr.

The problems of composition, and specifically the problems of organizing and creating sustained narrative writing, often can be brought to light best through the use of a working model. I Never Saw the Lightning, Martin Luther! discusses the problems associated with pre-writing—structure, point of view, and thematic considerations—as well as techniques of editing and unifying the continuity of a manuscript. These techniques are written as a preface, a "process paper," to the novel length piece of original, religious fiction which follows, serving as a model to exemplify the process of composition. Specific scenes, stylistic features, theme and plot considerations in the book are analyzed in the preface in both a thematic and a practical way.
I NEVER SAW THE LIGHTNING, MARTIN LUTHER!
A COMPOSITIONAL MODEL
by
Donald J. Davenport, Jr.

A Thesis Project in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Field of English

January 1977
Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis project in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a project for the degree Master of Arts.

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To Edward Blankenship
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### PART II  I Never Saw the Lightning, Martin Luther!

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I. INTRODUCTION

The prospect of writing a preface paper to be included with my creative project for the completion of my Master's Degree in English at Loma Linda seemed like a great idea at the inception of the project; it was, in fact, an idea of my own devising. The record should read from the outset, however, that no matter how hard this preface to *I Never Saw the Lightning*, Martin Luther tries to come to grips with the process of composition, one fact remains: the process of composition—like most other creative processes—seems to be innately undefinable and equally diverse. In retrospect I realize certain things that are necessary for writing and organizing effective narrative prose, but there is a body of notions, practices, and various heuristic devices that remain viscous, slipping in and out of any attempt to capture them and analyze them.

This preface, then, is a "process" paper, a discussion of the mechanics involved with writing a novel-length piece of narrative prose. I have attempted to structure the preface in such a way as to roughly correspond to the stages I went through in the writing of *Lightning*. However, any pedagogical value that this project may have to anyone else can never come close when compared to what I managed to learn from attempting to write the book itself. That knowledge will be a vital asset when and if I consider ever writing other books, and in that sense, *Lightning* has been well worth the effort.

The desire to complete a book had been with me for a long time. I had
tried several times when I was younger to write sustained narrative prose and had even managed to hammer out a few pages, perhaps even chapters, on various projects before the coefficient of discouragement overwhelmed any impetus that remained and I gave up rather quickly.

It was after a short and varied writing career that I decided to try again to write a story, one that seemed a suitable vehicle for what I felt I wanted to express artistically and emotionally. The timing was right because I was left with a summer that, because of a domestic coup d'état, was largely free, and, moreover, I was aware of the personal need to establish some type of literary voice, a need rooted in my quest to re-establish my own feelings of acceptability.

On June 21, 1976, I put the first word on paper. I would consider the book "done" a year less three days later. Aside from making it successfully through puberty, Lightning stands as one of the most sustained and, in its own way, difficult tasks I have ever tried to complete. Even as I finish this preface, I am still so drained from the editing and re-writing of the manuscript that I will allow myself several weeks before I begin working on the pre-writing stage of any other project that may be simmering somewhere in my head; I can say with certainty at this point, however, that the next book will be better.

* * *

The body of this preface will be divided into four sections, each one
having to do with four different phases of the writing of Lightning and the thrust will be largely historical. But one more point must be remade by way of introduction, and that is this: The process of composition—the organic, mechanical, inspirational, and occasionally pedestrian task of writing one word after another, and one true sentence after another—remains, as I have mentioned, partially mysterious. Consequently, everyone's "modus operandi" must differ, the extremes ranging from Scott Fitzgerald's apparent ease of writing which seemed "as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly's wings," for example, to Hemingway's writing sessions in which he gives the impression of trying to handle a narrative the way Marlon Brando would handle an unyielding lover—one has to "fight it like hell."

This preface is my story and my method, a method that can be labeled effective and valid only if it works successfully, but that is a question that I do not now—and maybe will never—have the perspective to answer completely.

II. THE CONCEPT

What was the Lightning?

I wanted to write a religious novel, one that would involve elements of initiation and Jobian stoicism, but one that would give a new treatment to the traditional "l'enfant terrible" theme. It was this melting pot of ideas that existed somewhere behind every other consideration such as plot-
I felt that elements of initiation were necessary because initiation is, after all, often considered the basis for a novel. The hero in a novel must develop through series of events or circumstances and eventually come out having changed in some way from how we first see him.

This process seemed to me to be even more important in a religious book since Christianity is traditionally a process of initiation, or in Christian terms, "re-birth." Nicodemus asked how a man could be born again and Christ answered that this initiation is only possible by man's accepting truth when he is confronted by it and by growing from the encounter. Unfortunately it was no easier for Nicodemus than it is for Peter Tyson or anyone else for that matter. Suffice it to say that I wanted to write a story with a thoroughly initiated protagonist even before I knew anything else about it.

My second consideration for a hero was that he had to be one who could be a good Job figure, the reasons being as much literary as they were personal.

I have always been moved and heartened by Job's experience. It was a scene of conflict that ennobled both Job and God; God rebukes Job, not for his desire to question what he considers to be unfair treatment, but because he is asking the wrong questions, ones that he could not ultimately understand the answers to anyway. But for his part, Job never wavers from a deep-seated sense of his personal rightness. He is willing to be corrected or instructed, and he is willing to bear his suffering, but he desires to know the reasons for his suffering. He doesn't want the heavens to remain
Lightning was begun on June 21, 1976, the day after I had planned to be married, and in a microcosmic way (although it didn't seem microcosmic at the time) I felt that the undoing of an important part of my personal life—a situation I couldn't come to feel responsible for—put me in a position a little like Job's. I was asking questions, albeit the wrong ones, but the heavens remained silent. I decided that the best way to process these feelings would be in my manuscript, so the Jobian motif in the story became important.

The "l'enfant terrible" or prodigal son motif was not nearly as important a philosophical or literary consideration as it was a dramatic and a commercial one.

I have always believed that there are few things that "establishment" (and I use this word in the largest possible sense) people secretly enjoy as much as becoming involved with a hero who is brave enough to take on the bulk of the establishment. That type of hero becomes a perfect alter-ego character, someone people can live through vicariously without having to worry about getting drummed out on their ears. For the majority of projected readers, I wanted a prodigal son who had been thoroughly washed through "the rinse cycle of orthodoxy." If readers grew to like my protagonist or secretly admired him because of his hotheadedness, they would like the book and that was of sufficient interest for a rookie writer like myself to try and mold an acceptably "unacceptable" hero for the story.

These conceptual elements were then ready to be plugged into a plot of
some sort a task that proved to be rigorous. It was only after I had seen the Bob Rafelson film "Five Easy Pieces" that the storyline in Lightning began to form in my mind.

The film involves a talented musician from a prestigious, musical family who feels he cannot accept the sterility of the esthetic life, so he leaves home in order to work in a Texas oil field. But even that level of involvement with what he considers to be the "real" world cannot alter the fact that his problems stem from an inability to accept or give love; he is as sterile as the musical life he condemns.

It was on this basis that my protagonist, Peter Tyson, was created. He is bright, but rash. He tries to know what cannot be completely understood. But most importantly, Peter lashes out at the seminary and his fellow theo jocks because he feels their system is not viable in the "real" world; all the time he, himself, is plagued by doubts and fears that his own system may be as inadequate. He may appear stereotypically as a sort of romantic idealist, but I hope he is more than that. I hope he appears instead an idealist with some complex emotional problems. In actuality he is a man trying to implement a world that, because of his belief crisis, has ceased to exist.

Mapping a course for Peter was difficult. In my early workings with him he appeared as a nonpareil character, one who purged himself by fighting a sterile system. It soon became obvious, however, that it just would not work having Peter as that type of crusader because it shifted the responsibility for the conflict from the hero to the institution.
It became necessary, then, to allow Peter to become a different type of hero—an initiation hero whose personal problems and disillusionments preclude him from growing within the structure of the system. The change was really quite important since the Peter who does appear in Lightning is a man struggling to understand his world and, in that sense, he is much more universal. He is vulnerable in a greater way, a way that produces more empathy with the reader.

As far as blocking out the plot itself, I called upon three areas of my own experience. First, there was my familiarity with the lifestyle, curriculum, and attitudes of many of the Seventh-day Adventist ministerial students on the Loma Linda University campus. (In fact, I roomed with one for a year.) Peter, then, becomes a synthetic product, made up of all that I observed during those undergraduate years.

Second, it was necessary to provide Peter with a frontier—a place for him to learn and understand how a survival attitude works. Alaska was a natural choice for this. I had spent the summer of 1970 working on a homestead just outside of Talkeetna, and in a way similar to Peter's, I also learned the survival mentality from the people around me. The Alaska setting is as accurate as my memory could reproduce and as realistic as I could make it.

There is a third element—perhaps a lesser one—in Lightning that draws on my own experience directly, and it has to do with the Luther allusions, principally in Chapter III. Luther's experience struck me as the perfect unifying image for Peter's struggle to understand his destiny. I felt my
experience with Luther had been fairly extensive, having taken several classes
dealing directly with him and having read much of his work and several biog­
raphies. On the basis of my own knowledge I chose Luther as the parallel
instead of Zwingli or Calvin, or any other of that type who probably would
have worked in the frame, because it seemed evident to me that Luther's life
was paradoxical just as I hoped I could show Peter's life to be.

There was a final matter that I had spent considerable time with and
that was the process of choosing a title. The selection of a good title I
have always felt is absolutely crucial to the success of the book as a
whole. An excellent case in point was [Jaws] by Peter Benchley. There is no
other one-word title that bears as much implosive impact as "jaws"; it is
perfectly congruent. Unfortunately, none of the titles I played with had
the effect that seemed necessary to the plot.

I finally arrived at the title I Never Saw the Lightning, Martin Luther!
by means of a rather circuitous route. I had been inclined to select some­
ting that would not make complete sense until the reader was nicely into
the book. I remembered several examples that seemed effective because of
their subtlety--Good-bye Columbus by Phillip Roth and "The House of Blue
Leaves" by John Guare, for example. After thinking through the parts of the
narrative that I had decided I could use--scenes and confrontations mostly--
I chose to direct the title towards the classroom scene in which Peter breaks
down in class. In several ways, this sequence is central to the theme of
the book because it most clearly demonstrates his struggle to understand
things as they are against how he feels they should be. But, even after
deciding that, I was still having trouble with the essence of the title.

The breakthrough came when I ran across a list of titles I had jotted down several years before. They had interested me for one reason or another. One of these titles was Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon. Suddenly it became easy for me to come up with my title, based rather directly on the same syntax, and in spite of any cumbersomeness—and the title can be a bit cumbersome—I am convinced that it works with more effect than anything else I could have come up with. It is a good glimpse into the theme of the book, and since it is technically an apostrophe to Luther, it seems to carry a certain mystique.

What I had then—even before I started formal prewriting and long before I actually put words on paper—was a fairly clear notion of character and theme and a rough idea of the flow of the plot. Translating these ideas into a form out of which a narrative could flow took quite a bit of detail work with most of it revolving around a device called "the outline."

III. PREWRITING

Organizing the Lightning

If one happens to take a survey of several of the current rhetoric books he will discover that there is no consensus concerning the formal outline. Some authors believe that it is a valuable tool in the compositional process, while others believe that it places an undue stricture on the deeper, innate organization that they ascribe to be within everyone.
The latter group insists that a good writer probably will not even need a formal outline.

I do not wish at this point to qualify myself as a good writer or a bad writer, but I do wish to assert that outlines for the writing of Lightning were invaluable. They were flexible enough to be adapted or changed thoroughly when necessary. The greatest benefit, however, probably came from the tendency outlines have of stabilizing and standardizing the narrative, giving it a constant point of reference. If it was necessary for me to write at odd hours—as it usually was—or to be constantly interrupted while working, an outline charting the plot flow of the chapter allowed me to find my place in the story faster and to write more consistently and more effectively.

My first step in making a working outline was to write out my conceptual plans for the book, fitting in major scenes, the entrance of major characters, the action I wanted a sequence to take, etc. After this sketchy outline was finished I began to break the plot down into pieces that seemed to be approximately chapter length. This division then gave me an idea—albeit a rough one—of what I should plan on covering in a given chapter. Early on I went so far as to assign approximate pagination to various elements in the first several chapters as they appeared on the outline, but that turned out to be more structure than I needed so the practice was stopped.

At this time I had not completely decided what point of view the narrative should take, and it was after I had completed a rough, divided outline of the book that I found myself faced with the need to solve this
problem. As it turned out, first person narrative was chosen because it represented the lesser of two literary evils.

The problem with selecting proper point of view for my manuscript was simple: How skillfully can a person call the "play by play" on his own initiation experience? If a first person narrator can clearly and consciously describe the guilt-induced hell of his own nervous breakdown, that very lucidity that he demonstrates may serve to destroy the credibility of the experience itself. In other words, if the hero can explain what he's feeling too nicely, easily, or smoothly, he will not stand to be a victim of the conflict, which is necessary for his initiation process.

On the other hand, what advantages third-person narration offers in the area of objectivity must be balanced against the skill needed to successfully establish all the characters, each having the proper amounts of knowledge and insight. Somebody has to know something all the time, and the work involved in crafting this type of melodrama in order to be true to all the characters' abilities and perspectives seemed to be too much of a task for a novice novelist. And while it may not have been a factor directly, I was aware that Ernest Hemingway had come to the same conclusion after trying to shift the narrative point of view in The Sun Also Rises from first person to third person. He simply couldn't make it work, and being my mentor, his struggles may have had some sway on my decision. Nevertheless, first person seems the proper choice in retrospect.

In the story, Peter must shift from a stance of being totally lucid about externals to one of being confused and disoriented about what is
going on inside his own head. I desired that he be believable although not always trustworthy, even if he did not distort things purposefully. That paradox in itself took some work in order to insure a consistent degree of inconsistency in Peter.

As it turned out, writing Lightning in the first person was more natural because some of the settings and a bit of the action is autobiographical and I found it easy to place myself in Peter's head and to re-discover various questions simultaneously as he discovers them initially.

After deciding on the point of view, I was ready for the last bit of prewriting--the first chapter outline. It, like the general plot outline, was loose and flexible. Most of the entries pointed to specific events or the entrance of specific characters. Scenes were also indicated, and if an important emotional experience was to be included in the chapter, I would indicate it in the outline. Throughout the duration of my work on Lightning, I continued to outline one chapter at a time, changing elements in the chapter freely and often eliminating complete sections. Nevertheless, I always knew roughly what would come next in the story simply by referring to the general plot outline--it would give me a major event or circumstance I could aim for like a beacon.

The total conscious time spent in prewriting the book was probably less than 10 hours; the subconscious time was a matter of months or even years. And with the dramatic grist I had accumulated--and a strong cup of Swiss Mocha at hand--I felt ready to begin writing what I considered to be a potentially unique religious novel. I would learn, however, that there
was little else in life that requires so vast an amount of energy and so high
a threshold for disheartenment as being a hack writer, yet trying all the
while to fool yourself into thinking that the whole process might actually
be worth something. It would have been easier for Peter Tyson to have written
about me.

IV. COMPOSITION

Proving the Lightning

Writing a sustained narrative is like running a 220-yard race. It
requires a medium burst of concentrated energy. That kind of writing is not
like a sprint because at that pace one will never accomplish enough per
sitting before he is burned out. It is also not like a marathon because
the intense concentration needed to place oneself in a scene completely
and accurately will not adapt to long lengths of writing time.

I discovered that if I could accomplish five pages per day of
salvageable prose, the day would have to be considered a success. As it
turned out, I averaged slightly under five pages per day; frequently I
found that I couldn't write anything at all and would give up after only a
short period. The most I ever composed at one sitting was eleven pages,
but I found that I was so completely dry at that point that I didn't touch
the manuscript for the three days following.

I would start each session by rereading one or two of the preceding
pages and then start right in, trying to match the mood and tone as closely
as I could. Once I had started and had managed to write half a page of new copy, the narrative would begin to come much easier until I was again absorbed in the story.

I also discovered the secret of providing a good starting point for the next day's session. It was necessary for me to learn to stop writing while I still had somewhere to go in the story. If I wrote until I reached an impasse, I found that it would take a Herculean effort to overcome the inertia facing me at the next session. I remember both Hemingway and Twain insisting that a person should stop before the "tank" runs dry.

The structured routine of forcing yourself to sit in front of the typewriter at approximately the same hour each afternoon and to do nothing else but write became almost a torturous exercise, especially when the "flow"—that mystical, literary jet stream that occasionally accomplishes wonders—wasn't flowing.

An interesting example of the nuts and bolts process and the rigors involved with it is contained in a note dated 1/23/77, written after an extremely rough day at the typewriter.

Sometimes it is like dealing with something that you already know. The writing will present you with a chain of meaning that will lead you along, idea to idea, each one cracking open at just the right time. Finally you discover that two hours have gone by and you have handled a scene or a situation in an unconscious way that surprises even you because it actually turns out a little better than you had pictured it to begin with.

Then there are those days when each word grinds after the preceding word, and they never seem to quite fit, and you believe that you never could write and that no one will ever read what you've done. A sentence will impact itself, literally lock itself into a dead end, and will not release until you pull
it away and reroute it around the wall or over it. It is the most tiring work I have ever done and one that yields more amazement than pleasure. I have been on the verge of throwing over the whole project a hundred times, but I also know that if I can crawl to a place in the story that will leave an opening, will leave a place to go so that when I take it up again, I'll have at least one easy solution before I have to deal with a difficult problem, it will start up easier the next time.

And beyond all this, I have to keep listening to other writers. I understand them more perfectly now as my own work continues. I leave a copy of Movable Feast within reach and, if I need to, I'll read, "I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day. But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, 'Don't worry, you have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.'"

Even writing true sentences can, at times, seem like an insurmountable obstacle.

Before I had gotten beyond the first twenty pages of my book, I began to realize that my initial notion that a series of well-written, climactic episodes, fused together, could carry the story was wrong. The further I went in the narrative and the deeper I got with my characters, the more clearly I realized the indespensibility of effective transitions. I began rereading small portions of my manuscript in an effort to see what could be done to minimize that "stalling out" tendency that occurs immediately after some type of action scene. It seemed necessary to be more conscientious in constructing the structure of the transitions; unfortunately, my reaction ended up being self-defeating because it sent me spinning off in the direction
of Henry James, destroying any effective balance between importance and non-importance in description.

I began to try and align the prose so that it accounted for every minute of Peter's life. Events that could have been handled in a terse sentence or two became small expository essays all their own. Fortunately, when it came down to the editing stage, those transitions-gone-wild could be easily pared down or excised altogether, and paring down is always the more joyful of the options when editing. Even so, traces of this writing phase still remain, and, as my ad hoc literary critic insists, a significant weakness in Lightning is its "pontifical" tone--the problem again tracing back to the transitions and events of lesser significance that do not fit in the overall scope of the section.

Another major problem that surfaced after the first hundred pages was the problem of my having a very short literary memory when it came to describing certain events, actions, and reactions. While I will describe in length in the next section the process involved in editing out similarities of description that pop up, an example at this point is appropriate.

I have managed to get it in my head that hunger and pain produces a clarity of perception--perhaps even a surrealistic clarity. I also know exactly where the notion comes from: it comes from Hemingway's "hungry" description of Cezanne's paintings in the Palais du Luxembourg; it comes from Santiago's ability to think more clearly after the fishing line has cut into his hand. Even James Dickey in Deliverance has Ed seeing with super-human clarity into the night after his exhausting climb up the vertical
Therefore, it seemed completely appropriate for Peter Tyson to experience this same type of heightened perception, and so, whenever he gets hungry, hurt, or tired, he will suddenly begin to see more clearly, more deeply, more intensely than he "ever had before." This cause and effect relationship was, of course, ridiculous contrivance, and the later editing became almost amusing because I could almost sense at what moment Peter would see things "more clearly than ever before," especially if he had not eaten for awhile.

As I continued to write, I continued to do everything I could to keep distractions at a minimum. This especially applied to names. I had decided that I would decide on names later--thus giving me a chance to pick names that would work thematically as well as structurally. In lieu of that, I would use familiar names as I wrote--names of friends, celebrities, etc. Since I was using a first-person narrator I used my own name for Peter. The Billy Freeman character was written with the name of a former roommate, and Linda Fisher was originally named for an old high-school girlfriend. Occasionally, when I would need to know someone's name and could not remember what name I had been using, I would even leave it blank and go on--anything not to disturb the flow of my writing. Other details that would also have required verification were estimated (with a question mark to remind me to recheck it later) or were left blank. In short, the compositional process was something that had to be handled delicately, and an ill-timed telephone call or stopping to verify a name or check a spelling would inevitably
cause me to lose momentum, sometimes for the remainder of the session.

* * *

In general, the actual composition of Lightning was a slow and often boring operation. I think it can only really be likened to what a director feels in the midst of production. He cannot fully conceptualize what the film will be like after it is edited together. The final triumphant climax may be filmed at the beginning of the schedule, so there is no sense of continuity in what he is doing. He finds himself stuck in the middle of each scene--important or not--trying to get the most out of it, but after numerous "takes" even he loses perspective.

As I finished the first draft of Lightning in late April, 1977, all I could determine was which episodes had been easiest to write and which ones had not. Other than that, I did not really know what the book was all about because it had become so clinical and so trite. I did know, however, that there would need to be some substantial changes, particularly with the opening, but I wasn't sure what could be done, so I waited until I had an idea before I began the editing process.

V. EDITING

Polishing the Lightning

Before I sat down and began to edit the manuscript, I had a fairly
good idea of what needed to be changed. Besides all the problems with ungrammatical sentences, undeveloped paragraphs, pontifical transitions, names that needed to be chosen and standardized, there were some basic changes in the general structure of the book that I felt were needed, even though I wasn't completely sure how to go about them. The most pressing of these changes was the opening of the book.

I had originally opened the book with Peter Tyson sitting in a psychiatrist's office feeling that he was going crazy, and by the time the session was over he had told the doctor the basis for his belief crisis and had decided that he should go and visit Denny. It was not subtle, dramatic, or acceptable, primarily because it provided the protagonist with an ability to recognize the problem in its entirety, which is nine-tenths of the solution, and the rest of the book was simply a working out of the karma he felt was necessary. It destroyed any semblance of the development of Peter's guilt reaction to Karol's unfaithfulness because he had "come clean" so early.

It was necessary, however, to establish the basic frame--an indication of Peter's problem contrasted with the idealistic--and largely unrealistic--world he had shielded himself in. But how to plant both of those notions and have them understated enough to have them merely as starting points and not incidents in themselves still posed a problem. The answer came about 3 o'clock one Monday morning.

I awakened this particular morning and couldn't seem to get back to sleep, so I reached over and grabbed the nearest book on my shelf which happened to be The Great Gatsby. Turning to the first chapter I started
reading, and realized that Fitzgerald had faced part of the same problem I was facing; he had to establish the sensitivity and credibility of his first-person narrator, and he accomplished it by using an anecdote, something that had happened when the narrator was a child that had shown a pattern in his life. Nick recalls when his father had told him that whenever he had felt like criticizing someone to remember that they had not had all the advantages he had had.

So at 3:05 a.m. I promptly invented a flashback sequence for Peter Tyson, one that was based on my own remembrance of a camp meeting sermon in the junior tent at the Lynwood camp meetings. The whole airplane metaphor, I had hoped, would provide Peter with a goal—the ministry—that was motivated by a sense of duty, duty being blood kin to guilt. His vow also paralleled Luther's vow. All that remained was to write a new opening, rewrite the first 30 pages, and then settle down to a myriad of less strenuous revisions.

One more point can be made about the development of the new opening. When I first saw the parallel passage in *Gatsby*, I immediately knew that it could be made to work in *Lightning*; it was in fact exactly what I had been looking for. This stresses again the role played in composition by the subconscious. I had subconsciously been searching for a better opening for months, lining up some type of subconscious template that would accept the right idea when plugged in. Even in a more consistent way, I would find that when I had finished a writing session, I would often put up the manuscript without a clear idea of where I should go next. But after a
night's sleep and a day's work at school, I could sit down and have many of the details and scenes in place without having spent any conscious effort. It remains as a compositional equivalent to the widow's barrel—there is always just enough flour and oil.

Aside from major changes that needed to be made in a manuscript, the majority of editing involved making the narrative consistent. I discovered that the tone of the novel didn't begin to stabilize until approximately one-third of the way through. The first of the book was tremendously choppy, completely overstated, and "cute." All those places had to be softened down and smoothed together. Occasionally the revisions were extensive, but a writer must remember that editing involves a finite heuristic which is made up of deleting, reordering, substituting, and embedding. Any given passage that, for some reason, doesn't work properly must be fixed by one or more of those steps. An awareness of that can be an asset because it makes revising a more controlled process.

As was mentioned in the last section, a source of constant concern was that of getting around certain reactions that seemed to surface when triggered by a specific incident—the hunger producing clearer perceptions, for example. There were several of these types of things that had to be written out, or written around.

Another of these "reactions," for example, is the wretching of Peter's stomach. I imagine that it was Catcher in the Rye that reinforced the notion that emotionally unstable people always have weak stomachs. Peter, then, is no exception. The problem was that he ended up retching at every possible
occasion, and each retching episode diminished the effectiveness of all the other retching episodes exponentially.

Another reaction that had to be modified in the editing stage was Peter's leave-taking. He seemed to want to remain in a situation precisely until there was nothing more to say, and then he would leave "without saying good-bye." In my haste to provide an appropriate sensation of the scene having a certain finality to it, I ended up creating a pseudo-existential departure syndrome, a scene of characters isolated to the point where they couldn't even say good-bye to each other. This problem, too, was remedied.

Syntactic similarities, when they became over-worked and ineffective, had to be changed. Ironically it is this repetition of certain syntactical devices or patterns that critics use to categorize "style," but the style should never be allowed to be an end in itself. If it does not jibe with some other unity in the story, it can often detract rather than add to a work. Faulkner's style, for example, can best be understood in terms of the decadent microcosm that he wrote about. There was a unity between the south and sentences that contained the whole world in each one.

Tendencies that I discovered in my writing had to be watched so that they didn't become tired. My tendency to start sentences with the word "but" was one. But it was by no means the only one. There is a constant pattern in the narrative involving quotes. The sentence would start with a short word or phrase followed by the speaker's identification; then the remainder of his line was followed by some type of free modifier. For example:
"Well," Crindall said, "What the hell do you want?" giving it the tone of an ultimatum.

Actually this isn't a bad way of handling dialogue, except when it appears too often, and especially when the free modifier begins with a participle, making the whole unit even more telltale.

Most stylistic concerns were edited on the basis of effectiveness—if they didn't not work, they were probably working okay. The majority of the other changes were simply word switching and amplifications of weaker passages.

Perhaps the final step in the editing process was deciding upon the names for the characters to use. There is no cut-and-dried method for doing this, but trying to make some kind of thematic tie-in usually gives one a good place to start.

With this in mind, Peter's name was an easy choice. He had certain ties with the Biblical Peter in that he had a temper that was difficult to control and was willing to take the initiative when he thought it was necessary. I chose his last name--Tyson--because I liked the sound of it.

The Freemans were so named because Billy, especially, was a free man. Other character's names were chosen more for their workability than for any other reason. Crindall seemed an appropriate name for the character--a name that could be easily profaned somehow. The Fishers were based on a real family in Alaska and their real name had certain phonetic similarities with Fisher. I chose Linda's name because I have never been romantically involved with anyone named Linda, and therefore felt comfortable with the lack of a frame of reference. Anyone else's name was chosen at random.
simply because it seemed to work.

On the whole, the editing process took about a month. It could have gone much faster except that I wanted to go with a solid second draft and was willing to let the manuscript season as I slowly worked on it. After having edited the book, I began to type it out, making a few more changes--as I went--mostly just switching words, and immediately sending the finished draft out to my proof reader-ad hoc critic for corrections and suggestions. By the time she had finished with her suggestions, it was clear that parts had to be revised. It was her "acid test" comments that proved the most helpful in my tracking down unclear references and sentences that were inappropriately Faulkneresque. It took me two more weeks to make the corrections and some of the changes that she suggested. I then took the finished copy down to a printer and had three copies xeroxed in case a fire should burn down my apartment and reduce the only copy of Lightning to ashes.

I put the book away, took a deep breath, and told myself that it was probably okay for a first book, that the depression that was settling in would not last forever, that my next project would be better. At least the depression has not lasted forever.
Dear Child, I also by pleasant Streams
Have wander'd all Night in the Land of Dreams;
But tho' calm & warm the waters wide,
I could not get to the other side.

--William Blake
I Never Saw the Lightning, Martin Luther!

Chapter I.

When I was young, there was a preacher who told a story one night in the mystical setting of an old-fashioned tent meeting that I had relived over and over a thousand times in my young mind.

There was an airplane pilot who had decided to kill himself by flying his plane out to sea until it ran out of fuel and plunged into the water. Before he had gotten far, authorities had discovered his motives and begun to radio messages to him, trying to talk him into turning around and coming back. When he didn’t respond they sent for his wife who pled over the microphone for him to return for the sake of her and the children, telling him that the problems could all be settled, that it really wasn’t as bad as he thought. But he didn’t answer and kept his course.

And then the preacher imagined being with the pilot, of seeing his face contort with guilt as he listened to his wife. He listened to the pleadings and promises, but they made him clamp his hands harder on the controls since he had heard them before. As he flew on, the radio crackled to him that he was approaching the point of no return, the time when he would not have enough fuel to return even if he had a change of heart.

It was that thought that struck terror in my young mind. The motor throbbed in my head, and the radio crackled pleadings in my ears, and I imagined I heard my mother’s voice pleading for me.
With each mile the signal got weaker, and the static crashes got louder until the pilot could only just make out his wife's voice, telling him that it was almost too late, that he was almost past the point of no return, that it would soon be impossible to be saved if he didn't act immediately. And finally the signal faded completely, and the pilot flew on until the tanks were dry and then he dropped to be swallowed by the sea.

It didn't matter to me that the story wasn't true. The fact that I believed it made it true, and right there, in the quiet, damp heat, I decided that I would never ever push myself past the point of no return, that I would never run so far from God that I could not hear Him above the static crashes and the throb of the motors.
Chapter II.

I waited in the parking lot about half an hour before I saw his silver XKE pull in the driveway at the opposite end and slowly drive up. He stopped a couple of times before he saw me. I walked up to him slowly, despite how I really felt at seeing him. He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"I'm really glad you could come, Ben," I said. "I hope it didn't ruin your schedule."

"I only had one patient this afternoon, and if he sits around for awhile it'll probably just make his anxieties more clearly defined. He may take care of himself before I even get back. Incidentally, you could have called the office. You know you can always do that."

"I've got a stigma about offices. Probably from my childhood," I said. "Probably so. Now, what can I do for you, Pete?"

"Why don't we walk a little. I can talk better when I'm moving."

We started across the grass that bordered the upper terraces of the park. There were steps that gradually descended and crossed a couple of footbridges spanning the little streams of water that ran in concrete beds toward the muddy pond at the lower part of the park where the grass flattened out and people picnicked under the trees.

We walked silently for a couple of minutes before I could find a way to begin, to tell something that I didn't understand but that seemed to feed on me until there would soon be nothing left.
"Ben," I said, "what do you tell somebody when he feels he can't take anymore?"

"Depends on the reason."

"How about if someone feels suicidal?"

"I usually tell them not to make a mess when they do it. Actually, it's pretty common. Fantasies about suicide are just one way that some people cope. Most of the time they're not serious. Just usually tired or overworked or feeling unloved."

He paused for a couple of seconds, probably to see if I was going to ask anything else, but I didn't.

"How long have you had these feelings?" he asked, finally.

"Not long. A week maybe."

"Do you know why?"

I felt him looking at me and right through me, even though I was looking at the ground.

"It's just not like me. If anybody should have enough to believe, I mean, if anybody should be able to get through it——"

"Make it through what, Pete?" I didn't answer. "What's coming down with you?"

"Let's walk," I said. "It's hard for me to talk right now."

I walked ahead, down the footpath, and Ben followed. Ben Feldman, whom I had always thought would have made a better preacher than a psychologist, a better preacher than I could ever be, whom I had admired and tried to emulate all the time I was growing up, and now I felt I
needed him desperately and would feel better if I could talk to him, but I still couldn't.

I stopped at the picnic table at the edge of the pond and sat on top of it and Ben sat on the bench.

"What happens when something you believe in is destroyed?"

"Either you find something else to take its place, or you learn to live without it."

"Ben," I said, "I've lost it all. All of it. And I feel like I'm going to explode. Totally come apart, I mean totally, and there's nothing I can do about it. I can't say 'Just take it easy' or 'It'll work out' because I know that it can't and never will, and I just can't control the idea of that. It scares the hell out of me.

"Ben," I said, "I've been wired up to my eyeballs: and I haven't slept for three days. I'm losing my mind. I'm going crazy, and the thought of that makes me want to die."

And it did scare me. It scared me like nothing else ever had. I would slowly sense the devils rising in my head and they would hold onto me and I could feel my neck tighten and my heart would begin to pound in my ears and I would have to gulp for breath until I was dizzy and everything looked unreal. I felt like I was moving outside of myself and couldn't get back inside and control what was going on.

"I pray about it, Ben. I pray to God that the tension will go away and that I can start to understand myself again, and then the words echo around inside my head and go nowhere. I even think about being a minister
and what would have happened if I had to work on other people's problems when everything in my own world was making me crazy. I just don't know anymore."

He thought for a second, and it made me uncomfortable. He didn't understand. Lord God, none of them understood.

"Ben, if I make it through this it will be a miracle."

"Let's go for a miracle, then," he said. "I'm overdue."

"Maybe we both are."

"Okay, but now we need to talk. I need to know what has happened to you that could produce this anxiety. What is it, Pete?"

I tried to take my finger off the repression button. If I could do that it would probably be like lancing a boil and it would help, but I still couldn't do it completely, no matter how hard I wanted to. It just couldn't come out that way. It would have to come out in small pieces. Maybe chunks later. Or maybe I couldn't even finish, and I would go back to my dormitory room at Thompson and spend another night alone with the sound of my breathing and heart beating, and the cries of the devils echoing up from somewhere in my own psyche.

"I'm dropping out of ministerial. I've decided that much," I said.

"Was that a good decision or a bad one?"

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't.

"Was it a rational decision?"

"Probably not," I admitted, "but it wouldn't do me any good to finish. I'm not ready for that. I don't even believe in it anymore."
I see more and more how it's all nothing more than a crock, and I wouldn't have made a very good minister anyway. Not now, anyway. So I decided I should figure out what I really want to do."

"What does Karol think about that? Have you talked to her about this thing?"

"No," I said after a long pause.

Ben started to ask something, but stopped and looked at me again.

"Pete?"

My head was shaking, methodically, slowly from side to side although it didn't seem like I was doing it.

"What about Karol?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"No what?"

I didn't answer.

"What about Karol, Pete?"

"No!" I answered loudly, painfully, almost like a cry. "No, nothing! Karol is nothing. She is nothing to me. Ben, can you believe me? She is nothing to me!"

"Pete, she was something, wasn't she? You were going to marry her. She was going to be your wife. That's something."

"No!" I insisted, "That doesn't work anymore. It never would have worked."

"You aren't getting married, then?"

"No," I said.
"Who called it off?"

"She did. We both did."

"Why?" he asked, but I couldn't tell him. I couldn't go over it again. "Why Pete? Why can't you tell me? Is it something that you did? Did you hurt her?"

"I can't talk about it. Ben, please, I don't want to talk about it now."

"What did you do to her, Pete?"

"Nothing! I didn't do anything to her. I loved her. Don't you believe that?"

"Did she hurt you? What did she do to you?"

"No!" I screamed, hearing the sound of my voice as it burst and then echoed back through my head. I leaned over and held my head in my hands and felt the devils in my mind again and saw what I knew had happened with Karol, made more vivid in my own imagination because I could see it from every different angle. And it was a slow-motion coming together with another face I couldn't recognize, and then it fuzzed and sputtered like an arc lamp burning itself out. It was a long time until I looked up, and I thought for a second that Ben had gone, but he was still there, looking off in a different direction, waiting for me to come back to him.

"Karol was involved." I had to spit the words to get them out.

"With who?"

"I don't know. I didn't know him. Someone that lived by her."

"Was he older?"
"Married. Two kids."

Ben thought for a second. He looked off across the freshly cut green that spread to the edge of the lake.

"How did you find out?" he asked after awhile.

"She told me. She told me the whole thing. And what am I supposed to do, then? Am I supposed to say, 'Whatever makes you happy?' Or say the hell with it. The hell with all of you. And all the time I believed in some sort of a destiny. I believed that it was God's will. I've believed in that all my life. And I was going to do it. I was going to take my hands and do it. But behind it all, behind the whole damn thing, there has to be belief, and I don't have it anymore."

"How does she feel?"

"I don't know. She doesn't know. She still loves him."

"And you feel?"

"Bitter. I don't know. Confused."

"Would it help for me to say that you'll eventually get over it?"

"No!" I said, angry with the way that it sounded so clinical and pat. "Ben, you've got to understand something. It wasn't just some girl who flipped out at the last minute. It's belief. And belief isn't something that you replace or throw away when it doesn't work anymore. It's something that's mine and I've made it and it's a part of me. If I choose to believe in someone, that makes it different from anything else. I stood before God with my hands cleaner than they have ever been and chose to believe in a person that could help me achieve, be everything I wanted
to be, and what do I have left? Where am I supposed to go from here?"

"You have everything left."

"Everything and nothing. None of it means anything anymore."

"What does this guy do?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's not important."

"Well, is he a pilot, a movie star, what?"

"I don't give a damn what he does!"

"Okay, okay," Ben said, "it's not important. But what is it going
to take to get things back on the track with you?"

"I don't know," I said, and again I didn't.

"Are you sure you want to drop out of ministerial? You wouldn't have
long to finish."

"I don't care about that now. I've been playing this jock game too
long. I couldn't have made it."

"Can you think of anything that's really important to you? Anything
that would make you feel better about yourself?"

I had to think for awhile. It had been so long since anything but
the most obvious had been important and everything had been built on that
frame. I knew that it had been an idealistic notion, that I hadn't always
been willing to see things as they were, but who had? The other theology
jocks? But now the whole complexion of the thing had changed and I was
on the verge of throwing it all away over a mixed-up girl whom I thought I
loved. And what she had done was bad, but nobody had been killed. Nobody
had been permanently disfigured. It wasn't like a car accident where I
ended up paralyzed from the neck down. But there were devils in my head that no one could see and no one could understand. They would have eventually tormented me from the pulpit and eaten right through any shreds of belief that I had left.

"I want to go someplace where I can just be straight with people."

"Like where?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. I don't think the place is important. I have to understand why what happened happened."

"One thing, Pete, when you're dealing with irrational needs like this type of thing must have involved, sometimes you can never fully understand it."

"But I have to, Ben. I've got to understand it all. All of it. But I need to get away."

I knew he probably thought I was obsessed with some strange idea, some Mosaic statute that must be carried out before the dead or dying horse can be spared anymore whipping. He didn't understand and I knew why he didn't, but I couldn't tell him.

"Listen Pete," he was saying, "before you make up your mind, why don't you talk to some of your friends. You don't have to give them details, but bounce a few of your ideas off their heads and see what they think. Is there anybody else you could talk to?"

I had to think about it for a second.

"There is someone," I said. "He's a mechanic in Santa Monica and he seems to make things work for him. I could talk to him."
I noticed as I was talking that Ben was looking to his left, and as I looked I saw a swarm of children—it seemed like hundreds of them—spreading out in every direction, and then I could hear them screaming and laughing as they ran toward the pond until they were in the water. And then they were moving over toward us and surrounding us. We both watched them for awhile and, for the first time, it seemed to me that I had never understood childhood until now, and now it was too late, and somehow the laughing seemed tragic and naive, or at least frighteningly temporal as if we could see those kids grow and change and distort until images of ourselves would replace their faces. Then we would see in them only what remained in us, ugly and pathetic things that in someway, by some unknown process, had evolved into what we had become and what we were forced to remain.

"Do you ever wish you were young again?" I asked Ben when the kids had moved far enough beyond us that we could talk again over their noise.

"I used to occasionally," he said, "but not anymore. We romanticize childhood into something it never was."

"Still, you were usually too dumb to know how screwed up it was all going to get. That's got to be something."

"Yeah, that's something," he said as he got up to leave. "Just remember you're not going crazy. The mind can take a tremendous amount of abuse. Once you understand your situation and redirect yourself, the anxiety will fall off rapidly. Go see your friend. I really think that will help."
He squeezed my shoulder with his hand as he left and I watched him as he made his way up the footpath to the parking lot. I stayed for awhile and watched the kids wading in the water. By the time I left it was mid-afternoon and I wanted someone to hold me and tell me that I was beautiful.
Chapter III.

I had taken Ben's advice seriously; I wanted to see my friend, especially now. If he had been right about the tension beginning to ease as soon as I really knew where I was going next, I wanted to decide that quickly. But not too quickly. It wasn't that I was concerned about being totally altruistic—the Albert Schweitzer syndrome—but it was just that I wanted to do something that would give me peace of mind. I don't think it would have come to joining up with a missionary band and going off to the steaming jungles of the Amazon anymore than my wanting to do a hundred other traditional church-related positions; I wasn't ready for that and maybe would never be. I didn't even want to consider it. It was enough being alone without having to front a missionary image prompted by some guilt reaction that I couldn't explain.

I went back to the dormitory, took a shower, and put on some denims. I still didn't feel really tired, but maybe a little jumpy. On the road into Los Angeles, I stopped at a Mexican fast-food place and got a burrito to eat on the way. When I got to Santa Monica it was early evening.

I knew my way around the place pretty well because I had spent quite a bit of time peeling at Will Rogers State Beach which is right next door, and from my excursions to and from the Palisades I had learned the main streets. I couldn't picture Dennis living in Santa Monica. He just didn't belong there in the maze of tenements for retired people and the general decadence.
Den was at least by the ocean and that was a lot more than I could say about my situation—landlocked with foothills on one side and desert on the other. Still, it didn't figure somehow. Just four or five miles to the south was Marina Del Rey where the sun never set on the adult-only apartments alleged to be filled with supple stewardesses. A promised land if you were one of the promised. But the more I thought about that, the more I realized that I was the victim of my own fantasies, not his.

I got off the freeway and pulled into a Texaco station and parked by the phone booth. After I found Den's listing I had to go back to the car to get something to write it down with; too many numbers to remember.

I didn't know the street, so I asked the pump jockey for directions. He was Oriental and confused. I kept asking, saying the street name louder and louder until I was almost shouting. I knew that shouting never did any good—even though every tourist does it—but I shouted anyway; it felt good. I finally ended up looking for the street on the map taped in the office. Even then it was difficult to find it because the map had been traced so many times with greasy fingers that parts of it were almost completely illegible. I finally found it and mentally traced around the labyrinth of lines to find a way to get there. I had been so engrossed that I hadn't noticed that the gas man was now standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. Either he was genuinely interested or else business at the pumps had hit an all-time low and I was providing the entertainment, and it irritated me because I wanted
to be irritated and besides, he couldn't help me and I wasn't a missionary, let alone an ambassador to the East.

I turned to go back to the car. As I brushed past him and headed out the door of the greasy office I muttered, "You need a new map."

"You find okay?" he asked.

"Barely. That map is too OLD. Need NEW map!" I was shouting again, playing the ugly American. "You need to learn some of the damn streets around this place."

"Ah, new map," he said, drawing out the "ah" in a way that complemented every stereotype I had ever been able to form.

"That's right, Charley, a new map."

By the time I had reached the car I heard steps behind me. As I turned and faced him I saw that in his hand he had a map that he had run back to the office to get. I couldn't believe it. For me. The ugly American. The brash, pounding-on-the-table-with-a-fist-full-of-dollars American.

"Here. New map," he said.

I stood there still not really able to believe it, and I felt humiliated and furious with myself.

"Thank you," I mumbled, "and God bless you for that." I know he didn't understand, but he seemed pleased. I took the map, stuck out my hand and he shook it.

"Next time that I'm in Santa Monica I'll come by and get some gas," I said. "A full tank. I'll even let you hustle some oil on me."

"Thank you." He nodded and half-bowed with a conditioned reaction. "Thank you very much."
With that I got into the car and left. I don't know why I thought about that funny little man for the next ten minutes as I drove across town to where Dennis lived, but then I did know and it was because the whole thing was eating at me. With the traffic and all, it would have been safer if I hadn't thought of anything, but I kept coming back to him. Someone who didn't understand. He didn't understand anything, but he was willing to help—at least try to help. It may have been that for the last week everything had seemed to be totally ironic, but this seemed somehow to typify it all. Everything that I should have understood about my life and didn't, all of it, was somehow tied up with that.

I knew it was important for someone who was an existentialist to decide on a course of action on the basis of principle and follow through no matter what, but the gas jockey wasn't an existentialist; he was probably a Buddhist. But I kept playing with that tension. How should a person act even when he can't understand, or at least not completely? What was more important, acting on the basis of how things appeared or being able to understand something completely before you tried to do it? Of course, the problem was that a person could never completely understand anything. Hell, I had been going to school almost sixteen years and it was obvious that I didn't understand very much, especially about almost everything that seemed important and necessary.

I felt like I was on the verge of hammering the little episode into a universal example of something when I drove up in front of the apartments that Dennis lived in; it was probably better left alone, anyway. It wasn't worth universalizing.
The apartments weren't new by any standards. They represented that age that seemed most thoroughly spent and it reminded a person that there had been parts of California that had really changed. The buildings were wood frame with long halls and dimly-lit stairways. It seemed a long way from the stucco cubicles and the swinging stewardesses across the channel.

I hoped that Dennis would be home; I should have called from the gas station but didn't. Somehow it just never seemed to be quite as spontaneous whenever I would call. I guess I assumed that he would be there.

I found his door on the third floor and was going to knock but suddenly I stopped. I knew he was there—there was light under the door and I could hear him. I was sure it was him. I leaned closer to the door, which was flimsy enough to let the sound pass easily. I could hear him talking, but it wasn't really talking. The intonation wasn't right. It wasn't natural. He was speaking but not talking, like an amateur actor reading the lines of his part for the first time aloud. I was sure that he was alone because there was no other sound. No laughter. No grunt of agreement. No shuffle of feet or creaks of furniture. Nothing. Then I realized; he was praying.

I had never heard anyone pray when they thought that only God was listening, and I instantly felt that I shouldn't be listening but I couldn't stop. And I couldn't interrupt. All I could do was stay hunched by the door and listen, hoping that no one would come down the hall and see me.
What does a mechanic pray about? Cars? The idea was so crass I couldn't believe that I had even bothered to ask myself the question. People and things. Needs. Desires. He prays about things like that. The voice was quieter now and I had to strain to hear. Something about work or the people at work.

"Help me to be right with the people at work..." I thought that was what he had said and I caught myself wondering if that was a valid request. Oh, it was beautiful, but rightness shouldn't be an issue. Wasn't it automatic for a Christian to be right with people at work? I mean if you are a right person to begin with? I had always felt a little uneasy about burdening God with things that were too nitty-gritty, too automatic.

He was finishing. I could hear the tone in his voice shift, and I wanted to make a better entrance, give him time to recover. I decided to wait a few seconds, plant a couple footsteps outside the door and then knock.

The door opened a crack before the chain lock on the jamb pulled taut with a metallic snap. It closed quickly and then flew open.

"Peter Tyson, what on earth are you doing here?"

"I was just nearby and I wanted to see you." Even if it wasn't the truth, I didn't have the finesse to tell him that I had driven sixty miles in from Riverside just to see him. It was a white lie, or at least off-white.

"Well, you don't know how great it is to see you. I had just been
thinking about you the other day. I ran across an old senior yearbook and there you were, big as life."

"Probably bigger than life."

I took a quick survey of the apartment, looking for a chair. My back had gotten stiff from leaning so long against the door.

"How are things at school these days?"

"Busy," I said. "It never seems to let up. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it all. Most of the time it's not."

"Yeah, but you're almost through."

"One way or another."

"I know what you mean about that," he said, making me wonder how he possibly could. "Are you still getting married? That's the last I heard."

"No," I said, "it wasn't working. It would've been hard, maybe impossible considering the circumstances."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Pete, but I'll have to tell you, I couldn't really see it happening to you. Not just yet."

"Den," I said, "the further I am away from it all, the more I see it that way too." The devils were sleeping and I wanted to change the subject. "Tell me about yourself. It's been a long time. I haven't seen you for a year or more."

"Yeah, well, things are pretty much the same. I'm still working at Bob Desorey's shop. You remember Bob?" I nodded even though I wasn't sure that I did. "Well, he's built up a pretty big business here--I mean
all types of people—and it's been good for me. I like the work and it's steady."

Den always had a strange type of charm. I don't really know exactly what it was except that it was genuine. He was the oldest of two sons of a farmer from Nebraska. We had gone to grade school together, but my earliest memories were more about his father than him. His father was the most bigoted man I had ever seen. I don't think it was a malicious bigotry as much as it was an ingrained and socialized one, but somehow Den had managed to escape the process. His brother was three years younger and still lived at home. There had been some talk of some type of either a mental or an emotional problem with his brother, but I had only seen him once or twice and I wasn't sure. I guess the most surprising thing about Den was that there was never any gulf between himself and other people. He didn't allow it. No matter what it took to get through to someone, he seemed willing to try. I had often taken that for granted in him like the way you come to expect certain things from certain people, but as I sat there in that three-room apartment in the peeling section of old Santa Monica, I appreciated him more than I ever had before.

"The only real problem at the shop is some of the other guys there. I mean that sometimes I feel like I'm stuck in the middle of something that I don't want to be in."

"What do you mean?" I asked, more interested now after what I had overheard at the door.

"There are some guys down there who aren't honest. Okay, a lady comes in with a car that's just got a loose ignition wire. Nothing
major. Anyone could fix it in a couple minutes is all, but it's obvious that she doesn't know a carburetor from a crankshaft. And some of these guys will really stick it to her. You know, do stuff it doesn't need. The works. New fan belts, new pan gaskets, I don't know what all." He shrugged his shoulders and as he held his palms straight out I noticed his hands. They were rough and calloused, not swollen and discolored and misshappen like those of the longshoremen I had seen working at the docks in San Pedro, but active, involved hands. For some reason they reminded me of the picture of the praying hands by Durer. I suddenly wanted to have hands like that. Active hands. Involved hands.

"At first I didn't say anything when I saw what a couple of these guys were doing. Figured that it wasn't my place, and it wasn't everybody--just one or two. But one day after this guy wrote this lady up for everything except new seat covers, I couldn't take it anymore so I went over and talked to him. I just asked him if what he was doing was honest. At first he thought I was kidding, but then he got real mad, I mean pissed. Just about hit the roof. He even went and talked to Bob about it saying that I was spying on him and that I was making trouble between him and his customers and all that stuff. Bob didn't know what to do. He says, 'Look, this guy's a good mechanic--a little crooked, maybe, but good.' He just told me to try and mind my own business and do my job. He said that everybody does a little of that type of thing and not to blow it out of proportion. But it gets me. It eats at me every time I see it. You know what I mean?"
"What are you doing about it now?"
"What can I do?"
"Are you asking me?"
"Well I pray about it when it gets real bad, I mean, when it bothers me the most."
"What do you pray for?" I asked. I wasn't being cynical; I really wanted to know.
"You tell me. You're the theologian."
"Maybe and maybe not," I said. "I guess you pray that they'll have a change of heart."
"No, actually I end up praying more for me than for them. I pray that I'll have the courage to be straight with them. I'm not very brave when it comes to stuff like that."
"Has it helped--your prayers?"
"I'm not sure. But it will."
"Listen Den," I said, "could we go down to the beach tonight? There's some things that I want to ask you and I just feel like taking a walk where I can see some water. It's easier for me to talk when I'm moving. There still a beach around here?"
"There was last time I looked. Do you want to take your car or mine?"
"Mine," I said, "then I can just drop you off."

He went into the bedroom to get his coat while I tried to review the questions I had, the ones that had been circling my head while I was driving in. What was he doing with his life? Was he doing anybody else any good?
Was he at peace with himself? That last one was the most important, and I knew that he would give me the straightest answer he could because I trusted him totally and he knew it.

We drove south from his apartment and got back on the Santa Monica Freeway and stayed on it as it wound into the tunnel and then spilled out onto Pacific Coast Highway. It was a cool evening made suddenly cold by the wave of salt air that came through the window as we reached the spot where PCH wraps around the shore. A misshapen moon was just beginning to show over the haze and glow of the city. I parked the car and then, taking off my shoes and socks, I led the way down to the water. I could feel the gritty coldness of the damp sand between my toes and the texture—the roughness—felt natural and alive.

I stood for awhile without saying anything and Den just waited. He was looking out over the water as if he could actually see something beyond where the sound of the waves came. I turned from him and I could see the lights of Malibu, the beach condominiums, the restaurants that leaned out over the water, illuminating the breakers with the cold blue of mercury vapor lights.

I looked back the other way toward Los Angeles—a city without bounds, out of control, a miasma of complexities without definition. I tried to pick out International Airport and when I did, I could see the landing lights of at least four planes as they circled in pattern, waiting to land. Straight ahead of me there was only blackness and I began to concentrate on
the rhythmic lapping of the water. A natural rhythm, unchanging and mysterious. We stood on the shore for several more minutes—maybe ten—before either one of us spoke.

"Did you ever read 'Dover Beach'?

"Who?" he asked like I was dragging him suddenly back into the present and he was reluctant to leave wherever he had been before.

"Dover Beach," I said. "It's a poem by Matthew Arnold that he wrote while thinking about standing on the cliffs of Dover and he gets feeling depressed because the sound of the waves remind him that nothing in life ever lasts."

"Is that how you feel tonight?"

"Tonight? That's a good question," I said.

"Why tonight? Do you know?"

"I know a few reasons, but I'm fuzzy about some others. God, I'm thinking of leaving school. Leaving everything. Going where the demands are different."

"That's kind of a big step, isn't it?"

"Yeah, for anybody," I said. "It's just that I've lost my steam. I used to know exactly what I wanted to do, had it all planned out, but now..." I kicked at the wet sand and sent a shower of blue phosphorescence over our feet.

"What do you think you want to do?" Den asked.

"When? Now or ultimately?"
"For now."

"Something different, something being honest with people. I'd just like to know after the end of a day that I didn't do any kind of a big number on anyone."

"Anything else?"

"I don't know."

"You know, Pete, it's been like that for me a little. I wasn't much good at school. Got by with C's but I was good with my hands. Always really good with my hands. I figured that I had some kind of natural ability, almost a gift. Even those tests that we took in high school—what are they called?"

"Aptitude tests."

"Yeah, aptitude tests showed that that was where I should go. But listen, it was harder than hell to see you guys pack up and go off to college. Seemed like everybody was going—even some that I thought were dumber than me—and I knew that my future would be a lot different. It just had to be and I had to accept that. I got a job working for Bob. I make good money. In fact, I make top money for what I do, but where was it going? I didn't know."

"Did that matter?" I asked.

"Hell yes, it mattered. I used to ask myself that question over and over again. Then one day I decided to go to church and I heard this guy talking about how God doesn't expect us to all be important and famous. Or even successful. He said that an honest carpenter, welder, or mechanic
was doing as much to be a Christian as some doctor somewhere. That was the very example he used—a mechanic. And he said that the only important thing in life was to be able to go to sleep at night knowing that you stood right before God and your fellow men. Believe me, that news came right on time. I really needed to hear something like that. So I decided to be what I already was, but try and be the best, and I really haven't thought much about it since."

I was a little amazed. He couldn't have known how much I had been wanting to ask him about that very thing but hadn't had the courage. He couldn't have known how much I had wondered how a person could spend the golden age of his youth changing oil, adjusting carburetors, and tightening fan belts. But something came back to me. He was making it. His life had meaning to him. That was the part that I had to understand. How could a life like his mean anything? He wasn't married. He didn't travel to exotic places. He wasn't chasing some lofty standard of absolute truth. He wasn't even striving with the last ounce of energy so he could accomplish some goal and stand proud in his robe, or someday accept his PhD in automotive engineering or something, allowing him to put a "Doctor" in front of his name and proceed to grind it into everyone's face. He couldn't have known that at that distinct moment in time and space I would have given it all to have been him, to have a life that manages to make some kind of sense; I would have gladly settled for that.

I looked back over the water, and then over the cities that glowed right up to the water's edge, and as I watched, from somewhere out in the
darkness, beyond anything I could imagine, beyond anything I had ever planned before, far out over that surging body of water, lapping relentlessly at my feet, I felt the awareness of something, the mystery of an idea--small, embryonic, still forming. I could almost feel it grow and become clearer and more sharply defined. And maybe it was more than just my feeling. Maybe Den could feel it, too.

"Do you sense anything when you look over the water?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something I can't explain, but it feels like some kind of beginning. An awareness. It almost makes me not afraid anymore."

I waited for him to answer, but he didn't.

"I just got the feeling that everything will happen. Everything I want will someday happen."

He was listening even if he didn't answer, and he probably understood a whole lot better than I did because he had been to that point before.

"Den," I said, "I want to get away. I want to live with different people than I have ever met before."

"What about school?"

"Not now."

"You mean that?"

"Sure I mean it. I can't go back and finish it right now. I'd be wasting my time."

"What will your mother think?"

"I don't know. She wants me to be happy. I'll just have to tell
her that this is necessary. It's just that I've got to do something. Den, I've got to learn to believe again, not only in other people but in myself again. That's as basic as it gets."

He nodded, but I could sense that he didn't understand completely. He couldn't fit together all the pieces it would take to make a person turn his back on something that he worked so hard for. I could have made him understand, but I didn't think I needed to. It was enough that he saw how I felt even if he didn't know all the reasons.

I looked up the coast toward Malibu again. I tried to imagine the people there. What were they doing? Eating? Sleeping? Making love? It suddenly seemed good to think about other people for a change, to be the lone observer, seeing appearances without seeing causes. Detached, but transitory. Waiting in the ashes for re-birth.

"What are you going to tell them back at Thompson?" Den was asking and the question brought me right back to the beach again.

"I don't know. The truth, I guess."

"Where do you think you'll go?"

"I'm not sure of that either, but I've got a friend named Billy Freeman up in Alaska who's been after me to come up and spend some time with him. I might do that," I said, suddenly realizing that I was cold, so I turned and headed for the car, with Den a couple of steps behind me.

"It gets freezing up there. Better take a coat."

"Would you quit being so stinking practical," I said. "It's spoiling my vision."
"I just don't want to read in the paper about some young Californian religious fanatic who freezes to death on an Alaskan glacier because he forgot his coat. That's all."

"Okay, I accept your concern. Anyone ever tell you that you'd make a great mother?"

"Not in so many words."

Something in the matter-of-fact way he said it struck me funny and I started laughing. The more I laughed, the more I realized that nothing had really been that funny, but it was just a good release and it seemed better than crying. I felt like I could have done either.

As we reached the car, I felt Den's hand on my shoulder and I turned, startled. I could see his face and he was completely serious again. He held me at arm's length and looked at me. I didn't know what he was thinking but it didn't frighten me, although I felt a strange sensation.

And then I reached my hand behind his neck and brought him to me and held him tightly against the side of my face until I could feel the stubble on his unshaven cheek press into my skin. He still held me by the shoulders, tightly. I felt our minds lock together. We were grappled to each other in a muscular bond unlike anything I had ever known. This wasn't woman's skin that would have made me lose my rationality and would have forced me with natural impulses to do what I couldn't yet justify or maybe never could justify. It was a man with involved hands whom I love like a brother and would be willing to die for because I saw in him the
colossus that I must totally become. I clamped down tighter with my hands and I felt him reciprocate by squeezing my shoulders until they ached. We were linked so closely now, it seemed we could have been wrestlers, holding, twisting, focusing all the khetic energy that we could pump into our arms into the individual conflict, but being so evenly matched that we had become frozen and paralyzed, neutralized by our own sameness.

We held each other for what seemed hours, but it could have only been a couple of minutes. Neither one of us spoke. My hands and shoulders were burning now, but the pain was sharpening and revitalizing. I heard Den try to say something, but it was difficult for him.

"I'm with you, Pete. I don't know all the reasons for everything, but I know what you want. God help you to find it." His voice was low and almost a whisper.

"Thanks," was all I could manage to bring out before my voice choked shut and the tears began to flow. I couldn't tell if he was crying, but I didn't care. I didn't give a damn who saw me or what happened to me. I was beyond all that. My hands were shaking so badly now that I gradually let go of him and I felt the pressure of his hands ease on my shoulders until he let go completely and we were apart.

I felt more exhausted than I ever remember having felt before, and I tried to catch my breath easily and slowly. We didn't talk the whole way back to his apartment. I pulled up in front of the building and had to double park.
"Tell me one thing," Den asked as soon as he had stopped.

"What?"

"Is there a reason for this? A single reason why this is happening?"

"Not one," I said. "A couple of reasons."

"Karol?"

"That and a lot more. A lot."

I knew he would have liked to know but didn't feel comfortable asking about specifics.

"She was confused," I said.

"Any chance you'll get back together? I mean, do you think it will ever work out?"

"I don't think so, Den."

"Why?"

"Trust," I said. "It was trust between two people who lived a long time ago, but now there's nothing left."

He looked for a second like he wanted to ask something else, but he didn't.

"I'm sorry," he said as he got up and slammed the door. I leaned over and rolled down the window.

"Hey, Den. Keep in touch. I'll let you know what happens."

"Do it."

I left without saying good-bye, but it wasn't really necessary. As I turned down the street to catch the freeway, I saw the Texaco station. It was dark now, with only a small light burning way in the rear of the place.
by the grease rack. I reached down with one hand and picked up the map and held it for a minute while I turned the corner. Then, as I waited for the next signal to change, I reached over and put it in the glove compartment.
Chapter IV.

I'm not sure how it happened, but somehow I managed to get up early. I had class on Wednesday morning and it was usually a struggle to get out of bed, especially when I hadn't slept very well, but I was awake and my head was clear. For just a second the thought crossed my mind that nothing that had happened the previous night had been like I remembered it. Instead it had been just faces and names that had come together and formed their own patterns and filled an evening that would have otherwise been barren. But it couldn't have been that way.

The morning was still new. I stood at the window and watched as the clouds near the horizon still clung to a tinge of pink, and it was still early enough for the grass on the low foothills to be green. The mountains beyond the hills looked more distinct and close, not like in the afternoons when the hot desert winds blew the smog from Los Angeles through the Santa Ana canyon and everything took on a brown cast that made it look dead and far away.

It had been a long drive back, long because I was exhausted, long because my head was far ahead of me, dragging the rest of me along, relentlessly, like there was finally some sort of purpose again even though I couldn't completely understand it, and when I tried not to think about anything I could feel the drowsiness climb up the back of my neck until I would pray that I wouldn't fall asleep. And then I would start on another tangent and feel myself going into another set of potentialities.
that were different from the others, but still possible, and that realization made my head swim. It was ironic that I should be so concerned now, maybe even supremely ironic.

I couldn't believe the nihilistic jive I had laid on Ben. It all seemed completely out of phase. Suicide was romantic trash. So what if Nietzsche had stayed up nights trying to keep his sanity by convincing himself that suicide was an option? I could see that self-destruction didn't apply now. But it had once and I assumed that something had changed. Maybe it had been something that Den had said, or maybe it was because he expected something out of me and I had to try just because he was willing to care. Whatever it was, it was as ironic as hell that I should be driving late at night and desperately trying to fight to stay awake because, for some reason and for the first time in awhile, I was still living for something. I wasn't sure what. I couldn't identify it, but somehow it had to do with the beach and the feeling that had come over me and the glimpse of something beyond myself that I could almost feel develop. Deep down inside of my head I felt the stirrings of a life that again was taking on that nervous quality that comes when there are big expectations, or when you're in love—​an obsession with self-preservation, a need to look both ways before crossing the street in a way that I hadn't done since I was eight.

I remember a newspaper clipping that someone had tacked on their dorm room wall—​something from the National Enquirer, which had made it even more mystifying because it probably wasn't true, but still could have been.
Some guy had jumped off a freeway overcrossing and sailed down into the on-coming traffic. But instead of getting smashed into the next level of the great chain of being, he landed in a truck full of cotton bales. Then, before he could get the truck to stop, it blew out a left front tire, hit the center divide, overturned and ignited, killing him and the driver.

I kept thinking of the caption that some hack had come up with for the story: "Trial and Destruction by Fire." It all seemed so useless and even merciless. I prayed that the same thing wouldn't happen to me. Not a truck flipping and burning. Not a momentary reprieve before some more terrible destruction. I just didn't want to be some guy whose life gets snuffed out on a God-forsaken freeway somewhere just when the fog was lifting, just when the future had suddenly seemed less and less nebulous, just when life was on the very edge of beginning to begin. And now as I stood in the window, I was glad to see the sun. I looked full into it and let it tear into my eyes and leave dark blue circles when I looked away.

I was a theology jock again. I could feel it as I looked back over the campus. It seemed like I was almost conditioned to be that way. At Thompson they didn't count the number of touchdowns that you rushed for, or the number of free throws you made, but the number of stars that you had in your crown. And even though I hated the theo jock label, I also knew that it wasn't completely wrong. We did act like jocks. We sat around playing trivia games with our Greek Lexicons and playing at moral systems like other people would play Monopoly. I showered and dressed,
and then grabbed a couple of doughnuts at the place down the street from the Seminary and washed them down with black coffee. Then it was time for Luther.

I was ready for Luther this morning. I was strangely at peace with that constipated old manic-depressive who had once told Melanchthon to love God and sin bravely. I wondered what he would have said to the theo jocks. Those to whom sin was no longer an issue. He probably would have prayed that we'd get nicely lusted or greedied or lechered off our pedestals and land hard on our theological little butts, and then be forced to try and put it all back together as neatly. But it really wasn't anybody else's problem but mine. It seemed like it was, but then it probably wasn't. Any rock I could have thrown at any of the others who seemed so pious, so un-godly Godly would have been aimed at me first of all. It was just that I was less patient now. It didn't mean the same things to me now. I didn't believe in it and now I didn't believe that I could believe. From somewhere inside of my head I felt almost proud that I was at least toying with the idea of calling the bluff of the saints. It was a devil rising—a familiar one.

As I drove back to the campus, my mind shot back to what I had told Den and what I had been thinking about all night. I played all the options over again, trying to use the caffeine rush of the coffee to make the subtle points of difference seem clearer. By the time I reached the dorm parking lot, I had decided what I was going to do. I guess I had always known that I could go through with it anytime I had wanted, although
it had never really seemed within my grasp. But now it was and I was almost certain that I would go to Alaska.

I had met Crazy Billy Freeman the summer before when I had gotten a summer job in an automobile body shop. We had both answered the ad and both got hired within ten minutes of each other. I wouldn't have stayed as long as I did if it wasn't for Billy. The work was dirty and gritty, and after a hard week you felt like the inside of your head had been primered.

Billy had come down for the summer just to get away. His folks lived on a homestead somewhere outside of Talkeetna and he had said that he had come down because he would appreciate it up north so much more when he finally went back. In the meantime, nothing bothered him. Nothing.

The second day at work he had come up to me, grinning from ear to ear, his face covered with steel grey sanding dust from a Ranchero he had been working on. He wanted to know what I knew about wheel bearings, which was practically nothing. He balanced himself on the drive end of an air sander in a way that made me cringe and told me about how he and this miner he knew from Copper Center had been driving out somewhere and a wheel bearing had seized. I wasn't particularly captivated. I just kept eating the twinkie I had bought from the catering truck. So he told me how this miner got out and found a piece of wood and whittled out a wooden wheel bearing, and how they got enough grease from under the car or someplace to make it slimy and put it in and drove thirty miles into town. Everyone laughed and told him he was crazy, and he grinned back at them as if that was what he had expected and would have been disappointed if they had believed
him. But for some reason I had believed him. It didn't make any differ-
ence, but I think that I remembered that day because I sensed in him
what I had never been able to find in myself.

He was crazy, and he lived like he expected to be shot at sunrise--
a life that was without restraint and without fear. He had none of the
ambition, none of the anxiety, no fear about getting old. His whole life
was totally antithetical to all the fears I had had about future shock,
and I ended up almost worshipping the guy.

When I quit work at the shop he gave me an address and an invitation,
one that I knew he meant, and he said if I could ever come up that I could
live at his father's place and he'd help find me work. I had stuffed
the paper into my wallet and only now, as I entered my room, did I take
it out and unfold it and put it on my desk, under one of the rubber feet
of my high tensor lamp.

Simultaneously picking up a couple textbooks and kicking the door
shut with my foot, I walked down the hall and out the back door. Then, I
was walking across campus, a theo jock among other theo jocks who had long
ago learned that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and
that it was this neurosis that had made us wise beyond our years.

There were times that I had regretted signing up for this Luther
class. Reading assignments were heavy and esoteric. I had had other
classes that touched on Luther in a much less specific way and it had
seemed that it would be an easier task than breaking new ground. It was
nothing more than a concession to laziness, but one I was at least willing
to admit. Besides, Dr. Locke was a good lecturer, and he seemed to think on his feet better than most.

There had been another reason why I was glad that I had registered for Luther. The class drew on the most traditional bunch of ministerial students at the Seminary. The hard core. The old right guard. And the difference between who I felt I was and who I felt they were seemed stark to me. Not so much in philosophy but in approach, something I was often contemptuous of. The saints. And I was a thorny theo jock among them.

Steven Older, another theo jock who was in the class, was always telling me to be patient with them.

"You can't change them, Pete. You can't do a thing. But you've got to remember that sometimes that's what some people need. They need that structure that makes things seem easier than they probably really are."

I nodded and acquiesced on a conscious level only.

"But what world do they see out there, Steve? I mean really? What do they see? It all doesn't fit. It'll never fit."

"Don't make it your problem. It doesn't have to be," he said.

"Yeah, I know. But I get sick and tired of hearing stained glass vocal chords."

Class started slowly. Latin terms. Names of popes and prelates and papal legates. I had my notebook out, but wasn't taking notes. It would probably be my last class. I would go talk to the Dean that afternoon and request a leave, and he would ask why, and I would tell him something. I'd tell him that the Lord was leading in my life and I needed time to understand.
His will. No, I wasn't disillusioned. Yes, I would keep in touch. God bless you, too. And your good wife, Mrs. Dean. More Latin terms. And then young Luther came bursting onto the scene.

Luther--smart, hard working, sometimes hotheaded. Educated by the Brotherhood of the Common Life. Gross Hans the miner wanted a lawyer for a son, so he bought Martin the entire set of canon law as a subtle hint. So then Luther went to law school. Not thrilled. Not overjoyed. He'd probably rather sit around and drink beer and watch miracle plays and flagellates, or even some Zwickau prophets if there were any around that early.

Then, university days at Erfurt. The legal jock. Probably didn't like it too well. I was following what Locke was saying. I had heard it before, but now I was paying more attention, trying to cram myself into the historical frame.

Could Luther have felt certain that he was doing the right thing? I didn't know, but I doubted it. He couldn't have been totally convinced that what he was doing was what he really wanted, even if he was trying to please his father. Otherwise, what was to follow never could have happened. I wondered if he ever went to bed after a hard day of trying to read screwed up legal parchments and was ready to say to hell with all of it. He must have. I let the idea sink in for a second and it catapulted my mind into another whole framework full of questions that I had never thought about. It was personal will and divine intervention that I was trying to process through. A disgruntled young man who secretly wanted to pull the cork on years of parental manipulation.
And then there was that stormy day, that day when everything changed, when the life force was re-directed. They shouldn't have attempted the trip. They should have stayed where it was warm and dry. Luther and his friends riding, and suddenly a thunder storm on top of them. They kept riding, hoping that it would let up, that it would clear out enough that they could get through without having to go back. They wanted to get to where there was a warm hearth and a frosty brew in a local inn somewhere, but it was too late.

Then it happens. It happens so quickly that Luther can scarcely react. The air explodes as a bolt of lightning brighter than anything he has ever seen before hits a tree so close and with so much force that it knocks him from his horse. He fights panic as he waits on the ground, dazed, his mouth filled with that strange metallic taste, his nostrils burning with the pungency of the ozone, his ears still ringing with the turbulence of the thunder. For several seconds the universe stands still for Luther. It all hangs in the balance for him. A few seconds more. It takes him that long to collect his thoughts, to feel the fear as it burns clear through his mind and makes his veins surge with adrenaline.

Perhaps it was another burst that did it. Or just the thought that this was only a foretaste of final judgement. A prelude. The unfinished writing on the wall that prophesied eternity for a carefree law student. Luther can wait no longer.

He shouts toward heaven, trying to plead with God, trying to bargain
for his destiny. He prays to Saint Anne, telling her that if she will protect him, he will become a monk. The skies quiet momentarily, and he remounts and finds his friends who have come back to look for him, and together they gallop off toward Erfurt.

Once they have made it, the others probably forget about the storm, but Luther can't. The ozone still burns his nostrils, and the feeling of standing alone before the erupting forces of the uncontrollable finger of God. And the vow is binding—it has to be binding—because Luther will drive himself to insanity with guilt if it isn't validated.

What does God require, Martin? Obedience. It doesn't matter that you were afraid. Jonah was afraid, Martin. Saul was terrified, probably lost his bladder while sprawled in the gravel of the road to Damascus. The vow is always binding.

Luther sells or gives away everything, and now, standing, destitute, he knocks on the door of the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, and the past reshapes itself into the present.

That was the call. The Call. I rolled the idea over in my mind and found the implications of that phenomenon difficult to believe. Divinity reaching down the omnipotent finger, manipulating some atmospherics and creating a static charge that could easily have fried anyone if the aim wasn't perfect. That's what it takes to make mortal man in his wormy glory realize that there is a higher priority for himself than what he thinks. Some divine teletype to make us redirect ourselves.

That was the assumption, the whole damn assumption. Every man who
was at that moment preparing for the ministry had to believe that there had been some kind of selection. Some extra-ordinary, extra-sensual selection. That was the basic idea. It meant that the covenant was complete and that the sacrifice and the dedication of a life was pleasing to God. Without it, the whole thing was just a job where you didn't get weekends off.

"Dr. Locke," I said as the room tightened and I became aware of only myself. "Was it really the storm that convinced Luther? Was it really the fear of God?"

The answer was predictable.

"One has to believe that, in the light of the political climate, it was the work of God to call Luther at this particular time. The rising nationalism of the German states, the eventual need to replace Maximilian—all these factors provided Luther with the necessary elements for his movements."

"And it was the call of God?"

"Do you have reasons to doubt it?"

"I have reasons to doubt almost everything that I can't explain," I said. "I can't buy the package, the theatrics of it all. I've been scared before but I knew the reason and it wasn't a call from God."

"Mr. Tyson, I think you're missing the point."

"Sir," I said, "is there really a point? Is what you're saying about Luther that universally applicable to us? Are we supposed to shudder at every train wreck, at every plane crash, thinking that it is God's way of trying to communicate to us? By scaring the shit out of us? Excuse me, I don't mean to be vulgar or obscene, but I'm confused right now."
Locke asked if the class cared to respond. Nothing. They looked uncomfortable, the other theo jocks, the varsity squad with jerseys never soiled.

"Does every person who wears the cloth have to be called by God?"

Someone in the back of the room said something and a couple of people laughed.

"Are all of you called by God? Have you had an experience that led you to this decision?" Nothing. "Answer me! Are you called by God or not?"

"I believe I am," James Milson said. I looked back at him but he was only an image, only a face attached to a name.

"Anybody else?" I asked, aware that I was standing now and leaning over my desk. "It's important to me at this moment. It's terribly important."

"Sounds like an altar call," Milson said. "Are you looking for converts?"

"That's just the point. Are you?"

"Mr. Tyson," Locke interrupted and I turned and faced him, still standing. "I feel as if you are using some valuable time to try to deal with some personal problems that might be better resolved in private." He wasn't being malicious; he just didn't want to take the time, but I wasn't going to leave him a choice.

"There are a few things I need to get straight here. Right here. Now listen to me, I always wanted to be in the ministry because I believed in it. I believed in God."
"Past tense, Mr. Tyson?"

"Imperative tense, Doctor. Present, imperative tense. And because of that belief I made a decision on the basis of it. And now I look at you, I look into your faces and see a smugness. I see you on the inside. And you look at me and can't understand, can you? Well, I'm going to make you understand," I said, straining, and as I looked down at my hands, I saw they were bloodless as they gripped the sides of the desk, and I suddenly realized that I was going to explode. It was something that I had to do, and maybe it would be better after it happened.

"Saul was called! Luther was called! Zwingli was called! Bucer was called! Wesley was called! All of them were called! And all of you are called. I can see it. I can look into your faces and see it. And I also know that out there, beyond this place, these onion skin curtains that we hide behind, there is a world that doesn't give one holy damn about it. Now if I could talk to Luther, if I could see him and talk to him I would tell him something. I'd tell him that maybe he was wrong. Maybe it wasn't a sign from God. It was only his believing that made a difference. He believed that he was called.

"I'd say to him that I don't believe anymore, that I can't believe anymore. I'd say to him, 'I never saw the lightning, Martin. I never heard the thunder. I never made that kind of vow to God. I just wanted for once in my whole stinking life to do something right, and that was my reason.'"
I tried to keep my voice but it was choking out. I didn't know why I was doing this thing. God help me, I didn't know. It wasn't my fault that they couldn't understand.

"What about rapists? And whores? And junkies out there? What does it mean to them? What does any of what we do here mean to them? Nothing! It means nothing!"

"Mr. Tyson, please!"

I was at the door to the hallway, facing the other class rooms, the other people at Thompson, those who didn't know that God was dying with me and because of me, but not for me.

"I never saw it! Do you hear me?" It echoed down the hall which had become quickly very quiet. "And none of it matters! I don't care that I never saw it! I don't care that I could never make myself believe enough!"

It was a source, a spring that was running out and beyond me and now it was running swifter and feeding the rage, making it come faster than I could control, rage glowing white-hot now, and I didn't even think I knew who I had been or who I had become.

"But some others don't believe. You don't believe. Some of you don't believe either. I can see it, and I can smell it, and I know what'll happen to you. You will destroy people! For the blessed sake of Christ you will destroy people. In God's holy name you will ruin what you try to save. Ruin them! Damn them to hell! Oh Jesus Lord, why is this happening to me? Oh God, please take it away from me. Please take it all away from me."
I spun around and looked back into the class room, holding myself up in the doorway because I was dizzy and would have gone down. I could see them looking at me, but I didn't understand why. They were just staring, not afraid or angry, but neutral and waiting like they would never understand.

"I'm going now," I heard myself say in a voice that was suddenly quiet and uninvolved. "I just wanted you to understand, that's all. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I was just confused and wanted you to understand, and I'm sorry."

I waited until I had gotten back to the dorm room before I puked, stretched out prone on the floor, feeling my stomach retch and retch until I had completely emptied myself into a blue plastic trash can and nothing else would come up except mucus that tasted warm and bitter. It was a purging, but not only a physical one but a spiritual one, too. And the condemnation was by my hands, with myself as both the accuser and the accused. I didn't hate those people. I didn't really know why I had done what I did. It had just gotten out of control and there had been no way to stop it.

When I finally got up off the floor, much of the dizziness had left, and I leaned on the sink and drank a glass of horrible tasting water. If I could hold it down I would be all right. Then I thought, the hell with it. I didn't really care how I felt. All I wanted to do was leave as quickly as I could, so I took out the phone book and made a reservation to leave for Anchorage on Sunday. It would give me two days and a weekend
to tie up any loose ends, to take care of whatever else hadn't been done or undone. It would also give me some time to spend with my mother and to tell her what had happened. And to help her understand. That was the hardest part. There was a time when I could have played the stoic, toughing it out for her even while my insides were rotting, staying by just to fulfill her personal dream for me, but even that option had closed after today; they wouldn't let me stay now. At best, I could maybe come back in a year or so after I had been sanctified in a way that Thompson hadn't been able to do, or hadn't tried to do.

While at my desk I scratched out a message to Billy, telling him I was coming. I put down a couple of lines but couldn't get it right. I wanted to let him know in some way that I wasn't just coming for a vacation, but I didn't know quite how to word that. What I should have said was "I'm coming to live with you for an indefinite period of time until I get my head straight, and in the meantime, would you please find me a job?" That was what I was asking, but if I sent that to him I doubted if he would show up at the airport, but then there was no guarantee that he would anyway.

I finally worked out what I thought would be appropriate. "Billy, I need to see some wilderness. Like to stay with you for awhile if offer still good. Arriving in Anchorage, Sunday, 5:20 pm local, Western flight 112. Pete." It wasn't profound, but I figured that he would understand. I called Western Union and gave them the message. As I repeated each word back, I sensed that it was becoming final, that I was actually going through with it.
It had always seemed a little romantic to have some unusual place on tap in the back of my mind, a place to go if things reached a threshold. I could work as a waiter on the Left Bank, or crew my way to Rangoon in the fetid hold of a rusty steamer. But I had never considered an actual frontier. I knew what my mother would say. She'd tell me to dress warm, to take care of myself. I just hoped she'd understand. It wouldn't make much difference now if she didn't, except that it would be easier for me.

Someone knocked on the door as I was hanging up the phone. I opened it and saw Steve Older with my books in his hand.

"I think you forgot these," he said, putting them on the corner of the desk, and then he sat on the edge of the bed. I put the blue trash can at the other end of the room so he wouldn't have to look at it.

"Listen Pete--"

"No," I interrupted. "I don't want to have to explain. What happened today had been building up for a long time. I didn't know why it happened like that, but it just got out of control. I'm leaving this afternoon so it doesn't really matter anyway. It was just something."

"I know," he said, sounding like some theo jock of a father confessor and it made me mad.

"No, Steve, you don't know. Nobody here knows. If they would be willing for one damn second to admit that there are things that they don't know, it might be different."

"Hey, I'm a friend, remember?"

I had to pause for a second.

"Yeah," I admitted, "you are a friend. I'm sorry. Sometimes I
think I'm possessed. I mean really. I get these massive buildups of something that makes me feel like I'm going to explode."

"Maybe you are possessed," he said. "Have you ever had it checked?"

"How do you check it? Turn off the lights and see if I glow in the dark?"

"They use the same thing that they did at the Salem witch trials. They threw you down a well and if you drowned, you were innocent, but if you floated, you were in league and they would take you out and hang you. It was pretty hard to beat the system."

"I'll pass," I said. "You don't even get disability for something like that."

"Pete, can I ask what you're going to do now?"

"I'm going to empty the trash can."

"You know what I mean."

"You mean now now?" I asked. "Well, I've got a friend up above Anchorage who's been trying to twist my arm into going up there for awhile."

"How long are you going to stay?"

"Don't know. As long as I want. Or as long as I need to. It doesn't matter. The point is that I've got to get somewhere because I can't stay around here."

"The point is you've gotta do what you've gotta do."

"Agreed," I said. "In fact that's so right-on it's hard core."

Steve made a face like when you get an aspirin caught in your throat.
"Just one more thing."
"Right on."
"This is serious, Pete."
"Okay," I said. "I'll be serious."

"Something happened after you left that I think you ought to know about."

"Oh Steve, spare me that, would you?"

"No," he insisted, "I think it's important. About half the class went to Donner Chapel and prayed for you."

"God, Steve, why would they--"

"Would you stop it?" He was angry. I could see it in his eyes as he looked at me. "It's not what you're thinking."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"You're thinking that it was a pious thing, that they prayed that you'd come back to the fold. That's what you're thinking."

"Well, didn't they?"

"They prayed for themselves." He quickly corrected himself. "We prayed for ourselves. And for you. I don't care if you believe it or not, but those people care about you. They care, Pete. But they also understand what you were saying."

"Like hell."

I stood by the window and watched the parade of theo·jocks glide off to class. All those pious people who would condescend to pray for me.
"You're beyond me, Pete." His voice seemed suddenly sad, not angry. "You're somewhere I've never been, where there's so much anger or hate or something that I can't even break through. What does it take, Pete?"

"Don't worry about it, Steve. Let me plod along like this and someday we'll get together and figure out why people in the world do the things they do to each other. Maybe we'll both have some answers, okay brother?"

"I'll be waiting, Pete."

I heard him leave, but I didn't turn away from the window. After he had gone, I went to the phone and tried to call Ben. The phone rang about four or five times before his answering service came on. It was the same girl who works for every answering service in the world, the one with the voice that was Bactine sterile. She said that he was out, but I could leave a message.

"Just tell him I've decided to go to Alaska. Tell him that Peter Tyson is going to Alaska and he'll know what I mean. And tell him thanks."

I hung up the phone and looked down at my books, the ones that Steve had brought.

"You guys understand like hell," I said to nobody in particular. I reached over and picked up the books and then tossed them towards the center of the room where they landed twisted and open.

"I'll be waiting for you. Someday I'll be waiting for all you guys."
Chapter V.

I felt the plane tires bite into the runway and looked out the window at the grey sky and the puddles on the pavement and watched the buildings as they bounced by. I had spent most of the flight writing letters to some people who I knew would have felt a little hurt if they thought I had taken off, maybe never to return in this life or the next, without having bothered to let them know. It seemed impossible to write about what was happening to me, so I didn't try. I billed the whole thing more as a vacation than a retreat. But I also knew that most of the people I kept close with had heard the things that people always hear and would have already assumed to know the reasons—that there was a connection between Karol and this. That's what people always assume, but I really felt no burning desire to explain any of it to anyone; it really wouldn't have made much of a difference.

By now it was just beginning to sink in that I had actually left. What had once been an option—a psychological opiate—was now a reality and, for the moment, irreversible. The hardest part had been with my mother.

It was not that she took the news of my leaving badly. In fact, she was surprisingly composed, but I could feel vicariously what was happening under the surface. It was not the change of plans, the lack of a position,
the deferment of a personal dream of hers for me that was most painful. I think what really hurt was when she realized, like I had done, that this was only a part of a larger system. My leaving was an aftermath, the effect of an earlier, hideous cause.

For awhile I debated whether to try and explain it to her, but I ultimately did; I knew that some other explanation just wouldn't wash. Not with her.

There had been a lot that I needed to do before I left. I went to the bank and closed out both a checking and savings account. I had asked the teller to give me negotiable legal tender for Alaska, which she didn't seem to think was particularly funny because it had confused her for a second. Billy would have to stand good on his promises of finding me work because what I had amassed wouldn't last long. It gave me a funny feeling to see the money that had for so long only been digits on a quarterly statement. It had been the only tangible security I had planned on for our first couple months of marriage. I watched as she counted out twenties and put them in piles, and I couldn't help thinking how paltry it looked. The thought made me bitter and I had to fight the urge to run out and spend it immediately, simply to be rid of what it had represented. Buy anything anyplace. I could have bought a new color TV and given it to the first person I met on the street. I'd tell him it was a gift from God, that here was undeniable evidence that Jesus loved him. I was going to live in a world where money filled tangible needs, like putting bread on the table, not some middle class, abstract notion of security.
I could be like a cowboy who, collecting his weekly pay, rides into town to gamble, drink, and fornicate it away before dawn. Security? Life is security. A person could stay alive eating salamanders and wild asparagus shoots to sustain him. And if that wasn't enough for him to make it, he would die and some other believer would come up from the ranks to take his place. It sounded like Darwinism, but I didn't give a damn because that's how I felt. I could have come up with the same conclusion about survival from a Christian point of view—the part about not worrying about what you will eat or what you will wear because God who provides for all the animals and flowers will also provide for you—but somehow I had always considered that system more viable for a farmer or a fisherman. Or a beggar.

It was God who would send the rain for your crops or the school of tuna into your nets, or even send a rich Pharisee of a business executive enough guilt on his mind that he wanted to do some good karma, so he manages to drop a few quarters into your grimy hand. Even if my Christianity was suffering from a lack of sufficient evidence syndrome, I would be willing to become a lily of the field. And if I didn't believe after that, I would never believe.

I put all the twenties into an envelope, folded it over and shoved it far enough into my watch pocket that it couldn't work itself out, and I dropped the rest of the change into my other pocket and that was that.

Also before I left I managed to call a few friends, mostly to say good-bye and give them Billy's address. They were good enough friends not to press me for details, and even if they had, there wouldn't have been
much to say. I didn't want to think about leaving them. It wouldn't have done me any good to think about any more loss. If I did miss anyone that would be later and probably during some melancholy, purple-black mood while stuck in some God-forsaken hole in the middle of the last frontier, and I really didn't want to anticipate it.

My mother had driven me to the airport and she stayed with me until my plane left. I don't remember what we talked about, only that before I walked down the tunnel to board the jet she hugged me and told me to be sure to keep myself warm. She asked if I had packed my jacket—the heavy one, the Clint Eastwood looking one—and I told her I had. And then I left.

Now I was looking at the Anchorage airport and the rain, and feeling the cold wind that didn't have the slightest hint of spring in it. Beyond the gate there was a sea of faces, bobbing and craning. There had been a lot of servicemen on our flight, and now I could see some of them ahead of me meeting wives or lovers. It felt strange to watch those reunions, those fortunate souls who could have a holy wedlocked or otherwise warm body to aid and abet them during the long Alaskan winter. At the same time I was praying another prayer—simple, yet poignant in its appeal.

"Dear Lord, please help me find Billy. I don't care if you have to dredge him up from the very bowels of the earth. Just please produce him. If not, may the rapture come quickly. Amen."

I had passed behind the first wall of people before I saw him, and as I did I felt a sense of relief that simultaneously spread from the top of
my head to my toes. There he stood, grinning, looking at me as if to ask what had taken me so long. I ran towards him, and I didn't care who I bumped or pushed, and when I had gotten within reaching distance, he grabbed me in a bear hug that almost finished me. Nothing had changed. He looked exactly the same. His eyes had that same shine that made me imagine that he had just won the Kentucky Derby.

"I see you got my telegram," I succeeded in saying after I managed to get some air back into my lungs.

"You better hope I did, boy, or it would be a long walk for you."

"I was almost afraid you wouldn't. I sure am happy to see you," I said, fully realizing for the first time how anxious I had been all along that he might not have gotten the wire or that something else might have happened. I liked to think that I could have somehow made it up to where he lived by myself, found him, and started from there and everything would have been okay. But what had been worrying me the most was that feeling that maybe it was in the stars that this trip would not do for me what I needed—that I would have to come back home and meet those same people, knowing all the time that I hadn't been able to go off and make anything work, or at least make something better or different. The thought of that frightened me more than a hundred empty airport waiting rooms. Whether anything else ever worked out for me, at least I knew that I would have a place to stay for awhile. At least the lily had a field.

I went to claim my bags and was waiting on the curb while Billy went to get the car. It was still grey and cold, but I could see
mountains and it made me try to imagine what the rest of the state looked like. Mountains and rivers. Beyond that I didn't know, but I guess that was enough. I felt that I was ready for a few mountains and a little icy water and some non-academic, good old ground-in Alaskan dirt.

Billy was honking the horn, so I picked up my bags and carried them over to the car, an old, rusted-out Oldsmobile station wagon. It had once been blue but now was almost completely primer grey. The rocker panels had long since been eaten away, and I guessed that it was because they salted the roads during the winter. I had seen cars with rusted panels in Detroit and someone had told me that that was why.

"Are you sure that this thing will make it?" I asked as I got in. "We aren't going to have to stop and whittle out a wheel bearing for this trap are we?"

He seemed pleased that I remembered the story, which made me think for the first time that he probably had made it up.

"Are you kidding? This thing runs like a top. It's driven the Pan Alaskan Highway twice."

"Is that good?" I knew that it was a classic greenhorn question, but I figured that I better be willing to slide along with that status for awhile.

"Sure is. A lot of it isn't half-paved. It goes from Washington and they'll eventually end up cutting it through to the North Slope."

"How far is it to Willow?"
"It's about an hour-and-a-half, and then our road is about twenty minutes beyond that."

"Your folks know I'm coming?"

"Sure. Everything's all set. I haven't had time to ask around about getting you some work, but I'm sure we can dig up something. Sound all right?"

"Sounds great. I'm ready for anything. In fact, I'm ready for everything." I looked over at Billy and he seemed pleased.

I didn't remember a lot of the drive in because I slept most of the way. I did wake up a couple of times and noticed that we were going through some rather wide valleys and that in spite of the mountains around us, the land was flatter in places than I had imagined. I also woke up once as we were driving over a river and remembered that the water was a machine-gun grey. I was going to ask Billy why, but I was too sleepy to bother.

I finally woke up before we got to Willow and started watching the scenery. Aside from an occasional lodge, there wasn't much on the road. The greenery which was thick in places grew down to the sides of the road. Trees and tall grass. It reminded me of some of the rain forests in Washington, and once in awhile, I caught sight of a cabin that had been built back from the road in a place where the forest had been cut away. The cabins were not the log cabins I had thought about and expected, although I guess I knew all along that they were something I had pictured more with Lincoln than with Alaska. The cabins were mostly just boards—plywood it looked like—and sometimes plaster board. But
all around them the forest closed in and secluded and isolated them. I asked Billy what those people did for a living.

"I don't know. Just survive most of them. There's a lot of retired people who have pensions and stuff like that coming in and who want some place away from everything else, so they build a little place and cut the wood they need and burn kerosene and drink well water. They don't need much else."

"What happens when winter comes? Aren't they pretty well cut off from everything?"

"I reckon in some ways, but they've still got fairly regular mail service, either by roads or by the Alaskan railroad which goes way the hell back through some of them small towns that even roads can't reach during the winter. Then if anyone really needs to get ahold of anyone else, there's Northwinds and Bush Pipeline."

"Bush what?" I asked.

"Bush Pipeline. Most of these folks don't have phones. In fact, there are whole towns up in the interior that maybe only have one or two phones in the whole place. So if you need to get ahold of someone in these towns, you can call the closest radio station to them and give them your message and then twice a day--morning and evening--they read all the messages over the air. Most people up here just make a habit of tuning in every day not just to get their news but to kind of stay up with what their neighbors are up to."

"Then they'd really be cut off without radio."
"You got it."

"Is there any other way for them to communicate?"

"There are some ham radio operators in the area, and lots of CBers, too. Other than that—oh wait, there's a big communication station that they built a couple of years ago in Talkeetna that they can use to get signals from those television satellites. I don't know if it's even working, but I remember when they were building it. It was just before I went down to California. I knew a pilot who was flying in crews to build the thing. It's one of those big dish jobs."

"It's hard to imagine people up here scattered so far over this big place. Maybe I've had too much city living, you think?"

"You'll get used to it," he said.

"I hope so."

I really wasn't worried about it, but I must have sounded like it was going to be a drastic culture shock for me to adjust because Billy felt he needed to convince me.

"Oh, sure. You'll get used to it. Besides, it's not really that isolated for us ever, especially during the summer. You don't need to worry about it. You may even want to stay up here for good once you get settled."

"Really?"

"My folks did. They left Oklahoma one summer on a vacation and ended up here with twenty acres of woods."

I had read enough James Fenimore Cooper to know a little about
the pioneer spirit, but that had belonged to a different age, one that
the Twentieth Century had distorted and romanticized into something quite
different from what it had been before. A little like Tennyson and
the Victorians had done to poor old King Arthur. But as I looked out
the window at the occasional clapboard cabin, I found myself thinking some
of the questions that I hoped I was going to leave behind in California.

What motivated a person to move this far away? I mean, it wasn't
just across the state or from one city to the next, but this was com­
pletely away—as far away as it was possible to move and still stay in
America. I kept asking myself what a person could accomplish here. Was
it just the freedom of knowing that there would never be a Fuller Brush
salesman knocking at the door, or that nobody would be putting a freeway
through your front yard? Not for a decade or two at least. I just couldn't
figure what life could be worth up here. But maybe when I had lived here
long enough I would begin to sense some mystical, primeval, Jack Londonish
call of the wild that would make this wilderness the very doorstep of
paradise. But for the moment, I didn't understand.

"Billy boy, what is it that makes people come up here to live?
Freedom? What?"

I guess that it wasn't an easy question—not the kind that you can
answer off the top of your head—because it took him awhile.

"I don't know if there is a common reason. Some of these people
just ended up here because they came up and liked it. Some people probably
didn't like the city and the pollution and the rat race so they came to
where they figured they could get away from it. A few are probably running away from something or someone. I reckon I like it because I've gotten used to it and understand how to live up here—what you've got to do to make it, and that gives me a sense of satisfaction—to know that I'm living in a hard-ass man's country and am able to cut it."

It sounded good. His explanation made the most sense to me, and it made sense because it meant the same thing that Den's reasons had meant to me. Someone living for what they considered important and meaningful. It seemed like things were bound to be simpler because they were more geared for survival. It was going to completely destroy any of the residue of that humanism that I had championed for so long, that idea that folks are not naturally greedy and vile, but just inherently uninformed, just lacking a little polish and style. It would have been fun to have dug up Erasmus and brought him along. It didn't seem possible to me that any vestige of sunny-natured man could be holed up in one of those cabins. Real people with needs and problems. Yes. I could understand that. But also people who by their very natures and rationale for living where they did must be totally inoculated against whatever some smart college boy of a theo jock drop-out could come across with.

I could only imagine that if it didn't help to keep the cold out, or make the work a little easier, or somehow help to pass those dark hours of quiet snow that isolated you and must have made you wonder if you were even alive and if you would ever see the sun again—if it didn't ease that, whatever "it" was, it wasn't worth anything. Couldn't be worth anything.
I kept thinking of a cartoon that I had seen in the Sunday paper about a kid in front of a desk at the employment office and he's telling the guy behind the desk, "What do you mean, 'What can I do?' I can't do anything--I'm educated." It was trite, but it seemed appropriate. The only thing that mattered was finding a system that worked, and if God was in the business of providing people with a means of giving their lives meaning, it would have to work up here, and if it didn't work here--not just that I couldn't make it work here, but if it couldn't make itself work here--then, well... I'd have to deal with that later.

More than anything else, I would have to try to remember who I was. I was not a missionary. I was not a Jesus Freak. I was not coming expressly for the purpose of Matthew 28ing everyone into submission. I was coming to be taught, to learn from people who couldn't give a damn about 99% of everything I knew something about. They were only people, people I could--I would have to--be honest with.

We turned down a dirt road that ran beside a river that Billy told me was Montana Creek. I had seen what I thought were creeks before--those little meandering things that cut through mountain valleys--and by those standards, this was a river.

The road we were on paralleled the water until we had climbed much higher and could look down on it and see it as it rippled over the smooth-worn rocks in its bed. The water was the same steel grey that I had seen in the river we had crossed on the way from Anchorage and Billy told me that it was because it was a glacier stream. Streams that come
from springs are almost always clear, but there is something in the melting glaciers that gives the water almost a creamy color.

As the road veered away from the creek, it became more rutted and we had to drive slower. The ground was damp and soft and I knew that it hadn't been long since the snow had melted off. Billy said that there were still patches of it further up and I could believe it because it felt cold enough.

In places the ground was newly green with a blanket of small shoots that looked so alive that the color seemed to be irradiant. The trees that grew down by the creek were already green. Billy was pointing out some fireweed alongside the road and was telling me that from the time they started to bloom, you watched them to see how high up the stalk the new flowers that had opened were. And when the ones at the very top started to open, you could expect the first frosts of autumn.

I opened the window and let the cold air chew into my face and nose. I let the rich humus smell of the dead and the newly born vegetation fill my head until I couldn't hold it anymore. It was so cold that it tingled my nose and made my sinuses ache. It was a strange sensation. I wanted to roll in those muddy fields, now completely reborn, and to fill every inch of my being with the wildness and naturalness of the earth; to let the staleness of everything that had ever happened that wasn't real or was too real evaporate, to be drenched with a process that could heal and strengthen and give life.
"Does it smell good?" Billy was asking with the pleased smugness of one who has taken children from the Midwest to the coast for the first time to see the ocean and vicariously lives their wonderment with them.

"I can't get enough of it. It makes my eyes water and my nose burn, but there's something there I can't describe. It's sort of just hard-core natural."

Billy nodded as if he understood, and that was okay because I wasn't about to try to explain something that I couldn't really describe to myself in the first place.

As we drove, I could see that we were passing through some kind of boundaries. Every several turns in the road there would be a fence running along or a clearing would pass and I could see a small cabin or a trailer, and even the land itself changed from time to time. Some of it had been cleared and mowed while the rest looked as if nothing had ever been done to it.

"Are these different homesteads?" I asked.

"Right. These are our neighbors. This road goes through just about everybody's property. Most of these folks own about as much land as we do, some even more. But lots of them don't do much with it. They just try to do the least the government expects and then keep it as natural as they can. They figure that during the winter the deer and even some moose will come down and graze if the land hasn't been messed with too much."

"Then what do they do?"

"Poach."
"Really?" I asked, certain that I was giving the impression of being surprised—which I was, I guess, because he said it so matter-of-factly.

"Sure they poach. They figure that it's their land and they don't want any game people telling them what to kill and what not to kill. There's an awful lot of meat on a bull moose, and it's even a better deal if you don't have to buy tags to make it legal. Reckon it's mostly just economics and a lot a pride. These folks just don't like to be told what they should or shouldn't do." He paused and then added, "And those good ol' boys have a point."

We had just come up a small rise in the road and when we reached the top, there was a flat place that had been cleared into which the road widened out and dead-ended. The spot had been rimmed with tree trunks and was wide enough for a car or truck to turn around in. Off to one side ran another trail but it was much smaller and I doubted if even a jeep could have gotten through. I figured we were in for a walk.

"Ready for some exercise?" Billy asked.

I had already grabbed my two rather worn suitcases.

"You bet. How far is it?"

"A piece. It's not too bad."

After six hours on the plane and whatever time it had taken to get here from Anchorage, I was tired of sitting and it felt good to start walking again. The air was cold and damp, even more than it had been when we were on the road because now we were walking over the grasses, and the combination of everything I was feeling made me hungry down to my toenails.
We walked through the forest for what seemed about a mile, maybe more, and then suddenly we broke out onto the edge of a huge meadow, tall with new grass, that stretched for a couple hundred yards to the north. The road curved along the edge of the woods that bordered the meadow.

It was completely quiet and I stopped to look at it for a minute. I didn't know what had caused the trees to stop at the edge, so I asked Billy if it was man-made and he said he didn't think so. It was just something that happened. He told me that he and his father had talked about clearing some of the grass and putting in an airstrip, but somehow they didn't have the heart to plow up any part of the meadow so they decided to leave it as it was. I could only imagine what it must have looked like during the winter when the snow would have covered any natural imperfections. I hoped that I would get to see it like that, but if I never did, it was enough just to see it now.

As we walked along the path, Billy pointed up ahead to several tall trees that were standing above the other trees at the edge of the woods. I could see that they were on a little rise, and, as I looked, I saw a wisp of smoke curling up beyond them and I knew it must be Freeman's homestead.

As we got closer I could see the cabin beyond the trees, set on a rise that overlooked the meadow. It was made out of boards and had windows that were double-covered with a type of plastic covering. There was a tool shed on one side and on the other an outhouse. That answered the question in my mind about plumbing that I hadn't bothered to ask.
About all I could see besides that was another little shed that looked like a well house with a couple cords of wood and about three propane bottles standing beside it. I was anxious to see inside the cabin.

The interior reminded me of some of the other cabins I had seen in California. There was a large wooden table with rustic looking chairs, a large wood-burning stove, a kitchen with everything imaginable hanging all over the walls, and a small passageway that went back to other rooms which were dark, but I was sure they were bedrooms.

The rest of the Freemans were in town. Billy's folks were both school teachers in Talkeetna, his father taking grades 5-8 and his mother the rest. Billy had said that they usually had about thirty kids, but, during the winter, it depended upon the weather. Often there would be only a couple who didn't get the word over the radio that district schools had been closed that day and would struggle in, finding the school house dark and cold, and they would have to turn around and trek back over the deep drifts. It all seemed strangely picturesque and I tried to see myself walking to school in freezing weather wearing snow shoes, but I couldn't complete the picture.

Just after Billy had gotten my telegram he had gone around to a few of the neighbors asking if there was any work, but most everyone had said that it was too early to tell and that I should mosey back over after I arrived. It was probably that they just wanted to have a look at the city boy before they went off and got themselves committed. I could work for awhile doing chores and planting at Freeman's until something else
turned up and that at least would be good for room and board. But in the meantime, I would need to go around and meet the other homesteaders and find someone who needed a hand. Billy said that someone or other was always building during the summer and would probably jump at an opportunity to hire a novice hand and be able to pay him unskilled wages.

The Freemans didn't return home until about ten that night—at least that's what my watch said—but I had lost all sense of time because the sky was still bright and I would have guessed that it was about six. Mr. Freeman was a small man, but not small in a weak way. He had huge arms, arms that looked like they could tear a license plate in half. He was relaxed and easy and I felt like I had known him for a long time.

He only knew about me from what Billy had told him, which wasn't too much, so he asked me only a few questions. I tried to explain why I had dropped out of school, but it didn't sound very convincing to even me, so I just said that I guessed that I needed a change of scenery.

Mrs. Freeman, on the other hand, was rather large and she had hugged me when I had come into the room as if I was some lost son—the prodigal who had managed to find his way back home. I sat at the table for awhile and listened to her tell about everything that had gone on in town for the past week. I didn't recognize names that Billy talked about, but they still seemed familiar sounding. There was mostly a lot of who did what to whom, and it seemed pretty typical of anyplace.
The Freemans had made up one of the smaller rooms that adjoined the hall which led off from the main room. There was a bed, a night stand, and two windows which looked over the meadow. It was still bright outside so I pulled down the blind, got undressed and slipped between the embrace of those cool sheets. I pulled the heavy quilted blankets over me, and the weight of all that material made me feel warm and kept. Besides, there was no heating except for the stove and that was in the other room. I would have liked on the first night of my trip to have lulled myself to sleep with the regular set of fantasies that a tired consciousness produces, or maybe dreamed of lions running on the beach in Africa, or even preaching the Sunday sermon at the White House. But I shifted once in bed to turn over on my stomach and curl my legs under me in fetal bliss, and I was gone within the minute.
Chapter VI.

We had decided that until I got used to the country and the time change and all, I should take a little time to get myself acquainted with some of the local color. The Freemans were just in the midst of planting a large garden which they did every year and I could help with that. There were also a number of other chores that needed to be done, especially getting water from the spring which was down a rather steep hillside overlooking the creek. It had seemed strange that the drinking water had to be hauled up from so far away when there was a well just outside the cabin door, but I learned that some health people from the state had run a sample of the water from the well and found that it was so high in organic material that it probably wasn't safe to drink, so they only used it for washing. I was elected water boy, a position I hadn't held since I had tried to make the football team in college.

The afternoons were mine, and together Billy and I planned to systematically visit most of the neighbors, not only for the purpose of finding me some work, but just because it was the neighborly thing to do and the Freemans had been too busy to do it for awhile.

I had only been north about three days when Billy decided that we should go over and see Earl. It was not that far to walk and the weather had warmed up—which didn't make it really that warm, but at least it wasn't raining. Earl lived in a different direction from where we had
come when we walked in from the road the first day. He lived in an old trailer that he had somehow managed to drag into his small, cleared-out spot of land. It was now so overgrown that I was amazed that anyone would have ever been able to get that thing in by any way other than airlift. Young saplings had grown over the top and there was brush growing completely around it. We found the door, knocked, and after waiting, we knocked again. Someone was in there. We could be sure of that because the smell of bacon was still hovering around and we could hear the floor boards of that old Airstream creak.

The door finally opened and I looked into the face of about the most pitiful looking person I had ever seen. It wasn't pity that was generated from any innate expression or a pathos that belonged to the face itself, like the tragic looks that some people have that make you react a certain way towards them even if you don't want to. This man's face was pathetic from the cruelty generated by self-neglect.

His cheeks had a three-day growth of stubble that came out in irregular splotches. His skin was heavily creased and sallow, looking almost jaundiced as did his eyes which were yellow, dull, and vascular.

He didn't recognize Billy. He thought we were selling something and it wasn't until Billy repeated for the third time who he was that he finally understood and opened the door. Immediately I wished that he hadn't. I wished that he would have allowed us to have our little visit on his front porch because the inside of the trailer was so fetid with smoke and stench that my eyes watered and I had to fight to keep from gagging.
There were clothes strewn all over the floor. Dishes on the board that he was using for a sink looked like they had been welded into a piece of porcelain sculpture by the brown residue of bacon grease that was now crusty and hard. It wasn't until I had found the store of empties on the table that I caught on to why things were like they were. Earl was drunk—bombed out of his head—and for the first time I began to understand what Jane Addams and the other social reformers had been all about.

Earl had lived in Talkeetna most of his life before he had moved out here a couple of years before. He had been a diesel mechanic after the war and had moved around. He had finally settled with his wife in town. There was always some heavy construction going on someplace nearby and a lot of the local folks owned their Caterpillars, which needed servicing, so Earl kept busy.

His wife had died about three years before and it was after that that he had sold his place, bought the first trailer that he could find, and moved it out to the only plot of land that he had been able to hold on to.

I watched as Billy talked to him, Billy with his easy style that made everyone feel comfortable. Earl was saying that he hadn't been feeling too well, that this winter had been the hardest for him because he had run out of fuel oil about March and had had to go without any heating except for some kerosene heaters that didn't do much during the heavy snows that always come before spring. It didn't surprise me that he was feeling sick. I was actually surprised that he was alive. He said that
he had run out of groceries and had been too poorly to go after anymore, so he had been living on bread, bacon, and black coffee—not exactly a breakfast of champions.

It wasn't until he and Billy had talked about all of the other 'steaders that his attention turned to me, and the very fact that I knew eventually I would have to say something made me nervous.

He looked at me for a couple seconds before he spoke, I guess to try and let the image penetrate and settle behind the clouds in his eyes.

"So, you up to Freeman's awhile?"

"That's right," I said, trying to make the words sound as natural and as comfortable as I could. "Billy and I are old friends, and he kind of invited me up for a vacation."

"What do you think of the place?"

"Freeman's?"

"No, the whole place." He made a gesture with his hand that seemed to take in everything in sight, but specifically grand enough to mean the great outdoors.

"It's beautiful." I tried not be overly enthusiastic and sound like a tourist.

"Hell, boy, you think it's beautiful now, but when winter comes it'll freeze your ass off." His native cynicism came so naturally for him that I didn't even think it was for my benefit.

"Where do you hail from?"

"Pardon me?" I said, which sounded so suddenly unnatural that I cringed the second it left my lips.
"Say what?" he asked, looking at Billy.

"He wants to know where you're from, Pete," Billy interjected as if he was mediating between two incompatibles who weren't capable of any sort of understanding without his help.


The old man looked like he hadn't heard me, but then I saw that he was merely trying to remember something, probably something that was so deeply lost in the mist of his inebriation that it required all his focused concentration to try and dredge it out.

"I'd only been to California once," he started slowly. "During the war they took us out of San Francisco to the Pacific, but I don't remember much except them old houses and the bridge."

I nodded, not knowing really what to add.

"And them street cars."

"The cable cars," I corrected for some unknown reason.

"Is that what they are? Well, I rode them cable cars, then." He seemed to have drifted off again for a couple of minutes and I looked over at Billy and he flashed me a smile that I took to mean that something was being accomplished here. I figured that if Earl could think about San Francisco and the cable cars he might be able to escape from this pit and even a moment of escaping and remembering would be worth it. But in awhile he was back.

"What are ya doing with your life, son?" he drawled, making it sound like one word in a different but familiar language.
"I was studying to become a preacher, but I don't know right now. I'm just kind of trying to sort things out."

"A preacher, huh?" he snorted, making me feel foolish for even considering the idea. "I don't got much use for preachers. Never really told me much I didn't know, and what they did tell me I didn't give a damn."

"Well, I'm not sure now."

"You ain't sure?"

"No, not now," I said.

"It ain't no crime not be sure cause there really ain't much to be sure about." He seemed pleased at the way the little profundity rolled off with hardly any effort. And it was profound. It called to mind a dozen theological proofs that someone somewhere was always using to reach some kind of conclusion, even if the conclusion wasn't worth much. In the end, no one really knew anything.

Earl slid back into another few minutes of silence before turning to Billy and I felt that my interrogation was over. I shouldn't have considered it an interrogation, but I did. He hadn't been hostile. In fact, he may have been downright, home-style pleasant, all things considered. It was just that I had nothing to base him on, but then I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Did I want him to stagger over to me and drape his arm around my shoulder and say, "You just come on down anytime and we'll eat old, rancid bacon and drink our brains out." I knew that I was being too hard on myself, so I tried to just sit back and listen and maybe learn something.
They talked on for awhile, again about people and things that were happening in the area. I tried to concentrate on the names—Butler, Fishers, Crindall. Billy would ask Earl a question about someone and he would reply with a short obscenity. I couldn't figure out if that was some strange code of ethics that was intended to show respect for the person, or if he really felt that way about all of them. There was one name that somehow managed to cause more furor than the others and I sensed that this time the epithets were really intended. The name was Crindall and I didn't know anything about him except that we had passed his property on the way into the homestead that first day. It was some land that the road crossed, but I didn't know which. Something about that name made Earl boil in a way that the liquor probably intensified. I could find out why from Billy later, although I sensed that he was even a little surprised at Earl's response. Somehow, in a way I didn't yet understand, Crindall had violated something that made him persona non grata. It was an interesting thought that these folks out here should still be somehow vulnerable to someone else messing them up. Perhaps John Donne was right that no man can be an island, but apparently he can still be a son of a bitch according to Earl.

After we had said good-bye and stepped out into the air which suddenly smelled like the breath of God, I asked Billy about Crindall, but he said he didn't know anything about what Earl was saying. He seemed amused by the visit—not amused like it had been a joke, but like it had been everything he had expected. He wasn't nauseated or disgusted
or even a little afraid the way that I had been. I figured that he had probably seen enough people in worse condition, so that now this really didn't faze him. Like a doctor who can see the most morbid gore with an unflinching, clinical coolness.

Maybe it was good to be like that. To be willing to accept people totally as they appeared. Besides, Billy had told me that there was nothing anyone could do about Earl. He wouldn't accept help, he wouldn't go to a doctor, and, if he didn't allow anyone to help him, there was nothing a person could do. In fact, the Freemans had taken some supplies to him the winter before, but he wouldn't touch them and left the bags sitting near his trailer until the bears found them in the spring.

I couldn't help thinking that people probably like Earl well enough, like you would a character in a Zane Grey story, but if his stubbornness was going to kill him, it would do it with or without help. It seemed to me that the whole thing was a little lacking in human dignity, but Freemans were probably right and I tried to think about it all in those terms.

For the next couple of days I kept myself busy planting potatoes and some beans in the garden. It wasn't hard work and I even liked the idea of being responsible for something creative. It was important to get the cuttings and seeds planted as soon as the danger of frost was over because the growing season was so short that a homesteader can lose a whole crop from an early autumn frost.
When I wasn't working in the garden, I was helping Billy cut firewood with chain saws. We would go out away from the house into some corner of the property and cut for hours, stacking the wood on a small sled-like wagon that had been fitted with wheels. It was the kind of work that made my muscles ache and my back stiff, but it was real work and I could see what we had done after we were finished, and it made me feel good, I suppose, because it made me feel part of the earth. Cutting wood wasn't Eden, but it was closer to how life had been immediately after the original sin, and for some romantic reason, that seemed to make it better and certainly more simple.

I didn't meet anyone else besides Earl for a couple days. Billy had been in town afternoons and I wasn't going to go around by myself. There was enough to keep me busy anyway and I just felt like I was getting used to the climate and the long days and the nights that were only a little dark. It was more than a week after we had visited Earl that Billy suggested that we go see the Butlers.

The Butlers lived to the southwest of the Freemans on a path that took off from the main trail at a point not far from where it dead-ended into the place where Freemans parked. We took the trail bike since it was a further distance away than Earl's place had been. Butler's cut-off path climbed up a small rise just after it left the main trail and then cut through some thick woods that were broken only by a small lake that had trees growing right down to the water's edge. Billy said that it was spring fed and that he didn't know what people called it but he imagined that it didn't have a name.
The path curved around the lake and then headed up another rise which flattened out on top and was cleared. Once on top, I could see several people—what looked like two men or a man and his boy—beyond the clearing, almost hidden in the edge of the woods.

Billy was inside the house, talking to someone I guessed to be Mrs. Butler, a woman in her late forties wearing old jeans and a grey sweatshirt. There were two children, a boy and a girl, neither one of them older than six, and they watched me from the doorstep until Billy called me into the house. Then they ran around the cabin and peeked around the corner with only the sides of their faces showing. I supposed that they didn't get much company.

Mrs. Butler was pleasant and gracious in a neighborly way, and she asked me how I liked the country and if I was hungry. I told her that I was getting to love the country, and that we had just eaten, so thanks but no thanks. I tried to be careful not to be careful with my pronunciation, something I had come to understand would be a dead giveaway for a city boy. I smiled a contented smile, hoping that she would be susceptible to some kind of "I'm okay, you're okay" transaction, and she smiled back, telling me that I was welcome and that was that.

Turning back to Billy, she started to tell him about what had happened the night before. They had been awakened by one of their dogs about three o'clock, and when the growling and barking had risen to the intensity where Butler couldn't ignore it, he had grabbed his rifle and gone outside. At that time in the morning it was light enough to see easily and as he
came through the door, he looked down the clearing just in time to see a black bear suddenly reach out with his paw and swat one of the baying dogs, knocking it into the next time zone.

Butler fired three shots at fairly close range and he saw from the immediate reaction of the bear that at least two of them had hit. Butler watched as the bear made it to the rim of the forest beyond the clearing before it died. That's what Butler and his oldest son were doing down there--butchering the bear and hanging out the skin to dry.

Billy asked me if I wanted to look and I told him half-heartedly that I'd follow them down a ways.

I remember the description of Butler that Billy had given me, and when I saw him, I knew immediately that he fit it perfectly. He was a huge man, rotund, bald, with a black beard that hung in a tangled mass to his collar bone. He looked older than his wife--perhaps in his early fifties, but I couldn't be sure. The other thing I remembered was that he had a very bad heart. In fact, he had had two heart attacks within the last couple years, the last one being so severe that they didn't expect him to live. But there he was, up to his elbows in bear guts, grinning from ear to ear. His son, who was scraping the inside of the skin which had been stretched between a couple of evergreens, looked just the opposite of his father in almost every detail, making me wonder if he had been adopted or else there had been a mixup at the hospital--if he had been born in a hospital. He was small and lanky, wore heavy glasses and looked about sixteen.
"Well, what do we have here?" Billy drawled as we got close enough to see.

"Well I'll be damned, Bill, I bet you come after some bear meat."

"No, not this early in the season. Boy, but he's a big one."

"I heard them dogs growling about three this morning, so I get the rifle and just when I come out of the doorway, I seen this guy come up to one of my dogs and before you know it, he's wacked the living hell out of him with his paw. So I let him have it, and hit him twice, once right through the heart. Now we's cutting him up, and Jim's fixing to cure that hide." Butler grinned and I could see that two of his front teeth were missing.

"Well, that's something," Billy said.

I looked down at where the skin was hanging and from the size of that, it must have been a big bear.

"Do you have much trouble with bears usually?" I asked.

"No, not much, but if we do have any trouble, it's usually early on. Them bears can be cranky when they first come out of hibernation, before they've got a chance to fatten up. I don't think we've met," he said, suddenly becoming aware that I was a new face. "I'm Ron Butler. I'd shake your hand, but I'm afraid that you'd regret it." He laughed and held up his hand which was covered with bear blood.

I let Billy talk. He said that I was from California and that I was spending some time up here. He also asked Butler if he had any work that I could do, but Butler declined, saying that they couldn't afford
to do any building that summer and whatever else they had, he and Jim could handle.

"You ever taste bear meat?" Butler asked, looking right at me, even though I was hoping that I hadn't heard the question right.

"I can't say that I have."

"How would you like me to send you some of this? I've got plenty here."

I probably should have let him give me some, but at that moment there were few things in the world I wanted less. I wasn't really fond of any wild game meat, but the thought of that greasy bear meat, probably with an army of trichinae made me wince. I wanted to be cordial, but it didn't look like he had anything to wrap it in, and to ride a couple of miles with bear meat in my hot little hand was out of the question.

"I've been having a little trouble with my stomach since I've come up here," I said, "and I think that I'd better wait awhile before I try anything as rich as that bear meat. I've heard it's darn strong, and I don't know if it would be best for me right now." I didn't think I was being dishonest with him. It would have been impossible for me to gag down the smallest piece of that stuff.

"By God, that's just what the doctor tells me. He says that there ain't much worse for me than that greasy bear meat, but I tell him that mountain food will give me strength. I really don't give a damn what he says, anyway." He laughed again with that laugh that started way down in his frame, and by the time it got out, his whole body rumbled.
We didn't stay long, just long enough to be neighborly, but before we went, Billy asked Butler if he had heard anything about Crindall and told him what Earl had said. Butler hadn't heard anything. Besides, he said that he didn't give a damn about either of them--one was a drunkard and the other was a hothead. I knew what he said about Earl was true, but I guessed that I'd have to wait to find out about Crindall. I was beginning to get the feeling that there wasn't as much unity around this back forty as I had first thought, at least when it came to a few select folks, but that complexion would probably change if there was a crisis. It seemed almost certain to me that if there was a natural disaster--an earthquake, flood, fire, or whatever--that they would all rally together in the end. I had always believed that there was at least that much of the image of God left in all men.

Within the first couple of weeks that I was with Billy, I got around to meeting almost everyone that lived close enough to the Freemans, and I think I was beginning to understand them better. Not that everyone up there had something bizarre about the way they lived, but I could sense an attitude, almost a religion in itself, that was more than religions I had known. It was necessary to understand that before a lot of people's lives made much sense. The closest thing that I could come to in describing it was pride, but I knew that even that wasn't very close. You liked people that you couldn't respect, and you often respected people that you probably wouldn't speak to, but that happened only if they played by the rules of the game, the unwritten law of the homesteaders that established that
there was a collective right to independence, but it was an independence that must be protected by everyone who subscribed. The homesteaders seemed to be constantly playing a type of power politics, a game that spelled out brighter than a neon sign that each had the potential of complete sovereignty but that no one was willing to use it. It was a responsibility that a person had to the herd, and, from what I had seen, relations could be pushed to the limit, but as long as nobody was willing to go beyond his natural boundaries, some kind of order would prevail.

I remember a story about Jerry Scott that someone in Talkeetna had told me after I had been around only a couple of weeks. Scott was rumored to be the best bush pilot in Alaska, the kind of guy that would be willing to fly in almost any kind of weather and land on almost any stretch of land or ice. He was the pilot that was always called whenever someone had gotten himself lost, or when climbers were stranded on the slopes of McKinley. He was self-assured, cocky, and believed so much in his own legend that he was willing to kill himself to uphold it.

There was another pilot in Talkeetna who was probably just as good a flier, but either he was not as brave or else he was smarter. Scott and this other guy had both been drinking one Saturday night and before long, they had gotten to arguing about who was the best pilot. Finally they ended up in the main street of town, beating the hell out of each other, rolling around in the mud and gravel, so drunk that they could barely focus on each other, let alone connect on any blows.

They were out there for about an hour before Scott's wife got a call
saying that there was a group of Japanese climbers who had gotten themselves stuck on McKinley and it would take more than one plane to get all of them down. By the time that the sky was beginning to show pink, Scott and this other guy had downed enough coffee to clear their vision, taken a cold shower, and then flown off, one after another. I asked the guy who told me--I don't remember his name--how often that kind of thing happened. He said it happened about every Saturday night that they both were in town.

It didn't make sense to me on one level, but then I think that it did on another. It seemed that all the people that I had gotten to meet functioned on at least two levels, one which was an extension of pride, another which was plugged into a high source which I couldn't identify. I didn't know what motivated it. I'm sure it wasn't Christian love, but I kept asking myself if maybe it could have been that there was some kind of love that would work in a way that pride and frontier ethics couldn't.

It had been awhile since I had thought much about Christianity. I guess that I had been more concerned with just getting acquainted and doing my work. But whenever I walked back from town, past the lodge and the creek, and up the dirt road that led to the homesteads, it kept coming back to me. Was there a God that could work for these people--a God other than survival? I had always heard that people most often found evidence for God in the natural beauty around them, but I doubted if even that argument would hold up here since the winters were brutal and could offer no succor to the unprepared. I found myself not ready to buy that argument either because it left too much unexplained.
Nature was only a precise system of checks and balances, regulating itself by some of the most gruesome and brutal means, and I had trouble making a case for a loving Deity in the rotting carcass of a white-tailed fawn that had been half-eaten by a wild cat. So what that the world was sold to sin and sin produced all the rest. That only looked reasonable on paper, but it didn't satisfy any need for security I had, and it didn't erase any images of the brutality. There would have to be another demonstration of love, one convincing enough for Butler and Earl, and, even though I hadn't met him, Crindall. Probably for him especially.

There was a truck that I hadn't seen before parked in the flat area where the road ends and I figured that the Freemans had company. As I followed the road along the edge of the meadow until I got to where I could see the cabin, I kept hearing what sounded like shouts or screams, but I wasn't sure. It wasn't until I started up the rise in front of the cabin that I realized what was happening. The place was crawling with kids.

It was the Fishers and, at first glance, they looked innumerable. There were fifteen of them, although I could have sworn that there were fifty. They had scattered all over the hillside, kids of all different ages, sizes, shapes, but with one thing in common--they seemed to be in perpetual motion.

Pa Fisher worked on the Alaska railroad and had to be gone much of the time. From the size of his progeny, I assumed that he attempted to make up for his absences whenever he could. He was a big man with dull features,
and, for a second, I wondered if anyone had ever bothered to tell him
what caused all those kids. I wasn't sure that he had taken the effort
to figure it out for himself, but I guess as long as the wife was willing
and the flesh was able, this would be the country to do it in.

When I saw Ma Fisher, the mystery of Pa's perseverance was even
greater. She was no beauty. In fact, she looked worn and used, somehow
like a machine that had been pushed to its limit without any care. I
could only think of a woman who had been physically stripmined and then
left to erode, and the image bothered me. It didn't even help when Pa
grinned his full, toothless smile as he reached over and grabbed her
fanny while she scolded and squirmed painfully to get away.

I also remembered that Fishers had an older daughter, Linda. Billy
said that he had gone to school with her and I wondered if she had come.
At least she would be close to my own age and it had been awhile since
I had seen any women that weren't either too young or worn out. I didn't
know what I was expecting, but any change from the swarming kids and
Ma and Pa Kettle on the porch would be all right.

They said that Linda was down by the creek and told me to go
and introduce myself. That she'd be pleased to meet me. I thanked
them and headed down the rise, past the clearing, and to the ridge which
ran along the bank of the river. At first I didn't see anyone. Then,
as I waited, I saw a spot of color below me, behind some trees, and I made
my way down the bank, which wasn't steep, until I was level with the trees.
As I looked across I saw her watching me, waiting for me to come within
talking range. She was young, thin, and amazingly a woman. I eased across the bank until I came to where she was standing.

"You must be Linda," I said, trying not to sound out of breath.

"I know who you are."

"Really?" I didn't know whether to be flattered or not.

"Someone in town said that you were staying out here with Freemans. I was hoping I'd get to meet you."

I couldn't help watching her, looking as closely at her as I dared without making it obvious. I couldn't figure out just why I was reacting that way, but it must have been because she looked beautiful to me, but in a way that was impossible to explain.

Her features were perfect, but completely temporal and it somehow made me wonder how long it would be before they became worn-down and distorted. It seemed like it could almost happen at any minute and that if I watched long enough, I could see the lines around the mouth grow harder, and the eyes become cold, and the complexion get bloodless and sallow.

I asked her if she wanted to take a walk down by the water and she nodded, so we made our way down the rest of the bank and onto the flat, hard shore made of long piles of small, smooth pebbles. As we walked along, I picked up a few of the pebbles and skipped them on the water. I did it unconsciously, and, when I saw her look over and watch as I released a flat stone, grunting under my breath, I felt embarrassed. I didn't know what to talk about with her, what to ask about, so I asked about her family.
"What's it like growing up in so big a family?"

"Lots of work, mostly."

"Are you the oldest?" I asked, beginning to feel like I was Barbara Walters doing an interview.

"No, I've got one older sister learning to be a nurse at Fairbanks."

Her voice dropped away, making me feel that we had exhausted that line of conversation, so we just walked along without saying much. Up ahead, around the next bend in the creek, we heard the sudden cry of a waterbird and we stopped to watch it as it rose out of a quiet pool that lay along the side of the creek and circled above us before flying off.

I kept looking at this girl out of the corner of my eye, wondering if she was really that beautiful, or if it was just me, and my own needs. It seemed incredible that, out of the mass of protoplasm that somehow had formed the same material that made up the cellulite of Ma Fisher and the sagging belly of Pa Fisher and the multitudes of little Fishers, the features had come out right. In fact, a little better than right.

"Do you like it up here?" she asked suddenly, cancelling out my impromptu wanderings in the field of genetics.

"Yes," I said, then adding, "A lot," as if the first response hadn't been convincing enough.

"It's different from where you're from?"

"It's different, but not that different," I said.

"What do you mean?"
It wasn't time to hit her with my sociological theories. I knew that. It was even doubtful if I could have explained to anyone all that I had learned, so I quickly tried to find a good, convincing answer and fit it into the most low-key plain wrapper language I could come up with.

"I mean that situations are different, but some of the emotional things that are coming down are the same. Folks are still after the same needs like love and security and acceptance and all that." I listened as it came out and guessed that it sounded all right.

"Is that what you're after, too?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Then why the hell did you come all the way up here?"

"I came up here to be with Billy," I said, feeling myself begin to get a little defensive.

"Is that the only reason?"

"Listen, what do you want me to say?"

"Just don't bullshit me. Most everybody that comes up here has a damn good reason. Now there are other friends in California--that is where you're from, right?"

"I have other friends," I said.

"And there are trees in California?"

"There were when I left."

"And there's mountains?"

"Un-huh."

"Then why did you come up here?"
"I just wanted to see some new country. What's so strange about that?"

"Nothing," she said, and she meant nothing.

We walked a ways further to where the high banks gradually come down until they are no more than a few feet above the level of the water, and the trees lean out over the river and hang their branches into the water, making a gentle rushing sound that had almost a narcotic quality to it.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked.

"With what?" I knew it was a smart answer, but I was getting tired of the questions and she was beginning to look less and less beautiful, making me think that it probably was my love-starved condition more than anything else that had been responsible for my initial reaction.

"Don't be a smart ass. Have you ever been in love?"

"Maybe once," I said. "No more than that. Maybe not even then. I don't know."

"Have you ever made love to anyone?"

"No, I've never made love to anyone. Does that surprise you coming from a sophisticated city boy like me?" I didn't know if it would have surprised her, but it hurt to have to admit to myself that I really wasn't very proud of the fact.

"Why not? Didn't you want to?"

"Don't you think I'm normal? Of course I wanted to. I just wanted it to mean something."

"I slept with Guy Lawrence. Ever hear of him?"
"No," I said. "Should I have?"

"He's a drummer for the 'Alaska Railroad'--that's a group in Anchorage."

I didn't know if I was supposed to be impressed and ask for an autograph. Or if she expected me to give her a sermon. I didn't know how much she knew about me, if she knew I was a drop out theo jock. But then, I didn't imagine that it would have made much difference to her.

"Did you love him?" I asked clinically, cryptically, trying to make it obvious that I didn't give a half-baked damn about who she played venereal roulette with.

"No, I didn't love him. Not how you mean it. But you don't have to love someone to make love to them. I mean, it was beautiful."

"Was he the best? I assume that there were others?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You guess so what?"

"I guess he was the best."

"Would you make it with anyone?"

"Are you asking?"

"Hell no," I said, and even though I wasn't asking, her question gave me a sensation like someone had grabbed my adrenals and squeezed them dry. "No, I'm not asking. I'm just curious."

"Why not? Aren't I okay?"

"Linda," I said. "What's the point of this?"

I could see her reach and then I felt her hand run along the outseam in the leg of my denims.
"Come on, Pete. It can mean what you want it to mean."

Her other hand was around my waist and I could feel her leaning on me, trying to overcome the inertia that kept me from moving. It was gentle. Gentle. Then stronger. Almost a magnetic impulse. She was beautiful to me again no matter how I tried to deny it. I could feel myself softening, bending, almost breaking.

Before I knew it I grabbed both her hands by the wrists and squeezed them hard until I could feel the bones. She looked up with surprise, not knowing why I held her so painfully, not knowing if this was part of what would follow, a strange ritual of passion unseparated and undefined. She didn't know what was happening as she looked back at me, startled, but I told her. I raised my hand and brought it down hard on her face. Instantly. Like a shot. And she staggered back.

"Don't you see that's not the point!" I screamed at her so loud that my voice carried over the noise of the water and echoed off the high bank along the next bend in the creek. "Can't you see that?" She looked back at me terrified. "It wouldn't mean anything to me. Nothing! It would just make me crazy. Don't you understand?"

"Well goddamn it!" she screamed back.

"Yes," I said. "He would. God would damn it, if He hasn't already."

"You're crazy."

"What do you think God would think about us?" I was trying to talk softer now, but still it was strange and intense.

"How the hell should I know?"
"You should know because it's important to you."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked. I stepped towards her and she moved back quickly, impulsively, like a frightened animal.

"Linda," I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

She was hurt now and angry.

"You're sick. Get away from me."

Now I was the one who was needing. The devils had gone and I was miserable.

"I'm just trying to be honest with you. You were the one that was telling me that I was doing all the bullshitting back there and now I'm trying to be honest with you."

She took a couple of steps towards the river and turned her back and stood there, waiting for me to explain again. Making me pay her off in bits and pieces. And I was sorry, and sorrier still that what happened couldn't be explained. I sat on the bank and waited for her to turn around, or leave, or whatever she was going to do. I could understand how she was hurt, but the hurt wasn't my fault and I wasn't going to feel responsible. She always had her drummer in Anchorage, anyway.

After awhile she turned and came over to where I was sitting.

"You're a pious bastard," she said.

"Okay, but that doesn't change anything."

"I really didn't want you."

"I don't blame you. I didn't really want me either."

"I mean I did but I didn't. You wouldn't understand."
"I think you wanted me, but not in the way that you thought."

"The hell I did," she said with the bitterness of a girl that's been stood up for the senior prom.

"Listen--" I started, but she had already turned and was heading back up the bank. I jumped up and caught her by the arm, trying to be gentle and different this time.

"Will you let me explain? Linda, just let me talk, okay?"

She didn't say anything so I assumed that I had been given a hearing of some sort.

"I need as much as you. I want as much as you. But God has forbidden me. I can't do it. And it makes me angry and I want to make other people hurt because of what He's done to me. And if I loved you and we got naked together, I could only see God judging me. He's judging me for something that I had no control over, and sometimes--like right now--I hate Him for it because I don't understand. So I get crazy, but I didn't mean to hurt you. You've had it rough, too."

Linda didn't say anything and she didn't look at me, but somehow I knew that she was hearing and trying to understand. At least she wasn't trying to run away and that was some progress.

"Now I know that you come from a big family. A lot of kids and a lot of work to do and your dad is gone a lot on the railroad." I looked up and she was watching me and listening. Really listening.

"Did you ever wish that your father would have been home and that you had been the only girl and he could have sat you on his knee and bounced you
up and down until you giggled and then told you that you were the most beautiful little girl in the world?"

"I don't want you to see me like this," she said, disarmed and vulnerable.

"Is it honest? If it is, it's beautiful. Just let it go."

We stood there for awhile. I didn't say anymore. There was no moral, no lesson to be drawn. She didn't say anything either, didn't throw her arms around me and bawl her head off. She just stood there, letting me hold her arm as she looked over the grey glacier water of Montana Creek. And then she turned and started back, and I followed a couple of steps behind.

We walked back along the bank and down the path that led to the homestead. The rest of the Fishers were still playing in front of the house and Ma and Pa were still on the porch, talking to Ralph Freeman. It was the same scene that I had left before I had gone to the river, and I wondered to myself if things really ever changed. I kept wanting to believe that they did, but then it wasn't my responsibility to try to change anybody anyway. It was no one's responsibility.

The crowd stayed until about seven, and I got the impression that they would have stayed all night if not for having to put the children to bed. I walked with Linda out to the truck. 'We didn't say much, but when we got to the wide spot in the trail where the road dead ended, she turned to me and asked how much I had known about her.

"Not much, but I'm a lot like you in some ways, I guess."
"But you don't have as big a family, do you?"

"No," I said. "It doesn't always take that. Other things can do it just as easily." I don't think she understood, but I didn't explain and she didn't ask me.

Ma and Pa piled all those kids into the back of that Chevy truck and headed down the road. Linda waved just before the truck turned a corner and was gone.

I walked back on the path, but instead of following the road as it curved along the edge of the woods, I walked straight out into the meadow where the grass was waist high in places, and I lay down, completely hidden and covered with the meadow grasses and I tried to imagine myself completely free of any needs or dependencies—completely beyond achievement, beyond the depression that I felt, beyond the drives in my own head that made me do things that I didn't like or didn't respect or couldn't control. Something in the dampness of the meadow seemed to draw away all the broken things, the incomplete things and absorb them out of my consciousness until I had only an awareness of my breathing and functioning and nothing else. It was a heady, intoxicating feeling, being one with the earth, and I began to realize how I was finally a process of many processes. But there was no freedom in that. If I could only see how God fit into all the processes—not just natural things—it would take away the randomness and that seemed like it would give everything meaning.

Then, suddenly, I began to feel that same sense of purpose that I had felt once before. It was the unfolding of the emotion on the beach
when I could sense something beyond the present, barely perceptible, but representing some direction in my life. In spite of everything else and everything beyond control. Direction. And now the meadow grasses touched me on all sides with their dampness and fragrance and covered me over completely against the residue of the past, baptizing me from the present into the future in a straight, unbroken line. And at the end of the line and all around the line was God and should be God. And above the grasses it became evening and the sky grew deeper, and before long I got up, ran my fingers through my hair, and walked back to the path that edged around the woods towards the house on the rise, where I could see lighted windows and the silhouettes of people as they crossed the room.
Chapter VII.

I worked hard for the Freemans and felt myself growing stronger every day. I had seen the neighbors several times and had become generally better acquainted. I even went fishing with the Butlers, and I had been invited for dinner with the Fishers about a week after Linda and I had talked, but, for some reason, I didn't feel comfortable about going so I worked up something else to do that night and got out of it gracefully. Besides being uneasy about seeing Linda, just the whole idea of fifteen kids crammed around a table made me a little nervous.

In the whole time I had been gone, I had heard from home a couple of times—nothing important—and a note or two from several friends at school who wanted to know if I was still alive or if I had been eaten by a grizzly. I didn't write much either, although I could have made the time to write, but I could only tell what was happening to me in the most abstract ways and I didn't think it would have made very interesting reading.

Aside from what little contact I got through the mail, there were no ties with the past. I had purposely told people around the homesteads as little as I possibly could about my roots, and it satisfied me to see how it was possible to work up next to folks who had little or nothing in common with you except they lived on the same soil and had to cope with the same Alaskan sky that never really got dark. I was happy.
I had still not met Crindall and I knew that the sooner that happened, the better, because I could feel the tensions in the air and I wanted to know why they all had something to do with him. People wouldn't say what he had done or what he was going to do or even why they didn't like him—or downright hated him.

Billy and I had gone to see him about three weeks after I arrived, but he wasn't home and we just hadn't gotten around to going back. Ralph and Mary Freeman hardly ever saw him, and I knew that they didn't like him because he was stubborn about things. They wouldn't be more specific. Just that he was stubborn. And that he got mean when he drank.

Crindall had been an Air Force pilot and had flown B-17's over Germany during the war. After the war he flew for awhile commercially and then retired and moved to Alaska. I don't think anyone knew for sure, but there were people who were positive that he had been grounded because of his drinking. It didn't seem an impossible theory to me because I had noticed a pile of empty bottles of scotch beside his porch the afternoon we had gone over. With all this background information available to form sketchy conclusions, I was anxious to meet him. Still, none of it proved anything. Maybe he was a great guy. Maybe we could sit ourselves down, pour a little scotch, and then I'd get him to tell me why all the neighbors hated his guts.

Billy and I had planned to head back down the road to the Crindall cabin after I finished my work on Wednesday, but Tuesday morning he decided to hitch with some friends down to Palmer, so I figured I would wait a day or two until he could go with me. But I had finished work early on Wednesday
and I felt like I could make it by myself. I was sure that Crindall knew about me by now. He had probably been listening to the grapevine and knew as much about me as I did about him, so it wouldn't need to be awkward. I couldn't always rely on Billy to lead me around. I'd just go down, ask how he was, ask if he needed any work down around his place and then leave. Just be neighborly.

I left the Freeman's just after lunch and headed out the path as it edged along the meadow and then into the woods. Once in the woods it was cool and damp with the same rich, organic smell of the moss and humas that I smelled the day we first drove in. I heard a bird call and stopped to try and see where it was, and I finally spotted a big spruce hen perched in an evergreen about ten yards from the trail. There were probably a whole family of birds there, even though I could only see one. Billy had said that you could start at the bottom limb of a tree and shoot spruce hens off a branch, one at a time, until you had gotten them all.

"You can Sergeant York 'em," he said.

I picked up a rock in the path and threw it at the branch. It hit about a foot away from where the bird was sitting and it gave a squawk and flew off, making me think that here was another story destined to fit into the wooden wheel bearing file. It was a good story, though, because it was expected, and I guess I knew that as soon as something the least bit adventurous happened to me, I would probably end up distorting it beyond recognition. It seemed to be a part of a system of social mores, but as long as everyone concerned knew what was expected and what was happening,
it was probably best to put absolutes on a more relative basis. It wasn't lying; it was "expanding" and if nothing else it could keep folks from taking themselves too seriously and I was primed for that.

It was about a forty-minute walk to Crindalls, and as I came around a turn in the road to where I could see his cabin, I knew that somebody was home, and more likely there was company since I could see a couple of pickups parked under the trees that grew to the side of the cabin.

I stopped for a minute and listened to see if I could hear anybody talking. Somehow in my mind I hadn't considered that there might be other people and I debated with myself whether to turn around and go back. But then I thought the fact that there were other people there meant that this guy had friends at least. That was a good sign. He was apparently able to relate to other people on some sort of level and maybe this would be even better than catching him alone.

It was not until I came around the edge of the cabin that I saw them and they saw me. There were three of them, three men, sitting in folding chairs in front of the cabin. I stopped when I saw them and felt my blood go cold. The man on the end chair nearest me was pointing about the biggest rifle I had ever seen at me, pointing it right at my head. If I could have spoken, I don't know what I would have said, but that didn't matter. I just stood, unable to move, unable to speak. Totally unable.

"What the hell do you want, boy?" the man with the gun asked.

Silence. No words would come.

"Speak up before I blow you into the next county."
The man in the middle was speaking now. I could hear him although I still didn't understand what was happening.

"Okay Ed, put the gun down. I reckon you've scared him plenty."

The man slowly lowered the gun and then burst out with a rancorous, insulting laugh. I was realizing that I was only providing afternoon entertainment for a couple of lovable, good ol' boys, and on top of that I had managed to find my voice.

"I'm looking for Mr. Crindall," I said so quietly that I was afraid that he hadn't heard, but not wanting to talk loud enough to let the vibrato that panic brings come to the surface. "I'm Tyson, Pete Tyson. I'm staying over at Freeman's place for awhile and I wanted to come over and introduce myself."

I took a few steps towards the group who still were looking amused and probably busily planning the next stunt. I knew immediately that I didn't like them, whoever the hell they were, not only because of the bitter taste that was still heavy in my mouth, but because they had stripped me clean, totally and indecently, and then had laughed about it.

"I'm Crindall. Now what is it you want?" the man in the middle said.

"They're short on work at Freeman's and I was wondering if you needed a hand part-time this summer?"

"What can you do?" Crindall asked, the intonation in his voice making it clear that he couldn't have cared less.

"I have been planting, but I'll do just about anything."

The other two men looked amused again.
"He must be half-starved if he'll do anything," the man with the gun said. "Where are you from anyway, son? Don't they feed you up to Freeman's?"

"California. Near Los Angeles."

"Well I'll be Goddamned. He's a city boy. What are you doing up here in a man's country?"

The anger that had been rising inside me had long since replaced any remaining fear that I had, but the man on the right was still holding that rifle and I didn't want my name to end up on the sheriff's desk as a "hunting accident," so I just shrugged my shoulders as if I had conceded the point. I wasn't ashamed that I had grown up in the city. It had its advantages. I could quote some Shakespeare. I knew where a couple of good restaurants were in Beverly Hills. So what if I was out of my native element up here; I was still breathing the same air that they were.

"Well, it don't make a bit of difference where he's from, I don't got nothing for him," Crindall said again, letting me know that I had completely wasted his time and probably interrupted some dirty joke they had been telling when I came up. I could understand why people around didn't take immediately to Crindall.

I was about to turn and head off down the road when the man with the gun suddenly got out of his chair and came towards me with uneven steps. I was surprised to see him get up, but I didn't move and he stopped about ten feet in front of me and sized me up, half-smiling and slowly
running his eyes over every inch of my body in a way that was as vulgar as it was insulting. Crindall and the other man were watching and I could see them behind the man with the gun. Crindall turned and whispered something to the other man and he let out a laugh and then a howl like a wolf. Ed turned and looked at them and grinned wide. I didn't know what he was going to do except that it would probably be insulting. I should have run, but I didn't want to. I couldn't run. It would have confirmed everything they thought about me, and there was no way I was going to let that happen. Not now. I was angry and insulted, and even if this whole shakedown routine was only for laughs I would try to stay loose and watch carefully to see if the game could be figured out quickly enough to let me keep ahead of it.

"Do you know what this is?" Ed was asking, holding out the rifle in both hands like he was presenting me with a scepter.

I nodded.

"Well, what the hell is it?"

"Sure ain't a washing machine," I said and forced a grin, hoping he wouldn't shoot my head off for trying to be funny.

"I could wash your ass clean off with it if you smart off, boy," he said as the other two men roared. "Now what I'm going to do is to give you a little lesson in how to shoot this here washing machine."

"Better tell him which end to hold there, Ed. Liable to shoot his damn head off, and then they'd have to send him back home in two pieces," Crindall said. Ed turned and grinned at the other two.
While he had been standing there with the gun, I realized what I had been thinking. I had been working with the notion that perhaps they would force me to take off my clothes at gun point and run back to Freeman's naked. It was a crazy notion. I could have run off before then, but for some reason that seemed the ultimate humiliation. If they were going to make me shoot at something at least I had a chance. And I would have the gun. It had to be a game of pride, and not being able to shoot was supposed to be a terrible blow to anybody's prestige. I knew that Billy could shoot pretty well, but I hadn't figured it involved anything more than that.

"Now you put this thing on your shoulder with this round end pointed out and this flat thing hard against your shoulder. Hard now, so it don't jump back and break it." He grinned wide again, making me think that that was probably exactly what he hoped would happen. He struck a pose with the rifle which looked so contrived that it was funny—like he was trying to pose for the cover of Field and Stream.

"You got that?" he asked.

I nodded again.

"You hear that?" Ed yelled over his shoulder. "He says that he's got it."

He threw the rifle at me like the way I had seen them do on television to test soldiers' reactions. I grabbed for it with both hands and managed to catch it with one and pull it in to me with a snap. It was a Remington 30-06 that looked like it had seen a lot of use. The stock was ground and
pitted and the metal had the bluing worn off in several places. I didn't
know much about guns, but I had been shooting before so it was at least
possible that I could shoot better than they expected.

I had been looking at the rifle and by the time I looked up, Ed
was clear out away from the cabin. He had something in his hand, but I
couldn't really see it except that it was white and shiny, probably a
glass, but I wasn't sure. He set it on a stake that Crindall must have
used to tether his dogs. It was a long ways away. I was never very
good with distances, but it must have been at least forty yards away,
and whatever was on top of that stake wasn't that big. I began to resign
myself to the fact that they could be pretty sure how this little game
would turn out. They didn't have to prove anything. They were native
sons. I knew that they probably couldn't hit it either, but they would never
admit it. They'd probably tell you that they could pee across the Yukon,
too.

"What the hell is he shooting at?" Crindall was asking, suddenly
disturbed.

"It's just one of your glasses, but relax."

"If he breaks that thing I'll let him shoot at you next and it'll
beat close range."

The other man laughed, and I wondered for a second why he hadn't
ever said anything. Either he didn't know how or else he was too drunk.
Probably too drunk.

Ed sat back down and the three of them were watching from their
chairs like they were in some reviewing stand at the Rose Parade. I put
the rifle to my shoulder and looked through the sights at the patch of
white that hid itself completely behind the barrel sight and then jiggled
out and back again.

I could feel the wood with my left hand and I tried to grip it so
hard that my hand would become a part of it. I tried to fuse the gun
with me, to make it an appendage that would respond with the same precision
that controlled my fingers and hands. I didn't really know why, but at
that moment, in that country, under that sun, hitting that glass was the
most important thing in the universe for me. I'd sort out my feelings later,
but it seemed for a second that the motivation wasn't bad. And then, as
I stood there, I remembered why I had come north—to make life work better
because I was being honest to people, and to make them respect that quality
in me because it was genuine and different.

I didn't know how long I had been holding the rifle, but I could
feel my arms ache and I knew that if I didn't shoot soon, I wouldn't
be able to hold it in the general proximity of the target because it
would be shaking so much.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then, as the white glass
glistened for a moment and hid behind the barrel sight, I squeezed the
trigger and heard the sound fill my head and make my ears ring. I felt
the butt dig into my shoulder until it felt for a second like it was
going all the way through me before it stopped, and from somewhere beyond
I saw, looking almost like slow motion, the spot of white shatter into a
thousand crystals and scatter on the ground, too small for me to see. I could hear the sound of the blast echoing against the hills in front of Butler's homestead. And then silence. I lowered the rifle and looked again to see if the stake was by itself. It was.

The reaction from the three in the reviewing stand was immediate and profane. I don't think Crindall was upset that I had hit the target as much as that the sacrificial grail had been consumed. Ed was more stunned and angry that the game had ended differently. What was more, he couldn't accuse me of cheating because it was his gun, so he settled for simply being profane. I walked over to them and threw the gun back at Ed.

"That's got a fine action to it, Ed," I said.

"How the hell did you learn to shoot like that?"

"Prayer," I said. "I pray a lot."

"What the hell do you mean 'prayer?'" Crindall asked, for the first time showing a little curiosity in his voice.

"Do you three gentlemen believe in God?" I asked, aware that I could have probably said anything and they would have been ready to listen since I had earned my right to speak. I was still angry. Maybe more now than before.

"Things wouldn't be in such a fucking mess if there were a God," Crindall answered.

"How about you?" I asked, turning to Ed.

"Dunno." He shrugged his shoulders like he had never thought about it, and it was possible that he hadn't.
I turned to the third man but before I could ask the question he suddenly added an observation of his own.

"You sure did shoot the hell out of that glass," he said and started to giggle.

"Shut up about that glass, Lyle. It wasn't nothing," Crindall snapped.

"Just what are you getting at?" Ed was asking.

"I just want to know if you boys know why the things that happen around you are happening. Did it ever occur to you that there might be a reason for things that you see happening to you?" Apparently not, because no one said anything. They just watched and waited, as if I was drawing them up to some conclusion or something that they would have to sign on the dotted line. "You guys are a bunch of selfish clowns, worried only about surviving up here, doing the best you can to live on your butts and keep warm and all that. But what are you going to do when all that's over?"

"What do you mean over?" Crindall asked. "What's over?"

"When you can't survive anymore."

"Then I'm going to lay my ass down and die," he said.

"Okay," I said, "That's just the point. If survival is what it's all about, birds survive, bears survive, wolves survive, all animals survive. It's a natural instinct. It's impossible for them not to try to survive. So there's no difference there. But aren't you different than some black bear someplace?"

"Bears can't think," Ed answered. "At least not like humans. They can't think as good."
"If you clowns can think better thoughts than a bear, what do you think about?"

I watched the three of them and I could tell that they were trying to come up with something, but if they were going to come up with any abstract thoughts—and I wasn't even sure that they were capable of that—it would have to come pretty soon before they grew tired of being badgered and manipulated by a lucky shot, smart-mouthed stranger.

"I think about things that matter...like building and taking care of things around this place," Crindall finally answered.

"That's still nothing but bullshit survival. You're still worried about staying alive and warm."

"What the hell are we supposed to think about, smart boy?" Ed asked, letting me know that I had gone about as far as I could. But to hell with them; I was preaching now. They wouldn't give me a church at Thompson so I'd make my own here.

"I just want you to think about something other than survival. Think about what it means to be a person, to be able to talk to other people, to slap a man on the back and call him a brother. Because Something up there beyond everything we know gives people the desire to want more out of life than just survival. If you haven't felt that, you're only half-alive. You need to realize that there is a power beyond. You can feel it if you let yourself."

"I don't feel nothing, and I don't give one Goddamn about feeling nothing. This is my spread and I can do like I want, and if anyone questions
that I'll shoot the bastard, including you, you son of a bitch." There was a fire that burned in Crindall's eyes that I hadn't seen before and it frightened me a little, but not nearly enough.

"I'd rather be a son of a bitch than a clown who doesn't care about anything except his belly. You made fun of me because I was a city boy until I played your game and made you look bad. Now I'm trying to talk to you and give you some clues why your lives aren't worth shit and why your neighbors hate your guts. I have nothing to gain by talking to you, but you are people who could be living lives that were worth something instead of this half-baked, Marlon Brando woodsman garbage. That's nothing and survival's nothing if there isn't something beyond."

I turned and left before they said anything else, and it wouldn't have really mattered if they had. I figured that what had happened was only okay. Probably a draw and no better. There was a toughness that logic couldn't pierce. I ignored the epithets I heard roaring behind my back as I headed into the forest, out of range. I felt empty and tired and like I had tried too hard to win a battle that I couldn't win by myself and maybe not even with help. I tried to remember how long I had been up north and I figured that it must have been about six weeks. I felt tired, and for the first time in a long time I wished that I was home.
Chapter VIII.

Billy had gone to Anchorage for a couple of days. Mary Freeman had heard it on the Bush Pipeline and told me when I got home. It really didn't matter to me because I was pretty well going my own way now, especially since Billy had been spending so much time in Talkeetna. He had gotten a construction job, and even though it wasn't full-time, he would usually put in three full days a week. I was used to his schedule so I didn't really think about him being gone. There were other things on my mind anyway—like what had happened with Crindall.

I felt embarrassed about the whole thing after it was all over. Not that I had hit the glass, but just that I ended up ripping them off instead of them getting me. The walk home through the woods and finally along the edge of the meadow had given me time to think awhile about exactly where I was and where I was going. I knew that I was happy up here, but I also knew that I hadn't accomplished much. But then, what was the point? I hadn't come up to be a missionary, but that's what bothered me about the session with Crindall. I had been a preacher, had come across in a way that I wasn't sure I was willing to accept. I guess what bothered me the most as I walked back was coming to the conclusion that the things I had told Crindall applied as directly to me as they did to him. I was as interested in survival as he was, but I kept telling myself that it was a different kind.
I knew that it was important to survive in a way that demanded my willingness to sacrifice what I had learned and prepared for at Thompson. It wasn't a condescending attitude. I knew that, even if sometimes I caught myself thinking that it might be. I had to admit that when it came to technical and practical skills, the folks that lived off the main roads could do almost anything with almost anything. I admired that like someone would admire a painting that was beautiful even if the technique, or something else about it, was beyond explanation.

But then, I knew that I was becoming a mountain man. The process had made a mark on my physical appearance. My hair was combed less often, I had grown a fairly respectable beard by Alaskan standards in six week's time, and I felt myself getting stronger physically. The wood-cutting had made my forearms larger and more sinewy, and the veins showed when I gripped something. And I knew my back was stronger and probably my legs, too. I was beginning to feel a part of the forest, and, while I didn't really know why or what caused it, I felt sometimes as if I was a part of the natural order, an order that I could see and understand even when it was brutal or unfair the way that nature is often unfair.

I supposed that God was at the top of the order although I didn't think about it and I didn't look for evidence. I don't even know if I took it for granted that there was a God that fit into my picture. I fit into my picture, and the sky and the sight of Mount McKinley over the meadow on one of those few days when it is visible through the clouds, and the long days and grey nights—they all fit into my picture and I could
see them and believe them and trust them to be there tomorrow. That's why I was surprised by what had happened with Crindall.

It had been like an old conditioned response that required only the proper stimulus to set it off, and apparently he had done it. I didn't care about what he thought. Someone who had bombed the hell out of the Germans from his B-17 couldn't have been much affected by some kid who dumps on his lifestyle in the name of Christianity. But then, I must have cared about something because I spent the next couple of days thinking about the whole thing. Playing it back over and over in my head in order to try and figure out what it really meant, and especially what it told me about myself.

Three days had gone by since I had gone to see Crindall and I was working in the garden when I heard someone talking to Mary Freeman and I turned to see Linda Fisher. I hadn't seen her since the whole clan had been there, and now I was a little surprised to see her alone. She had come around the back way from Butler's place and now was on her way back, so I offered to walk her to where she had parked the truck.

We walked along the bank of Montana Creek, the same bank where I had first seen her, and I remembered feeling the cold and gritty sand under my shoes the same as I felt now. But it wasn't romance and I knew it. She was just talking about how things were at home and that Pa was gone more than ever because he was working overtime in order to pay for Francie's schooling. I told her that it wasn't fair, and it probably wasn't. I didn't bother to tell her that nothing in life is fair, although
I was beginning to believe in that conclusion more than ever before. I just told her how pretty she looked and that someday things would be the way she wanted, all the time thinking to myself that I was the biggest damned hypocrite alive. But hypocrisy was just a symptom. I could tell her anything and still be a hypocrite because I was involved, even though I didn't want to be--and I didn't--she was still a woman and some-how that made a difference in what she thought about me. I did care what she thought, but not as a basis for anything other than curiosity, that was sure.

"What do you really think of me?" I asked after we had walked awhile without saying anything.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know you."

"You know me a little."

"Why do you want to know?"

"A couple reasons. To see if I'm fooling myself."

She paused for a second, thinking.

"I think you're a very religious person."

"Now what the hell does that mean?"

"I mean that you believe in spiritual things," she said. "That's what you were telling me you did. Making everything have some meaning or something. Isn't that what you said?"

"That's what I was afraid of."

"What?" she asked.

"It's just that I'm trying to make something work up here that
doesn't want to fit in. Something only works if it fills a specific sort of need. Nobody up here senses any need except survival, and they can handle that themselves just fine."

She didn't say anything, but I was sure that she didn't understand, which wasn't too surprising because I wasn't sure that I even understood completely. We started walking again for awhile until we came to where she had parked the pickup, down by where the creek ran alongside the road. I could see it as we came around a bend in the creek and I tried to slow our pace because I felt like talking some more. About anything.

"Anything besides religious?" I asked, trying hard to resuscitate a conversation that probably should have been allowed to die long before.

"What?"
"Do you see anything besides religious?"
"I think that you look okay, if that's what you mean."
"No, that's not what I mean, but thank you anyway."
"Jesus, Pete. What are you trying to find out?" She was annoyed at me but not angry.

"I just want to know if my time up here has been wasted."
"You've got friends up here, don't you?" and then she added,
"I'm your friend, aren't I?"
"Yes you are, but that's not the point."
"Well, what the hell is the point?"
"I've got to know if I've been real with folks."
"What do you mean 'real'?" she asked.
"You know, real. Honest."

"You were with me, weren't you? I mean it was crazy but it was how you really felt. And it helped me, too. It made me think about myself."

"Bullshit," I said in my finest disgusted, ecumenical tone.

"No, really."

"Still bullshit."

"Listen," she said, "if you won't believe it when I tell you the truth, why are you so hung up about being honest anyway?"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I believe you," I muttered, knowing full well that neither one of us were convinced.

"Like hell you do."

"I don't need to take this." I turned and headed back up the bank of the creek, leaving her still a distance from her truck. Then I had to stop. "I'm sorry I asked. I'm sorry I put you on the spot. I've just got problems so why the hell should any of it matter to you. You're perfectly capable of screwing up your own life without my help. Good-bye and I'm really sorry."

I walked to the top of the bank and then turned around. She was still standing by the creek, watching me. I thought that she was probably waiting for me to come back, to explain it to her, to tell her why every time I was around her I went crazy.

"I'm sorry," I yelled. "I didn't mean to put you down. It's not you, it's me. Okay?"
She didn't say anything for a couple seconds, and then I thought I saw her shake her head slowly. "Okay," she called back though I knew that it still wasn't.

"I'm sorry," I called again, but either she was out of ear shot or else there wasn't anything else to say because she didn't turn around. Now I watched as she slowly walked back to the truck. I couldn't ignore the fact that she was still beautiful to me. I also couldn't ignore the feeling that made me wish I didn't always end up like this, but I couldn't help it. Telling myself that I couldn't help it didn't make me feel any better, in fact, probably worse. I wondered if I would have come off the same way to any woman, or if I had always been that way underneath, or if it was just since Karol that I was so critical of myself. I almost felt like I was punishing myself, trying to accept all the blame for what happened before, and although I knew it wasn't right, it kept happening anyway.

I felt like walking so I decided to go back to Freeman's along the creek. It was the longer way back, but it felt good to hear the water and look into the large pools of deep, slow water along the edges of the creek. Billy had said that there would be salmon coming back up Montana Creek to spawn and I had been watching for them.

There were places along the creek bank where the forests grew right down to the water and where the willows would trail their branches in the water, making the whole tree lean and bend to the current. When I couldn't get around the edge of the forest, I cut back through the woods and climbed along the bank, which was usually steep, until I could
get back on the flat bed, or at least hop along the rocks until the creek widened and the forest receded from the water. Occasionally there would be fallen trees that I could walk along without getting my feet wet, although I didn't care because the water was icy and made my feet tingle and feel alive.

I don't know how long I had been walking, but I knew that it had probably been at least an hour and would be close to suppertime when I finally got back. The walk had helped to make me hungry and the thought of dinner and then sitting around the table with a cup of coffee made me feel happier than I had all day, and I moved a little faster along the bank until I came to the turn in the river with the steep bank and the trail that took off up the side, behind the clump of trees where I had first seen Linda, and then over the rise and down to the homestead.

I had just come over the ridge and could see the cabin when I noticed that something was strange. I didn't know what it was at first, and then I realized that there was no smoke from the stove pipe and that the propane lights over the table hadn't been lit. I probably wouldn't have thought much about it except that Mary Freeman was getting ready to fix dinner when I had left and had told me not to be gone too long because they'd be eating soon. It seemed strange to me that there wouldn't be anybody home now, and the more I thought about it, the stranger it seemed until, by the time I reached the front steps, I could almost taste that something was wrong. And when I reached the door, I knew it. It was standing open.
I called but there was no answer. I could see that there had been things cooking on the stove, or about to cook, because the pans were still there. The fire in the wood stove had burned down and, without thinking, I put another log on it and watched it flare. As I looked away, I caught the reflection of something lying on the table and I went over to it.

It was a note written to me. Mrs. Freeman had done it quickly because the writing was scribbled and it took awhile to make it out, but when I held it near the stove I could read it: "Peter, there's bad trouble with Crindall. Not sure what. Come as quick as you can, but be careful." I read it over again to make sure it was right, even though I was already sure, and the next second I was out the door and off on the dirt path that led along the edge of the meadow and into the woods.

I kept thinking over and over as I ran along what could have happened that would take the Freemans over to Crindall's place. If someone was sick, why did they need me? What did they expect me to do? Pray for him? Crindall wouldn't have let priest, minister, rabbi, or witch doctor near him. Probably not even Christ Himself. I could picture Crindall in my mind, lying in bed, pale, breathing hard and coughing up blood, but with that sneer of defiance that announced that he didn't need anyone's help to die. He had withstood all those winters up here without anyone's help and now he could shuffle off to limbo without any help as well. The image of that expression, that facial gesture of triumph and self-reliance that had frightened me when I had first seen him and then made me angry stuck in my mind. T. S. Eliot
would have been proud to meet this lost, violent man of the Twentieth Century. But then, maybe he wasn't sick. Sickness isn't bad trouble, it's only sickness, but it didn't seem that anything else could have been so urgent, especially if it involved me.

I had run about half the way to Crindall's and I had to stop because I had a side ache that was burning through me. All the while I had been looking ahead to try and get a glimpse of someone coming along the path or anything that could have given me a clue about what was happening, but so far I had seen nothing.

As I turned the last corner before the cut-off path joins the main road, the flat area where people parked their cars, I noticed that only Freeman's car was there. It was possible that Butler had gone someplace, but the fact that their Scout was gone didn't seem right either because they usually didn't go out around evening since Butler believed that the night air wasn't good for his heart.

I started running again, painfully and not very fast because I was trying to listen at the same time. I knew the road enough to know that Crindall's place was not much further. When I could finally see it through the trees I slowed to a walk and then, when I was about twenty yards from the cabin, where the forest broke off, I stopped and just stood, listening. Everything was completely quiet.

From where I was I could see the cabin clearly, although I couldn't see the front door and the porch because the road ran behind the cabin, but there was smoke coming out of the chimney so I figured that there had to be someone in there.
I waited awhile longer and then decided that it would be better if I called out. There were still some memories of the last time I came visiting unannounced and now, at least, I was in a better position to retreat gracefully.

I called out to Crindall and was standing, waiting for an answer. At first I didn't hear anything and I figured no one had heard me. It looked like his windows were closed anyway and that was probably why. I was getting ready to call again when I did hear something. It was a kind of sliding thud like when someone bumps into a piece of furniture on a hard wood floor, but there was also another sound with it. It was a noise that was closer to human than animal but could have been either. It was almost a growl, but a growl that sounded like it had words or a voice imprinted on top of it. It frightened me, but not enough.

I waited a second longer before I called again. I could hear my voice echo away through the trees until there was only silence left. Then, I heard another cry like the first, but without the sliding noise. I had just started to move toward the cabin when I saw the glass in one of the windows that looked out the side of the cabin facing me shatter and the next instant I felt my face sting in a hundred places and I fell to the ground while the echo of the shot died away on the hills by Butler's homestead.

In a stunned second I knew two things: I was alive, and I had to get the hell out of there. I felt my cheek and it burned and tingled, and when I looked above me I could see what had happened. The shot had hit
the tree next to me just about eye level and sent a shower of bark flying at me. It had really only grazed the tree, but I could see that a good chunk of bark had been shot away. It wasn't a good shot. I had been close enough to the house that anyone could have hit a person from that distance pretty easily. Maybe it was just a warning. I didn't know. But what I did know was that I had to get to someplace where I could see what was happening without being gallery bait for whoever was in the cabin.

I crawled around behind the tree that had been hit and waited a couple of minutes while the tingling in my cheek went away. There was no more sound. I kept looking around for some movement, but there wasn't any. Just the smoke rising slowly from the chimney and the sound of the creek in the next valley, barely noticeable as it tumbled over the stones in its bed.

It was only after I crawled safely behind the tree and had begun to try and piece together what was happening that I realized that I was supposed to meet the Freemans there, and, for the first time, I began to wonder if it had been worse for them. I couldn't see anyone outside, but I didn't know who or how many were in the cabin. Someone was crazy. That was sure, and the thought that whoever it was who had the gun and had tried to kill me could have killed anyone, and maybe everyone, made me start to fight panic. I tried to talk myself out of it. I hadn't heard any more shots before I came, but I had been down in the creek bed with the roar of the water drowning out most everything else. There could have been other shots. There could have been a lot of things that I couldn't have heard down there, so that didn't prove anything. I peeked at the
cabin and tried to see if any other windows had been shot out. I only saw the one on the side of the cabin that faced me, but there could have been others.

For a second, I considered leaving, making a break for the path and running to the lodge at the place where the homestead road turned off from the paved road. There was a phone there and I could call the sheriff, but then, almost instinctively, I knew that it wasn't the right thing to do. If I called the sheriff on Crindall and he hadn't killed anybody and he could say that he was just doing some target work and hadn't seen me, or something like that, I knew that it would be trouble, probably more trouble than I had ever been in. Folks may have hated his guts, but they respected the guy. Maybe you couldn't explain the feeling, the ambivalence, but I knew that it was genuine. Besides, if he had killed anyone, it wouldn't matter how long I waited. And if somebody was wounded, not even Crindall would have let them die like that.

I had been watching the house, but I began to take another look around the rest of the clearing, changing my position so I could look around the other side of that sacred tree. Still nothing moved. I could see the stake where I had shot the glass, and there was a large pile of garbage that looked like it might have been a compost pile, but I hadn't seen a garden so I wasn't sure. Beyond that there was the edge of the clearing with the forest thick and green behind.

As I looked over toward the cabin again, I thought I saw something move. I had seen it from the corner of my eye and I looked back, trying to pinpoint where the movement had been. It could have been a bird fluttering
past or some animal. I scanned the field with my eyes again, trying to see everything and make sure that I wasn't playing tricks on myself. I was just about ready to shift my position again and turn back toward the cabin again when my eye caught the movement again, and this time I knew what it was.

I watched as a hand crept slowly around the trunk of a large evergreen that was just about opposite from where I was in relation to the cabin. At first I had only seen the fingers, but now I could see the whole hand as it slowly inched its way around the side of the trunk.

I ducked back out of sight and watched. Whoever was behind the tree wasn't moving, but from where he was hidden, I figured that he was interested in hiding from the cabin and not from me. Maybe it was someone coming down the road who had heard the shot and was curious. But that wouldn't explain how he had gotten on the far side of the cabin, the furthest side from the road.

I heard the sound of something in the cabin that sounded like breaking glass and then Crindall's voice above it, cursing. I had turned away to look at the cabin, and when I looked back, a figure had emerged from behind the tree. He had moved around behind the tree, keeping hidden from the cabin, but I could see him now. At first I didn't recognize him from the side, but then he turned full on and I saw that it was Jimmy Butler.

I let out a low whistle and he turned and saw me. I could see him motion with his hand for me to head back up the path that led to Freemans.
I turned behind me and looked to see how far it was to run before I was in the woods at the edge of Crindall's clearing. There were only a few trees for about the first twenty yards and after that the path ran quickly into the thick, uncut forest. I took one more look over my shoulder at the cabin and it was still quiet and the windows were dark. Then, I took a deep breath and ran for my life. There were no shots from the cabin. Crindall probably hadn't even seen me go.

Within seconds I was covered by the shade of the woods and the change from the darkness into light made me stumble in the path. I scrambled on all fours until I was up again and kept running further into the forest until I couldn't see the light from the clearing through the trees, and then I sank to one knee and waited for Jim.

In about a minute I heard him. He hadn't come down the path. Instead he had cut through the woods and he actually came out behind me. I heard something rustle and spun around to see him standing there, making me almost wet my pants for the second time in one day.

"I betcha I scared ya," he said and looked almost pleased.

"A little," I managed to say when I discovered that my vocal chords still worked. "This seems to be the day for it."

"Jesus Christ, Crindall 'bout plugged you. That man is crazy."

I nodded, even though I wasn't worried about Crindall just then.

"Where are the Freemans?"

"Oh, they're up to the house," he answered with a matter of factness that was so sincere that it was almost irritating.
"What in the world was happening back there?"

"Crindall wants to build a new place for himself."

"So?" I asked, totally missing any cause and effect relationship that could possibly exist between my getting killed and Crindall building a new place.

"So he started building it right on the road."

We started walking along the trail until we reached the cut-off path that went up over the hills to Butler's homestead, and on the way Jim told me what had started the whole thing.

He said that people had been at odds with Crindall for a long time. They respected his independence and would have helped him if he would have needed it—or if he would have let them help him—but there had never been any love lost. I asked Jim what there was about him that put people off. I wanted to hear what other people had against him, wondering if their reasons compared with the ones on my list which was growing by factors of ten. Jim said that he wasn't exactly sure, but probably just small things. Attitudes. Just generally being insular.

It had also been common knowledge that Crindall had been wanting to build a new cabin since he felt that his other place was too old and too small. But it wasn't until the Butlers came back from Anchorage where they had been buying some supplies that they found that Crindall had begun building his place on the homestead road. He had just finished pouring half the footing for the foundation when Butlers drove up. Jim stopped walking for a second and asked if I had seen the footings. I
hadn't. They were further down the road, behind the cabin from where I had been. He asked me if I wanted to go back and see them, but I declined. I told him I'd see them later, like maybe next year sometime.

Crindall had finished the pour and had gone back into his place. He was out of sight when Butler found the footings and decided that since the cement was still wet he would convert the foundation into a few feet of flat paving for the road. He had just picked up a shovel and was preparing to dig in when Crindall appeared at the door with a drink in one hand and a rifle in the other, telling Butler to get off his property while he still could. Butler's response was to pick up a shovelful of wet cement and throw it in Crindall's direction. It didn't take Crindall long to act. He shouldered his rifle and fired twice, putting two slugs though the windshield of Butler's Scout.

Jim wasn't sure exactly what happened next. He went running to get the Freeman's while his father went home to get a weapon. He heard a couple more shots after he left and figured that Crindall had shot out the tires, too.

He said that it was lucky that Freemans had been home because he was sure his father was mad enough to kill Crindall, and Ralph Freeman had known him for a long time and could talk sense to him before he did anything. Freemans arrived at the cut-off path to Butler's just as Butler was coming down the hill with a double-barreled shotgun. Somehow Ralph was able to cool him down, and finally he and the Freemans ended up back at his place, much to the delight of Ellen Butler who had
taken out after her husband with both smaller children in tow. All she could do when she saw everyone coming back was to keep saying "Thank God" under her breath. I could appreciate her sentiment.

Butler told Jim to go back to Crindall's and wait for me. He had stayed for awhile by where the path comes out of the clearing, but then he had gotten curious about what Crindall had done to their Scout and had carefully made his way through the woods at the edge of the clearing and around to where the truck sat, windshield shattered and with two front tires flat.

He had to hide behind the truck when Crindall suddenly staggered out of his cabin, by this time atomically drunk. It was between the time that Crindall staggered back into his cabin and before Jim could make his way back to the path that I showed up. He said that he would have called to me except that he could see Crindall through the window and he didn't know what he'd do. He said that he heard the shot and he thought sure that I had been hit. Crindall had competed as a marksman. Those kind never miss.

We walked along in silence for awhile. I kept running it all over and over. Seeing images of what had happened from several angles in my mind. I saw it happen in slow motion as if I was looking in on it from beyond somewhere and I could see everything. Maybe like God saw it. But the thought of that made me try and think it through on a whole different level. I still couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that I was somehow involved in a situation where a man was trying to kill me. Me! I asked Jim what he thought they were going to do, but he didn't know.
I didn't know either, but it was obvious to me that it wasn't just the incident that would have to be resolved. Crindall was stubborn and drunk. One was a character flaw that probably could never be changed after all these years; the other was the state's official unofficial pastime and would probably be good enough for some kind of excuse if it came to that. I mean that they'd make Crindall settle the damages but they wouldn't send him to jail for attempted murder or assault with a deadly weapon.

I knew that the road was important, too. It crossed most everybody's property that lived between Crindall and the paved road. If he denied passage to people, they would probably have to build a new road. Even if there was some provision in his land agreement to provide passage to the other homesteaders who lived up the line, I was sure that there was nothing anyone could do. I kept thinking of that old adage "Possession is nine-tenths of the law" and it made sense in a way that I had never been able to see before. Sure, the road was important, but that was only a symptom. They could build a new road. All the neighbors could get together and hew another passage through the forest. It would be a job. There would be cursing and swearing and a lot of sore backs and tired legs. They would do it if they had to, but that wasn't the point. Crindall was the point. He had violated a law, unwritten but apparently universal to those people who lived around him. Everything else seemed to me to be just symptoms of a condition that had been building for probably a long time. And for Butler, and for Earl, and for Robbie Watts who lived beyond Freemans,
and for Fred Harter whom I didn't know but who had some property back there somewhere, and maybe even for Ralph Freeman, the punishment for breaking that kind of law was severe and, apparently in the eyes of some, capital.

The walk up the hill with Jim had made me tired, but tired in a way that even, seemed comfortable. It probably burned up any adrenaline that was left in me and it made me feel like I could think about what happened and see it in my mind less emotionally.

As we rounded the top of the last little rise I saw the cabin beyond and I could hear Butler shouting. He kept saying something about Crindall, but I could only understand the name repeated over and over. He would pause for a few seconds and then start again. He probably would have killed Crindall, and, hearing him shout and knowing how mad he must have been, I was amazed that Ralph had managed to talk him out of going through with it.

Butler stopped and turned when we came in the door. He had been pacing the floor and was at the far side of the room when he heard us and he turned around quickly, the sight of that big man, his bushy black beard and the red that had come from below his shirt and had crept up his neck, making me unconsciously afraid.

Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Butler and the little kids were standing by the sink. Ralph Freeman had been standing by the window and he was the one that I had seen through the glass from the outside. I flashed him a 'peace' sign with my fingers which was the only gesture that I could
think of to let him know that I was all right.

"Did you see anything else?" Butler was asking Jim. "Did that son of a bitch do anything else to the truck?"

"Just shot out the front tires. 'sall," he answered with the same calm that made me wonder how he would have reported a nuclear holocaust. "It weren't much, Pa. Just all of downstate New York."

"Did you see him get the tires?"

"No, but he 'bout blew his head off," Jim said, indicating me with a nod.

Ralph spun around and faced me as if he couldn't believe it.

"Did he fire at you?"

"Yep," I said, feeling more embarrassed than heroic. "He hit a tree about a foot away."

"Why would he take a shot a you?" Butler asked, emphasizing the word "you" to make it all sound even more bizarre that I should have been involved.

"I don't know," I said. "He was drunk. At least that's what Jimmy was saying, and maybe he didn't know who I was."

"How many times did he fire?" Ralph asked.

"Just once at me. I hit the dirt and then hid behind a tree until I saw Jim. Then we made a run for it."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to get the sheriff right damn now. That man is crazy," Butler said. "There's no telling what he'll do."
I looked over at Ralph and he was watching Butler in a way that I thought meant that he wanted to say something but he wasn't sure if he dared.

"You with me, Ralph?" Butler boomed, reminding me a little of what Elijah must have sounded like when he delivered "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

"I'm not so sure. Let's just think about this for awhile."

"Goddamn it, Ralph, what in hell are we going to think about? Ask the boy," he said, indicating me. "He's the one that come closest to getting kilt."

Butler looked right at me and I looked at Ralph. If either of them thought I was the one to decide, they were both wrong.

"What do you think, Pete?" Ralph asked.

I took my time before I answered just because I wanted to make sure that I had gotten what I wanted to say clear in my own head.

"I think we better act on our own, without the law."

Butler took a sharp breath to interrupt me, but Ralph held up his hand and told him to let me finish.

"The way I see it, Crindall is dead set on being defiant. For some reason he feels that he needs to show us that he can do whatever he wants, that he doesn't need and doesn't care that we're dependent on him in any way. If he wants to build a new place, he has about half of his 'stead cleared already. He wouldn't have to build it on the road. Or if it came down to us putting through a new road, we could do it. We could
put it through those timbers just north of Crindall's place. But my point is that we still have to live with Crindall. He's too stubborn to die yet. Okay, he's done the worst possible thing by cutting off his neighbors. He's saying that he's totally independent and the rest of us can go hang. And if we go out and get ourselves outside help, we'd be violating our own independence, and his defiance would have worked. Can you see it? He could always say that he was so big that we had to go get the law to help us. Is there anyone in this valley that could look Crindall in the face with any pride if knew what he was thinking?"

"But what about my truck? What are you going to do about my truck that he shot the hell out of?"

"Okay, I know that I'm a greenhorn up here, but I'm just going to suggest something. What he did to me was different. First of all, he missed me. Second, he was completely bombed according to Jim. People get crazy when they're drunk. I know that doesn't excuse it, but it probably explains it. Anyway, it's different with you. He did some damage to your truck--"

"Damage? He shot the goddamn hell out of it," interrupted Butler who I guess wanted to be sure that none of us lost sight of the tangibles in the case.

"Okay," I said again, "but Jim told me that you started shoveling his cement before anything else happened. In a court of law that would mean that you provoked the incident."

"But he didn't have to shoot the truck for one damn shovel of cement."
"You're right. He shouldn't have, but he could say that you were doing physical damage to his property and all he was doing was protecting what was his in the best way he could. Now he could say that, couldn't he?" I asked, feeling a little like Perry Mason trying to lead some balking witness.

Butler looked confused and began pulling on his beard, making his head bounce with each little tug.

"But he was trying to build his damn house in the middle of the road."

"The road on his property."

"But we got to use it. We've always used it."

"Don't you think he knows that? I don't think Crindall would have wasted ten minutes building anything on a road that nobody ever used. What would that have proved?"

"But that son of a bitch should have asked us," Butler said with a final, climactic tug on his beard that made the last word seem to explode.

"Sure," I answered, "admitting that we really do depend on him and that he controls that kind of power in our lives? I don't see how we can admit that, do you?"

Ralph had been following the whole thing carefully, even if he didn't say anything. I felt like he had been waiting to see what I said before he was willing to commit himself to any plan. After all, I was the one with nothing to lose. I didn't have to stay there and try to coexist with Crindall if I didn't want to. Talk was cheap, especially for an outsider, or a partial insider. But I felt I was more than that now and I hoped it counted for something.
"I think Peter's got a point," Ralph was saying. "Crindall does have responsibilities to us."

"But what about my truck? What the hell am I supposed to do? Give it to him to practice on?" Butler asked, almost helplessly, as if we were on the verge of forgetting the most important fact. It almost made me smile to see him anxiously scanning our faces for some sort of assurance that we hadn't somehow, in some strange, educated way totally beyond him, been able to settle this whole matter on some abstract level and, in the process, forgotten his truck, or, worse yet, decided it was just a casualty—a piece of armor left gutted on some beach-head.

"All right, what can we do about the truck?" I asked Ralph, hoping that he would have some idea of how to get a shot-up Scout away from a drunken, mad cabin builder in the heart of the Susitna Valley.

"We could go up and see him and tell him if he doesn't let Ron have his truck and pay for the damages, we'll take legal action."

"What kind of legal action?" Butler asked, and I sensed for the first time that lawyers—that's what I think he understood as legal action—were not high on his list. He probably felt about them like Earl felt about preachers.

"I don't know," Ralph was saying. "Probably small claims court. The damage shouldn't be over $500, you think?"

"Not what was done when I left, but there's no telling what that bastard has done in the meantime."

"Let's worry about getting the truck out of there. Maybe Pete and I could go see him about it after he dries out awhile. I don't think he'd be inclined to us the same way he is to you."
"I don't know, Ralph. He liked to blow this boy's head off before."

"He didn't even know who I was. I just called outside his place. I've only met him once and he doesn't know me." I didn't particularly like the idea of going back, but I was finding myself getting more and more curious about what was happening with the man. And if I went with Ralph, respected local school master, there wouldn't be problems.

Butler was still skeptical when the three of us--Ralph, Mary and I--left, skeptical the way all men of action get when they see people trying to handle problems that they are sure can only be handled with force. But he had agreed to let us go and see Crindall and try to reason him out. I didn't think that it would be much of a problem getting his Scout back, for it would have ended up about three feet beyond the front door of his new cabin and I didn't think he would have thought it made a very attractive yard ornament. The money for the damages was something else, however. Butler had been destructive in a way that could have been fixed in a minute, but what Crindall had done was a little more permanent. I was almost certain he wouldn't see it that way, and if he didn't settle with Butler, I had no doubts that Ron would grow tired of what he probably thought was nothing more than half-baked attempts at appeasement and would try again to take things into his own hands. Survival, after all, was survival.

On the way back to Freeman's homestead, Ralph was nervous and upset. He wanted to talk, and ended up telling me about all the people that lived along Montana Creek. He told me about his experiences, the times when he
first met those folks, how they were and what they did. It was nothing that I didn't know by then or hadn't figured out, but it was good just to be able to hear it from a new source. Ralph had been in town a lot and it had been awhile since we had talked about anything, and never like this. I could see a lot of Billy in his father, that same kind of inexplicable charm that made him easy to talk to.

We had just come out of the woods where the path curved along the meadow. It wasn't until Mary Freeman said something about warming dinner that I realized just how empty I was. I could see that Ralph wanted to talk some more, so he and I stayed at the edge of the meadow while Mary walked the rest of the way to the cabin.

"How did you know what to say to Butler?" he asked after we had watched his wife make her way along the path and up the steps into the cabin. I could see her lighting the propane lamp and it made the cabin glow.

"What do you mean?"

"Those things you said about dependence and defiance and all that. How did you pick that up?"

"I don't know," I said. "There were just some things that I kept my eyes open for, some things in folks that you can recognize. There always has to be some kind of common denominator that brings all these different types of people up here together, and it seemed to me that it had to be some type of independence trip. It was just a guess."

He seemed satisfied with the answer.

"I knew it would be bad news to call the law, but I didn't quite know how to explain it to Butler. He's stubborn. I didn't think he'd take to trying to work this thing out a different kind of way. I just don't know
how you could have figured it out like that. Still, Butler's going to be a hard sell."

"Did you ever have any psychology in school?" I asked.

"Just basic psych in college, but I don't remember much about it. It must not have been a very good teacher, but I do remember him trying to teach Freud. I remember that, just his trying to teach, but I must have blocked out everything else."

"Maybe you had a fixation."

"Probably hundreds of them. I just hope they were all oral, or at least those kinds that are above the belt. Actually I was a math major."

"Ralph," I said. "What do you really think is Crindall's problem?"

"Probably the problem of all riff-raff around here. He drinks too much. That's the cold weather curse."

"Earl has real trouble," I said. "I saw that when I met him first time. It can't be that bad for everybody."

"I imagine that we all would have every other vice, except that during winter you're limited as to how much hell you can raise. It's a little too cold to dance and you're too far away from the bars in Anchorage, so for a lot of people it's the only damned sport there is. If my mother hadn't been a Mormon and drummed the idea of abstinence into my head, it might have been a temptation for me. But I never developed a taste for it, so it's no struggle. Besides, I'm keeping busy with school most of the time during the winter and it's a case of having too much to do instead of not enough."
"Anything else on Crindall?"

"No, not really. Why? What do you think?"

"I think he's probably lonely. I mean chronically lonely. Either that or some other big acceptance hang-up. From what I took in school—which hasn't been all that much except that we were required to take some practical psychology classes for my major—it usually comes when a guy is not willing to play by a commonly accepted set of rules or some type of code of ethics because he is unable to, or he doesn't feel that the system is providing for his needs. So he tries to shuck it. Crindall could be an acceptable rule player. I mean he's kind of done it all along, so it's not that he can't. It just could be that his needs for acceptance aren't being met by this life up here. You can't expect some hard and crusty bomber pilot to come up to you and say, 'Listen, I don't feel worth cow dung these days, and I wish you could show me that I'm still okay.' So he overreacts by becoming totally defiant and acts like he couldn't give a rip about anyone, and if a person is going to admit any type of dependency on him, they're going to have to come crawling up to him on the belly. I think Crindall is the type that often feels that if he can convince enough other people that he doesn't need anything from anybody, then maybe he can convince himself. Hell, I don't know. It's dangerous playing amateur psychologist, but sometimes it helps to have some kind of perspective instead of thinking, 'Well, he's just a chronic screw-up.'"

Ralph didn't say anything, but I could tell he was thinking about something because his forehead was wrinkled in the way that showed he was concentrating extra hard.
"What have you got?" I asked.

"I was just trying to follow what you were saying."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't know enough about Crindall to be sure. I just wish we could get everybody together, you know, face to face and let 'em sweat it out."

"What type of thing are you thinking?" I asked, not letting on that I had been thinking the same thing for most of the walk back home.

"Well, they've got an organization in Talkeetna where folks meet together on a regular basis to iron out their problems. They've built a community center where they meet in, raised all the money for it themselves by selling raffle tickets. That sort of thing. But with that group, they're all pretty centrally located. Besides, I think it's probably a different cross section of people. All the store owners and all."

"What would happen if we got all the people along the road who were involved in this thing and tried to work it out that way?"

He was thoughtful for a minute.

"You've got me, Pete," he finally said. "I really don't know what would happen."

"Would anyone even come?"

"I'm sure that some of the folks around would come if we made it like a social occasion. But I doubt if we could get Crindall, and it wouldn't do much damn good without him."
"How about if we could get him? I mean wouldn't it just be a help to have everybody on some neutral ground somewhere without anything to kill each other with and be forced to look at each other. Maybe even talk."

"If we could get Crindall out I think it might be worth something, but that's a big 'if.'"

I was trying hard not to let my own enthusiasm have an effect on him. I wanted him to be skeptical and careful about wanting to bring a couple of irresistible forces together. He knew these people better than I ever could and what might work and what might not. I thought I could sense a little optimism in his voice. He was probably still hung up on the logistics of getting Crindall to come, but I was already a couple of steps ahead of him on that front.

"Listen Ralph," I said. "I don't want this to sound like something from Little Rascals where we can all get together and put on a musical show in somebody's barn, but I do know a little about encounter groups. You know, where you get some of the people to act out their emotions and frustrations. I've seen it work with people before. Really work. They can learn tremendous amounts about their own personalities. It might take a little explaining since most of these guys have probably never heard of something like that, but it might be new and different enough that they could actually open themselves up without realizing it. Groups can be pretty subtle like that sometimes."

"I don't know too much about it," he said. "It might be hard to get any participation. Folks tend to be a little more inhibited up here
than other places. They clam up quick and stay clammed."

"If we can get people to come, participation won't be a problem, believe me. In fact, it may be hard to hold it down," I said, but not feeling it necessary to tell him that I had a few ideas about that, too.

I could tell that he was feeling ambivalent about the whole thing, like the fellings I always got before I signed anything on the dotted line, knowing full well that I'd eventually have to live with whatever happened. I told him that we ought to wait until Billy got back from Anchorage, which would be any day, and we'd talk it over with him. In the meantime, we could see Crindall about getting Butler's truck out of hock. Ralph agreed and I think he felt a little more comfortable about having a chance to talk it over with Billy when he got back.

Across the meadow I heard a bell and knew that it was Mary Freeman ringing for dinner. I could see her in the doorway of the homestead and we waved to let her know that we had heard her. I had forgotten again how hungry I was until I heard the bell, and I had to smile to myself when I thought of Pavlov, and here I was with the bell ringing and my juices flowing.

Ralph had started up the path before I told him that I'd be along in a couple of minutes. I just wanted to spend a little while by myself. The hunger could wait. In fact, the ache from my belly seemed to make everything around me seem more immediate and vital. I looked at some fireweed that was growing alongside some of the taller meadow grasses and I noticed that the little red flowers had climbed about halfway up the stalk. It
didn't seem like I had been away from home that long in terms of natural time, the time that controls everything and that man can only anticipate and try to measure, and sometimes not even that. As I looked up and across the field, I could see the clouds on the horizon where McKinley was. They had become deeper yellow until now they were almost orange.

I turned and started down the path, and, before I had gotten ten feet, I picked up the smell of dinner that had drifted over from the cabin. Suddenly, the scenery was no contest.
Chapter IX.

As Ralph and I trudged down the path the next morning on our way to see Crindall about the Scout, I wasn't feeling particularly easy about the whole thing. All night I saw bullets, hundreds and thousands of dream bullets that danced and streaked and finally slammed into a tree trunk that moved closer and closer to my head. As they hit, they shattered into sparkling clouds of atomic dust, and as I would prepare myself to enjoy the colors the bullets made, I would hear Crindall make that same animal growl, a bitter cry of reproach that echoed through the wastelands of my dream consciousness. I would wake suddenly, only to feel the pillow damp with perspiration and to see the light grey of the earliest Alaskan summer morning.

Ralph thought that Crindall didn't even know who he had fired at, and maybe didn't remember anything at all. I knew that he was probably right, even though it did take a little of the intrigue away. I caught myself thinking about what a waste it would have been if I would have gotten my head blown off by a man who didn't know who he was shooting at and didn't remember the whole thing in the morning.

We stopped for awhile on the edge of the clearing to see if there was anyone around. I could see the cabin through several trees and it looked quiet. I followed Ralph to the front and stayed at the base of the steps while he knocked on the door. There was coffee brewing which
I thought was probably a good sign since most people act a little more rational when they're coming on to a stiff cup of black, mountain coffee, the kind that eats enamel off teeth.

The door opened and Crindall looked out and then he came out and stood on the porch. He looked at Ralph and then at me without saying anything, and then he looked around the clearing as if he was trying to figure out if he was where he thought he was. Finally he twisted his face and squinted at the sun, which was warm and bright, and it made the wrinkles in his face tighten even more as he tried to keep it from burning through the morning-after haze in his eyes. He stared at the sun for a moment longer as if somehow it was able to purify him and strengthen him while making his eyes ache with penance.

"How you doing this morning, Al?" Ralph asked.

"I'm doing 'sall."

"That right?"

"Yeah. Just doing."

"Well listen, Al, I kinda told Butler that I'd come down here and talk to you about getting his truck back. I understand you two had a problem."

"It sure as hell ain't my problem. That fool of a man tried to dig out the foundation I had just poured for my new place. Now how am I supposed to take that?"

"I guess he was upset that you were building your place on the road. It even kinda of puts me out, 'cause it sure means that all of us have to walk a lot further and that's no pleasure in winter."
"Now there ain't a damn thing that I can do about that," Crindall said. "A man's got a right to build where he wants to on his property. After all, I was getting sick and tired of all the traffic whizzing through here at all hours. On top of that, there wasn't another place where I could put up that wouldn't have had to be dug out and leveled. Over there where I'm going in is the only place with anywheres near level frontage."

I guess Ralph figured that there wasn't much use in arguing with him, especially when he had home court advantage, so he got back to why we had come.

"Well, do you think that we could pick up Ron's truck?" he asked.

"If you want to move that damn thing, you're gonna have to pick it up because it ain't gonna roll with two tires shot out."

"So's the windshield," I added, sounding as matter-of-fact as I could.

"You ain't wrong, boy," he answered. "It's lucky Butler ain't trying to dig shot out of his hide. He tried to shovel all the cement that I'd just spent the better part of the day setting. I'm gonna have to make a whole new pour on one end because of him. And listen, you can tell that son of a bitch that if he expects one red cent from me, he don't know me very well. You catch my drift? I fired one shot at him when he came sneaking around later and I didn't miss by much. I'll drive it home on him next time and I don't mean maybe." There was not one shred of doubt in my mind that Crindall meant what he said. His powers of iden-
tifying objects when he was drunk may not have been the best, but I knew that what he was saying now was no bluff.

Ralph told him how we'd have to go into town to get the tires fixed before we could move the Scout. I thought that Crindall might have even looked a little pleased at how much work he was causing us. With that, he turned and scuffed his way back into the cabin.

As we walked around the side of the cabin, I showed Ralph the tree and the gouge that the shot had made. It even looked worse now, I thought, because during the night it had filled with sap which was now dripping down the trunk, making the whole thing seem more like a wound than just a hole in the tree. He asked where I had been standing, so I showed him, and then I pointed out where I had seen Jim Butler.

"Sometimes I think he is crazy," Ralph said and shook his head as if he still didn't completely believe what had happened.

"He's sure got my vote," I added.

After walking around the side, we could see the place where it all started. There was a huge pile of sand that Crindall had brought in. There was an old, gasoline-powered mixer and about half-a-dozen bags of cement stacked beside it, and all around there were piles of dirt and the crude forms that people use when they pour cement and don't care if it's smooth on top. We could see that about half of the footings that he had dug out had been poured, and a couple were dry enough that he had taken off the forms. Beyond the foundation was Butler's Scout, front tires flat, making it list forward like a customized '57 Chevy. The windshield
had two holes on the driver's side that had spider-webbed until at least half of the glass was obscured. I couldn't even guess how much it would cost to replace it, but if it was like everything that they had to freight up here, the tag would be incredible.

We jacked up the truck and then used the jack stands that Butler always carried in the bed to prop it up while we got both front tires off and then rolled them back the rest of the way to the paved road. I waited while Ralph called a couple people from the phone inside Montana Creek Lodge, trying to get someone to come and give us a lift into town. Finally Pa Fisher showed up and drove us into Talkeetna.

We finished in town by early afternoon and came back to put the tires on the Scout, and after they were lugged on, we drove it back away from Crindall's place and down one of the small hills where the dirt road runs alongside the river until we came to a flat enough place where we could park it. It was where Billy was going to have to park the Freemans' rusted tank when he got back. I wasn't sure how he was going to figure it all out, but then, if anyone could, he could. Even if he did happen to drive up to Crindall's, I was sure nothing would come of it. Not with Billy.

I walked back to the homestead while Ralph took Butler's keys back to him. I could only imagine, while I was walking along, the scene of Butler tugging furiously at his thick beard when he heard what Crindall had said. I just hoped that he wouldn't decide to take it all into his own hands after all. He would probably swear his head off and threaten
to call the sheriff and even the governor. But as long as he chose to keep away from Crindall's place, he could say anything he wanted and it wouldn't matter. Maybe if we couldn't pull off the community encounter session, or maybe if Crindall did come and then lost his temper and ended up murdering someone, maybe then I could change my stance and invoke the blessings of the God of War. I could plead for the Lord of the Faithful to send fire from the heavens at the request of a small company of believers for the destruction of the infidel. Considering how much alcohol Crindall had apparently stored inside his little fortress, the whole place would have probably gone off like a ton of napalm. I guess that I was a little glad that God had changed his tactics since the Sodom era. It was shrewd of God. He knew that most people would consume themselves in their own wickedness anyway, and He seemed willing to let them stew in their own embalming fluid. I was beginning to admire Him for his discretion.

Billy arrived back at the homestead about seven that evening. He had run into Butler who was down with his truck, no doubt simmering in sauce made from the grapes of wrath, and he had given Billy an account of what had happened that was beginning to sound like the battle of Manassas Creek with the whole countryside resounding with gunfire. It made a good story when Billy told it back to me, and I hoped that it would replace the wheel bearing story in his repertoire. But more than just being a good story, it had become almost an epic tale of survival against a manifestation of incarnate evil. I had to set him straight on a few of
the details, some of the things that Butler had colored beyond recognition, or forgotten entirely. I figured that Billy should at least get more than Butler's side, and what he did with it from there was beyond my control.

I was really glad to see him and we all sat around the table for awhile that night and let him talk about Anchorage. Not much had changed. The girls still had long legs and everyone was still concerned about what was happening with the pipeline. Lots of construction folks were around, cursing the environmentalists and the government red tape.

Billy had spent a couple days fishing on a commercial boat that a friend of his owned and he said that before he had finished the run he could hardly lift his arms above his shoulders. But he said it had been a good trip. He had earned some cash, seen some old friends, and spent time in at least half the bars on Fourth Street. That brought a snort of disgust from Mary Freeman, and I could have mistaken the sound as coming from my own mother.

We took a walk after dinner--Billy and I--because I wanted to tell him what I had talked about with his father. The group meeting. We had walked across the edge of the meadow until we came to the dirt road that ran on the other side and went over the ridge to where Earl lived. I looked back and could see the cabin sitting on the rise with the two tall trees over the top. Billy turned and looked too. I could see him out of the corner of my eye and he seemed pleased that I was looking back at the cabin.
"You like that, don't you?" he asked.

"I like what?"

"The whole scene. Don't deny it, Pete. It's got you and it's gonna turn you around and change your thinking about a lot of things. I told you it would happen when we were driving in that first day, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," I said. "I think a lot of things have changed already. I mean I don't care if I ever see a freeway or a MacDonalds again. It's just not the same."

He looked as if he wanted to ask me something, something that was apparently important to him because he tried to start several times but couldn't.


"You seem a lot happier now...I mean, after you've been here awhile." He stopped again as if he was trying to pick his words carefully.

"I am," I said without pausing.

"Why?" he asked, and then quickly added, "I mean I'm glad, but it seems like there's been a real change."

"Sure there's a change. It came from using your crusty outhouse. Re-established my ties with humanity."

"Be serious."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be serious. I came up here to get away from a bad scene, one that I couldn't handle. I was going to be married. Thought that I was in love and all that, and as it turns out, the lady was doing tricks on her own. Not exactly kosher."
Billy gave a low whistle that for some reason seemed perfectly appropriate.

"Anyway, I was having trouble swallowing some of the piety that was coming down with some of my fellow ministerial heads at Thompson, so I felt I needed to get away and let my head clear."

He shook his head slowly.

"That must have been rough."

"Billy, it was the pits. The stony-ended, grunt-caked, burned-out, screwed-over pits."

We began to walk again, down the road to Earl's and we had moved into the edge of the forest that came down close to the far side of the meadow. It was cool and I wished that I had worn my jacket. I took a deep breath and noticed that same smell of dense vegetation, so rich and heavy that it seemed like the air was filled with enough protein that I could have sustained myself just by breathing in enough of it.

"Do you think about what happened much?" Billy asked as we walked.

"I try not to...but I do. I guess more than I should. Sometimes I get into moods where I play it back over and over again like some crazy video instant replay."

"That's just pretty damn unbelievable. Really unbelievable. The whole thing is. I bet it makes you down on women."

"Not all women," I said. "My mother was a woman and she's all right."

"Smart ass."

"Okay, you're right. I am a smart ass. But really, I don't think that I can't fall in love again or anything like that. I just need to know
some of the reasons things like that happen. I mean if people are
constantly letting you down and disappointing you, maybe you're expecting
too much. Do you think?"

"I think that you got shafted," Billy said.

"Yeah, me too. So what do I do about it?"

"Try not to think about it."

"What else?"

"I don't know."

"Sometimes I don't either. I guess that it's just going to take
awhile," I said, feeling that we probably had run the gamut on cheap and
easy solutions for erasing a couple years of memories. Besides, talking
about not thinking about something that happened was the same as thinking
about it. I was sure of the logic of that theorem even if it wouldn't
have made sense to me if I had repeated it out loud to myself--it
wasn't the first time that my subconscious and conscious were working
different sides of the street.

"Listen. Billy, I've got a plan on how to help resolve this thing
with Crindall and your father wanted me to talk it over with you and see
what you think. He's a little leery of the whole thing, I think, but
it really might work if given the right set of circumstances and a little
luck. What do you know about Gestalt therapy?"

He hesitated a second before he answered, saying that he thought
it had something to do with the Germans and World War II.

"That's the Gestapo. They were the German secret police. This
is Gestalt therapy. It's a type of encounter group where people get together and learn to act out their emotions, anxieties, hostilities, and all that. Your father said that there hasn't been any kind of community meetings that he can remember, and so I thought that if we could get those folks who are involved in this little house on the road business together face to face, maybe something could come of it."

"Are you crazy? You aren't going to get Crindall to come out to something like that. This isn't Beverly Hills."

"I've got an ace up my sleeve," I said, trying not to admit to myself that the job of getting Crindall to show was finally beginning to worry me.

"I think you'd feel better if you had a knife up your sleeve."

"We'll just tell them to check their lethal weapons at the door—sawed-off shotguns, hand grenades, mortars, vicious dogs."

"For a rookie Alaskan you sure have a bitch of an attitude. These folks are the salt of the earth," he said, grinning.

"I'm no rookie. I'm just a half-baked Alaskan." The joke was noted but not appreciated. "Seriously, Billy, what do you think?"

"Where are we going to stage this fiasco, as if I didn't already know?"

"Someplace unpretentious. Sleazy. A little run-down so nobody would feel threatened by the environment. What about your place?"

"That's real funny, Pete. Just tell me who's gonna clean the blood off the walls when they get tired of listening to you try and shrink 'em?"

"Not me," I said. "You know why?"

"Why?"
"Cause it's gonna be my blood."

I had managed up to now to keep from laughing by not looking at him, but I could feel the corners of my mouth twitch and I knew that I couldn't hold it much longer.

"What the hell," I said. "You could probably write the whole thing up for Psychology Today." I was able to get only the "Psychology" part out before I started laughing.

It wasn't until we had headed back toward the cabin and we were about half-way across the meadow that I asked him again what he thought. He waited for a minute before he said anything. It was a long minute.

"Pete, I've got to be honest. I don't really know what this thing is all about. It sounds a little crazy to me, but then people up here are a little crazy in some ways too. What I guess I'm trying to say is that I don't think that there is much you could do that I wouldn't be willing to back you on. If you think it might work...." He didn't finish the sentence.

"You'll tell your dad that you think it's okay to try it?"

He nodded.

"Thanks," I said.
Chapter X.

At Thompson they never would have believed it had come to this. Not even Steve Older could have known what I would be doing out beyond the compound gates, out where "Amazing Grace" could easily be mistaken for Southern Comfort. A place where a Christian soldier stood to suffer greater casualties than salvos of brimstone from the pulpit, where pain was felt deeper than just in the wallet when collections were taken. Where a Greek lexicon would be torn into pieces to kindle fires or stuff boots. And where there wasn't a theo jock for miles.

When Billy told his father that we should go ahead with the group, Ralph replied that he had been thinking it over some himself, and he thought it might just work after all. He said that we had his blessing and he would support us and do what he could to help, but that it was really our baby. It didn't surprise me that he wanted to be on the fringes because he had the most to lose. I mean that if things did manage to somehow get out of hand, he had a reputation to protect.

I kept wondering to myself what he really thought might happen. Did he imagine that the whole purpose was to get into some room and sweat each other into some primeval frenzy, complete with screams and cutting of flesh? It had seemed to me from the beginning that if everyone got together and nothing came of it, the reason would have been because everyone there had thought the whole idea stupid, but not perverse or obscene.
The only problem that I felt was the lack of time. I knew that the more time that went by before we got folks together, the more inaccurate and distorted everything would be in everyone's head. Besides that, I knew that Butler couldn't be pacified much longer. Ralph had told him that he was going to try something with Crindall to get a settlement for his truck, and if that didn't work, Butler could go ahead and settle it some other way. You didn't have to be smart to picture Butler itching to shaft Crindall, and the more time that went by, the less patient he would get, and the less chance I would have to try something on my own, something that was beginning to seem tremendously important. Maybe it was the most important opportunity that I could have. I don't know why I was thinking about it in those terms, but the whole idea felt significant in the way that most Alaskan things felt significant--because they involved survival--and this was social survival.

Billy and I planned whom we were going to see. We wanted to tell the other homesteaders about the group in person because that way there would be no chance that they might misunderstand what it was all about. We billed it as a social occasion, something that would help to develop some community strength and protection. I wished that I could have gotten Jack London to write the script because I wanted it to sound as frontier as possible. I had been plagued with the idea that there would be some crusty old mountain man who would think that this was some social for the DAR and he would have to sit around and drink tea from little tiny cups while having to hold his little pinkie straight out. Maybe we were
being too cagey by not telling anybody more than we had to, but the truth was that there wasn't that much to tell. I wasn't sure exactly how I wanted to try some of the ideas that had been fermenting in my head for the past several days. I tried to explain a little more what it was about to Billy, but he got confused and said he'd rather see it in action. Brave boy.

We finally decided that Billy would go and see Butler and Robbie Watts, and Harter if he was home. Billy thought going to see Harter would be a waste of time because he only came up from Anchorage a few times a year and sometimes not at all. I told him to go anyway because if there was a chance that this guy might be home and word got around that there was some kind of community group that had formed without an attempt to involve him, it would have been bad karma and I wanted to do everything I could to avoid any karma that wasn't at least leaning toward some lukewarm echelon of goodness, whatever that meant.

With Billy talking to those folks, it meant that I drew Earl, and, due to the importance of the assignment, Crindall. Earl would be no problem. Someone might have to go over and remind him later in the week so he didn't forget, but I figured that he was a social enough boy that just being invited over to somebody's place might do wonders for his self-respect. The only part of seeing Earl that I didn't look forward to was the possibility of having to inhale any more of the stench inside the trailer, but I figured that lesser men than I had had to breathe rancid air, and besides, I had lived in Los Angeles most of my life.
where air pollution was something to be accepted, like the law of gravity. I could deal with Earl all right, but then there was Crindall.

No one had seen very much of him since the shooting. He had finished pouring the floor of his place and had begun to nail some 2x4's into place. Ralph had passed the place on his way into town a couple of times since, and, while he hadn't seen Crindall, he said that he was making some progress on the cabin. No one else had been by and seen it. Butler had been cutting across the woods just below the rise that the road climbed before it got to Crindall's place. He had been able to pick his way through the forest and up a small valley until he was past the property and then he would connect with the cut-off path to his place just as it began to wind up the hill.

It struck me a little like the glory days between the Jews and Samaritans, how those wonderful legalists would walk miles out of their way to keep from putting one pious foot on gentile soil. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that maybe a Biblical allusion wasn't really very good. It was more like the Hatfields and the McCoys. There really wasn't much of a case for piety with either party, just gradations of immorality, or amorality.

It was Monday morning when I told Billy that I needed to go into Anchorage and asked if I could borrow the car. He agreed even though I was pretty evasive when he asked what I needed.

"Things," I said.

"What kind of things?"
"It's a little persuasion for Crindall to be more sociable. Trust me," I said, trying to ignore his look which I took to mean that he didn't trust me any further than he could have thrown McKinley. "Remember pal, we're pardners, right?"

He nodded and fished up the keys for me. I grabbed my coat and a list of things that I had been compiling, and I headed off.

I cut across the meadow and wound down the path that led to Earl's. It was still fairly early in the morning and the grass was wet and heavy. It soaked through my leather boots and made my pants cling to my legs, but they would dry out on the way to Anchorage.

Earl was home. I could see the door to his trailer open even before I got into the clearing. The whole place hadn't changed since the first time I had been there. I knocked on the side of the trailer by where the door was and Earl stuck out his head.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning yourself. What can I do fer ya?" I didn't figure that he would have remembered much from that first visit, so it didn't surprise me that he looked at me without recognition, and maybe even a little suspicion.

"I'm Pete. Living up with Freemans this summer. I met you when Billy and I came over, remember?"

His eyes narrowed as if he was studying me closer and the furrows in his brow became even deeper.

"I don't recognize you rightly, but I remember that there was a boy
with the Freeman boy. I remember that he was some kind of a preacher or something."

"That was me," I said.

"Well, what was your name again, son?"

"Peter. Peter Tyson."

"Could I pour you a cup of coffee, Peter?" he asked in a cordial way that almost made me think that he was glad to see me, although he was probably glad that I wasn't from the government or selling anything.

I told him no thanks but to go ahead if he wanted, and he disappeared back into the trailer. I could hear the hiss of a cold pot being put over a burner and then the rattling of some dishes.

"I've been needing a cup to get going these days. I ain't been feeling well at all, and..." his voice faded away as he moved to the other part of the trailer and I could hear him pass water. The thought of the emaciated old man and the bodily function joined together with a mental picture of what that little bathroom in that old Airstream must have looked like made me retch from somewhere below my stomach, but it was only for a second. I figured that it was the residue of a typical city boy reaction and I tried not to think about it. I just made up my mind that I wouldn't shake hands before I left no matter how good of friends we ended up.

He was back in a couple minutes with his cup in hand, taking long noisy draws from it and sighing after each swallow.

"So what brings you out this way so early?"
I wanted to make it good, so I started out carefully.

"The Freemans are having a get-together of some of the local folks at their place on Thursday--that's three days from now, and they wanted me to come over and invite you personally." That sounded cordial enough with a minimum of threatening overtones.

"What kind of get-together?"

"A social one, mostly. A chance for the neighbors to talk about some things. A kind of community meeting."

"I ain't very social and I really ain't got much to talk about. I'll do fine by myself, but you tell them folks 'thanks' anyway."

"But Earl," I said, realizing that maybe it would take a little harder sell than just an appeal to some nebulous idea of community spirit. "It's important that everyone from around shows up. There are some real important things that folks need to talk about."

Suddenly his eyes narrowed again like they first did when he couldn't recognize me, and I knew that something had just dawned on him.

"Is Crindall coming to this thing?" he asked sharply.

"He's supposed to," I said, immediately aware that I was walking the line between speculation and fact, but somehow it seemed all right.

"Is Butler?"

"I'm sure he is."

"Well, that's going to be a hell of a fine social with those two boys together. Likely as not, they'll kill each other. Ain't you heard what happened? Crindall tried to shoot Butler down 'cause he tried to drive his
truck right through his place. They're both madder than neutered hounds. You're all liable to get yourselves kilt."

"But that's the reason for the whole thing," I said. "We're going to try to get folks together and work out some kind of settlement without getting the law in here. Everybody thinks that it's the best way—without the law. It's not going to be any good unless people around have an interest in what's going on and can help. You can't help but be involved, especially since the road's blocked."

"That's so?" he asked, obviously a little surprised. I figured that whoever told him about the confrontation had been more interested in the theatrics than the result. "Why did Crindall block off the road?"

"He's building a new place right on top of the old road. That's what started the whole problem with him and Butler. He was pouring cement when Butler tried to drive through. Didn't you hear about that?"

"Well I'll be damned."

"That's why it's important that you come."

"Still ain't no matter. I can't come. I don't get out much, and I sure as hell don't want to walk over to Freeman's with my feeling so poorly. You youngsters can't realize how hard it is to get around."

I had one more card to play. If he didn't go for this one, he probably wasn't going to give in.

"Supposing someone came over and picked you up and took you home after it was over. Would that make a difference?"
I saw his eyes narrow again, and I was beginning to sense that maybe that was a signal that in some way his mind was processing external input, like the "feed" light that lights up on a copy machine when it's ready to receive a new original.

"Well now," he said. "I don't suppose that there would be much way of getting around it then." He had almost a touch of disappointment in his voice, disappointment that his castle walls could be broken down so systematically.

"Then we can count on you?"

"Unless I get to feeling too bad."

"It's that important for you to be there. This Crindall thing involves all of us."

"I sure reckon it does," he agreed.

I figured that I had pressed my point hard enough, so I said good-bye and left. I was beginning to like Earl and I guess that it was because he couldn't have cared less if I did or not. Somehow that made dealing with him less pretentious. He was a stubborn old mule, but he was 100% mule. A mule that would have made Darwin proud.

I took the creekbed down to where the car was parked because I didn't want to run into Crindall yet. I climbed up the bank just above where Linda had parked her truck the day of the shooting, and I caught the road as it came up from the lodge and followed it up toward Crindall's place until I came to where the cars were parked. Butler's truck was there and it was obvious that he had been using it even if it was a little hard
to see through the windshield. I got into Freeman's rusted Olds and bottomed my way down the dirt road until I came to the paved highway, and then it was an early-morning, high-gear roll into the big city.

When I got to Anchorage I grabbed the nearest directory from a pay phone and tried to plan what I had to do. I needed to find a print shop that would be willing to do some letterheads, and I needed to get ahold of a typewriter, and then find a liquor store. At least the liquor store part wouldn't be hard.

I found the place and told the guy what I wanted. It had to be a printed letterhead on commercial bond with the names "Issacs and Goldberg, Attorneys at Law" along with an address that I had been making up in my mind during the drive down. I thought I'd better put a box number, so I told him to run P. O. Box 726, Anchorage, Alaska, 99501. For the phone number I looked over at the number of the phone on the counter, and I told him a number with the same prefix plus four other digits that I got off the top of my head.

"Is this for real?" the guy finally asked. I wasn't completely sure which part hadn't been convincing enough, but then I suppose it was probably the whole thing. "Anyway, you'll have to get a dozen."

"All right," I said. "I'll take a dozen. Actually it's a practical joke for a friend who just graduated from law school. Hastings. Top of his class. And his name is John Issacs, but he isn't Jewish and I thought he'd get a kick out of having it look like he was practicing law with another Jew. He'll probably be pissed." I didn't care if he bought that line or
not, but as I listened to it come out, it almost convinced me. I thought to myself that Huck Finn could have probably been proud of an on-the-spot, fairly classy lie that was for a good cause.

"Could you center the printing however you would to make it look professional?"

"What kind of type style do you want?" he asked.

"I don't know. Just make it look dignified, and even a little imposing."

He said to check back with him in a couple of hours. On the way out of the shop I asked him if he knew where a liquor store was and he pointed down the block.

I found it about three doors down. It was a sleazy place that looked like a set for "Dragnet" except that it was minus the crew of winos that would always sneak in after dark and then hit the streets again to sit on the curbs and drink their cheap port out of bottles dressed in wrinkled paper bags. The place was empty when I went in. I wasn't sure, but I figured that if I stayed around long enough I would be able to see every stereotype of degenerate stagger into the shop. It was almost too perfect. Stuffed salmon and all.

The man behind the counter was big and he had a black beard, making me almost mistake him for Butler.

"Listen, I need a little help with something," I said. "I don't know much about hard liquor, but I want something that I could put into a punch bowl that would get everybody a little happy. You know, spike the
punch. What is there that you can put in that won't give it away with the taste?"

"Vodka," he said.

"How much would I need?"

"You having a lot of folks to your place?"

"Not a whole lot. A dozen, maybe."

"If I was you, I'd go with about two fifths. It might sneak up on 'em at first, but they'll feel it sooner or later."

"Okay," I said. "And I need some punch concentrate. You got Hawaiian Punch?"

"Sure do. Did you say that I'm invited to this party?" he asked, flashing a crooked smile as wide as the Yukon.

"I would, but it's up past Talkeetna way."

"Why the hell did you drive clear down here? Ain't they got liquor stores up there? In Willow or Palmer they've got dozens of 'em. Talkeetna, too."

"Yeah, well I was coming down here for some other business, and besides, since this is kind of a surprise thing, I wanted to do it a little on the sly. A lot of folks know me up there. You know what I mean?"

"That'll surprise 'em all right. Just be careful about letting 'em on the road after."

"Pal," I said as I grabbed the bag of bottles with one hand and my change with the other, "that's the very least of my troubles."
I drove to the library to wait for the printer to finish the letterheads, and I also wanted to read up on a couple of things. It was the city library. The main branch. It even felt a little strange walking through the shelves, row after row, stack after stack. I stopped and pulled out a book at random and looked at it in my hands. I was amazed by how out-of-place it looked, being held by callused fingers with dirty fingernails. But it was a disunity that I had chosen, and the contrast between the book and my hands made me suddenly happy.

I found the behavioral science stacks and just did some looking. I wanted to find something practical, something I could understand. Not just documented case studies with graphs and statistics and controlled surveys and experiments—all that data, bit on bit, correlated and organized. I wanted something on the role of the counselor, on how to handle situations of conflict. What to emphasize and what to ignore.

I took a look at some Perls and some Maslow, and tried to remember what PSCH 101 had taught me about "self-actualization." I made a note about Buber's "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships. I read an article by Eric Fromm and thumbed through a mutilated copy of Freud's Anxiety of Influence--I don't really even know why, except I figured that if people had been using it enough to wear it out, it must be some help. It wasn't.

It was midway through some Erikson that I began to realize just why everything seemed so far removed. All the books explained systems, systems that made sense in that they explained what was going on with people, but in the explaining, the people had somehow been synthesized
out in a way that I could only feel. It was almost like an impressionistic painting, a Monet or Pissaro, that looked beautiful and dreamy, yet distinct from a distance; but when you got close enough to the canvas, the colors rebelled and didn't three-dimensionalize. It wasn't like Durer where every feather on a bird was photographically clear no matter how closely you looked. Everything I could see and try to understand seemed only to fuzz out, but I knew better than to just blame any small part of a system. I blamed the systems in general because religion was the biggest system and the most imposing system, and the hardest one to get to work in any way other than the rigid way that sacrificed the people it sought to save. Or else it became impotent because of its own holy bureaucracy.

The relics, the pilgrimages, the penance required, the pieces of the true cross that, if collected and assembled during the middle ages, would have yielded enough lumber to build a Holiday Inn. But beyond all that—beyond it all—there were people for whom the system didn't work, people whom the statistics didn't cover, whose needs were somehow exempted and not like the ones of those of us who ended up in the rinse cycle of orthodoxy. But then, I wasn't really the one to talk. Not any more. It had been awhile since I had thought about any of the things that I had felt I needed to get straight, and even longer since I had prayed. I didn't know why except it just hadn't seemed necessary.

I stayed at the library and read until my eyes got tired. It didn't seem like the books had done much good anyway. Out on the street, I
looked around until I found the Olds and drove back to the print shop. The printer met me at the counter with a stack of letterheads and they looked convincing in a cold and calculating way.

"I set it to look traditional. Hope it's okay," he said.

"Great! This will do just great." I was amazed at how legitimate my little stacked progeny looked. "There's one more thing. Do you have a typewriter I could use or rent or whatever?"

"I've got a Selectric in the office. You want to use that?"

I took my bundle into the office and composed two paragraphs that had been in the back of my mind for a couple of days. I signed the letter, typed Crindall's name and route on a plain envelope that I bogarted from one of the desk drawers. I stopped at a post office as I headed out of Anchorage and sent the letter certified mail, and I was finished. Again, Huck would have been proud. I knew only too well how stubborn Crindall was, but I didn't think that even he could afford to withstand this subtle form of persuasion. If he could withstand it, well, go ahead and let Butler and him fight it out. Maybe there would even be some profit to be made in that. It would be colorful at least.

Billy was waiting for me when I got back. He asked what I had done and I told him that I did a little research in the city library, and then picked up a few things. Nothing more specific than that. He told me that Butler was coming "sure as hell" and that it probably meant that Mrs. Butler and the kids would be along, too. I
wasn't sure, but I figured that this would be the perfect occasion for
making a show of family solidarity. How could Crindall get nasty with
the little woman and all those kids looking on with their big brown
eyes? It was a touching thought, but odds were that someone would
inevitably end up underestimating the savvy of the other, and I was
afraid that what money I hadn't spent on booze and stationery would have
to go on Crindall.

Harter wasn't home, and it didn't look like he had been home
for awhile, so we counted him out. I told Billy about my meeting with
Earl and the agreement that was negotiated on his behalf. When Billy
heard the part about the transportation, I got his famous wheel bearing
grin which I inferred to mean that I was an accommodating fool, but probably
not without some redeeming social value.

Ralph Freeman had decided that we should ask Pa Fisher to come,
even if he didn't live close enough to be directly involved. But it
wasn't a bad idea. Anybody who could father all those children ought
to have some credibility. He was probably the unofficial father of
the great frontier. That was what working on the Alaskan railroad would
do for a person. Those long winter nights alone in a caboose
can't help but do something to a man's biorhythms. Anyway, I was glad he
was coming although I prayed that he wouldn't bring Linda. No matter how
hard I tried to tell myself that I didn't care what she thought, I really
did care and I didn't much want her there on opening night. Especially
after all the other unexplainable ways that I came off when she was around.
I'd rather go down the tubes in private.
And then there was Robbie Watts, the tire man, who lived behind the lodge where the dirt road came off the paved highway and went alongside the creek before it started climbing up to Crindall's place. He said that he wasn't sure that he was going to be around. His father worked for the state and Robbie spent some time on the road with him. He told Billy that he would try to come. At least the principals were coming, providing Crindall could be counted on, and I knew deep down that he couldn't be. The rest was just a waiting game.

I kept going over in my mind what I wanted to do--play some roles, try to act out some emotions, give everyone a little better picture of why they ended up acting like sons of bitches most of the time. It wasn't much to expect. If it worked I could win the Nobel Prize on a write-in. Maybe make the cover of *Psychotic Illustrated*. Billy and I didn't talk much about what might happen, but I knew how nervous we both were. Ralph was nervous, too, although he didn't talk much about it either. I found myself wishing to have the whole thing over with before Thursday, but I had to make sure Crindall got his letter.

I rode the motorbike over to Earl's the day before to remind him that he was expected. He said that he felt poorly but he would be ready. Then I went home, had some supper which didn't settle too well, and tried to get some sleep. Billy came in from town late, and I could see his silhouette as he stuck his head into my room.

"Everything all set?" he asked as if it was something I could have given a yes or no answer to.
"It all depends on Crindall. It won't be anything without him. It'll just be party time."

"Then we'll have a party. If that happens, it's okay. I mean we can't do everything."

I was in no mood for Pollyanna. "But it's not okay. Just trying to do something isn't damn near enough for me. It was probably just a wild-eyed bullshit idea anyway. I just hate to have so many variables. I don't even know what I'm trying to do. They aren't going to have any idea what's happening; they aren't going to understand, and then what do we have? I don't know. It just seems like you work harder than hell on something that feels so important and makes you think that you could actually end up doing someone or something some good...I guess I just need some sleep."

Billy paused for a minute without saying anything as if he was suddenly weighted down not only with his own misgivings, but with the legacy that I had just donated. I saw his head lean back out of the doorway and then he softly hit the door jamb with the palm of his hand, making a gentle sound.

"It'll be real," he said from the hall.

"Yeah," I said. "Really real."
Chapter XI.

We all sat waiting. The chairs had been placed in a circle in Freeman's front room. Behind the chairs that had their backs to the kitchen there was a table set up with punch and cookies. The weather hadn't been very cold for several days, but Ralph had brought in some wood and made a fire in the stove just to add some atmosphere... or something. Billy had ridden the motorbike over to get Earl and brought him back, Earl cursing sharply whenever he thought Billy went too fast, which was most of the time. They spun in from Earl's place doing about forty with Earl holding on to the seat like he had been welded to it.

Everybody else had filtered in and was sitting around the circle. All the Butlers had come except Jimmy. Pa Fisher had taken time off from any procreational plans that he might have been contemplating and made his entrance wearing his railroad hat. Ma came in a few paces behind him. Robbie Watts had come after all, straight from work, wearing pants that were too short and a shirt that was too small. He looked a little like something from Li'l Abner.

He rubbed his hands nervously and then began to whittle on a hangnail with a screwdriver that he had in his shirt pocket, looking up only to see if anyone was watching him. Earl had taken a seat by Butler and was talking to him. I couldn't hear what he was saying but I imagined it was either something about the road situation or about his health.

Everyone talked quietly, cautiously, like people do in a theater before the movie starts, seemingly afraid that someone else might be listening.
to their conversation. Uneasy. Like they didn't know what to expect. I could feel them waiting.

Billy was standing by the door to the hall that went back to the bedrooms. I was aware of him watching me even when I wasn't looking. When I did look at him, he looked back uneasily at first and then he would smile the classic grin. But it wasn't convincing to me.

Mary Freeman had started to serve the punch. I told her that I would make it. Boy, did I make it! The only thing I hadn't counted on was Butlers bringing their kids. I mean I knew that he might, but I hadn't realized that it would make a difference in the serving. I didn't care if we were able to accomplish anything there or not, but I wasn't going to be responsible for getting Butler's two little kids drunk. That could undo a lot. Maybe everything. So I made up some regular punch and put it in a container for the kids, telling Mary to make sure the kids didn't get any of the other. She knew I had done something, but when she gave me that look of utter matronly distrust, I wondered just what exactly she thought I had done. Spiked it with LSD? Truth serum? Spanish fly? But she didn't say anything--I guess she didn't figure it would have made any difference. I just told her to make the servings small.

It was late, past the time when we had said that we would start, and still we couldn't because Crindall hadn't darkened the door yet. Butler was agitated now. I could see him out of the corner of my eye.
Earl would say something to him and he would nod, but I knew that he wasn't listening; he was watching the door. Fisher looked at his watch. Billy looked at me and I went over and got some punch and chugged it. Every man has his crutch. Let Crindall come. I'd eventually be ready for him. I knew what was going to happen, how I was going to wear away crust and get at the kernel of everyone's pale, unattractive, fetid self that was wallowing underneath, teeming with unfulfilled dreams, secret fears, and everything else in the dregs of the human psyche. More punch and I would be ready.

"Let's wait a couple more minutes for Mr. Crindall," I announced. "He knows that he's supposed to come."

"What if he doesn't?" asked Butler.

"We can make it without him, but it won't be as good."

A couple more minutes went by. I had started across the room to tell Billy that maybe he should ride the bike over and see if "Crindall the Terrible" was even home. I got about half-way across the room when the door burst open. I had my back to it and I couldn't see who it was, but I took one look at Butler and I knew. Critical mass in place, reactor set, temperature rising, countdown to nuclear fission.

He stood there, looking like James Cagney used to look just before he rearranged someone's face. I turned around slowly, deliberately, like they taught me in Boy Scouts if I should ever see a rattle snake, avoiding sudden moves to keep him from striking.

"Mr. Crindall, you're just in time," I said. "We almost had to start without you."

Nothing. He just stood and looked around the room. One of Butler's
kids started to cry and Ellen took her down the hall into one of the bedrooms.

"Sit yourself down," I said, indicating with my hand where the only untaken chair was. I didn't have to. It was the only chair that was away from the others. I didn't know if the rest of the folks had unconsciously moved together, leaving this one chair apart, but it was conspicuously apart and gave the impression that battle lines had already been drawn.

"I just want to know one Goddamn thing," he said. "You do this?"
He held up the letter, torn, smudged, and dog-eared.

"What does it say?!" I asked with a feigned innocence, transparent as glass, but I wanted him to explain. I thought it would do him good.

"It says that there are two Goddamn lawyers that are going to prosecute me because I shot at Tyson--that's you, ain't it?--unless I come to this meeting." He waited, but I wasn't sure for what. An apology?

"I'm Tyson," I said. "You should be more careful who you shoot at."

"Next time maybe I won't miss."

"Maybe there won't be a next time--but as long as you're here, why don't we get started, all right?"

"I ain't staying."

"Mr. Crindall, I don't have anything against you right now except you drink too much and that's what gets you into trouble. But let me tell you one thing. If you don't sit your ass down in that chair, you'll
wish that you never saw me. You'll never dream the legal trouble that you will find yourself in. The choice is up to you."

He kept standing, not certain if he believed what I said. That made two of us. Then, slowly, deliberately, with pomp and circumstances that would have befit the Shaw of Iran, he went over and sat. Billy leaned back against the wall, amazed. I could feel everyone watching me. Now to move into something--anything--that would turn the attention away from Crindall.

"All right," I started, "we're here tonight for a specific reason. There's been some problems between people who have to live together and it's up to those people to find some way to work things out." So far, so good.

"Now I realize that when someone pisses you off, the most natural thing is to do exactly what happened between some of you here. You try to settle it by force. But what you don't realize is that we do that--and I do it, too--because it's hard to know what the real reason is for what we're feeling. It's like when you have chills from a fever, but you don't know if you've got the flu, a cold, or if it's something you ate, right?" No response. They were still watching, still waiting for something that they expected to happen, something that would deal with Crindall and Butler and the road. This was the national anthem before the kickoff.

"What we're going to do tonight is a little game that can help you understand yourselves a little better. It's called acting out and it will help us see the way we look to those around us and show them how we feel about ourselves. Once we know each other better, we can start to work on
some of the things that are going on, okay?" Everyone was still watching, looking uncomfortable as if they were about to undress in front of each other. It made me think of the first day in PE class in high school when I was small and shy and nervous about going in to take my shower with all the seniors in the shower room because my legs and chest were smooth.

"Now first pour Mr. Crindall a little punch just to keep his whistle wet, and we'll try a few things here. I think you'll like it," I added, trying to overcome the ominous inertia that seemed to have everyone riveted fast to the floor.

Mary Freeman brought Crindall a glass and he took it grudgingly and immediately set it down without touching it. He looked out at the others with eyes that alternated distrust, disinterest, and always an ocean of belligerence.

"Now," I continued, "let's start with me. Most of you know me a little, but you haven't gotten to know me real well. What I'm going to try to do is to act out something. Like charades. I'm going to act out how I felt when I first came up here, and then we can see what that tells you about me."

I pulled the chair out a little towards the middle of the room and sat down. I looked around to see if they all were watching, something that I should have taken for granted, but I wanted to be sure. Then I started by reaching down and picking up some imaginary dirt from off the floor and tried to rub it into my face and arms.

"I sure want to be dirty," I said in a voice that came out a little
higher than I would have liked, even though I was trying to sound a little theatrical and maybe it was all right. "If they know I'm from the city they'll make fun of me and not like me hanging around, and they'll say that I'm not a man. But if I'm real dirty that'll make 'em think that I'm from the country and they'll like me and trust me."

Earl let out a snort like he was a little amused. The rest just watched with what I thought was a little bit of fascination. Like when you see a mime on the sidewalk for the first time and can't help stopping because it's unusual.

"And the way I talk. That'll really put them off. They don't know that I can even talk like Shakespeare," I said and then did the only piece of anything that I knew which was a soggy little chunk from Romeo and Juliet, trying to sound as close to Lionel Barrymore as I could.

"Shit," burst out Robbie Watts, but he was amused and the expletive sounded complimentary. A few of the others laughed. Only Crindall wasn't watching now. He would look up sometimes, and then stare at the floor again, obviously trying to get as much mileage as he could out of his sulking routine. He was an amazing martyr. He probably would have agreed that being prosecuted by those Jewish lawyers from Anchorage would have been better than being made to sit through this. But then I was glad that no one asked him.

"But," the show contined, "I think that if I talk like I've been to college they'll think that I'm being uppity and maybe out to make fun of them. So I reckon," I said, making the last syllable explode in the
same way Minnie Pearl says "How-DEE" at the Opera House in Nashville, "that if I'm dirty and don't use good English, maybe they'll think that I'm a good ol' boy. I mean that's what I want 'em to think. Otherwise, why would I have come up to this place?"

I dropped my head and fell out of character to show that the impromptu was over. Billy started clapping and so did Robbie and Earl. Butler just looked amazed. I pulled my seat back to the edge of the circle, although it was more in Crindall's direction, because I wanted to try and break up the way things had settled when he first came in.

"Now, you know I'm no actor, but what I have acted out has something to do with the way I feel about things, or at least the way I felt. Let's talk a little about what some of the things were," I took a pretty big draw on my punch glass and began to realize that I was getting a buzz and feeling a lot more loose, and I wondered how the rest of them were feeling. Probably with their old stone livers they could have drunk one of those fifths straight and it would have been like drinking Geritol for them. I didn't want them drunk. I just wanted a few inhibitions broken down like those of mine that were beginning to come down like the walls of Jericho.

No one said anything, making me decide that I'd better get a little more specific in my requests. Point the finger.

"Robbie," I said. "Let's start with you. What did that little act tell you about me?"

He had been looking at me when I called his name, and now that he
had been spotlighted, his eyes fell and he began to squirm. I waited as long as I felt I could without helping him, without doing something to break the silence.

Finally he said, "I dunno."

"But you laughed, didn't you?"

"Yeah, 'cause it was funny the way you was talking funny."

"What about the other things? Were they funny?"

"Yeah, some of them were kinda funny."

"Why were they funny?" I prodded as gently as I could, trying not to show how frustrated I was becoming.

"I dunno."

"Okay," I said, "let me ask you one more thing. Were they funny because they were things that I really should have been worrying about? I mean were they real things?"

He paused for another long, squirming silence. Dear God, please let him say something.

"We ain't all that dirty up here, you know, most of us ain't. Not all the time. I get dirty at work changing tires, but I always wash up after I get back home."

"Then I had the wrong idea about you folks up here, right?"

"Some of 'em, yeah."

"Then why was I so worried about the whole thing if it wasn't even true?" I took my attention off Robbie and looked around the room.

"'Cause I guess you wanted to be 'cepted up here;" I heard Pa Fisher say.
"Would you have accepted me just on if I'd have been dirty or clean?"

"Hell yes!" said Butler. "We accept Earl and he's the dirtiest son of a bitch that I know." Pa Fisher roared so hard that he almost tipped his chair over backwards. The thought struck me--what if he had fallen and hurt his back and couldn't have done his manly ritual with Ma for awhile? I probably would have been up to get a medal of outstanding service from Planned Parenthood.

Earl, who I think was a bit surprised that he had been tossed so suddenly into the arena, laughed, too. But then what else could he do? Maybe the punch was working. It sure was with me.

"Butler, you wouldn't know your ass from a hot rock," he said.

I could feel the tension begin to unwind a little, but only a little. It was still there and I knew it would stay as long as Crindall was there and as long as we still hadn't talked about the cabin and the road and Butler's truck.

"Pete," Billy asked from the back of the room, "is what you're trying to say that you were worried about what people would think of you because you thought that they wouldn't like you the way that you were?"

"Would that have been a problem?"

"Let me just say right now that I don't give a damn what a man looks like or talks like, if he can look me in the eyes square, you know what I mean, honest-like," Butler said firmly, making me think that somehow I hadn't given him credit for the great humanitarian that he apparently was. At least it sounded good.
"But Ron," Robbie said. "I know some guys that would pretty hear shoot a long hair on sight no matter if he was honest or not, if they got half a chance."

"But that's not me," Butler answered.

"Then what is you?" I asked, proudly ungrammatical.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that why don't you show all of us a little what it's like to be you. Act out a little of yourself that shows exactly how you see yourself."

"I wouldn't know how to do that," he said. "I've never done something like that before."

"Come on now," I coaxed. "I did it. It doesn't have to be fancy. We aren't in the movies. Just tell what's important in your life. It's easy. You can just list something if you want to. Come on, stand up. Just list some things." He stood up slowly and embarrassedly and I took the opportunity to grab his chair and move it toward the center of the circle.

He sat down on it and looked around at everybody before he let out an explosive, self-conscious laugh.

"I don't know what to say," he giggled. "I've never done this before."

"I'll help you get started," I said. "Repeat after me, all right?"

He nodded.

"I, Ron Butler..."
"I, Ron Butler..."

"Am a son of a bitch," I said, while Earl roared and Crindall let out a sigh of disgust.

"Hell, I can't say that," Butler protested.

"You don't have to 'cause everyone knows it's the damn truth," Earl fired back with timing better than Bob Hope had ever had. Funny bunch these homesteaders.

"Okay Ron," I said, "if that's not the truth, what is the truth about yourself?"

He thought for minute, more seriously now, and I figured that this time he wanted to say something deeper, or at least as deep as he felt he could.

"I want to be a good father for my youngsters," he said quietly.

"I want to make enough for them."

"Alright," I answered, a little more quietly myself, trying to show that there had been a change in the message and that we were on our way. "Now suppose that you could write about yourself. I mean after your life was over—like those eulogies that you can read in the paper—what kinds of things would you like to say about your life?"

He hesitated.

"I'm not much good when it comes to talking about myself. Better ask Ellen. She'd be better at it than me."

"No," I said. "It has to be you because you are the only one who really knows yourself."
Another pause, less painful because I knew that he was thinking and that he would probably say something serious.

"I guess that I'd say that Ron Butler was a man who tried to do his best for his family. He worked real hard to make sure that they had enough things to keep 'em through the winter and that they was always warm enough." He thought a second or two more before he continued. "He tried to be a good man, though he did lose his temper more than he should and did drink his health down too much sometimes."

"Anything more?"

"No, I guess not, except he tried to be a good neighbor most of the time when he could. That's all."

I nodded and Butler dragged his chair back to where it had been, and Ellen, who had returned and was trying not to show that she had gotten misty, patted his hand.

I waited a couple seconds, hoping that it would all sink in. I also took another sip from my punch and I noticed that most everybody's glass was empty. That meant that there was a good chance that it would be easier for some of the others to talk, that a few inhibitions had been weakened. Alcohol's wonderful truth serum.

"Thanks Ron," I said. "Now I want to ask the rest of you how many of you recognized Ron from what he said about himself. Do you see him the same way he sees himself in what's important?"

Earl nodded and so did Robbie.

"I know what it's like to be concerned about youngsters," Pa Fisher
added. Immediately my mind spun through his comment on about three different levels, and two of the three were funny. I tried not to laugh at the thought of Pa Fisher ever being the least concerned when his wife announced that she was in the family way—again. I could picture him shrugging his mammoth shoulders and drawling out, "So what else is new? Ought to be used to it by now, woman."

"From what I know of Ron, I think that he showed pretty well how much his family means to him. I can understand that." I had forgotten Ralph Freeman was even in the room until he spoke, but when I turned and saw him standing against the wall near the kitchen door, it made me feel good.

"Let's find out about someone else," I said. "How about you, Earl? I don't know much about you myself, and I figure that this is as good a time as any. Whadda you say?"

"Me?" he looked up like he'd been shot. "Hell, boy, I ain't got nothing to say. Nothing at all."

"Earl, you're a liar," I said, surprising myself a little bit by the way that it came out so crisply and without restraint.

His eyes narrowed. I could plainly see that "liar" was a poison word and I was immediately sorry that it was what had come out.

"What I mean, Earl, is that there is something about you that you could tell. It's something that you've told me before a couple of times. Come on. Think back."

"I don't remember nothing that I've told you that was of any matter," he said.
"How's your health today?"

"I felt just plain damn bad this morning, but better now. Thought that Freeman boy liked to kill me off on that crazy motorcycle ride up to here."

I caught a look at Billy over Earl's shoulder and he grinned and made his hand like it was opening a throttle on a bike wide open. I had to camouflage a laugh into a cough, which wasn't done very skillfully but it got me by.

"You worry about your health?" I asked.

"I don't worry about it much of the time, but it sure as hell don't give me much comfort when I have one of my spells."

"What do you think about most when you're having one of your spells?"

"I don't know. It just concerns me. What would happen if I got really bad, bad enough where I had to get some help? There ain't no possible way that I could even get over this far without help, and you're the nearest folks around, Ralph. I ain't like your boys here who can git where they want, no matter what."

"You say sometimes you feel a little isolated then," trying to explain it in a different way so it would seem more universal to the rest of them and not just Earl's problem.

"You're Goddamn right," he said. "I mean I don't want folks looking in on me and trying to tell me what to do; but then if I was in a fix and couldn't git out, well, you know what the hell I mean."
"Can you understand what this man is saying?" I asked. Most of them nodded, except Crindall who was staring at the floor, still looking like he was under house arrest. "Then let me try and add up a little bit of what I hear you folks saying. Mr. Butler has said that he needs people to know that he's an honest man and to know that he is a good family man." Butler nodded and looked a little pleased that his sputtering impromptu could have resulted in so positive a picture of the man, even though I had taken a few liberties in the translation. But that was my privilege. After all, it was my gig. "And Pa Fisher said the same thing about his family right? Okay, now that says something very important about you people here—in fact, it says something about all people. It says that no matter how independent everyone is, we still all have certain needs. That's what Earl said. Earl's not saying that he needs someone to look after him. Hell, he's as independent as a cat—but he still needs someone to come through for him when the chips are down.

"Let me tell you something," I said, trying not to make it all sound too clinical. "No matter who you are or what you do or where you live, you all have some basic needs that must be met somehow or else you end up ripping each other off or acting crazy because you aren't at peace with yourselves." I stopped to drain the punch out of my glass, and when I put it down, I saw Mary had picked up the pitcher and was pouring everybody another round. God help us!

"Okay," I continued, "the need that you folks are telling me about is that you want to be needed. Cared about in some way. Your
families depend on a couple of you; others like Earl need to have friends that they can depend on. This is the thing that screws most people up. It's this needing to be needed thing. 'Cause when it's not being met, the people will do other sorts of crap to tell themselves and others they don't need nothing or nobody. Not because they don't, but just because if they say they don't, they won't have to admit to themselves they're lacking something."

"You said that everybody feels this thing?" Robbie asked. "What if I don't feel nothing like that?"

"All right, all right," I said, getting my bearings. "It could either mean that your need is being met, or that you are denying to yourself that you have it and are dealing with it some other way. Like a man who has an old lady that won't let him have a grab when he wants it, so he gets so uptight that he goes out and works his butt off digging a ditch or something, or beats his kids when they smart off. That's called projection because you're taking one thing that's bad and working it out on something else that never did anything to you. You might be so pissed that you go out and kick the snot out of the dog because of your old lady."

"I hope to tell you that it ain't just with men," added Ma Fisher who had come alive with the thrust of the topic. "When I get upset or I don't think that something was right with me, I'll wail hot hell on them kids when they've hardly done a thing. I mean I'll raise welts on their little bottoms." The only little bottom I could think of while she was talking was Linda's and that started another whole thought process.
I had to labor for a couple of seconds not to succumb, at least not until later. I figured that I was thinking that way because I could feel my head swimming, and I tried even harder to concentrate since Crindall still loomed on the horizon and when it came to dealing with him, I wanted to be functional. Or whatever.

"Do you ever do anything else when you're frustrated?" I asked.

"Sometimes I go through and clean the house--more than once sometimes, too."

Suddenly I could see it all. Even though I had declined the one invitation I had had to go to Fisher's house, I could still see it. Pa Fisher had just gotten home from the railroad, gotten his wife pregnant, and then had just enough time to grab a clean pair of overalls and a can of beer before heading back to the tundra. Within seconds after his exodus, I could see the welts begin to rise on all the little bottoms and then a great pillar of cloud begin to form as Ma tries to work out her frustrations with a therapeutic dust cloth. Pa probably just thought that she was a good housekeeper and a rigid disciplinarian. How on earth could he have known that she was a raving neurotic who, if forced to bear one more child for this good ol' boy with railroad grease caked under his fingernails, wouldn't only raise welts on the remnant of his seed--she would probably murder them. Okay, so my mind was wandering. It proved a point to me, didn't it? Of course it did. These people understood some things. They had to deal with problems and frustrations. Their only shortcoming was that some amateur shrink hadn't given them names to call everything that they had been feeling.
"That's projection when you clean the house like that. Everybody does it in their own ways."

"What happens when people don't make projections into themselves?"
Robbie asked, bastardizing the term with unwitting charm.

"A couple different things can, I think," I answered, trying desperately to think of anything that might sound convincing. "What I mean is that if there is something that is upsetting enough to a person and he doesn't find a way to get rid of it--I mean, he just holds it inside--it can ruin him. Completely blow him out. High blood pressure, ulcers, nervous breakdown--all kinds of things. Bad things. You know, the pits."

I turned and looked at Crindall. He was still there, in the same position that he had been in since he had slumped into the chair. He hadn't said anything and I was sure that he wouldn't if he had his way. But then, that was his problem. He had been getting his way and when I realized that he was on the verge of getting it again, I felt a little angry. In fact, I knew that it was time to complete the orchestration of this little gathering by dragging him into it. I was ready. Hell, I was more than ready.

"Now that we've talked a little bit about needs and what can happen if they aren't met and what people do when they aren't, let's take this whole thing and make it practical. All right?" I asked. "I mean, let's see if we can make it fit a little better into our situation here, okay?"
Sure it was okay. I don't know if they were where I was, but I figured that they couldn't be too far behind. I mean I was beginning to like
these people as if I had known them for years, and if somebody would have suggested it, I would have probably broken into a community version of Auld Lang Syne. So bring on the lions and tigers and wild bears. I was ready for Crindall.

"There have been some pretty lousy things that have happened around this place with some of us. I think that there's a reason for what happened that we can understand a little better after what we all talked about already. But what I would like to do is hear from Mr. Crindall and find out what he thinks about what we've talked about up to now."

I turned and looked at him again, and now he was looking back at me with the same look he must have had that afternoon when he fired the shots, even though I couldn't see it. It was an intense, burning stare that made him look explosive.

"Mr. Crindall," I urged, hoping that by taking the offensive it would--well, how should I know? For just a split second it had seemed like a good plan. "Don't you have something that you'd like to say?"

"I think that you're all full of shit. All you and this head shit. If I didn't think that you were such a Goddamn little pimp and would make trouble for me about that shot, I wouldn't have sat here one stinking minute."

Mrs. Butler had made another dash for one of the rooms down the hall with the two younger children in tow. Everyone else just looked dazed like when something has wrecked a good celebration and nobody knows exactly how to react.

"Well," I said. "That's a fine start."
"You fools can sit around here and talk for the rest of the night but that doesn't change a damn thing. I can do what I want to, and if anybody comes on my property, I can do what I want with them. And that goes for the road, too. That was my property and my road and I didn't much like the traffic through there anyway. But it sure as hell ain't your business." He looked around at everyone, his face and neck red and his eyes still angry and explosive.

Then I remembered Butler. As soon as I took my eyes off Crindall I saw him and I knew that something better happen, something that would move beyond or behind or above wherever we were and change things. I didn't know what, but it had to happen quickly. Butler had taken all he was going to. I could see that. His hands were gripping the arms of the chair, making his knuckles white, and in his frame I could see the same explosive potential, one of two critical masses moving nearer and nearer to the emotional point where they would erupt into a brilliant display of violent energy.

"Crindall," I said. "You're joking when everybody's trying to be serious. Let's cut it with the jokes."

"The hell I was joking. I'll show you how joking I am."

God help me--didn't I know when to stop?

"Now, if you were really as big a Yukon pisser as you're trying to show, you wouldn't have waited for an opportunity to say all that. You would have done it right off. You see, Al, that's what I figure to be your biggest problem. You're always trying to be so damn theatrical. So dramatic. Why don't we try to be real with each other for a change."
Listen, I've been involved with youth gangs in Boyle Heights and you wouldn't raise a pimple on their butts. So cut the show. What are you really all about? You're man enough to tell me that, aren't you?"

"I'm man enough to break your fucking head off," he said.

"We've all seen the act before, Al. All of us. And nobody's impressed. You see? Nobody." I didn't wait for an answer from the gallery.

Crindall paused for a minute, off balance, not sure what to do. Then he settled back into his chair and into the sulking again; but anything was a blessing. For Butler's sake, at least. Besides, maybe now, if the anger was even a little spent, maybe there could be a little space inside the wall, behind the shell that was Crindall and that made him so resilient.

"Al," I said, now trying to take on a more gentle tone, "I have heard what you said. Really I have. Not just this time, but every other time that I've been around you. Now you may tell me how you are, but you can't tell me how you really are. You keep telling me and everybody else around here that you don't give a damn about them, but the fact is that if you didn't give a damn, why would you have to tell anybody? Why would you have to worry about it? Am I right?" He didn't answer.

"It's the difference between talking a good game and playing a good game. Talking's fine as long as you can keep folks believing, but playing is the best because that's the part that's real. I don't believe your talking anymore. Not only because I don't think that it's saying what you
really mean, but because I choose not to believe it. From everything I have heard about you—and it's a lot—I knew you could handle yourself. Okay, you were a hot shot bomber pilot during the war. You were an expert hunter, a great outdoorsman. You're the kind of guy that's every kid's idol. You're a damn hero. A combination of Daniel Boone, Jimmy Stewart, and Eddie Rickenbacker. If I let myself, I would be scared half to death by you. But I'm not." I got up and started to pace. I don't know why—it just felt better, even though I had to concentrate to keep my balance.

"No, I'm not afraid of you. I'm just a little confused. That's all—just confused. I just can't figure out what the hell is with you. That's all I ask. Just tell me where you're coming from. Can you do that?"

I turned to him and held my hands out at my sides almost like someone pleading for mercy. I wasn't being rhetorical. I was asking him a genuine question, a gut-level, basic-issue question.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I don't have to explain nothing to you."

"No," I said. "You don't have to explain nothing, but let me explain something to you. I've gotten to know these people up here in a couple of months. They're people, Al, just like you. They've got things about them that aren't perfect. Some drink too much. Ron over there has got one hell of a temper as you well know. I can understand that, though, because I have a temper, too. I'm not better off than any of these people. Probably worse than some. Anyway, I've learned a lot from them. But there's a difference between them and you. One hot hell of a difference. These are
folks who have found out that to make life mean anything they've got to care about other people. Now I came up here to see Billy because I had to get away from all the things that had happened to me at home. I probably should have faced up to them, but I didn't. When I got here I felt strange because I didn't understand everything that was coming down. I felt really different. Out-of-it different. These folks here have taught me a lesson that I needed to learn. They taught me what it takes for a man to survive in his environment. How to make it. Now I feel that I owe them something, and in a way I do, but in a bigger way I don't, because they know that I'll do anything I can to help them whenever I can. Anytime. And that I'll always be glad to see them. And I know that some of them feel the same way.

"But what the hell do I have to do to get through to you? I'd love to hear about your war stories. I'd give anything to go hunting with you sometime. I'd love to see you coming and feel good about it. Don't fool yourself, Al. These folks respect you. They think you're a man. In fact, they think that you're as big a son of a bitch as you want them to think. And they'd help you out if they thought you needed it and if they thought you'd let them. You've earned their respect, but they don't give a damn about you as a person because they know that they won't get anything in return except a blocked road and a shot-up truck and all the other shit that you have given everybody. All I would need is to see that somewhere behind that crusty image that everybody around here believes is really you, all I would need is to see a picture, just the tiniest peek
that would let me know that if I showed I was willing to be a friend to you, you wouldn't screw it all up. Al, I'd slap you on the back anytime. Hell, I'd even help you build your damn cabin on the road. I'd help you build it on the side of McKinley if you wanted. I'd do it because I think that you're the loneliest man in the whole Susitna Valley, but you're too proud to admit it to yourself. I don't care what you think now. At least you know where I stand."

Where had I been? The sermon was over and I was standing in the center of the room. People were sitting all around, watching silently, but what else were they feeling? Were they confused? Amazed? I didn't know. I couldn't tell how long I had been talking. I didn't even remember everything that I had said. But in front of me, looking at me was Crindall.

I looked around the room again, I guess to try and find my location in time and space, but nobody was helping. Nobody could help. As I turned back to Crindall, I could see he was agitated. He was rubbing his hands together, slowly, with enough force to make the roughness of the callousesrubbing against each other audible. It was almost a sanding sound, the wearing away of dead skin. He kept looking at me, his expression the same but different, also, in a way I didn't understand. I wanted to say something, but it had been said. "Involvement" the books had said. The counselor had become involved with his patient.

I turned back away from Crindall. I didn't know what to do next, but I couldn't think with him watching me. As soon as my back was
to him I heard a sound, the sound of a voice, but a voice without speech. The sound of air that wouldn't modulate, wouldn't create words. I turned around and faced him again. I could see him moving his lips and I could hear him breathing, trying to make words, like a halfback who has just had every square inch of air forced out of him by a linebacker and he wants to cry in pain or anger but there is nothing to produce the sound.

"Easy, Al," I said. "It'll come."

I turned again and looked at Billy. He looked mystified as if he was seeing something that he couldn't believe. He had been watching Crindall, but when he saw me looking at him, he looked back without expression, like somehow he was watching characters on a stage, and I was looking at him because some script somewhere called for it, but I couldn't see beyond the footlights. The others looked a little the same. Seeing, but seeing from beyond an abyss, one that I had tried to cross, but no one was sure if I had made it. Only Crindall was sure and he couldn't explain. But then suddenly he could and as I heard his voice I turned back.

"We came up here after the war," he started slowly, deliberately, each word rough but coming a little easier, "because land was so cheap. I wanted my boy to come and help me put together a first-rate place, but he wouldn't and said that it'd kill his mother up here. That it'd be too severe for her. He said that if anything happened he would never forgive me for it. We was never close, my boy and me, 'cause I had been gone so much in the service just when he was growing up."
"During the war?" I asked.

"Then and after. I was a career man in the Air Force until I retired, and was gone a great deal, so we was never that close."

I nodded.

"But it wasn't fair. Goddamn him for what he did! To hell with him for that! It wasn't right. I would have told him to his face that it wasn't right. That it wasn't just his feelings. That I cared, too. I was the one that had lost her. I was the one that was going to be alone. He had his life. I told him that, too. I told him the whole thing and still he wouldn't come."

"Wouldn't come to what?" I asked quietly, but he hadn't heard. He was in another time and now even I realized that I could only watch and wait for him to finish.

Crindall looked around the room at all of us. Seeing, but unseeing. Almost like we were some grand tribunal that had kept him at bay until now, and now that we had captured him, we had to pass judgement on a sentence he had already been serving for years. I suddenly realized that what he was doing was defending himself, trying to explain the reason for something that none of us understood. Something his son had done after his wife had died. I figured out that much, but I knew that he hadn't touched bottom yet.

"And it was the last of winter. The snow was still deep in places. Deep enough to get yourself lost in. And it was still snowing, but I knew that I had to go out when she got her worst. I was hoping that she
would last until it got clear, but the fever came on her strong again and I knew that I had to get help. I figured that there was nothing more that I could do alone." He took a long drink from his glass and then set it back down. He didn't get it square, and it tipped over, but no one made a move. It slowly spread crimson on the floor.

"So I left. I put enough wood in the stove that it would keep her warm and I left for the lodge to call. No, that road ain't easy in the drifts. It's a hard road and I had to work it hard. I worked it hard as hell trying to get over to the lodge. And when I got there, I wasn't surprised that it was closed. They always closed it down when there was a storm, so I wasn't surprised. But I knew that Jack Larson who used to own that lodge lived there and it was the only place around where I could have called. And I seen him. I seen Jack through the window over by the bar, drunk as a cluche and still pouring. And I called to him. I called to that son of a bitch. I beat on the door with my hands and I even broke a window. I broke a window with my hand and cut myself bad until the blood came down and I had to hold it in the snow until it stopped. I yelled at him and said my wife is sicker than she can stand, and I've got to call for some help, but he didn't move. I could see that he saw me because I could see through the window that his eyes moved whenever I yelled until the cold got to my voice and it was only a growl, and then I tried to break down the door. But it was bar-latched and I couldn't do it. And Jack was just watching me, his head was rolling from side to side and then down on the bar again. I could have killed him with my bare hands."
He held out his hands and looked at them mechanically, almost like he was looking for some trace of the blood that had come from the cut. They were big, calloused hands, leathered and discolored. I don't know why, but for a second I remembered Den's hands and how they had looked that night in Santa Monica. Involved, but in a different way from Crindall's. Crindall's hands were past involvement and more than involvement. They were tools of pure survival—worn, broken, like a badge of courage that would only indicate in a small way some greater, undefined valor.

"So I walked up the road to Talkeetna. There was no trucks on the road in that weather. It took me five hours of walking until I came to where they had a phone. It must have been the mercantile there, just on this side of the crossing. And I called a doctor and he came out in his truck. A half-track I guess it was. And we went back and up the road past the lodge and as far as we could go before having to walk. We finally took off on foot and carried his bag until we come to the house. But she had already gone. An hour before, the doctor said. But the sweat was still on her face and she was still warm from the fire. And I held her and I cried until the doctor turned away and walked into the kitchen to get hisself some coffee. Her head was on my shoulder like she was asleep and like the fever had broken and she would wake up."

The tears that must have been coming for so long finally fell down his cheeks and dropped quietly into the pool of punch in front of his chair. He didn't make a sound. Once or twice he moved back and forth in his chair, a sort of rocking motion with a gentleness and slowness that had
a dream-like quality about it. But then I guess that it was a dream. And then the mood changed again as he continued. Slowly. Deliberately. Unaware of us—probably unaware of even himself.

"We had to carry her out to the woodshed 'cause the doctor said it would be dangerous to keep her in the house, especially after what she had and since I was about done myself with the cold. So I made a place for her. Some flat pieces of wood covered with all the blankets that I could find in my place. The doc didn't want to leave her. He wanted to make everything easier for me and official, but even if we'd been able to carry her to the half-track, there wasn't any room to put her down. He said he'd come later with something to get her and take care of things for me. So he left and I went out there to be with her for awhile, and all I had to take her was a candle we had saved in case we'd run out of fuel for the lanterns. So I took that out and put it beside her, and even in that light I could see her plain, and when I looked at her and thought about Jack Larson at the lodge and how if I could have called maybe she might have lasted or least I could have been with her at the end. But she died alone.

"Alone!" he shouted. "God'll punish a man for letting another man's wife die alone."

Crindall kept crying silently. He looked around the room occasionally, but mostly just at me because I was standing in front of him. He still looked without seeing and I kept asking myself how much deeper he could go before he would have to come up again. He would have to
come up again and realize that he had been apart from the people that sat and watched him. He would have to become aware of what he was saying to these folks whom he had abused for so long. That thought kept crossing my mind and it worried me. I tried to disregard it, to just let things happen, but it kept coming back.

"I wired my boy as soon as I could," he began again, but somehow the tone had changed and I noticed it. "They took Beth to Willow but they couldn't bury her until they could thaw the ground. God, I wanted them to do it. I begged them to do it, you hear? I begged them. But they had to wait. I wired for my boy to come. When I didn't get an answer I wired again. I kept sending 'Allen, your mother took sick and died and I need you up here. I need you up here, Son.' Finally I got word. I got word from my son and you know what he said? To his father? You know what he said to me? He said 'You killed her. You bury her.'

"He had no right to say that to me. I said, 'Allen, it wasn't me. Jesus, you got to believe me! I didn't do it.' I walked to Talkeetna to save her. It was Jack Larson. He could have let me use his phone. I could have gotten help. Allen, don't you know how much I loved her? Didn't you know that? You can't blame me. I did everything I could. Nearly died myself. Ask the doctor, Allen. He knows. He told me that there was nothing more that I could have done. Jesus, Allen, why don't you believe me? Why don't you come and we can talk it over. I'll help you come. I'll help pay your way. I'd pay it all but, with the cost
of taking care of your mother, I can't pay it all. You can see how I tried to take care of her. And she was happy. She told me that she was happy. Allen, you've got to believe me! I didn't kill her. Jack Larson killed her. I loved her, Allen! Goddamn you, Allen. Goddamn you if you don't believe it. Allen!" he cried, his voice cracking, and then it was over and suddenly he had to readjust his eyes to look at things and see them instead of seeing only in his mind.

Crindall looked around at the people there, and I slowly went over and took my seat. I suddenly realized how long I had been standing and that my legs were cramped. But I kept looking at Crindall. I could see him changing back, beginning to protect his vulnerability, to re-relate to those folks who were trying to seize his road and his privacy. I knew that I wanted to stop the process, to somehow force him to remain outside of himself a little longer.

"But none of that matters to any of you, now does it?" he asked, with the bitterness showing through again.

"You're damn right it doesn't. The only thing that matters to me is what are you going to do about my truck that you wrecked? That's all that matters to me."

I couldn't believe it. I looked at Butler and I still couldn't believe he had said that. I don't know how much spike he had had, but now he was drunk. I couldn't tell it so much in the way he talked, but when I looked at him I could tell, and I could have killed him for what he said. That was probably the first time that Crindall had opened up to
anyone ever. And, God, it made sense. It made so much sense what he said that I expected everyone to be changed somehow just because they heard it. I couldn't believe it. Butler, the concerned family man who had been given enough good strokes and approval to last a month, didn't seem to care that some crusty recluse had spilled his guts all over the floor. Instead, he wanted his truck fixed. I didn't know what to say to him, but I would have thought of something. Something that would have made him shut up, but I didn't have time.

Crindall didn't say anything and Butler was right back. Relentless. As if for the first time he had seen through the facade and spotted the weakness that Crindall hadn't let anyone see before, and suddenly Butler was on it, trying to tear away enough to get a foothold and a hand hold until he would be able to rip away every defense mechanism. Everything. I just couldn't understand it.

"I asked you what you're going to do about my truck. You can't cry and soft ass your way out of this. You damn well better act like a man and fess up to your responsibilities," Butler taunted, glancing sideways as he talked to see how Earl was enjoying the scene.

I started to move, but it was too late.

"Oh, God, no!" All I could see was the glass in Crindall's hand. He had picked it up quickly from where it lay on its side and was holding it cocked over his shoulder almost like a quarterback would throw a pass. A growl came from Crindall, the same animal sound that I heard at the cabin before the shot. And then the glass was gone and I heard a cry of
anger and surprise from Butler and then the sound of glass shattering against the wall. The two smaller children who were in one of the bedrooms with Ellen Butler started to cry.

I jumped out of my chair and lunged for Crindall and finally caught him in the center of the room. Billy had grabbed Butler. I didn't know what the hell to do. Butler was bleeding. His head was cut just above the right eyebrow so I guessed that the glass had hit him before it hit the wall. Crindall and I were on the floor and I was trying to hold him, trying to keep him away from Butler. He was squirming with his legs, twisting and kicking, and screaming at Butler. He lifted a knee and twisted over, bringing his leg down solid and hard, catching me in the solar plexus. I felt myself go numb and had to let go and roll over on my belly, and I thought I was going to die.

I could hear noises, but I couldn't lift my head to look. I kept trying to get some air back into my lungs, to make my chest expand and contract without my fighting to make it move at all, and to make the vomit that was somewhere below where I could feel it when my stomach would squeeze and grab stay down until I could breathe. After that I didn't care what happened.

I lay on my stomach with my head down even after I got my breath back. Butler was still there. I could hear him talking loud. He didn't sound like he was angry, just excited and still drunk. But I didn't care about him. Someone had gotten Crindall out of there, probably Billy and Ralph, while the ladies got a compress for Butler's head. I didn't want
to have to face those people again. I felt like I was trying to blame myself for something that wasn't my fault.

Billy came over and knelt by me and asked if I was all right. I nodded and told him that I just wanted to rest a little while longer. Butler was laughing, but I didn't have the faintest idea what there was to laugh about. It all just wouldn't make sense to me. I thought maybe Crindall would have gotten more civil after talking for awhile; maybe agreeing to do something that would get Butler off his back in exchange for everyone else leaving him alone. That would have been enough. But what he did and said was incredible, incredible because it fit so beautifully and made so much sense. Guilt that had been festering for years inside a man who tried to convince other folks that he was unneeding and uncaring because he wanted to believe it himself. And then he comes right to the verge of seeing himself, himself, and Butler had to do what he did, had to go against the whole damn flow. I knew right then that it was over with Crindall. After all, maybe he was right. Maybe they were all right. What difference did it make anyway?

After awhile I got up and went into my room. Mary Freeman saw me and started to follow, but I motioned her away. I lay down on the bed and looked out of the window at the sky which was now a steel-grey. I don't know when the pain in my chest stopped, but I must have fallen asleep about the same time because that was my last sensation.
Chapter XII.

There was nothing heroic about leaving, but that wasn't important. I wasn't in the mood for heroics. I felt worse than useless, worse than hopeless in a way that the strongest opiate couldn't ease.

Now I was above it, beyond Montana Creek basin with everyone who had been thrown together there. I was where the forests were almost impenetrable because they were so deeply grown. And from the porch of the cabin that Billy and I had found once when we rode the motorbike back beyond the hills that sheltered the north edge of the basin, there was nothing and everything. I didn't know how far it was back to where other people lived--ten miles maybe--and I felt the emptiness that comes from being alone and away. But I was still a mountain man and a part of the system, a bigger system than Butler and Crindall and everything that had happened the night before, which still lay upon me and pressed me, making me want to scream with rage. But I was back to being a process, a slowly growing, slowly decaying system that, like the pond which huddled in front of the cabin and up against the edge of the rise that held it, I would sustain life by my own processes of letting in and sending out until everything had changed again or until the eye of heaven decreed and all matter instantly quivered and jumped and then fused together again, according to that decree.

I didn't know who owned the cabin, but I remembered it and left for it the day after the meeting. I had taken only a sleeping bag, matches,
a knife, and my New English Bible. Mary Freeman wanted to fix me some sandwiches to put into the saddle bags on the bike, but I said no. And I left without much of an explanation. Billy knew where I was going. He offered to go along, but again I declined. I told them I just needed some time alone. I'd probably be back in a day, and if I had to stay longer, I'd hunt for wild berries or something. There was nothing to worry about. Thoreau had done it.

I had found the place and forced open the door. It was empty inside. Cold. Dirty. There was only a potbellied stove against the wall nearest the door, so I went out and gathered some wood for the night. Because the sky was now becoming dark during the latest hours. I went out onto the porch and looked across the pond and watched the forest that surrounded me and kept me isolated and protected. It seemed so strange to be like this. I tried to remember if I had ever felt this way before, if I had ever felt this self-imposed.

I had once told Karol that we should someday plan to come away together to a place where there was no need to talk, and then spend as long as we wanted there, communicating but not talking. I thought about how it would have been so easy to love her in so many ways if we had been alone, and not just alone, but apart from everything but ourselves. I tried to pass over Karol, but she kept coming back. Gently. Honestly. In a way that she probably never could have. More like I had wanted her to be than how she ever was. At least how she was now. But then, I had never loved anyone before her—not in a way that left me so vulnerable. She came back again to me and I closed my eyes and let myself
feel the blood surge as I saw her again more clearly than I had seen her for a long time. And then the scene changed, and I opened my eyes and looked at the pond and it had become dark, and I wondered how the sky had become clouded so quickly. It wasn't that I was afraid. There wouldn't be a storm because the clouds were light and full and they moved quickly, but when I closed my eyes again, they were gone.

"Why me?" I asked loudly and suddenly. "Why the hell me?" The sound echoed against the rise and then was absorbed by the forest. I listened to my voice fade and it made me want to be a preacher again, right there where I was. A voice crying in the wilderness.

"I am he that was living and now dead. Listen carefully and I will tell you of what is beyond the grave. Beyond the grave are the bones of those who have chosen to do what they could not do and to try to establish themselves against the rock. They were wise, but all their wisdom brought them nearer to their foolishness and all their foolishness brought them nearer to death; but nearness to death brought them no nearer to God. Where is the life we have lost in living, my brothers of the wood? My brothers of the common life? Those who live and die in this land of empty dreams, this land of shade and water, but no comfort...." Only words that echoed and were gone. Nothing else. There was never anything else.

I saw a water bird at the edge of the pond and heard it cry as it lifted off the water and made low circles over the pond and then flew off. Probably didn't like the noise. Probably didn't like being preached to,
being blamed for something which didn't involve it. But at least it could fly.

"And God," I said, lifting my hands to heaven and then changing my open hands with their palms up to clinched fists that I shook and shook in the face of Heaven like I imagined Job might have done as he sat with his runny sores, "God is above us, and around us, but the heavens are silent. I don't hear the thunder, I don't feel the glory of the tabernacle, the power that would burn my skin and make me tremble and feel impotent as if I am responsible in any way other than an inner way that churns and gnaws at me but does not make me feel afraid."

"I never saw anything, God. Mr. God. Do you resent me for presuming to call you by your first name, Mr. God? Jehovah? Rose of Sharon? Fairest of Ten Thousand? And what do you call me? Worm? Goat? Smuck? Drop-out theo jock? Or will you call me at all? Have you ever called me?"

I was on the other side of the pond, away from the cabin. As I looked at it, suddenly it seemed something else. A sacred place that I had come from once when I didn't know who I was--but now I couldn't go back. I could only look across the pond and shout across the water as if I was waiting for Charon with his hell boat to take me across to where I could forget my past as I bathed in the waters of Lethe, and the windows of the wooden temple would fill with fire and speak my name in a way that I could remember but never repeat. I knew that I was thinking crazy, that my mind was letting me see what could never have been there, but what-
ever I saw and whatever I felt still involved me, and so I kept looking
and kept trying to see what I could only imagine.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us
this day our daily bread, and lead us not into temptation and into
fornication and into alteration and exaltation. But lead us in the paths
of righteousness for thy name's sake. And yea though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death. Yea, though I walk through the shadow
of death with everyone. With Crindall and the gun that could have—should
have—done it except that I wasn't ready then. Mr. God, you know that I
wasn't ready then and I'm not ready now, because I haven't done everything.
I still haven't finished. I screwed up and here I am. And You are there.
In the cabin, the most holy place. And I reach out to you, heaving up
my either hand—cold as paddocks though they be—here I lift them up to
thee, for a benison to fall on our meat and on us all....

I was beyond the pond now, up on the rise that held the pond. And
I was above the cabin, and I could see down on it. It must have been
getting late, but I hadn't brought a watch. As I looked at the cabin and
above along the horizon, I wondered how high the fireweed flowers had grown
on the stalks, if they were near the top and if the frosts were already
on the way. They must be near the top, and when they reached the top,
the cold came and they died. It seemed for a second to be a worthwhile
thing to be able to tell by looking at your life when your time of destruction
had come. You could unravel your last blossom, not in defiance of something
that you couldn't control, like Prometheus holding up his chains to spite the gods, but to show, instead, that the process was complete, that the ending was necessary to justify the creation. It seemed beautiful to me in a way, but I'd have to always deny that course until I was willing to put down my chains, to change from Prometheus Bound to Prometheus Unbound. But God help me, God, please help me; I don't know how. I want to know how but I don't.

Then I saw them in my mind. Both of them. Alone with each other. Naked. Coming closer and closer. I held my breath when I saw what was happening on the cold floor. And I was away in California, planning for something that I could never have. Did I stop and turn at the very second that they started, when the idea and possibility and desire and distortion suddenly clamped them together? Did I feel something that I had never felt before, a pain that touched through all the defense mechanisms in my head and seared into the very center of my brain like a cauterizing electrode that makes the flesh twitch and burn? Did I turn away from a window at that moment, unable to imagine what was happening, thinking that the burning came from something I ate, or not enough sleep, or worrying about the weather in Carmel for the honeymoon?

"Where were You then? Where the hell were you, Mr. God? And when it was over, when they had slowly fallen away and were now side by side, couldn't I have felt a change? Couldn't I have felt the earth move? Jesus, couldn't you have moved it for me to tell me that the
universe wasn't right and that the heavens weren't smiling and that the angels were not singing celestial music? Why couldn't you have helped me understand? You must have been with them. You must have been trying to get them to realize what had happened. To understand what it really was. But they wouldn't, would they, God? Was that why there was an accident? Because they wouldn't see what had happened, what had been consumed and destroyed? Is that why he had to die? Because it happened in his pastor's study? But God, why him and not me?

"Shout, Peter!" I cried to myself. "Make him explain it to you! Make him tell you what it means!"

"But can't you see, God, our Father in Heaven? Can't You see? He didn't suffer. He was guilty and he didn't suffer. The pain was immediate and then the eyes stopped and the brain numbed and stopped. But the suffering goes on. The suffering lives with me and I take Valium and do everything I can do to stay above it, and then the scene comes and I die again, but not the way he died, but the way that kills me just enough to let me recover and feel it all over again. But what the hell am I talking about?" This had been coming so quickly that I felt confused.

I looked around again at the water below me and the circles in the pool that fish made as they touched the surface to catch an insect. I knew that I was feeling better about myself. Maybe I had been getting some outside help. I kept feeling that I shouldn't be guilty. I shouldn't blame myself for last night. If anybody should be martyred, it would be
Butler, but that couldn't be helped either. Nothing could be helped. Nothing. I knew it and understood it, but I wondered how far back it applied. Was there a statute of limitations? Dear God, how far back do I have to go before I should take responsibility for anything. Ben said that the marriage thing wasn't my fault. Butler wasn't my fault. Crindall wasn't my fault. If none of it was my fault, what would it have mattered anyway? Which was worse--having something screw up that could have worked all right and then feeling responsible? Or working your ass off for something that was beyond your control all along, only you were just too stupid to have figured it out before it was too late? All I knew was that I still felt responsible and hurt, and I let the devils rise in me again until I could think of nothing else. But at least they were mine.

"All Goddamn mine! Do you hear? I earned them!" It echoed faintly and was gone. I leaned back against the rise and put my head on my arm.

I suddenly roused because it had gotten colder. I didn't know that I had slept, but it was much later and the sky was completely cloudy and steel grey. I got up and walked stiffly back to the cabin. The cold had made my chest hurt, so I tried to rub it to make it loosen. It was tender all the way across and I could see the dark place where it was bruised, even though the light wasn't very good. Another red badge of courage that nobody could see.

I lit the kindling I had made and put some bigger pieces on top, leaning the wood that was still a little green against the stove so it would dry out. I also took the top off the potbelly so I could see the
flames and the light they scattered. It would give me enough light
to read the New Testament I had brought.

I turned to Romans 8. I remembered it, almost word for word, but
it didn't move me. I went back over it again, trying to think about what
each word meant. It made sense. It all made sense, but in a different
way—like the theory of relativity almost makes sense after you study
it enough. But you can't see it working. Or if you do, you don't know it.
And if it works, it will keeping working anyway, whether or not you know
anything about it.

I understood how nothing could separate me from the love of God.
It was impossible. I was powerless to break diplomatic relations with
God, but I couldn't see how it made any difference to me now—away, alone,
and with the heavens always silent.

But the Bible study time was over. It was time for the worship
service. My stomach gnawed at me, like it had all those times in church
while I cautiously looked back over my shoulder at the balcony rail, turning
my head until I could see the clock out of the corner of my eye, waiting
for both hands to be straight up so we could go home and have dinner. And
now it was that time again. It was time for me. God and I. Silent God.
Passive God. God, whose plan for me I had proxied away and spent as best
I could, but obviously not good enough.

"I want to welcome you all here this evening to vespers. Our ways
are informal here, but we try to conduct ourselves with a feeling of
reverence. We will start with a scripture reading. Turning in our Bibles,
we will be reading from II Corinthians 1:8,9. 'In saying this, we should like you to know, dear friends, how serious was the trouble that came upon us in the province of Asia. The burden of it was far too heavy for us to bear, so heavy that we even despaired of life. Indeed, we felt in our hearts that we had received a death sentence.' What the apostle is trying to tell us in this passage is that if you want to have a better time while on your missionary journeys, call ahead and make reservations.

"Now regarding the offerings, I have been asked by one of the dear brothers to mention some desperate needs we have and to urge you to be generous in accordance with how the Lord has blessed. First, there is the matter of the carpet in the pastor's study--it is much too old and worn in spots. He was telling me just the other day that it had become quite painful for him to do any more pre-marriage counseling because the carpet had gotten so bad. He said it irritated his shoulders and back. And since he is doing such a wonderful work in the community with our young people, and since he obviously works so well with them, I urge you to help with his much needed project in the form of a freewill love offering for your pastor.

"Now brothers and sisters, there is also the matter of church expense. Ever since we had the fluorescent fixtures put behind our lovely stained glass windows, our utility costs have skyrocketed. If we don't manage to climb back into the black, we will not only have to cut back on lighting, but on the use of our air conditioning during the summer months. Please be aware of this important need."
"Finally, beloved, our young people have been hard at work renovating an old garage next to the church to use as a youth center for evening get-togethers and good wholesome fellowship. Now I talked to one of the boys last night and he told me that the only two things that they still need to make this place complete is a pool table and a water bed. I know that this may sound strange to you, but I have been assured that they will only play 'Bible Billiards' which means that you have to quote a Bible verse with the same number as the ball you hit in. They've told me it is helping them learn scripture in a terrific way.

"As to the bed, I have their assurances that it will only be used if it is ever necessary to bed down a raving dope addict for the night. In a way, it is an integral part of their community outreach. Let's remember these projects today as we give generously."

No lightning yet? What are you waiting for, God? This is blasphemy. Desecration. Haven't you read Fox's Book of Martyrs? People were poured full of molten lead and then filed down into coffee tables during the Middle Ages for less than this.

"And now for the message of the hour. We will be discussing the story of the Good Samaritan. You remember, it's about this guy who almost gets wasted by some robbers on the Hollywood Freeway up by Silverado. And a city councilman drives by, and a couple other folks go by, but nobody stops. But finally somebody does and helps him and takes him to the free clinic and then to the Holiday Inn and pays for the whole thing. And he was a man that was despised by the race of the wounded
man, but he was still willing to help. And those around who heard this story were deeply moved and vowed to change their lives and truly care about their fellow man. What they didn't know was that the Good Samaritan had gone home and written the entire thing off his income tax."

I felt sick to my stomach, and I wanted to purge myself of all this, but it wasn't possible. I couldn't get away. I couldn't goad myself into not believing what I had to believe. But the poison was still there. I could taste it on the back of my tongue.

"The moral of this story is that if you're going to help somebody, just be sure you don't forget to save the receipts."

The fire was almost out in the stove, but I could still see. There must have been a moon out. I thought for one half-second about the last moon I really remembered seeing--Malibu, on the beach with Dan--and how it had come up slowly, orange and discolored through the inversion layer over Los Angeles. But then I was back again and alone, and everything was distorted again, and the vague apprehension that I couldn't control what was happening to me began to rise again like it had been doing all day.

"Dear God, I'm burning up here. I can feel it. I can feel it all over me. But I don't want no deals. Do you hear me? I don't want no Goddamn deals. I've played by your rules. I've tried to do the right thing. All my life I've tried to do the right thing. And what the hell did it get me? Do you hear? What did it get me? Why did you even let me try if you knew that it wouldn't do any good?"
"No, no. Not this again. I'm not going to pretend that it doesn't matter. I did that with the bitch. It mattered. Don't get lightweight with me. It almost killed me. So I don't want any deals. I won't be put off this time! Do you hear me?"

No longer did anything mean anything.

"I won't be put off! Do you hear me?!

It wasn't even a voice but a scream and it shook the cabin. I was aware and unaware. I was inside myself and completely above myself, looking down as I screamed and shook and was not able to remember who I was or where I was.

And then I knew that I was trapped. I couldn't see the door. The cabin was completely dark now. I had been able to see before but not now, and I ran around until I would hit a wall and feel the force sting my face and then make it numb. I would grope for the door, but it wasn't there. If I could only get outside, away from whatever was inside the cabin with me, whatever was making me like this. If I could get outside and walk along the edge of the pond or climb the rise where I was during the afternoon and then look back at the cabin, it would be all right. I wouldn't make demands of God then. I would just let myself unwind and calm down and watch the moon make reflections on the water. It would be alright then. It would be peaceful and natural. But I had to get out. I would die inside. I was dying already, killing myself by inches and growing more and more crazy until I couldn't take anymore—and it would always be that way. I would never get away from the devils that made me lose control of myself.
"Oh my God! My God, get me out of here!"

Suddenly the moon was out again and in a second I saw where the window was, and in one motion, I broke through it with both fists. I felt the teeth of the broken pane tear my arms and the feeling made me scream as I put my shoulder through the frame and pushed until I felt the rest of the window break out and I fell to the ground on top of the broken glass, and then jumped up and ran toward the pond, stumbling and frantic. And then the icy water filled my nose and covered my face and numbed my arms as I bowed on the bank and let the upper part of my body float face-down in the water. I turned over to gasp for air, and then I was down in the water again until I could think of nothing but the water and the coldness as it slowly numbed away the pain in my arms.

After several minutes, I leaned back until I was upright again, holding my arms above my head and letting the water drip down my elbows until it wasn't water dripping anymore, but blood. And I held my arms to my cheeks until they were wet, and then I held them to my nose and tried to smell the blood coming more slowly from the cuts, and then I watched it in the moonlight until it dripped off my elbows onto the ground. It all was becoming a process again, and I waited and waited, even after the pain came back into my hands and made me grunt and grind my teeth, waited until everything became a process again. And then I stuck my face back into the pond until it was numb, and then let it tingle and ache and make me feel like I had returned from the dead.
I kept baptising myself until the sky got the slightest tinge of pink, until I lay down on the bank of the pond and slept, until I knew that I was part of some process again.
Chapter XIII.

It was late morning and the sun was already high when the dull ache in my arms finally drilled through to my awareness, and I sat up by the edge of the lake and felt my head and arms explode. I leaned back over towards the lake and soaked my arms up to the elbows in the water until they became numb again. Turning my head, I looked behind me at the cabin and I could see the broken window frame, jagged and angry.

It frightened me to think about what had happened, because it made me have to admit to myself that it had all been something that I couldn't control. Like before, once the feeling started rising and I felt my pulse beating inside my head and my breath got short, it was already too late to stop. But I still didn't know why. Why was it like that? Finally, ultimately, why? Even now the pain in my arms was alive again and searing, and I could account for it because I could see the cause. But this other pain--this sense of wild motion without pattern that made me curse God when I should be seeking Him, clawing for some glimmer, some damn morsel of something out beyond myself--it still hadn't come to mean anything.

I lay back down to make my head stop pounding and watched the sky, trying to concentrate on seeing as deeply into the blue as I could until I imagined that the sky was not blue anymore at all, but black, and I was above the blue and could look down on it. And then slowly I would drift back down into the blue, from shade to shade until I was somewhere in the
middle with blue above and below me. And then the pain came again and
I had to lean over and soak my arms in the water until they went numb.

I lay back down and closed my eyes, and from somewhere I saw
Denny, hands folded, kneeling in his small apartment in the bowels of
Santa Monica, and I could hear him pray like I heard him that night.
But it was different. It was for me this time. For me. The sophisticated
theo jock, apostle to the Alaskans, preacher of the lake, now lying
crucified on the shore, with scars in his hands and a knee wound in the
solar plexus. I could hear him saying something, over and over, but
I couldn't make it out. It was repetitious, like a chant, and I could
see his lips move and hear his voice, and I could see his hands gripped
together, tightly, passionately, urgently, like we had held each other that
night on the beach, as if there were something vital that had to be com­
municated and understood. And still I could hear his voice and I knew
that he was praying for me.

"Dear God, what is he saying?" I heard myself say from somewhere
beyond my senses. But all I could see was blue and from somewhere behind
the blue was Den. Then the pain came again, and I opened my eyes and
felt the sweat on my forehead and under my eyes, and I had to blink it
away because the salt burned. I didn't want to have to raise my arms to
wipe it away.

Now I deliberately tried to think of Den and the same image came
to me that had come before. The room. His hands looking like the praying
hands in the Durer painting. And his saying that it didn't matter what.
That the whole Goddamn thing didn't matter, or didn't matter in the way I thought it should. That God didn't require performance. Did Den say that? No. He didn't. God requires performance. I knew that. God requires every ounce of performance I could ever muster. Is that what Den said? No, that's what I said. And I wanted to believe it. God, I wanted to believe it because it would make everything mean something. I would know that I simply hadn't measured up, that I may have thought I had, but now I was being shown that I hadn't. That was why the heavens were silent. If I had succeeded somehow, if tongues of fire had fallen on me and all those around me, I would have known. There would have been singing. The heavens would have parted back like a scroll and I could have seen the throne of God. But I hadn't. And I didn't deserve to. The only thing I didn't understand was how any of it could have been different. I only knew that it should have been somehow. My dealings with those sons of bitches should have been different. And then I saw Denny, working on some Ford, adjusting somebody's grimy carburetor, and the whole thing didn't make any more sense to me than before. He measured up a hell of a lot less than I did, but for some reason, he was exempted. He knew some kind of purpose I had never known, and I didn't understand why.

"Dear Lord God," I heard my voice out loud and it sounded different from the other voices that had been speaking inside me. It was the voice that I was used to. I wanted to keep speaking, to keep hearing myself be myself. "Why does it have to make so much difference? Such a complete difference?" As soon as I felt the words leave my mouth everything was
quiet again. "Why can't I just be enough, just willing enough to do what I can to help?

"Don't make me Luther! I don't want to do what he did. I don't want to stand up and bullshit on everybody's plans. I'm not like that. Dear God Almighty; don't make me do that. Please don't make it like that for me. Please don't make me Luther."

Was this a prayer? No, it couldn't be. But what was I saying? What was I asking for? What was I asking God to do for me? Let me off the hook? Make me less responsible than I had already made myself?

That wasn't a prayer, it was a treaty. I was negotiating with God. God, who never spoke, never showed His hand. A divine card sharp, stone faced, playing His cards one by one until He had what He wanted.

I lay back down and closed my eyes and felt myself go off again. When I opened them it was later afternoon and it seemed like I could hardly move. I was feeling so empty, so lightheaded that I knew that I had to try and get back while I could. While I could still find the way. Before all the colors went dry before my eyes.

I tried to stand up, but could only get to my knees before my stomach and head both dropped and the ground began moving towards me too quickly. So I stayed on all fours until I felt the movement stop and then I slowly tried to get up again.

The blood in my arms hit my fingers like hot lead and my stomach retched again, and then again, but there was nothing to come. I started up the hill unsteadily, the ground shifting in front of me. I tried to
remember what I had left in the cabin— the sleeping bag, the Bible. Not much else. I decided to leave them just because I didn't feel like going to get them. Besides, I could come back sometime, or Billy could, but it just didn't seem important now.

It felt good to sit on the Honda seat. I had been on the edge of the lake for so long that I had gotten stiff and just to sit on some kind of padding seemed to take away a little of the pain.

I knew that the main problem with riding back would be the throttle, so I reached in the saddle bags on the bike and got the roll of toilet paper that was there and began to wrap it around my right hand until it looked like the taped hand of a defensive lineman. Gripping with my first two fingers and my thumb wouldn't be so bad because it was the other two fingers that had hit the window first. I couldn't help thinking again that it had been unexplainable and stupid. If nothing else, the night had ruined my career as a concert pianist or a surgeon. I tried to clamp my hand on the throttle and make it turn. If I could get going a set speed where I wouldn't have to move my hand much, I thought it would probably be all right.

I kicked the starter on the bike a couple times until it caught, put it in gear, and headed back down along the edge of the forest and then into it, following the same animal trail I had come in on, and mostly just trying to keep going. Steadily. Evenly. And all the time a new idea was forming in my head, one that I would have to act upon immediately if it was going to do me any good at all. I would have to make one last visit to Butler
and Crindall. I would have to tell them what happened. Why what happened happened. After that I didn't care what happened. I could wash my hands of it. Something would happen and then something else until I would be beyond where I was now and it wouldn't be so important to me. Eventually I wouldn't care or even remember.

I tried to watch the forest carefully, to plan my direction as far ahead as I could so I wouldn't have to make quick turns because I had to use my other hand for that. But if I took my time, I could make my way through the trees fairly smoothly. I looked deeper into the forest, looking to see everything that was there like I had done when Billy and I had first come up. I don't know if my senses were any sharper because I was hungry, or if I only thought they were, but now it made sense to me why starving artists painted their best paintings when they hadn't eaten for days; the woods looked unnaturally bright.

I rode along for several miles and then without realizing it, I was thinking about Butler and Crindall again as if I couldn't really concentrate on anything else for a very long time before my mind drifted back. I wanted to tell them something, even though I didn't know what it was exactly. There was something, somewhere, hanging in my mind. Not clear. Not ordered. Half-way between several emotions, and as I thought about it, it came back to me as a dull, guilty ache that made me feel a little angry and hurt at the same time.

Almost before I realized it, I noticed that I was just about to pass the place where I would turn off the trail and, after going through a few
hundred yards more of forest, come out on the far edge of the meadow that stretched in front of the homestead. I fought the impulse to turn, slowing down while I still tried to make up my mind if I should go back to Freemans yet. I had almost stopped when I rolled back on the throttle and felt the Honda jump under me, making me have to grip the handlebars tightly in a way that made the cuts burn in my palms, and I felt myself lean along the trail as it veered gently left. After winding through the woods awhile longer, it slowly began to climb up the rise that bordered the back side of Butler's property.

I came on the cabin suddenly. I hadn't expected to see it where it was because I was coming from a different direction than I had all the other times. There was smoke coming out of the chimney and I could smell food. I knew that right off. I wasn't sure what Butlers were cooking, but I suddenly felt every inch of my body crave whatever it was. Butler could take anything of mine that he wanted. I would sell him my birthright. I would let him do anything he wanted to me if only I could have something to eat.

I was stiff when I tried to get off the bike and I almost fell. When I finally stood up I saw Butler coming out of the woods on the opposite side of the cabin from me, with an ax in his hand. I just stood there and watched until he got close enough to recognize me. I didn't know how he'd react to my being there, but I didn't think it mattered much now. As soon as I had seen him, I knew what I had to say to him. He saw me and waved.
"My God, he's a big man," I said to myself under my breath. Half-man, half-bear. A genuine mountain man. He probably could pee all the way across the Yukon.

"Howdy there," he called when he was still a little distance away. "What brings you over here? I thought you were out--Goddamn, what did you do to your hands, son? You cut the hell out of 'em."

"I was checking some grizzlies for hemorrhoids and I guess that they didn't take to it."

"They must have been damn big grizzlies," he said.

"Yeah, well the hardest part is getting them to spread."

He laughed from down deep, under that big, hypertensive belly, and just hearing him laugh made me feel better.

"Did you have some trouble where you was?" he asked, suddenly serious.

"I let things get a little wild in my head one night and the part of being alone got to me strong. I had to go through a window when I couldn't find the door."

"Those cuts look fresh. Couldn't have happened too long ago."

"It didn't," I said. "But that's over and most everything's all right now."

He nodded like he understood, even though I doubted how anybody could understand, especially the guy who couldn't even let Crindall bleed in silence.

"There's something in the wilderness that can make a man feel different than any other time. I've felt it more than once, and it gets
worse in the winter when the snow makes it quiet."

"Listen, Ron," I said, "there's something I need to talk to you about. Something to get off my chest. After that I won't have to bother you again."

"Is it something man to man, or can we talk it over dinner? I was just fixing to eat some stew that my wife had made with some of that bear that we still had around, and if you've been off and away for a couple days, I'd bet you could use some warm food."

"Sure you got enough?"

"Hell, I'll ladle it down you until it oozes out. We got enough for the Turkish Navy."

As I followed him into the cabin, I felt myself swell up against myself again. I wanted to like him, but I fought against it. Even though he was feeding me and laughing at my stupid joke, and even though his wife looked at my hands and arms and put mercuromchrome on them, which almost killed me, and then wrapped them, wasn't Butler the man who had destroyed whatever hope there was left in Crindall? Wasn't he the one that I wanted to kill personally, in the way that he had killed a part of something that had been entrusted to me? I should have refused his food and told him to go to hell. But I didn't and I couldn't, and I knew that I liked Butler no matter how much I wanted to hate him for what he had done.

I ate dinner without saying much, concentrating mostly on chewing the meat as long as I could before swallowing it. It tasted all right.
a little strange and wild in the same way that venison tastes wild. I ate steadily, filling myself so quickly that I suddenly realized that I had almost eaten too much and would be sick, so I tried to nibble slowly on a piece of homebaked bread until the queasy feeling began to go away, and my head began to fill with those feelings that a full stomach produces, feelings of acceptance and contentment which I still kept trying to fight.

Ellen Butler sent the children outside and then poured coffee. I watched as Butler brought the cup up to the edge of his furry beard, and from somewhere behind it lips protruded and sucked up the hot coffee quickly with the same sound as a whirlpool in the drain of an emptying bathtub.

I picked up my cup and took a sip, but it scorched into my tongue, and I half-spit, half-coughed it back into the cup. Butler looked a little amused.

"It's hot, son. Take your time," he said.

"It sure is. I haven't felt anything that hot since I've been here."

"Wait till winter comes and some of the clutches back in the woods can throw out plenty of heat, I'll tell you that right now. There ain't nothing like an Alaskan woman in the dead of winter, ain't that right, Ellen?"

"Don't look at me," she said. "I'm only your wife. God knows that there ain't no telling what you do when you're in the bush with Ralph. 'Sides, you should have enough sense not to give this boy the wrong idea."
"Hell, he knows more about warm blooded meat than any other man around here. He's been chasing those California women on them beaches where they run around with bare bosoms. Ain't that so, Pete? Don't they have beaches down there like that?"

How could Butler know that of all the topics in the universe, this was the one that I didn't particularly want to discuss now.

"I don't know, Al. I was always afraid to go near the water."

"Like hell you were. That's a good one." He laughed his eruptive laugh again and I was glad that he thought I was enjoying myself, even if I wasn't.

"Ron," I said, the tone in my voice suddenly serious and both he and his wife looked up at the change as if they didn't know what had changed. "I wanted to talk to you about what happened at the Freemans. Do you mind?"

"The community meeting?"

"Yes," I said. "I wanted to explain something."

"Well, I thought it was one hell of a good idea getting people together like that, and I'll tell you one thing for sure, I felt pretty damn satisfied about a few things."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like finally understanding the way I am and some of the feelings I've got about things. You know, some of that stuff that we talked about--what we need to do to be happy--that sort of thing. I'll admit, it made me pretty damn proud to realize that some of those other folks knew the way
I felt about my family. My family is the most important thing I have, and with this bad heart, it's important that I can take care of 'em no matter what. And on top of that, I sure got Crindall back. Did you see how pissed he got? I put him in his place for good, don't you think?"

"Ron," I said, "I think what you did to Crindall was one of the shittiest things that one human being has ever done to another."

"You what?"

"Wait--let me finish. I like you and your family a lot. And what he did to all of us was wrong. Dead wrong. But what you did to him was just as wrong."

"Now just a minute, son," he answered, beginning to look uneasy. Immediately I sensed it and felt myself reaching back into some corner of my mind for a ladle of soothing oil that I could pour on the troubled waters. The conditioned reaction that would have let me ease things down, explaining away the friction. But I couldn't do it. Dear God in Heaven, let me for once in my ridiculous life have the guts to call something by its right name.

"You said that it was important that people know what was important in your life. Listen, what Crindall finally said--what finally came out--was more important than anything else. It was a miracle. Can you believe what happened to him?"

"As a matter of fact, I can't. It was all mumbo-jumbo to me."

"Well, it wasn't to me. A man's life can't be subjected to those kinds of things and not show the lasting effects that his life shows. Do you think he made all that up?"
"Might of," Butler said, hurt now and not willing to admit anything. "You never know what a man'll say."

"Be serious," I said. "Come on and be serious for a minute. You know as well as I do that Crindall didn't owe anybody any explanations. He could have been a son of a bitch for the rest of his life and nobody would have questioned his reasons. But he opened up. He let people who he didn't like and who didn't like him see him as he really was, see him as not being defiant, but hurt and angry and guilty. And while he's there, laid open, in the most vulnerable position that he'd been in for years—maybe the most ever—you tried to punish him for something that you should have been praying would happen.

"Crindall will never open up to anyone again. I would almost bet on that. People have screwed him over too many times. And in spite of your friendship, Ron, and the fact that you're one hell of a nice guy, what you did to him makes me want to puke. You may have been mad about your truck, and probably still are, but to figure your windshield equal with a man's soul, the very thing that makes him human, was just plain selfishness. I don't mean to put you down, and I won't bother you any more about this, but I felt I had to tell you."

I had been talking into my cup, but now I glanced up and saw them both looking at me. Ron didn't say anything. Then, as if to break the silence, he slowly lifted his coffee cup and, after sucking another swallow through his beard, he set it down again. Then the silence resumed, a heavy silence compounded like the inverse square law, growing deeper and
deeper until it was almost a wall. But I noticed that he wasn't angry like he had been at the start. His face wasn't red; his hands weren't clinched, but now were resting, palms down, on the table.

"I'm sorry, Ron," I said. "But I had to."

He made a gesture with his hand like he was brushing away a fly, as if to say that the apology wasn't really necessary.

"The truck's nothing," he said finally. "It was just him, not the truck."

"But the truck is something. I can understand--"

"The truck is nothing!" he insisted. "I'm not worried about the truck. I don't have to worry about the truck because the Goddamn thing is insured anyway. They'll pay for everything. I've already turned in the claim. I just told them it was vandals and they said they'd take care of the whole thing. It was just him I wanted. I wanted to show him that he couldn't do that to folks and expect to get any feeling from me. I don't care who the hell he was, he wasn't going to get anything from me."

"Then it's all taken care of?" I asked, not believing what I had heard.

"You're damn right," he said.

It was all coming so fast, this whole revelation, and I still didn't understand it all.

"When did you file the claim?" I asked.

"It was the day before we had the folks over to the Freemans."

"And the man told you that the whole thing would be paid for on the truck?"
"That's what he said," Butler replied quickly, like he had run over the whole line of questioning before.

"Then you knew that your part of this whole deal was settled before the meeting, didn't you?"

"Sure, but that didn't change nothing. Like I told you before, some things go deeper than just getting paid what's owed you. It goes clear to the bottom with that son of a bitch." He slapped his hand down on the table as if he had just clinched the argument. The coffee cups clattered and Ellen, who had been looking the other way, let out a little gasp.

"But when does it stop with him?" I asked. "When have you done enough? Is it ever enough?"

"I reckon not."

"That's going to kill you, Ron. I hate to see it, but there's nothing I can do."

"No one's asking you to do nothing. You've done enough."

"Maybe."

"And it's no business of yours now, anyway."

"Still maybe," I said.

"I reckon not."

I stood up to go and Ron stood up, too.

"I'm not a preacher, but I need to tell you this. Jesus Christ says that only when we can love our neighbors the same way we love ourselves will we be really happy in the long run. That's probably a lesson we both need to learn."
He didn't say anything, so I walked to the door, but when I got there I turned back.

"Ron," I said. "Crindall almost killed me that afternoon. He could have. He could kill you, too, but only if you let him."

As I stepped over the rough wooden threshold, I looked back at the table. Both of them were still standing in the same places, looking like a variation of American Gothic.

"Thanks for the dinner," I said. An afterthought.

"Oh, it was nothing. You come back real soon and see us when you can spend some time. You bring those Freemans along with you when you do. Real soon, okay?"

"Yes," I said. "Real soon."

I left the cabin and walked down to where the bike was standing, rocked it off the stand, and kicked the starter twice before the engine fired. The bandages Ellen had put on my hands made them feel better when I gripped the handlebars. I put the bike in gear and headed down the path that went to the cutoff road on the way to Crindall's.

I played back the road thing one more time as I took the curves down the hill, the same hill that everyone had retreated back up after the shooting. I saw the scene perfectly, now from all angles, from all perspectives; it seemed different to me, but I wasn't sure why.

But as I got near the bottom of the hill where the forest became more dense and the rich organic smell was strongest, somewhere before
the cutoff road, I realized that I had been wrong about one basic thing. Survival wasn't primary. I had been naive to think that. As naive as I had been to assume that all ministers should be like John the Baptist. Survival was important, essential, but not primary. Everyone's motives in the road incident were probably no different from those of swindlers or income tax cheaters, or anything else where people are acting for themselves in an existential setting where good and evil have become only relative terms. It wasn't survival, but greed. Survival was only a concept, a pure doctrine that I had wanted to believe, but now I couldn't. I don't know when I finally began to understand that, but it was clear to me now.

I turned off Butler's path and headed through the forest on the wider trail until the forest began to clear and I could see Crindall's cabin through the last remaining trees before I reached the clearing. I put the bike into low gear and revved the motor as high as it would go, trying to make sure that anyone would know I was coming. After putting the bike on the stand, I clomped up the steps, stomping my feet to shake off the dust, and also making as much noise and being as deliberate as I possibly could.

The door opened before I reached the landing and Crindall's face peeked out through the crack. Rough. Unshaven. Ugly. I looked into his eyes and immediately knew that he remembered who I was.

"What the hell do you want?" he said, giving it the tone of an ultimatum.
"I want a cup of coffee 'cause I'm colder than a frog's ass. Can you brew some?"

He didn't budge.

"Come on, Al, I'm unarmed. What do you think I'm going to do, bite you? I just want to talk to you and then I'll leave, okay?"

He stood still, peering out the crack of the door as if he was trying to decide what to do. I took a step toward the door, and when I reached it, I looked up and he had turned his back from the door, leaving it open. I pushed it wide and followed him into the kitchen, which was neater than I expected. A wood stove, a couple shelves with spices and coffee on one wall. A cupboard with a door open, filled with flour and staples. His wife must have fixed those things for him years back. I don't know why, but the arrangement looked like woman's planning and it was all low enough that a woman could reach it.

Crindall got a coffeepot out of a pile of metal, army-type dishes that were sitting on a towel on the sink, pumped a little water into it, and set it on the stove. It sizzled when it touched the stove metal.

The kitchen was the center room of the cabin, one side joining a bedroom, the other going into a living room. It seemed bigger than I expected from the inside. I turned and looked into the den and my eye immediately went to the window where there was a pane of glass boarded over. I leaned a little until I could look out one of the other panes and could see the place I had been when Crindall shot, and the tree beyond.
Crindall was off in the bedroom. I could hear him doing something, probably cleaning his boots. Occasionally he would let one of them fall and it would rattle the floorboards. I walked into the den and sat down on the edge of the chair arm and looked around the room.

It was dark, but the roughness and closeness made it seem almost intimate, a rustic room that seemed perfect for starting a fire and pulling up the bearskin rug, ready to listen to the wolves howl. Every detail seemed just right, perfectly set and appointed. There were pictures on the wall opposite the window and I got up and walked over there. It was his war buddies. Probably all in the chamber of commerce someplace where the biggest crisis was when the little league team lost.

Crindall was back and pouring. He walked in abruptly and handed me a cup of coffee that was so hot that the handle was uncomfortable to hold even with the bandages on. So I set it on the mantle, trying not to give the impression that I had done it because it was hurting my fingers.

When I turned back, he was sitting down, facing me.

"You wanted to talk?" he asked with the same abruptness.

"Yes," I said. "But I have to get started."

He didn't say anything, waiting for me to start to say something that I didn't know how to say.

"Al," I said. "You probably think I'm crazy." No answer. "But would you let me try and tell you one thing? Just let me tell you that I'm really sorry about what happened. As sorry as I know how to be. Not just about Butler and the road and all that. That's really nothing. First
big snow and no one would even be worrying about the road. I am sorry about what you told me, about your wife. I know I'm a lot younger and a hell of a lot more stupid than you about a lot of things, but I know what it means to love something and then lose it. Maybe it wasn't the same with me, but I still know.

"And I know it doesn't seem fair that it had to happen, and it doesn't make a bit of difference now probably, but to me you're better than just about everybody from here to Fairbanks. And when I leave here and go back where I belong and probably should have been the whole time, I'm going to remember you and pray to God that you're doing okay. If things would have been different I probably could have shown you better, but you'll have to take my word now."

He still sat looking at me without expression as if he hadn't heard the words. I had to fight the urge to lean my head over just to see if his eyes would have followed me or if they were looking right through me. And again I marveled at him. A titan in whose iron grip all creatures were lead to pay homage and to worship in fear. But the heavens had conspired and now the mountains were tinged with the glow of the Olympians and he was weakened and deserted and stripped of everything that gave him strength. And yet I felt myself worshipping the fading light of his invincibility, now with only traces remaining. The thought of what he was once and what he had become filled me with a sorrow that made me want to tear off the bandages on my hands and re-puncture the wounds and together we would have bled ourselves dry, him emotionally, me physically.
I waited for him to say something. I knew he had to. I could see that there was something that remained.

"Would you have done it?" he asked finally, after a long silence.

"What? Would I have done what?"

"Would you have brought your wife up here?"

"I don't know, Al. It wasn't my choice. But she loved you and she came and that's good enough. It has to be good enough. I guess what you must ask yourself is would you have stayed down below just for her?"

"God knows I would of. Nothing meant so Goddamn much."

"Okay," I said. "Then let her rest, Al. Don't disturb her anymore."

I said good-bye and left, leaving the coffee untouched and Crindall alone in the den, in the closeness of that darkening room that sealed him and protected him like a shroud. He looked after me and I could see him silhouetted against the light from the window, but he didn't answer.
Chapter XIV.

After leaving Crindall's cabin, I rode down the homestead road as it wound from the higher land down to where it trailed around the banks of Montana Creek, ending up at the lodge where the paved highway was. I put the bike behind one of the bungalows and locked it. If anybody managed to spot it back there they would probably think it belonged there, but I doubted if anyone would even see it.

It was evening. I knew it because there were a lot of cars in front of the lodge and I could smell whatever was cooking being blown out by the exhaust fan in the kitchen. I had thought for a second that I should have gone back to Freeman's but it would have seemed so melodramatic and I didn't want to face them yet. I felt lightheadedly euphoric and I didn't want to explain anything.

I waited for a greasy yellow diesel rig to grind past and then I crossed the road and began walking along the gravel shoulder, but it was damp and made a sound like when you tamp wet cement. It felt marvelous walking and once I was past the lodge everything was quiet. There would be cars along, heading for Anchorage and I could hitch with them. Maybe I wouldn't even get that far, but I couldn't have cared less.

I wasn't sure if anything had really changed. I thought about it as I walked and I couldn't see how it had. In the natural flow of human greed and self-interest there would always be some joker like me who would try to throw a little sand into the gears in the name of God or morality,
but that was only a momentary inconvenience. It seemed that I was the only person who had gained anything from it all, and that was only the knowledge that there wasn't anything I could have done. It takes a massive fault line to rearrange a mountain or redirect a river, and it would have taken a whole lot more to lean people away from their natural inclinations. It wasn't that I hadn't learned to like those folks. It was just that I shouldn't have expected so much--that was the problem and I knew it.

A missionary greets the natives with a picture roll and portable record player, and he works and manipulates until he is able to persuade a few to shift from the way they had always believed, and then they believe in him rather than in themselves. But the third and fourth generations who never knew any reasons for the original change only know that they are different and don't know old tribal ways and the old magic won't work, and the new god is misunderstood, imperfect, and powerless.

I heard something coming down the road, so I turned and stuck out a wrapped hand. The truck was almost past me before I heard the brakes jam on and saw it skid over to the shoulder. It wasn't until it had backed up that I saw that it was Fisher's truck and that Linda was driving.

I slid onto the seat, grinning from ear to ear. She just sat and looked at me, and slowly the corners of her mouth began to move, and a dimple on her left cheek began to form until her face erupted into a grin that was at least as wide as mine and maybe wider.
"Where are you headed?" I drawled like Jimmy Dean.

"Well, I'll be--"

"No! Don't say it! I will endure no more profanity."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just out for a walk," I said. "Actually, I was looking for a phone."

"There's one back at the lodge that you must have passed. Why didn't you use it?" she asked, still smiling.

"I didn't like that one."

"Why not? What the hell was wrong with it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just didn't feel right about it. A phone's a pretty personal thing and you've got to feel good about it. Some of my worst phone conversations have taken place over phones that I felt paranoid about. Don't you think it would be a good idea if you got this ecological honey bucket out of the middle of the road. I mean you're really constipating the whole process here."

She didn't budge.

"You're crazy. I mean you're really crazy."

"That surprise you? I would have thought that you would have figured that out a long time ago."

"I mean this is serious. You could be violent."

"Would you like that?" I asked. "I will be violent if you don't put this thing in gear. I've got to make a phone call and you're waiting for the first frost."
She reached down and slammed the truck into gear and laid down a couple feet of rubber before she looked over again, obviously pleased.

"What are you doing out here all bandaged up? Seriously, Pete?"

"I am seriously looking for a phone. Where are you headed?"

"Anchorage."

"Mind if I go along?"

"You're already along."

"What are you doing down there? Or should I ask?"

"I'm getting some things for Pa. He was supposed to go, but he's up the line, so I'm going. Hey, I heard what you did for Butler."

"I didn't do a thing for Butler. Nothing."

"I heard that you did a lot. Ellen came over last night and said that Ron was going to let things drop and not make any more trouble for Crindall."

"Yeah," I said, "but he could have done that from the start. He's out for himself. Everyone is."

"Are you?"

"Probably."

"Pete," she said. "Sometimes I want to smack you alongside the head. You just never give up, do you?"

"No, I guess I never do--but what do you mean?" I asked, not knowing really what she was talking about.

"All I've heard from you was all this crap about doing something. You had to do something. So now you've done something and you still aren't
satisfied. Jesus, what does it take to satisfy you?"

"A miracle. The parting of the Red Sea."

"You are a pious bastard."

"Wait a minute," I said. "What difference does it make to you anyway? I'm nothing to you. You've got your drummer."

She didn't say anything, just drove and kept looking ahead, and I knew that I had said too much. Just as suddenly I didn't feel like talking either.

"Are you going home?" she asked suddenly, unexpectedly.

"Maybe," I said, not knowing how she could have been reading my mind so perfectly.

"Is that the kind of maybe that means you are?"

"Maybe. I mean really maybe. I don't know."

"You make it awfully hard sometimes."

I didn't understand what she meant. "Hard to do what?"

"Did it ever occur to you that someone could love you if you'd let them?"

"No, it hadn't. Not anymore. I try not to use that word," I said.

"Not until I understand it—which will probably be never."

"I could love you," she said, still looking straight ahead, not looking at me as if the admission was difficult.

"For God's sake, why?" I asked. "What do I have that's worth loving?"

The whole thing surprised me and I didn't mean to say what I said, but that's just the way it came out.
"I guess because we both need it so much," she answered in a voice that came from somewhere so deep inside her that I wasn't even sure that she had said it. "Are you going home?" she asked again.

"Would it really make a difference?"

She turned full toward me for what seemed like a long time. "You decide that," she said, finally.

I turned toward the window and watched the rivers of milky glacier water pass, and then there were hills and the ridges and the farms, and I laid my head back on the seat and felt only the road underneath us and, after awhile, not even that.

All the ridges and hills and rivers were turning into the meadow and it was the beginning of summer and the fireweed was still high on the stalks and the flowers would never completely open and the winter would never come.

I took off my shirt and my denims and lay down in the tall grass, and took my hands and wove the long green stems around me until I was so tightly bound and held that I could barely move, and I felt that I could stay there forever. And then I could look down from above and see myself and I was only a head in a sea of green, a flowing, rippling mass of stems, and I was suddenly happy because I had done nothing and tried to do nothing except become a part of the meadow that was already there and already mine. I had taken it to me, and joined it to me, and the field was mine and it stretched to either horizon and it could never change.

Then, subconsciously, I heard the road underneath us change, and the truck was slowing down, and the field in my mind dissolved into buildings along the road.
"Where are we?" I asked.
"Outskirts of Anchorage. Have a nice nap?"
"Different," I said. "How long was I out?"
"Forty-five minutes at least. I'm not sure."
"Linda, is there an ocean nearby?"
"Sure. Lots of it. You want to see it?"
"Is it far?"
"Not very," she said.
"Okay. I think it would do me some good to see an ocean."

She drove across Anchorage, past some streets that were a little familiar to me now, and then beyond, down by the docks and then a little further up the bay where I could look back and see the shoreline curve until, further out, it fused with the greying sky and the darker water.

I got out of the truck and walked down toward the water until I was a little way from the road. Linda followed me down, but I wasn't really aware that she was behind me until she put her arms around my waist and leaned her head over my shoulder. It felt good, as good as anything had felt in a long time.

"Are you going home?" she asked again, in my ear, so privately that even God couldn't have heard it.

"I have always looked for easy answers. Nobody has ever had any. Ever."

"What do you mean?"

"It took a guy named Martin Luther getting knocked on his can
by lightning before he learned. I just don't know why it takes me so much longer."

"Because you're a stubborn bastard," she said.

It made me smile and I turned and kissed her.

"Yeah, but God isn't done with me yet."

I turned back toward the water and felt Linda's arms tighten around my waist. We stood for awhile without saying anything, letting the movement of the water run through us and release us and then absorb us again, until I could feel the natural rhythm and turn away.

"I do have to make a call before it gets too late."

She turned and faced me and I could see her clearly in the greying light, and she leaned over and kissed my ear and asked me again if I was going to go.

"Maybe."

"I already know," she said. "I just want you to know that it makes a difference."

And it made a difference to me, too. It made a difference when I got ready to fly home a couple days later. And it still makes a difference—but it's an internal difference, not the kind that ever really changes anything.

My life has always been pieces of ambivalence that only roughly fit together until they almost form a picture; but it's so imperfect and so far from what it had seemed to be at first. Still, you feel you need to hold it up before God and ask Him if what you've done is good enough, if it
has made any difference to anyone or to anything. You ask Him. And ask again. And again. You beg to see the lightning. You plead with God for thunder. But the heavens remain silent, and, after all the questions, if you finally choose not to believe, the process gradually begins to mean nothing. But if you do believe, you begin again. You must begin again, and again, until you eventually realize that the whole beginning process is eternal.