1973

A fine young couple

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A fine young couple

by

Morgan Dean Benedict

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTEr OF ARTS

Major: English

Approved:

Signature redacted for privacy

In Charge of Major Work

Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Department

Signature redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1973
This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.
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DEDICATION

To Charlotte for working and waiting
and to my parents for believing and watching
After the 1970-71 school year, my wife and I were weary of teaching as are so many other teachers in June, and so we sought relaxation by traveling to Fairbanks, Alaska, in our Toyota. The route taken by the Davidsons in this novel duplicates that route. Observations of the landscape are meant to be accurate although colored by my moods.

In characterization, however, most is fiction. Each character is drawn from a composite. He or she is based on observations taken from many people I have known who have had some function or occupation in common. For example, the personalities of the girls' physical education teachers are based on features I have observed in both male and female physical education teachers but not in any one in particular. In addition, the relationship between John and Kris is not a picture of how our marriage was, but of how it might be for any young couple who meet after growing up in both physically and emotionally divergent worlds.

Work on this novel has been tiring yet rewarding due to the help I have received. I wish to thank Drs. Will C. Jumper, Albert L. Walker, David K. Bruner, and Wallace C. Schloerke for serving on my committee. Their endurance should not be underestimated nor should their friendship. I was fortunate to have my writing challenged by them. I have learned.
CHAPTER ONE. LONELY CANYONS, CROWDED NIGHTS

John and Kris Davidson, who have been married only a year, live in a two-story, brick-faced apartment building about a mile from Browning Senior High School where they both teach. The neighborhood is noisy. There is a shopping center only a block north from them, and Highway 30 intersects with Main Avenue, the major street across the city, just two blocks east of their apartment. The apartment itself is an older building, one of the first ten years ago to provide efficiency housing for young adults. They have an L-shaped living room with a kitchen next to the shorter end of the room. The bedroom and bathroom open from a small hallway that meets the corner bend of the living room.

The mating dances of fast cars on the blacktop are greatest during late spring, and, consequently, evenings in bed become particularly irritating to the Davidsons. The frequent squealing of tires on Main has often prevented a good night’s rest, opportunities to anticipate aloud the adventures of their coming trip to Alaska or the inward reminiscenses of life before their marriage. Both of the Davidsons are tired this May evening. The afternoon at school has been spent scheduling students for next year, a tiresome repetition of warning students which courses need not be taken and reassuring them that the inhumane reputation of a certain chemistry teacher is really not deserved.
John opens the bedroom window because he can't sleep without fresh air, and Kris grabs a blanket because she gets cold easily.

Good night, John. John, aren't you going to say good night?

Good night, Teach, and do me a favor tonight. Please don't repeat any more lesson plans in your sleep. OK? He turns away his head so that she won't see the smile on his face.

Do I really? she asks as she raises her arm to support her head. She waits with eyes half open for an answer.

Since you asked, I can't deny it.

What do I say?

I think last night you said something about allowing five minutes for attendance, ten to explain dodgeball rules, ten for an interruption by Jo, one minute to hit that loud-mouth if she forgets her bra again ...

I'm sure, starts Kris as she sits up.

Ask somebody else, if ... you ... don't ... believe me. John's speech slows as he pretends to drift into sleep and rolls over.

Now who am I going to ask? Come on, I know you heard me. Answer me or I'll hit you with my pillow.

I only know what I heard. Anything else before I report you for hitting a student? John expects to get hit himself, but the manner of attack changes.
Can I ask something serious?

About the trip?

Do we have to go so far? Even the question tires her, and Kris sinks back on the bed before saying more.

It's important to me. Don't worry about it. We're going to see some of the most beautiful spots in the country.

Do we have to see so many at once? I'd be satisfied to stay at the Tetons for a month. They say it's beautiful in July.

We could stay there, but we may never have a chance to go to Fairbanks again; just think of the adventure we'd miss.

I wouldn't miss it. It's not so important to me. I don't see why it is to you. Sleep takes charge of her remaining thoughts, and John is quiet, too.

Their brief sleep is interrupted by two cars that begin a quarter-mile chase down Main. The engines roar at new and higher levels as the impassioned ego hunters slam their spring-loaded shifts back and forth on the floor. The evening air acts as a conductor to direct the sound in their bedroom window. Then the baby next door begins an angry cry—broken only by time to inhale—which lasts an hour. Their neighbors on the other side awake, too, and start swearing. Those damn police are never on their damn patrol when the damn dragging begins. Where are they? Must a schedule of each damned race be left on the damned desk of the, what-do-you-call-it, night watch, never see, damned captain.
Give that damned brat a whack, will you lady? Damn parents gotta be deaf or something. Slowly John and Kris retreat once more into shades of sleep, reflections of the past and plans for tomorrow.

---

Jerry, Jeffrey, Jill, leave John alone. Can't you see he's trying to read a book? explains and pleads their mother as she irons Father's white shirts.

Why does he always read, Mamma? asks Jill, who is the only one to stop. We wanna play.

Come on, Johnny, play with us, her twin brothers chorus.

Go 'way, Jerry, pleads John, who is curled up in the corner of an old davenport. A floor lamp shines over his shoulder.

Just 'cause you're bigger, says Jerry, and he pulls off one of John's tennis shoes.

Can't ya see I'm busy, yells John as he tries to kick Jerry but reaches Jill, who gets in the way by accident.

Mamma, Johnny kicked me, wails Jill. She grabs her mother's leg to cry on.

I'm going upstairs. Don't follow. John stomps up the
stairs carrying a book, a tennis shoe, and an apple grabbed from the kitchen table.

Who cares about you? yells Jerry.

Get lost, adds Jeffrey, who follows John to the foot of the stairs and yells louder, GET LOST!

Stuck up, stuck up, repeats Jill, who has stopped crying but still hangs on to her mother's dress.

Children, please. Your brother's getting older. How can he become a teacher if he doesn't read? Mother puts down her iron and starts shooing them outside.

Ugh, he'd do that, says Jeffrey, who is the first to be forced outside. Jerry, bring my bat, he cries in.

Stupid brother, mutters Jerry as he reaches for the bat and other baseball equipment by the door.

He won't be my teacher, will he, Mamma? cries Jill. If he is, I'll kick him back. I don't care if he tells the principal on me. I don't, I don't. She follows her brothers out the back door.

John enjoys the peace of having his own bedroom. He had painted the walls brown and had the posters of Racquel Welch and Sophia Loren up on the wall before his mother came in and blushed last summer. John wishes his parents could have arranged it before he went to the university. But at least he can come home on semester break now and find a place to be alone. How he loves to be alone. To breathe and think, to dare unlimited hopes. Most of all, hope of accomplishing
something that others only dream of. What will he do? He doesn't know. Sometimes, more often as he grows older, he feels like a wild stallion of the open range, suddenly trapped in a narrow canyon. He runs back and forth. There is no escape! He just doesn't see it. But he knows, he knows. Nobody can hold him. Nothing can. He is destined to run free, not from anything, but continuously running. His thoughts are a calliope of teaching the banned novel and answering before a packed courtroom, being born too late to be a brawling mountain man, becoming the secret lover of an olympic idol, building a cabin in the Rockies, loaning millions of dollars to struggling artists, and writing the great American novel, essay, play, epic, and literary history. Running, jumping, popping, flooding thoughts that bang, whistle, roar, and wheeze—all aim at being indifferent to the acclaims of the world, vain enough to ignore the applause as they survey the crowd who will never know that he could have done it before, any time he wanted to. The crowd never knows what is important. The crowd follows. He won't be one of the crowd. He'll walk alone, appearing when wanted, doing the unexpected best, world records of good will without reward. He'll walk alone. Soon the degree, the first teaching job, and then he sees the escape out of the canyon. Nobody, nothing will ever be able to hold him back. Sweet days, building hours, hopeful seconds.
Why'd you ever date me? asks John a few minutes after parking his old Buick by the Cedar River.

John, why so many questions? Can't you just relax and enjoy the sounds of the river? What a beautiful night. Kris looks out on the river, caught off guard without an answer.

I can relax later. Now why did you first want to date me? He stares at her back, feeling that this is the wrong night and that he is being too grave, foolishly late thoughts.

Oh, all right. Because I knew you were nice.

I raped a girl when I was ten, he answers solemnly as he raises his hands to her neck as the Boston Strangler might do on such a secluded spot.

You did not, laughs Kris as she turns around into his arms.

You didn't know I was nice, either, claims John, wondering now what to do.

Yes I did. That's all my students ever said: "Mr. Davidson's nice, but he'll never marry. He told us. He hates women." She looks down at his arms. Are you going to strangle me now?

How'd they know I hated women? The detailed answer she
has given has aroused his curiosity. She is usually so general, almost bland, when he gets personal.

You told them many times.

Well, maybe I did, laughs John as he removes his arms and plays with the steering wheel.

They never believed you. I even knew who you were dating most of the time. Kris smiles in victory too soon.

But not all of them. No high school spy is that good.

I never cared. But they’d run and tell me anyway.

"Miss Barrington, guess where he was last night?"

How can a bright young teacher like me ever become superintendent when there are spies around everywhere I go? I must have been trapped into dating you.

Don’t blame me, John. It wasn’t my idea. I always preferred more sociable men.

More sociable! I thought you said I was nice.

That’s not the same.

Then you don’t want to marry me, he blurts out, wondering afterwards where those hasty words came from.

I don’t want--I do, if you--are you proposing? Kris garbles out the little phrases in confusion.
A strange marriage it has been called by Kris' friends at college. They remember Kris Barrington, the girl who had more time for dates than for studies. She always had at least two boyfriends who regularly called on her at the Tri-Delt house. Few of the other girls in her sorority were more active or attractive than Kris, who enjoyed being with people. She couldn't remain still for long, always going to a rock concert, helping on the annual blood drive, participating on the inter-sorority council, serving as activities' chairman, doing anything to be near people, to avoid being left alone. Something there was about the Barringtons' daughter from the day she was born--they could all sense it--that demanded extra care and extra love.

Now the girl from Indiana who couldn't stand to be alone marries an Iowa boy who prefers solitude. A mismatch of needs is smothered and temporarily forgotten. They heed the warnings, yield to professional pressure in their roles as teachers. Young and single male teachers are a threat to high school virgins; the English teacher is frequently tempted and unprepared for the innocent infatuation he receives. Women in P.E. must marry; the athletic discipline must overcome the Amazon image and replace it with a pleasant picture of the well-rounded American wife. The school policy at work, the students conspiring, the single teachers refusing to accept the fantastic threat--who is to receive the congratulations for bringing such a fine young couple together?
CHAPTER TWO. ESCAPING THINGS THAT IRRITATE

The P.E. office for women is small, a ten-by-ten foot cubicle with a closet on the west side which has three metal lockers and one shower. There are no windows, but the room is bright and sterile. The walls have a fresh coat of salmon-pink paint, and the floor has a thick coat of wax. That floor is the only one in the building, except for the one in the principal's office, which is taken care of so regularly and carefully. The rest of the building is dusted but only waxed and buffed during vacations. There is a chalk board on the east wall and a first aid cabinet beneath it. Two of the three desks are placed in a row at the south end of the office; they face the other desk at the north end. The desk arrangement makes the office appear to be like a small classroom. Inside the P.E. office two women are working at their desks. Jo finishes her work first, looks up at the IBM clock, and then speaks to Anne.

Aren't you hungry, girl? asks Jo, her hands pressed down on the desk top as if to support herself as she stands.

Sure, Jo, be with you in a minute.

Well, I'm not waiting.

Oh, come on, you're five minutes early, answers Anne as she turns to the next page of the skills' test she is correcting.

I don't like to wait in line.

Oh, all right.
Stop that, will you please? Jo stands and glares at Anne.

Oh, OK, I'm done, sighs Anne although she isn't done. I can see that. Stop saying "oh" so often. It's getting on my nerves.

I never thought you got nervous. What's the matter, Jo?

Anne clears the top of her desk and then stares at Jo.

Listen, Anne, I'm not nervous. I'm just irritated. By just a word? It can't be just that.

No, it's not just that. Have you noticed Kris' class is still in the gym?

Yes, they must be having fun getting bombed. Anne steps into the side room to get her purse out of her locker.

I beg your pardon, answers Jo when Anne returns.

Bombed by those balls. They're playing dodgeball. They should be in the showers. They go to lunch in ten minutes. I'm going now.

I know. Anne pours out all of her change on her desk and starts separating the nickels and dimes.

You coming or not?

I'm coming.

They walk to the cafeteria, get their lunches--hot turkey and mashed potatoes--and carry their trays to the faculty lounge. Jo thinks the faculty dining room is too hot and crowded. She leads the way into the lounge, holding her tray with one hand, and heads for a table in the corner by the
larger air conditioner. Anne follows, hanging onto her tray with both hands. They sit on the same side of the table.

I wish they'd fix that air conditioner, says Jo as she wipes off her silverware with her napkin.

Is that all that's on your mind, Jo? I haven't said "oh", you know, since we left the cafeteria. My character is now spotless, Anne thinks as she praises herself quietly and stares at Jo's hands busy with the silverware.

Forget-it.

Sorry, says Anne as she weakly smiles, freshly intimidated.

She's going to be late again, says Jo as she pushes down hard with her knife on the tender turkey.

Kris?

Darn right. She ought to get here on time and leave on time like the rest of us.

She may have decided to eat in the dining room, answers Anne as she breaks apart her meat with only a fork.

Well, it sure doesn't help morale. The girls' P.E. department should eat together.

And sleep together, too, I suppose, thinks Anne.

Anne, did you ever think she'd marry John?

Yes, I did. They dated for over a year. I thought that was a pretty good clue.
I am well aware of that. My point is--she pauses to put a spoonful of potatoes in her mouth--I didn't think they had much in common.

Such as?
John is so orderly. He's almost neurotic about it.
And she isn't.
Exactly. Mrs. Kris Davidson. It just doesn't sound right.

Oh. Did you know I tried to line him up with a couple of friends I had in college?

No. I don't blame you. Kris just isn't his type.

I agree. I don't know of one thing they have in common.

They're both teachers, but other than that... Jo stops again for a spoonful of potatoes.

How long do you think their marriage will last? inquires Anne. The subject begins to take the form of a mystery novel, and she loves to solve them before the end, but rarely does.

I don't know or care. But here she is. What makes her think she gets an extra five minutes for lunch?

I don't know, Jo, but I'd do it, if I could get away with it.

You'd what? We're not paid for that!

Oh, don't worry about Kris. Besides, she's never said anything when you've--you've left after school early. Anne wonders at her own sudden bravery and waits for an attack
that does not come.

That's different, and I still say she makes a bad name for the rest of us in girls' P.E.

Who cares? I'm late once in a while, too.

With her it's different. I think she does it just to irritate me. I know she does.

Hi, Anne . . . Jo. Didn't you two eat lunch?

Yes, we did. What took you so long? complains Jo. My potatoes almost got cold waiting for you.

Mine were cold when I picked up the tray, mutters Anne.

Anne is a short brunette this week. Without careful attention to herself she gains weight quickly. An extra five pounds makes her look dumpy. She loves to use make-up. The shades around her eyes change daily. In the middle of winter she still has a deep tan without a trip to Florida. Anne's speech is milder than Jo's, but she lacks authority. None of her listeners is ever sure how she really feels, nor does he even pay much attention, especially when she complains about being discriminated against as a Mormon. However, with a whistle in the gym, Anne can communicate clearly.

Outside of school, Anne is an avid reader of third-rate paper-backs—romantic histories and formula mysteries by authors who have two or three pseudonyms.

Jo is an experienced teacher. She has put twenty years into her career, more than twice the total years of Anne and Kris. Jo is a strict disciplinarian—which shows in the
tight muscles of her pale face, arms, and legs. She tries to hold her younger associates in tow as if she has the authority and righteous obligation to do so. Jo has beautiful red hair, but is manly in her slender-hipped, flat-chested physique. She converses in a curt business-like tone all day long at the high school, whether she is in front of students or members of the faculty. As soon as she leaves the school grounds, however, she suddenly becomes a warm and kind person. The change is welcome to those around her, even though they know it is not a retreat from the business of education or a moratorium of good will, but only the flicking of a switch.

The object of their conversation is Mrs. John Davidson, the third member of their trio in the girls' physical education department. The ruddiness of Kris' face precludes any need for her to use make-up. The firmness of her skin indicates good muscle tone. Her weight is ideally proportionate to her height of five feet six. She habitually carries her head tilted a little toward her right shoulder which gives her a look of indifference toward the scene before her. Kris' blond hair is longer this spring, for her husband prefers it that way, but she has a hard time giving it curl. In other matters she occasionally defers to John's taste, but seldom does she acquiesce to those in front of her now.

Where've you been, Kris? asks Jo.

Eating, I just said.
Well, time to go, Anne. Coming Kris?

In a minute.

This short conversation always puzzles Kris. Her associates wait just long enough for her to enter the faculty lounge and then get up and leave as soon as she joins them. Kris doesn't follow immediately but waits an extra five minutes sometimes to talk sports with two men from boys' P.E., or, when in luck, to say hello to her husband as he brings in his sack lunch. She wishes he would eat the school lunches.

John is late today, so she spends a couple of minutes staring at a dime store picture of an early American log bungalow nestled at the foot of some mountains which could belong anywhere in the West--possibly the Rockies or Sierras. Their peaks in the background are covered with snow, and their aloof majesty suggests a Shangri-la existence which she longingly wishes to step into, even more so if it were in Indiana. Flowers are blooming and the water of the creek in the foreground is clear. A few patches of snow dot the creek's banks. Her husband does not appear, so Kris returns to the P.E. office.
Now what do you suppose the relationship was between the narrator and the old man? asks Mr. Davidson.

I think he was the guy's son. He was going to get a lot of money when the old man died, and he got tired of waiting.

Anybody else? Yes, Bill.

I think money played an important part, but so did the eye. It got on the narrator's nerves.

Jim.

Gotta be the eye. Jim always tries to be agreeable; his parents have told John during open house that their son will get a beating if he isn't.

Jane.

That eye bothers me, she answers, trying to be as profound as possible without being told she is wrong.

Anything else? John tries to get more out of her, but someone else jumps into the question.

Well, I don't think it matters how they're related. We're just supposed to get scared.

Interesting point, Mark. Do you agree, Al? asks John as he tries to keep their minds off summer vacation.

I think Poe was trying methodically to put us into an insecure position where . . .

Excuse me, Al. Why do you say "trying to"? Didn't he?

I didn't become unnerved by the story, Mr. Davidson, but someone of Jane's nature might.

He's right. I sure might.
John Davison's class is about finished for the year and so is he. His room, on the second floor of Browning Senior High, has windows on the west side, and the afternoon heat is unbearable. His legs won't carry him around the room as his methods' class at the state university recommended to him five years ago. He is just too exhausted. The humidity is high, the temperature at 95, and his small fan only circulates hot air among the front rows. John sits behind his desk with both eyes on the class as he follows the discussion.

While this is going on, his hands are searching the top middle drawer of his desk for a paper clip to clean his fingernails. His search is in vain. The best he can come up with is a broken rubber band, a couple of pencils, and the high school teacher's manual. The other drawers are bare. He cleaned out his desk a week ago Thursday.

The grey IBM clock shows 2:03. Classes will pass in two minutes. Discussion stops, notebooks rustle, and he goes to stand by his open door. He is required to keep an eye on the boys' restroom down the hall across from the language labs. He hears two predicted drop-outs walk by and joke about the relevancy of English and watches the cancer hopefuls go into the restroom to assuage their systems with more nicotine. A few probably have marijuana, but the school hasn't been hit hard by dope yet. The current fad is to have
a gin party at home while Dad takes Mother with him to a con-
vention or their once-a-month dinner and dance on the town.

John nods to the young English teacher down the hall, Alice Rawdon. She started the year after he did. The kids like her. She is noted for her lively discussions and few written assignments. He doesn't think she's a particularly good teacher, but he likes her personally. John wonders what she thinks of him. He's only five feet eight, about a couple of inches shorter than she is. Her hair is the same shade of brown. She likes to wear pant suits and bright-colored yellow and orange blouses with ribbons to match in her hair. He dresses conservatively in three-button grey or blue suits and plain colored shirts. Only his ties add pattern. If only he were three inches taller, liked girls who smoke, and were still single, he'd ask her for a date.

John turns in the opposite direction, sees a member of his homeroom, and stops him.

Didn't see you in homeroom this morning, Carl.

Yeah, well, I... Carl always seems to answer with the same words.

Never mind. It's too late in the year for that. Just stop after school for...

Now wait a minute! Yeah, I brought in a written excuse. You can check that in the attendance office--anytime. With the last word, Carl cocks his head, daring John to dispute him.
As he talks to Carl, Mr. Davidson notices a head peer out from a half-open door of the boys' restroom. A cloud of blue smoke filters out above the boy's head as he checks for teachers trying to break up their retreat. The older chemistry teacher looks forward to this type of opportunity, for he knows that he'll only have to walk half way to the restroom before the word spreads that "Chem is coming" and the half-smoked cigarettes will be floating in the stools. Without a student on guard, the teacher may have to enter the restroom and take a chance on being asphyxiated. Chem heads for the restroom, and John smiles and turns back to Carl.

I don't care about any excuses, Carl.

Yeah, why not?

They don't matter this time. Will you calm down; you don't know what I want. John laughs and leans against the wall, trying to put Carl at ease by his own manner.

Well, I didn't skip.

I believe you. It's not that. I've got some of your graduation pictures.

You do? Where'd ya get 'em? Must be that bunch of wallet photos.

Apparently you forgot them at the awards' assembly last week. They were found on the bleachers in our seating area.

Oh, is that where? Well, I don't want any more of them.
Keep them for souvenirs. I'm giving away enlargements now. Carl swaggered away down the hall.

There is nothing worse to a secondary teacher than a high school full of rich students, even if some have photogenic profiles. Of course, most of the seniors don't have to come this last week, but a few have to return for make-up or to pay library fines, if they want a diploma. Why do the students from wealthy families always owe the school money? Carl must owe the library forty or fifty dollars, not counting the books he's walked off with and never read.

An hour passes and school is over for the kids. John waits fifteen minutes to see if any of them might want to see him after school and then flips the lights off and closes the door, anxious to get down to the faculty lounge. He passes two of the local romantics at one of the grey metal lockers. Sherry Jackson, who had to wear her cheerleader's uniform today, is bending over to get some books on the bottom of her locker, and, while doing so, showing her thighs to Greg Anderson, the jock-of-the-week. He smiles approvingly down at her while hanging his right hand on her locker door with the attitude of a contented ox. They don't notice Mr. Davidson as he passes them by while they kiss. He laughs to himself and winks at Hal Coward, the drama teacher, and stops for a chat.

Ah, isn't young love beautiful? suggests Coward. If
only Shakespeare had Romeo and Juliet do a locker scene in the hall together. Would she be braless? Would he wear a muscle shirt?

I don't know, Hal. They were nude in the latest movie version, had a little contact, and never even worried about all those people in the audience watching them. I would have kept my socks on.

There is something dramatic about knowing syphilis is alive and well in Iowa. To be infected or not to be infected, that is the question.

More toil and trouble, is that it, Hal?
I doubt if she has to toil much.
But today's young are tomorrow's leaders.
This administration doesn't care if the students start a day early. Student liberation is here. They're free and we're being made prisoners.
It could be a lot worse.
I think our beloved history marm ought to make a recommendation to the principal's curriculum committee. Suppose we suggest to her that the school establish a new course on Babylon. The kids are ready.
I suppose. Going to the lounge?
Can't. I've got a kid who decided, after three weeks of reminders, to come in to make up two unit tests.
You let them wait that long? says John, not ready to
believe what he has just heard.

Well, if he does a good job, I'll show him my generous nature and give him a D-.

You're mellowing with age. I'll see you tomorrow.

As John walks down the stairs, he spots a couple of black girls in a corner watching him. Jane hasn't been in school much. She got pregnant in both her sophomore and junior years. Her friend, Regina, is much prettier and much more careful. Regina's eyes are on Davidson. He knows it. She grabs Jane by the hand and they follow him to the lounge. Suddenly John finds them walking beside him.

Hi, Regina. Now you keep those big eyes off me. You know I'm married.

Just remember, Mr. Davidson, I'm countin' on your promise.

I haven't got a divorce yet, Regina, but, as soon as I do, I'll come a smokin' after you.

Yes, sir. I get first chance, says Regina while Jane nudges her in the back.

Course I promised a few others, too, explains John. They ain't got a chance.

That's what I told them, he says as he stops in front of the door to the lounge.

Right on, Mr. Davidson, calls Jane, making sure she is loud enough to embarrass him as he enters.
John enters expecting a breath of air-conditioned air but inhales instead a stagnant grey cloud produced by ten or twelve chain smokers. Two men take the cover of the air conditioner off, look inside for the trouble, but get nowhere. John stops at the Coke machine, puts in a dime, and pulls out a bottle of orange pop. He then sits down by Craig Hovenstadt, the business ed teacher.

Long day, John? begins Craig.

Sure was. Can't wait until summer vacation.

Going to summer school again?

No, trying to plan a trip this summer. You going anywhere?

I think we'll take the family to Colorado, probably camp on the way out, and stay a few days with my folks out in Denver. Ought to make a long enough trip with the kids, 'bout 1,500 miles, I'd say.

Really sounds good.

Harry Miller, the biology teacher and assistant basketball coach, leaves a table of women and joins Craig and John. He slides an ashtray and a bottle of Coke over on the coffee table and sits down directly across from them.

How's it going, boys? says Harry innocently.

Fine, replies John prematurely, without trusting him for a minute.

All right, adds Craig, not caring what Harry thinks.
How's married life, John? Getting lots of sleep? asks Harry while winking at Craig.

Any reason I shouldn't, Harry?

Warm weather, you know. How's Kris' cooking coming along? I hear she's a pretty good cook.

Pretty good. I'm not losing any weight, answers John as he reaches for a magazine to put under his bottle.

No cases of food poisoning, huh?

No, not yet. Why, have you had it at your house? Are you kiddin'? Too busy planning our big trip. I suppose I already told you about it.

I've heard it ten times, mutters Craig.

No, you didn't. Where are you going? asks John. California. Going to do a little fishing along the way. That's a long trip.

Twenty-three hundred miles there and back, long enough for anybody, says Harry as he looks around to see how many people are listening to him. Then he adds, Got any plans yourself, John?

Oh, I think we might take a drive to Fairbanks.

Fairbanks? Fairbanks, Alaska?

Yup, the car needs a little breaking in.

A little breakin' in, he says--'bout 10,000 miles, I figure.

No, more likely about 14,000, says John, correcting him as cuttingly as he would a disruptive student.
Now I think you're a little off there.

Well, we're going to make a stop at Death Valley on the way back.

He's kidding, Craig, isn't he?

Why would you want to go so far, John? asks Craig.

Kris and I want to try a little camping. John stands up and carries his empty bottle over to the rack by the machine.

You're going to camp all the way? rejoins Harry too late as he sees his favorite victim escape out the door.

Yeah, he just bought a tent last week, says Craig, but it's not as big as yours, Harry.

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John and Kris plan to get as far away from teaching in Iowa as they can. The tensions of the past school year have removed any idea of returning to summer school at the university. For the past month John has been studying camping directories while Kris has been collecting outdoor cooking recipes and making a list of foods which other campers among the faculty have told her will last longest in a large cooler. Mrs. Novenstadt has been especially helpful.
With little prior experience, they plan a trip which will take them across sixteen states, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon Territory. They want to take the famous Alaska Highway, sometimes called the Alcan, to Fairbanks and afterwards make their way by ferry to Seattle and then by road to Death Valley before returning to Iowa, thereby visiting both the highest and lowest geological points in the United States in one summer.

The couple buy all of their equipment, some new from discount stores and other pieces used from garage sales. Their supplies include a brown ten-by-twelve-foot wall tent, two five-gallon plastic water containers, aluminum cooking utensils, two Dacron 88 sleeping bags and air mattresses, a large green cooler, a double burner stove, and two suitcases of summer weight clothing. Their car is packed with more than they need, but they don't know what is expendable. They stand out in the street looking in the back of it.

Kris, I hope we won't have much more to take. We don't have room for the extra gas tanks.

Why don't we set some priorities?

Good idea; what shall we eliminate?

I don't know yet. I still have two other things I want to take. She heads back for the apartment but is stopped by
John's voice before she gets two steps away.

Whoa. We've got enough for a two-year safari. We don't need to take anything else.

We don't have a first aid kit, John.

You saw the cheap little kits they sell at drugstores. There's about a quarter's worth of bandages, a ten cent tube of burn cream, and a nickel bottle of mercurochrome. I'm not about to pay $6.95 for that tin box.

I agree but I can make a better kit for about three dollars.

How?

You get a plastic tackle box, and I'll fill it. I've got over half of the items we need all left over from that first aid course I taught last fall.

All right, but don't forget your pills. Now what else were you going to take?

My bag of hair curlers, she answers. Her face is blushing at the mention of the pills.

Oh, I guess that's all right. But we do have to get rid of more of this load.

Seems to me we don't need that platform. I know you spent a lot of time making it, but will we use it?

If they are going to sleep in the car, they must have a platform because the car's body is so short. Their car, a Toyota Landcruiser hardtop, is similar to the American-made Jeep--there is no way to support a prone adult body without
some type of extension. The platform John and Kris made is basically a 38- by 35-inch board cut from three-quarter inch plywood and covered with brown nylon carpeting. It rests across the two rear wheel wells in back and supports most of their gear, except for the tent, air mattresses, and tarp which are stored underneath it. Wooden runners are nailed along the lengths of it for another 32- by 32- by 3/4-inch piece of plywood to slide in and out as an extension.

The platform is a special dual purpose idea of John's. When they don't want to set up the tent—suppose they are crossing South Dakota and don't stop driving until nine—they can shift part of their gear to the front seat, pull out the extension, drop the tarp over the back, and sleep in the car. In addition, when pulled half way out during the day, the extension can serve as a handy table for Kris to cook on when no picnic table is available.

They had tried out the platform and extension with the tarp on the last weekend they had before leaving. They had set it up at a nearby state park in only eight minutes—which was wonderful, in John's mind, since it takes them twenty minutes to set up the tent. Then they had rolled out the sleeping bags inside the car to provide a little more cushioning and settled down for the night. The people nearby were using a tent and had a lantern hung outside so their children would find their way back from the restrooms. The
lantern's light had shown directly into the side windows of the Landcruiser.

You're going to have to make some curtains, Kris, says John as he tries to hide his face with the cover flap of his sleeping bag.

I don't know how.

You don't know how to make a simple thing like curtains? You didn't have to park so close to that tent either.

Boy, I wish they'd shut off that lantern.

They will, John, as soon as their kids get back from the restrooms.

I'll bet those kids are looking for toilet paper to play with. If they find a loose roll they'll make a streamer out of it or teepee somebody's tent.

I've never seen it done to a tent, but I think they're too small for practical jokes. Not this late at night.

I hope so, says John without believing her.

How come you're so grouchy anyway? Kris lies on her back, trying to figure out a way to hang a dress from the car roof.

My back can't adjust to the platform.

You mean where the extension comes out?

You noticed it, too. Well, we can't change it without using hinges.

Why don't we change it then? she asks.
The carpet is already glued on.
I think it'll work out. We'll just have to get used to it.
At least we can save some time using this.
I kind of doubt that now, says Kris as she takes away the last hope.
Why?
The only reason we saved time tonight is because we didn't have to shift any of the load to the front seat.
We'd have to shift some to get the tent out.
Not as much, John.
Who cares?
But I thought that was the whole idea!
The night had passed very slowly without much sleep.
The bugs infiltrated the Toyota from underneath the platform where the tarp was not tightly secured. The close sleeping space had prevented one from rolling over without the other's sleep being disturbed. Neither had remembered to bring a pillow, and since neither had slept lately on a hard board and sleeping bag, they both had awakened with headaches. Aside from those problems—the curtains would definitely be made by hand for, although John had insulted her intelligence, he had also admitted that his platform had a few defects in workmanship—Kris considered the evening a minor failure any way, while John felt it was a stupendous success.
During the last week before school is dismissed for the summer, John and Kris cut their clothing needs in half and eliminate taking one of the suitcases, but they cannot find any other equipment they can do without. They are going to purchase two extra five-gallon gas tanks for use along the Alaska Highway but decide to postpone that until they reach Dawson Creek. Each day in that second week in June they drive their loaded vehicle to school, testing the packing arrangement for rattles and vibrations that irritate, efficient accessibility to the stove and food, and visibility for dependence on the side mirror. After school they drive back to their apartment and change clothes. Then they immediately walk down to their car and resume their debate over their method of packing.

I don't like those sleeping bags behind the driver's seat. I can't see cars approaching from behind to pass.

But you put them on the other side yesterday, John.

I know. Well, where do you think they should be?

How about way in back, next to the water container? We could put the cooler where the bags are now. I bet the stove'll fit on top of the cooler. Let's try it, John.

Won't the stove on top make it as high as the sleeping bags were?
Maybe just as high, but it won't be as wide. You'll be able to see past them without having to look over them.

OK, we'll try it. What about the duffel bag, Kris?

What about it?

It's all right behind you now, but if we start putting dirty clothes in it, then it'll be taller. There's an extra foot and a half of vertical space that is just collapsed now, but later it'll stick up behind the passenger seat.

I suppose we don't need the bag, she limply replies.

Well, I don't... hey, I know! Let the bag fill up. It'll make a good head rest for one of us while the other is driving. John climbs into the car and leans over the front seat to show the height with his hands.

We can try it. But now what about the food? asks Kris, shaking her head at his demonstration.

I thought we'd be putting it all in the cooler. That's why we got the biggest one we could find, isn't it?

John, it's taking up more space than any other single item. I knew we should have bought a smaller one.

If you knew, Kris, why didn't you say so before?

Never mind, forget it. But we've still got a lot of food up in the kitchen. We might as well take it with us instead of buying more as soon as we leave.

How much space will that food take?

Only a carton--say, about two feet square. You've also
got to remember that we're going to need a large bag of ice, maybe two bags, in that cooler, so it won't hold as much food in there as you might think. Kris climbs into the back of the Toyota to show where the box could be put.

You're right. I forgot about that.

Well, do you want to spend more on food?

No, no, not 'til we have to. We've spent enough already.

True, but we'll use most of this equipment over and over again. And I thought we agreed, didn't we, that the only souvenirs we'll buy will be gifts for our families?

Yeah, I think the money we'll spend on film will be better than any souvenirs we could buy for ourselves.

I think we ought to keep the clothes rack, she says.

Nope, says John as he instantly recognizes a burden greater than the cross, a row of dresses to be constantly protected from dust.

Why not? Ouch, cries Kris as she stands up indignantly and bangs her head on the ceiling of the car.

There just won't be room. With everything piled up, nothing else will hang straight anyway.

What about my dresses? Where will we put them? Kris sits back on the floor, cross-legged and determined to get a final settlement.

I'm not going to take any suits. If you have to, why not just take one dress that would be suitable for most
occasions? You won't get much chance to wear it anyway.

I suppose I could keep it in the large suitcase . . .
but we aren't taking it, she responds with a half-hidden plea.

Would it fit in one of those plastic bags? Be reason­able, Kris.

Oh, John, at this rate we'll spend our whole vacation
packing and unpacking.

That seems to be all they do the last week of school. Neither has any more daily lesson plans to make. John spends those last two teaching days giving make-up unit tests, collect­ing book fines, arranging incomplete make-ups, and fin­ally assigning some busy work. Since the administration has designated a test date for each department, no work can be tested after that date. There certainly isn't enough time to prepare the classes for another theme assignment, and he wouldn't care to read them.

Kris' physical education classes aren't allowed outside the last week because towels and locks are being collected. Skill tests are being made up by a few girls, and the rest just sit in the gymnasium bleachers talking for fifty-five minutes.

June 10, the last day of school for the students, fin­ally arrives. Kris and John are daydreaming about mauling bears, leaky tents, and flat tires. The day passes very slowly like all last days of routine school life. As usual
about one-fourth of the school population begins summer vacation a day early. The rest continue their annual routine of lighting firecrackers in the restrooms, releasing fire alarms, and dumping waste barrels in the hallways and down stairs. Occasionally an abnormal few in a class ask for recommended summer reading or where they could get more swimming lessons during the summer. The girls usually want a class party—they have been pleading for a month. The administration won’t allow it—the Spanish and French classes have them anyway for they can speak a foreign language in between stuffing themselves with cupcakes and fruit punch.

Maryann Smith, the forty-year-old head of the English department, steps into John’s room between classes to ask how the day is going. The impromptu visit is one of many nice little mannerisms she has which John has always admired since he came to Browning. She never wastes time using educational jargon—cares not for theories on what is meaningful, humanizing, or accountable—or checking lesson plans. She makes it her imperative to grease the machinery of learning with practiced attention to her teachers’ daily needs, striving to eliminate the committee work of budget requests, parental rumors of dirty books, overcrowded classrooms, and administrative pressure to eliminate flunking. So much, she knows, makes the teacher’s classroom a toy, subject to the whims of any principal who plays golf with the district
superintendent, a pouting student with a father on the school board, or a student teacher who, assigned without notice, comes to Browning with the latest old idealized standards that go in and out in cycles.

Maryann smiles at John. She admires his rapport with the students and his ability to encourage class discussion. John turns at the sound of her voice. He sees she is wearing her favorite brown and gold knit suit, favorite because it was only recently that she was able to get into it again. She stands by the door, waiting to get his attention. He closes a dictionary, and she speaks.

Well, John, it won't be long now. You must be very excited.

Yeah, Mary, I sure am. Of course, it doesn't take much to be excited on a day like this.

How is Kris feeling about the trip--still a little uncertain?

I think so. She hasn't made a point of it though, that is, an either-or issue. You know, I kinda wish she would get it all in the open.

She spoke to me about it yesterday in the lounge.

She did. How'd she sound? he asks, hoping that Maryann had intervened for him.

Like you said. Somewhat reticent. Her grandfather got sick on one of those trips--did you know that?
I've heard that before. He was fifty miles from a doctor. Right?

Be easy on her, John. Maryann wonders at the matter-of-factness of his answer.

I'm trying. Once we get started, things'll be different.

I know she'll love to be outdoors.

So do I. That's why I can't understand her attitude.

Some women don't like to drive very far. Could that be it?

I don't know, Mary. Some day it'll all come out. I just wish the trip was as important to her as it is to me.

Time's slipping away. Need any supplies from the office?

I'm going on my free period.

Don't need a thing. Thanks anyway.

Oh, Anne, 7:45 to 3:10 seems like an eternity.

I know, Kris. I'm sick of checking towels. I still have to account for thirteen.

Wait until Jo hears about it, Kris smiles, increasingly amused at Anne's bravery this semester.
I’m getting like you. Right now I don’t care what she thinks. I’ve tried my best all year, and she still gets mad. I wish the tone would sound. I think the clock’s off again.

Kris, didn’t the kids get released about fifteen minutes earlier last year?

I think you’re right.

Wow, fifteen minutes! They don’t care what time it is in those air-conditioned offices.

It sure makes it easier to be pleasant with kids when the sweat isn’t dripping off you, Kris agrees.

Where is Jo, anyway?

Last time I saw her she was in the equipment room counting tennis balls.

Why doesn’t she wait and do it tomorrow afternoon?

Now, isn’t that strange? She wouldn’t want to leave early, would she?

Your attention, please, sounds a voice from the school intercom. We wish to take this opportunity to wish you all a healthful and educational summer. The main office will still be open tomorrow until noon for those students still having unpaid fees and fines. School is dismissed.

There is the expected cheer from the students and the hallways quickly flood. Anne and Kris hurry across the hall and set a new record in the study hall for shutting windows
and venetian blinds, and then return to lock the P.E. office door. They check the locker room, but it’s empty. A few doors hang open, a couple of forgotten socks and a tennis shoe rest on a bench.

The teachers have to return the following day to turn in keys, grade books, and look busy, but the worst is over. The P.T.A. brings donuts and coffee on this last clerical day as if in apology for other parents’ children; certainly their own never cause problems. The faculty takes an hour and a half for lunch on Friday, even though most don’t show up in the morning less than an hour late. After returning from McDonald’s or Rod and Martha’s tavern, many gather in the faculty lounge to discuss their plans again for the summer, say good-bye to those leaving on sabbatical or maternity leaves, or just stall for time instead of sitting like idiots behind their desks in classrooms full of empty student desks, blank bulletin boards, and brown-paper-covered book shelves. Of course, a few teachers won’t have their grades done until noon, and a few others are subtly trying to learn their teaching assignments next year from the principal’s secretary.

During the last semester John has made a habit of stopping by Craig Hovenstadt’s classroom at least once a week. He decides to stop and wish him a good summer. As he walks in, John sees Craig has everything put away and covered, too. Craig is leaning back in his chair, feet up on the desk, and
smiling at the pages of a yellow-covered paperback in his hands.

What are you reading, Craig?

_**Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask.**_ It's very educational. Did you know that five men and ten women can . . . .

Yeah, I already asked, says John, knowing the joke.

Well, you're in a better mood than usual. Have a seat.

I guess I am. John pulls a student desk over by Craig's desk and sits down.

Probably thinking about your trip, probes Craig.

Right. I'm hoping this thing will straighten out a lot between us.

If there is anything wrong. You want everything to be perfect. How many times have I told you?

What's wrong with that?

You don't know your Bible very well.

Since when were you a Biblical scholar? laughs John.

I was a Sunday school teacher.

You?

For about a year anyway. Then after a while I found I couldn't get all of the newspaper read and still get to the church on time.

So you gave up the less important job.

Never mind about that. You know what's wrong with you?
What, Dr. Rubenstein? says John.

All you newlyweds think marriage should be a Garden of Eden.

And?

And it's not. Read about the trials of Job. His wife gave him fits.

But Kris doesn't give me fits.

Don't worry, she will.

Any other encouraging advice?

Loan a friend a dime for a bottle of pop, and he'll go with you to Alaska. Your wife could then stay here and teach in summer school to pay for the trip.

Suddenly at 2 p.m. the event every teacher and counselor in the building has expected arrives. The principal decides to surprise his crew with the generous announcement by intercom: All may be dismissed now, two hours earlier than your contracts require, with warmest wishes for a happy, learning-filled summer and looking forward to working with you all next year.

The physics and biology teachers beat John and Kris to the north parking lot. The couple know that their apartment is locked and their car has a full tank of gas, so nothing remains to be done but head the Toyota across town to Highway 30 and then west.

John drives in that direction for 125 miles and then turns north toward Spirit Lake. They travel 315 miles by
the time they reach Marble Beach on the lake. The beach is one of the few public camping areas on the lake. Kris insists that they look no farther, so John turns in the entrance at 9:30.

Let's follow this road for a minute, Kris, and see where it goes.

It's a little late for that. What can you see at this time of night?

I don't mean that. I just want to determine if we can find a spot closer to the lake that isn't so crowded with campers. We can't even see the water from here.

Who cares about the water? I'd rather eat. All we've had since leaving Cedar Rapids has been cookies and apples. We'll just be here overnight anyway.

All right, food is more important than a view, agrees John.

Good, now let's find a place to park.

How about on that rise to your left?

Drive in closer. We've got to have a flat place to park if I'm going to cook on your extension.

OK, how's this? Get out and take a look, will you?

Kris steps out and finds the ground is a little bumpy, but all four wheels are approximately on the same level. She sees a couple of outhouses 500 feet away that convince her they've found a good spot. The buildings are close enough for convenience, but far enough away to avoid the flies and
lime smell.

This'll be fine, John. Shut off the engine. Let's start putting some things in the front seat.

It won't work, Kris. I know it now.

What won't?

We're not going to get it all in front. Where are we going to put the rest?

You should have built a luggage rack instead of this platform. I guess we'll have to put the rest under the car.

I suppose that should work as long as you don't forget and drive over it in the morning.

Me forget? Why me? asks Kris.

I was the last to drive tonight. It will be your turn to start in the morning.

I drove for an hour.

But I drove more and I was the last to drive.

Oh, all right. Get the stove set up and lit, will you please? I'll get the dishes.

The front seat is finally packed for the night. Two of their most basic needs, a red, water-tight flashlight and a yellow roll of toilet paper, crown the load. The platform extension is pulled out and the stove placed on the right corner so the dishes can be set on the left. John pumps the stove's fuel tank to get enough pressure for Kris to cook by, and she finds the dishes under the duffel bag and
promises herself to relocate them when they pack in the morning. She also gets a can of beef stew and a can of peaches out of the food carton and then shoves John away from the stove so she can heat the stew.

Move over, John. Why don't you light the lantern so I can see what I'm doing?

OK, he replies as he uses an automatic flint lighter. Where do you want it?

Can you hang it on the gate handle above me--no, never mind, that's too close. It'll be in my way. Just hold it by my right side, will you please?

All right. Ouch! John slaps his right thigh with his free hand.

I'm getting bit up, too.

How long will that take? asks John.

Ten seconds more for the bugs; food, about ten minutes. Great! By then every moth, gnat, and mosquito in the area will be here. I've lost a quart of blood already.

I told you we should have stopped earlier, Kris remonstrates.

We could have, but I'll bet we wouldn't have gotten this far either until about eleven o'clock, says John, searching for some redemption after shedding so much blood.

I thought we weren't going to worry about how far we travelled each day.
That's when we get up into Canada.

OK, ouch, yells Kris as she slaps her arm.

I'm going to get out that insect repellent. Where'd you put it?

Look in the first aid box.

OK.

Find it? asks Kris as she looks back over her shoulder. No, it's not here. Are you sure you put it here? Ouch!

I didn't say I put it there. I said to look there.

Well, where did you put it?

I didn't. I thought you packed it, Kris angrily replies. Ouch. No, I didn't. Here, you take the lantern. I'm going to look at the road map in the car. I'll use the roof light.

I don't want to hold it. Put it by the stove. Here, I'll move the dishes.

How much longer before the stew's ready? Ouch. Gotcha.

Do you have a fly swatter? I don't remember packing it.

No, I used the map. There's blood over Mitchell, South Dakota, now. Say, how's the food coming?

Just a couple of minutes more.

I hope we can get rid of these bugs that are in the car. Otherwise, we'll never sleep tonight.

We'll just have to get used to it, John, unless . . . .

Unless what?
Unless you want to stay in a motel tonight.

Don't tempt me!
CHAPTER THREE. REAL DARKNESS

John and Kris leave Marble Beach the next morning at 8:30. They have to detour into the southwest corner of Minnesota and then travel west through the flat plains of South Dakota. While Kris is driving, John sleeps lightly with his head bouncing from a pillow to the door post. He sees Minnesota through half-closed eyes and misses the first fifty miles of South Dakota.

The mesmerizing miles of green wheat fields and straight interstate highway are broken only by exit ramps to dreary small towns of empty brick buildings and tin-shingled co-op elevators. Some of these towns have small shopping centers on the edge of town that are doing a good business because they are near the interstate, not because of the town. As they near the Kimball Exit, Kris feels a need to take a break from driving and signals a turn-off the highway. Within a mile she is entering town.

John wakes as the turn-off is made and stares at the buildings as they come into Kimball. The older buildings have the character that only a pride in frescoes, arched windows, and solid double doors can evoke. He notices one building, a bank, stands out among all the others on the main street. It's partially remodeled on the front side to provide for a large plate glass window. The new bricks used to mold the window frame into the rest of the building don't match. The remodeling resembles the feeble attempt of a surgeon to graft a
reservation Indian's skin on to that of a burned Australian aborigine. It is the only building on the street that appears to have changed at all in the last twenty years. Then John looks ahead and sees another older bank that looks deserted but has the same name.

Stop in front of this building for a minute, Kris.

John, why do you want to stop here? It's just another old building. Let's go on down to the city park, she says as she points down the street.

I'll just take a minute.

What do you expect to see in that window?

I don't know. My eyes haven't adjusted to the light yet.

Just shut off the engine and wait.

Kris watches him as he cups his hands around his eyes. She shakes her head and then, with nothing else to do, joins him and together they look into a room partially lit by the morning light penetrating the dirty glass and a brown-tinted plastic shade.

See those marks on the floor, Kris?

Of course, I do. Must have been some partitions there. Right. There's a couple of rusted iron radiators. I sort of hoped to see an old teller's cage or an antique safe.

Sure is a lot of dust. I'd hate to clean it, she says.

I wonder if this bank did much of a business. Yeah, I'll bet it did.

Mind telling me who you're talking to, John?
Look back down the block. See that bank, the one with the new plate glass window? We passed it coming in.

I guess so. There's only one bank down there.

Well, I'd say that bank used to be this one, he says. I'll bet on it.

Why didn't they remodel this building?

Bad location probably. I think we're probably looking at the last remains of an old friendly neighborhood bank.

We are? I knew something like this was going to happen. I should have brought a black dress.

I'll ignore that. See those radiators. There's something about a new bank that's too crisp with its dust-free, central air conditioning.

This is terrible. Should we contribute to the flower fund? asks Kris. I feel so helpless.

Listen a minute, will you? Picture a modern bank. You think of new slogans, of getting a new barbecue grill by starting a checking account, or of drive-up tellers, but who knows their banker on a personal basis any more?

I do. Want to bet? she mimics, as she places one hand over her heart in a patriotic stance.

Never mind. Don't you see? Small buildings kept business personal. I'll w-w-w-wager, not one person out of ten knows their banker's first name.

But I did know my banker. The president's daughter used
to be in my room in elementary school. He knew my father.

That is really unusual.

It didn't stop him from charging all the interest he could. Small banks are no different at all, John.

Maybe not. Are you ready to look for that park?

Not now. Just drive. I'm tired of all these wheatfields and Wall Drug signs.

They head back for their car, and, upon reaching it, Kris hands John the keys. He tries without luck to avoid her hand, but then takes them and gets behind the wheel, adjusts the driver's seat back, fastens his seat belt, and starts the engine.

Which way to the highway? asks John.

Go back to the remodeled bank and turn left. When you reach Interstate 80, stay on it until you reach Rapid City.

We ought to get there by nine tonight—or sooner.

We're going to stop about six to make supper, whether we're there or not, aren't we?

I don't care. It's up to you.

About a quarter after six John pulls off the super highway at a rest stop. They unpack the food and the stove. Their meal consists of minute steaks, green beans, corn bread, and root beer flavored Kool-Aid. Kris then heats some water for dishes. This establishes a pattern for the rest of the trip. Water from the other five-gallon jug will be used for freshening up in the morning. They fill the jugs every three days.
As they finish washing the spoons and forks a steady sprinkle of rain begins. Kris finishes the washing and dumps the water while John puts the hot metal stove on some pea gravel under the car. They wait a half hour, but the rain doesn't increase. They finish putting their equipment into the car and drive on to Rapid City. They see its lights at eight p.m.; it's about ten miles away. Kris has been sitting quietly, staring into the blackness and thinking.

John, why is this trip important?
I don't know, says John, not paying much attention to her. We're going fourteen thousand miles and you don't know! Why'd you ask? he says, hoping to change the subject. We're seeing a lot, or haven't you noticed?
You want to know what I think? I think this trip is a bore. All we do is drive. It's dull, dull, dull. Don't tell the South Dakota recreation department.
I think they know.
The speed limits are faster here than in Iowa, she says, while pointing at a sign in their headlights which they quickly leave behind.

Tired of sitting?
How'd you guess? What else is there to do?
All right, knock it off, Kris.
Well, I can't stand sitting so much. We've got to get
some exercise, at least I do.

We will.

I can see you're enthused. Why didn't you ever join a faculty intramural team? Answer that and I'll believe we'll get that exercise.

Never had the time or didn't feel like playing before school--take your pick, says John.

Didn't think you were tall enough to play basketball would be more like it and too slow for volleyball. Can't hit a golf ball. Don't like tennis. If you had given me any of those reasons, I would have said they had the ring of truth. What you did say--no chance.

Lay off, Coach. Who gave you an inside track into my mind? For your information, height isn't everything in basketball. I was a good dribbler in high school--made some good passes, too. John holds his head a little higher as if to avoid further slander.

I didn't know that, Kris admits.

Of course not; you were in Indiana.

Tell me more.

That's all there is.

As they reach the city limits, they don't see any parks. According to their camping guide there should be at least three nationally-linked campgrounds here. They see only one that has been fully landscaped. Large pines border its driveway and
picnic tables on grass plots separate the parking stalls for car and trailer. Each camping area has its own water and electrical hook-ups. There is one central building containing the manager's office, a small display of groceries, and, by separate entrance, public showers. This campground looks nice but is full.

Another campground nearby has only a newly painted sign and a dirt driveway. It hasn't opened yet, but the guide doesn't indicate that. John and Kris learn early on their trip that construction workers can seldom keep up with the public relations men in the campground business. They are fortunate that, except for a few metropolitan areas, they won't have to stop at commercial camps.

A third campground across the highway also has a central building and Monopoly squares for travelers—it seems to be a new style of American architecture. The building is not yet painted and has no name. The surrounding area is covered with lightly spread gravel and bordered by spindly oaks. There is a sign at the entrance stating VACANCY, and, after observing the dark rushing clouds above and occasional flare-ups of distant lightning, the couple decide to stay there.

For an overnight fee of three dollars they get a 15- by 25-foot space and a warped picnic table. They also get to use the electrical and water hook-ups, but since they don't have a trailer, they don't need them. John sets up the platform
again. Kris prepares dinner.

Occasionally one of them glances over at the trailers in the stalls around them. These range from two-wheeled ten-footers to the four-wheeled twenty-five footers. They also note shells and toppers on pickups, fifth wheels, fold-downs, and one solitary nylon mountain tent set up in the far north corner of the grounds as if it is a poor ancestor to the gaudy newcomers in the center. Camping is no longer the primitive sport for the hardy, but a luxurious invasion of the wilderness by amateur nature lovers. They look for a large museum to step out into at their convenience. It is big business as only Americans can make it or would.

After a dinner of soup and toasted cheese sandwiches, John and Kris separate. Showers obsess their minds. Behind the central office are the showers and toilets. The toilets are free, but the showers cost 50 cents for five minutes of hot water. There is a long mirror above the row of sinks immediately remindful of a dormitory washroom. As John enters the shower door on the far right he hears an angry father.

Billy, take your towel out of there.

Daddy, it's wet.

I know, I know, Billy. Where's your soap? Billy's father asks as he peers from behind the steamy door of his shower.

I don't need any. I rub my fingers real hard on my skin. You should see it work.
Billy, use a washcloth. Where is it?
I don't know. I left it, he says as he looks up at his daddy's head.

Where'd you leave it?
I guess I lost it, but my fingers worked hard. Billy demonstrates, Like this, Daddy. Look.

We'll find it later. Here. Use my washcloth.
Daddy?
What? Get back in the shower and talk while you wash.
Daddy, the water's getting cold.
Your time must be over. You've still got two quarters.
Put them in the slot and turn the handle. Can you do that?

Yes, but I . . . .
But you what, Billy?
I need a quarter.
But I gave you two quarters.
I got a candy bar.

With your shower money you got a candy bar?
I didn't spend it all. I still got a dime and the other quarter.

Well, finish washing what you can. I'll have to go back to the trailer so I can get another quarter. Why don't you get in with me for now?
The next morning after a breakfast of rolls and orange juice, John heads the car back to Highway 16. After a fifteen minute drive they reach the approach to Mount Rushmore. The edge of the memorial grounds is similar to the outskirts of Lake of the Ozarks or Wisconsin Dells. Miles and miles of gift shops line the highway to within viewing distance of the east side of the national shrine. It is amazing that so many people enjoy such a welcome to an outdoor setting. The park service has plenty of work picking up the litter, keeping people on marked paths, and guarding parking lots from thieves. Overall, as long as the sightseer keeps his eyes upward on the mountain, the effect is nobly inspiring. The parent becomes a history and morality teacher to his young children. The agitator becomes a patriot. The freedom lover becomes an idolator. However, a careless movement close at hand brings his eyes back to the Coney Island world of the more popular national parks and monuments.

John, what are you looking at?

The monument, of course.
They're up higher. It couldn't be that red head in the pink halter, could it?

Isn't nature wonderful, Kris?
Some of it's not bad.
What's so bad about those presidents? Lincoln was a great emancipator and . . . .

Never mind trying. I know what you're thinking. Don't you like me any more? she teases him.
Sure. I was just thinking.
I'm sure you were. I think it's stupid to dress like that to see a national monument.

Oh, I don't know about that, replies John while inwardly laughing. I think it's emancipating.

Are you done looking?
Yeah. I've been here before, says John, as he walks to a different corner of the visitor's patio.

You never told me. When?
About ten years ago with my parents.
Well, I haven't. Here. Take my picture with the presidents in the background.

I think I'll get a few of just the presidents, too.
I've already done that, she says.
But it was cloudy.
I used the other camera. Where've you been?

After asking a stranger to take a picture of them both
in front of the memorial, John returns the favor and then he and Kris leave and drive through Custer State Park. Just a few miles southwest of Rushmore, they find views of the memorial that are unspoiled by tourists and private business. Clouds are building up and scatter among the blue sky over Rushmore. The grey-tinged clouds foretell rain in a matter of hours.

By 3:30 p.m. the couple reach Jewel Cave, which is almost ten miles from the Wyoming border. It is raining, so they stay in the car to eat a lunch of cold cheese sandwiches, potato chips, and lemonade. Half an hour later the rain stops and they walk to the ticket office, which is about the size of a telephone booth. Displayed on a counter in front of the office are sets of slides and postcards showing the inside of the cave. The items sell well since no flash cameras are allowed inside the cave. Colors of blue, green, and red crystal captivate the eyes of Kris.

Oh, John, look at those postcards. This is going to be great.

I admit it looks good.

Of course it's not quite like an old bank.

Hah, hah. Whatever happened to the obedient wife I married, the one who worshipped every word I uttered?

I didn't have the ring then.

Don't get overconfident if this tour takes us by a
bottomless pit. When it's dark, men have been known to lose their footing or their wives.

Just the two of you? asks the ranger.
Right, they both speak at once.
That'll be two dollars for you both.
How long do we have to wait? asks John.
Next tour starts in twenty minutes. There are some benches placed up by the restrooms. You can wait there if you like.

Do you have any other slides of the inside of the cave? Kris inquires.
Just the sets you see there.
OK, I'll take this set. We'll never get any pictures like this of our own, John.

I know. It's a good idea, he says, not knowing what is a good idea because he has been watching a little girl.

They wait for twenty-five minutes on the benches above the ticket booth. Three other couples join them. One man, apparently a grandfather, is leading his granddaughter, who is mentally retarded. She wears a pretty dress and her hair is neatly cut just below the ears. Her eyebrows are very thin and contribute to the unusually large appearance of her brown eyes. She becomes nervous whenever her grandfather releases her hand. He does this to look through his binoculars toward the dark pines in the direction of a
mountain peak back near Custer Park. They learn later that the bark of the trees, Ponderosa Pine, provides the color from which the name Black Hills is derived.

A couple of young men in their early twenties join the group. Both are well tanned and wear infantry shirts with insignia of divisions still deployed in Vietnam. Their sleeves are cut off and the fronts are only buttoned halfway up. Neither has shaved today, but they both have short haircuts and long sideburns. The taller one also wears a cowboy hat which makes him appear even taller than his companion, who keeps yawning. John listens to their conversation, but not always comprehending what they say since he was deferred by his teaching and then the lottery.

Damn, Jerry, it sure is quiet in these hills, says Dick.

Man, ain't it great, answers Jerry. He breathes deeply. The rain sure made things smell good.

Jeez, it's great.

Nobody lookin' over your shoulder. Nobody yellin', says Jerry as he lights up a cigarette.

God, I can't believe we could pull this in two weeks. We oughta dump these rags and start livin' again.

Not me, I wanna find a hippie who bought one of these shirts, and then I'm gonna . . .

I don't give a damn what they wear. Why look for more trouble? asks Dick.
Maybe so, but that "peace, brother" crap just makes me want to hit somebody. Don't it you, Dick?

Hang on, man. We're out. Let it be. Let's not go on patrol any more. Look, there aren't any rice paddies around here, just a nice forest and a cave. Let's make the most, man.

OK, I'm with you for now, ya dumb draftee, but, hell, if I see one of them toy soldiers, he better run some more.

Aw shut up, ya son-of-a-general.

Not another word comes from the former soldiers until later on the cave tour. They continue to smile and point, but that is all.

The ranger who is to be their guide steps around a corner of rock. He is in his middle twenties, about the same age as the soldiers and John and Kris. He has very light brown hair. His brown hat sits perfectly balanced on his head. There are no wrinkles in his grey shirt or dark green pants. His teeth sparkle as brightly as the brass buckle on his belt. The ranger's image seems to be the reincarnation of the park service's ideal servant, a good model for a glossy portrait in National Geographic. When he approaches his group, they all stand at once as if in worship of his illustrious presence. He laughs easily at their uniform response. His unexpected laughter causes some reciprocal self-conscious laughter from his group at their action, and the shine of his appearance is forgotten.
This easy-going fellow shepherds them like a group of lost sheep to the mouth of the cave. The opening is just around the corner of the rock from which he makes his hourly appearance. The cave opening is blocked by an iron gate. Only the worthy, those who have paid a fee, are allowed to enter and follow the narrow path. The ranger gestures for his group to stop about fifteen feet in front of the gate.

Good afternoon, folks. Welcome to Jewel Cave. My name is Jerry Conklin. I'll be your guide for this trip. Now I want you all to form a single line close together. This is a primitive cave you are about to see, and we don't want any accidents. Every third person should pick up one of these single mantle lamps such as I'm holding as we enter the cave. They are already filled and lit for you. Now please watch carefully. We don't want anybody getting burned, so please hold your lantern this way. Use your left hand. Swing the handle down over the side of the globe like so. Hook your thumb over the handle and rest the base of your lantern in the grip of your other fingers. You'll need your right hand for the railing. There are very few electric lights inside. This is a primitive cave. The steps are all wooden and very steep, some angle 50 to 65 degrees. Please use all of the railings available. Any questions? Nobody? OK, let's go.

Grandpa, hang on tight.

Sure I will, Susie, don't worry.
Hey, I like the sound of this, Dick.

John, I don't want to hold the lantern. You stand ahead of me.

They follow their guide into the cave and along the winding gravel path. Nobody can see more than four lanterns ahead. Occasionally they meet a staircase made of two-by-fours and two-by-sixes. There seems to be consistency in the naming of cave formations. Along the path each indentation of the wall is named after a common concrete image, such as The Monk, Baby Face, Fish Tail, or The Castle. However, the passages themselves usually have names referring specifically to anatomy, such as Fat Man's Misery, Broken Back, or Headache Doorway. Ranger Conklin is proud of the names; he has memorized them all.

Most of the crystal in Jewel Cave is hound's tooth. Some formations come from ancient shifts of rock. There are no stalactites, for this is a dry cave. The only natural color to the cave is a salmon pink, and without lanterns even that is absorbed by the darkness. The texture of the walls is similar to sandstone, except where the crystals show.

Conklin has created a new high point on the tour. It is being tried on an experimental basis this week. This climax is reached only by a one foot wide stairway by which all who wish to see must both enter and return. Therefore,
the ranger allows only three or four to climb it at a time. The retarded girl refuses to go up, so her grandfather wisely stays behind with her. John and Kris and the two ex-soldiers go up together. Their expectations build as they climb the stairs to a recess near the cave's ceiling.

John, I bet this'll be something.

Yeah, this is probably where they took that slide set you bought.

It must be.

Crap, Dickie, the army's imagination reaches even here.

Captain Donovitch, I salute you. Your art is now a one-man show. I never thought you and the underground would get together.

Oh, no, look at that, Kris.

I don't believe it, she frowns.

Somebody really has what it takes. I've only seen one dime-store window look this bad, or was it a second-hand store? I thought this was a primitive cave.

I did, too. I liked it until now. I wish I hadn't bought those slides.

Well, the idea sure is primitive.

In front of them on a rock a color wheel is turning and shining on an exceptionally large protrusion of crystal. Apparently the wheel is run by a line connected to the cave's emergency power outlet. As the shades on the wheel turn, so
does the color of the crystal. The adults continue their mumbling. The children on the tour are the only people who seem to appreciate the display. Their exclamations of glee are heard below by the ranger who cannot help smiling.

The last major spot for stopping on the tour is in the largest open area of the explored part of the cave. Everybody is directed by the ranger to find seats of flat rock which were placed there in a semicircle many years before by the park service. Conklin explains again, as he did at the entrance to the cave, how to light the lanterns and then asks them to shut them off. He keeps his lantern on until the others are out, and it returns the glow to his face that all had noticed when first meeting him above at the start of the tour.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, you're about to enjoy a very unique experience.

Hang on, grampa.

I am, honey, I am.

Scared, Kris?

Are you kidding? No, are you?

We are in the lowest part of the explored area of the cave. This is a good place to demonstrate real darkness. I'm sure none of you has had the opportunity to experience this before.

With that last remark the ranger turns off his lantern.
Who said that?

How do you like it?

Hold me, Grandpa.

What about God, Daddy?

Can you feel it, Dick? I can almost feel that mortar coming.

I felt this way when I first saw one of Donovitch's paintings--the one he called "Cow in a Pasture."

I was talking to Mommy, Davey.

The ranger strikes a match and relights his lantern. He adjusts a screw and the globe fills with light. Most of the light shines outward even though the ranger's lantern has a bent shade. The roof of the cave can't be seen, but the people sitting closest to the ranger can be. Nobody can see all of the ranger. Light on his grey shirt gives it a silver sheen. His shoes have a glare. His facial features seem blurred as if in an overexposed photograph. He is no longer their young leader but a metaphysical figure who seems to judge them with the light from his hand. The figure speaks, and his words echo in a solemn quality throughout the room.

Has time stood still for you? It doesn't exist if you can't look at your watch. Did you remember the past or think of the future?
Has time been standing still lately, Craig?
I don't know, John, not according to my watch, it hasn't. What does the clock in your classroom say?
I mean has this warm weather slowed you down? asks John as he walks over to an open window.
Sure, it always does.
But are you in a rut? John asks as he watches two students light up their cigarettes by a tree.
Something on your mind?
Yeah.
Well, the counselor is free. Come on in, old buddy, says Craig as he walks over to close the door.
You haven't been married long, have you, Craig?
Almost three years.
That long, huh, replies John, slowly digesting the surprise.
Doesn't seem like more than three weeks. You know how it is.
No, I don't.
I see. That's what's on your mind. You wonder how it should be. Craig sits on the corner of his desk to appear more personal.

Part of it.

I'm listening, says Craig as he tosses out a hook.

Did you ever wish you'd waited?

About twenty million times.

I'm serious.

So am I, John. Everytime I want to do something and Helen doesn't, I wish I'd waited.

I thought I was the only one who thought that way.

I'll bet every married man who's under fifty years old, maybe all of us, still gets that feeling.

How did you arrive at that? asks John.

It's natural. Men are more independent than women.

Women have to have someone to lean on.

Do you really believe that?

I don't know if I do or not, but it makes me feel better to think it. When I walk out of this room at four o'clock I tell myself anything I want to. I'm not on contract to this school then.

But you are to your wife, says John, breathing slowly and finally turning away from the window.

Look, I've got to live. There's only one door out of here, and there's only one way away from her--if I choose to
take it.
What's that?
Break the contract.

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There is only one way to leave this room. You came in following me, but will you be able to return on your own? Such moments are few in the days of most people, but there are a few.

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There are a few such moments, Kris, says Mrs. Barrington as she watches her daughter play with the necklace on the dresser.

I know, Mother, answers Kris. A warm feeling bathes her body like a gentle summer breeze. Her mother has seldom spoken of the days when she dated her father, and Kris has never thought to ask. They have always been Mother and Dad, never two young people courting. And when he left you that
night, Mother, how did you feel?

Oh, Kris, I thought the world would come to an end. I cried and cried—missed my supper—and wanted to die.

That was the week before the wedding.

No, two weeks. Wait a minute, come to think of it, it was three weeks before. I was having my wedding dress fitted. Your father had just been told he might lose his job. He looked so sad. He didn't want to have a wife to support, not without having a job. I was so scared.

Scared, Mother? asks Kris as she goes to sit next to her mother on the bed. The yellow shades are drawn in Mrs. Barrington's bedroom. The air is yellow, so is the furniture as if the sun had an over supply of yellow paint and indiscriminately covered the whole room.

You can be sure I was scared, Kris. Don't you know? Half of love is being near someone, never having to be alone. I knew if your father went to another town to look for a job he might find another girl, too, and forget about me.

He couldn't have forgotten about you, protests Kris, not the considerate father she knows.

You're so young, Kris, you don't know. A ring doesn't stop a man from looking, either. Even your grandfather liked to ogle the matrons at church. You and I know he behaved like an old fool, but he did it anyway, God rest his soul.

It isn't fair. It's stupid. Women are more than just
Yes, I agree it isn't fair, but that's life. And you've got to remember, Kris, lookin' and leavin' are two different things.

That's making women appear like second rate human beings, as if what they think is unimportant. I'd feel so gloomy, like being lost in a cave, if John treated me that way.

You don't have to, says Mrs. Barrington as she puts her arm around her daughter's shoulders. You don't have to at all. Every marriage has its own problems, and you'll have your share. This spat won't be the last.

I don't know if I'll be able to stand it, Mother.

You will, mark my words, and John might even leave you for a short while. But just remember, your dad came back after he was sure of what he wanted, and so will John after he gets what's irritating him out of his system.

But John and I had such a fight. All I mentioned was children; I asked how many he wanted.

Some men don't want to be bothered by children right away. They like to think they're still independent, but he'll change. John'll be back and, likely as not, you'll find this fight has brought you closer together.
The turn of a key clicks in a metal box and then the thung of a switch is heard as it connects two poles of electricity. The room is flooded with light. Ranger Conklin returns to the room's entrance to resume leading the tour back to the mouth of the cave. He pauses with delight as he notices the stunned look on some of his followers' faces. A few are still whispering to each other. Others are lighting their lamps again. He sees a little girl on her grandfather's lap, hugging his neck tightly.

Just before we leave this room, folks, are there any questions? asks Conklin. Don't be afraid to ask.

How long were the lights out? shouts the grandfather, and then he shrinks back in embarrassment as the echo of his voice bounces back and forth throughout the cave.

I don't know for sure, but I'd guess about five minutes, answers the ranger.

What if you didn't find that switch? asks John.

Who cares about switches, thinks Kris. What about us? Always thinking about his glorious trip, or telling me how
great the next stop will be, checking the mileage—doesn't he know, doesn't he care? We're traveling farther apart.
CHAPTER FOUR. RUNNING LOW

Highway 16 leads from Jewel Cave, South Dakota, to Gillette, Wyoming. Along the way John and Kris cross areas that bring to mind the wild West in any movie starring Gary Cooper or John Wayne. Crook County, Powder River, Crazy Woman Creek--these names have a vitality that revives the child in Kris, who once owned a Roy Rogers tent, and in John, who had to shoot his best friend with his Lone Ranger six-gun when he caught him robbing the sandbox bank.

From Gillette they take I-90 to Sheridan, which is at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains. As John drives the Landcruiser into Sheridan he spots a small park just a block off of the main street. He drives over there so they can stop to fix supper. Across the street from it is an old three-story hotel called the Sheridan Inn. Forgetting about supper for a minute, they go over to investigate the large building --that is, Kris follows John, knowing there is no use in starting supper yet.

The outer walls of the Inn are white siding, and around each window and door is a pair of green shutters. A porch follows the length of the hotel's front which must be close to 150 feet. John tries a few doors but they are locked. Kris tries to peek in a few windows, but her view is partially blocked by white lace curtains. In a few spots along the edges the lace has yellowed.
At the south end of the building is a gift shop. Through its windows Kris can see shelves and display cases lined with fine glassware. John looks through the door glass of the main entrance, and his eyes are caught by an old mahogany registration desk. Stacks of brass-trimmed mail boxes cover the wall behind it. To the left he notices a sitting room with three high-backed chairs visible in a corner, and to the right appears to be a large dining room, for he notices part of one long table. While Kris continues looking in the gift shop, John walks the rest of the length of the porch. As he walks, his feet slide a little on rice which he finds littered all along the porch and also on the front sidewalk.

Hey, Kris, look at all of this rice. He slides his right shoe over a few kernels so that she can hear it, too.

I already fell on it over here, she answers without looking up.

They must have had a wedding.

I didn't know you were so observant, John.

What's taking you so long down there? Did you hurt yourself? He stares at her, hands on his hips, and is angry that he is not the center of her attention.

No, come on back and look in this window.

I already did. He actually didn't, but somehow she has taken the fun out of his bit of exploring.
Did you see those old black upholstered chairs? asks Kris. I'd hate to guess what they'd cost in an antique store.

Yeah, I saw them. They're quite common, probably not worth more than ten bucks apiece.

My grandmother has one just like them, but she paid seventy-five dollars for it.

Good. Let's go back and eat now.

Wait a few minutes. I haven't looked in all of the windows yet. Why don't you get the stove out if you're in such a hurry?

What are we going to eat? John is angry as he watches her bend over to look in a window with her butt sticking out at him.

Get out a can of peaches and that box of chicken chow mein. And let's put the stove over on one of those picnic tables for a change.

Yes, my dear.

And get a clean table, she adds without ever looking up. Her butt moves slightly as she shifts her weight from her right to her left foot.

John leaves the hotel and crosses the street to the park. It isn't much. About half of its space is taken up by an old steam engine which is surrounded by a cyclone fence. Many western parks have these retired work-horses from the heydays of the Union Pacific, Santa Fe, or Colorado and
Southern. Being a railroad fan, John has to read the plaque hung on the fence before he gets out the stove and food. THIS ENGINE WAS A CLASS 05A MOHAWK WITH A 4-8-4 WHEEL ARRANGEMENT. IT WAS USED TO PULL A HIGH SPEED PASSENGER OR FREIGHT. BUILT IN 1940 FOR THE C, B, AND Q, IT HAS A LENGTH OF 106 FEET 5 INCHES AND A LIGHT WEIGHT OF 290 TONS. ITS STARTING TACTIVE EFFORT WAS 67,500 POUNDS. John can barely recall the Chicago and North Western diesels and those of the Milwaukee Road that used to pass through his home town--the ones that took his father away on business--but he can only imagine the action of an engine like this. No longer do they rock the land causing young men like Thomas Wolfe to dream of the golden cities at the end of the track. The golden cities are covered with smog, and the tracks are being covered with asphalt.

The rest of the park includes two picnic tables, a garbage can chained to an oak tree, and two pairs of horseshoe pits with benches along the sides. The benches are painted red, yellow, and blue, apparently to brighten the days of the older people. One elderly man walks over by the benches and stares at the nearby railroad tracks. The engine behind the fence was apparently brought in off those tracks. The man, however, is only concerned with the tracks being used. In a few minutes he sits down on a yellow bench. His old blue pin-striped suit is ragged and too heavy for the warm weather,
especially with the drab brown sweater which is visible underneath. He pulls out half of a cigar and relights it, and watches John set up the stove. John feels the man's eyes upon him while stirring the chicken chow mein. As Kris comes across the street, he nods at the stove, and then walks over to the man on the bench. He notices the man's grey whiskers and brown skin. His body has a stale old-man smell. He breathes slowly. His eyes turn slowly. John smiles and sits down quickly beside him.

Hello, are you from around here? John begins, anxious to find a little nostalgia before Kris calls him back to reality.

Might say that, replies the old man.

Lived here long?

Off and on.

Oh, I see. You ever ride a train pulled by one of those? John points at the engine behind the fence.

Used to when they ran, the old man replies. His eyes stay on the engine after replying.

How long ago was that?

I don't know.

Twenty years? Please turn around, will ya fellow? thinks John. He wants to look into the past through this man's eyes.

Maybe. The old man despairs of gaining any solitude
today and turns to face John.

Did you like the steam engines?

You might say. The old man feels like he is being bothered by the welfare office again.

The conversation dwindles for a few minutes. John suddenly avoids looking at the old man; he has a feeling that the man wants to hit him. Kris calls that supper will be ready as soon as everything cools. At the sound of her voice, the old man shifts his body to the edge of the bench, stretches his feet out so they rest on the heels of his street boots, and takes two short quick puffs on his cigar. He glances at Kris and then resumes the conversation.

Do you like red or blue colors, young man?

Yes.

Well I hate them. Why don't you go sit on a red bench? he asks with all the lack of subtlety befitting his years.

Then he quickly turns his head and adds, Would that girl be calling you? Maybe you'd better go.

Yes, replies John, she is. He gets up to leave, but the old man calls him back.

You married? The man begins to hold court for the trial of the welfare office versus free old men.

Yes, we're married.

That your car?

Yes, it's a four-wheel-drive.
Thought so. Where you headin'? The old man is trapping the witness. His eyes gleam, and he puffs on his cigar again.

Well, from here we're going to cut across Idaho and then head north to Montana.

Know where Sandpoint is?

Is that in northern Idaho? guesses John.

Yep, near the tip. I used to fish there.

I don't think we'll go that far north into Idaho. Kris, my wife, says it's too far out of the way.

Too bad. The old man pronounces a death sentence. He drops his cigar from his mouth.

I suppose it is. John feels that somehow he has been separated from the world of men.

You moving somewhere? asks the man quietly as if watching a cherished "friend" leave with his daughter and son-in-law for a nursing home, a bitter execution of sentence.

No, just looking the country over.

I did some, too, when I was your age. Didn't have a wife to tag along though, he says as he shakes his cigar in John's face to emphasize the last words.

Oh? John mistakenly thinks he has detected leniency in his judge.

Nope, didn't need one. Don't now.

The old man continues staring at John but doesn't say
another word. John gets up and returns to the car, his curiosity about the engine never to be fully satisfied. He suddenly realizes that a warm sweat is clinging to his arms and back.

Kris dishes out the chow mein and peaches on paper plates, and they move to the nearby picnic table to sit down and eat. They spend the meal time discussing the hotel and possibilities for a campsite. Their roadmap shows camping areas about fifteen miles north and thirty-five miles west of Sheridan.

They leave Sheridan at 9:30. Their road switchbacks as they climb. The scene is beautiful but strange. The horizon above them is a fading yellow. The rocks appear gold, purple, and indigo. The pines are deep dark green and black and pierce the sky like a child's fingers ripping off the yellow wrap of his birthday present. The highway is a ghostly grey. A mist slowly settles down on them. Visibility dims as if one is looking through glasses having a thin clear oily film on the lenses. Patches of clouds float by exchanging lightning.

A half hour later they are high in the Bighorns. The black-top road is deserted but for them. Occasionally a dirt road branches off behind a clump of pines. Signs stating No Snowmobiles mark some of the side roads. John spots another such road in their headlight beams and tells Kris
to pull over. She turns into a small clearing. The purpose of the clearing's existence is unknown. There are no animal tracks to be seen. A few tire tracks are barely noticeable which appear to belong to a piece of earthmoving machinery, possibly a bulldozer. The road seems to extend farther into the trees but the sandy earth is so undulating and strewn with boulders and logs that its direction is not determinable. John and Kris quickly set up the platform and tarp. They have yet to use the tent. There never appears to be time. The air is misty, but the temperature is cooling. A mountain storm could easily appear tonight.

They decide to sleep in their clothes and curl up inside their sleeping bags. Neither thinks to zip the bags together for a cozier evening. As they lie on their backs they look out through the car windows at the clouds swiftly moving by and listen for cars on the road about twenty-five feet away. There are no cars on the road. The wind rustles a few branches.

John?

Yes.

What did you and that old man back in Sheridan talk about?

Oh, I asked him about that engine, and he talked about traveling to Sandpoint, Idaho, he replies.

Is that all? Kris asks, no longer seeing the clouds.
Well, he mentioned he didn't need a wife.

Didn't need a wife? Now why did he say that? She turns over to look into his face for some hidden meaning.

I guess he was thinking about you.

Me! Did you make him an offer? laughs Kris in relief.

No, I don't want to get rid of you yet, Kris, smiles John. He gives her cheek a quick pinch and shake.

Yet? What does that mean? She leans over his face, drops closer, and then licks his nose and right eye.

Just what I said. Watch that tongue, you St. Bernard.

Yeah, well I may decide to get rid of you. You don't know a good thing when you have it, says Kris as she suddenly turns serious, unable to help herself.

You're right. I don't know because I don't have it.

Whoo, weee! he laughs and pretends to gasp.

Ha ha, yourself, she says, not liking his mocking gasp.

Tell me, was it my animal magnetism or subtle conversation that first attracted you to me?

Neither. It was your money. She can't prevent herself from smiling now; she has become so dependent on him for her moods.

But I never had any, says John as he gives her a quick kiss on the forehead.

There goes my reason--and a--thanks for the kiss; real romantic. She pauses and then says, You know I'm kidding,
don't you?

As their conversation ends, John's thoughts are just starting. He thinks about their marriage. It's been only a year now. Boy, the time has gone by. With both working regularly they really haven't gotten to know each other well. They have been too tired after school to talk much. Weekends have been spent preparing lesson plans, buying groceries, doing the washing, or running to garage and auction sales looking for bargains. Of course, they've done all of this together, and they've never been twenty-four hours away from each other since they were married, but what do they really know about each other?

John knows what time of the month her period comes, that she doesn't like to spend money on herself, that she prefers doing physical activity outdoors to reading a book. She loves her family back in Indiana and gets homesick when visiting his family. She seldom argues with his decisions. She can't keep a checkbook balanced and hates to iron his shirts.

They know many details about each other's daily lives, but do these combine to make "great and wonderful loving truths?" He doesn't know. He turns his head to look at Kris' face. Her eyes are open, and she is staring at the ceiling. Does she have questions, too, he wonders, or is she planning tomorrow's meals? Does she really like me, or did
she feel she was getting too old to be particular when I asked the question?

Kris can feel the eyes of John upon her. She wants to be alone inside herself and so does not return his gaze. His comments about the old man not needing a wife disturb her. Did the man really say that or is John teasing again? It is so hard for her to know when he is telling the truth. Is he thinking about what it was like not to be married, or is he thinking about that road atlas again?

What does she know about him? He dated other girls besides her; he wants to live in the mountains; his hobbies are stamps and model railroading. Pizza makes him very gassy but he eats it anyway. He hates purple dresses, haircuts, and baseball on television. Is that important to know?

As the clouds rush by, more questions are asked, but none are answered. The temperature drops below freezing. John and Kris zip up their bags farther. The warmth of their four-pound bags and their bodies slowly settles over them like the haze over the mountains they just climbed. Questions become more and more important to ask, frustrating, and sensitive, but none are now uttered and are finally lost in sleep.

Outside the Toyota a pickup truck rolls by. Its lights briefly glisten the damp windshield of their car. The cold air takes away the smell of the pines. A small deer sniffs at their cooler lying on a flat rock. He fails to find
anything interesting with his nudging nose and continues his browsing deeper in the forest. The temperature drops to 28 degrees early in the morning. About eight John awakens to the sound of traffic on the highway. He tickles Kris' ear, but she only shakes her head. He uses his fingers to strum her lips a couple of times, and then she opens her eyes.

What time is it? she asks.

Eight o'clock. Let's get up. John gets out of his sleeping bag, loses his balance, and rolls over on Kris.

What's the hurry? Get off me!

There's lots to see. He gets off her and starts rolling up his bag.

Go back to sleep, John.

We can't stay here all day.

Why not?

It's private land.

But nobody knows we're here, and I was having the first good dream I've had in over a year.

Well, I'm ready to eat breakfast.

Fix it yourself--quietly. She turns over on her stomach.

Why are you so tired? asks John.

Why are you in a hurry?

I told you. There are places waiting to be seen.

Go away. Go chase a deer.
We've got almost a full tank of gas. Let's go!

As he shouts John lies back on top of Kris and opens his mouth. Out comes a blaring distant resemblance to music. In a twangy country music style he sings a couple of verses of "On Top of Old Smokey." Kris keeps her eyes closed, but a smile develops on her face. John adds variety to his repertoire with the song "Let It Be." Then, by changing to a crooning style with falsetto, he succeeds in imitating a moog synthesizer, so that the theory of evolution has progressed in him from animal to machine without missing a link. After a few more minutes of this noise, he raises his left leg, lets a couple of farts which she feels in her back, and then roars with laughter until he starts coughing and has to sit up.

John, did you have to?

You wanted to get back to nature on this trip, didn't you? There's nothing more natural. He leans back on her again.

Open the tarp before I'm gassed to death. Get off.

Off!

It's cold out.

I don't care, Kris says as she pushes him off and tries to reach the tarp.

I feel inspired, he says as he grabs her from behind by the breasts and pulls her back.
You mean expired! Now get your hands off me! She strikes her left elbow in his chest. He releases her but still blocks the exit.

No . . . well, all right, that's one for you. Hey, he suddenly spurts out, did you ever read the poem, "Fire and Ice," in high school? He sits on the rear of the platform now, knees against his chest and facing Kris.

The one about the end of the world?

Right. You know, I think I'll write a sequel to it.

Good, John. I'm sure there's a ready market. There must be a lot of literate animals around here.

Aren't you going to ask me what I'll call it?

No. Now open the tarp, and get out of my way.

I'll meditate upon it.

Your mind fascinates me in the morning.

Just my mind?

Yeah, just barely. Now open the tarp, please, begs Kris as she holds her hands mockingly in prayerful supplication.

Just ask me the title of the poem; cover yourself with ashes, and I'll let you go.

What poem? she asks, knowing there might be a long wait if she doesn't.

The one I was expired with a minute ago.

OK, what's the title, "Gas and Ice?"
How'd you guess?

Please, John, she says while ignoring his question. Let me out of here, or I'll get even.

How?

Wait till it's time to eat.

Kris crawls out the back of the car. John stays inside to sleep a little longer. He zips her bag together and curls up. Outside, Kris opens the cooler to check the ice supply. All of the ice is gone. She recloses the lid, walks around the car to open the door on the passenger's side, and reaches into the box of groceries. Then she notices John.

JOHN! GET UP!

Yes, my love. I was just meditating. He sits up with a sweet smile on his face.

On what!

On the fastest way to get things done this morning.

You bum.

Aren't you going to kiss me this morning? He leans forward on his hands and knees and puckers his lips.

You missed your chance. Close your mouth, you've polluting the air.

What if I brush my teeth? he asks, but she closes the tarp in his face.

John shuffles on the platform, straightens Kris' sleeping bag and rolls it up. Next he grabs the luggage and
duffel bag, in turn, from the front seat and pushes them to the back of the platform. While he is doing this, Kris takes out oatmeal, salt, brown sugar, and raisins from the box and goes to start breakfast. In a few minutes they enjoy hot cereal.

Kris, how much food is left in that box?

It's about half gone.

I'd like to get rid of that box, John says as he points at it with his spoon.

Well, the cooler is out of ice. If we don't buy any more perishables--quit dripping oatmeal on the table--we'd have room for all of the food in the cooler.

That's what I had in mind.

I know, I'm tired of looking for ice machines.

And ice is too expensive.

After breakfast they rinse out the cups and pot used for the oatmeal. The remaining packaged and bottled food is put in the cooler. Then they take turns tipping one of the five-gallon jugs so the other can wash his face and brush his teeth. Each makes a quick trip behind a tree with the toilet paper, and then they are almost ready to leave. The tarp is folded, the extension pushed in, the stove stacked on the cooler, the jug replaced, and the back of the car is shut.

John pulls out on Alternate 14. About five minutes down the road they spot seven or eight deer in some thinly
scattered brush and pine. John drives the car onto the shoulder of the highway, and Kris gets out one of their cameras. She opens the door quietly and crosses the highway.

The deer watch her closely, following every movement. The brush is dry, however, and the deer blend too well with it to make a good color picture. Kris is still sixty feet away when the deer start to get nervous. They see her hand move as she looks into the view finder; she snaps the shutter at the instant they bolt.

After Kris returns to the car, John starts the engine and they leave. He stays behind the wheel until they reach Cody, Wyoming, where they stop to visit the Buffalo Bill Museum and Whitney Gallery. The building houses a vast collection of paintings and bronze sculpture of the West. John opens one of the heavy glass doors, and they enter. As they stop at a small stand in a corridor for a guide map, a petite woman in her sixties approaches them. She wears a navy blue dress with white polka dots. The rinse on her grey hair has a green tint.

Hello. You folks enjoying our museum? I hope so. I'm Mrs. Stone, may I be of some service?

We just got here, but I'm sure we will. I think those costumes over there are beautiful, don't you, John? Kris points to some glass cases behind the woman.

Yes, they are, says John. He looks briefly toward the
cases, but his eyes remain fascinated by a dark shadow on the mouth of their interrogator.

Have you been here before? asks Mrs. Stone.

No, we're just traveling through. We happened to see your mustache—I mean your museum as we approached it on the highway. John turns away, looking desperately for an art object to concentrate on. Kris kicks him.

You mean to say you had never heard of it? exasperates Mrs. Stone, and she smoothes the hair above her upper lip quickly.

No, I'm sorry we haven't. You sure have a beautiful building here, Mrs. Stone. I wish we were going to have more time to look around. We weren't planning on stopping here at all, says Kris.

Not planning on stopping? What a shame that would have have been. But now that you are here, can I help you with anything?

Yes, where are the restrooms? asks John.

The restrooms? Down the stairs to the basement—on the right. But isn't there anything else? Don't you have a special interest, young lady? Young man?

No, says John. He starts to walk toward the stairs, but an authoritative voice seems to order him back like a misbehaving child.

Let me tell you a little about it then. There are
mannequins dressed in Indian costumes, a stage coach from the Butterfield Line, a rare silver inlaid rifle and other rare guns, and many old photographs of America's frontier. The display cannot be hurried through--no, I must say not--not if the works of Remington, Russell, Gatlin and Bierstadt are to be appreciated. How could the life of Buffalo Bill or the deeds of the Great Plains Indians be understood as anything but stereotypes if you did? No, mark my words, you'll want to stay longer.

While the assistant curator speaks, her eyes have switched from the couple to a large varnished box on the counter of the information desk at the museum entrance. John looks over at the box, too; he remembers passing it when they entered but says nothing. When the woman realizes he is staring in the same direction, she smiles. John interrupts her with a question.

Well, Mrs. Stone, what would you recommend that we see in particular?

I think you'd find it extremely interesting to compare the sculpture of Remington with his paintings--he often used the same subject, you know. Of course, you surely know that.

Where are they? I was just telling Kris about him yesterday, he says while his wife stares at him in humble disbelief.

Over on the north tier, just up those steps to your right.
Thank you, Mrs. Stone. We'll take a look. C'mon, Kris. John, did you have to ask her about the restrooms? Why? he asks as he pulls her along by the hand. You don't seem in a hurry to get there. They're down the stairs, not up.

When I realized what she was up to, I just wanted to get out of her sight.

What do you mean? asks Kris. Slow down, you're hurting my arm.

She wants us to pay for this.

I certainly wouldn't mind, John, but you're wrong. The sign on the door distinctly said this was free. She pulls away her hand.

You didn't see that box on the counter when we walked in, did you? insinuates John as they stop in front of a painting of Yellowstone Falls.

No, what about it?

That woman was standing behind it and glared at us when we walked by. Hey, we ought to see these falls this afternoon.

What's the box for?

Take a look yourself--not now--when we leave.

John and Kris spend about another hour and a half here before they regretfully have to leave. They have tried to concentrate all of their attention on the costumes and
paintings but feel they must move on to Yellowstone Park yet this afternoon. As they walk out Kris turns by the information desk to look at the box John was talking about. Their former assistant is back standing behind the box, and Kris smiles at her in recognition. The woman does not return Kris' smile until she puts a dollar in the box, for on the box in poorly formed Gothic letters are the words: Please contribute to the museum's painting restoration fund. Mrs. Stone turns her eyes toward a family coming in the door.

John drives the car over to a nearby supermarket so they can buy some groceries for tomorrow, and then they stop at a drive-in to order Cokes and hamburgers. While waiting for their order, Kris trades places with John behind the wheel. As soon as they get their food, they leave, eating as they ride.

Kris drives on to the east entrance of Yellowstone National Park. They do not plan to spend much time there either because of the park's reputation for having too many spoiled tourists and bears. They intend to go on a few miles south to Grand Teton after making a picture-hopping circle beginning at Yellowstone Falls.

Just past the falls both John and Kris are riding slowly and looking for wildlife in a meadow beyond a grove of trees when Kris stops the car as suddenly as she can without squealing the brakes. Across the road she sees a huge
videotape. It's like waiting for a replay of a rough tackle. The audience waits.

What can she do after she's taken the picture?

Nothing, I guess. For all we know she already took it.

Maybe she knows, Kris thinks to satisfy herself since John won't. She feels a strange excitement, almost like on her wedding night.

She's too far away from the trees. That buffalo will get her any minute, says John, generously accepting the woman's fate like a poor lawyer.

The subject of their worry is a silver-haired lady in her sixties. She's wearing a purple dress with white printed leaves. The dress hangs down to her ankles. She is about five-foot-three and weighs 120 to 125 pounds. She is a former history teacher whose hobby is photography. Her camera has always been her companion on these tours sponsored by an education association for retired teachers. The same camera has been reconditioned at least eight times by a friend of hers; her local Kodak dealer will no longer handle it. Actually it has been in her friend's basement workroom nine times. The last time she got a roll of film caught so that the case wouldn't open. Her friend said it wasn't supposed to, it couldn't happen, so in her mind she dismisses the incident rather than believe she has lost a little of her former dexterity or camera knowledge.
Opposite her is a magnificent buffalo. He weighs just over a ton. If he decides to move forward three feet, his horns will touch the woman's camera, and it will be back in the basement of her friend, where she will never reclaim it. His dark brown hide still has most of its winter thickness. Occasionally a fawny-grey wisp of color may be seen where he is just starting to shed. As he faces the woman with his head bent down, his eyes looking at her red shoes, Kris and John watch the scene with knowledge of impending horror. At that moment, nature or God, or the education association, or the women has created a still life, and helpful Mrs. Stone will not charge them to see it.

Can she get out of it, John?

I don't have any idea. I'm having a hard time thinking just now.

So am I. I could wet my pants.

We'll have to watch and see.

Don't be funny now. She starts to laugh, but feels awful and the smile on her face hurts. I can't watch any more. Kris only turns half way around and feels compelled to continue looking out of the corner of her eye.

Well, then, pull ahead slowly. Maybe we'll see a ranger, says John. And don't look at me that way. I wasn't trying to be funny.
Are you sure we won't cause a disturbance?
It doesn't seem to be aware of our car, he says as they inch away.

About a mile down the road they see a light green pick-up truck belonging to the park service. They notify the long-suffering ranger of the incident. Then John and Kris go on to see the Mud Volcanoes, Mineral Springs, and Old Faithful. They reach Old Faithful at about 7:30. The park information officer at a booth near the log seats surrounding the geyser tells them: "Old Faithful erupts approximately twenty-two times a day--not as often as it used to. The last eruption in daylight will occur at 8:20." They wait to take their pictures, trying to get a sequence of the geyser rising to its peak, and then return to the Toyota.

John, you drive, OK? I feel washed out.
All right, move over. He leans forward and Kris slides across underneath him.

Fasten your seat belt. How often have I reminded you?
I did. C'mon, Kris, do you always have to remind me?
Yes, I can't help it. I worry about getting in an accident.

Don't you think you're a good driver? sympathizes John.
Sometimes, she says, staring at the floor. All right, let's go. You're always in a hurry.

Sometimes? What do you worry about?
I never know what's on the other side of a hill. Let's go. What are you waiting for?

Oh. Well, do you want to stick to flat roads? he asks as they leave.

I wish we could, she responds quietly.

All we have to do is get somebody to move the mountains out of the way, says John, preferring to ignore her hint.

Why do you always have to make fun of me?

I'm not. I worry, too.

What do you worry about?

This side of the hill, getting through the day--little things like that. How does that grab you?

Funny, again. You're just mocking me.

It wasn't meant to be funny that time, he replies.

Say, have you looked at the gas gauge lately?

Yeah, we have less than a quarter of a tank left.

Well, it's getting late. We'd better find a station.

There's one a block down the street. It's on the other side of this parking lot. I noticed it when we first pulled in because there was a car like ours at one of the pumps.

Why didn't you stop then? she glares.

I didn't know when Old Faithful was going to erupt. Besides I didn't have a credit card for that station.

There's another! It's about a block down the street behind us.
We'll try it.
Use a Traveler's Check if you have to.

That station is closed, too. They travel another twenty miles to West Thumb and learn from a clerk locking up a gift shop that all of the gas stations in the park close at six. He mentions another station just outside the park which is another twenty miles from where they are. The station is part of a place called Flag Ranch, a combination dude ranch and campground. The road leading to the south exit of the park gently rolls, giving John and Kris hope of reaching the ranch before they run out of gas. John holds their speed under fifty miles per hour when going uphill and allows the car to coast downhill. They try to avoid looking at the tenths of a mile spindle on their odometer. It turns so slowly. Their view is limited to a black mass of forest on both sides of the road and a grey sky. They spot a porcupine and later a raccoon in the glare of their headlights; each quickly scurries away from the shoulder of the road. They laugh as they remember their hurried tour earlier through the park.

John, what was the big hurry?

We knew before we left Iowa that we couldn't spend much time in both parks.

Couldn't we have delayed things a day?

It wouldn't have mattered to me. You could have said
something before, he says as he looks at the speedometer.

Yeah, I suppose, she replies, knowing he still won't give the real answer.

Do you realize we haven't seen any bears in this park? In Yellowstone of all places. Why haven't we?

I asked the park officer about it.

What did he say?

It's too early for most of them. Remember, we're still in the middle of June.

Oh, they're still hibernating, remembers Kris.

And there isn't much garbage around the camping areas yet. But you know what else that guy said? says John, sounding irritated.

What?

He started giving me that same old line about how fortunate teachers are to have the whole summer off.

Not that again. For a moment Kris is relieved to think about school instead of the gas. I wonder if Anne will be back? she reflects.

I guess teachers will always be lazy bums three months of the year, he says while glancing in the rear view mirror.

Well, I don't mind not seeing any bears, but that's the first question my aunt will ask me when we get back. She was here a few years ago and saw lots of them.

We'll see bears on this trip before it's over. Hey,
Kris, you didn't see a light ahead, did you?

No, are we about there? I'm getting nervous.

I see that light again. That's gotta be the Flag Ranch. I'd guess it's about three or four miles further. He turns to see her face brighten.

That far! Do you think we'll make it?

I'm not sure, but we've got to try. The tires are bald, and the bullet wound in my head stings a little.

If we don't make it, remember, John, that there's never been anyone else. Kris pretends to dab at a tear in her eye. You're the only guy I've slept with--in a sleeping bag.

I know, I wish I could say the same to you, Kris, but in my darkest hour I've known you'd understand.

I realize that, and I've let it tear my heart apart all of these months.

And I was looking forward to the day when you could claim your heart had been tearing you apart for years.

I forgive you, John.

I always knew you'd understand.

Now that that is settled, if we don't make it who's going to walk? Kris has suddenly noticed the needle in the gas gauge is leaning below empty.

Get out a coin and we'll flip for it.

I'm not going out on this highway at night.

Well, why should I? asks John.
Because men are supposed to.
But I've been doing all of the driving.
You haven't driven that far!
Remember, Kris, you forgot to watch the gas, too.
Oh, I know, but I don't want to walk on this highway at night, even if it's only five hundred feet.
Don't worry about it now. We're there.
Well, in that case, there was somebody else, but it doesn't matter now.
You're right. It doesn't, says John matter-of-factly.
You really wouldn't care?
Next time we run out of gas we'll discuss it further.
You just want time to think up a smart answer.

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He always has a smart answer, Maryann. Take this trip, for instance. I don't mind going, but he makes all the plans. He packs the car the way he wants it, then he unpacks it, and then he yells at me to help him pack it again.

John's just excited about going, suggests Maryann. She holds her cigarett aside for a moment while she takes a sip of her Coke.
No, it's not just that, says Kris. There's something more, and he won't tell me what it is.

Are you sure you want to go? asks Maryann.

I don't know. Don't you think it's a long way for one summer?

There's no question about it being a long way, but you've got all summer—excuse me for a minute. Maryann gets up to put her bottle of Coke back in the refrigerator. Her Coke is a substitute for coffee which she cannot stand. A few sips each morning before school are all she ever takes; one bottle lasts her a whole week.

Would you do it, Maryann?

You'll see a lot of pretty country, I'm sure.

That's not the point! maintains Kris.

But, Kris, I don't have a husband to ask me. I admit, if I did, I'd be a little scared, especially if one of us got sick.

Maybe I'm a little scared for the same reason.

Why don't you talk it over with John?

I've tried. But he always has something else on his mind like "showing that Harry Miller" or "proving something."

He takes a lot of ribbing in this lounge sometimes. Have you ever noticed? asks Maryann.

I know, nods Kris. I've seen Craig and Harry with him, sitting in a corner by themselves. I used to think they were
just talking about this summer.

They all like to brag some about their vacation plans.

There's more to it than that. I know they talk about other things when I'm not around. Then, if I come and join them, Harry winks at John and pats me on the shoulder--oh, how I hate that--and John just smiles or blushes, just sits there! I get so mad! Sometimes I turn around and just walk out, but one of these days I'm going to slap Harry first.

Harry's preoccupied with sex, agrees Maryann, but I feel sorry for him.

Why? asks Kris, surprised that anybody could find sympathy for Harry Miller.

His wife dominates him at home, whispers Maryann.

You're kidding! That's funny, that's really funny.

Don't tell anybody I said so.

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It is 9:30. They are at a Texaco station, part of a large log complex operated by the Flag Ranch. The building also houses a gift shop and a restaurant. An attendant comes out. His cooled breath fogs the window on Kris' side of the car.
Help ya, folks? asks the attendant as he scratches a pimple on his chin.

Fill it with regular. I think we're kinda low, says John.

Boy, John, am I ever relieved.

What was that, mister?

Never mind. Check the oil, too, will you?

Say, how much does this rig hold? The attendant stands back to look it over. A spot of blood grows larger on his chin.

Eighteen and five-tenths gallons.

Pretty dry?

I've got a hunch she is, says John as he watches the attendant take a clean towel to wipe the dip stick.

Figured as much. Most folks stay in the park when it gets this late.

Except us. Kris feels as if she's spoken the words before. She stares at the attendant's greasy hands and black fingernails.

Stations close early there, you know, says the attendant, wiping his chin with his sleeve as he informs them.

Yeah, we know. How's the oil? asks John.

Oil's fine.

They stay in the Toyota while the tank is filled. Kris slides over closer to John and rests her head on his shoulder.
John is busy looking at their remaining Traveler's Checks. He frowns when he notices that one of them forgot to note where they cashed the last check. Kris can't relax while John is fumbling with the checks. She sits up as the station attendant slams the nozzle back into the side of the pump.

That about does it as far as the gas is concerned. Sixteen and nine-tenths gallons, mister.

Oh, I guess we stopped too soon, says John nonchalantly. Funny man. I married a funny man, she whispers so only her husband can hear her.

Got your card, mister? The attendant is scratching a scab on his neck now.

Will you take a Traveller's Check? asks John, and, assuming he will, John pulls out the checks from his shirt pocket.

Long as ya got some identification.

I think I do.

John, I can't believe we made it. Kris slumps back on the seat, relaxed and tired.

We've still got a long ways to go.

What was that, mister?
CHAPTER FIVE. DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU WANT

The next morning John and Kris leave for the Grand Teton National Park. It is only a ten-mile drive south from the Flag Ranch. The sky is clear blue except for an occasional group of cotton ball clouds. As they cross the park's northern boundary they sight a small meadow a half mile ahead. The meadow has a heavy carpet of grass and dandelions. A lonely picnic table sits two hundred feet from the highway.

John parks the Toyota on the right shoulder and they get out. Kris carries a brown paper sack containing a half dozen cans of cold orange juice and a dozen sweet rolls which they bought back at the ranch cafe. The sack of food makes a late breakfast. As they sit at the table eating, they view the Grand Teton, Mount Moran, and the lesser peaks. Jackson Lake sparkles. The pine-lined shore becomes a long black mass of curbing which prevents the brightness from spreading.

What do you want to do first today?

I feel so filthy, John. I just want to wash and get into some clean clothes.

What else?

I think it's about time you shaved, she says as she rubs his cheeks.

I told you when we started this trip that I wanted to grow a beard.
Just because your students wanted you to, prods Kris.

Maybe, but I also want to see how I'd look without your friends making jokes about it. This summer will be the best chance I'll get.

Doesn't it itch?

Not yet. What you are looking at? John notices she is looking past him.

The low shrubbery along this side of the lake. I thought I saw an animal walking in it.

I'll bet moose feed along there in the evening. That's what they like. And what have we got left to feed on?

Well, there are two rolls left. You want one and I'll take the other, offers Kris.

No, thanks. What about the orange juice?

One can left. She slides it toward him.

I guess I'll finish it; these rolls have made me thirsty and. . . . He quits, realizing she isn't listening.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a cabin and raise a family on this spot? She spreads her arms out and pretends to pull the meadow in.

If it wasn't a park, you mean, qualifies John.

Right, it if wasn't a park.

Well, I read that some people think we've got too much land in our parks, and, if our population keeps growing, the rest of the country will need more space.
So, if we have our children first, they'll have to give us this meadow!

I doubt, says John, choking on the orange juice, if the Sierra Club would agree with you.

Maybe Planned Parenthood would agree, returns Kris. With them against the Sierra Club we'd have one of the hottest lobby fights Congress ever saw.

Who would take the first step?

You'd go to Washington, John, and testify, of course. About what? he asks.

One of the bears got me pregnant. You'll sue for damages, and this meadow will about cover our demands.

Well, people think everything else is their fault. It might work.

Why not? Listen, last year a girl in Iowa went to court and claimed she got pregnant in a municipal swimming pool. That seems possible. More room than a back seat.

Her dad blamed the city for not purifying the water. As she speaks, her eyes catch the dazzle of Jackson Lake in the distance.

The bears are gonna lose again.

And we'll own a piece of the park.

Even if you don't get pregnant, the parks will have a hard time surviving, frowns John, who seems incapable of seeing a happy ending for many long-range plans any more.
Drink your orange juice.
I will but this irritates me.

The store didn't have any other kind of juice, she rationalizes, and I'm really not pregnant. Kris doesn't smile, either.

I mean that pile of rusty cans over there under the tree, clarifies John as he tries to head off a discussion about babies. Junk everywhere. Look how often we've come across aluminum tabs and plastic bags. He catches a germinating smile near her eyes and praises himself for some quick thinking.

Or Polaroid negatives. Even when I've climbed up on a ledge I've found them.

Some people treat these places like garbage dumps.

I guess they don't care, Kris suggests while clearing the table.

Why should they? They'll see it once and probably go some place else next time or never be able to afford to come back. It becomes somebody else's responsibility. And there are worse responsibilities, he mutters to himself.

It all depends on what people want, I suppose.

I wonder how this area will look in the middle of August.

I don't know. I'm ready to go now, John, are you?

They drive another three miles down the road to Colter
Bay and find a large picnic area with restrooms. They go in and change clothes. John also shaves. He decides, if he's going to grow a beard, that he'll wait until they get into a cooler climate farther north. His beard doesn't itch, but the skin feels greasy in the sun. Just a few hundred yards away the bay area has been developed. There are small boat docks, two gift shops, a post office, and a tackle shop. After changing, John and Kris walk over and look around. A sign in the front window of the tackle shop advertises boat rides on Jackson Lake. The boat makes a wide circle around Elk Island which takes approximately two hours. They decide to take the ride.

The boat is a brand new twenty-foot crusier. Two men are in charge. One steers the boat while the other describes the scenery. John and Kris sit in the back to feel the spray. A flag waves in the stern. It has an outline of the Tetons in dark brown centered on a yellow background. The boat makes three stops during the trip to allow people to stand and take pictures. The stops help, but the boat still rocks. The waves are spurred on by a light wind across the lake.

John, take a few pictures of some other peaks besides the Grand Teton.

I will, but it's hard to get an angle. There's a lot of glare coming off the water. I wish we had a light meter.

Well, it's past noon, so the angle of the sun's rays
shouldn't be so bad.

I wouldn't want it any brighter. John shifts the camera angle several times before taking each picture.

Did you get a picture of Elk Island? she asks.

I thought it would be better to wait 'til we're on the other side of it.

Let me take a few. Kris reaches for the camera.

Go ahead. Take it. Have you noticed those four clouds to your left?

What about them? Kris takes a quick upward glance.

I see three horses facing an elephant.

I see an idiot.

What's wrong with my imagination?

Nothing. It's yours.

Let's have somebody take a picture of us sitting in the stern. He waves his hand for her to come and sit beside him.

But, John, my hair's all messed up.

If it's combed, the picture won't look natural.

I'm normally messy, is that it?

I would say your present condition is normal for this state of your environment.

You're a slob, too.

When they arrive back on shore John stays near the dock. He wants to get a full length picture of the boat without the people on it. Kris goes ahead to buy some aspirin; the glare
from the water has been too much for her. While waiting for all the people to leave, John starts rubbing his nose. He quickly finds his fingers covered with pus. He wipes his fingers on the underside of a plank and then takes his picture. Kris has returned and is waiting at the top of the bank by the time he's done. She stares at his face as he approaches her.

Don't rub your nose, John.

It's burnt, I know.

Your nose looks like a melted pat of butter.

Did you put that salve in the first aid box?

Yeah, but you'll have to stay in the shade for a while.

If you don't cool down, the salve'll run right off.

OK, doc. John smiles broadly.

It may not be funny. You could get a bad infection from that.

All right. How's your head? He grabs her around the waist and looks into her face.

It's not throbbing as much, she pretends unconvincingly.

I guess we'd better not go any farther today.

We were going to stay here a week, anyway, weren't we?

Well, we can't right here, John says matter-of-factly.

Why not? You said . . . .

Take it easy, Kris. That sign says why not. This area is not for camping.
Well I'm not leaving this park.

Nobody said you had to. I think there's a campground a couple of miles farther south.

I'll bet it has horseshoe pits, a ski jump, and basketball courts, too, laughs Kris sullenly.

Why'd you say that? asks John as he whirls around angrily.

Because this place is starting to remind me of Disneyland. It has everything you need but mostly what you don't need.

Is that all you meant?

I suppose. I'm sorry but I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just tired, OK?

For the next few minutes John doesn't hear her. He sits down on the grassy bank, and Kris sits beside him, content to avoid an argument which would worsen her headache. They watch the next group of vacationers line up on the dock in preparation for another lake cruise. Kris brushes a few pine cones out of the way and leans back on the grass. John remains sitting up and staring straight ahead.
Prove you can do it, Johnny. I say you can't, yells a boy standing along a free throw lane, his hands stretched above him and his knees bent.

Shoot, Johmy. Shoot, shouts another boy.
You're going to mi-iss. Mi-iss adds the first boy.
Kid, if you're going to go out for basketball we require you to aim for the basket once in a while, calls the coach from the half court line. He wipes a white handkerchief against his brow.

Sorry, coach, says Johnny Davidson.
You guys shut up. None of ya have made the team yet, yells the coach to the other boys. I'm not sure Madison can use any of you. I don't see a sophomore team yet. Now shut up! He turns back to Johnny again.

Sorry, coach, continues Johnny again.
Don't tell me you're sorry, Johnny. Show me what you can do.

All right, I'll try.
Don't try. Do it! Do it! snaps the coach as he claps his hands sharply at the end of each sentence.
John continues staring toward the boat but thinking about basketball. Kris stares at his back wondering why what she said was so wrong. She knows he was never a great athlete. Whenever she brings up the subject he makes a joke out of it as he does of so many other things, but she doesn't give it much serious thought. She is more interested in finding out about why the trip is so important to him, John?

What? he replies, not looking at her.

You never answered my question. Now hold it. I don't want to argue. Kris jumps a little as he turns to her. His face is tight. The tips of his ears are red.

Well, what do you want? he says.

I want to know, she answers slowly, if we can do some hiking while we're here.

I thought you said this place reminds you of Disneyland.

It does where all the people are, but most of the park is away from this, away from the roads.

Yeah, we'll see. John doesn't register any emotion in his face now. He looks at her, but sees his coach.

They rest for a half hour in the shade and then leave. John drives slowly, looking for one of the small unobtrusive brown signs that points to a campground that can't be seen from the road. They turn in at Summit Mountain Campground, a place situated between Signal Mountain and Jackson Lake.
On the other side of the mountain is the Snake River. Only about a fourth of the area has camping on the lake shore, but none of the rest of the campground is more than 500 feet away. Because of its choice location, the campground is full.

How much is this going to cost, John? wonders Kris. I don't know. It sure is close to the lake. Keep driving around. We've got to find a place here.

It's beautiful. She sticks her head out of the window and inhales the pine-scented breeze. I've already circled three times. There's nothing next to the lake.

Circle again. Let's take any place we can get. Is that guy waving at us? asks John. I think so. Stop and see what he wants, she says, and the car stops before she finished speaking. He had intended to stop.

Hello. I watched you circling. Place is pretty full, says the man. His hair is grey and balding on top. We're finding that out, says John impatiently. You folks got a tent? Yes, Kris answers quickly and hopefully.

Well, my wife and I--name's George Walker, by the way--we have that Airstream, but we don't use the ground behind us. He points to their trailer and then adds, Plenty of room for a tent.
ground in back of the Airstream, their generous friend comes over to them again. He is smoking his pipe and dressed in one-piece green coveralls. They zip up the front and have a sewn-in flexible belt. The outfit is popular among many older men who are traveling. The Davidsons have seen other men wearing either pink, blue, brown, or lavender overalls, colors that evoke a real backwood's flavor among unreal suburbanites.

You folks decided? asks Mr. Walker.
Yes, we like it, replies John.
Fine, my wife is going to clear this table, and you'll be able to use it whenever you want.
What will you use? asks Kris.
Oh, don't worry. We've got a comfortable little nook in the trailer.
We sure appreciate it, says John as he waits to shake the man's hand.
That's all right, says Mr. Walker while knocking his pipe on the palm of his left hand to remove the ashes. Then he shakes hands with John and Kris, too.

John walks back to the Toyota for the tent while Kris clears a spot for the tent floor. There are a lot of pine cones and wood chips that must be removed to avoid rupturing the plastic tent floor. The ground is on a slope so no matter how the tent is pitched they'll be sleeping on an angle. A
half-buried root crosses the chosen spot. She doesn't notice it. John returns with the tent in one canvas bag and the poles and stakes in another.

Bring the tent over here, John.

Well, come over and help. I can't get it out myself.

He struggles with the tent.

Poor little boy.

Have it your way. We don't need the tent.

I'm coming. Kris kicks a few big sticks out of her chosen spot as she comes.

Pull the bag down while I hold the tent.

Yes, master.

Lay off. I'll pull the bag, if it'll make you happy.

I was just kidding.

Is this where you want it? he asks, looking at her partially cleared spot and the root.

Yes, she says while trying to determine if she should act meekly. Then she, too, sees the root. Well, I guess it still needs to be cleared some.

OK, let's unfold it. Grab an end.

Which end?

On this side.

This is going to be easier to set up than I thought, she hastily surmises.

Shouldn't we zip up the windows? asks John, not
remembering if they did so the last time they set up the tent.

I don't know. We unzipped when we folded it.
Forget it for now. Get the stakes and hammer.
Where's the hammer?
In the bag, Kris, in the bag.
No it isn't.
Well, look in the car. Try behind the driver's seat.
Can't you push them in without it? she asks, hoping to save a trip.
Some of them. I'll see what I can do while you get the hammer.

John manages to force in six stakes, three on each end of the tent. He looks toward the car. Kris has the back of the car completely emptied. She has finally resorted to looking in the dirty clothes bag. No luck. Then, she tries the food box. She finds the hammer wedged between a box of rice and two cans of soup. Crap, there it is, she complains. What a stupid place to put it.
John, where are we going to put the tools?

What tools? He looks up at Kris, who is sitting on the sidewalk with her legs crossed.

I think we ought to take some in case something breaks.

We haven't got room for more. The tool box under the seat has everything we need for the car. John returns to his newest method of packing.

We don't have a hammer.

There isn't room in that box.

I still think we ought to have one, she insists.

OK, find a place for it.

OK, I will.


The food box, Kris answers smugly.

But we'll be using it all the time. You might take the hammer out and forget to put it back in.

No, I won't. It'll be easier to find there.

Have it your way. John knows some battles aren't worth winning.

Let's stop for tonight. It looks fine to me.

I want to see how the stove fits on the cooler.

I'm going upstairs, she calls as she walks in the front entrance of their apartment building.
I found the hammer, yells Kris as she returns to the tent.

In the food box, assumes John, who has been sitting on the grass for ten minutes waiting for her.

If you knew, why'd you let me take everything out of the car? she asks in exasperation.

I thought you'd remember, and if you didn't ... I'd save you the trouble of unloading the car.

Right! Hammer the rest of the stakes. I placed them by the loops on the front and back sides. He points sternly at the stakes like a slave's taskmaster.

Do you remember where the poles go? asks Kris in submission.

No, but it shouldn't be difficult with the tips color-coded.

It shouldn't be, she agrees.

Yellow ones go through the eaves' loops, right? He smiles down at her with confidence.

It might be difficult, she thinks.

Blue ones hold the peaks, right? He continues his proud
assumptions.

It's going to be difficult, she knows and laughs exultantly inside.

There aren't enough red poles to hold all four corners.

Use the two black ones, suggests Kris, pointing at them in the same manner that John used with the tent stakes.

They're too short.

Inside the Airstream, George and Eloise Walker have conveniently left the back window of their trailer open. They are munching on some coffee cake and drinking hot chocolate as they listen to the plight of their neighbors. Each comment from John or Kris about a pole brings a bite of cake or a sip of chocolate and a nod from George to Eloise, who responds with a wink of thirty-two years' understanding.

George is also recalling his first trip West in his old Ford. He went with two good friends who worked with him at the steel plant in Gary. His only camping gear was a down-and-cotton sleeping bag and a hatchet. He didn't have a stove or heater. Few tents had floors; few people had tents. None of the tents were equipped with color-coded poles; you had to buy a rope separately to hold up the canvas. He washed his clothes in a creek instead of in a laundromat.

Eloise is listening patiently to George as no one else will any more. As he talks, a smile or wink from her is all he needs to keep going. Sometimes a word from outside stirs
her memories of their early married years. She remembers how anxious George was to take her camping and how she hated it. Her clothes were too heavy or too light, she got sick of pork and beans, and George ignored her until he got tired, and then those dirty clothes kept her away from him. She pats the wall of the trailer and brushes a crumb off of George's lap. George looks good in green. She can't understand why he doesn't like to wear his new coveralls. Her brother in New York insisted they were the latest fashion.

I don't think the black ones fit on the blue ones, complains John.

Here comes our neighbor from the trailer.

Having trouble, folks? asks Mr. Walker.

No, we're doing fine, Mr. Walker. Just trying to decide which way we want the door to face, John bluffs.

Call me George.

OK, will do.

Mind if I watch you set it up? Their neighbor calls the bluff.

Not much to see. No different from other tents.

What do those colored things do? asks George.

That's where you connect the ends of the poles. The colors make it easier to connect the right poles together. Saves a lot of time. Kris looks away at these words.

I'll bet that's nice. Well, go ahead. Don't let me
bother you.

No bother, Kris says, John’s got it all memorized. You see he was just about to connect the black ones to the red ones.

I was? whispers John in surprise.

That’s why they’re shorter. They boost the center height, remember, John? Kris acts as if John does know and only George needs the information.

Sure I do.

Let me see two of those poles, son. Show me how you connect them.

You slip one inside the other and twist until they snap. John demonstrates with two poles.

Is that all? asks George.

That’s all. These holes on the side let you extend the pole in different lengths to tighten the canvas.

I think I got this one stuck, says George, as he turns his head for some expert advice.

I see, groans John.

Well, go ahead with the rest. I’ll enjoy watching. Kris, take the blue pole out of that eave.

Why? she asks. Then she notices George chuckling as he pulls out his pipe from a chest pocket.

Because I’ve got yellow ones on this eave and in the loop of the peak, says John, waiting.
All right. I was just poking some sticks out of it.

Bring a blue one down here, and let's stand up this side.

John holds up one corner while giving orders.

Lookin' pretty good, son. You sure know what you're a-doin', says George as he lights his pipe.

What next? asks Kris.

Other side, answers John without looking up.

What's going to hold up this side? She waits for an answer.

Need some help? offers George.

No, thanks, we're just taking our time, replies John.

Going to be dark soon. George chuckles to himself again and thinks, I wish I was doing it all over again. God, how I wish!

We know, we know. I'll hold this. Kris, try setting up one of the peaks. He watches as she extends a pole.

Stretch it more. Now get to the other side.

OK? Kris steps back for John to take a look.

No, I meant the other peak, on the back, he answers.

I'm trying. Why don't you do this, and I'll hold the eave?

You do it? OK, come here.

Don't let go of that pole! I can't reach it yet!

After setting up their tent, their stay in the park proves to be very restful for the couple. John wants to take
a raft trip on the Snake River, but Kris won't agree. They hike instead for a few days along Jackson Lake. On another day they drive three miles over to Jenny Lake. After registering their leaving time at a stand by a small pole bridge, they begin a hike around that lake. They munch on raisins and dried apricots during the hike.

The trail is used by both people and horses. The people usually wear the popular hiking boots which leave waffle sole imprints around the greenish-brown piles left by the horses. The high spots of the trail are covered with gravel or wood-chips, but the low spots are muddy. There are creosote guide posts every three-tenths of a mile.

At one point Kris sees a climb that requires overcoming a lot of granite rocks, but it is not hindered by high grass or thorny bushes. She hopes to see Grand Teton by making the climb. John stays behind to take her picture. She is soon disappointed, for there is another valley she has to cross which she did not see until she was two-thirds of the way up. The high point she had seen from the trail is actually on the other side of a hidden valley. Perspectives are more deceiving as the setting fills with larger objects. What seems close is actually much farther away. Goals are harder to reach.

On the trail back John and Kris pass a pair of young men their age who are wearing jeans and hiking boots. Both have long hair tied up in back in pony tails. The two groups
smile a greeting and pass.
   They seemed like nice hippies. What d'ya think, John?
   I suppose a lot of them are.
   Somehow their long hair appears more appropriate in the wild than on a city street.
   Hippies are wild, is that it?
   They sure fit the surroundings better than that man in the purple overalls, she replied.
   The guy with the Winnebago by the lake?
   That's the one.
   You know--hey, watch where you're stepping--I've never seen a spot of dirt on his clothes. He must spend all of his time in that motor home. He notices she isn't listening to him. Kris, what are you staring at now?
   Those hippies we passed. They left the trail by that big boulder.
   So what?
   One was starting to take off his shirt.
   And you think .... He doesn't need to finish; they both know the young men are going swimming nude.
   I'm going back and sneak a look.
   What a sex fiend. John turns back to stare and then follows.
   Oh John, I'm just curious. She turns her head back at him for a second as she walks.
Sure you are. I knew you were a nympho. Don't deny it. Aren't you coming? Kris notices John hesitate. Maybe, just to keep an eye on you. I don't want you to attack them.

Kris doesn't hear John's last comment. She walks quietly back a few more yards to the granite boulder. Then she steps around it, parts a few bushes, and looks down toward the sudden sound of shrieking voices.

How's the view? asks John as he comes up behind her. Oh, John, knock it off. Boy, I bet it's cold. Why don't you go down and check the water temperature? What would you say if I did? she rejoins. I'd ask if it was hot or cold. I'll bet! Kris turns away, her girlish curiosity spoiled.

That one's climbing on a rock to take a dive. Kris, c'mon back. Take a look.

I think it's time to go, she says without turning back. Aren't you going to watch his dive?

In another hour they are back to where John parked the car, at the south edge of Jenny Lake. On the other side of the car is a painter concentrating hard on his easel. His subject is the Tetons which are visible from where he looks up into the same valley which had earlier prevented Kris from finishing her climb. The Davidsons cross the dirt road
to get around and behind the artist. As they do, John almost steps into another palette, a bundle of camel's hair brushes, and a dozen tubes of oil paint. A large black leather satchel rests by his left foot. It is partially open, and a roll of paper towels lies on top. A spare canvas leans against the bag.

The artist is dressed in brown slacks which have plenty of grass stain on the knees and are worn shiny on the rear. They have large pockets on the thighs with flaps that button. A leather bag hangs from his belt. His black shoes are badly scuffed and in need of new heels. The sleeves of his light tan flannel shirt are rolled above his elbows. He wears a broad-brimmed olive hat which he keeps tipping down on his forehead.

His whiskers are brown with a few streaks of grey. It is impossible to tell where his beard ends and his sideburns begin. His hair is combed but has a few pieces of dried grass in it. His cheeks, nose, and forehead are tanned a deep brown. His age is hard to estimate—somewhere between forty-five and sixty.

The artist is standing at a slight angle with his right shoulder diagonal to the easel. His right foot is in front of his left as he leans forward to make small dabs with a fine brush. His palette is covered with splotches of red, purple, brown, gold, and burnt sienna.
The sky is a pale blue with wisps of white clouds. The purple Tetons stand without competition in snow-capped majesty. Dark green pines showing a few dead brownish-grey limbs sprinkle the approaches of the peaks and cover their base. The artist has also placed part of Jenny Lake at their base. He cannot see the lake from his current position, but he has placed it accurately as if he were a couple of miles closer to its outlet.

The artist paints what he sees. There is no impressionism. He limits his colors and reveals a true vitality that cannot be felt without one's having been there at least once. To John, the landscape appears finished, but the artist's attention does not indicate that.

John, do you have the camera?

I sure do. I saw the opportunity when we first discovered him from the car.

I think we ought to ask his permission first, suggests Kris.

John approaches the painter cautiously, not wishing to disturb his concentration. As he stands at the man's left elbow, the artist turns his head slowly, slides his right foot closer to the left, and straightens up.

Yes? The painter feels John's presence but does not turn.

Excuse me, but I was wondering if I might take a few
pictures of you while you work, says John, uncomfortable as a little boy in the principal's office.

No, I don't mind. Just don't step on anything. My equipment is spread out in the grass.

Thanks, I'll be careful.

The artist returns to work. John takes four pictures in about fifteen minutes. The first two he takes from the artist's left. Then he lies on his side in the grass. He holds the camera while his right elbow is propped up and snaps two more. John can't seem to stop himself and takes three more while on his back behind the artist. That way he gets the whole man, easel, bag, and subject of the canvas in one view. He takes the last picture by stepping farther back and resting on his knees. He can't include the Tetons, but he can get the artist at work with his materials spread out in the grass around him. As John finishes, the man turns to him. Kris is close enough to listen.

Get enough to last you a while? The painter looks at John for the first time.

I took eight; thanks.

That's all right. I'd rather have you do this than drive back and forth in front of me like that fellow over there in the station wagon full of kids.

I think I understand. Could I ask--have you been paint-
ing long?
Almost forty years, replies the painter as he rubs a dab of paint off his brush handle and on to his pant leg.
That's a long time. John looks at the canvas while replying.
Not if you like what you're doing. What is it you do?
My wife and I are teachers.
Like it?
I think so. I've only taught three years, though.
I don't think I could do work I didn't like.
I didn't say I didn't like it, says John. I haven't decided, but I do envy you. Working outdoors in scenery like this. What a life!
I had a chance. I took it. Don't figure I'll get another. Course, I don't make a whole lot. I can't paint more than eight or nine a year, but I get by, he says, not trying hard to hide his contentment.
I know what you mean by "getting by." My wife and I have only been married a year, living in a semi-furnished apartment. There are a lot of things we wish we owned. John wonders why he is telling the painter this.
Trouble is the more you possess the more you can't have. Take me. He starts listing. I don't own a house or car--never married--don't belong to any clubs--but I'm happy. Most folks get to visit places like this only during the summer. I work here all year round, and I wouldn't trade
places for all the money on God's green earth, says the painter as he bends over to pick up two tubes of paint.

You've got a beautiful life here.

Not always. When the snows come, things ain't easy.

No, I don't suppose, but you still do it.

That's exactly right, and will 'til I die, if I have a say in the matter. The painter returns to his canvas as he talks.

I think you will, says John.

I intend to. Same with your teaching, you know.

Well, I don't know about that.

It all depends on what you want from life, says the painter. A man's always got to find his spot. He reaches for a finer brush.

I hope I do. Teaching hasn't been bad though.

I wouldn't know. Never been inside much. Walls made me too restless.

I get that way at the end of the day, says John, warming immensely at the painter's last words.

Do something about it.

When you've got a wife, it's not that easy. Kris wants a family and horses.

She's got you in a rut.

I wouldn't put it quite that way. John glances at Kris, not at all sure of what he just said.

Pretty words don't change the meaning.
A little. Do you suppose there's a giant lying against the back side who's blowing smoke rings? John feels taut like a rope under too much sudden strain.

I wonder if he knows that smoking causes cancer. She notices his stare and adds, Well it does.

Another beautiful image spoiled. Some women get breast cancer or uterine cancer, you know, and they don't smoke.

Another bright start for a happy day with my husband, the doctor.

Just because I don't like babies. Look, I can't help it. They always smell of vomit and dirty diapers.

This'd be a good day to travel--before we spoil all the memories of the good times we've had here.

Any time. You say the word, he says as they head back to their tent. I think it's going to rain anyway.

Let's head for Glacier this afternoon, Kris suggests as she skims a rock across the water's surface.

How about eating lunch before we leave? asks John. His stomach burns.

Might as well. The stove is out, she answers in a withdrawn mood. Her skimming hopes, like the stone, have sunk to the bottom of the lake.

I'll sweep out the tent while you fix it, he offers.

Highway 26 takes the Davidsons over to Idaho Falls, where they have to make a stop for gas. Then they take Highway 91 north toward Butte, Montana. They consider staying overnight
at Butte, but the old city is ugly, like a Mississippi River town. Kris stops to buy some fruit in a family grocery which is destined to be replaced by urban renewal. They stretch for a few minutes, and a couple of glances fail to discover any inspiring remnants of architecture, just old buildings covered with a layer of copper dust. Only a few mean-looking people walk the streets at night, mostly miners and ranch hands looking for a beer, a fight, or a woman. A few glances over the dry, eroded hills of the town are enough to convince John and Kris to go on with little more regret than if they were passing the funeral of a stranger. John takes over driving because Kris can't stand the glare of headlights.

Small red print on their road atlas shows the nearby location of the world's largest smoke stack. The slender pile of brick sits about a mile back from Alternate 10. Only the top half of the stack is visible because of a slag heap between the factory and the highway. As John drives in the evening dusk, lights begin to blink on in the factory. They aren't bright enough to reveal the form of any building from such a distance. Their gleams resemble a myriad of fireflies in a cemetery. The slag becomes a recently filled grave. The stack serves as a temporary marker until a stone that reflects their dismal heritage can be found by the survivors.

Pretty big, isn't it, John?

Seems like a waste.
That's what slag is, you know, nothing but waste minerals.

I'm aware of that. What about the stack?

Apparently they needed it.

To me, it stands like a large monument of the best that men could do here, a statement of grand futility.

You're awful stuffy, John. People have got to have jobs. They can't all read Shakespeare or wonder about the meaning of art. She grabs a banana out of the sack and starts peeling it.

But why does it deserve such notice on a map? Why not mark the world's oldest garbage dump, or the home of the first porcelain toilet in America? He turns and adds without being able to keep the same dignified voice, Give me a bite.

Because this is big, a symbol of man's ingenuity, she gestures, holding the raised banana like the torch in the hand of the Statue of Liberty.

You're right. No ordinary animal could ravage the earth like this. It took the perverted genius of man. Now give me a bit of that banana.

Don't preach at me. Hey, don't take so much. Get your own.
I'm glad you folks took time for this visit. So many young people rush into these matters, Rev. Burkey begins. He smiles formally. He has never seen them in his church before.

I want to be married in a church, states Kris. She feels very religious. I think everybody should marry in a church.

Most girls do. And how do you feel, son?

Kris and I have talked this over many times. There is no question about our being married in a church.

Is there some other question? pursues the minister.

Yes, there is. You see, hesitates John, we have different church backgrounds.

One of you is against being married in this church?

Something like that, Rev. Burkey. John and I aren't sure if the doctrines of our home churches would favor such a marriage.

I'm sure your own ministers could help you on that matter better than I could. Rev. Burkey turns for John's answer.
Well, you see that could prove to be a little embarrassing.

How's that? Has one of you been married before?

No, but--well, neither--he stops, perplexed by the air of coldness in the room. What I mean . . . .

What John is trying to say is he hasn't been to church much lately, and he doesn't exactly remember what they believe, says Kris. She feels sorry for his stumbling and mollifies him by adding, We all forget.

John, what do you believe? asks the minister as he leans forward and rests his elbows on the glass on top of his desk.

Is what I believe important? John begins to feel trapped. He shoots a glance at the door and coughs nervously.

Very much so.

Well, I think we ought to be equally yoked, he blurts out.

You never told me that, John. Now Kris is uncomfortable. She half pleads, Rev. Burkey, I believe that, too, don't misunderstand. I know it's good for the children--so they don't get confused later.

Young man, where'd you ever hear that phrase?

It's true, isn't it? John relaxes under his digression and smiles confidently at Kris more to irritate than to assure her.

Yes, the Bible so instructs. I'm curious as to why
those words stick out in your mind.

I heard my grandmother say it, says John. Everything to her was either yoked or unyoked in this world.

Your grandmother was a godly woman, I believe.

She went to church a lot. All of John's relatives do, even on Wednesdays, announces Kris proudly. She's getting anxious now, waiting for the discussion about sex and parenthood to start. I think all parents should bring their children to church.

Rev. Burkey ignores her and reminds John of his backsliding. But you don't go so much now, is that right, son?

Well, not so much since my grandmother died, adds John.

But why do you remember those words, son? The minister opens his worn Bible as he asks.

Because she always used to say that a marriage unequally yoked will be frowned upon by God. She always said to pick a nice girl, a clean one, but most of all of the same yoke, or it wouldn't last. She said it'd be all fire and smoke.

That's silly, John, says Kris. She's never heard him mention those words before and expects an inopportune joke.

Just a minute, young lady, there is a scriptural basis, says Rev. Burkey as he taps a stiff finger on a passage in Corinthians.

There is? she replies, quite relieved.

Christ was very specific on marriage. Let no man be
deceived. You realize, of course, that until I am sure that you two are right for each other, my church does not require me to marry you. That's why we have these meetings.

We understand, Rev. Burkey. We'd like you to tell us if we're ready or not, says Kris as she regains her composure. Now hold still, don't be jumping on your high horses. You two have to make the decision. You can always find some minister to marry you, if not me.

Do you think we're properly yoked? asks John. What is your faith, young man?
I usually go to a Lutheran church. And you, young lady?
Congregational, but the Baptists use the same church. Are you from a small town? the minister inquires, raising his right eyebrow in a sign of ecumenical misery.

Yes, in Indiana. I'm sure you never heard of it. It's called Riceville.

No, can't say as I have. But now, you know being yoked also means adjusting to the habits of the other person, just like a team of oxen.

We've known each other for a year. John and I teach at the same school.

A romance between classes, I take it. I haven't had one of those since, oh, for at least three years. Kind of hard in front of the kids, isn't it? he laughs in short wheezes.
I'd always be looking over my shoulder.

My girls think it's exciting. They always want to tell me about their new boyfriends now.

And you? What about you, John?

An English class is hardly appropriate. John is bored with what he senses to be excitement in Kris's manner.

A-hem, I see. Have you ever discussed alternate means of communicating between a man and a woman? asks Rev. Burkey, outside of school, I mean?

I don't understand, admits Kris.

Suppose you have a fight. How will you re-establish communication with each other? You tell me, Kris.

Well, I wouldn't admit I was wrong, if it was his fault.

Not even to save your marriage? wonders the minister as he closes his Bible with an ominous thud.

Are you telling me I should lie, Rev. Burkey?

Not everything is going to be my fault, Kris. He's being very logical. John's boredom has disappeared. He observes Kris unsympathetically.

Suppose one of you becomes sloppy, and the other is very orderly. Could that cause a fight?

It could. John is too orderly, she answers, feeling unfairly on the defensive. I know he'll be irritating sometimes.

Are you saying I'd have to be careless to marry you?
John laughs sarcastically.

There's the real problem, Rev. Burkey, everything's a joke.

It seems we've opened up some new thoughts, says the minister, uneasy and tired. Why don't you two come back in a week? Tell me how you feel then. He tries to usher them to the door, but they are slow to follow his lead.

You'd have to be careless, huh? You sure know how to make a girl anxious, says Kris, ignoring the waiting minister. Thanks a lot, John. She returns John's glares.

I'm anxious, too. What's the difference? John exclaims as he heads for the door.

Good-by John, Kris. I'll see you both next—let's make it Friday afternoon. Rev. Burkey watches Kris catch up with John.

Is there anything you want us to do before then? She asks as she turns back.

Talk, Talk! Rev. Burkey loudly repeats the word and frowns but she doesn't see.
What do you want me to do? Walk over and start tearing that stack apart brick by brick?

Don't be silly. You couldn't walk that far, retorts John.

I don't see any difference between that stack and Phar-oah's tomb, she smugly answers. A monument's a monument.

That's a good comparison. What I said still holds.

What's really irritating you? asks Kris. You've been that way ever since you talked to that artist.

Leave the artist out of it. He had a lot going for him.

So do we, Kris answers with a newly softened voice.

Do we? whispers John. What do we have?

What do you mean by that, John?

I wonder what kind of monuments we'll leave behind.

O, come on! Who wants a monument?

I mean hypothetically. What are we building for the future?

A home and a family.

Are we?

Well, aren't we?

You seem to think so. You can't wait to have a bunch of kids. When am I going to get pregnant? That's all you worry about.

And I thought you did, too, once. I was sure you enjoyed practicing the means. What was it you called it once, a
consolation prize?

I suppose you thought you just had to satisfy me, even if you forced yourself.

Well, you never complained before.

You know what's wrong with you?

I'll bet you're willing to tell me, she says.

You've got the mentality of a jock.

Sorry I don't wear one, or haven't you noticed at night?

All right, call it the moral fiber of a G-string, I don't care.

You're so poetic. Kris pretends to look at something outside her window.

Your appreciation is gratifying.

Every day I'm thankful I married you, instead of . . . .

Instead of that rich bum from Lake Geneva, interrupts John. I know, you wouldn't want me to forget that snob.

He wasn't a snob. Kris turns around angrily. You're jealous.

Why didn't you marry him?

I still could. At least he has some money not buried in a tax shelter.

Typical jock attitude, get what you want on a scholarship, even marriage. John knows he is hurting her but he feels penned in. And you want me to be jealous of that?

All right, so you've got the cutest answers. Big deal! Surely an objective assessment.
I don't care what you think. You got yourself all heated up before I said a word. You know it, John.

So what?

So, if you don't want to talk about it, I don't care. Go ahead and smoulder. A tear falls but hardly enough to put out the fire inside.

Why don't you shut up and drive. It's your turn.

No, go ahead. You've got plenty of energy.

By eight o'clock it is obvious to the Davidsons that they won't reach Glacier National Park. They are too tired from arguing, driving, and eating only snack food. Their map doesn't show any more state parks before Glacier, so they begin looking for anything that's cheap. There are many signs of old motels--aged wood covered with chipped white paint and faded black letters advertising modern steam heat and a free telephone for five or six dollars a night. The newer campground signs are metal with brightly painted large lettering. Each sign is conveniently and blatantly placed every five-tenths of a mile so the driver won't get lost or see a way out. There is an audacity in the newer signs' refusal to post their rates. One of them, in the form of a tepee, has been getting bigger as the remaining tenths of a mile to its service get smaller.

Finally, because John is tired of driving and he knows Kris won't drive, he pulls off of the highway in the direction of the tepee and arrows. The arrows no longer
indicate any further distance to travel, and John assumes the campground is hidden behind some scrub pine near the highway. He hopes it is close, for the sky is now full of billowy grey clouds, and fog is thickening over the road. He turns on his low light beams and snatches a glance at Kris. She is resting her head on a pillow against the doorpost, but he can't tell if she is sleeping, pouting, or disgusted. He doesn't care this time.

The Toyota passes a bulldozer mired in the coarse red soil of the road's shoulder. Surrounding it, but for a narrow gap, are thousands of trees, all seven to eight feet high. Their trunks are about one inch in diameter or less, and the only branches longer than two inches are on the top green foot of the trees. The fertility of nature is running out of control, producing thalidomide gymnosperms, more organisms that will never mature normally. The bulldozer is used to bury many of them and maintain the side road, an emergency incision of an artificial artery where no natural passageway exists.

After driving five miles, John reaches the end of the red graveled road, a campground having all the scenic splendor of a quarry. Each camper's allotted space is marked by the rupture of two conduit pipes out of the ground. John stops the Landcruiser in front of an unstained wooden building shaped like an A-framed hen house. Before John can step
out of the car, a man in heavy boots, dirty jeans, and a red and gold flannel shirt briskly walks out to meet him.

John sees a face that an advertising man might polish into a perfect lumberjack. He could sell pancakes, beef stew, or a super deodorant. His straw-colored hair is falling out from under his red stocking cap. His bushy eyebrows are the same color, but his short beard is slightly darker, especially around the mouth. He has rosy cheeks and a grin from ear to ear as if he was just caught leering at a pair of beautiful legs and their owner gave him a wink of a promise instead of a cold stare of indignant surprise. His pleasure in his current state provides a warm feeling that waves over John's back and shoulders and causes him to smile back without first thinking of a reason why he should.

Howdy, mister, welcome to our little place. Name's Mike Brady, and we've got a place for ya.

Hi, how much is it? asks John.

Oh, don't worry about all them little things. Break out of that rig. C'mon inside for a cup of coffee and a chat.

I don't like coffee, says John. He stays in the car.

Don't matter. We got sody pop, too. It's all free. Bring in the wife. She looks like she needs a break.

Did you say it's all free? John smiles. You're very generous.

Almost got me there, pardner. I gotta make a small
charge for the space, if you decide to stay.

How small?

Just a few dollars, no more. Wouldn't charge that except for my wife's miserly disposition.

My wife's the same way, says John.

I am not, growls Kris as she lifts her head. You keep all the money.

I thought that'd wake you up. John looks blankly at her, not sure of her mood.

You're so thoughtful, she states curtly.

Frisky dame you got there, says Mike with a smile.

Don't call me a dame, Kris speaks in a slow measured tone.

She one of those woman's libbers?

I don't think she has a membership card, but there's a free spirit inside, replies John.

That kind takes a while to break, but we get 'er done.

What'd ya say your name was?

John Davidson. This is my wife, Kris.

Pleased to meet you all. C'mon in. Offer's still free.

John and Kris follow Mike into the building. He motions them to sit down in two orange metal lawn chairs on each side of a blond veneer end table. Mike steps past the little foyer and the office counter into a general store area on the opposite side of the building. He grabs two bottles of Pepsi.
Kris glances at the end table and nods at a magazine for John to look at. A well-thumbed copy of *Outdoor Life* lies on the table under a dirty ash tray. On the cover in a lower corner are the titles of stories inside. Kris runs her finger along some of the titles: "Find Yourself in the Wilds," "Up Against a Montana Man-Eater," and "Add Spice to Your Lures." She smiles, and John, realizing the overplay, presses her left hand for a second.

Mike returns and they tell him it's really true that Iowa has a lot of corn but not so many rich farmers. He expects their answer and then complains about the cost of meat. Slowly he finds an opportunity to tell them they can have a spot for three dollars. For a dollar more he will rent them a fold-down trailer which is already set up for the night. John hears the rain starting and readily agrees to the extra dollar.

The rain continues all night and is falling harder when the Davidsons awake in the trailer the next morning. Since they've already paid and most of their car wasn't unpacked, they fry a few eggs on the built-in stove in the trailer for breakfast and then drive back to their highway, Alternate 10, and turn north for Glacier.

Turn on the radio, John.

Want anything in particular, he asks, looking at the map but not moving a hand toward the radio.
The weather. And I'd like to hear it now.
I'll try for a station in Kalispell. John reaches for the dial.
I don't care which one.
Doesn't look like the sky is going to clear.
Looks darker than yesterday, Kris agrees but realizes inside that all days are now the same to her.
What do you want to do if it continues raining?
How about the clothes? We haven't done them since we left.
I guess it's about time.
There's a town ahead. Do you see it, John?
That's probably West Glacier. He looks up. Yeah, that's it.
How about looking for a coffee shop?
Fine.
The town of West Glacier sits near the tracks of the Burlington Northern Railroad, but the trains make no regular stops there. Not enough freight is dropped off to make it pay. The town consists of a group of buildings which exist mostly for summer vacationers. There is a cafe, a grocery store, a post office, three gift shops, and a laundermat. All of the buildings, except the post office and laundermat, have log frames or at least log fronts. The post office is brick and the only building with a porch. The laundermat is
covered with corrugated tin which has a coat of peeling blue paint. In front of the post office twenty yellow bikes are parked in the rain. Each is a ten-speed and has a red flag hanging at the top of a metal rod fastened to its rear frame. The riders are sitting on their sleeping bags on the post office porch. Some are writing overdue postcards to their parents. Others are making up for lost talk not possible during heavy peddling. Two who appear to be older than the others are huddled over a map.

John and Kris have an early lunch of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches and hot cocoa. Then they take a short drive down the block to the laundermat. Only a Dodge van is parked in the lot. John grabs the duffel bag, and Kris stretches over the seat for the soap in the food box. As they enter the laundermat they notice a guy about twenty years old sitting in a corner reading a comic book. The two washers closest to him are running. John helps Kris sort the clothes on a plastic table marked, Not for Sitting.

John, you don't have to.
It's OK, he says as he turns the duffel bag upside down.
I don't mind. Let me do it myself.
Quite a switch.
What do you mean? she asks.
Our conversation seems to alternate between ridiculous arguments and sweet melodramas.
And we always argue about the same things.
I know, says John. Where do you want the whites?
We don't seem to be doing much else lately. Kris starts
a pile of his underwear and he adds to it. You know, I think
we're sorta puppets to our emotions.
That's the most thoughtful expression I've ever heard
come out of you, Kris.
Maybe I've become a thinking jock, huh?
Maybe so, he winces at the memory of his own words. Not
all jocks are bad.
Just the ones that are never washed, she snickers, half
astonished at her boldness.
Ohhh, I wonder if that guy in the corner heard you?
Who cares? Kris smiles at John's feigned embarrassment.
I don't. We probably sound like a couple auditioning
for a coffee commercial. All we need is our Swedish neighbor
to stick her nose in.
And bless our marriage by sprinkling some coffee grounds
over our contrite brows, says Kris, leaving John to look for
some clean machines and talking while searching.
Exactly, that's all we need.
We aren't doing too badly, are we? she asks as she turns
back to look at him, but he is watching the rain leak in under
the door.
Then she’ll say, “Things aren’t going too badly, are they?” and you know you’ve got her worried, says Craig. He nods his head in experienced complacency. You’ve got her good after that.

But I don’t want to worry her, Craig.

Nobody said you had to, John. That’s the way women are. What way?

They aren’t happy unless they think something’s wrong. Isn’t that part of getting to know each other?

It sure is. Look, John, the longer she’s married to you, the more she expects to know everything about you, and it becomes your obligation, in her eyes, to tell her everything she wants to hear.

How do you know? asks John. He suspects a joke; perhaps Harry got to him.

I got it straight from a top secret source.

What source—Harry?

Ladies Home Journal, that’s just a little better.

You’re kidding, Craig; is this a gigantic put-on? Sometimes when you sit there I wonder about you, thinks John.
Only a little.
I'll bite. Explain yourself. John pulls a piece of Scotch tape from the dispenser and wraps it around his finger as he listens.

Have you ever noticed how many women read that magazine?
Sure, a lot do. He pulls off the tape; it feels too much like a ring. Then he says, Don't ask me how many.

It's all over. More women model themselves after those slick pages than ... than the onion skin of a Bible. Sit down, will ya? You make me nervous pacing back and forth.

I don't see anything secret about who reads it.
And you're an English teacher. Sit down, will ya, yells Craig as he waves a ruler menacingly.

They didn't offer a course on that particular journal at the university--all right, I'll sit down--but I had one on Defoe's.

Some day there'll be one on the Ladies' Home.

Why?

Well, look. Each issue is a masterpiece of code words, a Rand study in semantics. Craig shudders in horror.

All right you've got me hooked. What are some of these so-called code words? ask John.

I'm not trying to hook you. It's true. Grab a few magazines and check yourself. Or, worse yet, wait until you
find your wife reading an article in one and then looking up to stare right through you.

Go on. John listens intently now as he sits on the top of a student desk, his hands folded over the edges to brace himself.

Try this for example: "fostering creativity." What does it mean?

So what, an article about creative knitting or fondue cooking, or paint by number—who knows?

Wrong, an article about using artificial insemination without her husband knowing about it. Try "there's no problem."

Telling her husband she is perfectly willing when he wants her to go to bed with him.

Almost. More likely it's a monthly schedule on how to use her body as a tool to get a new kitchen appliance.

I haven't heard of that, but it makes sense.

Do you see it now? Good! Try this: "a nice marriage."

Keeping the husband away from Saturday afternoon football on television.

That could be, or encouraging the husband to babysit while she goes shopping.

It all seems pretty innocent.

That's what you think! Craig starts rising to his own occasion, and comes around to sit on the front edge of his
desk facing John, and then he says, You know what Orwell should have written about, instead of a Big Brother?

It should have been something like a Giant Wife.

Right! There is a conspiracy, a very rational and successful one in this world. While our magazines capitalize on silicone-injected playgirls, their magazines tell them how to control our minds and morals.

Our morals? gasps John as he grabs his chest. Craig, save me!

Sure, you know how most men feel a little sheepish when their wives catch them reading *Playboy*.

It's understandable.

It's asinine. That same wife may have been reading how to engage in sexual fantasies with her favorite movie star in order to overcome her fear of orgasm. I'm not exaggerating; that's nothing, John. Wake up! The world isn't full of Communists. It's full of nice girls who become domineering wives and kind husbands who become their babbling pawns.

OK, it's been laughs, Craig, but I can't buy it.

You don't have to. You've been a serious student. See if what I've said is true. The women's lib movement isn't new. It's been underground for years, but it's more subtle, like carbon monoxide.
John, answer me; it isn't that bad is it? she asks again after filling the last machine.

Everybody's fine. I just had something on my mind yesterday.

What? asks Kris.

Why do you want to know; do you read Ladies Home Journal?

Once in a while. There's always a copy at the beauty shop or in the P.E. office.

What's so interesting about that magazine? he inquires innocently as he fishes in his pocket for a dime to put in a candy vending machine.

Oh, it has good cooking recipes.


I've got one. Now why are you avoiding my question?

I'm not.

Well then, tell me.

Have you got a dime?

The laundry is finished by one o'clock. John drives their Toyota over by the tracks of the Burlington. He thinks
he heard a diesel horn in the distance, and his hopes are realized when he again hears the blazing horn of a freight approaching. He grabs the black umbrella and gets out of the car to watch three SD-9's pull a freight along the tracks which are just fifteen feet below the embankment on which they are parked. He counts fifty empty hoppers swaying and a few flat cars loaded with lumber, but, otherwise, nothing strikes his eyes but the paint job of the engines. They already have the green and silver paint scheme of the newly merged Burlington Northern. John fails to notice that the rain has stopped while he is under the umbrella. The sound of the train had been rhythmically assimilating into the pattering on the umbrella. John returns to the car and sees Kris sticking her neck out to stare at the clouds.

He muses: look at that strange, beautiful girl. Who cares if she wants to control my mind? She can be awfully nice. But what is it about her that makes me so edgy? I never felt it when we dated, only after our engagement. Crap, I sure wish I knew what it was. Maybe the feeling will leave in a few years. Maybe. If only I could see ahead. If only it wasn't so final before I knew. But what can I do with her now? Have a baby, work twice as hard, buy a house, have another baby, add another room to the house--where does it all lead? Is it worth it? He smiles in resignation and adds a late thought, And yet she's mine.
CHAPTER SEVEN. OUR ARRANGEMENT

A five-by-five foot sheet of green painted metal declaring Welcome to Alberta greets the beige Landcruiser as it crosses the border. Behind the sign are miles of fields broken only by grain elevators and billboards. The flat land soon becomes as boring as traveling through Kansas, but the Davidsons facetiously excite themselves with the thought of being in a foreign country. The only entertainment being advertised along the way is the rodeo at Calgary in July. For some reason a sticker across a speed limit sign attracts more attention than a bucking horse filling up a whole billboard.

Calgary provides little for the visitor out of season. It is geared for the Stampede: facilities for the rodeo occupy a downtown city block encircled by log poles and cement blocks. The city also has a restaurant atop a massive steel-spindled structure similar to Seattle's space needle. Many suburban homes on the south approach to the city have a horse and pre-fabricated metal barn on a back acre. In between them and the loop are the usual one- and two-story decaying brick buildings of former family-owned groceries that now house discount stereo and tire stores. Take away the horses and the Canadian license plates, and Calgary becomes another American litter collection sprinkled with people.

Calgary is too hot in late June. The smell of rubber
is on every street. Tires squeal from every direction. The air is stagnant. The Davidsons thought they would be avoiding all of this, but instead they have driven hundreds of miles only to discover they could see it all from their living room window back in Iowa. Their minds become apathetic until John spots a small sign on a light post pointing to Banff, which is only sixty miles away. Kris nods slowly and sits up, alert for more signs that will show their way out of the city.

It's getting too late, John. We won't make it before dark.

Won't be the first time.

I'm hungry, she says as she rolls up her window to keep out the smell of hot tar.

What have we got to eat?

Hamburger, Kris answers slowly.

Sounds good. We haven't had that for at least six hours.

That's all we've got.

I thought we bought some cold cuts.

They spoiled.

Hamburger it is then. Let's stop at the next Shell station, and then we'll eat. There's a Shell ahead.

Can't we eat first? asks Kris.

Stations might be closed later. Remember Yellowstone?

While at the gas station, John learns of a small
provincial park, Bragg Creek, which is only seven miles off
the main highway, Canada 1. He tells Kris about the park,
and they decide to head for it and eat there since it is so
close. They follow a narrow dusty gravel road that needs
grading. The potholes and ruts force John to drive over the
center of the road until he meets a string of cars and trail­
ers coming from the park and riding on the same portion,
people returning to Calgary after a weekend outing.

The park itself appears to be little more than a pavil­
ion stuck in a pasture that was cut in the middle of a
forest. There are no outstanding natural resources. Bragg
Creek is nearby. The banks are badly eroded with no visible
attempts having been made to shore it up or plant vegetation
to retain the clay soil. The creek is low. Most of the bed
of smooth grey stones is visible. A forgotten collie is
drinking from the water.

John parks the car by the blue pavilion. The building
is not screened. No wood is by the fireplace. Flies are
feasting on the garbage and spilled pop on the picnic table
and floor. The garbage can is overflowing, and its lid is
outside lying on top of a bush with red berries. Across from
the back entrance to the pavilion are two outdoor toilets.
Neither is labeled. John opens the door to the one on the
left and sees a chipped porcelain stool fuller than the gar­
bage can. Horseflies are gorging themselves on a stream
of turds that hang out of it like a string of sausage. The scene does not appear to be the act of a perverted vandal but of a desperate camper whose bowels left him no time to wait for the semi-annual clean-up.

John covers his mouth to prevent gagging, closes the door, and tries the other toilet. The seat is clean, but the smell of pools of urine below and the clouds of flies are just as bad. He returns to the car, grabs the roll of paper and walks back into the trees. He squats behind a bush and waits for a bowel movement while gazing around. The cracking of a twig stiffens his body. He imagines one of next weekend's campers finding him mauled with his pants down and lying in his own waste. Then he hears Kris' voice.

John, are you there?
No, I'm not, he says between grunts.
What are you doing? Kris asks as she walks toward him.
Painting the leaves a different shade of green.
Want some help?
No! Can't I go in peace?
I don't know. Are you constipated? asks Kris playfully.
Just leave me alone. Wait there and I'll be back to the car in a minute.
There's somebody parked by our car. I came to tell you.
Where'd they come from?
They just pulled in, she informs him, waiting to be told
what to do about it.

So?

Well, I don't like staying by the car alone.

As they unload the back of the Toyota, John and Kris notice the collie climb up the bank of the creek and walk into the pavilion. The dog climbs on top of one of the picnic tables and licks the enameled boards. A few licks are enough to convince him there is nothing suited to his taste, so he jumps down and walks out the back of the pavilion. As the dog passes each outhouse he lifts his left leg and sprays a few files. Then the collie disappears behind a pile of gravel.

John returns to his work, hooking the tarp in place. Kris fixes a supper of hamburger, beans, and potato chips. After eating they retire early, there being nothing else to do. Kris drops off to sleep quickly, but John lies awake for an hour trying to convince himself he is lucky not to be a father. Confusion overpowers him, and a dream results.

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You've been there five days. Hurry up, Kris.
What's the hurry?
I'm hungry. He pounds on the door to show he's tired of waiting.
Open up another can of beans.
We don't have any more.
Well just wait.
How much longer?
No more than two days, she speculates. Then she shifts her butt as a crack in the porcelain seat starts to pinch.
That'll be seven days altogether. I haven't got enough food in me to keep painting.
You're lucky. It usually takes nine months. There's more paint in the first aid kit.
How many more are coming out? asks John.
Five or six.
That'll make a litter of fifteen.
They've all got long golden hair. Aren't you proud?
Wonderful!
Oh, oh, this one's going to be a runt.

John watches the door of the outhouse on the left which Kris walked into five days ago. He hears her say, "Do you accept credit cards?" and then a groan. There is silence for eight minutes during which he walks back to the trees. Then for the eleventh time the door of the outhouse on the right
opens. Out comes a baby already walking on its two legs. Its skin is thickly covered with the long hair of a collie. When the door closes behind it, the baby lifts his left leg, falls down, and then whines until John calls to it. "Come here to Daddy. He's got a pretty green fig leaf for you." The baby stands up and walks over to John, who is in the trees behind the car. He is bending over with his pants down and trying to paint a yellow leaf green. The baby waits for his leaf. John makes sure the paint is still wet when he presses it against him, an assurance the leaf will stick until the baby is ready for a larger size. The baby tries to pull the leaf off but only gets some green paint on his golden hair. John stops painting the next leaf long enough to motion the baby to stand with ten other long-haired children by the river. "Wait there for your other brothers and sisters, and then Mamma will come and teach you how to dog-paddle."

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Give me back my credit card, he moans. Then he slams his fist into the pillow.

John, wake up, cries Kris. She gives his left shoulder a shake.
And stay away from collies!

Wake up, John. Wake up.

What? he responds in a slow drone. Then he rolls over on his back and opens his eyes.

Wake up. You're talking in your sleep.

What'd I say?

Something about a credit card.

Anything else? asks John as he closes one eye again.

Yeah, but I couldn't understand it.

I'm going back to sleep.

That's nice of you since you've got me wide awake.

Might as well stay up now, she argues.

Why?

It's eight-thirty. We can be in Banff in an hour.

I'm tired. My hands ache.

Look who's tired now. Why can't we ever agree on something?

All right. I don't care if we leave. Let's get it over with. John sits up and unzips his bag.

Why would you want to stay? asks Kris incredulously.

I might want to take some pictures of this place.

Of what? It'd be a waste of film here.

Look, we've got lots of slides of mountains and lakes already, right?

Right.
Somebody might want to see a slide of something else. The creek still isn’t inspiring, she concludes as she looks out to see if any magical improvement in the park occurred over night.

But a Canadian fig tree would be, he thinks.

They pack and leave without any breakfast, and in a half hour they are driving through Banff National Park. The Davidsons are impressed by the park’s unspoiled beauty. The meadows aren’t cluttered with overcrowded campgrounds, and the roadways aren’t lined with cans and plastic bags. Few signs are sprayed with peace signs or riddled by shotgun blasts. Most backward, perhaps, is the sound of the wind caressing the trees and dying in basins. No honking of automobiles or yelling of young children compete with the ageless sounds. Every few miles a hiker with a forty-pound pack on his shoulders appears. He holds up a cardboard sign asking for a ride to "Van" when a car approaches. Some hikers never walk but unroll their bags for the night where they stand if there’s no ride.

As John drives along the Athabasca River he points at a resort situated on one of its bends. It is an older, well-kept place built on some scarce private land just south of Jasper. There are fourteen cabins and a combination lodge and dining room. All of the buildings are built of solid native logs and have small stone fireplaces made of rock.
taken from the river. Half of the cabins have cars parked behind them.

Only an English Land Rover is parked in front of the lodge. There are three people sitting on the nearby concrete steps. Matt Darby, the older man in the brown and olive tweed sport coat, is sitting one step above a younger couple. Jenna Scott is wearing a white apron over a blue gingham dress. Colin Arrington is dressed in a dirty pair of green corduroy pants and an old hunting jacket with the pockets ripped off. The three people are laughing as they hear Jenna tell of spilling two fried eggs on a customer unexpectedly. Jenna appears embarrassed, but Colin is prodding her with his elbow, and Matt waits patiently and smokes his briar pipe.

What did he say again, Jenna?

He said, "Young lady, if I preferred my eggs scrambled, I would have ordered them so."

Stuffy old shirt, right, Matt? asks Colin.

That's true, Colin, but he hasn't paid his bill yet, so we mustn't be openly critical.

It's your place.

I'm too well aware of it lately. A man always has his responsibilities, assumes Matt as he continues to puff on his pipe.

Look, Matt, I didn't mean anything by it.

I know you didn't. I was just thinking about
New Zealand again, says Matt to change the subject.

Have you ever been back since your wife died? asks Jenna.

No, Jenna, I never felt I wanted to face Elizabeth's relatives.

Do you think they still blame you for leaving the country? she wonders with concern for the older man.

Jenna, aren't you getting a little personal? Colin asks quickly.

That's all right, Colin, interrupts Matt. Jenna's open about herself that way. You ought to know her better.

Sorry, I just thought . . .

Now in answer to your question, no, it wasn't so much that, explains Matt. Most people think a man in his twenties should be settled by then. They aren't any different now. You're almost thirty. You must have felt it, Colin.

The old work ethic. I've felt it plenty, says Colin sarcastically. He kicks his shoe against the bottom step.

Maybe 'tis so. I never cared. I've always wanted to see beyond the next hill or island. Never been sorry we moved, says Matt, and he blows a smoke ring away with the thought.

You've lived in a lot of places, admires Colin.

You'll get your chance, Colin. In fact, I'd say you've got a head start on me when I was your age.

I've never been around the world, says Colin as he
watches a beige colored car approach on the highway. Looks like a Jeep, he judges.

I hadn't either till I was thirty-two.

Ever have a favorite place, Matt? One you stayed at longer than the others, adds Jenna as she searches for a topic they can all enjoy.

We stayed in Austria once for five years, but it wasn't easy to make a livin' then. It was terribly hard to find work. No, Jenna, I'd say the Canary Islands were the best. Elizabeth often said we should've stayed there.

Better than New Zealand? smiles Jenna.

Other than New Zealand. Elizabeth said it, not I.

You sound just like Colin, laughs Jenna.

I suspect so. I'd like to be back there in a few months.

When you planning on leaving, Colin?

Some time in March. I'll give you plenty of notice.

Are you going, too, Jenna? asks Matt as he places his left hand lightly on her shoulder.

I don't know. Colin hasn't asked me, Matt.

I'll never ask. That was arranged.

I still like it here, Colin, she sighs, at least until next summer.

Children, we have some visitors, announces Matt. The Davidsons are parking in front of the steps. Matt can't hear Kris whisper, We don't have to stay. I just said it
looked like a pretty place to stop--that's all.

Hello, John speaks from the car window. Nice evening.

Good evening. Can I be of some service?

Would you know of any campgrounds near here?

I don't believe there are any. Our place is the only stopover for the next twelve miles.

What do you think, Kris? John turns to her for a sign of approval on her face.

Can we afford to stay here?

If you'd care to take a look at one of my bungalows, I'd be happy to find you a key, offers Matt while they confer.

How much to they run? asks John.

Smallest is a one bedroom, but it has a fold-away bed, and, oh, that's rented. We ought to be able to do something. We're still a little early in our season. How does sixteen dollars a night sound for a two bedroom?

Please, John, pleads Kris, who is caught up in the rustic comfort of small cabins and clean sheets.

I guess we'll take it.

Will you come in and register now, or would you prefer later? Makes no difference, shrugs Matt.

Better do it now. We'll only be staying one night, John decides.

I think I'll drive over to Banff now, Matt. Anything you need?
Check with the cook, Colin.

John follows Matt into the lodge. Kris steps out of the car and walks over to a stone wall on the other side of the driveway. The wall is built along a bank above the Athabasca River which is sparkling in the bright yellow light of the afternoon. Beyond the river are the Canadian Rockies. Parts of their lower elevations are visible in a natural, undisturbed upheaval. The layers of bare rock are charcoal grey, and the trees that cover parts of them are like rumpled green carpet laid over a child's building blocks. The peaks are almost hidden by fast moving streams of clouds. Sunlight breaks through in broad spotlights on an empty stage that needs no characters. John meets her at the wall and then they walk over to their cabin. John follows Kris in.

Well, Kris, what do you think of it?

It's just like a picture I saw at school.

The one in the lounge?

That's the one, she nods while looking around. Hey, where's the kitchen?

There isn't one. They expect us to eat in the lodge.

We don't have to. If you're hungry, bring the stove in and I'll heat a can of soup.

A can of soup; is that all? he asks, although not really surprised.

Of course not, we've got a few crackers left.
Nothing like planning ahead. John opens the bathroom door to see if there's a shower or tub and jokes, I'll probably starve in a clean body.

Take it or leave it. Go to the lodge. I don't care.

All right. I give up.

While John goes out to the car, Kris takes a closer look at the cabin. There are four rooms. All of the walls are varnished hard pine. The stain used, however, makes them look more like mahogany. Their frame structure shows on each wall, indicating there is not enough insulation for the cabins to be open year around. The living room is entered directly from the porch. Opposite from the front door is a small fireplace. Next to the door is a davenport with a brown slipcover. In the center of the room is a table and four straight-backed chairs. A deck of cards in a clear plastic case and a freshly wiped ashtray are placed in the center of the table. There is only one picture in the whole cabin. It hangs above the hideaway bed, a scene of two men cutting blocks of ice from a river while a team of draft horses stands nearby. There is a floor lamp with a green fringed shade standing at the corner of the living room and larger bedroom. A full bed and an old walnut dresser fill the larger bedroom which is before the fireplace and to the right. Only a yellow and grey striped curtain hanging from a straight brass rod separates this bedroom from the living room. Opposite the large
bedroom is a smaller bedroom containing a single bed and a
clock radio on a marble-topped nightstand. This room is
separated from the living room by a wall and door. Next to
the small bedroom is the washroom which has a shower stall,
toilet, and sink without a mirror. When the door to the
smaller bedroom is opened, it blocks the door to the wash­
room. There is no television or phone in the cabin; it is a
place to rest after a day of fishing, but Kris does not want
to sit.

John, let's do something after we eat.
Like what?
How about walking down by the river?
Any night but tonight.
Why not? Aren't you tired of sitting?
I'm going to bed, he says as he suddenly stands and be­
gins unbuttoning his shirt. You coming?
That's all you think about, John. You're no different.
Man doesn't live by bread alone.
It just isn't right, Kris complains. She grits her
teeth.

I've got a marriage license that says there's another
way to relax.
You're not being funny any more. Go take a cold shower.
Well, you're sure ridiculous, he criticizes as he un­
buckles his belt.
Why, because I think sex has a purpose? asks Kris.

So do I. Why do you suppose I got this cabin, Miss Virgin Islands?

Because of the view.

Not quite, he says as he steps out of his pants. I had another reason.

But it's not the same as mine, she mutters, turning away.

She hears the springs creak as he slides into the bed.

Explain it to me in the morning, says John as he turns over on his pillow.

I'm going for a walk. GOOD NIGHT!

Watch out for the bears. They don't know the difference between--he doesn't finish as the door slams.

Kris slowly walks back to the wall along the river bank.

She finds the sunlight almost gone. Purple clouds fill the red and gold sky. The pink river flows swiftly over the black dots of rock below. When there are no cars passing on the highway she can hear the water more than her thoughts, for her thoughts are hopes that she seldom dares whisper, but the river is always loud.

Isn't it pretty at this time of day? whispers an unknown person who is half hidden by a tree.

What? How long were you there? stares Kris.

I didn't mean to startle you, apologizes a mellow voice.

No, please, it's all right. I could use some company.
My name is Jenna Scott.
You're the girl who was sitting on the steps earlier.
Yes, when you came in. You know my name, what's yours?
I'm sorry. Mine's Kris Davidson, and you're right, the river is beautiful.
I thought your husband said you were looking for a camp­ground.
Oh, we're always looking for those, explains Kris as she leans against the wall. Her fingers begin to explore its crevices.
Summer vacation?
It's supposed to be, but it's wearing me out.
Driving too much? asks Jenna. She takes a step away from the tree so that Kris can see her better.
We've been gone almost two weeks. No telling how long we'll be gone. She pauses and then adds for no apparent reason, These stones are so smooth.
They were taken from the river. Tell me, where are you going?
Fairbanks, Alaska, and then down to Death Valley.
That ought to take a couple of months.
It's a long way back to Iowa. I think we've gone far enough already, but John'll never listen, muses Kris.
At least you'll find Matt's place restful. Most people come here year after year.
Do you work here? I noticed you had an apron on earlier.
In the dining room, mornings and at noon. Then I'm free.
You get all of your evenings free?
Colin persuaded Matt.

How long have you and your husband lived here? asks Kris.
While she has been conversing her fingers have established a
set pattern of movement. When she is asking a question they
search for a new break in the stone. When she is receiving
an answer her fingers remain still.

Almost eleven months. But Colin's not my husband, if it
makes any difference.

Oh, I'm sorry. I just assumed . . . .

Nothing to be sorry about, smiles Jenna. We have an ar­
rangement. I followed him here from England.

England's your home?

It was, but my folks don't write any more. They don't
approve of Colin and me living together.

How did you meet? asks Kris. Her fingers stop on some
moist moss and then she pulls them quickly away.

In a London library. What a place--poor lighting.
You were both students, assumes Kris.

No, I've been out of the university for six years. Colin
left eight years ago, I think.

But then how did you happen to meet in a library?

We both liked to look at travel books. He was trying to
check one out that I had already reserved.

That's very romantic, Kris summarizes.

Americans see everything in a romantic way. Actually, I got so mad at him I threw the book at his back after he said some vile words to me.

But you're together now.

For now. He's not obligated to me, and I follow him if I want to. Jenna's eyes turn toward the river. I'll have to be deciding again soon.

He doesn't mind? asks Kris as her right hand, drawn by habit, returns to the top of the wall.

That's part of our arrangement. We have all of the advantages of marriage.

I'd like a man to follow me once in a while.

So would I, I admit, but Colin has a way, says Jenna.

A way?

He doesn't care, or pretends not to.

And you do, says Kris with understanding. She thinks of John and wonders if any men care as much as their wives.

I don't want to lose him now.

How can you keep him? asks Kris. And why do I care how other couples live? she wonders inside. Why should I be nervous?

By staying with him.

I'd feel insecure.
Matt told me he'd talk to him.
Your boss seemed nice, remembers Kris.
He is. He's been like a father, but he's a lonely man.
Why should another man help you?
He hasn't yet.
I suppose you think I'm intruding with all of these questions, says Kris, trying to apologize and yet feeling their talk must continue if she is to get through the night.
Some married people get curious about our way of life, says Jenna, trying to keep Kris at ease by generalizing. They seem to think it's a challenge to theirs. It's not--only an alternative.
I don't care how you live. Really, it's just that I get tired of having only John to talk to.
I see. I'm the only waitress who lives on these premises. The others commute. Some nights I feel a need to be drained by words or activity, but there isn't much to do here at night, and yet I don't want to talk to the regulars either.
How did you get your boss to say he'd speak up for you?
I didn't ask, ... I think he knew how I felt. He offered.
I wish John was that attentive.
It's not that, says Jenna as she touches one of Kris' hands on the wall. You see, I've missed serving breakfast a few times lately, and I think Matt figured it out.
You should tell Colin yourself then.
I know, but I've got a couple of months yet.

I wish we'd have a child, says Kris as she squeezes Jenna's hand.

Why not? You can get ready a lot easier if you're married.

Not with John.

Is your husband like Colin?

He doesn't want children, if that's what you mean. Kris squeezes Jenna's hand harder as she forces the words out of herself.

But if you didn't want any children or have to get married--my hand, you're hurting it--why did you get married? asks Jenna. She pulls her hand slowly away as Kris releases it.

I'm not sure now, answers Kris. I--I'm sorry about your hand. I didn't realize ... 

You should have an arrangement.

We do--the pill. Kris remembers packing for their trip. He didn't forget them even then, she recalls. He thinks of everything.

That's a break, at least.

I think it's a nuisance.

But you don't have to worry. You can go where you want. I know, no babysitters to find. I'm aware of all that, says Kris, feeling extremely bored by Jenna's presumptuous
attitude. It's getting late. I think I'd better be going.

Good night, Jenna.

"Good night, Kris. Enjoy your trip. I envy you."

As Kris walks back to the cabin she wonders apprehensively if John is still awake. She hopes not, for she is in no mood for his caresses this evening. Thoughts drift in her mind like the clouds across the sky above her, and Kris remembers how her mother used to reassure her, telling her how much fun it would be to make up after a quarrel. Mother was wrong! She thought every husband and wife would be as lucky as she and Dad were. Well, I guess it was my turn to get the bad luck. No, I must be fair about it, John is nice in his own way, but for me--what am I saying? I've got my chance now, and I'm ready to blow it. If I can't keep him, what chance will I have on the rebound? How would I get by? What school would hire a divorced teacher? Ohhhhh. Kris stops for a minute to steady herself by a tree. The confusion of thoughts has had a dizzying effect. We'll just never agree, but perhaps a baby would bring us closer together, and, if it didn't, if it didn't the courts would let me keep the child; they always give the baby to the mother. No, how could I afford to raise him? Dad'll be going on retirement soon; I know he'd be willing to help, but it wouldn't be fair to him and Mother. Oh, Rev. Burkey, why didn't I listen?
On Saturday afternoon the sky is dark with thunderheads hanging over the church. A strong wind is blowing, ruffling Kris' dress as she opens the heavy glass door to the administrative wing attached to the back of the church. As she walks up the hallway to Rev. Burkey's study, Kris wishes John had wanted to return with her. She knocks on the minister's door.

Come in, calls a deep voice. Hello, Miss Barrington, says the minister as Kris enters, good to see you although I'm sorry you had to come out in this weather. He smiles but his eyes show disappointment at John's absence. Here, take this chair, gestures Rev. Burkey toward a red velvet cushioned chair in front of his desk. How was your day at school?

Not too good. I couldn't take my classes out because it was raining. The girls had to just sit in the gym. Is it raining now?

No, it stopped about ten minutes ago, but I'm sure it'll be starting again soon.
Too bad, frowns the minister, I was planning on a round of golf with one of our new members later this afternoon.

Yes, too bad, says Kris while feeling awkward at how to begin and yet uninterested in any other topic of conversation.

Well, that's that. How are you and John getting along?

All right, I suppose.

Is there anything the matter? I was expecting him to be with you.

He wasn't feeling too good this afternoon at school. I think he probably drove home and went straight to bed, Kris lies and she pales slightly out of fear of discovery.

Well, I imagine he didn't have any more to discuss, says Rev. Burkey, trying to cover his disappointment. He seemed fairly confident, he adds.

I wish I were as confident.

Oh, may I be of help? Something about the ceremony? asks the minister, guessing poorly on purpose to let Kris unburden herself at her own rate.

No, not the ceremony, she says.

Would you, would you care to postpone the date? he asks while smiling kindly--like a mortician, Kris thinks.

No, the date's fine, but I'm worried a little about John.

How typical of a young person, thinks the minister, ready to look for help but eager to displace her problem on someone
else. What seems to be the worry?

I don't know if he loves me enough. Don't get me wrong; we have no physical hangups, but I'm not sure what he expects from our marriage, she says while fingerling the hem of her dress.

I see. Well, it's always hard to guess what goes on in another's mind. Have you tried to be open with him, have you talked to him directly?

I tried.

And? pursues Rev. Burkey.

Well, I know he doesn't want any children for a few years—if ever. And I know the main thing he talks about is having someone near him on whom he can depend.

None of us likes to be left alone, says the minister. Man is a social being, you know. In my studies I've found that at least half of the couples who stay married name companionship as one of the top five reasons for their marriage's existence. Even if they are having trouble, most of them would rather stay together than get a divorce and be on their own again. Some of them are actually afraid of being single again.

But the other half will get divorces, won't they?

Many of them do, admits Rev. Burkey, but I cannot find any merit in that. Our church frowns very strongly on divorce. After all, you pronounce holy vows before God,
and those vows are recognized by Him until one of you dies.

No matter how hard it is on one of them? asks Kris.

If a person might anticipate such problems, I tell them it's far better to wait or, if necessary, never marry. I cannot condone breaking vows which are pledged before God.

No, I suppose you couldn't, Kris realizes.

But we're sidetracking ourselves a little, aren't we?

smiles the minister.
CHAPTER EIGHT. LOOKING BACK

Dawson Creek, home of the famous Mile One of the Alaska Highway, is just ahead. It sits on gently sloping hills which could belong among those of South Dakota. The town has nothing unusual about it. Light industry is located on the edge of town—trucking depots, gas stations, warehouses, instant food services, and bulk oil storage tanks. An office of the state agriculture department claims one corner of the highway intersection.

Farmers don't appear to be suffering here, but they aren't rich either. The old and leaning wooden fence posts are not holding all of the barbed wire strands they should. Occasionally one strand will be seen dangling free for about 300 feet. The crops of corn and wheat have more weeds in them than an Iowa farmer could ignore. The corn is too short and light green for the last week in June, and the wheat is too thin. The crops are similar to those in northern Minnesota, which also suffer in quality from a short growing season, too much rain and cold air.

Most of the town is to the northeast, where a divided four-lane highway leads into heavier traffic. There are as many large semis as cars on the road. The trucks lack identity, whereas, in the United States, most long haulers have their names on every flat side of both cab and trailer.

There is a mist in the air. Perhaps it will rain again
soon. The clouds are low and heavy. Rivers of dark water stand along the highway and build into ponds on some fields. The weather and the day, being Sunday, have combined to convince the travelers from Iowa that no gas stations will be open.

How about saying something? says John to break the silence.

So you can yell at me again? No thanks.

I should have known better, Kris. I'm sorry.

Oh, I don't care. I'm not so sure I want to go on that highway anyway if it's going to be like this.

What do you mean? We haven't even seen the highway! I thought we settled that back in Jasper.

I know but the closer we get the more I get kinda ... kinda ... she hesitates, afraid of being ridiculed.

Nervous.

I can't help it, John.

Your grandfather made this trip twice.

I'm not a man.

You sure aren't.

What does that mean? She turns indignantly.

Now it was supposed to be a compliment, you sex fiend!

Thanks, but I'm not in the mood. Kris stares at the highway with her arms folded in her lap.

Well, don't worry. We've planned for months. This is
a chance we may never get again, says John, trying another approach.

Don't put it that way.

Sorry, I didn't mean it like it sounded.

As they approach the four-way stop at the intersection, John pulls over onto the road's shoulder to check their map. It shows the Alcan Highway beginning in the middle of Dawson Creek; the highway sign in front of them points to the left, away from the town. Suddenly, ahead and to the right, the sign of a gasoline station illuminates and begins revolving. The Davidson's notice that a car at the pump is starting to pull away. An attendant is holding a few dollar bills in his gloved hand as he walks into the station.

John, did you see that sign?

I think we'd better get some information. We might as well fill the tank, too.

I'd feel better knowing it was the right road, she says and stubbornly adds, if we have to take it.

I wonder if they sell extra gas tanks, says John, ignoring her implication. That camping magazine recommended them. He shifts the car back into gear and heads for the station.

Where are we going to put them?

We'll have to pile the sleeping bags above the cooler and stove. There'll be room by the back window, he says as he stops by a pump.
I don't care where you put them. The last thing I want to do is run out of gas on that highway.

What'll it be? asks the attendant.

Fill 'er up with regular, answers John without looking at him.

Well, I hope he doesn't try to stick the nozzle in the side vent like the guy in Wyoming did. He looked so humiliated with that drooping toothpick in his mouth, smiles Kris.

Check the oil? interrupts the attendant.

That'd be a good idea, answers John, and after that he gets out of the car to talk to the attendant. The attendant is wearing full overalls that zip up the front. They are heavily grease stained. He also has grease on his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

Where's I-wa at? I've never been there, says the attendant.

I-O-Wa is in the Midwestern United States. It's an agricultural state. John hopes the word "agriculture" won't trigger a joke.

Is it near Minneapolis? asks the attendant as he opens the hood. I've been to the Twin Cities.

About one hundred and twenty miles south. I hear they fatten a lot of pigs in that country.

Yeah, but it's not all that way, answers John, still defensive.
What’s wrong with that?

Why nothing really, but I thought I was going to hear one of those corny jokes. Lots of people, you know, hear we’re from Iowa and all they picture in their minds is corn and sun-burned farmers in overalls. You know, the kind with dirty red handkerchiefs hanging out of their back pockets.

I suppose. We get some people up here asking where all the Eskimos are. Say, how do you like this car? It sure is built tough. The attendant gives one of the front tires a kick and repeats, Real tough.

Well, we just got it back in March. We thought we'd test-drive it on the Alaska Highway.

Hah, the Alcan'll do the job all right. Well, the oil's only half a quart low, no use addin' yet. You wouldn't want protection for your windshield, would ya? I know ya sit high, but it wouldn't hurt.

What do you have in mind? asks John.

We've got some bug screens. They're made of a tough nylon. Also got some bubbles for the lights. We've had people tell us they lost three to six lamps before they got to Fairbanks, says the attendant, shaking his head at the bad luck of some people. You're going all the way, I suppose.

We're going to try, at least. Let me take a look at that stuff when you're done with the gas.

While he waits, John looks over the station. There are
three bays. Four white tow trucks are parked in front of the bays, two blocking the entrances. The trucks are 1969 Chevys. All of them have bumpers made of two-inch planking which is ribbed with tires. Each truck also has a short crane and a winch. The cab doors are lettered PAT'S AND ED'S SERVICE * TWENTY-FOUR HOURS * CALL 616-8584. John is not surprised that the Alcan provides a lot of business but wonders how a driver who needs help could get to a phone. Kris calls from the car. He turns and walks over to the window on her side.

Do you see a restroom? she asks.

Yeah, they're both inside.

I only need one. Where inside? I don't see anything.

Behind a table of souvenirs. If you see a candy machine, get me something, will you?

Did you ask about the tanks?

I will, he says, feeling like a kid when she reminds him of those little details.

As Kris goes inside, John turns toward the sound of a truck he just heard putting on its air brakes. There are two now at the intersection which is only seventy-five feet away. There is a strange fascination in these trucks that travel the Alcan. They are almost supernatural in their strength, their ability to keep moving all hours of the day and night. Macks, Kenworths, and Peterbilts form a monopoly.
Occasionally a White or an International comes along. Most trailers are enclosed. A few are loggers. Farther north the ratio will even. Their lengths are ten to fifteen feet longer than most semis in the States. Over the roughest sections they travel an average of sixty miles per hour while most cars do only twenty-five to forty miles per hour. Few of these trucks will be stopped by ice on the Alcan, but other vehicles will hesitate at the sign of rain. Large oil pumps are hung on the outside of their hoods and huge oblong boxes are attached behind the cabs for tired operators. Drivers are seldom visible through the dirty windshields. They may as well be phantoms, for pump jockeys and mechanics know the trucks by name, not by the men who shift the gears.

Let’s go inside and look at the screens, suggests the attendant. He shuffles his left leg as he leads the way, probably the victim of a sliding jack.

How much do they cost?

We’ve only got two sizes, and they cost the same—fifteen bucks.

What’s the difference?

One is for passenger cars. The other we sell for pickups. I don’t know what kind that Jeep’ll take.

It’s not a Jeep, insists John, for he always finds a little pride in knowing the difference and having someone to explain it to.
Sure looks like one.

Yeah, but it's made in Japan.

Any trouble getting parts? asks the attendant.

I don't know about up here, says John impatiently. Let's take that smaller screen out and see how it fits.

I'll get a pair of pliers.

The attendant carries the screen outside and takes off four clips to bring the screen to its full extension; however, it still doesn't cover the turn signals which are mounted on the front fenders. He tries positioning a couple of spring hooks higher on the radiator screen, but too much is then exposed beneath. John tries to help, but they finally give up trying to make use of the smaller screen. While there, they pull off a metal frame that surrounds and covers the space between the two headlamps. By adjusting a couple of screws and washers, the attendant puts on two clear plastic bubbles to protect the lamps and replaces the metal frame. John is curious about the resiliency of the plastic. He presses two fingers against the center of one of the bubbles. It collapses inward about an inch like a rubber ball. A slight amount of pressure on the edge of the bubble brings it back to its original sphere.

Did you say these were seventy-five cents a pair? asks John.

That's all. Quite a bargain if you drive a lot on
gravel roads.

They ought to have these back in Iowa, but I've never seen a station stock them.

I bet we sell five or ten a week and not just to tourists. The attendant wipes his hands as he talks, sure of a sale.

John, how about a Snickers? calls Kris from inside the station.

Sounds fine. What are you going to get?

I think I'll get a can of pop.

Get me an orange or a root beer--doesn't matter, adds John.

While this conversation passes, a '63 Ford sedan stops in the street in front of the station. Another man dressed in overalls with blue trim like the attendant's steps out of the car. The name Pat is sewn with white thread on a blue circle above his chest pocket. Pat's overalls aren't as dirty as the attendant's. His recent shave reveals a brown tan and scarred right cheek. He doesn't say a word at first but looks at the screen resting against the bumper.

You folks from I-e-way? Pat asks.

Yes, we are from I-O-Wa. John enunciates slowly again. He feels like a speech clinician.

I-o-wa, huh. Al, get the other screen.

OK, Pat.
I had a friend in the war from Waterloo. Know where that is?

Sure do. It's about seventy miles northwest of where we live.

That's nice country. Farm land's real expensive--about two hundred bucks an acre, isn't it? says Pat, whose eyes are looking over John from head to foot.

Well, I've read the average now is close to three hundred and fifty an acre, John answers quickly.

Jeez, you don't say. Course them farmers are smart. Can't lose when you put your money in land, except up here, says Pat cynically. John's appearance satisfies him as a good credit risk.

It's not easy farming in Iowa.

Can't be as bad as it is here, responds Pat kneeling down.

I suppose not.

Nope, only got a few months to grow. Not much you can plant with that. Al, where's that screen? yells Pat.

Al is inside the station answering Kris' questions about the souvenir wood carvings and glassware. The glassware is the same commercial product found in every gift shop along a highway. The wood carvings are original and of fair quality but have a price that's too high.

How much is this bear? asks Kris as she holds it up.
I think it's ten. Let me check. Yeah, it's ten, says Al. He lights up a cigarette.

Well, I don't know.

We have some for less, some for more. We don't care, says Al as he picks up an empty pop bottle to use for an ash tray. Whatever you want, we'll sell, but we don't make anything on 'em.

At these prices? Kris puts the bear down, stares at the objects on the table as if they are stolen art merchandise, and frowns that such a price could be asked in a gas station.

No, Pat just let a farmer friend of his set up this tableful to help out. He coughs.

To help out?

Yeah, a lot of his crop got washed out last week. We had five inches in one day, two inches the next. Roots couldn't hold.

That's too bad. I hope he had crop insurance, says Kris.

I suppose he did. Fred's not a good farmer anyway. Waited too long to plant. The attendant looks for a screen while he talks. He rests his cigarette on the edge of the table.

Why did he wait so long?

Not sure. I think Pat said the guy delayed, thought he could make some quick money selling an old car of his as an
antique.

How long has he been carving? asks Kris.

I think he did this stuff last winter. I've seen better myself, says Al, hoping to discourage her and get back to the car.

Well, if it'll help him out, maybe I'll . . . .

Makes no difference to me. Did you hear my boss call?

But if this farmer has had a bad time . . . .

Excuse me, says the attendant as he picks up his cigarette. I've got to take this screen out front.

Kris stays inside to browse some more. She finds some free souvenir folders left by the Dawson Creek Chamber of Commerce. One folder is an advertisement for The Milestone, a book which gives a mile-by-mile account of the cafes, gas stations, and history of the Alcan; a few copies of the book lie on a shelf behind the cash register. Another pamphlet shows a picture of a big white post in the middle of town, MILE ONE of the Alaska Highway. The flowers around it suggest idolatry.

The other pamphlets tell of motels, a miniature golf course, and a free museum open on Monday through Friday. The museum is shown in a black and white picture. It occupies a small two-story, brick building. Admission is fifty cents per adult, children under ten are allowed in with no charge. Kris flips through one pamphlet, then another, puts it back,
takes another over-the-shoulder glance at the table of carvings, and then walks out having purchased just two cans of pop, two candy bars, and a copy of The Milestone. She holds a can out toward John.

John, here's your pop.

Thanks. Hang on to it, will ya? I'll drink it after we get started. Those cans look small.

They are, interjects Pat.

But the price isn't, says Kris. They cost me a quarter each.

A quarter! yells John as he turns around for a second look.

Sorry, mister, says Pat. Blame it on the trucks or the vending machine. We don't get any profit. Freight costs are high.

Yeah, I know, says John, not caring to debate the issue nor willing to sympathize with Pat. If this is any indication of the cost of living, I'd hate to live up here. I couldn't afford to drink anything but water.

Food's all high. You're right. Now what do you think about this screen? I can clamp the extensions right here, if you like. Hold the other end so he can see, Al.

How will it fasten then? asks John as he steps back for a better look.

We'll hook springs around the posts of your turning
signals and onto the radiator. Pat gestures with his hands.

You say it's fifteen dollars?

Right, snaps Pat. Not including tax, of course.

Can I put it on my credit card? asks John.

Will do.

OK, go ahead. By the way, do you have any spare gas tanks?

We stock 'em, but you don't need 'em.

But I heard . . .

I can guess, interrupts Al. But listen, most stations are no more than sixty miles apart. If you watch your gauge, you won't have a bit of trouble.

I suppose you ought to know, says John.

He does, take my word, insists Pat, intent on keeping the sale after exerting himself.

As the screen is being firmly attached, Kris sits in the car. She records the mileage and gas that was pumped, so John can later figure their mileage per gallon. She sticks the candy bars on end in the ashtray, puts the pop on the rubber floor mat, and then looks up to see a man walking slowly in a zigzag manner up the driveway toward their car.

The approaching stranger looks intoxicated. As he puts most of his weight on one leg he tends to drag the other. This unbalanced walk causes the indirect motion which has to be corrected at every other step. His faded brown pants
are about two inches longer than necessary, baggy in the thighs, and too big around the waist. Occasionally one of his heels catches on a pant leg. His belt has folded his stomach. The protrusion of his belly may be the cause for the missing two buttons near the bottom of his blue denim shirt. He has hurriedly dressed this morning because of an important mission. His sparkling blue eyes and enormous grin of a three-day beard convince the men at the station that they are going to be included in his happiness in a minute, whether they want to be or not. Pat prepares his customer.

Say, mister, don't worry about this guy. He has some unusual ideas but he's not loony.

You know him? asks John while hardly listening to Pat.

Yeah, name's Fred Hanson. He's a bachelor. Rumor says he's got a lot of money.

I wonder if the rumor is true, says John, not really wondering.

His father died and left him a trucking business, but Fred still lives by himself in an old shack on the north side of town. Tries to make a living on his acreage.

What does he raise? asks John.

Nothing, snorts Pat. He tried a crop of corn once. That didn't work--barely came up.

I can believe that.
I'll have to write up another slip for this screen. Why don't you talk to him? says Pat while walking past John to Al. Al follows.

Pat? Fred calls to the retreating station owner.

With ya in a minute, Fred.

Fred turns with a slowly appearing smile toward John, but he doesn't say anything. John pretends to be staring at his new bug screen, but he can feel Fred's stare. Kris pretends to look at a map in the car.

That your car? asks Fred as he circles around the Toyota.

Yes, says John. He turns around as he answers.

Got power with all your wheels?

Yeah, it's a four-wheel-drive.

Like it? Fred looks under the rear end as he asks.

Haven't had a bit of trouble so far. It's only about three and a half months old.

Not a Jeep. What kind is it?

Toyota Landcruiser.

A new foreign model. Got a small engine block? asks Fred, staring at the hood and expecting it to be opened.

No, the block is very similar to what you'd find in a GM truck. John hopes the questions won't get any tougher, so he doesn't open the hood.

Well, I admire people who try new things. That's science and progress. Good for American trade, concludes
Fred.

I never thought of that when I bought it.

I'm interested in new things, too, but mostly in farming. I've got a big farm north of here, says Fred as he points in the general direction, over that-a-way.

I see. But, take my word, I . . . .

No, ya can't from here. Raise a lot of wheat and some cattle, adds Fred. It's over yonder about twenty miles. He points once more.

You do. How many?

Only about a dozen head. For my own use. Don't sell it.

Uh, huh, says John, looking impatiently for Pat.

Know anything 'bout catnip? As he asks, Fred thrusts forward a dirty fist which grasps half a dozen stalks of the plant. The stalks vary from twelve to fifteen inches in length. Fred's face is beaming more than ever.

Catnip? guesses John.

Catnip. You know, cats go crazy over just a couple leaves of it.

I've heard that.

It's true, says Fred, shaking the catnip under John's nose.

I'll go along, replies John, moving the catnip away.

Where?

I mean I believe you.
You should, insists Fred.

Kris is hiding her face behind the map which is slightly but steadily shaking, evidence of concealed laughter. The incident completely relieves her apprehensions about the highway, at least for the moment.

You don't suppose it might have the same effect on women, would ya? asks Fred as he stares toward Kris.

I don't know, answers John, not daring to look toward the car.

Got lots of it behind my place. Acres and acres. It grows faster than anything I plant, and I don't even try to cultivate it like I do the other.

Is that so? John looks toward the station door again.

You ought to see the size of it next month. This stuff is only a couple of weeks old.

Amazing.

Three weeks at most, says Fred, holding up three fingers of his right hand. By the first of August last year I had some near six and seven feet high. He shakes his three fingers in front of John's face again for emphasis.

I just can't believe it, says John. His curiosity is aroused.

I know you can't. I never seen anything grow like this anywhere else either. That's why I'm gonna find out.

Find out what?
This stuff might be worth something. If I could raise it like a regular crop, why there's no tellin' the future in it. Just think of the money in it. No tellin' how much.

Well, there are lots of cats, I suppose, but I don't know. Somehow John is reminded of drumming up enthusiasm for a theme assignment.

I don't either. That's what I'm going to check at the state ag office. Those guys are paid to know.

I wish you luck, says John, as Fred starts to turn away.

When Pat comes back out, calls Fred out of the corner of his mouth, tell him I'll see him later this evening.

Pat miraculously comes out after Fred is across the street, having taken fifteen minutes to fill out a very simple receipt for his customer. He has the shortness of breath that comes with repressed laughter as he speaks to John.

Well, what'd you think of Fred?
Seems like a harmless fellow. Quite a farmer.
What was that green stuff he was showing you?
I kinda think he'll tell you about it this afternoon, answers John. I'm not sure, but he claimed it was catnip.

Catnip? repeats Pat as he raises an eyebrow.

Yeah. Is that my bill?
I put it all on your credit card.

Fine, well thanks. Oh, one more thing. How do I get
to the first milepost? asks John as he stares after Fred, who is now standing in front of the ag office.

It's about four miles back into town, but there's not much to see. Just a big white post surrounded by petunias.

Well, if that's all--I don't suppose I could get a good picture anyway, not enough light.

I doubt it, says Pat, shaking his head in agreement. Besides there's the highway you want. He points to an asphalt road leading west for a mile and then turning straight north.

That's the highway? I thought it was all gravel.

It is, just about. The first eighty miles out of here are paved. Then it becomes gravel for twelve hundred miles 'til you get to the Alaska border. From there it's black top all the way to Fairbanks.

We'd better get started, John, says Kris.

Don't know how far you'll get. Pat shakes his head and then explains further. Roads could be pretty messy yet.

What do you mean? asks John after getting in and starting the car.

There are a couple of bridges washed out. Highway crews are working on it now but only letting one-way traffic get through.

How often? groans John. He doesn't want to sit for half a day. He notices Kris' head sticking out of the window as
she takes in every word from Pat.

Every few hours. Do what you want though, folks, Pat sympathizes.

Every few hours? asks Kris while looking at John.

Yeah, heard they had seventy cars and trucks backed up the side of one bridge this mornin'. You let that many across and that just wrecks a temporary road, 'specially when one of 'em gets stuck. Pat makes a diving motion with his hands.

Would you suggest we wait a day before leaving? asks Kris.

Wouldn't hurt. If we don't get any more rain, roads should be clear by tomorrow morning.

Kris hasn't bothered to look at the map since this talk began. All of her old apprehension has returned as she gently turns toward her husband and says with wide open eyes, I think we'd better wait, John.

Maybe so. We could wait a day, but I'm not ready to turn back.

I didn't say that! There was a nice place back there that advertised for campers, too.

How far back? asks John. He takes a look over the back of the seat.

Just a couple of miles.

OK, we'll go back and take a look, John promises as he
drives out of the station and turns back south. After going about a mile he reaches into his shirt pocket with his left hand and pulls out a leaf of catnip. Know anything about this stuff, Kris? It's catnip.

No. Why would I?

You'll never believe how fast it grows. Do you realize that in only a few weeks . . . .

We could be home, finishes Kris as she thinks about the bridge.

Don't mention that again and again.

What else is there?

Well, this guy Fred has grown . . . .

Who cares? she says, looking ahead for the motel and trying to end the conversation.

You've never known the glories of bachelorhood, says John as he thinks back to the girls he had dated and left behind. He prods her, there are certain advantages.

The man's a fool.
CHAPTER NINE. ONE MORE CANYON TO ESCAPE

Kris is right. There is a campground, or rather a sign in front of a motel stating *WE LOVE CAMPERS*. John stops at the office and fills out the registration and fee card, being very careful not to step on the German shepherd in front of the desk. Having spent his last dollar, John has to write a check and then reaches in his wallet for some identification. The owner tells him to forget it because he has a face that can be trusted. He adds that only one space has been taken and none of the others are reserved. They shake hands and separate. While John walks back to the car the owner of the motel looks out the door and copies the license plate of the Toyota.

As John drives around the motel he sees a large grass lot in back. The lot isn't very muddy, even after the rain of the last few days. The worn spots in the grass are covered with yellow gravel. Down the center of the lot is a board walk built on two-by-six-inch planks. Hidden beneath the boards are the water pipes and electrical conduits for the trailers.

The family already there, the Bixbys, arrived an hour ago. Their trailer and car are covered with mud and gravel from the Alcan. The backs of Mrs. Bixby and her three children can be seen five hundred yards away as they walk toward the only tree at the back corner of the lot. One of
her little boys keeps falling behind, grabs a stone, and
hurries to catch up, his hand stretched downward eager to
display this new item for his rock collection.

Mr. Bixby, dressed in soaked green coveralls, is trying
to hose down his car and trailer but not being very success­ful. Some of the dust and clay has hardened and grips the sides of the trailer like cement chunks accidentally dropped on a steel form. He tries to break some of the globs by striking out with his left foot while soaking others with the hose, but he only gets a few bruises. Neither method speeds the process. He doesn't have much trouble with the front of his trailer, for he had the foresight to fasten a large sheet of cardboard across the bottom half of it. The mud falls off the cardboard as soon as it becomes heavy with water.

As soon as they park, the Davidsons set up their tarp and pull out the table and stove. Kris begins supper, and John walks over to his neighbor to inspect the damage done by the highway. As he approaches, Bixby's hose gets stuck under a trailer tire, and John releases it.

Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it. What's your name?
asks Mr. Bixby.

John Davidson.

Mine's Frank Bixby. Call me Frank.

I don't mean to keep you from your work.
No trouble. Just hope I don't squirt ya. Always liked to squirt people ever since I was a kid. Boy, how time flies. Thanks for fixin' the hose. I 'ppreciate it.

That's all right. John stops and wipes his hands on the dirty handkerchief which he pulls out of his pocket.

Where ya from? asks Frank.

Iowa. Been gone since the middle of June.

Long ways from home. Must be going to Fairbanks, assumes Frank.

That's right, nods John. Did you just come from there?

Well, the streets of Dawson Creek didn't cause this. Ya know this is the ninth time I've made this trip. Sure glad I remembered to put the cardboard on this time. This was the worst, Frank sighs as he adjusts the nozzle to a more concentrated spray of water.

But you made it, says John, looking for encouragement.

Just barely. Well, I'd swear there was a line of a hundred cars, more or less. Nearly sat there ten hours.

Bridge out? guesses John with his recently gained knowledge.

That's only the half of it. The bulldozers made a temporary earthen dam across it, explains Mr. Bixby, by making a pushing motion with the palm of his hand. Then a truck starts over. First thing ya know, his rear axle bogs down. Hell of a time getting him out.
Sounds bad, but it ought to get better tomorrow, don't you think? hopes John, not willing to admit defeat after going so far.

Could be, but I wouldn't place any bets. You thinkin' of trying?

If the sun comes out tomorrow, I'd like to.

Better get some cardboard first, replies Frank shaking the hose toward John as he would a finger. Ah, sorry.

No harm, says John without conviction. He brushes his sleeves and then examines the cardboard. Yeah, I can see. Helps to get the mud off. John smiles, I mean the cardboard, not the hose.

Hell no, more'n that, it keeps the trucks from chewing you up with gravel. Wait 'til one of them idiots passes you. Rocks big as your fist come at ya from outa nowhere. Bixby shakes his fist at John, who gets squirted again. Ya don't believe me. Well, just look at the dents in the side of my trailer. That's not smallpox. I didn't get you wet again, did I? Hell, I didn't think.

Maybe I'd better step back farther.

You can't see the dents then, answers Frank, who has forgotten about the hose again.

I can see them, but we're not pulling a trailer, insists John.

Ya got glass don't ya? Hell, if you're not using those
windows, cover 'em. Ya got a side mirror.

You have a good point, admits John.

Ya bet I do. Well, I oughta know. Made the trip nine
times, says Frank proudly. A heavy expiration of breath es­
capes him as if he had not yet stopped for the night.

What's it like? I mean, besides the mud. How does it
feel?

Makes me poetic. Now don't laugh. Frank has a sweet
expression on his face like an ugly Mona Lisa.

How's that? says John, too surprised to laugh.

Ain't nothing wrong with poets, persists Frank, mistak­
ing John's reaction. Hell, I almost was one, 'cept I had
trouble rhyming words.

That causes trouble for a lot of people. Ever tried
free verse? suggests John, for the teacher can no longer be
repressed.

You a hippie or somethin'? Poetry ain't free. Ya gotta
work at it. It's hard stuff. Nothing free about it.

No, you don't understand. Free verse is . . . .

Hell, I told ya, I ain't a hippie. I don't want no
handout. A Bixby always found work where it's to get.

Well, anyway, what'd you write?

Told ya. 'Bout the highway. It's like a river running
through a canyon. Ya can only go one way, ya see--no side
roads.
So you compared the route to a canyon, surmises John.

No, I thought about it, though. Then I remembered how it wiggles 'round curves, and gets slippery and grey-colored when wet. Seemed more like a noodle. So I called it the grey noodle. This label is announced with all the respect possible under the circumstances. A king could not be more honored by Frank.

That makes sense. Too bad I missed seeing it. I assume you don't have it here, hopes John.

Ya didn't miss a thing, shrugs Frank. Wanta hear it? Hardly take any time at all.

No, that's all right. Finish your wash job.

No trouble, son. Hell, I memorized it. That's what the famous poets do with their good stuff. Wanna hear it?

Wouldn't miss the opportunity.

Just say yes or no, says Frank impatiently. You sure have trouble with words, don't ya.

Yes, says John limply. He feels like a poor student being tutored who still makes no improvement.

Goes like this. Hell, what's the first word? Oh yeah.

Here goes:

The Grey Noodle

Once I drove a long highway.
Folks call it the Alaska Highway.
On some hot days it's very dusty.
On other rain days it's watery.
Here's the next paragraph, continues Mr. Bixby.

You mean stanza, adds John, forced by habit to give encouragement.

Well, stanza, smanza. Same difference.

I'm sorry. Go on, pleads John, but not too strongly.

Suddenly it got very dark.
There was no place to park.
I was getting just a little scared.
Then I remembered and prayed.

I've never heard the word "prayed," interrupts John.

That's a past tense. Now pay attention. Here's the clincher. Hell, listen close or you'll miss it.

Lord, way up high above
If you remember me, show your love.
And get me out of the canyon
Or else I'll be your lost son.

Cause it's wet like a grey noodle
And runs like a boogle.
And I've got places to go before I sleep
If I get outa this awful heap.

Well, that's it. Pretty long, but, hell, that's the way all good poems are. What'd ya think?

That's really something, answers the stunned teacher.

Like it, huh?

What's a boogle? asks John, putting off an evaluation.

That's not past tense, is it?

Hell, no. Now to tell the truth, I made that word up.

Told ya them rhymes give me trouble. Hell, that was an
awful spot, but you're the first to ask.

I am?

Ya may have a mind for poetry, too. Ever write any?

Frank asks as he lowers the hose.

No, replies John, lying with a sense of inadequacy.

Well, I don't blame you.

Seems like I've heard one of those lines before, remembers John, something about "before I sleep."

Yeah, ya got an ear, judges Frank. Hell, I borrowed it. Some other guy, ya probably never heard of, thought of it, too. Yeah, hell, I borrowed it, but I didn't think he'd mind.

Why not? asks John, hoping for an answer that would explain once and for all the penalties of plagiarism to his classes back at Browning High.

'Cause he's dead, explains Mr. Bixby.

Oh. Well, it sure was a long poem. I imagine the other lines were yours. John folds his arms across his chest with feigned gravity.

Yeah, but you weren't sure, were you? pushes Frank.

Hell, admit it.

All right, I admit it. Those long poems can fool anybody. Right?

Hell, yes. Ya know, they take so blasted long. That one took me--no, I won't say. Take a guess.

I have no idea, John defaults.
Two weeks! Can ya imagine? asks Frank, who, reluctantly wishing the impact of his work could be lessened, also believes the creation of the world only took one week.

No, I can't. Say, you're standing in a puddle of water, points John.

Oh, hell, yells Frank. Damn hose! That's what poetry does to you. Takes your mind off the world.

Well, thanks for the information, says John, walking backwards in desperation and ready to turn and flee before another aesthetic attack begins.

That's all right, son. Hey, ya ought to write some poetry sometime. Hell, it's not so bad, once ya get the hang of it.

I'll remember.

That night at nine o'clock the German shepherd is let out of the motel office. He barks a few times at a passing car on the highway and then looks for an aromatic place to pee. The lights in the Bixby trailer are out. Kris warms two cups of soup before she and John go to bed. That night the heavy moisture in the air prevents them from getting to sleep. The platform becomes as uncomfortable as that first night they tried it in an Iowa state park. Kris rolls over and jabs her elbow into John's neck.

Oh, John, I'm sorry.

Never mind. I should have seen it coming.
You're not getting to sleep either? she asks.
No, I've been thinking.
What about?
Oh, wondering how many days it'll take us to reach Fairbanks, how the roads will be--that sort of thing. Do you realize our trip'll be half over then? We've been gone almost a month.
I know, three and a half weeks tomorrow. Wrinkles form on Kris' brow.
It hasn't been so bad, has it? John asks meaning to encourage an optimistic answer.
Not as bad as I thought. But we've still got to take that highway.
You mean the grey noodle.
The what?
CHAPTER TEN. WANTING

John, how much farther do we have to go? You said we could stop to eat an hour ago.

Do you want to cook out again, Kris?

But you said we could afford to stop at a cafe this time.

I know but there hasn't been a town, much less a cafe, in the last hour to stop at. He shakes his head in mild irritation.

Maybe my brain should know that, but my stomach sure doesn't. Are you sure the Milepost said it was only 51 miles?

That's what you read to me. Why don't you figure we have about 1,000 bumps and 2,000 holes to go and start counting. He tightly grips the wheel with both hands.

I haven't got the energy. The Milepost did say Destruction Bay had a cafe.

But it didn't say if it was still in business, he reminds her.

I suppose the cafe could have closed after this thing was published. But I hope not. I won't make it, she says, as her stomach growls.

Hang on, girl, you're not going to die. Doesn't that look like water over to the northeast? Beyond that curve ahead.

I see it, John; you can quit pointing. But it doesn't
look like the bay Sergeant Preston might have seen on *Yukon King*. There sure aren't many trees. More like a few groves than a large forest.

I know what you mean. I don't see any wolves or moose feeding along the shore either.

Everything we need for the same television setting is out here, says Kris. She remembers how close she used to sit near the television set to see the sled dogs.

The sets and props are too far apart, figures John as he jars her back to unwelcomed reality.

Everything is so spread out that it looks far away even when you get there, if that makes sense.

That building ahead on the right can't be too far, can it?

Nope, slow down, John. She presses her foot on the floor as if to help with the braking.

I'm only doing 35. You can't exactly speed on this highway, you know, unless you're a truck driver.

Well, I just don't want you to go by and then look back and say, "Boy, that would have been a nice place to stop, I bet." There's the bay on the other side. It looks like the water is completely surrounded by a wide beach.

The water of the bay is only about a mile away and near shore appears grey like the highway gravel since it is heavy with glacial silt. Some of the deeper parts of the bay
farther out are steel blue, turquoise, or dark indigo. The bay is actually only a part of Kluane Lake, the largest body of water in the Yukon Territory. A dirt road across from the cafe leaves the highway for the bay where there is a school and a barracks-type village.

Kris reads to John from her guidebook: "Most of the village is inhabited by workers for the Canadian national government who maintain the telephone lines along the highway both for domestic communication and for national defense. The highway itself, the only through road to Alaska, was built by the U.S. Army in the early 1940's in order to defend Alaska and, hence, the continental United States from the possibility of attack from Asia, which is only one hundred miles from Alaska. The U.S. Army still maintains fuel depots along the highway." Isn't that interesting? Oh, John, you never listen. I should have brought somebody along on this trip to keep me company, she complains and then reaches for the box of crackers, but John pulls them out of her reach. Come on, John, pass that box of Wheat Thins over again, please.

But we're going to stop to eat, Kris. You can wait. The box is half gone already.

Yeah, but if I start filling up now our meal won't cost as much.

That would sound ridiculously cheap, if that slice of
toast wasn't still on my mind. Remember that breakfast? Fifty cents for two slices of toast and a sealed pad of jelly! He realizes she is now ignoring his economics.

We must be approaching the business district, she says, what there is of it anyway. Destruction Bay does have a cafe. See it up ahead? The Milepost was right.

About time!
John, quick, close your side vent!
I see him.
Just in time.
I should have been more careful, he says. Going this slow makes a driver lazy.

Look at him roll, she says in forced admiration.
Do you ever smell the diesel fumes? John asks.
Do I what? she says as she turns to watch the truck out of the back window of their car.
Smell the fumes, he repeats.
Now that you mention it—no, I guess I don't, but that dust makes me feel like I'm standing under a rock crusher.

That's probably why they don't smell. He sees a quizzical expression on her face and so adds, Because the dust is so thick.

Probably, I don't smell any hot rubber either, she says as she looks at the cafe and wonders what they'll smell inside of it.
The cafe, a 20-by 40-foot building, sits on a slight rise about fifteen yards from the west side of the Alcan Highway. From the cafe the distant bay across the road is easily visible, for there is a slope which does not block the view, nor are there any buildings near the east side of the highway. The closest trees are the few scraggly pines along the side of the cafe.

This northern cafe is a typical gas and food hybrid common in the Northwest Territories and Alaska. Outside, it partially resembles a private cabin with its redwood-stained porch attached to the white and grey frame. Only a sign in a corner window identifies it as cafe. Toward the back of the building appear to be living quarters. In front of the cafe are two gasoline pumps which establish it as a northwest service station—no mechanical work done on cars, just pumps available which are labeled so indistinctly that they could be pumping anything in addition to gasoline.

John, they've got gas. Are we going to need some?
Well, we've got half a tank yet.
I think we better fill it up.
Yeah, I agree, but it's getting hard for me to say "fill 'er up," he complains.
You mean the cost? Kris asks. You knew it'd be more.
Yup. I'd heard rumors like everybody else, but when you actually pay it, that's when the believing begins.
How much do you think it'll be? I'll guess 60 cents a gallon.

Well, last time it was 55. I'll guess 65 this time.

I hope you're wrong, she says with the fierceness of one who has nothing to lose. Then she rests her hand on his thigh.

No chance! Hey, you don't . . .

What? she giggles. He looks like a little boy who has wet his pants.

I wonder if they ever have gas wars up here, he tries to say nonchalantly.

I doubt it. She happens to glance out the window and quickly shouts, Watch out for that post!

Surrounding the pumps is a gravel parking lot made from the same grey dusty material as the highway. Near the pumps on the south is a post about four inches in diameter and sticking about two feet out of the ground. The post is covered with so much gravel dust that a traveling stranger could easily miss seeing it, drive over it, and later assume it was put there to booby trap his car or at least discourage patrons who only desire a glass of water.

Actually, the post is probably placed to prevent vehicles from coming too close to the pumps. But, still, the post is more than two feet from the corner of the nearest pump, so whoever drives by and is still puzzled by its
placement has a right to be.

Because of the costs of truck freight, the cafe is one of the town's few business establishments, the other two being a combination hardware, drug, and grocery store and another gas station now closed but still lived in by somebody who insists the closure is only temporary--according to the sign nailed on top of the other sign which had once advertised their gasoline. As the Davidsons come to a stop they look over their surroundings.

John, these houses don't look as nice as those by the village.

I know. Do you suppose they're on the wrong side of the tracks?

Poorer side, at least, judges Kris. I'd call it the wrong side of the highway, though. You'd think this place would have a lot of potential as a resort.

John ignores her speculation and asks, I don't suppose you saw that long shack back there? It had a newly painted sign nailed on it calling it the Northern Beaver Lodge.

No, I didn't. Was it a nice looking place?

Oh, well. Yeah, I suppose.

John, don't do that!

What?

You've got a lousy habit of getting me interested in what you say. Then you pretend to forget what you were
thinking. I'll bet you never saw any Beaver Lodge.

There are perhaps a dozen homes scattered farther west of the highway, most of them a quarter of a mile behind the cafe and on the edge of a forest. They look more like hunters' shacks with their box-like construction, multi-colored roofs of rolled asbestos, and thinly-squared chimneys made of cinder blocks or native stone. Three of the homes have siding reaching only to the window sills on the sides. There is none on the back walls, but their fronts are completely sided. The other nine houses appear to be built solely of scrap lumber.

Still aren't many large trees. While Kris complains, a teenaged boy comes out and fills their gas tank.

I know, Kris. John turns, rolls down his window, and says, Fill it with regular.

Travel posters can sure be misleading. I thought this might be like driving through Humboldt State Park.

I think the bigger trees are closer to the coast. As he speaks, John pulls out his wallet to get at his credit cards.

How far is that? she asks.

Well, we were less than 200 miles, but the road has been heading more northeast lately so I'm not sure.

Just as long as we don't miss them. Kris looks out as if it were possible for the trees to slip by any second.
I hope not, but I know how you feel. I didn't expect to see so many small ones.

Many of the trees are short, pines and firs running about seven to ten feet, but growing very close together like those found west of Glacier National Park. The only green part of the trees is found near the tops. Few trees are over eight inches in diameter, and these would also be passed up by most commercial loggers.

The cafe behind the gas pumps is cheaply built but still unique in the North, for the construction has been completed, not stopped to reveal tarpaper insulation, and the building is neatly maintained. A finished building means that the insulation is covered with the thinnest fir siding, if available. Such siding does not lend much room for the owner to decorate with shutters or trim since it splits so easily. At best, a couple of coats of thickly brushed white paint are added, the painter hoping it won't all be absorbed. Yet, regardless of what color is chosen, the paint will dry mostly grey, for clouds of dust produced by laboring semis come rolling in like ocean waves piling layers of silt on any stable structure they meet, and the cafe is the only one for fifty miles in either direction and so will have more than its share of customers.

What finally accounts for labeling the cafe neat? There is a noticeable absence of junk stored on the porch, a shade
is evenly hung in the front window, no boards are missing in the porch railing, and no collection of vacationers' hubcaps is hung on any of the outer walls. There are no hand-painted or misprinted signs staked a hundred feet down the road, no blown tires marking the driveway, and no rusted car bodies half-hidden in the backyard.

There are three automobiles, a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and a couple of overloaded camper pickups parked in front of the cafe. Conspicuously absent are the loose dogs and half-naked children so prevalent in many small towns in the States. Sex and pet food are expensive here like everything else.

John, this cafe looks pretty nice. Who would expect it after breathing and tasting all that grey dust?

I think grey dust is worse than any other color.

If I wasn't so hungry I might, just might, laugh a little at that remark.

OK, Kris, we'll go inside. I pulled off the road, didn't I?

Yes, thanks, honey. The Milepost says it has good food.

That travel guide says the same thing, he mutters, about every restaurant and cafe it advertises.

Let's try this one, anyway. I don't want to cook out tonight, John. All we've got left are oatmeal and toasted cheese sandwiches, without the cheese.
All right, I'm coming, I'm coming. I just hope I can buy a couple of sandwiches for less than five bucks this time. He looks at the teenage boy and asks, Can I pay inside after we eat. The boy nods and goes back into the cafe.

As the Davidsons leave their four-wheel-drive and follow the boy, they don't see the steel-spectacled face looking out at them over the cafe sign. He notices that they both are wearing jeans, sweatshirts, and hiking boots. The jeans have holes in the knees and rear pockets but elsewhere don't seem worn at all. The sweatshirts, his blue and hers maroon, appear clean, for there are no spots or stains on them, but the limp way the sweatshirts are hanging on their shoulders gives away the fact that they have been wearing them for three or four days. She is combing her blond hair as they walk up the steps and telling him to brush his hair back with his hand before they walk in.

John, at least where you part it.

But the car window wasn't down on my side. How could it be messed up now?

Because you haven't washed it for a week. It hangs like a mop. Why don't you wash it? Kris asks.

You forgot to buy shampoo and we're low on our water supply--that's why, John says. I don't want to argue any more. I'm tired and hungry. Let's go in.

The Davidsons enter the cafe, not at first seeing anyone
else there except a waitress standing by one of six empty, chrome-legged tables. They decide it would be wise to sit at the table where she is waiting. She quickly hands them each a menu and waits.

I don't think we need a menu. I'll just have . . . . Oh! The waitress' resemblance to her mother startles her, but Kris looks over to the wall where she expects a list of the house specials to be. Oh, I forgot, you don't have those plastic signs around here, do you?

There are no fountain services and consequently no overhead menus illuminated by white plastic and sponsored by a cola. All of the drinks, occasionally ice cream, and sandwiches are listed on the menu enclosed in clear plastic which was wiped before being handed to them. All non-alcoholic drinks are 25 cents. Sandwiches are from one dollar for a peanut butter and jelly with potato chips to three dollars for a hot beef plate. No dinners are available under five dollars, and curiously, the only beer is in cold six packs to go, according to a piece of paper attached by a paper clip to the top of the menu. Apparently beer drinkers can't be served in a family cafe, but their money can be taken in other ways. In the bottom right corner of the menu is a personal note, intended to be homey. It says in capital letters DICK AND MAVIS JOHNSON ARE GLAD TO SERVE YOU. LET US KNOW IF SOMETHING IS WRONG--WE AIM TO PLEASE.
The waitress wears her hair in a long, natural fashion having a slight tint which only she and the rest of the women in the village know has given her a forestalling of middle age. No makeup is visible, but small earrings hang closely to her pierced ears. She has on a plain brownish-green dress with a white apron that has outlines of fruit in red and orange thread stitched on it. The waitress waits for the order and return of the menus knowing that few customers mull over large combination dinners in the late afternoon or any other time of day.

You folks decided? asks Mavis.

I think we'd both like hot ham sandwiches, John answers slowly while keeping an eye on his wife to check for one of her frequent changes of mind.

With pickles? asks the waitress.

Pickles? repeats Kris.

Pickles are a quarter extra, explains the waitress.

No, I think not. Got any pop to drink besides cola or 7-Up?

We've got iced tea, suggests Mavis.

No other pop? John joins in.

Well, we might have an extra bottle of orange. My husband likes it.

I'll have a bottle of orange. How about you, Kris?

And you, Ma'am?
I'll have iced tea, says Kris as she tries not to stare at the waitress. Suddenly she feels homesick.

That all, folks?
For now anyway, nods John.

The waitress leaves for the kitchen to become the cook. She probably knows that they have never been this far north before, but she couldn't guess how anxious Kris is to find out about the daily life of the town of Destruction Bay. Somehow the waitress has given the impression that she will not offer much information without constant prodding; perhaps it is her directness while taking the order that suggests it. After all, she and the couple have nothing in common except their humanity.

John, why didn't you ask her?
Ask what?
What they do besides work way out here.
It would take too long, he says. John is watching an older man out of the corner of his eye.

Just one question? John, look at me.
I mean her answer would take too long to complete.
How do you know? she asks.

Oh, I don't really, but her husband was eyeing her awfully carefully, and I don't want to become involved in a "Where you from?" visit.

Why would he be interested?
I don't know, Kris. Why are you interested in them?
But you said . . .
I know. Forget it.
No, I won't, Kris insists. I hate to just rush through places. We haven't stopped much on this highway except to camp, you know.

Why should we? What's there to do? It's the wrong time of year for fishing; we're about a month early. Neither one of us hunts. We don't have a boat. I don't see any shopping centers or theaters. John smiles, expecting her to bask in the warmth of his perfect logic.

Well, Solomon, I don't doubt your obvious wisdom, but even kings do a little rusty thinking after driving a car all day. These people must do something besides work--what are they working for? What purpose?

Ma'am, calls the cook. Along with the sound of her voice, numerous smells waft from the kitchen. Warm ham, apples sprinkled with cinnamon, and toasting bread all send out their delicious aromas to circulate among the only two paying customers and stimulate their appetites.

Yes? responds Kris.
Did you say you wanted pickles?
No.
OK, your order will be there in a jiffy, says Mavis.
Ask her when she brings it, Kris.

Yes I will, John, just wait!

The couple seem to run out of words to say which will not seem like an attempt at reinforcing an argument, and so say nothing. Kris fingers the silverware; she is habitually looking for food stains that might have been missed when the silver was last washed. John sits on the back legs of his chair, thinks about playing the jukebox, and reaches in his pocket for some change. He has a nickel and a few pennies; they won't work, and he definitely doesn't want to ask Kris for any change at this time. Having nothing else to do, they just sit and look around.

They soon notice that the cafe carries a small line of groceries and souvenirs. Bread, canned vegetables, frozen cold-cuts, combs, hair oil, toothpaste, aspirin, vitamins, and feminine notions comprise the grocery items. Knives that every real western boy wears, hatchets that no camper dares be without, handmade Indian billfolds made from Japanese plastic, ashtrays and plates showing outlines of the State of Alaska, and bumper stickers for the "We Drove the Alaska Highway" crowd form the souvenir inventory.

Other people are in the cafe. The local not-looking-for-work group of men, whose ages are often hard to tell due to their flacid facial and stomach muscles, are there. One does most of the talking, and the others are listening
with short verbal replies or nods of the head given whenever the speaker stops to look at one of them.

The main speaker is Dick Johnson, husband of the waitress. He is wearing trim-cut jeans showing little fade and a pair of leather boots which he has a nervous habit of rubbing as if the added polishing would attract more attention to himself. The pants cover the top of the boots leaving the heels to shine in a glimmer that would be out of place anywhere else except in the fashion window of a New York City leather shop. His Levi jacket is the style worn by the men on Marlboro billboards, but still he is not to be confused with the ads, for his clean face has the fuzzy look of a pre-teen boy instead of a man in his middle forties. The red hair and freckles don't add much maturity to him either. His shirt is green with fake pearl buttons fastening the fake chest pockets. He is wearing steel-rimmed glasses which make his eyes appear more spherical and deeper set than they really are.

I remember when I used to call on Mavis. I ever tell you about it, Bill? asks Dick.

Not lately, says Bill, showing no interest.

Well, you could use a good example. Guys like you always can.

I suppose.

Mavis never had to wonder what I was up to. I always
asked her out a couple of weeks in advance. That way she'd have a hard time turning me down.

I'll bet.

What's that? presses Dick.

I'll bet you kept her going, covers Bill.

You bet I did. Impressed her father, too, and Bill, I liked to be first at . . . Bill?

It is obvious that the talker is thoroughly enjoying the predicament he has his clerk in. His clerk is a slim young man of seventeen or eighteen named Bill Younger. He is about six feet tall like his boss and wears his auburn hair in a crew cut with no sideburns. His face is deeply tanned. He has a light reminder of acne on his forehead. Bill also wears jeans and boots, both of which are clean but well worn. His shirt is a blue and yellow plaid with a full cut instead of the tapered look common among his peers in more populous areas. His shirt does not hang over his belt, for he weighs only 160 pounds, about 60 pounds less than his tormentor. Bill is sitting on an empty nail keg and avoiding the faces of those around him. His boss, the main talker, is still at it.

Hey, are you listening, boy? You better listen, 'cause the way you been doing things you're lucky my daughter even talks to you.

I didn't know she was mad about anything.
See, you're just too sure of yourself for your own good.

Here Dick waits for his loyal observers to nod together in approval. Then he continues. Now you got to take care of first things first.

All right, what comes first? asks Bill. He resigns himself to another lecture.

First comes me, if you're smart. Then comes making your plans and you can't have plans if . . . hey, you better listen, 'cause I'm gettin' mighty tired of your attitude.

I'll try.

See that you do. You could be working some place else, and what's worse . . . .

What's worse?

What's worse is if you don't start listening to me, you dumb clerk, I might forget about that check I owe ya.

Bill registers no exterior emotion, for he knows that will only add fuel to an otherwise mild attack upon him. The matter is a hateful routine for him, but there are no other steady jobs working for a boss with a pretty daughter; in fact, he has conditioned himself to think this matter might make him a martyr in her eyes and so attract her when his income won't.

The clerk can laugh and be criticized for being weak-kneed, remain quiet and be thought a coward, or occasionally find relief in the sudden appearance of a grocery customer whom it is his duty to serve, if he isn't washing dishes or working
the gas pumps.

A grocery customer does come in and the talker is quiet, but, once the customer leaves, the boss will return to his attack, oblivious of the ears of his wife or those of the cafe customers.

Hey, boy, whatcha got on your mind tonight? I know it's Friday and you got plans. But you ain't told me, so they don't mean nothin'.

Right, Dick, grunts one of the loyal observers.

You want my daughter, don't you? What you gonna do with her? asks Dick with a leer in his eyes. Go to the movie in the next town? That's near fifty miles. You don't think I believe you'd go that far just for a movie, do ya?

No, we might get some pop or ice cream after ... Don't get smart with me! That's my daughter. You bring her back early, if I give you my permission to go at all!

Yes, sir! Bill jumps in spite of himself.

How bad you want to take her out, boy? Hey, clerk, look at me when I'm talking to you. It ain't polite to turn your head. Now I asked you, how bad you want to take her out?

Only if she wants to. I haven't asked her yet.

Your future son-in-law sure plans ahead, Dick, says the oldest observer while scratching his whiskers.

Yeah, Dick, says another follower.

What do you say about that, Dick? asks the oldest.
Dick's followers are a strange breed for a visitor to see. They are not distinguishable by their height, weight, or clothing. Rather, they are almost spirit-like, for the thick smoke which pours from their exhaling breath surrounds their bodies and hangs there. There is no breeze in that part of the room, so, as the smokers continue to draw, their stagnant cloud grows denser and larger while the distinctiveness of each's features loses whatever uniqueness it once had.

Now, Bill, I'm a reasonable father, don't you think it's time you asked her?

Tell him, Dick, snorts one of the followers with a big, yellow toothy grin.

You're right. I should've asked her, says Bill, exhaling in torment.

You should've asked me, too! yells Dick.

Yes, I suppose.

Well, you better wait until I'm in the mood. A good father has to be sure of the moral character of his daughter's friends. My wife may say one thing about you, but I know better.

While the ribbing continues, John and Kris are eating their ham sandwiches. They have exchanged a few glances as the neighboring conversation continues but have their own problem.

Well, why didn't you ask her?
She didn't give me a chance, John. You saw how quickly she left our food.

Well, ask next time, he says.

Next time?

Yup, I'm going to order another of these sandwiches.

But at two dollars apiece for these little things? Look at the size of the bread, says Kris, exasperated. Where do they get it so small--from a toy bakery?

I'm still hungry, John reminds her.

All right. Just don't tell me to watch what I spend for groceries next time. Kris pauses. Does that loudmouth remind you of Harry Miller? He sure teases a lot.

Yeah, yeah... say, if you're interested, I think I've figured out what they do around here for entertainment.

What? asks Kris.

Just listen to that stuff over there some more. Don't show any anger; just take it easy but kinda pretend you're the father.

Mavis returns while John is talking. She doesn't speak immediately, for she notices where the eyes of her customers are riveted. She pauses to look, too. There is a tight smile on her lips, and when she turns there is a flush in her cheeks which quickly disappears. She gets back to her original purpose and speaks.

Say, did you folks want anything else? We have some
fresh apple pie today, you know.

I am going to have another orange drink, says John.

Nothing more for me. John, are you sure that's all you want?

What kind of pie did you say?

Apple, freshly baked just today, says the waitress, proud of her baking talent.

I'll have a piece. Kris?

No, I'm full. I was snacking in the car.

OK, folks, says Mavis. Hey, she says, as if turning around on a sudden impulse, don't mind the noise at the other end of the room. It's as regular as a big truck going by at six. They just kid Bill. No harm. He's used to it.

We don't mind. Just glancing over at the souvenirs, says John.

Sandwiches are good, adds Kris, trying to cover her own embarrassment.

Thank you. Glad you stopped. The orange drink and apple pie will take just a second.

As the waitress leaves, John leans forward, his elbows on the table, and says, Kris, she was friendly then. Why didn't you ask her?

But you said to listen!

That's true. See that guy doing most of the talking.

I see him, answers Kris.
That's her husband.

Yeah, our waitress's. I figured that much, too.

How? he asks.

The others look too dirty to work here, except for the clerk. He doesn't do much, does he?

The clerk?

No, her husband, explains Kris.

The cafe owner is more active now. He grabs a chair from a table and straddles it to face Bill. Between his verbal jabs he chews on his thumbnail in short quick bites. The number of bites he takes increases directly with the rising tone of his speech and emotion in his voice. However, once his voice gets so intense, he chokes on the nail he has. This causes his loyal observers to laugh, but Bill only manages a weak smile which he tries to conceal. If Dick has noticed Bill, he apparently can't get enough breath at that moment to challenge him. He leaves the chair to get a drink of water and then hastily returns, for he senses that interest may be waning if he is away for long. Bill may step out, or another customer may delay matters further.

Hey, boy, I'm talking to you again. Don't you look away from me. Do you want to take my daughter tonight? You better ask while I'm in a good mood.

Sure you're in a good mood, Dick? asks one of Dick's friends.
Well, I think so, but it's goin' fast and then probably won't improve for hours; hear that, Bill?

Oh, Dick, take it easy, calls his wife.

Mother, stay in the kitchen and finish your work . . . .

Well, Bill, if you wait on customers like you answer me, your job won't last much longer.

I'd like to take her out if I can, pleads Bill.

You can if I say so.

And if Paula wants to, adds Bill impulsively, sorry at once that he said it.

Apparently Paula is in the back room behind the kitchen, for her mother calls in that direction from the stove, Honey, need some help?

I could use some help combing my hair, Mom, when it's dry.

Sure, honey, let me know.

Is Dad still bothering Bill?

Oh, he doesn't mean anything by it, says Mavis cheerfully.

What's he saying now?

Wants to make sure Bill's going to ask you out tonight. Bill hasn't asked you yet, you know, so you could be washing your hair for nothing.

He will. He knows I only go with him, says Paula confidently.
Isn't that taking you for granted, just a little?

The conversation is taking on that personal tone which Mrs. Johnson prefers to handle on a one-to-one basis without being disturbed by others. She steps into the washroom next to the kitchen.

Here, Paula, let me comb your hair.

It's not quite dry.

I'll be careful, says her mother, having answered the same way to the same situation hundreds of times.

What'd you say about Bill taking me for granted? asks Paula.

Isn't he, the way he never asks you ahead? He just shows up and says, "Are you ready?" or "Let's go."

That's the way everybody does it, Mother.

I remember when your father and I first dated. I was so young and innocent that I used to think he was too nice to me. You see nobody else really noticed me except your father. My mother and father were always working at the factory in Whitehorse, and they never saw him until we were engaged. My mother might have saw what he was--a guy anxious to be first, to beat everybody by working harder, getting married sooner, having children before his old friends did, and being the first to own a car. Sometimes he frightened me. He never wanted to wait. He asked me for our first date while I was standing on a corner waiting . . . .
I know. You just turned toward this voice and, next thing you knew, you were feeling funny inside. Ouch, take it easy! yells Paula. I was just kidding.

I don't like that kind of tone. Please don't, Paula.

OK, I won't any more. Well, tell it your way. What happened next?

Well, there is more to that first date. When he came for me we had to walk three miles to our first movie. But he said we'd have a car if we were married. He talked about lots of important things like that.

What else did he say? asks the daughter.

Your dad told me just where he wanted to live and how he was going to get a different job. Mrs. Johnson smiles with pride.

Where did he want to live?

He liked Ottawa so he could see all the big ministers and foreign people run the world, says Mavis and she thinks, It wasn't so long ago, was it?

This isn't Ottawa, complains Paula as bored as she can be.

Well, he got delayed by the war, you know, and then you came along.

He had a little to say about that, too, Mother! It wasn't my fault.

Hush, don't talk about it that way, says Mavis.
Oh, don't worry. What about the new job he was after? Well, he was only a dishwasher then, you see, but sometimes he helped the cook. He figured the cook knew the inside of the restaurant business, so your dad . . . .

But Dad only washed dishes.

Yes, but he kept his eyes and ears open. That's the secret he used to say, "Keep your eyes open and jump when you get the chance." I think I'm done with your hair now, says Mavis.

You can leave the comb by the sink. I'll put it away later. So how was he going to get a new job? asks Paula, having honestly forgotten this part.

Well, he heard the cook talking about this man opening a place in Ottawa who needed a partner with five thousand dollars.

And that's where your folks lent him the money--the whole five thousand.

I've told you this before, I guess, says Mrs. Johnson in a subdued manner.

A lot of times and I still don't get it. He should have been more careful since it wasn't his money.

How was he to know the guy would take it and run?

He just should have waited to check on the deal. They should have gone to the bank together, insists Paula, having the perfect knowledge of inexperience.
I suppose it looks so simple to you now, but your father always thought he could trust people who could look him straight in the eye. That's what he kept repeating afterwards when he didn't hear from the man.

Well, couldn't they have gone to the bank together?

We all know that now. Besides your father heard from the cook that somebody else was trying to raise the money to be a partner.

And Dad wanted to be first.

That's right and don't be smug when you say that, young lady! Your father paid my parents back. It took ten years but he did it, and you should be proud.

Oh, I know, Mother, but what's this got to do with Bill?

Honey, don't you see?

No, Mother.

Bill's got to have plans, and he can't have 'em if he don't think ahead.

He thinks, Mother, but he doesn't have to tell everybody.

Well, you should know.

Maybe I do.

What do you know? asks Mrs. Johnson.

I can't tell you just now.

He didn't ask you to marry him did he? prods her mother.

No, but he has plans, says Paula smugly.

Does he want to be first at something?
First at what?
I'm asking you ... I thought so, he hasn't told you anything like your father would have.
He's not like Dad!
Maybe that's too bad.
Maybe not. Bill's got his own life and you know it. No use in pretending, either.
He should want to be first at something.
You don't think much of Bill, do you Mother?
Yes, I do, Paula.
Then why talk about him this way?
It's not him, honey. I just want you to be happy. Your father and I were so happy. We didn't have much except our dreams and his driving energy. He went out and saw what he wanted and meant to get it.

Before Paula can answer, her mother turns to look in the pantry for something. Paula waits, knowing her mother isn't looking for anything but wants to hide a few tears. There is a lot of whispering by the customers while Mrs. Johnson is in the back room.

John, you're not gonna . . .
I'm still hungry.
But do you know how much this is going to cost? asks Kris.

Don't you want to know how Bill comes out?
No, this is sickening. Besides, what about what you said earlier about the cost of food? She waits, a little amazed and hurt, and then adds, I just want to go as soon as we can.

We'll go, says John. Just let me finish my pop.

Can I have a sip?

Sure, but don't finish it.

How about a piece of your pie, too? asks Kris.

Well, now you're getting me confused. Why didn't you order again when she came?

I'm full.

Oh, Kris.

I was only kidding. I don't want your pie. Finish it.

John is finishing his pie but doesn't seem to be hurrying much. Kris moves her water glass and studies her placemat. Although the mat is wrinkled somewhat due to moisture from the glass, there is still enough dry printing to make it interesting. A group of wild animal drawings surround the perimeter of the mat. Near each drawing is a short physical description of the animal and his habits. She reads for a couple of minutes in silence. Paula's voice can be heard again, a little louder than before.

Mom, he still doesn't have to do it that way.

I told you he don't mean anything.

It's silly, cries Paula.
I know, honey, but he needs something to do.
Well, why doesn't he go polish his boots again? sputters Paula as she wipes away a few of her tears.
He's got someone to listen, honey. You know what that does.
But why does he always pick on Bill?
Maybe he sees a rival, suggests Mrs. Johnson.
Oh, sure.
You never know about men.
Well, I hope Bill asks me to go 'way with him real soon 'cause I'm sure ready to get outa here.
Don't say that! pleads Mavis.
I can't stay forever. I've got to go sometime.
Go where, honey? asks her mother in sympathy.
I don't know, Mom, but I'm of age, and you treat me like a child.
You're still young.
Not that young. People my age like to get away from where they were raised. They want to see other parts of the country.
And you know where some of them go, honey? You know where? asks Mrs. Johnson.
Places to ski, to see plays and hear the latest singers, but all we go to are movies--and I don't see many movies even.
Some young people come here.

Here? asks Paula, stunned.

There's a nice young couple outside, a little dirty maybe, but they've got nice manners, and . . . .

What are they doing here? asks Paula, completely surprised.

What do you suppose? This highway brought them.

But they don't have to live here all of the time.

Look, Paula, says her mother impatiently. When you're their age I won't worry. By then you'll be ready to marry and settle down. When you're their age you'll be sure of what you want.

I'm sure now, says the daughter, feeling smug again.

Will you be so sure tomorrow?

Do you think your fine young couple out there is sure of everything? I don't. Do you think they know what they are going to be doing ten years from now? Paula begins to pout.

These long discussions with her mother are tiring. She never wins and as a result gets moody and soon forgets the whole point of the discussion.

That couple, young lady, is in a lot better position than you are. She has a husband to lean on. You've got a boyfriend with a part-time job.

Oh, Mom.

You never listen, but it's the truth.
I still want to get out of here, and some day I'm going. Where's that?
We haven't decided yet. Wherever Bill wants.
Well, be quiet 'til you do. Your father's been a good man, and you're still his daughter.
But, Mother . . .
Need any more help getting ready? I'll assume Bill's going to take you some place.
Yeah, OK.
I'll be back just as soon as I finish this scraping.
The cleaning of the stove and grill stops five minutes later. The mother leaves the kitchen after hanging her apron on a doorknob. In another fifteen minutes her daughter appears. Her face shows the bright anticipating smile of meeting Bill, whom she sees everyday, but not when she's dressed up. She is wearing a red and white checkered cotton print that reaches down to the middle of her knees and has a high neckline. Her hair has a soft look of cleanliness which Bill turns in relief to admire. As she walks toward him he detects the scent of lemon, probably evidence of her hair shampoo.

Hi, Bill.
Hi.
I'm ready, says Paula, wondering why Bill doesn't get up.
He ain't goin' nowhere and neither are you 'til he asks me, says her father.
May we go to the show tonight, sir? asks Bill like a whipped puppy.

Sir? Hear that boys? Well, I don't know. . . .well . . . I suppose, go ahead, but be back by 9:30.

Show doesn't end 'til nine, and we might want to get something to eat after, says Paula, much bolder than Bill.

Well, make it ten, but don't push me, Paula. Wait here a minute, Bill. I've got to do your work! The customers are finished and waiting at the cash register. Dick goes to meet them. That all, folks?

Yes, answers John. He hands over a ten dollar bill.

Enjoy your meal?

Better than cooking outdoors all of the time. Gets tiresome after a month, says Kris.

Wish I could afford to travel like that.

Yeah, it's fun most of the time, says John, tired of the same envious comments.

Always glad to serve tourists, says Dick as he gives John his change.

As the customers leave, a truck rolls by on the nearby highway. Its rear axles bang as it hits a low spot in the road. The sky is full of billowing dark clouds, but it has been that way for two days now without any rain. If the rain finally comes, it will hold the dust, but then the road will be worse—a situation which never seems possible until the next pothole.
As they walk to their car, Kris asks, John, do you think this country made that man so mean and sarcastic?

Are you asking me as a professional psychologist or as a vacationing teacher?

Just you.

I don't know, admits John.

That's you, all right!

Well, what do you expect? Fathers are always like that on television soap operas. The mother should have been throwing dishes or the young man threatening to "get you for this."

Still, I felt sorry, says Kris. My father was never like that, never that bad.

Yeah, I know, says John. But they'll get by.

How do you know?

It's a long way to the next town. What else can they do?

The time is 7:00 p.m. The dark grey of the cloudy sky is shot with the golden-red rays of a tardy dropping sun. Twilight stays a long time during the summer in the Land of the Midnight Sun. The seconds seem to stretch. Hours are as far apart as towns, and the people are even farther apart from each other.
CHAPTER ELEVEN. THE IDOL OF THE FAIR

The temperature is eighty degrees as the Davidsons approach Fairbanks. They see heavy orange-grey clouds of smoke arising north and west of the city. A couple of forest fires are burning out of control, the weekly summer average. Other than that wasteful panorama, there is little to see or smell as they enter the city. The flat base of the location offers no interesting natural formations. Urban Fairbanks is composed of fly-by-night taxidermists, motels whose best rooms don't have a view, and retail stores selling imitation Eskimo-made parkas and miniature totem poles.

John begins to feel pangs of disappointment. He realizes the pioneer image he has had of this Alaskan city is out-dated by one hundred years. Fairbanks has progressed like any other middle-sized American city. Layers of black-top lead nowhere. As the couple nears the center of town they begin looking for the last milepost which is supposed to be near a river. Kris has regretted not taking a picture of Mile One in Dawson Creek and insists that they don't miss taking a picture of the last mile of the great highway. A billboard above a travel office suggests visiting Alaskaland, a combination historical park and sideshow, but no signs point toward the last milepost.

John drives past the loop area and approaches the
concrete bridge over the Chena River. He stops at an intersection in front of the bridge, and there on the opposite corner is the symbol of their accomplishment. The last milepost is more than a slender wooden post, but not much more. It consists of an eight-by-one foot white box standing on end. MILE 1523 and the words ALASKA HIGHWAY are printed vertically in black on the boards. On top of the milepost rests a square box, also white, with information printed on it horizontally, which tells the tired driver that he is only 3,947 miles from New York, 2,206 miles from San Francisco, 3,770 miles from Tokyo, and 9,905 miles from Singapore. The sign gives no indication of how far back it is to Iowa.

When the light turns green, John makes a right turn and ends up parking in front of a well-maintained log cabin twenty feet behind the milepost. The cabin is the local office of the chamber of commerce, a shiny lacquered edifice of propaganda. Surrounding this building is a lawn only recently mowed. Sprawled openly on the lawn is a mixture of drunks and dope addicts. A few of these transients are huddled in cramped postures, an attempt to get warmer and reduce the shaking. One has his feet propped up against the base of a drinking fountain while his head lies in a pool of water. Two are sitting close to the river bank, watching a long boat make trial runs for the Yukon 800.

No noise comes from this crowd, however. All of the
sound comes from the taverns and discotheques along the street running parallel to the river. One tavern, the Mad Russian Bar, is a four-story wooden building covered with a coat of pastel lavender paint. Another tavern has its front window completely covered with black cloth on the inside, except for a three-inch diameter peep hole. Acid rock, honky-tonk, and country and western music compete with each other for business. Along the street, walk a conglomeration of air force men on leave or AWOL, business men carrying briefcases, miners, bums, lumberjacks, hippies, ignored children, and an occasional prostitute young enough to compete with the topless dancers in the discotheques. The noise and variety of people has the air of a country fair.

John, you sure picked a beautiful town. This place makes me want to curl up and assimilate the draughts of nature on the lawn, says Kris in a combined air of repugnance and a feeling of being cheated.

What else do those bulletins say? John has been observing a cat playing in the gutter with a beer can; he assumes she is reading from the display on the outer wall of the cabin.

I wasn't reading a bulletin--or the Milepost.

Where'd you get that mouthful? he asks.

Standing here for five minutes waiting for you to quit staring at that girl, mutters Kris.
Girl? I was staring at a cat.

Call her what you want. Let's take a picture and get out of here.

Do you want to stand by the milepost? John asks.

Not alone I don't.

Well, I'm going to walk over to the intersection. I can't get it all in from here.

What do you mean "all?" she asks.

The flowers and gold chain around the post. How about you kneeling down by the flowers while I take the picture?

Nothing doing! I'll wait in the car.

John has to wait twenty minutes to get his picture.

Other tourists have arrived with cameras while he has been observing the street life. He watches their methods. Few just take a picture and leave, not after coming at least 1,500 miles. Some approach the post, stop, and impulsively touch it as though it is the hem of a saint's robe. Others pause to read the magic letters. Their eyes start at the top and slowly work down, their heads following in a bowing motion. One man blatantly pulls out a pocket knife and cuts a sliver from the back of the post, a relic to show his friends back home. All those who have made the pilgrimage wear dusty apparel, a sign of penance for driving instead of flying. John quickly spots an opportunity to take his picture, but then the traffic light changes and a series of cars and
trucks postpones his shot.

What took you so long? asks Kris.

I had to wait for some other people to get out of the way.

Was it worth it?

What do you mean? You wanted it, he retorts.

Never mind. Let's find a place to stay.

It's only two o'clock.

Well, I'm tired, Kris complains. Besides, we don't know where to look for a campground.

What does the Milepost say?

It only lists motels. I'm going to stop at a gas station.

That evening the Davidsons find a city park open to campers. Bordering the park is the municipal stadium where the long Alaskan twilight of a midnight sun has brought out the town's baseball enthusiasts and parents for a little league double-header. Because of the game or some other hazy affair, the restrooms in the park are locked, yet the fee booth at the park entrance is not manned. Kris drives up to the booth and waits five minutes because of a sign on the side of it requesting patrons not to enter without paying the attendant and to wait if he is not present. No one comes so she proceeds into the park which is nothing but a large picnic area with a few Aspen trees and iron grills. Places
to park off the sandy road are outlined by stones painted red. As they step out of the Landcruiser the couple are met by a whirl of dust from the road and noise from the stadium; it continues until two o'clock in the morning. They sleep till noon and then leave the park. On the way out John pays a double fee because he failed to register when they arrived.

The afternoon is spent at the University of Alaska's musk ox farm. The pastures are surrounded by a six foot high chainlink fence for keeping tourists away. They have a history of pulling off the rare hair from those oxen who stray too close to the fence. The animal looks like a stunted buffalo with longer dark brown hair and a face rammed by a Volkswagon. John parks the car in a lot near a sign in front of the fence. The sign explains that the university is trying to domesticate the rare animals and warns people not to stray into the fenced area. Kris gets her camera out of the glove compartment.

They're too far away for pictures, John. How are we going to get any? asks Kris.

Watch that guy sticking the grass through the fence.

They don't see him. They're too far away.

There's one in the corner, Kris. Stand over here. John pulls her over to his right side.

OK, I see him. Now what?

Just wait, he whispers.
For what?
There's a path along the inside of the fence.
You think they'll come along it?
If one will, so will others. Something made it.

Kris spots a mother with her young ox. She admires the scene wistfully and then comments, John, do you see that baby? Over to the right of the main herd.

Yeah, I see it, he mutters and then he thinks, I wish she'd get that stuff off her mind, once and for all.

They wait for half an hour. Slowly, four more members of the herd approach the fence. Kris adjusts the focal length on her camera while John pulls some young grass he finds growing near the road.

Hurry up, John.
I am. Got the camera ready? he asks.

A long time ago.

All right, here goes. He pushes the grass through the fence.

I can tell you right not it isn't going to work, says Kris. You're in the way. Why don't you stand on a stump like that man over there?

He's got the only stump. Besides, the animals are getting too close to the fence. You can't get a picture of the whole body.

What are we going to do? asks Kris.
Get on my shoulders.
I'm too heavy.
Get on anyway, he insists. John cups his hands for a boost while the camera hangs on a strap around his neck.
Stand still, she says nervously.
Here. Reach down for the camera.
Got it.
Now when I throw the grass over, explains John, you stand up and lean over the top of the fence.
You're crazy! You're shaking too much. I'll take it from the ground, she decides. The fence won't be in the way.
Yes it will. Stay up there!
Well, stand still then!
Hang onto the fence with one hand, suggests John, until you're in a good spot and then lean on the fence. That'll help.
I know. Hold still. Here comes one.
The Davidsons stay in Fairbanks two more days. One day is spent in some large outdoor sporting goods stores while their car is being tuned. Another day is spent driving out to see a gold dredge operating north of the city. Finally, they drive into some hills west of town to tour a working mine, but the mine is closed. Feeling disgusted, they leave Fairbanks the next morning at six. Kris starts the driving. John reads the Milepost to see if they missed anything in
Fairbanks.

Well, we've made it to the halfway point of our trip. Not it's south for a thousand miles, says John, as he looks up.

We should have stayed at the Tetons.
Are you going to nag about that again?
No, she gives in. She's too preoccupied with her memory of the baby musk ox.
Well, the whole world doesn't center on the Tetons, does it?
Forget it, she replies. I only meant I liked them better than Fairbanks. What a hole!
Oh, I don't know. There were some nice homes.
It's just not what I expected. That's all.
Yeah, I know, he finally agrees.
John?
What?
Why is this trip so important? Now, please don't put me off again. I want to know. Just tell me and I promise I'll never say anything about the trip again.
You can't keep that promise.
Oh, John, tell me. Please?
Hi, John.

Mary. He smiles at her, realizing she has gained weight again.

Well, tomorrow's the day. All packed?

Boy am I! All packed out, I'd say.

Kris feel any different about the trip?

She still wants to make a shorter trip, says John, exhal­ing slowly.

She has a point. Fourteen thousand miles is a long way, grant her that.

I know, Mary, as well as anybody. But it's important.

Why's it important? You never did tell me.

I have to prove something, he says, not explaining any further.

John motions Mary toward the door. He shuts off the lights in his room, and she precedes him out before he locks the door. He turns around, his briefcase hanging by both hands at his waist, smiles, and changes the subject of their conversation.
Where are you going this summer, Mary?

Not having a vacation like you. No, I'm going to summer school again. I ought to be able to finish everything but my thesis this time.

Is it worth it? asks John.

For the money, you mean? Of course not, she says.

So why do it? Who said you had to?

Nobody, John. I started doing it simply because I liked to read.

And now?

And now I just want to finish. This will be my sixth summer. Let me tell you, says Mary, like a knowing mother, never do it this way. Take time off. Do it all at once.

And you still say it's worth it? John inquires.

Well, I can't speak for anybody else. I just had to prove I could do it.

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In the noisy gymnasium of Madison Senior High School are a group of young boys and their coach. Some of the boys are standing under one of the baskets, waiting for a teammate to talk to their coach, the man whom their fathers fondly
remember not as Gus Gribner but as Guts Gribner. Two of the boys are still yelling.

Prove you can do it, Johnny. I say you can't, yells a boy whose arms are stretched waiting for a chance at the rebound.

Shoot, Johnny. Shoot, shouts another.
You're going to mi-iss, mi-iss, adds the first boy.
Kid, says the coach, if you're going to go out for basketball, we require you to aim for the basket once in a while.

Sorry, coach, says Johnny Davidson.
You other guys shut up, yells Guts. None of ya have made the team yet. I'm not sure Madison can use any of you. I don't see a sophomore team yet. Now shut up!

Sorry coach, continues Johnny again.
Don't tell me you're sorry, Johnny. Show me what you can do.

All right, I'll try.
Don't try. Do it! Do it!

Johnny Davidson walks to the free throw line again. The other boys line up for the rebound. The boys on the bench start yelling, too, hoping their enthusiasm will help old Guts Gribner pick them for the sophomore team. Basketball is important at Madison. If you can't play basketball, you are nobody until football season. Conversely, if you can't
be a football star, you're nobody until basketball season comes around. The thoughts swirl in Johnny's head. He's a terrible football player, too thin. He concentrates on the basket, gives the ball a couple of bounces, bends his knees, and freezes. The other players can't wait. The yelling starts again. Slowly Johnny stands, tosses the ball to a player still under the basket, and walks back to the coach.

Sorry, coach, says Johnny like a broken record.

Look, son, what's the matter? asks Guts impatiently.

I don't know. I felt awfully warm. Then they started yelling . . .

You ain't been cutting any meals at home, have you? asks the coach suspiciously.

No, no, insists Johnny.

Well then what is it? asks the coach.

I told you I don't know. Maybe I'd better just quit and forget the whole thing.

We could use you. I'm not saying you're first team material, but you pass the ball well. Not many team players around.

No, I better forget it, says Johnny. He wishes he could melt away with the rest of the sweat on his body.

Forget it? That's awfully easy to say but not to forget. The world doesn't like a quitter, Johnny.

I know, coach.
You got to prove yourself sometime, kid. Look, let me tell you something I learned when I was your age.

What's that?

Now listen carefully, says Guts as if letting out a top secret. It's not how you play that counts, but who wins. Nice guys finish last. Don't pay any attention to those guys yelling out there. Just shoot and yell at the next guy on the line.

I don't know, coach.

Now look, kid. Quit pussyfootin'. You got to prove yourself sometime.

But I froze. They all saw me do it.

Forget it, yells Guts. His voice continues to rise. Show them you have what it takes. Go out and prove it.

I can't, coach, says Johnny as a few tears start.

Well, quit crying. Grab a towel and head for the showers.

I'm sorry.

Oh, shut up. Look kid, just remember. You've got to prove yourself sometime. It's important. Now head for the showers and don't forget the soap, says Guts, while giving the boy a last pat on the butt.
John, what's on your mind? asks Kris again.

A basketball game, he says finally, trying to concentrate on the road ahead.

Oh, John, can't you be serious for one minute?
You wanted to know, so I told you.

All right, I'm sorry I asked. Forget it, just forget it.
Forget about babies--and forget about any more long trips, too! she replies to an air of complacency surrounding John.

She retreats, alone again. For a while she thinks about that cute baby oxen, and then she imagines the future.

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John, it's time. Pack my bag, will you please? she calls from the kitchen of their new home. She makes sure all of the appliances are shut off.

Is he kicking? asks John, not looking up from the television set. He sips on a cola and pops a potato chip into his mouth between sips.

Yes, she is, about every ten minutes, says Kris excitedly.

That's too fast but try not to notice.

You're telling me. How do you know? she yells into the
living room. How can you be so calm?

Well, a husband should sound like he knows what’s going
on. Besides if it’s a girl, she’ll be late like any other
woman for an appointment.

Hurry up with that bag. What’s taking you so long? she
yells.

The basketball game isn’t over yet. Forty seconds left.
This could go into overtime.

John, the pain. Hurry.

Talk about pain. Come here and take a look at this
coach. He’s growing ulcers by the minute. Serves him right.
He probably got them by yelling at his players too much. Just
like now. Look at him chew out that guy who traveled . . . .

What’s so important about that?

Don’t you see? This could decide it, he says as he
leans forward on his chair and takes another sip of the Pepsi.

You don’t see. Look, John, if you don’t come right now
we could lose . . . .

He missed the shot. Don’t worry, my son’ll be just fine.
Good. Let’s go.

Good? he replies surprised, they lost the game.
While her mind is on a baby, Kris' eyes hypnotically stare at the highway taking them out of Fairbanks, automatically following the grey strip but forgetting to watch the side roads and her rear view mirror. John satisfies himself that they have seen Fairbanks' premier attractions, unfastens his seat belt, and leans over the seat to place the Milepost on top of a suitcase. He notices a Plymouth and Chevrolet following close behind them. As he turns back, he glances at Kris and senses from her stiff, determined look that the day will be a long one. He shrugs his shoulders and glances at the North Pole as they pass it.

The North Pole is a small cluster of brightly-painted buildings—red, green, blue, and yellow being their chief colors. On the roof of the largest building is a red sleigh and a team of eight reindeer. Nearby, Santa is observed climbing out of a chimney made of plastic sheets of brick; one side of the chimney is broken and the jagged angles of ripped plastic apparently account for Santa missing his left arm. Parked in front of the buildings is a red Ford pickup. On the cab doors the green words, SANTA'S SLEIGH, are painted, surrounded by holly leaves. Apparently when the wind chill factor is high, the grass wages low, and the reindeer don't start, Santa can always turn to this legacy from another materialistic legend, Henry Ford, and make his deliveries on time. John laughs to himself as he wonders if Santa
sorry, John jabs sarcastically.

I'd better stop. It's all my fault.

No, it isn't, he yields. That guy was following too close, and that other fellow shouldn't have turned then.

How do you know? she asks.

I was watching the road. What were you doing?

Thinking about something, I guess.

Well watch it now. Don't look at me while you're talking.

I don't want to drive any more, says Kris despondently.

And I'm not going to drive all the way to Haines. If you don't drive some today, we'll miss the ferry, John explains irritantly.

How much time do we have?

About ten days.

Ten days! What's the hurry? she asks, how many times have I had to ask you?

I want to rest before we board it. I assume you do, too.

And we'll need two days to get there. He adds in an attempt to be encouraging. There's supposed to be an Indian village at Haines. We'll want to see it.

I think we've hurried enough the last few months. That's all we've done since our marriage. Boy, am I glad to be on the way back.

Not quite.
What are you talking about? asks Kris, ridding herself of her defensive attitude. If you didn't have me so confused, we might not have had that accident.

Don't try to blame that wreck on me. You knew we never planned on going straight back to Iowa. There's still a lot to see.

I've had enough for this trip, she announces flatly. We planned on going into southern California, too. Did you forget about Death Valley?

I've seen mountains and sand before.

Death Valley is more than that, insists John. A lot more.

Well maybe, just maybe, we've already been there.

Now what is that supposed to mean?

Look, John, there's always going to be another road, but what about us? She turns to look at him, angry but not wanting to be.

Us? he repeats in surprise. Then he smiles, a little hesitantly but warmly.