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The artificial inseminator's wife and other stories

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The artificial inseminator's wife and other stories

by

Dianna Lee Hunter

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1994
Dedicated to my mother and father and to my longtime partner.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Neil Nakadate and Clare Cardinal-Pett, members of my thesis committee, and to my writing teachers: Steve Pett, Jane Smiley, and especially Barbara Haas.
I like to meditate in short snatches, standing between two cows. What it amounts to is unity with the universe—*samadhi*, the Hindus call it. I know this because I really listened in an Indian Philosophies class twenty-five years ago at Haversmith College. After graduation, I stayed in St. Paul for awhile and took up transcendental meditation with Shiva Gloria, one of those 1970s gurus, and then my lover, Cayenne, and I moved home to save the family farm after Dad's first heart attack.

Not that Dad seemed sufficiently grateful. In that year-and-a-half before his second and irrevokably final attack, he said again and again, "sending you to that Haversmith sure was the biggest mistake your Mom and me ever made." He didn't just mean the B.A. in philosophy, but I pretended that was all that he meant. I made it a habit to answer right back that a liberal arts degree ought to be required for dairy farmers.

"Cows are actually highly evolved beings," I used to tell him. "They just act stupid so we don't catch on."

Of course, sometimes they don't act so stupid. They chew their cuds and dream during milking, breathing heavy and slow. When I step between two of them, carrying the wash bucket or the looped rubber hoses of one of our milking machines, its plexiglass bowl balanced in the palm of my hand, my rib cage gets squeezed between the cows' rib cages. Skin and fur intermingle. Together, we inhale
and exhale the incarnations of grass: dusty in the manger, sweet on the tongues of the cows, vinegary in the gutter behind them. We move our bodies to the milking machines' count. Milk down! Air up! Reliable and even. *Happiness!* I have told myself, *Enough!* to be connected to other lives this way. Over the last ten years, I had almost convinced myself of these sentiments, except for the one nagging memory of Cayenne in the hayloft, sprawled across a pile of sweating bales.

According to the radio weather report that morning, a line of thunderheads was supposed to buzz across from North Dakota and butt up against a high that was sitting over Lake Superior, putting us in the line of a lot of water. By noon, we could see dark clouds piling up west of Haywood. We'd started raking hay at ten o'clock, rushing to get five hundred perfect bales of second-crop alfalfa under cover. The hay was barely dry enough for baling. The moisture made it pack tight. Bales the size of our usual forty-pounders weighed sixty. "Mankillers," my dad used to call those kinds of bales. We called them bricks.

One of those bricks jammed crosswise on the hay elevator that we had hanging from braces and chains along the roof ridge. I threw the switch on the elevator, and Cayenne went to climb the haymow ladder and knock that brick down—an easier job than the one I'd picked, which was to carry the last twenty bales to the front of the wagon, where we could grab them and swing them onto the foot of the elevator. I was sweating, breathing hard, so when I finished my
job, I sat down on the edge of the wagon. There was no breeze to make my sweat evaporate. The hot, damp air just kept pressing in. I quieted my mind, taking seven breaths, deep from the diaphragm. Afterwards, Cayenne still hadn't shown up on the elevator, so I went looking.

We'd studied heatstroke in health class at Haywood High, so I knew what to do. I coaxed Cayenne to the haymow ladder. I made myself like a basket around her and helped her climb down. I went and pulled one of the bales from the wagon and dragged it in front of the big fan we had for the cows. I sat Cayenne on the bale. I pushed her plastery black hair away from her cheeks. Her olive skin had gone completely pale. I ran to the milkhouse and got her a glass of water. She gulped it down and held the empty glass back out. I ran to fill it again. Without opening her eyes, she took it and drank it and said, "You've got to make up your mind, Rox—me or the farm."

We talked about an auction. I even called Reinhardt, the Haywood auctioneer. It was 1981, and cows were still high-priced. Reinhardt guaranteed us $1500 a head, enough that we could have sold the cows and the machinery and lived off the interest. For months, in bed at night, Cayenne and I hashed over plans. We would keep the machinery, start a hay-selling business, and open a health food store in Haywood. We would sell the machinery and the cows and go into dog sled racing. We would sell everything, buy Mother a house in town, and teach English in Hong Kong. Of course, we never settled on a single plan, and we never breathed a word to Mother.
After all, the cows were not just cows. That was the ever-present, primary tenet of the Swanson family creed. They were The Cows: daughters of daughters of daughters, stretching back to the half-dozen Holstein-Friesians my grandparents bought with their profits from a horse and handsaw logging operation.

So Cayenne and I didn't move on our plans, and after a few months, the Old Actor slashed the government milk price supports, and the price of cows followed right into the basement. We were left with no graceful options. Eventually, Cayenne bolted for Seattle, taking our Honda and the measly amount of cash we could spare—a thousand dollars, not much of a divorce settlement after twelve years, five of them at hard labor. I was devastated, but I couldn't bring myself to leave The Cows, and, besides, there was Mother to consider.

And so years passed, ten years carried away by breedings and calvings and plantings and hay-making, and then one morning last fall, I was in the barn milking, and I heard the roar of the vacuum pump rise up above the beat of the milkers. Since it was our regular calf-feeding time, I didn't have to look to know that Mother had swung the milkhouse door open, and she would be headed down the aisle with buckets half full of warm milk for the calves. She would be in her usual barn clothes: black rubber boots, blue coveralls, and a cotton babushka to keep the manure out of her blond-tinted, permed hair.
She stopped when she got to the place where I was squatting, massaging old Rainbow's flattening udder. She said, "Does that black calf still get milk or no?"

"You asked me that yesterday," I said, looking down the line to check how the udders were emptying on the other two cows who were being milked.

Mother turned on her heel. "Excuse me for forgetting," she yelled over her shoulder, as she marched toward the calf pen with two ice cream buckets, the right number.

I had all three milkers on different cows by the time she came back and set the empty buckets in the aisle. She pulled her scarf off. It had flattened her hair some, hair that was trying to subvert her plans, go completely gray and limp. She fluffed her curls with both hands. She said, "What did Richard want last night?"

"He was just returning my call about that cow I wanted him to breed. Why?"

"Just wondering," she said. "I didn't know if you'd answer it out here, so I picked it up in the house."

"Funny you didn't listen to the whole conversation then."

She grinned, showing an awful lot of tooth, the way our collie does when we've caught him in the henhouse. She said, "Why don't you go ahead and go to the movies? We could milk early."

Rainbow had emptied out. I pinched off the air on the milker, dipped all four of her tits with blue antiseptic, pulled the rubber hose off the milk pipeline with a little extra torque. Mother was
refusing to acknowledge who I was again. She tried this now and
then, still—after all these years, after I'd worked side by side with
her, brought my lover into her home, shown her who I was in every
way I knew how. I stepped out into the aisle with the milking
machine and its black rubber hoses in my hands. "You can forget it,"
I said. "I'm not interested in Richard. Besides, he wants to see the
new Stallone movie, 'the Italian stallion in action,' he says."

Mother threw her hands in the air, doing one of those
exaggerated double takes she's so good at. "What's wrong with that?"
she asked.

"Besides being dumb?" I said.

"No one ever claimed he was the smartest," she said.

"It's a little too suggestive, in a creepy kind of way, don't you
think?" I took the wash bucket and ducked in beside a heifer that
had calved for the first time just the day before. Her vulva and
udder were swollen with edema. Naturally, she was jumpy. So that
she wouldn't kick me, I patted her up near her spine and let her feel
my hand sliding all the way down her flank to her udder.

Mother stood in the aisle with her hands on her hips. She said,
"Where did you ever get the idea there was something wrong with
ordinary guy-girl relations? So Richard's a little needy right now.
Who wouldn't be, the way Marie left him, and besides, so what?
Those needy guys are the ones you can really do something with."

I had two cows washed before I remembered to think about
what I was doing. The minute Mother had said the name—"Marie"—
my mind had flown off to the low spot in the red clover, on the day last June, when my baler dropped to the ground, and I hopped down from the Allis and saw that the hitch pin had popped. I was standing there, wondering how I was going to get that baler hitch off the ground by myself, when I heard a horn honking and saw Marie climbing down from the pickup. I saw right away how the back was piled with cardboard boxes and furniture, so I knew that what Larry Anderson had told me in the feed store must be true. Marie was leaving Richard.

She waved once and got out of the pickup. She was a tall woman and a large one, size eighteen maybe, maybe twenty. She used her size well, had always done every job on the farm. She went right to the front of the pickup, popped the hood, and took out the screw jack and its handle. The way she came carrying them across the hay windrows, taking full strides and swinging her arms, with the solid little jack in one hand and the long, thin handle in the other, she looked like Diana on the hunt.

"It must take talent," she said when she got to me, and then she dropped down on her knees and slid the jack under the baler's tongue. The sun glinted on her hair, made it brown, gold, silver in the sun.

The jack wouldn't stay put. It flipped when she tried to turn the handle, so I knelt down and put my hand around the curved steel body of it. Still, the handle slipped out of its slot, so Marie bent down to fit it back in. Her breast brushed against my arm, and she
let it stay there. She lingered and looked right at me, her eyes inviting something. That's when I felt the power of history, its ability to awaken the present, set human synapses firing in every direction. She'd been my high school sweetheart, but we hadn't kissed since we were sixteen years old, and now she had a daughter almost that age and we were kissing again. Marie was pushing herself closer and closer to me, and the energy was surging between us, bringing the long-dead attraction back to life.

"Listen, Miss College Genius..." Mother stood across the gutter from me, holding the empty calf buckets, covered on their bottoms with lime from the aisle. "Maybe he asked you to a dumb movie, but Richard's no dummy around cows. All I'm saying is time's passing. Youth don't last, and I'm not gonna be around forever. You need a partner on this farm!"

With those words hanging in the air, the barn door creaked, and a puff of lime blew across the aisle between us. I leaned out and saw Richard backing through the door, pulling it shut behind him. He had his cap pushed back so that his bill covered his red-white-and-blue United Breeders logo.

"Think about it," Mother whispered, before she took the buckets into the milkhouse, greeting Richard with a nod and a lilting, "Hello!"

When Richard spotted me, he turned away toward where we kept the breeding records, in a sheet metal box on the wall. This behavior of his was odd, because he had an absolute routine for his
artificial inseminator duties, and staring at the breeding records wasn't part of it. He always arrived while I was milking, hustled right up to me, asked which cow I wanted him to breed and which bull I wanted him to use, hustled back out to his truck, fished the little plastic straw of semen from his liquid nitrogen tank, and plopped it into the warm water in his United Breeders thermos. While the semen was thawing, he always pulled a plastic sleeve out of his breeder's kit and slid it up so that it covered his whole arm.

This time, no little straw. No thermos. No plastic sleeve.

He kept on staring at the wall and said, "Which cow did you want me to breed?"

"Gem," I said, "the black one halfway down the aisle here."

"Which bull did you want me to use, then?"

"Commando," I said, naming a high-priced bull that was not on the United Breeders lineup. I owned my own liquid nitrogen tank, and I bought the little plastic swizzle sticks from different dealers who came around. Richard had always gone along with me, but this time he said, "Sorry, my manager says no more customer-owned semen."

Richard and I went back to grade school. We were the kind of pals-of-conveniencethat you make at recess, putting together teams for Pom Pom Pull-away and two-base softball. Until last June, I'd say the score between us had stayed pretty even. Till then, I'd say we knew each other as well as neighbors do. And then this big silence settled in, caused by this thing between me and Marie. Now,
with Richard staring at the breeder's box, I could see that Marie had broken the silence, told him something about us. It was obvious he was after vengence. He knew very well I had ten straws of Commando in my tank at a hundred dollars a pop.

He had turned around and was glaring at me. I could feel the pent-up energy in him. His hands were clenched. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly from my diaphragm, trying to visualize the two of us at peace.

"You got Patton?" I asked. That was United Breeder's best bull.
"Too high-priced," Richard said. "I can't afford to carry him."
"Bombasto? Bombadier?" I asked, breathing, breathing.
"No," he said. "You're the only one who ever wants them fancy bulls."

I forgot to take the next deep breath. I said, "You expect me to breed the best cows in the county to your ten-dollar scrubs?"

Richard yipped. At first I thought a cow had stepped on the collie, but then I saw the Holsteins turning their heads like fast-falling dominoes. Richard was charging toward me, his clenched fists swinging opposite of his heavy legs. I squeezed between the cows, into the manger. Richard stopped and glared at me, across the cows' backs. "Marie was over this morning!" he yelled. The tone of his voice was scary—enraged and a little bit desperate. "She still tells me things, you know."
I had hoped he'd take the news more calmly once Marie decided to give it to him, and not just because he was the only artificial inseminator in northern Bearpaw County.

I said, "I was hoping we could all stay friends."

He choked out a laugh. "And here, all morning, I've just been hoping I could keep from smashing your face in."

The forgotten heifer gave a high kick, and all four of the rubber cups on her milking machine landed in her bedding and started sucking straw and manure into the milk line. I watched it happen, through the cows' legs. Richard watched it, too, and he couldn't withstand it. He sliced the air with his arm and said, "Aw, come and take care of it." He was a dairy farmer himself, after all, and a dairy farmer's son.

I pinched off the milker hose and jiggled the heifer's udder to make sure it was empty. I washed the next cow and put the milker on her. I dipped the heifer's tits in blue antiseptic. The whole time, Richard hovered near, drawing circles in the lime with his foot, letting me feel the tension in his body. He said, "Don't flatter yourself. This ain't nothing new for Marie."

I kept working the cows and watching his every twitch and sigh. I knew about the woman in the Navy. I didn't know if Richard knew about me, back in high school.

He said, "I suppose you been boffing her all these years."

I told him, "Not 'til the two of you split."

He nodded. "You ain't gonna keep Marie long without the kids."
"Probably not," I said, thinking again that I must remember to breathe. You hear all the time about guys who go off the deep end over these things, take a shotgun to the wife, the kids, the lover. I wanted to keep myself calm enough to tell him anything—and only those things—that he wanted to hear. He most definitely would not have wanted to hear that we had already been to see a lawyer in Duluth and that she thought Marie could get some kind of joint custody, if it came to a court fight.

Richard stood around a few more minutes, scuffing up lime, and then he walked out. I heard him slam the car door and accelerate fast, sending gravel flying in the driveway. When I carried the milkers into the milkhouse, Mother stood by the sink, scrubbing the calf buckets. "Is it a date, then?" she hollered over the noise of the vacuum pump.

I could only think to holler back, "I'll tell you over breakfast."

While Mother washed the milkers, I climbed the hay mow ladder and dropped down seven dark green bales of clover. I broke the bales apart and scattered the chunks in front of the cows who were craning for it, licking up the broken leaves and blossoms that fell in front of their neighbors. The whole time, I was trying to figure out how I was going to keep getting the cows pregnant.

Mom and Dad had been using artificial insemination since the year I was born. They had told me how, in 1950, the university had sent experts out with the Bearpaw County extension agent. They had come armed with charts and graphs and photographs that showed
the milk pounds and the butterfat that the daughters of the artificial insemination bulls gave. And now today, for bulls like Commander, there's a whole page of measurements. The experts have proved beyond a doubt that it's bad management to use a real, live bull. Still, I owned a bull, a yearling I'd bought to service the last few stubborn, unbred heifers.

I decided, for the time being, we'd use him. When Mother stepped out of the milkhouse, rolling down the sleeves of her coveralls, I told her we'd have to chase Gem out into the heifer yard. Mother tilted her head to the side and looked at me.

"Richard didn't breed her," I said.

"What in the world is going on?" Mother said.

"I'll tell you at breakfast," I said. "Just first let's do this, okay?"
I went up in the feed aisle and unsnapped Gem's neckchain from the chain ties that held her in the stall. She jumped up and tried to hump her neighbor, sliding a leg across her back, but the ceiling was too low. Gem bumped her head on the crossbeam, jumped backwards, tripped in the gutter, and slid into the limed aisle like a whale on sand. I thought she might have hurt her knees, but she jumped right back up, and Mother sent her out the door with a slap on the hip. Mother looked over her shoulder at me. Her eyebrow was like a question mark. "Highly evolved?" she said.

"They can't let us find out how intelligent they really are," I said.
Mother went to make breakfast, while I ran the conveyor that carried the fermented, blue-green oat silage down the feed bunk to the heifers. Out in the yard, Gem and the little bull had already found one another. He was so short he had to stretch his hind legs and hop to mate with her, but she was standing for him, wiggling her hips and letting out the occasional guttural encouragement.

It was September, and the popple leaves had already gone down. I crunched through them outside the kitchen window. Inside the door, the smell of coffee and bacon reminded me of the work I had done at an early hour. I was terribly hungry, and yet I wasn't anxious to go into the kitchen, since that would entail spilling my guts to Mother. I kicked off my barn boots and stood at the hallway sink, scrubbing old grease from under my fingernails and looking in the mirror at my dry face, the widening crows' feet, the laugh lines that had stopped seeming humorous. I rubbed on Corn Husker's Lotion and took seven deep breaths, affirming with each one my resolve not to be deterred by anything this time, not Richard or Mother or The Swanson Family Cows.

Mother said, "It's getting cold."

I walked into the yellow kitchen. Mother had set a heaped plate at my place, and, after all those years in the city, I recognized the food for the blessing it was—those firm potatoes and onions from our own garden, the orange yolks of our own chickens' eggs, the lean, brown bacon from our own pig. Mother sat across the table. She had
taken off her coveralls and looked fresh in her jeans and flower-print blouse. She said, "What gives?"

I said, "Richard and I had a falling out."

"What happened?" she asked.

I took a sip of coffee, letting the burnt fullness slide slowly down my throat, waiting for it to give me the courage to say, "Richard found out that Marie and I are having a relationship."

Mother sat back and blinked, while I congratulated myself for leaving the words so clean and spare. After a few seconds, she said, "Why am I surprised?"

"I don't know," I said. I honestly didn't know. In fact, I had to work hard to keep from blowing up, her surprise infuriated me so.

"Ever since that hoity toity school," she said, "—the biggest mistake your Dad and me ever made. We should have sent you to Duluth."

_Breathe! Breathe!_ I kept telling myself.

Mother was trying to get me to take up the Familiar Old Disagreement, the one we started having by phone, when Cayenne and I were in our twenties, living together in that south-side Minneapolis apartment. It went like this: Dad would say I had fallen into bad influences, and I would say the same influences were everywhere; the lesbians were everywhere—at the University of Minnesota in Duluth, even at the community colleges. Mother would say no, it was that Haversmith. It was those books I had read. It was those people I had met. And then I always found myself
sparing my parents, protecting them from the truth by smoothing over details they didn't want to hear. Attack, retreat, but no capitulation—that was always it. That was the scope of the Familiar Old Disagreement.

I decided to try to end it. I looked into Mother's sharp blue eyes and said, "Marie was the first."

"What?" she said.

"In high school," I said. "Right here in Bearpaw County. Right on these roads. In your pickup, in fact."

"Our old Chevy?" Mother said. Her voice had become tiny, almost breathless.

"Yes."

"All those times you went to the 4-H meetings together," she said, "and the county fair—"

"That's right."

Mother quit looking at me. She quit looking at anything in the sunny yellow kitchen. She looked toward the shadows in the corner of the hall. She said, "I suppose I should have known."

"I don't know how you could have missed it," I said.

"We see what we want to see," she said.

"That's right," I said, "because I've been giving you that luxury, but I can't afford to give it to you anymore."

"You give to me?" she said.
"That's right," I said, "only now I've got to ask you to see what's really there to be seen. I want Marie and the kids to move in with us."

She gave a little gasp. "I still have to live in this town," she said.

"We have to live here, too," I said.

Mother's shoulders started to rock very slightly. Tears came into her eyes. She was crying without making a sound. "Your Dad and me loved you so much," she said.

I shook off her use of the past tense, got up, and laid my hands on her shoulders. I said, "I love you, too, but it's just not enough—and the cows aren't enough."

Her neck was like a fence wire. I started to work it with both hands. She sighed, "Cayenne was never the right person for you, was she?"

"Probably not," I said.

"But Marie...." Her voice trailed off, and she pushed my hands away.

We didn't talk any more that day, just the necessary stuff. Mother didn't come out for chores that night or the next morning. I had to feed the calves and clean up the milkers myself. When I came in for breakfast, exhausted and hungry, Mother was stirring pancake batter in her mother's old stoneware bowl. She said, "If you want that woman to live here so much, okay, but I'm going to move upstairs."
"Out of the bedroom you've had for forty-five years?" I said.
She waved me off. "It's silly to put a seven-year-old too far from her mother," she said. She didn't mention that she didn't want to hear our bedsprings crunching against her ceiling in the middle of the night, and that's okay. Some things can be left unsaid.

Now that Marie and her girls have settled in, I've taken to calling them the daughters that Mother never had. Last week, the twelve-year-old asked Mother to show her how to crochet, and every evening since then, all three of them have sat in front of the TV after the 6 o'clock news, watching "A Current Affair" and hooking doilies.

Richard takes the girls on weekends. We settled the custody deal out of court. When he brings the kids home Sunday evenings, Marie makes sure we have something baked. He carries in their bags. Sometimes he stays for coffee, but he still won't breed our cows. Mother says, "You can see the poor guy's point, can't you?"

I can, and so, until I can get to artificial inseminator's school, we're still using the little bull. Every morning, when Marie goes out to run the oat silage for the heifers, he leans his wooly brisket against the cow yard gate. He stretches his neck and sniffs for signs of cows in heat. Three or four times a month, he finds what he's looking for. When he doesn't, he shoulders his way into the line of heifers and leans with them into the trough. Marie stands there in her extra-large flannel shirt and hard-worn blue jeans, with her hands spread wide on the boards of the feed bunk, looking like one
of those ancient fertility goddesses, the Protectress, the Queen of the Animals.

Anyway, that's how I see her.

That old guru of mine, Shiva Gloria, used to say that your first love is always your true love, but of course, back then I was young and dumb. I thought she had flipped her enlightened lid.
TANKY'S DAUGHTER'S HORSE

My son gives a little half-wave and a funny grin when he passes me in Milty Tahja's brand new three-quarter-ton Ford. He comes from a long line of Finn farmers, Tanky, and yet he grooms himself like money, in one of those Jack of Diamonds moustaches. The way it loops, tight around the corners of his mouth, I can see that he thinks I don't know what a sorry sight I make on the John Deere B. Right beside him, Milty Tahja doesn't even bother to wave. He just nods and pulls his lips so thin that I can't tell if he's smiling or frowning. And then they're out of sight, and I'm eating their dust, besides the smoke from the B's exhaust.

For a long time, the B has needed its timing set, or new plug wires, or a carb job. These things I know. Tanky and Milty might think I don't know them, but it doesn't take any mechanical genius to figure out that a tractor needs fixing. That's kid stuff, just the easiest part of running a farm. The hard part is finding the money. Tanky would know that by now, if he'd been paying attention to the lesson I gave him last summer. When you don't have money, you need luck, but getting luck is not easy. There's a trick to it, and that's where Eleanor Roosevelt came in that day last June.

That morning, the wind was from the east, off Lake Superior, and I was on the B with the collar of my jacket turned up. When I got to Tanky and Lois's driveway, the blue heelers came out on the road and ran along with the tractor, circling it. I parked by the
milkhouse, and the pack of them swarmed around, rubbing their sides against my overalls while I stretched my leg down, feeling for the ground. When I finally got my feet down solid, the piebald male reared up and took a quick lick at my fingers. I kicked for his belly, but he whirled out of reach. Tanky ought to pen his dogs up, but he doesn't, because he thinks only of himself. For that, I suppose I'm to blame. The wife and I spoiled him while she was alive. He was our baby, our tag-along.

"Careful now, Arnie. Don't give yourself a hernia," Lois hollered through the milkhouse window. She had a warble in her voice, the kind that comes from holding back a laugh.

"Where's your better half?" I said, trying to cover my tracks with a little humor.

"Gone with Milty to help move some heifers," she said.

"I wondered when they were gonna get those dirty things out to the pasture," I said.

"Yeah, well, finally." She was looking through the screen window, smiling her usual crooked-toothed grin. "He says to go ahead and knock down the orchardgrass."

"The forecast is pretty good, then?" I said.

"If you can believe them on the radio," she said.

We both chuckled.

At least Tanky admits that I'm good at driving tractors. He had the haybine hooked up to the 2640, and he had the 2640 full of diesel. All I had to do was climb on and go.
I took the rig over the scrubby little wooded hill behind the barn, down to the place where the field road turns into two beaten tracks that trail through our alfalfa on out to our orchardgrass.

The alfalfa looked blue and hazy that morning, almost like water, and out in the middle, I saw something standing, a single post, like the last timber from a burned-out barn. But this thing was no timber. It moved. Floating almost, it moved—closer and closer to me, until I could see that it was a woman, and yet it was not a woman from today. It was a woman in a kind of suit that I hadn't seen in a very long time. She had a double row of those tiny, pearly buttons on her jacket, and the bottom of her skirt was disappearing into the alfalfa. She had a hazy blue light all around her, too. It shone like a full-body halo.

I shoved in the clutch, and the haybine slammed against the hitch pin. I reached and turned the key straight up, and the big diesel gave a chug and died. It got so quiet I could hear the woman's skirt swishing through the alfalfa, getting louder and louder, until I saw her face close up. Right away, I knew who she was. I had shook her hand at the Farmers Union youth convention in 1936. No one else could look like that—so awkward, hunch-shouldered and swan-necked with those hangy-down cheeks and that disappearing chin—and yet so sure in the way she moved, all forward motion.

She lofted her hand and gave a big, round wave to no one in particular. "This lovely world," she said, and my stomach dropped. The words went straight to my head, without a sound. She went on,
"I'm reminded of Campobello, before...." And then all of a sudden, her lips took a downhill turn. She put her arm down at her side. She said, "But you must go on with what you were doing, Arnold." And then she disappeared. Her halo hung around in the air for a second or so, and then that was gone, too.

I looked in every direction. I stood up on the tractor seat and looked again. It crossed my mind how the last time I saw Milty's father, my neighbor Leonard Tahja, he was sitting on a table in the TV lounge at the Haywood Leisure Manor, calling me "Dad" and wanting to know why I hadn't flushed him up any deer.

It made me think, but what was I going to do? Work's the cure-all. Keeping busy. So I drove the rig out to the orchardgrass, lined the haybine up against the outside edge of the field, and pulled the power take-off knob. The reels and rollers started flying. The sicklebar started slicing back and forth. I dropped the header and let out the clutch, and the haybine bit into the clumps of orchardgrass, grinding them up and spitting them out in a long, winding windrow behind me.

I had half the field knocked down by the time I saw Tanky's daughter, Aster, running across the field, jumping the windrows, coming to fetch me for lunch. She had my mother's family's legs, long, solid ones, well made for hurdling. On the way in, she stood next to me, between the tractor seat and the fender, tickling the back of my neck with a blade of orchardgrass. In the yard, the blue heelers climbed all over us. I growled at them, "You pests!"
"Oh, Grandpa," she said, "they're sweet."

"Well," I said, "sometimes sweet gets tiresome."

"Not to me, Grandpa," she said. That's the way she was thinking right then. That was the age she was at. Twelve.

At lunch, Aster sat across the table from me. Lois brought out roast beef, home-made bread, and canned peaches, swimming in cream skimmed off the milk tank. When we had eaten our fill and she went to get the coffee and strawberry shortcake, Tanky sat back and picked his teeth.

I noticed Aster had her eyes locked on him. She stared awhile and then blurted out, "Daddy can I have a horse?"

Tanky kept picking his teeth. He said, "Not this year, Darling."

"But you said that when I got big enough to help you milk cows, I could have a horse," she said, "and I'm milking cows now."

"But you won't be, come school," he said, fingering his toothpick. "You know you like to get on the schoolbus smelling like Avon."

"I'll get up even earlier, Daddy," she said.

"You say that now, but you won't do it when the time comes," Tanky said. His voice was eerie, way too calm-sounding. "Besides," he said, "horses eat."

Aster stayed still. Only her face changed. Her lips stuck out farther and farther. Finally, she shouted, "You promised me, Daddy, and now you're going back on your word. That makes you a liar!"
Tanky put his toothpick down, pushed himself up from his chair, and hoisted his blue jeans. He said, "That's about enough backtalk. Get out of here now, before I spank you in front of your Grandpa!"

Aster jumped up and ran for the door, hollering over her shoulder, "Liar! Liar!" She let the screendoor fly and ran.

A few seconds later, Lois came out of the kitchen with our strawberry shortcake. She set one plate in front of Tanky and the other one in front of me. I cut a little piece and rolled it around on my tongue, thinking about Tanky's sisters' horse and how Tanky ought to know what happens when girls turn twelve and you send them to chase your milk cows out to pasture. I don't think the girls can help what happens to them. They smell the perfume of the clover. They see the sun reflected on the dew. They watch the cows snagging big mouthfuls of timothy, drinking the clear spring run-off from the pasture ponds. I don't imagine the girls think, exactly. I imagine it just washes over them: HORSE.

For God's sake, where was Tanky when this was happening to his sisters? Broke as Elsie and me always were, we still managed to buy the palomino they begged for, even if we could only afford old King, who was sway-backed with pork-bone withers. We didn't begrudge King his eats, either. Anything to fatten those withers. We knew that was our posterity—two-thirds of it, anyhow—between those girls' legs, and besides, we weren't fools enough to think we owned the crops. We only planted and harvested them.
Tanky shoveled the last piece of strawberry shortcake into his mouth and slid the fork out, nice and slow. When I saw his eyes almost close with the pleasure of it all, I said, "Tanky, I remember when you were a kid once yourself."

He opened his eyes a little. He said, "I know you do, Dad, but that was a long time ago."

"Not really," I said, "I remember when your Mom and me bought you your first blue heeler puppy."

He opened his eyes all theway. He said, "What are you driving at, Dad?"

I said, "You know very well, Tanky, that dogs eat."

"And pureblooded puppies sell," Tanky said, crashing his fork down on his plate.

Man, for a short fuse. I knew enough to back off. I picked my cap up by the bill and slid it on. I stood up, tipping the bill down toward Tanky. I said, "I suppose the hay's not getting any younger out there."

He stood right up after me. He walked me to the door. He said, "You know, Dad, sometimes I don't think you appreciate how hard me and Lois are trying."

I kept the bill of my cap tipped down. "I see how hard you're working, Tanky," I said.

"But you don't see the books," he said. "Hell, you don't even know what a farm account book is, and, truth be told, that's the
reason we haven't hardly got a cashflow, which is another word I'm sure you don't know."

"Now, hold on," I said, tipping my cap back up, looking him square in the eyes.

"Hold on, nothing!" he shouted, his eyes blue like mine, but icy. "You and Mom handed me just as many debts as you did assets," he said, "and the sum figure of that is nothing. So don't tell me dogs eat, because if you want to know how much dogs eat and how much puppies bring and what the difference between the two is, Lois has got it all figured out to the penny, you can be damned sure of that."

"Okay, Tanky," I said, backing out the door. I knew he was right. I never did have any luck with money. I never would. "I'm sorry I brought it up," I told him.

"Yeah, well, you ought to be," he yelled after me.

The dogs came to lick and rub against the old loser who smelled of beef and cream. They followed me to the 2640, and I let the clutch out fast. I almost caught that piebald male under the outside wheel of the haybine, but he was quick enough to give me the slip again. I watched him lead the pack back to the house, where I saw Tanky, standing on the porch with his lips in a tight little circle. Maybe he was whistling for the dogs. If he was, I couldn't hear him above the noise of the tractor.

When I got to the alfalfa field, there was Eleanor again. She was standing beside the field road with her hand cupped against her forehead, as if to shade her eyes. I shoved the clutch in and stopped
the tractor, and she said, "Arnold, you are going to have to buy the horse."

She was talking those mind words again. My hands, on the steering wheel, started shaking. I wasn't ready to be passing into that time-traveling world of Leonard Tahja's, but then again, I wasn't ready to be talking to a dead woman, either. I said, "I know what you look like, but that's not necessarily what you are."

She clucked her tongue. "We can do without the egotism," she said. "I am not some malfunction of Arnold Taino's." That's how she talked, those fifty-cent words. She said, "If you must call me something, try Grandmother, Angel, Bodhisattva—pick your religion."

"I'm not religious," I said. "I figure you live and you die."

"Call me Ghost, then," she said. "At any rate, I'm not a missionary. I'm only here to tell you that you must buy that horse."

"Why is that?" I said.

She reached up and put her hand on the top of my boot. The blue halo light shot from her hand, through my legbone, up my backbone. It hit my chest with a terrible jolt.

"The fulfillment of desire—" she said, her voice ringing through my head. "It keeps the atoms in alignment, holds all of the spheres in balance."

Her hand was like a live-wire spliced to my leg. It nailed me so tight against the tractor seat, I couldn't move. I could hardly catch my breath. It was all I could do to spit out, "I'd love to buy the horse, except I don't have any money."
"Now, Arnold," she said, "I know that no one chooses to do this sort of thing unless they're pressed to, but why don't you go ahead and cash in a few of your annuities?"

I said, "I don't have any annuities."

"Well, take some money out of one of your savings accounts, then," she said.

"I don't have one."

"What about Social Security?" she said.

"I didn't pay enough in."

She let her hand loose, and the blue light started to drain away.

"Do you mean to tell me?" she said. She stood there, looking more and more like an ordinary woman—ordinary color, ordinary tired look on her face. She said, "That program was supposed to be cradle-to-grave. Now what?"

And then she just faded, and I could breathe easy again. Up ahead, the orchardgrass still needed cutting, or at least I thought it did. How would I know, I wondered, if I was really sitting on the 2640 and not in the TV room of the Leisure Manor? I seemed to be driving out to the orchardgrass. I seemed to be whittling those perfect, square corners off of what was left of the hay.

I thought about how happy I was to be doing what I liked to do, and I thought that it wouldn't be easy for the rich, even for a rich ghost like Eleanor, to understand how a thing like a clean corner on a hayfield could give so much pleasure to a man like me. Of course, my family always figured Eleanor was special—for a rich woman. We
followed, in the Farmer's Union paper, how she traveled to the projects and the Farm Security Camps. Mother always called her a great human being. "A great soul," she used to say, "greater even than Doctor Schweitzer."

When I had cut all of the orchardgrass, I punched in the power take-off and lifted the haybine. Its parts kept turning, squealing and grinding, until their momentum wore down. All around me I smelled the fresh-cut grass.

And then I heard Eleanor's voice. "I have it Arnold!" she shouted. "I have it! You people have something called the numbers, don't you?"

I gave a little snort. I couldn't see her. I was talking to the air. "Your geography's off," I said, "but we do have the lottery."

"Splendid," she said, clapping her hands. She was appearing in broken-up waves, like a bad TV picture. She leaned her ghostly elbow on the tractor tire. "Get some numbers," she said.

"I don't know how," I said. "I've never played."

"Look into it," she said, "and, meanwhile, find a horse."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Sure."

She laid her hand on my boot again.

"Okay," I said. "I'll do it."

On my way back up the field road, I passed Tanky, driving toward the pasture with the fence-fixing tools strapped on the back of his three-wheeler. When I turned up the driveway, I saw Aster
sitting in the tire swing by the house, pumping with her long legs. I parked under the diesel tank and walked over to her.

"Honey," I said, sitting down in the grass, "what kind of horse do you want?"

"Why, Grandpa?" she said, hanging through the tire, with her head dropped back. "What does it matter?"

"I might just buy you one," I said.

She pulled herself up and climbed out of the tire. She said, "Wait right here, Grandpa. I want to show you something." She went in the house and came back with her arms full of magazines that she plopped down in front of me. I saw how, on the cover of every one, there was a shiny photograph of a fine-boned, high-tailed horse that some poor fool had spent days brushing and combing. "These," Aster said, "are the best horses in the world, Grandpa. Desert bred for ten thousand years."

"Well, where can we get one of these horses?" I said.

"There's a place over by Moose Lake that advertises in here," she said, "Jo-Dan Arabians."

"Do these Jo-Dan Arabians have a phone?" I said.

"Of course," she said, "everybody has a phone but you, Grandpa."

"So hurry up and call them," I said. "See if they've got any horses for sale."
She came back and handed me a glass of water. She said, "They've got the Grand National Halter Class Gelding for sale down there."

"Any mares?" I said, and she said, "They've got some of them, too."

All I had to do then was figure out how to get to the Jo-Dan Arabians, because forty miles was too far for the B, and anyhow, what would they think? I could see Lois's head and shoulders now and then, bending up and down in the garden. I went and started to help her pick strawberries, but I didn't get many berries in her bucket before my back gave out. I stood up and rubbed it and asked her straight out if she'd drive Aster and me down to the horse farm.

"No way," she said, "Donald would have my head."

"Tanky doesn't have to know," I said. "We're just talking about a little trip here—a couple of hours."

"Arnie," Lois said, "you know we're talking about civil war."

"Okay," I said, "if that's what it is, then maybe I'll have to commandeer your car and drive over there myself."

"Don't you be trying that without a license," she said, "We don't want to have to visit you over in the sheriff's hotel."

"Those fools are never going to know anything about it," I said, "I see better than they think."

"Is that so?" she said.

"Yeah," I said, "that's so."

"Well, I don't think we'll let you have the keys," she said.
I dropped my chin against my chest. She was squatted down, still picking. I stood there rubbing my back. I didn't say anything, just sighed a little. After a couple of minutes, she said, "Maybe I better drive you then, if you're so bound, set, and determined to go."

The owner of this Jo-Dan Arabians came out to meet us at the car. He was dressed in clean blue jeans and one of those fancy cowboy shirts with the white piping. I could tell by the way his face fell that he had us figured for no-sales right from the start. Maybe it was the Pinto wagon, or Lois's homemade blouse with the painted-on flowers, or maybe it was my overalls. I hadn't changed them in awhile. Whatever it was, Mr. Jo-Dan Arabians carried on fairly well. "Right this way," he said, kind of between his teeth, and we followed him into what he called his indoor arena. Lois's mouth dropped. The place was way bigger than Milty Tahja's new machine shed, and it didn't have a single tractor or cow in it—only clean, raked dirt. We could just barely smell horse, but that faint scent was enough to get Aster's heart stirring. I saw it in her eyes.

"So—" the guy said, wringing his hands, "what can I do for you?"

"We want to see what you've got for sale," I said.

"Everything we've got is for sale, if the price is right," he said.

"We've got a few nice weanling colts outside."

"What about this gelding you're supposed to have," I said, "this champion?"

"Saffron Sahib?" the guy said, looking surprised and a little disappointed.
"Saffron Sahib!" Aster shouted, clapping her hands. "Can we please please please see Saffron Sahib?"

By the time he came back with Saffron Sahib on a nylon line, the guy had quit trying to smile. The horse was full of beans. His nostrils were flared. He was prancing and striking with his polished hooves. His coat was shiny, rooster red. His tail was high, and, like his mane, it was as gold as any jewelry you could hope to see at the mall up in Duluth. Aster couldn't think of anything to say but, "Oh!"

The guy said, "Walk out," and the horse started walking around him in a big circle. The guy said, "Trot!" The horse trotted. The guy said, "Canter!" The horse leaped ahead, with both front legs, into a rocking canter. The guy had one of those long, snaky whips, but he hadn't even used it. He'd been trailing it along, just in case, in a wide circle behind the horse. The guy said, "Trot!" The horse didn't trot. The guy cracked the whip and shouted, "Trot!" The horse stretched those red legs out into a gallop, making that bagpipe sound that geldings and stallions do: "Uh! Uh! Uh!" He started to fart and buck. "Sahib!" the guy shouted, cracking the whip again, "Trot!" The horse kept on bucking and galloping. "Trot!" the guy shouted again, cracking the whip in quick licks that exploded like a string of firecrackers above the horse's back. I knew that little thin whip was not going to hurt that big fool Saffron Sahib, but Saffron Sahib didn't know it. He slid to a dead stop and stood there, shivering in all of his muscles. I felt a little shudder run through Aster. Lois put her hand
on Aster's shoulder, and leaned across her, whispering in my ear, "That was for our benefit."

The guy said, "Trot!" The horse trotted. The guy held the whip a little higher than he had before. He stood up straighter. He had a smirk on his face. He put the horse through his paces, but I didn't pay attention. I was doing a slow boil. When the guy showed us to the door, I said to him, "How much do you want for that horse?"

He gave a little laugh. "Let me put it this way," he said. "You can't afford him."

"Suppose I can?" I said. I am not a small man. I stood up straight and stuck my chest out. "How much?" I said.

The guy just shook his head. "We've got some nice weanlings starting at around fifteen hundred," he said.

In the Pinto on the way home, we might as well have been in a rendering truck carrying Saffron Sahib's body to the fox farm. Nobody talked until we got to the stoplight in Haywood. Then Lois said, "I need a few things." She pulled into the parking lot beside the co-op store, and we all went in. She got a box of potato chips and a bag of cookies and put them on the check-out counter.

"Snack time, huh?" said the Anderson kid, who had come up from the meat department in his white butcher's uniform. He handed Lois her bag and her change, and I threw a dollar on the counter.

"Give me a lottery ticket," I said.
He looked at me with his white eyebrows raised, like he was waiting for me to answer some question. Finally, he said, "Did you want the computer to pick your numbers, or did you want to pick your own?"

"Oh," I said. What do I do? I'm thinking. I look around. Lois is cradling the grocery bag, staring out the window, with her mouth set in a frown. Aster is tearing open the bag of cookies. The Anderson kid is looking bored, waiting for me to answer.

"The computer," I said.

Out in the car, I handed the lottery ticket to Aster. "For your horse," I said.

"Grandpa," she said, "is this how you're going to buy it for me?"

I nodded, and she smiled, kind of weak-like. "Okay then," she said, stuffing the ticket into the pocket of her T-shirt, "We'll have to hope we hit."

When we got home, Aster went straight to the tire swing. Tanky was sitting in the recliner, watching Jeopardy. He looked at Lois's grocery bag and didn't ask any questions. He didn't seem to notice that our mouths were down around our ankles. Lois asked me to stay for dinner. She shrugged when I said I had meat that needed cooking back at the trailer. There was something new in her face, a hardness.

I didn't have any meat back at the trailer, and it didn't matter, because I wasn't hungry. I sat by the kitchen table and watched the mama cat hunting under the bird feeder. Like me, she had no luck.
I picked up a deck of cards and laid out a game of solitaire. I was starting to figure that the ace of clubs must be buried when I heard Eleanor say, "My game has always been gin."

She was sitting in the chair across the table, her brown hair in one of those loose rolls like my mother wore sometimes, to church and to the bigger Farmers Union Meetings.

Before I had a chance to think, I heard myself say, "I sure made a mess of things today."

"Not at all, Arnold," she said. She reached out and patted my arm. Her electricity, this time, felt nice—warm and soothing. "You've done very well," she said. "The dye has been cast."

The next day was Thursday, and when Olesiak, the cattle jockey, came to pick up one of Tanky's cull cows, I asked him if he could haul Saffron Sahib for us. He said he could, just about any time, except the two days of the week when he took cull cows down to South St. Paul. That afternoon, we baled the orchardgrass. On Friday and Saturday, it rained. I stayed home, played solitaire, and watched TV.

On Sunday morning, I was laying in bed when I heard this banging on the door, and then Aster flew in, yelling, "Grandpa! We won! We won!"

The first thing I pictured was myself, rubbing a wad of bills in the face of Mr. Jo-Dan Arabians. I pulled on my overalls and headed straight for the kitchen. "How many million?" I said.
"We only hit on four numbers, Grandpa," Aster said, "But we won a hundred bucks!"

"A hundred bucks?" I said, feeling the air rush out of my lungs. "Somebody I trust has let us down bad." I slumped down on the kitchen chair. *Eleanor,* I said to myself, you played me for a fool.

Aster put her hand on my shoulder. She said, "A hundred bucks isn't so bad, Grandpa. Besides, there's a hundred-dollar horse in today's want ads."

She showed me the ad:

**Mannerly older mare needs TLC**

$100 NO MEAT BUYERS.

I saw right away the dye really was cast. I said to Aster, "You run along home. I'll wash up and be right over."

She said, "Go ahead and wash up, Grandpa, but hurry. Momma's got Daddy waiting in the car."

I had a sinking feeling about this cheap old mare. Aster didn't know how ads could paint the truth. In the bathroom mirror, I was a sight. Hair white, all rumpled. No teeth. I stood there staring, couldn't bring myself to move. Finally, Eleanor showed up behind me, looking blue and kind of pent-up.

"So little faith," she said in a voice that rang strong enough to scare me.
I wanted to say *that's easy for you to say, you and your luck with money*, but I thought twice. I got the feeling she could rock the trailer, turn it upside down.

I made sure I sat in the back seat of the Pinto, right behind the driver's seat, where I figured Tanky couldn't look at me. Somehow he managed to shoot me a cold stare, anyway, in the rearview mirror. "You've managed to spin quite a web, Old Man," he said.

"Some web," I said, "What were the odds?"

"Odds, nothing," he said, "Here's a sure bet. Me and Lois are never going to see any peace until we go and look at this broke-down mare. We have you to thank for that."

Lois had her face turned sideways. With her eye that was away from the mirror, she winked at me.

The place we were going had a big house along the road and a small, old, dairy barn set back in the balsams. None of the outbuildings were holding paint.

Tanky sat in the car, while the three of us went up on the porch. Lois knocked, and a man answered. He was heavyset, with a day's black stubble on his face. Behind him, a woman was standing with her arms crossed over her chest.

When she heard that we were the ones who had called about the horse, she uncrossed her arms. "Well, she's a sweetheart," she said. "She's our daughter's, and we wouldn't sell her, except our daughter needs the money. She's married now and lives in a trailer court down in the Cities."
The man headed us out toward the old barn, tucking his T-shirt in as he walked. Tanky got out of the car with a scowl on his face and walked along behind us. The barn roof was in worse shape than it looked from the road. The old tamarack sill on the east wall had rotted almost through.

The mare looked out of place in there. She was bright rooster red with a gold mane and tail. While the man took a dry-looking leather bridle from a nail where it was hanging, she stared with big brown eyes. She stood there, nice and quiet, and let him grab her by the forelock. He pinched the corners of her mouth, slid the bit in, pushed the leather straps over her ears, and threw the reins over her head. Then he gave Aster a leg up.

I had never seen Aster looking so excited. She squeezed her legs together, and the mare carried her out the barn door and down the driveway. The mare was long in the foot and skinny. She showed way too much rib, but at least she was walking easy and not wheezing. Down at the end of the driveway, Aster pulled the mare's head around and kicked her into a trot.

Tanky ground the sole of his boot into the gravel. "All thanks to you, Dad," he said, "my daughter's bound to hate me now."

I didn't know what to say. I stand there with my hand on my chin, working my bottom lip with my fingers.

And then Lois said, "What reason would our daughter have to hate a generous father?"

I realized there was a nation we haven't heard from.
Aster and the mare trotted up beside us, and when Aster pulled back the reins, the mare rocked back on her haunches and stood there, gentle and quiet, working the bit up and down with her tongue.

Aster ran her hand down the bristly ridge of the mare's neck. "Look how beautiful!" she said, "She's much, much prettier than Saffron Sahib. I'm going to call her Starlight."

Lois reached out and patted the mare's hip.

"Now, don't get all attached," Tanky said. "We still don't even know how sound this animal is."

Lois stuck her chin out. She looked at Tanky and said, "We'll put her through her paces, Donnie. Give me a leg up."

I was surprised how willingly Tanky moved. He bent down and locked his fingers together so he could offer his hands as a sling. Lois put her foot in there and launched herself up, onto the mare's back. She and Aster rode down the driveway together, like spoons.

"Don't say a word," Tanky said to me, "not one word."

Later that day, Tanky had to put up fifty bucks to get Olesiak to haul the mare home. The next week he had to put up another fifty to get the farrier out from Cloquet to trim her hooves.

"That's what we call matching funds," Eleanor said to me, when I told her the story over gin rummy.

Every night now, driving home on the B, I watch the sun going down behind the popple. I watch Aster out there on Starlight, the reins looped loose over the mare's neck so that she can graze the
second growth of the orchardgrass. It keeps me going to see those
two together, to see that gold mane shifting, glinting in the sun every
time the mare reaches down and takes another bite of Tanky’s hay.
It keeps me going to see Tanky pass in the pickup and to know that
he’s seen it, too. He’s seen it, and he knows as well as I do that the
coming world may belong to him, but I’ll be with him always.
Ed Berg sat on his bunk with his back against the wall. He'd been in the Bearpaw County jail for six weeks, and he felt like one of those hard hippie cases he'd seen hitch-hiking up Highway 61, heading for the Rainbow Gathering in the national forest. His hair crawled on the back of his neck, and his jeans and shirt smelled of his roommate's cigarette smoke. The muscles in his back and his thighs ached. That's what scared him—not because he had ever kidded himself about his muscles. They'd never bulged like that German movie actor's, that's for sure, but ropy as they were, he'd always been able to count on them to make a living, bucking logs for his dad and tossing haybales for the neighbor farmers around Haywood.

Ed stretched his legs so that his feet stuck over the edge of the cot. He worked his knees up and down, smiling to think how he'd finally had the chance to plead guilty to Kitty's charges, even though her story about his so-called armed assault on her and little Eddy was one big joke. Ed could have told the judge how Kitty always exaggerated everything, except her own faults, but when did the High Mucky Mucks ever care to hear what a working guy thought? Even Ed's own lawyer, the public defender, told him to keep quiet and take the plea bargain deal, because some bulldog lawyer over at the women's center in Duluth had got hold of his case and made a big stink out of it, got all three of the Duluth TV channels to show the
videotape of Deputy Bob Lindstrom coming out of Ed's trailerhouse, carrying Ed's shotgun.

"How stupid can they get?" Ed had asked the public defender, drumming his fingers on the wooden table in the jail's visiting room. "The ten-gauge didn't even have shells in it. I only took it out of the closet to make a point."

"And what point was that?" the public defender had asked him, frowning and pulling her thin, dark eyebrows closer together.

So Ed had realized the women were all in it together, and he couldn't hope for much of a fight from his lawyer. He did what she told him. He kept quiet, and pleaded the weapons charge down to a simple assault, because at least he'd get a chance to do some outside work, breathe fresh air, and dig around in the dirt at the work farm. Of course, they didn't call it the work farm any more. They had some Mucky Muck name.

The sign said "Superior Regional Corrections Center," and inside the main building, the matron behind the desk even had a fancy name for Ed. She called him "Edwin Robert" and made him sign some papers that way, before she handed him back to the Sheriff, who handed him over to a blond, blue-eyed Finn guard named Nikko. Nikko stood about four inches taller than Ed; and he was barrel-chested with a belly that hung, just slightly, over his wide leather belt.
Nikko brushed his hand against the thick set of keys that dangled from the ring on his belt. He held his other hand out, thumb up, to direct the new guy down the sidewalk that led to the secure houses. "This way to the dormitories," Nikko said in a voice that he hoped sounded stern. He steered the new guy past a tin-sided shed. "There's where we butcher the chickens," Nikko said. "Five thousand a summer."

By the way the new guy winced, Nikko figured he must have done a bit of chicken gutting sometime in his life. Nikko took the new guy to be twenty-eight, maybe thirty. The name, Berg, sounded familiar, but that wasn't too surprising. Nikko imagined there was no shortage of Bergs anywhere in Minnesota. He himself had come up from the southwest, after finishing correctional officer's training at the Brainerd Vo-Tech, and he couldn't be expected to know everybody around Duluth. He did notice the smoothness of the new guy's muscles, the weasely way he moved. He figured the new guy for a truck driver, maybe—not an over-the-road man but a load-and-unload delivery man—or maybe a logger's helper. Nikko said, "You know how to use a chainsaw?"

"I ought to," the new guy said. "Been logging for my dad since I was twelve."

The new guy's voice had a sarcastic edge that Nikko didn't much like. He decided to give the new guy just one more chance. He said, "You like working outside?"
"You bet I do," the new guy said. His eyes lit up like a kid's eyes. He picked up his pace and let his arms swing in a goosey, boyish way that almost made Nikko want to smile.

"Show up over there after breakfast, then," Nikko said, pointing to the tin-sided shed. "I'll take you out on a brushing job."

"I'll be there," the new guy said. "You can bet on it."

Later that day, Morgan Funingsland was driving her Japanese sedan home after teaching an afternoon life-drawing class at the small state university in Duluth. She had passed the Farm Market and the federal prison, had turned west off the state highway, and had travelled almost twenty miles on gravel, along Bearpaw County 13. Most of the way, after she'd turned onto 13, the brush on the roadside looked rust-colored, blighted-looking, and dead—that is, until she reached the half-mile stretch, one side of an eighty-acre parcel that she owned with her lover, Joan Dwyer. That stretch was green and alive-looking. From within it, spindly young balsam and red-osier dogwood spilled out of the woods, shading the edge of the road like cross-hatches on a pen and ink drawing.

Everywhere else, the county had poisoned the brush with herbicides—for safety reasons, "driver visibility," the Highway Department manager had called it in the letter he had sent the previous spring to all of the property owners along number 13.

"I don't know what you expect me to do about it," Joan had said back then, her voice turning testy after Morgan had belligerently
tossed the letter across her plate as they sat down to supper.
"Legally, they may have every right."

"But not morally," Morgan had answered. "You're the lawyer, for crying out loud. Can't you at least write a letter?"

"I can try," Joan had said, working her tongue across her teeth, "but I don't know how I'm going to make it fly, legally—or logically, for that matter. You expect me to tell a government official that he can't kill our brush because the little plants have feelings?"

As she remembered this exchange, Morgan gripped her steering wheel in the two-and-ten o'clock position. She liked to keep herself ready to brake or steer at any time, because she never knew when some Being might jump in front of her car. She could be passing the six-figure executive homes that fringed the edge of Duluth, or she could be twenty-five miles inland, on this near-deserted road, almost home. Her Beings were unpredictable, prone to appear at surprising moments, looking like Whitetail Deer, Great Horned Owls, Black Bear, Timber Wolves... They seemed to materialize from the brush on one side of the road, flash into existence in Morgan's headlight beams, and then de-materialize into the brush on the other side of the road.

Morgan knew these Beings were animals, but she liked to think of them as something else besides, something mysterious, deep, weird in the ancient, magical sense of the word. Not that she harbored any hopeless desire to turn the clock back. She thought of herself as a woman on the cusp of the third millenium, used a
Macintosh to keep track of household accounts, sent e-mail nearly every day to friends in Florida and Arizona, but still, she felt the need for a powerful and sketchy philosophy. Message-bearers. That's the way she liked to think of her animal Beings. And yet she had only the vaguest ideas about how to reply when Joan asked in a teasing voice, as she often did, "So what's the message, then?"

"Something about motherhood?" Morgan had answered just the day before, after she'd told Joan about almost hitting three wolf pups on her way home from work. She'd had to brake hard to avoid hitting them in the dusk, they were so camouflaged against the dun of the road. She might not have seen them at all, if their mother hadn't put herself in front of the car, leaped out of the brush and squared-off in Morgan's headlight beams, her eyes like yellow warning flares.

"Maybe it's a fertility thing," Joan had answered, grinning. "Maybe I'll get pregnant next time." As she spoke, her laugh lines stood out in Morgan's mind. Morgan had traced her fingers lovingly along those laugh lines so many times, but at that moment, they appeared to her as stark negatives of Joan's stately cheekbones, unwelcome and sobering reminders of Joan's age, which was forty-two—not late at all for lawyering or lovemaking or many things, but for motherhood...late, late, late.

"I was thinking just the opposite," Morgan had said. "More like it was a warning against trying again."
Morgan was forty. She liked young people well enough to have made a career of teaching, but she had never in her life wanted to feel a baby growing inside her. She had never even liked the feeling of a man inside her, always felt intruded-upon and over-crowded by it, back in her college experiments in the seventies. She could hardly imagine a child squeezing through her. And then suppose the child couldn't squeeze through? Suppose it came backwards or had the cord wrapped around its neck a couple of times so that it banged hopelessly and repeatedly against the pelvic bone instead of starting down the birth canal, like their friend Marjorie's baby had done, or suppose Joan, who because of her age was in the high risk group for such things, had one of those tubal pregnancies that turns fatal so fast it makes the doctors shake their heads. Where was Morgan going to look for solace then?

Morgan steered over to the shoulder on the wrong side of the road and stopped the car. The dusky March light through the balsam and dogwood sent a complicated lace of blue shadows across the hood of the car. She let go of the steering wheel and reminded herself to feel blessed by even this fading light, after the long winter's repetitious drives home in the dark. She rolled down the window and took a pinch of tobacco from a leather pouch that she kept beside her on the seat. She held the tobacco in her open palm, stuck her arm out the window, and made up a prayer, ad-libbed it, the way she'd learned at that workshop with Billy Bastille, the Ojibwe pipe carrier from up north.
"Thank you for the lives that surround us," she said in a halting voice. "May we always be able to protect them. And may we be protected, too. Especially Joanie now, with this motherhood thing."

She lofted the tobacco and watched it scatter into the snow under the red and black plastic "NO HUNTING OR TRESPASSING" sign she'd put up with Joan. And then she looked at her watch. It was 6:30. She started the Toyota and drove it up Number 13, to a driveway that mounted a little hill and ended beside a log house half-surrounded by woods. Up ahead, she saw a light in her kitchen window.

Joan was stirring marinara sauce and whistling Vivaldi when she heard Morgan's Toyota come up the driveway. When the entry door opened, she leaped into the dining room, skipped all three of the rough-hewn kitchen stairs, caught Morgan with her coat half-off, grabbed her, and twirled her around the living room. Morgan's coat was still hanging from one shoulder as Joan crooned into her ear, "Marinara mine, it's about that time."

Morgan's back was broader than Joan's, a comforting armful usually, but that night, Joan found it tight and unyielding.

"Sounds like you've had some wine," Morgan said.

"Actually not one drop," Joan said, loosening her grip, "not for the next nine months, if we're lucky."

"The ovulation test?" Morgan said.

"A positive," Joan said.
"Well, I could stand some wine," Morgan said. With one smooth move, a twist of her body and a dip of one shoulder, she slipped out of both the coat and Joan's arms. Across the room, she found a half-empty bottle of chardonnay in the liquor cabinet. She twisted the cork out and said in a flat voice, "So have you called Bruce yet? Do you know if he's available?"

"I'm not worried." Joan shrugged. "Remember? He said he could do it any time—during coffee break or even depositions, if need be." She looked to Morgan, expecting a laugh, but she got none. She turned and hung the coat on the carved oak rack by the door. She said, "Maybe I will give him a quick call."

"Call away," Morgan said. She stood in front of their large, side-by-side, triple-paned windows, pouring the last of the wine into a glass. To the west, the sun had dropped behind the balsams, backlighting their ragged, dark crowns with a reddish glow.

"Hi, Andy, it's me," Joan said. "Is Bruce around?"

Joan had known Andy for almost ten years, two years longer than she'd been with Morgan. She and a friend had fixed Andy and Bruce up, in fact, on one of those supposedly whimsical blind dates that turned out fated. Bruce she'd known since law school. They'd founded the Gay Student Alliance together back in the seventies, and they'd done some considerable bar-hopping together, too, in those healthier, headier days of old.

"Hi, Guy, it's that time again," Joan said. "I hope you two have kept a lid on it these last few days."
Morgan shivered slightly as the first dry, grapey shock hit her taste buds. It was a little embarrassing and a lot to ask, that the two men should adopt Joan's monthly rhythm, keep Bruce's sperm count high by refraining from sex in the days preceding her expected ovulation, but it was also the kind of thing that Morgan would expect Bruce to be willing to do for Joan. In Minneapolis, Bruce and Joan had once rented the top half of a duplex together, brought dates home to bedrooms at separate ends of the house, and then in the mornings convened breakfasts for four. They even bought a pair of littermate laborador retrievers to raise in joint custody, and why not? They were practically littermates themselves. Soulmates. That's what everybody said. And now they were going to have a child together. No, check that. The two of them were only going to supply the genetic material. All four of them were going to have the child. That was the plan.

As Morgan stood looking out the windows, big flakes of snow started falling, the huge pasted-together kind that floated like hollow eggs in the wind.

Joan chirped into the receiver, "So you're sure now, the timing's going to work? Well then—mañana, baby—oh, and give Andy our love, will you? He was off the phone so fast, I didn't get a chance."

"What the problem with Andy?" Morgan said, when Joan hung up the phone.
Joan shrugged. "He won't come out and say anything, but what am I supposed to think when he hardly says two words and then he lets me hear him say to Andy, 'For you, Big Daddy'?"

Morgan took another drink of wine. "Look at it coming down," she said. "Maybe we'll be snowed in tomorrow."

"Can't be," Joan said, reaching to light the candles she had arranged in the center of the hand-woven Guatemalan tablecloth. "We've got a rendezvous with destiny."

Ed was sitting on one of those orange plastic chairs watching "A Current Affair" and playing poker for cigarettes with four other guys. He kept losing track of the bet, and every time Roger, the squirrelly Bohunk mine mechanic from Eveleth said, "Feed the kitty," Ed thought about Kitty and wondered why she couldn't have seen her way clear to cut him some slack just one more time. He wouldn't have had to hit her in the first place, if she'd just listened to his plan about the rich man's pay-for-slay deer-hunting farm. Would it have killed her to admit he could maybe have a decent idea once in awhile, especially when his cousin Joe was willing to put up three-quarters of the cash for the fences and ads and other things they'd need? So what if they did come up with the idea down at the Haywood Municipal Liquor Emporium? Did that make it a bad idea necessarily?

"You in, Ed?" one of the guys said.

"I guess so," Ed said. "What's the ante?"
The next morning on his way to breakfast, when Ed saw six inches of new snow on the ground, he wished he'd had on his felt-lined boots, instead of the cowboy boots, that morning when Deputy Bob Lindstrom burst through the door with his thirty-eight drawn. Ed shook his head and told himself it was a shame when a guy couldn't count on a high school drinking buddy to see him through a jam, but a guy couldn't count of anyone any more, thanks to the way the Mucky Mucks had redesigned the world.

Joan said she wanted Morgan with her when they picked up the semen, and besides, it was safer for Morgan to ride to work in Joan's four-wheel-drive, because of the new snow. Strapped into the seat beside Joan, Morgan felt cornered and a bit uneasy, even though the four-wheel-drive seemed to make sure tracks along the unplowed number 13.

"Look how the snow reflects the light!" Joan said, glancing across the seat at Morgan. "Would you say that this is an enchanting day? A day for a baby to get its start?"

"Could be," Morgan said, flashing a forced smile.

Joan eased up on the gas and looked at Morgan. "What's that supposed to mean?" she said.

Morgan felt a small spasm in her stomach. She looked straight ahead and tried to plan carefully what she would say. "You know how I feel about words having power," she said. "Don't make me give voice to something I'll regret."
"You're not with me in this?" Joan said, her eyes darting back and forth between the road and Morgan.

Morgan didn't answer.

"I need you to be with me," Joan said.

"I'm a little scared is all," Morgan said. "You know why."

"Still?" Joan said. "I thought we'd settled it all."

"Don't make me give voice to my fears."

Joan slowed the four-wheel-drive almost to a stop. "I need to know that you're with me," she said. Tears were starting down her cheeks.

"I'm with you," Morgan said. She reached across the seat and wiped Joan's tears with her mitten. "Now for God's sake," she said, with as much good cheer as she could fake, "watch the road."

Closer to town, Morgan saw how the snow had covered the roofs of the executive homes around Spider Lake. It covered the parking lot of the farm market, too, a cold blanket spread in front of the bright tempora-painted posters hawking Florida grapefruit and hydroponic tomatoes for a dollar-ninety-nine a pound.

"Damn!" Joan said, feathering the brake. "I left that grant proposal lying on the counter. And the board's set to look at it today."

"You can't stop now," Morgan said. "Now that we've got this far, you've got to take me in. I can't keep twenty students and a model waiting on the state's tab—not these days."
Joan swung the four-wheel-drive around the curved driveway outside the Humanities Building, stopped beside the statue of Cyrano, and swung out again as soon as Morgan had slammed the door. Joan didn’t wait to watch Morgan hoist the canvas backpack across her round shoulders or walk with her thoughtful, hesitant steps toward the door. Joan had it in her mind to head home fast and grab the grant proposal. By the time she got to the snow-covered lawns at the edge of the campus, though, she had decided to swing down the hill and check at the women’s center for emergencies.

Marcia Lindstrom, the director of the center, was sitting behind the receptionist’s desk, punching the buttons on the answering machine. She was a large, fiftyish woman, prone to wearing blazers and cardigan sweaters, because, as she put it, they “covered a lot of sins.” She looked relieved when she saw Joan.

“This is shaping up to be one wild day,” she said. “Dawn called and said she can’t get out of her driveway.”

“Thank God for four-wheel-drive,” Joan said, brushing the snow from the shoulders of her trench coat. “Is the board meeting still on?”

“Sharon called and said I should tell everybody it’s a got-to-go,” Marcia said, rolling her eyes. “She said it’s a deadline thing.”

“She’s right,” Joan said. “And so, unfortunately, I’m going to have to make a quick trip home. I’m in such a state I forgot the grant proposal.”
Marcia studied Joan for a few seconds and then broke into a broad smile. "It's that time of the month again, isn't it?" she said. "Well, listen, it's going to happen this time. When you think too much is happening and you just can't handle one more thing, that's when babies come. I don't know why, but that's just exactly the way it seems to work."

"Well, maybe it'll happen then," Joan said, "because I'm most definitely in a fog."

"Take your time," Marcia said. "Drive carefully. There's nothing on your calendar until the board meeting."

"No emergency restraining orders needed?" Joan said.

"No but the county attorney called," Marcia said. "He said to tell you he settled that assault case, that shotgun thing."

Joan nodded. "Was he able to cut a decent deal?"

"The guy's gone away," Marcia said.

"Good," Joan said, opening the door that led to the outside hall. "That guy belongs away."

Ed bummed a pair of wool socks from Roger, the Bohunk mechanic, who, it turned out, was the other member of Nikko's brushing crew. Ed put the socks on, under his cowboy boots, before he walked over to the tin-sided shed to meet Nikko and Roger. As soon as he got there, the three of them got into a van that had the corrections center logo stencilled on the door. Nikko climbed up on the driver's seat and told Ed to get in back with Roger. On the floor
between him and Nikko, Ed saw two chainsaws, some gas and oil cans, and a tool box. Beside Nikko, between the front bucket seats, he saw a single-bitted ax, its handle leaning against the dashboard. In the rearview mirror, he saw one of Nikko's sharp blue eyes, refocusing every few seconds from Ed, to Roger, to the road.

Nikko headed the van down the state highway and then turned onto a county road lined with deadbrush. The brush was rusty-needled balsam and dry sticks of red-osier dogwood, with a stubborn gray leaf clinging here and there, except for this one place where Nikko stopped the van and parked it on the wrong side of the road. It was a stretch, a half-mile long or so, where the brush was alive, looking as green and juicy as Ed himself felt, out there riding along in the cold wet air, pretty much like a free man.

"This is it," Nikko said, pulling the van over to the shoulder.

"Jesus," Ed said. "What a mess. Don't these people believe in keeping stuff neat, or what?"

Nikko acted like he hadn't heard. He grabbed the ax and said, "Take a measure, Roger. Show Ed how."

Roger dug around in the toolbox and pulled out a ball of plastic rope tied to a big lead sinker. "Watch now," he said to Ed, as he set the sinker on the center of the road and began to uncoil the rope, high-stepping through the snow, across the shallow ditch and into the edge of the woods, until he came to the end of the rope.

"Fourteen feet," he said, straightening his back. "That's the right-of-way. That's where we cut to."
Nikko said to get the chainsaws ready. Roger grabbed the new-looking one and tipped his head to indicate that Ed should take the beat-up one. Ed turned it on its side and unscrewed the black plastic cap that said "oil," and then he poured in the bar and chain oil from the gallon jug. He took one of the half-pint two-cycle oil cans and pulled the ring at the top to open it, and then he dumped the oil into the gas can and watched it turn the gas green. He unscrewed the plastic cap on the chainsaw that said "fuel," and he poured the green gas in, through a funnel that had a screen in it. He slipped off the plastic sheath that covered the bar and chain. He pulled on the chain and felt its teeth. It was tight enough but none too sharp, so he gave the teeth a few whacks, all around, with the round file. Finally, he pulled the rope, and the saw started. First pull.

The saw droned like a whole hive of hornets, and Ed liked the sound. It filled the air. It filled his head. It drowned out every other sound. It made it so a man could concentrate. It was that kind of sound. It was the sound of work, of making short work of something. Of what didn't matter. He was going to feel good, cleaning up this mess. He was going to feel good, bending over with the saw in his hands, touching the whirling chain to the trunks of the balsams and the dogwood, watching the white chips of pulpwood fly from the chain, breathing in the exhaust fumes from the saw. He already felt good to think how he would remember the work later, the memory of it a rubbery feeling in his legs and arms and back. He relished that tiredness. He had missed it.
But something strange happened when Ed touched the blade of his saw to the wrist-thick trunk of a balsam. Something about it made Ed's stomach drop. He didn't know what, for sure—something about the way the little fir fell, as gracefully as a bird, into the snow.

Whatever the trouble was, Ed shook it off. Soon, he and Roger had found a rhythm. Side by side along the road, they were making progress. Ed could feel it in the small of his back. They had cut everything for about three hundred feet, and they were starting up the little hill that led to the driveway. That's when Ed glanced up and saw the house. It spooked him. It wasn't a normal house. It was weird—a log house with a peaked roof and two big windows, separated by a narrow section of logs that made the windows feel like two eyes looking back at you.

Ed couldn't see through the window glass. It wasn't glass like the locals had. It was glass of a kind he had seen somewhere, but he couldn't remember where, maybe on the office buildings in Duluth. It reflected back at you. Ed saw the clouds in it—white and fluffy with dark bottoms that meant more snow. He saw the balsam, pine and birches in it, too—the woods that slipped around from the north and circled around the house. The balsam and pine, Ed told himself, were too small for the papermills, but the birch looked big enough to make firewood.

When he looked up again he saw her charging toward them: one of those trench-coat types, a horse-faced woman with big teeth. Behind her, she had left her four-wheel-drive, idling on the road. Ed
could see the exhaust rising from it—a nice outfit, cherried out, with
even a two-tone paint job. It must have set her back something like
twenty thousand bucks, Ed figured, which was five times what his
trailer house had cost him, and she had left it idling. He spit into the
snow, thinking how the trailer had been home to the three of them.

The woman's cheeks and nose were red. Her narrow mouth
was moving. Ed reached his thumb around the back of the saw and
flipped the toggle switch. When the motor choked off, there was no
more hornet sound. Roger had already shut his saw off.

Ed heard the woman saying, "Who's in charge here? Who's in
charge?"

Nikko had been leaning on the ax. He stood up straight, cupped
his fingers around the end of the handle, and said, "I am." For as
little as Ed knew about Nikko, he could see there was a dangerous
spark flaring up in the man's eyes.

"What do you think you're doing?" the horse-faced woman
yelled, climbing the hill. "Who gave you permission?"

She must have seen the way Nikko looked at her, and yet she
went straight to him and looked right into his eyes, and then she
turned her head and looked at Ed and Roger. Ed watched her eyes
travel the distance from the bottom of his cowboy boots to the top of
his head, as if she was trying to memorize every inch of him. She
glanced at the four-wheel-drive, and then she looked back at Nikko.

"Who gave you permission to cut here?" she said. She was
breathing hard, and she looked nervous. Even when she wasn't
talking, her lips were open just a little, and her tongue was working back and forth across those big teeth. She said, "It couldn't have been the owner, because you're looking at her."

Nikko frowned and put his hands on his hips. He let the ax stand on its head in the snow. He said, "The county sent us, Lady. You can't just let your brush go wild, you know."

The woman blinked but didn't quit looking at Nikko. She held her hands at her sides in loose fists. "Who at the county, precisely?" she said. Ed could see that the tone of her voice had made Nikko narrow his eyes.


"Let's clear this up right now," the woman said, waving one of her hands toward her car. "We'll ring him up on my cellular."

Ed shook his head. He noticed that his toes felt painfully cold. It was not a good idea to stand in the snow without moving. He could feel the wet starting to seep through the seams of his cowboy boots.

The woman was walking toward the four-wheel-drive, a little bit ahead of Nikko, who was carrying the ax across his belly, holding both ends of it in his hands. "You won't get him," Nikko yelled at her. "He's never gonna take your call."

Ed walked over to the van and stood in front of it, leaning on the grill. Roger came and stood beside him. They put the chainsaws down on the gravel in front of them.
The woman was standing in the open car door, talking into the phone. "Well, I don't see what the problem is," she said. "Did you tell him this was urgent? Then why can't you ring me through? No, I'm afraid I don't understand."

Nikko was standing on the other side of the car door. He winked at Ed and Roger. Ed took his gloves off and put his hands under his shirt. His belly made a good furnace.

The woman was punching the buttons on the phone. "Commissioner Lechter, please," she said, and then, "Dick? Joan. How's Mary?" She giggled, and Nikko's smile disappeared. She said, "We've got a little problem out here, Dick."

Ed stomped one foot and then the other. The woman was talking in a bright voice, and Nikko looked disgusted. Ed hadn't noticed before how tall the woman was—almost as tall as Nikko, and her legs were solid, not skinny like a lot of tall women's legs. Her boots were tall, too, and they fit tight against her calves, the tops of them reaching up and disappearing under her trenchcoat. She poked the phone at Nikko and then climbed into the seat, settling in sideways, with her legs hanging over the edge. She looked so sure of herself. Ed imagined she was impossible to satisfy, in bed or anywhere else.

Nikko didn't talk much. He listened and nodded, mostly, and now and then he glanced over at Roger and Ed. He didn't look at the woman at all. After awhile, he poked the phone back toward her and shouted, "Boys! What say we warm up with a cup of coffee?"
The three of them were sitting a few hundred feet down the road, with the van motor running, when the woman passed them, heading toward Duluth. Ed and Roger were holding styrofoam cups, half-full of warm coffee, in their hands. Nikko held the red plastic cup that had come with his thermos. He raised it to his lips and blew into it. "Jesus," he said, "Deliver us from lippy women."

Roger squirmed on the seat. "Talk about your ball-busting bull-daggers," he said.

Ed took the side of his hand and wiped the steam from his window. He cleared a circle and noticed, through it, how the morning was growing darker. The clouds had turned grayer and moved closer together so that they made a solid background for the roof of the woman's house. The two windows had become iron gray eyes, blank and dead-looking.

"Who do all these women think they're fucking with, anyway?" Ed said. "There ought to be some way to show them who they're fucking with, wouldn't you think?" His gaze travelled around the van and landed on the ax, the upright handle of it, leaning against the dashboard. "Wait a minute," he said, "I'm getting an idea."

On her way past the executive homes and the Farm Market, Joan asked herself how Morgan would go about clearing her head of the workfarm men's faces. Some kind of visualization, she was pretty sure, to replace those dangerous sneers and evil eyes with images that might be capable of enticing a baby's spirit into the
world. But what would that be? Trees, maybe, or those wolf pups. She tried to make a picture of the wolf pups in her mind, but it was no use. The men's faces loomed there, crowding everything else out, until Sharon, the chairwoman, called the board meeting to order and asked Joan to explain the rationale she had sketched into the grant proposal.

Joan took note of every suggestion, marking the needed revisions on her draft. Afterwards, she laid the draft on Marcia's desk. She said, "Sorry, I've got to run."

"Never apologize," Marcia said, taking her hands out of the pockets of her blazer. "Stay the morning, too, if you want. You know how I get about babies."

Joan was running late. On Skyline Drive, atop the cliffs above Lake Superior, she kicked the four-wheel-drive up to forty. She arrived at the Humanities Building just in time to watch Morgan come walking down the glassed-in hallway, shoulder-to-shoulder with a student. Morgan was gesturing with her round, delicate hands as though she were putting the precise, finishing touches on a drawing.

When they knocked on the carved oak door of Andy and Bruce's house, Andy answered. He was six feet tall, a slightly balding securities salesman and a community theater volunteer, given to impromptu dramatizations that sometimes made Morgan feel uncomfortable.
"The potentate is in, Ladies," he said with an elaborate bow.

"Hi, here I am," Bruce said, hurrying to the door with a bottle of wine in his hand. He was not as tall as Andy, and he was bearishly-built and dark-haired. He had a five-o'clock shadow and an embarrassed grin on his face. "Would either of you like some wine?" he said.

"I can't," Joan said. "Or at least I don't think I ought to."

"But of course, I can," Morgan said, putting her coat into Andy's waiting hands. "In fact, I'd like a very tall glass, please, Bruce."

"I'd like a tall glass, too," Andy said.

Bruce made a gesture behind Andy's back—a quick but emphatic throwing up of his hands—and then he went to get a sparkling water for Joan. The four of them sat down in the living room, with Bruce and Andy on the couch, and Joan and Morgan on the love seat across from them. Andy launched into a story—Morgan's mind was wandering—some silly mistake one of his clients had made on the telephone.

Afterwards everyone fell silent for awhile, and then Bruce said, "Maybe this is a good time to go up and do it, then. Shall I?"

"Why not?" Joan said.

"Why not?" Bruce said. He got up and went upstairs.

Joan excused herself to go to the bathroom, and then Andy made a grimace and said to Morgan, "I've got to tell you, this still feels momentous to me. It's way harder than I expected for the third try."
Morgan drew back and looked at him. "What do you mean," she said.

"I don't know," he said. "It's almost too much." His lower lip had fallen into shadow. It seemed to be trembling. Somehow, seeing him fall apart that way, she felt the need to act pulled-together. She went over and put her arm around his shoulder. She said, "We're going to be okay."

"Are we?" he said.

"People have been doing this for centuries," she said.

"Heterosexual people," he said. "Mothers and fathers."

"My God, Andy," she said. "What are you worried about?"

"Cells colliding," he said. "The miracle of it all. Don't you ever wonder just how it's going to affect them afterwards, the two of them?"

Morgan let her breath out slowly. She was weighing her words. "Are you seriously worried that Bruce might turn straight on you?" she said.

"Of course not!" he said. "Ish! Is that what I sound like?" He started to chuckle. "What a paranoid!"

"See?" Morgan said. "We're all going to survive this. We'll work it out."

"I hope so," Andy said.

When Bruce came down the stairs, he handed a twelve-c.c. syringe to Joan. It had no needle, just a green plastic cap on the end
of it. Down in the bottom quarter, Morgan saw the semen. Such a tiny amount, Morgan thought, but then it just took one good swimmer to reach the egg, and even in this small, seemingly inert deposit, Bruce had handed them potentially thousands of swimmers.

"Bruce," Joan said, "I still don't know how to thank you."

"Make yourselves at home upstairs," he said, putting his hand on Andy's shoulder. "Use the jacuzzi, or whatever. Take your time. I'm buying Andrew dinner at the Castle."

Joan had brought along a compact disk—Mickey Hart, drumming for babies about to be born. She put it in the C.D. player that sat on the headboard of Bruce and Andy's waterbed. "It should work for babies about to be conceived, too, don't you think?" she said to Morgan.

Morgan had given the tape to Joan four months earlier, after they'd worked up the courage to talk to Bruce and Andy about the baby. She had been glad enough, back then, to have a reason to bring the tape home. She had felt so relieved when Joan had stopped crying every night, lamenting the child she was afraid she would never have a chance to mother.

Morgan held out her hand, and Joan took it. She pulled Morgan down next to her on the waterbed, and pressed herself against Morgan so urgently that Morgan got the feeling the world could not go on for Joan unless Morgan helped her try to have this baby.

What they did next was not erotic. At least, it was not as erotic as Morgan had hoped in the beginning. The first time, they had tried
to make the insemination coincide with a mutual orgasm, but they had found that it couldn't be done, fumbling with the syringe and the little rubber tube that they had to put on the end of it, —or at least, if it could be done, they hadn't figured out how to do it yet. Still, it was romantic somehow, reaching inside Joan in this new way. Morgan felt linked, truly united, when she released the semen. Afterwards, she had the sinking feeling that conception was actually going to take place.

"It's happening right now," Joan said, lying there with her pelvis raised on a pillow. "Let's help it along, Morgan. What shall we visualize?"

"Swimming, I guess," Morgan said. "Visualize giving all those little swimmer guys a boost up that dark canal."

As she lay beside Joan, Morgan tried to visualize it, but her mind kept wandering to hospital emergency room corridors and scarlet-splashed sheets. When the CD started its second run-through, she said, "Let's go home."

On the way home, Joan told Morgan about her run-in with the brushing crew. When they got close to their driveway on number 13 and Morgan saw the little balsams and red-osier dogwoods lying on their sides in the ditch, she drew her breath in sharply.

"Oh, my God, Joanie," she said, "How awful. How sad."

And then she felt remarkably relieved to see that a whole hillside of living brush had been left standing, along the rise that led
to the house. That's where she saw it—the message the men had left. She saw it, and then she heard Joan gasp. It was standing beside their driveway, a kind of political art: two four-foot snowballs and something between them, erect and monumental, eight feet tall or so, with a rounded tip.

"Well, will you look at that?" Morgan said. She felt taken aback, not sure whether to laugh or rage.

Joan raged. "That dirty coot," she hissed. "This is sexual harassment, plain and simple! I'm going to haul his fat ass into court. We're going to get the camera and take pictures, and then we're going to get the ax and we're going to chop this thing into a million pieces."

Morgan started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Joan said.

"Well, do you—" Morgan's stomach was shaking so hard she could hardly catch her breath. "I just got done trying to impregnate you, and now—do you want me to do battle with the giant snow phallus?"

Joan looked chagrined. "Maybe we should have some tea first," she said.

"Yes," Morgan said. "I think that's a good idea."

Once they were in the house, Joan seemed to bristle with energy. She put the teapot on the burner and got out the box that contained the teabags, while Morgan sat at the counter, feeling completely drained.
"Joan," she said, "are you sure you want your baby to have a frumpy, mystic, artist-weirdo for a parent?"

Joan leaned against the counter across from Morgan. "What brought this on?" she said.

"Why not somebody more down-to-earth and financially settled—another lawyer, for instance?"

"That's a scary thought," Joan said. "Where is this coming from?"

"I don't know," Morgan said. "I can't shake these worries."

"Well, I need you to shake them," Joan said. "I need you to help me with this child."

Joan poured the water over the tea bags, and the smell of mint rose into the air, but Morgan did not feel cheered. Her thoughts had turned to the brush that the men had cut and the snow sculpture they had left behind. Political art or not, it had stopped seeming funny. Morgan felt violated, and she was becoming more and more upset. "Those bastards," she said.

"I was wrong to talk the way I did," Joan said. "Let's forget about the photographs and the charges. Let's just go chop that thing. It'll do us good."

"I don't know," Morgan said. She didn't want to say what she was thinking—that the whole thing felt like such a bad omen. She used her spoon to push the teabag up and down in her cup. She said, "I think we ought to call Bruce and Andy. I've got an idea that they should help us get rid of that thing."
Joan reached for the phone. "I wonder if they're home yet," she said, punching their number. "Oh, hi, Bruce. Listen, have I got a story for you guys."

While they waited for Bruce and Andy, Joan and Morgan went outside and walked down the driveway. A south wind had come up. It carried the smell of balsam and damp dogwood bark, and it felt warm against Morgan's cheeks. Underfoot, the snow had turned soft. There was a narrow trickle of water running between them, down the middle of the driveway.

They walked down the hill and waited on the shoulder of number 13. Morgan thought that Bruce might come alone, but Andy was in the driver's seat when the pickup pulled up beside her and Joan. When Morgan was the only one looking, he gave her a wink.

"Whoa, my goodness!" he said when he saw the snow sculpture. "Girls," he said, patting his lips with his palm. "I just don't know!"

"What—does it remind you of someone?" Joan asked.

"A former lover of his, I think," Bruce said.

The four of them walked down the road, gathering armfuls of the cut balsam and red-osier dogwood. They carried the aromatic armfuls up the hill and made a pile around the snow sculpture. Morgan thought the metallic smell of the melting snow made the night even more delicious. As far as she could tell, everyone enjoyed making trip after trip.

They went back and forth until they had gathered nearly all of the cut brush and laid it in a circle around the snow sculpture, and
then they stood around the brush pile, clapping their hands and shifting their weight from foot to foot. Andy said in an earnest-sounding voice, "Are you sure that you want to go through with this, now? Because maybe you should think about enshrining these things instead of melting them. Really now, I'm serious. We could rent a refrigerated truck. They've got them in Cloquet. We could put in a glass plate, and it could be like Lenin's tomb. We could tour all of the major cities."

Morgan waved him off. "Let's get on with it," she said.

She took a candle from her pocket, lit it with a match, and held it so that its wax dripped onto the balsam boughs. Then she put the flame to the wax. The green boughs sputtered and sparked, and Morgan said in a hesitant voice, "We are so sorry." She went to the other side of the brush pile and let wax drip there awhile, too, before touching the flame to the boughs. The boughs were so wet and green, they took awhile before they burst into flame, but when they did, they made an amazing conflagration, popping and shooting sparks to the crownheads of the forest.

"Let these sad little endings become a powerful beginning," Morgan said in a voice that grew stronger as she spoke. "Help us have the courage to begin and begin and begin."

Andy had his arm around Bruce. "May it always be so," he said in a strong, clear voice.

...
Ed felt a chill. He felt the cold seeping into him from the bottoms of his feet. The air smelled of balsam and dogwood, and as far as he could see, the woods lay around him, shadowy and dark, except for the hill where the house stood. The house seemed alive. It had two eyes, and light was lapping out of them like some kind of warning signal. In the light, he saw a path, a footpath through the snow, and he followed it, because the shadows were grabbing at his heels, and the path was the only bright thing. He came to a small opening in the woods, a meadow brightened, like the path, by the light from the windows of the house. In the center of the meadow, he saw a pile of balsam boughs, and in the center of the boughs he saw Kitty kneeling. She was naked, and when she looked into his eyes, her eyes flared with the same light. He knealt down in front of her.

He felt compelled to do it, and yet it felt completely natural. Nothing locked him in or pulled or pinched at him, and that's when he noticed that he was naked, too. And then little Eddy came out of the woods and toddled toward them, and he was naked, too—two-and-a-half feet tall and carrying an egg as big as his head.

"For you, Daddy," he said in a sweet little voice that seemed to have no fear.

Ed took the egg and held it against his chest. "What am I supposed to do with this?" he said, and then he felt the horse-faced woman's presence. He saw her standing over them in her trenchcoat, working her tongue across her narrow lips.
"Eat it, Ed," she said in a voice that echoed against the trunks of the birches and balsams.

Kitty had a butcher knife in her hand. The light gleamed from its blade. "Bring it here Ed," she said.

He felt too afraid to move.

"Give it to her, Ed," the horse-faced woman said. "It's good for you." Her voice had become the wet March wind, licking and whistling in the hollows of Ed's ears. "It's the other half, Ed," she said, "Take it in. Take it in. Take it in."

When he held the egg out for Kitty, she lofted the knife like an ax and sliced the egg with two quick strokes. She took one piece and handed it to little Eddy, and she took one. She left the middle piece in Ed's hands.

"Eat it," she said.

And he did eat it. All three of them ate. They stuffed their mouths until their cheeks bulged like sacks of grain. Afterwards Ed felt full and satisfied and not at all like hitting anyone. He had so often felt like hitting someone. The thought crossed his mind in the dream. He became the aware dreamer. He had so often felt like hitting someone, but after eating the egg, he did not feel like hitting anyone at all.

Hours later, in the breakfast line, he took a plastic tray and put his spoon and fork and napkin on it. Across the stainless steel counter, an Indian-looking guy in a white apron handed over a plate of scrambled eggs with four pieces of white toast laying beside them.
Ed was thinking about the dream. It sat in the back of his mind—a memory he couldn't quite put his hands on. It bothered him. It seemed like it was very nearly within his reach.

He spied Roger sitting alone, hunched over his tray, so he walked over and sat down across from Roger. He took a sip of coffee and watched Roger eat. He watched Roger take a bite of toast and fill his cheek with it. He watched Roger cut the dry scrambled eggs with the side of his fork.

Ed didn't feel like eating. He sat there and shook his head. "I wish I could remember the damned dream I had," he said.
Chad Henderson stood in the cab of the big John Deere, holding a stubby, hand-rolled joint between two fingers. He had the infrared system switched on, and it was guiding him and the eight-row cultivator through the field of foot-high corn. Iron Maiden was playing in the tape deck, loud enough to drown out the grating sound the cultivator made, slicing the Johnsongrass and wild oats out of the sandy loam.

He leaned across the steering wheel and felt the vibrations of the drive train—the motor, transmission, and interlocking joints and rods and bearings that added up to something like 150 horsepower. Not that he cared a bit for drive trains or horsepower. He just couldn't help but think in mechanical terms sometimes. They expected it of him. Everybody did, because he was Larry Henderson's first-born son.

He was watching a cloud that had looked, when he first drove onto the field, like a Canada goose taking wing. "Art Duck-O," he had chuckled to himself. He knew a little something about art. He had knocked down two blue ribbons at the Sac'n'Fox County all-school show, and he always read, or at least skimmed, the art sections in Newsweek and the Mankato Free Press.

He watched the cloud shifting, until it had changed into the upper half of a naked woman with one nosecone-shaped boob aimed at each side of the sky. "Cubist centerfold," he giggled. He sucked his
lungs full of marijuana smoke, and that's when he felt it. His left front tire lifted up fast and slammed back down. He scrambled to get his legs under him so that he could push in the clutch, but before he could do it, he felt the big rear tire lift up and set back down, too. When he finally managed to stop the tractor, he crushed the joint out on the dashboard and climbed down the ladder, muttering, "What the—?

He saw right away what he had run over, behind the rear tire and just ahead of the cultivator's curved teeth: a flattened-out, rolled-up rug with a set of black clay hatch marks—from his tire lugs—across its middle. He put his foot on the roll and jiggled. He didn't like the way it felt: firm yet pliable, like a dead calf. He bent down and looked into the dark center of the rolled-up rug, and when he saw a round swatch of blond hair, the top of a head, he felt the breath rush out of him. "You okay?" he heard himself whispering hopefully, though he had smelled the sweetish scent of old spilled blood.

He was only a few hundred yards from the buildings, so he ran. His seed corn hat flew off, and he felt the long bristles of his Mohawk haircut start to bounce. From the field he had heard steel ringing against steel—hammerblows—from the machine shed. He ran toward them, through the wide open doors, shouting, "Dad! Dad!"

Chad had never felt time collapsing before, never felt it moving in such uneven jerks. He watched Larry's workboots and bluejeans shimmy from under the haybaler—then thick fingers in a loose wrap
around the handle of a ballpeen hammer, forearms and rolled-up sleeves, biceps and shoulders, filling and straining the faded fabric of the work shirt. Finally, he saw Larry sit up and say, "Now what's broke?"

Chad couldn't think of words. He waved his hands at his sides. "You better come," he said.

"Why? What's going on?"

"Can't you just come? I might of found a body!"

For what seemed like a very long time, his father looked puzzled, staring into Chad's eyes as if he thought it were all a joke, and then he dropped the hammer and sprang to his feet, saying, "We'll take the Allis."

The old WD was sitting just inside the door. Larry climbed onto the seat and motioned Chad up, into the space between the seat and the orange wing of the fender. Larry steered carefully, keeping the wheels between the corn rows. When they got close to the place where the old rug lay behind the John Deere, he punched the stick into neutral and leaped from the WD, clearing the front tire. Chad watched him squat over the rug and wrestle it. He watched the rug pop open and saw a face, a white girl's face, he thought, turned swollen and dark. Over the roar of the WD, he heard his father yell, "Know her?"

"I don't think so," he shouted. He stayed on the tractor and tried not to look, but something powerful kept drawing his eyes back.
His father jumped back on the Allis, threw it into fourth, and made a wide turn, knocking down several rows of corn. In the machine shed, he dialed 911. He told what he knew and gave his fire number, and then he said to Chad, "We better talk to your Mom."

The kitchen smelled of something that stung Chad's eyes. His mother was bent into the oven, scraping. She backed out on her knees and turned to them, holding a spatula in her hand. Chad watched her look them up and down, watched her face fall. "What's the matter?" she asked. "What's going on?"

Chad didn't plan to say much. He stood beside the refrigerator, concentrating on the Saturday morning cartoon sounds that came spilling in from the living room. He could picture Matt and Melissa, sprawled on the couch on the other side of the wall. He watched his dad step close to his mother and heard him say, in a soft voice, "We got problems."

"I can see that," his mother said. "What kind?"

"Chad found a dead body in the corn," his father said.

"Chad did?"

"Yeah."

"In our corn?"

"Yeah."

Chad watched his mother drop her arms. The spatula made a dark smear across her pink sweatpants, and then she put her free arm on the range top and pulled herself up. She said, "You've got to take me out there, Larry!"
"Why?" his father said. "You can't do anything."

"Did you forget I'm a nurse?" The pitch of her voice was rising.

"It's too late," his father said. The pitch of his voice was rising, too. "Believe me, Susan, nobody can do anything."

"We've got to call somebody, then," she said.

"I already called the Sheriff's office," Larry said. "Al said he'd come himself."

"Why'd you call the Sheriff, Daddy?" Melissa was standing in the living room doorway in her birthday pajamas, the kind that looked like a baseball uniform.

Matt scuffled into the kitchen, trailing untied shoelaces. He went right up to Chad and asked, "How'd you find it?"

"Ran over it," Chad said, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.

"With the tractor?" Matt said brightly.

"You ran over it?" Susan said.

"Her," Larry said. "It's a her, for Christ's sake. A girl."

"Awesome," Matt said.

"That's it!" Larry said, smacking the palm of his hand against the table. "Everybody's gonna shut up about this right now!"

The noise from the TV kept on. Matt backed away from Chad and leaned against the kitchen wall. Melissa stared at Chad from the doorway. Chad opened the refrigerator and got himself a can of Mountain Dew. He sat down with his elbows on the table. His mother stood against the sink, leaning with her hands on it, staring out the window.
"You can't see it from here," Chad said. "It's behind the machine shed."

He chugged half the pop and waited for the rush he'd get from the sugar and caffeine. He watched his mother slide a chair across the floor, stand on it, and reach into the back of the cupboard. She fished around and pulled out a pack of those menthol cigarettes that women like, the kind she used to smoke. She tore the top open and tapped out one cigarette.

Larry was standing by the screen door, rubbing his temples and staring out toward the place where the driveway met the Ditch Bank Road. When he heard the rustling of the cigarette package, he turned and said, "What are you doing?"

"Getting a smoke," she said.

"Why blow it now," he said, "after all these months?"

"Leave off, Larry," she said.

Chad watched his mother put a match to the cigarette and inhale. That's when he remembered the marijuana. He got up and stepped, as nonchalantly as he could, toward the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Larry said.

"I was just gonna check on something," Chad said.

"What?" Larry said, shifting himself to the side so that he stood full across the door.

Chad had to think fast. "I might've left the tape deck on in the tractor," he said.

"I didn't hear anything out there," Larry said.
"I think I had the headphones plugged in," Chad said. "You don't want me to kill the battery, do you?"

"We can jump it later," Larry said. "You sit right here 'til Al comes."

Susan exhaled a cloud of menthol smoke. She leaned the small of her back against the sink and said, "Start talking, you two, and don't leave anything out."

Chad didn't figure he knew much, and he kept the story as short as he could. He and his dad had both finished talking, and everybody was staring at the walls when they heard the car come up the driveway. Looking out the screen door, Chad recognized Al Matalmaki's Bronco, riding high on heavy-duty springs. Under the cottonwood, Sheriff Matalmaki stopped the Bronco and stepped down, easing a tan cowboy hat over his out-of-date, Elvis-style hair. Larry trotted out to meet him.

Chad watched the old football teammates huddle up in the shade of the cottonwood, climb into the Bronco, and drive out to the field. Then he felt Susan grab his hand. When he turned to face her, he found her staring into his eyes, her eyelids looking puffy and red. "Tell me you had nothing to do with this," she said.

"With what?" he said.

"Tell me you're not like that," she said.

"Like what?" he said, looking down at the table. "A murderer?"

He kept his eyes on the formica, but still he could feel her eyes on him.

It made him mad to hear her ask these things. He could feel the blood pounding in his chest and up the sides of his face. He had to force himself to gentle down before he answered her. He told himself he knew how to do it, because it was not that different from the times he'd gentled down some crazy steer to ease him through the 4-H auction at the Sac'n'Fox County Fair. You couldn't yell at a steer or hit him with the lead rope. That just made him crazier. Chad took a breath and looked straight at his mother. "I'm not like that," he said. "Okay?"

She put her hands on the bare sides of his head, the shaved part of his Mohawk haircut. "Okay," she said, kissing him on the forehead.

"Can I go outside now?" he said.

"No, I don't think you'd better," she said, drawing back at last, to his relief, to her own side of the table. "Stay right here until your father gets in."

Chad watched the clock. In exactly twenty-two minutes, his father came walking briskly up the driveway from the field road. He jumped the porch steps in one bound, looked at Chad through the screen door, and hollered, "Get out here."

He walked ahead of Chad, making a circular motion with his hand, and Chad followed. His father led him into the hay barn. It was almost empty, dusty, and dark as a cave, blinding when you came into it from the mid-day light. Before he could see anything,
Chad felt something hit him, hard, on the side of his face. He fell backwards and landed, splayed-out but half-standing, against the pile of hay bales. "What was that for?" he asked, rubbing his cheek.

His father stood over him in a shallow crouch. He had his big hands clenched into fists. He shouted, "Get up!"

"Why?"

"Get up!" His father cuffed him on the ear.

"Ow! What're you doing?"

His father opened his hand and held out what was left of the joint Chad had left on the dashboard of the John Deere: crumpled yellow paper and a few broken bits of green leaves.

"Okay, I been hand-rolling cigarettes," Chad shrugged. "I know I'm not supposed to, but—. Ow!"

His father had kicked him, hard, on the thigh. He said, "Don't lie to me!"

Chad felt his eyes get watery. He tried to will them to stay dry.

"Sorry," he said in a voice that broke, against his intentions.

"Sorry don't cut it," his father said. "What's the story?"

"What do you mean?" Chad asked. He slid his hand down from his cheek to his thigh. He couldn't believe how much both places stung.

"What's this dope of yours got to do with the dead girl?"

"Nothing," Chad said.

"What's she doing in our field, then?"

"I don't know."
"I hope to Hell I don't find out different." Larry tossed the marijuana into the hay and turned his back on Chad, walking away in the off-balance shuffle of a worn-out lineman. "By the way," he yelled over his shoulder, "the tape deck wasn't on in the tractor."

Chad sat in the hay, rubbing his sore spots and staring at the dust-filled sunbeams that streamed in through the doorway. He couldn't believe his parents were treating him like some kind of criminal. "Hypocrites," he said.

He heard the steel-on-steel banging start again in the machine shed, faster and louder than before. He pushed himself up from the hay and walked over to the cottonwood. He sat down there in its shade, his back against its trunk. The windows of the house were all open, and he could hear his mother talking on the phone.

"That's just it," he heard her say. "Well, I don't know, but Al's out there right now."

"Gossipping hypocrites!" he shouted, loud enough so that she should have heard something without being able make out the meaning.

He pulled out his hunting knife, the five-inch, tempered-steel jackknife they had given him for his sixteenth birthday. He started picking up cottonwood twigs and peeling off their bark, smoothing them down to their creamy white insides.

In a few minutes, Matt came outside, his skinny pencil ankles sticking out below high-water jeans. He took out his own jackknife, a
dollar one from the fleamarket outside Mankato. He fumbled for the
thumbhold and said, "How do you s'pose she got killed?"

"Maybe I did it," Chad said, trying to make his voice sound
deep and sinister. "Maybe I'm the one who cut her."

"Was she cut?" Matt asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't know," Chad said.

"See?" Matt said. "You didn't! Because you didn't even have
the guts to cut that cat in science class."

"That wasn't about guts," Chad said.

"What was it about then?"

"It was about stupid little brothers with big noses," Chad said,
swinging one leg out quickly and catching Matt across the back of the
knees. Matt landed on his tailbone and started to wail. He ran
toward the house. Chad yelled after him, "Baby can't take his
lumps!"

"Chad," his mother called through the window a few minutes
later, "come in here!"

He didn't move, just stayed under the cottonwood, guessing
that she wouldn't call him again, and she didn't. After awhile, a
green sedan pulled into the driveway with two suited-up guys in the
front seat. They honked, and Chad saw Larry run out from the
machine shed and point them toward the field. Awhile later, Chad
heard a droning sound—a helicopter from the direction of the Twin
Cities. He'd figured they'd send one. It made a big, black dustcloud,
landing, and before long, it roiled up another thick cloud of topsoil,
lifted through it, and headed back toward the Cities again. Then the green sedan came back, snaking slowly up the field road, through the yard, and down the Ditch Bank Road. Sheriff Al brought up the rear. He parked his Bronco in front of the house and went to knock on the screen door. Susan let him in, and pretty soon Matt ran out to the machine shed—to fetch their father, Chad imagined.

Chad heard the bull bawling and decided to get up and see what was the matter. The heat of the day had settled in, and the big-bodied horse flies and quick-diving deer flies were thick in the barn, drawn by the smell and the warmth of Su-Lar Bonny Prince Charlie's manure. The bull was rubbing his broad, white forehead back and forth across the two-by-twelve planks of his empty feeder.

Chad felt sorry for Charlie. They'd had to leave him penned up, even thought they'd run the cows out to pasture. Charlie's instincts made him dangerous, so he got no mercy for having done his duty and bred all the cows. If he got any mercy at all, it was because he was a valuable and rare animal, a pure-blooded polled Hereford, probably the last pure-blooded polled Hereford bull in Sac'n'Fox County.

Chad climbed up the wooden ladder to the loft above Charlie's pen. He tossed over a bale of timothy, climbed down, and popped it across his knee. It split open, into square chunks, and he tossed the chunks into Charlie's feeder. The hay dust was thick when he spotted Sheriff Al waltzing through it, the yellow decorations on his
shoulders as bright as the white on Charlie's head. Larry came walking behind Al. His face showed no emotion.

Al said, "I'd like to ask you a few questions, Chad."

Chad thought he should act casual, so he grinned and said, "Sure."

"Down at the office," the Sheriff said.

"You can't just ask me here?" Chad said, looking at his father.

"We'll be more comfortable in the office," the Sheriff said.

"Can Dad come?" Chad asked. His father's face still gave nothing away.

"It's you I want to talk to," Sheriff Matalmaki said, cupping his big hand completely around Chad's shoulder.

Chad didn't think it made sense to treat a witness this way. He said, "Do I need a lawyer, Dad?"

"Let's hope not," his father said in a flat, serious voice.

The Sheriff led Chad by the arm and steered him across the farmyard, into the back seat of the Bronco, behind the wire-and-plexiglass shield. Chad felt his stomach drop when the door locks clicked shut. "Gentle down," he told himself. Hadn't he taken this trip before? He pictured the Sheriff's Office: the brand new brick building, still smelling of paint and glue, the teal-colored carpet, the oak-veneer tables. "Art Buck-O," he said to himself.

Al Matalmaki didn't say anything until they had parked in the basement garage and got into the elevator. Then he said, "You're getting to be kind of a regular around here, aren't you?"
"Not really," Chad said, reminding himself to keep his voice calm.

"Seems I've had you in here quite a bit."

"A couple times," Chad shrugged. He knew the Sheriff had the records.

"Not for murder, though?" the Sheriff asked with raised eyebrows.

"No," Chad said, feeling a little twist in his stomach.

"Refresh my memory," the Sheriff said.

"Malicious mischief the first time," Chad said.

"And then breaking and entering at the school, wasn't it?" the Sheriff asked, steering him down a teal-carpeted hallway into a room with an oak veneer table and four wooden chairs. "Didn't you decorate the principal's office with frozen cats or something?"

"Yeah, from the biology room freezer," Chad said. "They call that performance art."

Sheriff Matalmaki pushed Chad against a chair, and Chad sat down. The Sheriff reached under the table. The waves of his pompadour hairdo stayed in perfect order, even though he bent completely over. He pulled up a tape recorder, popped in one of those miniature tapes, and said in a flowery voice, "Testing, One, Two, Three." He turned to Chad. "Now you know what a deposition is, right? You know that you've got certain rights—."

Chad listened half-heartedly, fingering first his sore cheek and then his rhinestone earring. It occurred to him that he ought to slip
the earring out and put it in his pocket, if he got a chance to do that without Al Matalmaki noticing.

"Name?" said the Sheriff. "Address?" He was making notes on a yellow pad. He asked, "Where'd you get that bruise on your cheek?"

"In the barn."

"Who hit you?"

"I got butted by the bull."

The Sheriff made another note. "How long you been using marijuana?"

"I don't."

The Sheriff reached for something in his pocket. He pulled out the baggie that Chad had left under the tractor seat. He held it in front of Chad and bounced it up and down so that the green-brown leaves made a rustling noise. He said, "So this must be your Dad's, then."

Chad kept telling himself, "Take it easy." Hadn't he figured Al would find the dope? He said, "That's not mine. I've never seen it before."

"And nobody hit you, either, right? Or did the girl hit you?"

Chad felt his blood pounding. It made a big noise inside his skull, like some kind of storm, circling. "Gentle down, gentle down," he told himself, but he also told himself to think fast, think of something smart to say and think of it quick. He said, "Maybe you hit me."
Al picked up the phone and punched two buttons. He said, "George, would you come in here and witness for me?"

Chad knew George Thompson, the fidgety deputy who liked to sniff out booze at the high school football games. The kids called him Barney Fife. When he came in, with his chest puffed out, Sheriff Matalmaki said, "Refresh my memory, George. What's standard procedure on drug busts?"

"Strip search," George said with a grin.

"That's right," Al Matalmaki said, snapping his fingers. "I guess you're going to have to stand up and take your clothes off, kid."

"You're kidding," Chad said.

"Am I kidding, George?"

"We never kid," the Deputy said, tapping his thin fingers on the butt of his holstered pistol.

Chad told himself he could get through it. He felt okay taking off his T-shirt and socks and even his blue jeans, but when it came time to pull down his jockey shorts, somehow he managed to roll his waistband into a wad. He stumbled, stepping out of his shorts, and he felt his skin turn hot, all the way up his scalp, which he wished he hadn't shaved.

"Nice earring," George said. "Doesn't it look divine on him, Sheriff?"

"Lovely," Sheriff Matalmaki said, pulling on a rubber glove. "Let's have a feel."

Chad felt a thick, smooth finger slip into each of his ears.
"Open your mouth."
He opened.
"Lift your scrotum," the Sheriff said.
"What?"
"Your whole damn toolbox," George said. "Take ahold and hoist it."

They both watched Chad carefully lift his scrotum. Then Sheriff Matalmaki said, "Bend over and spread your buttocks." Chad found himself staring at his long white toes on the teal carpet. He tried to make a joke of it, tried to think of his toes as art objects, to imagine the performance art piece he'd make out of this experience some day, but he couldn't. He found that his awareness had a will of its own, and it focused on the smooth, thick thing, the plastic-covered finger, that moved inside him and then slid back out. The Sheriff said, "Get dressed. You'll hear from us."

"I'll hear from you?" Chad said.

"You can hear, can't you?" Al Matalmaki said, pulling off the glove.

"You're not arresting me?"

"Not for murder, anyhow," the Sheriff said. "The boyfriend confessed last night, only he couldn't remember where he dumped the body. I guess to them Cities boys every cornfield out here looks the same."

When Chad walked past the oak-veneer reception desk, George gave a little wave, and Chad knew how it would be from then on,
whenever their paths crossed. George would wave that little wave, and they would both know.

Outside the Sheriff's Office, the sun was going down. Chad stood on the sidewalk, waiting for his parents. His face and thigh ached, and every time he thought about what happened in the Sheriff's Office, he felt a tingling sensation between his legs. It was strange, because he felt the same tingling sensation when he thought about the things that must have happened between the dead girl and her boyfriend.

The country was flat enough that he saw the pickup coming for more than a mile. He crossed the street to be on the passenger's side when they pulled up beside him. When they did, Susan jumped right out, and he had no choice but to climb up and sit between them, wedged there, breathing human sweat mixed with Hereford manure and stale menthol cigarette smoke.

His father said, "I hope you learned something."

"They're not charging me with murder, you know," Chad said.

His father laughed. "Of course not, Chadwick."

Chad felt tears welling up. He didn't try to stop them.

"Mr. Tough Guy," Larry said.

Susan ran her fingers through the hair on the top of Chad's head. She said, "Leave him alone, Larry. He's been through enough. We all have."

His father turned the pickup onto the Ditch Bank Road and stepped on the gas. Chad saw that a storm was building in the west.
Thunderheads had piled like a mountain range across the blue horizon. As far as he could see, everybody's corn was a foot high.
Jeanie and Roxy sit cross-legged on the grass between Bowen and Bigelow Halls, giggling at the newly-arrived freshmen and their parents. Jeanie has her legs in a yoga position, her feet on her thighs, tucked tight against her stomach. Roxy admires Jeanie's posture so much that she tries to match it, until she feels something pull in her knee, and then she decides to let her leg settle where it wants to, down against her calf. She sighs and blames her muscular thighs, which got that way from chores she has come to think of as peasant work, squatting to lift the stainless steel Surge buckets on and off the surcingles which hang, during chore time, over the backs of the registered purebred milk cows at Swanson's Holstein Heaven, her parents' dairy farm.

A girl with a flip hairdo walks by, carrying a portable hi-fi.

"The Class of '74 looks incredibly square," Jeanie whispers to Roxy, "Look! Gidget goes Minnesotan."

"Did we look like such babies?" Roxy asks.

She reaches up and strokes her own blond hair, finds it comfortably long, almost to her breasts, but still, with its loose waves, such an inadequate expression, even though she leaves it unkempt enough now that no one could mistake her for the old Roxy, that bland and compliant farmer's daughter, the 4-H show-woman extraordinaire, the number one student in a graduating class of twenty-five.
"Over there," Jeanie giggles, elbowing Roxy and nodding for her to look at a boy in a heavily-greased pompadour. "It's Ricky," she says, "I wonder where he left Wally."

"You're mixing up your TV shows," Roxy says.

"What's the diff?" Jeanie laughs. "The whole world's a stage, and it looks to me like the casting director must be on acid."

They both crack up and flop onto their backs, slapping the ground. Jeanie has her legs stretched straight out, with her toes pointed. She has sewn patches of bright, flowered upholstery fabric on the knees of her jeans, and on her feet she's wearing a pair of beaded high-top mocassins. For a few seconds, Roxy allows her eyes to follow a line that she suddenly clearly imagines. It flows from the toe of Jeanie's mocassin, across the arch of Jeanie's foot, along the echoing arches of her leg, to the place where the line of Jeanie's thigh plunges against the line of her other thigh and her pelvis. That Y-shaped intersection fascinates Roxy, and then she catches herself and she's shocked. She looks up at the third floor windows of the dormitory, hoping that she's managed to get away with her little peek, hoping that Jeanie hasn't noticed.

But Jeanie has noticed. She's ready to start her last semester in Haversmith's psychology honors program, and just yesterday she got back from a summer internship at the Hastings State Hospital, where one of her privileges was sitting in on the psychiatric social workers' interviews. Now she's looking off into the sketchy clouds, trying to
keep her face fixed in an objective kind of clinical smile while she reviews the categories she learned in Abnormal Psych.

Invert behavior. Unresolved complexes. None of it seems to explain the rising exhilaration she felt while Roxy's eyes were traveling up her leg, and now that feeling has changed into a heaviness in her stomach. She doesn't know how much of this she will try to explain to her boyfriend, Randy, and she's pained to see that Roxy has still got her eyes fixed on something up around the third floor of Bowen Hall.

"What's there?" Jeanie asks.

"The windowsills are painted white, but the undersides are peeling," Roxy says.

"Must be a metaphor for something," Jeanie says, reaching into her pocket. She pulls out a joint, twisted in yellow paper, sticks it in the corner of her mouth, and puts a match to it. As the paper flares into flame, she has a serious, almost religious, look on her face. She says, "Time to administer the antidote."

Later that day, half an hour late, Randy and Jeanie pick Roxy up for dinner. All summer, the three of them have been a social item: dinner together almost every night, movies, concerts, you name it. As far as dinner goes, Roxy and Jeanie always cook, though Roxy's the only one who can claim any sort of expertise, because of the lessons she got from her mother, the old-school, dairy-farm cook. Tonight they've decided to try a recipe for quiche lorraine.
"Now listen, you guys, this really is a crapshoot," Roxy says, slamming the door of Randy's VW beetle in the parking lot at Applebaum's. "For sure, my mother has never made a *quiche lorraine*. In fact, I doubt whether she and my Dad have ever heard of it."

"At least she taught you how to make pastry," Jeanie says. "We never had a pie unless it came from the Lincoln Deli."

"Like mother, like daughter," Randy says, holding the big glass supermarket door for them.

He's slight and puckish, cute in his blue jeans and black T-shirt, and yet Roxy feels a surprising flash of anger toward him. She feels almost like slapping him, until Jeanie beats her to the punch by poking him, playfully, in the stomach. "Any time you want to take over in the kitchen—," she says to him, letting the sentence fade into a throaty chuckle.

"Talk about your fates worse than death," he says, "for everyone—believe me!"

They need all of the ingredients for the quiche, even flour, which—to Roxy's surprise—Jeanie does not keep on hand. Randy pushes the grocery cart along, while Jeanie and Roxy roam the aisles, snatching up lard, eggs, milk, swiss cheese, and Gold Medal pastry flour, the only brand that Roxy's mother buys. Afterwards, they drive into Selby-Dale, the turn-of-the-century neighborhood where most of St. Paul's black people live, along with this new influx of hippie types, into which Randy and Jeanie figure.
Randy pulls the VW over to the curb in front of a white duplex. He honks, and in a minute, Clyde Schmidt comes out, swinging his guitar case. "Hey, man," he says, pulling his hair away from his heavy-lidded eyes, "Hey, ladies!"

He eases his guitar case into the back seat, the neck of it across Roxy's lap, because there's no place else to put it in the VW. He doesn't ask, just looks at her to make sure she sees the guitar case coming. They've ridden like this many times before. The crowding is mostly okay with her, part of their thing—the communal experiment, the adventure of meeting each moment creatively and getting by cheap. Still, she's glad for her rolling pin in the brown bag beside her, a small psychological buffer.

When they get inside the apartment, Roxy notices that the sun has dropped low enough to shine through the prisms in the beveled-glass windows. Little rectangular rainbows speckle the hardwood floor and the India-print bedspead that covers the couch. She watches Clyde walk into the rainbows and notice them, a few seconds later, on his arms. "Far out," he says, spreading his hands and twirling until he bumps against the couch and half falls down on it. "It's a sign, Man," he says, looking at Randy, "—colorful licks tonight."

Roxy has moved to the window. Across the street, a dark-skinned woman is walking with two little girls. All summer, Roxy has been fascinated with the view from this window, the comings and goings of the variously-shaded, colorfully-dressed people who seem such a far cry from the denim and drab students at Haversmith
and the tow-headed Swedes and Finns around Haywood. This apartment feels substantial to her, an exotic land but a land just the same, the only real-feeling place she's known since she left the farm.

After awhile, Roxy goes into the kitchen, where Jeanie has started unpacking the groceries. Roxy opens the cupboard and reaches for a plastic mixing bowl. She asks, "Do you have a pastry cutter?"

"A what?" Jeanie says, looking perplexed and a bit vulnerable, Roxy thinks, with one of her fine-fingered hands spread to grip a carton of eggs and the other still fishing around in the grocery bag.

"Never mind," Roxy says. "We can use two butter knives."

Jeanie stands beside Roxy, and Roxy shows her how to measure the flour and lard into the mixing bowl, how to cut criss-crosses through them until you've made hunks the size of large peas, and how to sprinkle in very cold water, a tablespoon at a time, keeping a close eye on the consistency of the pastry.

"It's got to be just sticky enough, but not too sticky," Roxy says, handing the measuring spoon to Jeanie.

Jeanie is sprinkling in the second tablespoon of water, working the pastry with a fork, when she hears the feedback start in the living room, and then the long, dull tuning notes. She gets a cross look on her face. "We cook," she says "while they make art."

Clyde's strumming starts, and then Randy's melody, a slightly off-tempo cover of Jimi Hendrix's lead part in All Along the Watchtower. Roxy reaches across Jeanie's arm to check the
consistency of the dough. "A woman's place—," she says, scrunching her cheeks so that Jeanie will know for sure she's kidding.

Jeanie snorts and puts down the fork. "Well, I do like to eat," she says, watching the sure way that Roxy pinches the pliable dough between her fingers, fingers which Jeanie notices are shorter and thicker than her own, but not at all awkward. They move in a quick and efficient way, something learned, Jeanie imagines, in those earthy and mysterious rituals of the dairy farm, chores that Jeanie used to think were strictly men's work, outside the strength and ken of women.

"By the way," she says, "I'm almost done with that Shulamith Firestone book."

"Oh, good," Roxy says, throwing a handful of flour across the tabletop. "I'd still like to borrow it."

"I especially love how she takes on Freud," Jeanie says, watching Roxy dump the pastry dough onto the floured tabletop. "Have you heard what the old voodoo doctor says about men's work?"

Roxy shrugs. She has flour up to her elbows, and she's unsheathing the rolling pin from the paper bag.

"He says it's all about libido," Jeanie says, leaning slightly against Roxy. "He says work is where a man puts his sexual energy after he finds out his mother's love has conditions attached."

"And a woman's work?" Roxy says, flattening the ball of pastry with the round, muscular heels of her hands.
"Never understood," Jeanie says, "or really, truly loved."

Roxy begins to stroke the pastry with the rolling pin, pushing first in one direction and then in another and another and another. For a long time, neither one of them speaks.

Later that night, after riding with Randy to drive Clyde and Roxy home, Jeanie stands near the living room door and watches Randy lower himself gracefully onto the couch. When he sees her looking at him, he pats his hands against his thighs. She walks over and sits down there, on his lap, and leans her head against his shoulder. His long hair rubs against her cheek. In the past, she has loved the way it felt, but this evening she's feeling disengaged. She sees herself examining every feeling, checking them off like items on a to-do list. His breath in her hair. Her back against his chest. The difference between them, too—that fleshy mound against her hip.

And his fingers, those calloused guitarist's fingers. She imagines them traveling the same territory that Roxy's eyes traveled earlier that morning, only his fingertips scratch, send off tiny, sharp alarms. In this, her imagination is beyond-the-bounds, operating unfairly, and she knows it. Randy's body still has its admirable qualities. His fingers are still agile and strong, still possessed of great endurance. He still has that almost-feminine, bantam quality that wowed her last Halloween, convinced her to allow him to be her first lover. He's not the one who's changed.
He has put his hands on her thighs. He's sliding them back and forth along the seams of her jeans, touching her with his palms and the front sides of his fingers—no callouses, no scratching. "How tired are you?" he asks.

"Very," she says, glad that he's put it to her that way. "It must be the quiche," she says, pushing herself to her feet. She doesn't want to tell him what she's realized, that something about him remains alien to her after all these months, untranslatable and increasingly hard to endure. She hopes to wake up changed, back to feeling the way she did all winter—wise and ripened, validated by the remembered feeling of Randy inside her. Such changes, she believes, can happen. About love, there seems to be no predicting.

One evening in October, while the last falling leaves and the first flakes of snow churn together in the air, Jeanie picks up Roxy in Randy's VW. While they sit at a stoplight, waiting to cross the narrow old Lake Street Bridge into Minneapolis, Roxy whistles a few bars of some unrecognizable melody, and then she says, "I wonder if that woman with the glasses is going to wait on us again."

"Why? Does she make you nervous?" Jeanie asks. She has noticed that Roxy gets odd, shier and more withdrawn than usual, when they leave their predictable Haversmith orbit and enter the gravitational pull of the University of Minnesota.
"She doesn't make me nervous," Roxy says, looking out the window. "I think this women's bookstore collective thing is totally righteous. That's all."

Jeanie parks the VW in front of a two-story house on a busy street. When she pushes the door of the house open, she sets half a dozen brass bells jingling on a leather thong. Before long, a woman in wire-rimmed glasses appears at the top of the stairs. She has a spiral notebook in her hand, and she uses it to take notes while Jeanie picks out books and Roxy packs them into a cardboard box.

Jeanie notices that the tabloid newspapers have been getting bolder and bolder. On one called *Off Our Backs*, there's a gauzy silkscreen print of one woman kissing another. Jeanie can't take her eyes off it. The one woman has her head tipped back, with a look on her face that's so ecstatic it's almost a grimace.

Jeanie hands two copies of the newspaper to Roxy. The look on Roxy's face changes, grows cloudy, unreadable. There's a chance it's because of the extravagence, Jeanie tells herself, the unlikelihood of selling both copies at the table they'll set up in the Student Union. "I'll buy one," Jeanie tells her. "I definitely will."

The next day, Roxy takes the cardboard box to the Student Union. The custodian helps her set up a folding table, and she lays the feminist tabloids, with their screaming banners, along the front edge. She puts the women lovers right in the middle, where anyone who walks by can't help but see them. A few people slow down for a
better look, she notices, and afterwards some of the longhairs smile and flash the peace sign or the raised fist salute, but most people just turn and walk away.

Around noon, Jeanie comes from class to watch the table while Roxy gets lunch. When Jeanie's alone, Geoffrey Kurgan, the ruddy-cheeked chairman of the English Department, comes along and reads the titles of every one of the books. He taps his finger on *To the Lighthouse* and says, "I'm afraid you'll find that she doesn't support your cause."

"Oh, really?" Jeanie says, angry at herself because she hasn't read *To the Lighthouse* and doesn't know enough to refute what he's said, though she's pretty sure she's heard Roxy say that at least some of Woolf's work is feminist. She feels the blood rushing to her face.

"Wait a minute, Professor Kurgan," she hears Roxy saying from over by the door of the grill, "Well, I guess you've never read *A Room of One's Own*, then."

Roxy is flying low, the belled bottoms of her jeans pumping the air like wings. She has a sandwich in her hand. "It doesn't seem like you've really understood *To the Lighthouse*," she says, and while Professor Kurgan stares, she bites off a big piece and chews it with an open mouth.

"It's hardly worth arguing," Professor Kurgan says before he walks away, moving with what Jeanie takes to be an exaggerated dignity. She leans her head against Roxy, and when he's out of sight, they both burst out laughing.
After Jeanie has left for her senior seminar, Roxy is thumbing through *To the Lighthouse*. She hears a familiar-sounding voice and looks up to see a dark-haired woman from her Indian Philosopies class, a woman whose name Roxy can't quite remember.

"Catha Goldberg," the woman says, sticking out a hand that's squared-off at the heel and fingertips. This woman's handshake is solid and vigorous, the kind of handshake that Roxy's father would judge reliable enough to seal an agreement. Catha turns a book over and reads the blurb on the back. "So what do you recommend?" she asks.

"I don't know," Roxy says, feeling intimidated by Catha's hair, which tumbles across her shoulders in waves even more unruly than Janis Joplin's. "What have you read already?"

"Oh, you know, Friedan, Millett—that's about it," Catha says:

"That's a lot more than most people," Roxy says, tucking her own limp hair behind her ears.

"Well," Catha shrugs. "I find it fascinating." She's wearing a fatigue jacket that says BRIDGEMAN in black letters across the breast pocket. Roxy lets her eyes rest on those letters, wondering whether they spell the name of an anonymous donor to the Goodwill or someone Catha knows. "My lover's brother," Catha says.

"Oh," Roxy says, reaching for a book, "Well, DeBeauvoir's the best, but very heavy. Woman as Other and all that. Maybe you'd like this one, *The Dialectic of Sex*"
"I'll take them both," Catha says, sliding a checkbook out of her pants pocket. Roxy has never before seen a woman keep anything but kleenex in her pocket. When Catha gives her the check, their fingers touch, and Roxy can't think of anything to say. Catha pushes the books into the side pocket of her jacket and says, "Maybe we could get together sometime and talk about these."

"Yeah," Roxy says, feeling her throat go dry. "I'd like that a lot."

Jeanie comes back after her seminar, and she and Roxy spend the rest of the afternoon in the Student Union grill, drinking coffee with sugar and cream and reading to each other from the feminist newspapers.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Jeanie and Roxy are sitting in the grill. Jeanie is wearing a bulky turtleneck sweater. She has the sleeves pushed up above her elbows, which look pale and sharp against the dark wood tabletop. She alternates drags from a Camel with sips of coffee from a paper cup. "Did you finish _The Dialectic of Sex_ yet?" she asks.

"Almost," Roxy says, watching Jeanie launch two thin jets of smoke from her nostrils.

"Don't you think it's powerful what she says about romantic love?" Jeanie says. "How it's made women into economic parasites?"

"One of the ugly little deceptions of this culture," Roxy says.

"Not to mention Freud and the vaginal orgasm," Jeanie says.
"Sure," Roxy nods. She doesn't like the direction the conversation seems to be headed.

"And so now the clitoral orgasm is the thing we're really supposed to be after, right?"

"Right," Roxy says, hoping that a telegraphic style may be the key to preserving her dignity. She shifts in her chair when she sees Jeanie's eyes on her, waiting for her to say more. She's not anxious to confess that she knows infinitely more about theories of orgasm than she knows about the real thing.

"So do you find a built-in disappointment making love with guys?" Jeanie asks. "With balling, as they like to call it?"

"I guess so," Roxy says.

"You guess so?" Jeanie says, grinding her cigarette against the tin ashtray. "What's the story, Rox? Has sex been totally satisfying for you?"

Roxy sits back in her chair, takes a breath, and lets it out slowly. "I've never exactly gone all the way," she says.

Jeanie lights another cigarette. She stares at Roxy. She asks, "What about that lover back in Haywood?"

Roxy looks around the room. The coffee machine is humming. The high old ceiling is yellowed with smoke. The cafeteria counter is empty, closed for the holiday. There are only two other people in the room, strangers, not apt to interrupt. She sighs, "I sort of misled you by using that word 'lover.' We didn't exactly do the deed."
Jeanie takes a deep drag from the cigarette. She exhales a long stream of smoke. She lays her hand across Roxy's. She says, "Have you ever considered that you might be a lesbian?"

Roxy has not come to grips with that word, the hissing of it, the way its sibilance enthralls her while Jeanie pushes closer and whispers, "Be honest, Rox. Haven't you ever thought about sleeping with a woman?"

Roxy feels the pulse pounding in her temples, wrists and stomach. She's not been totally honest, maybe even lied in a way, by never using her high school lover's name and by never using a pronoun to refer to that lover. Marie Martinski. The two of them did some things in the cab of the Swanson family pickup, but Roxy has never quite counted those things as sex. It wasn't the old in-and-out, anyhow. They never even had their clothes off. Not completely. Still—

"I think about it all the time," Jeanie says. Her eyes are jade green, implacable as stone.

On Thursday, Randy, Jeanie, Roxy, and Clyde are in the VW, on their way to a Thanksgiving potluck at a farmhouse in the hilly country near Hastings. Somewhere in suburbia, Randy pulls into a SuperAmerica, and he and Jeanie go inside to buy something for the dinner. Roxy has baked a pumpkin pie, and she's holding it on her lap, wrapped in a kitchen towel. Above it, she's balancing the neck of Clyde's guitar case. Randy comes out of the store ahead of Jeanie.
When he gets into the car, he shakes the snow from his hair and reaches up to adjust the mirror. In it, Roxy sees that his eyes look red.

Clyde says, "I can't wait for you chicks to hear Randy's new song. It's kind of a cross between Kantner and Hendrix, like the airplanes from the Star Spangled Banner cut are chasing down the rabbit hole after Alice."

"To do what?" Roxy says.

"I don't know," Clyde says. "Ball her, I suppose."

"Oh, Clyde," Jeanie says. "That is so sexist!"

"Why?" Randy says, throwing one hand up in the air. It's a fluttery, penitent gesture. "That's the whole point of rock'n'roll isn't it?" he asks. "Isn't that the whole point of life? I mean, isn't everybody supposed to like to ball?"

"Not with warplanes that have chased them down," Jeanie says.

"Look," Randy says, combing his hair with his fingers. "I guess it's not so easy to describe a song. I guess I'd just like to think you cared enough to listen."

Clyde looks puzzled. "It's a good song," he says in an earnest voice, "a fanfuckingtastic song."

Outside the farmhouse, the first thing they hear is the TV—an announcer's voice and then bursts of cheering. From the entryway, where they hang their coats on painted iron hooks, they hear women talking. The kitchen smells like marijuana smoke and turkey. The table is spread with burned chocolate chip cookies, a macaroni
casserole, several boxes of various kinds of chips, full and empty beer bottles, and an open baggie of dope.

Three women in floor-length skirts are standing in front of the stove, passing around a joint. They smile when they see the travelers, and Rachel, the hostess, stretches out a fringed shawl and swoops toward them. She clucks a welcome and throws her arms around Randy and Clyde. "The guys are in there," she says, pushing them toward an arched doorway, through which they dutifully disappear.

One of the women passes the joint to Rachel. She inhales and passes it to Jeanie. Jeanie says, "You haven't seen Al and Rachel's place yet, have you Rox?"

"By all means, show her around," Rachel says, flipping her shawl toward the stairs which go up from the corner of the kitchen.

The wooden stair treads are worn hollow. Jeanie steps carefully, lifting her skirt so that her beaded mocassins appear and disappear under the hem, as she leads Roxy up the stairs. She shows Roxy what there is to see on the second floor: a bathroom and three bedrooms. The last bedroom, the biggest one, has been converted into a music room. It's furnished with a mixing board, microphones, and amplifiers. "Al's a bass player," Jeanie says. "He'll bring the guys up here after the game. This is where they'll spend the whole afternoon."

"And not eat dinner?" Roxy says.

"Oh, I forgot," Jeanie says. "Football, rock-n-roll, and DINNER."
"You forgot balling, too," Roxy says.

Jeanie doesn't laugh. She says, "You've got to see the view from the attic."

The attic stairs are narrow and steep.

"I'm going to trip on this damn skirt," Jeanie says. She undoes the button at her waist, pulls the skirt off, and leads Roxy up the stairs in her underpants. The attic, Roxy sees right away, is meant to resemble an opium den—or rather, it's meant to be an opium den. There's a worn oriental rug on the floor, pillows, a mattress, and a tall glass waterpipe. Jeanie sits down on the mattress and says, "Let's smoke the hookah together."

Roxy sits beside Jeanie and watches her tamp marijuana into the bowl of the pipe. Looking down at Jeanie's bare thighs, Roxy knows for sure she's being seduced, and she is amazed at Jeanie's courage. It's rare, she tells herself. It's once-in-a-lifetime.

Jeanie holds a match to the pipe and draws smoke from the red-hot coals through the water and up the glass stem to the mouthpiece. "Sit closer," Jeanie whispers, through barely parted lips.

Roxy slides closer.

"Open your lips," Jeanie says, and then she breathes into Roxy's mouth.

Roxy feels her mouth filling with warm smoke. It's good-tasting, earthy, almost like hay. She feels Jeanie's tongue touch softly, tentatively, against her lips, and then she feels Jeanie's hands slide around her back, and then there's no turning back. Roxy
reaches out and pulls Jeanie closer. For awhile, they kiss and roll around on the mattress, slipping their thighs in and out from between one another's legs, and then Jeanie says, "Let's take our clothes off. I want to feel you next to me."

Roxy has a passing worry that someone might walk in on them, but she unsnaps her blue jeans and peels them off. She lets Jeanie help with her blouse, feels separation and safety giving way, button by button. And when Roxy sees Jeanie naked, lays eyes on her freckled breasts and pale, vulnerable belly, Roxy thinks she knows the meaning of true and honest desire, something that has always been worth claiming, if she'd only known it. And then she lets go of thinking.

When Roxy hears the tuning notes start up from the second floor, Jeanie is lying on top of her, cheeks all flushed, a look on her face that someone who didn't know any better might interpret as intense concentration.

Down in the kitchen, the women are hovering around Rachel, who has draped her shawl over a chair and is basting the turkey. The bird looks browned enough to Roxy. She'd recommend putting on the cover and turning down the heat, but nobody asks her. She stands there gawking at the huddling women and the heat waves snaking through the air above them. She thinks to take Jeanie's hand, and Jeanie lets her. Rachel looks at them and says, "You know my sister, don't you, Roxy?"
Roxy says she doesn't think so.

Rachel insists, "Why don't you go see? She says she knows you."

In the living room, Roxy sees the woman from the book table. She's sitting on the arm of the easy chair with her leg draped over the leg of someone who's sitting in the chair. "Catha?" Roxy says.

"Hi, Roxy," the woman says, holding out that squared-off hand. "Actually, my name's not Catha anymore. I've changed it to Cayenne. This is my lover, Silver Bridgewoman."

Roxy hadn't looked closely before, but now she sees that the person in the chair is a woman with shockingly little hair—a crewcut, in fact. "That's quite a name," Roxy says.

"It used to be BridgeMAN," the woman says. "BridgeMAN, BridgeMAN, BridgeMAN, for who knows how many generations, everyone a BridgeMAN, until me."

"That's very revolutionary," Roxy says.

"Not really," Silver says. "Out East everybody's changing their names now."

"Silver goes to Sarah Lawrence," Cayenne says.

Roxy looks around. The four of them are the only ones left in the living room. Jeanie reaches out and touches her on the cheek. Such a small gesture, Roxy's surprised to see how it makes Cayenne and Silver smile.

The guitar music from upstairs is loud. "It's taking over the room," Jeanie says. "How about a walk?"
Outside, an inch of snow has fallen, a wet snow that sticks to the barbed wire fences and the bone-yellow ditch grasses. For once, Roxy thinks, the hard-worked old earth looks new. "Do you suppose," she says, "that there are other women like us right now, finding each other and trying to figure things out?"

"I imagine there are thousands," Silver says.

"Thousands!" Cayenne says. "That's an optimistic thought."

"It's no exaggeration," Silver says. "Out East there's hardly a woman left who'd even consider a heterosexual relationship. In a few years, we'll all be lesbians."

"Hmm—" Roxy says. The other three fall quiet, waiting, and she feels pressured by their patience. It's hard to think how to explain what she's thinking to city girls, that there's something about this day that makes her think about the best cow syndrome, the strange but true fact that the rarest diseases and the strangest accidents always befall the very best cow in the herd. She wants to warn them, tell them she's got a feeling that this evening might be too good-looking. This awakened passion and this brisk talk might be too delicious.

"Don't you ever wonder," she begins, "whether someday we'll look back and see that we've made some of the same mistakes that men and women have been making for all these centuries before us?"

"No way," Silver says.
And then Roxy feels something smash against her back. She turns, just in time to see Jeanie chucking a softball-sized snowball down Silver's collar.

"Enough talk," Jeanie's squealing. "Time to administer the antidote."

A few seconds later, snowballs are flying everywhere.