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Snowplow and other stories

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Snowplow and other stories

by

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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I. SNOWPLOW

**snowpuow** (sno' plou'), **n.** a machine for clearing away snow from highways, etc.—*the Random House Dictionary*

Galen agreed with the other drivers: it was loneliest in the early morning. Plowing the red routes at 4 a.m.—half-hypnotized by the switch of the wipers, the grate of the plow blade on asphalt, the yellow strobe reflecting off the snow—a person's mind could do funny things, convince you you were the only person in the world. Drive for twelve hours and meeting another plow became a surreal experience, like driving into a mirror. One morning last week he had stopped at a downtown intersection and looked left, expecting to see the yellow plow, himself reflected in the huge mirrored windows of the First Savings and Loan. Instead he had seen himself reflected too closely and at the wrong angle—a shadowy, hunched figure behind the wheel. His features, too severe,
gleamed white in the dashboard lights. A lit cigarette clung to the bottom lip of what he thought was his reflection. Then the light had changed and the other truck had pulled ahead of him into the intersection, and Galen was left staring at the orange, reflective sign fixed to the back of the other truck above the spreader: KEEP BACK 50 FEET.

Galen, now, plowing Springfield Street past the old business district, thought how strange it was that morning, that ghostly countenance behind the wheel of the other truck. How, though he had stared at the other driver for what had seemed close to half a minute, he hadn't been able to tell who it was.

Galen stared at the passing storefronts, these ancient, red-brick buildings crowding the street: Davolt's Westlake, the license bureau, the Paradise Taco Parlor, Nellie's Sidewalk Grits Cafe. He made a right on Ash, rolled the plow past the remaining businesses, the volunteer fire department, the post office. He held the wheel steady with his knee, reached down with both hands and undid the top button of his jeans, letting his stomach breathe. That done, he lifted one hand back to the wheel but left the other on his lap, worked his fingers into the crevice where his stomach pressed against his thigh. Going to have to do something about this.

He had heard it was harder to lose weight the older you became, and he was old, would be twenty-nine in two weeks. He had never exercised much, and what he lacked in physique he made up for by dressing neatly. Thick shirts of chamois or flannel. Jeans that fit him loosely, disguised his broad, flat butt. Cotton sweaters that fanned out stylishly around his waistline. He hated to shop, but he had a tidy array of mail-order catalogues in a wicker basket beside his toilet—Eddie Bauer, Land's End, L.L. Bean. Lately he had
been worried about his ass crack showing, his jeans easing down over his hips as he bent to tie his shoe, to pick up a tool or a water jug. He had thought about ordering a pair of suspenders, but was worried they might make him look like a fairy—one more thing for the guys at work to tease him about.

Galen squinted, rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. The snow was falling harder now, a thick, gray matter like wet ash. It fell soundlessly against the windshield, or maybe it made a sound—it was hard to tell—something like thuff. Outside the grate of the blade on concrete, muffled by the closed windows, made a sound like someone scraping a plate with a fork.

"219, pick up, please," a voice rasped from the radio overhead. It was Craig, the Streets Supervisor.

Galen reached up and turned down the radio—he didn't feel like talking this morning. For four years he had been a Responsible Driver. He felt he had earned the right not to respond.

Galen looked to the stereo console, expecting to see the time reflected there, and was surprised to discover that he had been listening to Elvis—the word TAPE showed dark against the orange liquidescent display. Funny how you could have a tape playing and not even hear it.

The King was on the second stanza of "Can't Help Falling in Love," a song that always made him think of his wife, the wife he didn't have yet. Some mornings before dawn he would play the song and think about their life together: driving somewhere on a rainy spring afternoon, his wife drowsy in the seat beside him, and then "Can't Help
Falling In Love" would come on the radio and he would look over and say “You know, back when I was driving the plow I would listen to this song and think about you.” And his wife would say “I know, Sweety” because by then he would have told her before, but she would put her hand on his leg and for the next several miles it would be good just to ride like that, with a woman’s warm hand on his thigh.

Galen pressed the display button on the stereo and the word TAPE was replaced by the time—5:15. About time for his break. Like clockwork he could feel the dull ache in his lower abdomen, the head of his penis beginning to sting. Despite his gut, his bladder was roughly the size of a small peach. He had never liked the idea that a bladder—an actual sack filled with urine—was nestled in among his organs somewhere, and he did his best to keep it empty.

Galen passed the Fast & Friendly, craned his neck to the right to see in the store window, but of course she wasn’t there. "She" was Patty, the night clerk: flat, brown hair that hung in her eyes and that she was always pushing out her lower lip and blowing, lifting the limp strands like curtains over a heating vent. A broad, flat face like a reflection in a spoon. A tea-colored canine that jutted out of her gum line above the rest, and that her upper lip sometimes caught on when she smiled.

She had caught his eye last summer when she had worked the noon-to-five shift. He had pulled up in the street sweeper he had been working on and went in to get something to drink. When he went up to pay she was eyeing the giant machine through the rectangular window behind the counter.
"You drive that thing?"

"Yeah."

She eyed the machine, seemed to be searching for the right phrase, a verdict:

"That's cool."

In the fall she had started working the night shift, midnight to 6 a.m. When Galen started plowing after the first big storm in November, he found himself looking forward to his breaks when he could see her, found himself debating what products he could purchase to impress her: Gatorade, bottled water, Welch's Grape Juice.

Over the course of that cold December they had engaged in a kind of pleasant banter, talking about the weather, how the plowing was going, how it sucked to work in a convenience store. What scraps of conversation they shared were never too enlightening, but the last time he'd seen her, some two weeks ago now, he'd felt something different, a kind of breakthrough.

She had been mopping when he had entered the store, the red mat in front of the counter doubled over and pulled against the wall. Galen said good morning, had taken several steps toward the cooler when he noticed that he had just walked over the section of floor she was mopping. He apologized, said he hoped he hadn't messed up her floor, and she had uttered some witticism he couldn't remember. But he remembered the way she had laughed, a kind of deep-throated, glottal laugh, the way people laugh when they're around someone they're comfortable with. Her top lip had caught on that bourbon-colored canine jutting out of her gums, and when she stopped laughing she had had to make a conscious effort to slide her lip down over the tooth.
Then the weather had warmed and Galen hadn't plowed for an entire week. When
the next storm hit and he again found himself plowing the roads, pulling into the Fast &
Friendly to get something to drink—he had decided he would get a large coffee this time,
black, though he couldn't stand the stuff—it wasn't Patty behind the counter but Carl,
like some strange, new breed of amphibian.

"Where's Patty?"

"Gone," the man croaked. He seemed to be breathing through his skin. "Took a
job in Arizona. I'm her replacement."

So she had left, moved on to better things. It figured: Girls like Patty always
moved on to better things.

Still, Galen found himself looking for her behind the counter on mornings like
this one, hoping that things might not work out for her in Arizona, or that she would
realize what she was missing, would come back for the pudgy, neatly dressed man who
purchased strange items.

But he was only kidding himself. She wouldn't come back, not for him. And what
did it matter, really? After all, it wasn't like they were *married*. Galen doubted he would
ever *be* married, had no prospects.

Still, sometimes he fantasized about it, being married, although these "fantasies"
were seldom sexual. Rather, they tended to be domestic: he and his wife hosting a
summer barbecue, inviting friends who held teaching positions at the college. Listening
to his wife, who was sitting on the deck with the other women, talking about how she and
Galen had met: "He would come into the store four or five times a week, and he always
looked so lost. Every day he'd buy something different—I'd never seen anything like it. I had no idea he was there to see me." And the other women would giggle and look over to where he was standing by the barbecue grill, cooking chicken or filets. And he would smile back at them, or say something witty, or else act like he didn't know they were talking about him. And he would be handsome then, older, standing by the grill with his mug of Guinness, poured from a can with the ingenious DRAUGHTFLOW® SYSTEM, which meant that he could enjoy the smooth flavor and creamy head of pub draught Guinness even at home. He would no longer look chubby, a man unable to restrain his impulses, he would be prosperous, a man who enjoyed the finer things in life.

At the stoplight Galen made a right onto Aldrich, still covered with wet snow, pressed forward the lever that lowered the blade. He listened to the hum of the hydraulic ram, and then the familiar sound of steel scraping pavement resumed. Drowsy, his thoughts returned to his wife. The twitch of the wipers became . . . the twitch of wipers, only a car's wipers now, sloshing away rain instead of snow. His wife asleep in the seat beside him, her head pressed against the section of seat belt that spanned from her shoulder to the door, and she was—ugly. All women were ugly when they slept in a car, but to him she was—scary. He couldn't stand the cunt—that's why he'd dumped her. Technically they were still married, but they'd been separated for seven years now and he hadn't seen her for six, since he'd moved out and taken this job working for the city and she'd moved out of state. He'd heard she was living with some other guy now, some guy from Kansas City. Nice car. Gold tooth. Big Afro. That's
all he knew, and to be completely honest he couldn't care a whole lot less. She could
fuck who she wanted. He wasn't into that anymore.

Lately he had taken to slapping the rumps of the other drivers and calling them
"Bud." This had got him a few looks, especially from the older fellas—Rex and Virgil—but he figured they would pass it off as him simply being neighborly—male bonding and all that. But this morning Craig had told him that they needed to have
a talk when he got back to the shop, and his boss had that look in his eye he got
when the news wasn't good. He had never slapped Craig's ass, but he wondered if word
hadn't gotten around. He bet it had.

Wayland piloted the truck down deserted Aldrich, past the factory outlet district,
the Southern Star Saloon, the old Wal-Mart converted into a bowling alley. Past the
splintery, charred remains of the Country House Restaurant, the sign by the road still
advertising S URDAY N G T SE F OD BUF ET. Beyond a chain-link fence on the
left side of the road the white aluminum husks of airplane hangers loomed eerily out of
the darkness, unused since the new airport was built outside of town.

Pulling right onto Route J Wayland's hand drifted to his face, felt the tiny, sharp
points of whiskers pushing through his skin, pressed his fingers farther up his face
and scratched the longer bristles of his chops. He'd had them for a couple of weeks now,
had decided to grow them for the hell of it really, but now he was kind of attached to
them, felt they gave his face a certain dark beauty he'd never noticed before. The whiskers
made his face seem more angular, seemed to be working with his brows towards
something, concentrating his features to a point. At five-seven, a hard and lean one-sixty,
he'd always been considered a pretty boy. Women had always found him attractive—that wasn't the problem—but they didn't take him seriously. How could you, a man who was shorter than you? He had inches elsewhere to make up for his height, but most women never made it that far, didn't seem interested.

He remembered the day he'd watched his wife asleep in the car, her head against the seat belt. How he'd thought There's got to be something more than this. His wife's head tilted back, the lines on her neck like a straw wrapper pushed up at one end. The flesh hanging slack from her face, her mouth open, white teeth shining. Her faded, washed-out beauty, and it was somehow the beauty of her face that made it all the more detestable. The things men would do for that face, the things he had done, when beneath there was nothing more than a thin layer of muscle. Bone. Water. Blood. There was something almost ethereal about a woman sleeping he had discovered, but unwholesome. Scary. It reminded him of what walking skeletons we all are.

Now that the cab was warm Wayland gripped the wheel between his knees, wriggled out of his coat, pulled his shirt over his head. He grabbed the pack of Winston from the cubby hole beneath the tape deck, shook one out, pulled the lighter out of the wrapper around the package and lit up. He used to smoke Camel, but then they had started with that Joe Camel shit and he hadn't wanted any part of that. He liked the old ad campaign, the one with the Camel Man, the model with curly, sandy-blonde hair and a face that looked fashioned out of work gloves.

In the ads the Camel Man was always out fixing telephone lines or working construction, doing manly things, a Camel pinched confidently between his lips. Wayland
had never been attracted to the Camel Man—he'd always seemed too staged; he could almost imagine some fat faggot powdering his hairline before he climbed the telephone pole. He could, however, see how men would find him interesting, even admirable, and he thought he would like to have that kind of appeal.

His skin was warm now. Gripping the wheel with his left hand, holding the cigarette between the fingers of his right, Wayland rubbed his palm over his chest, his stomach, his nipples. The calluses on his hands, raised and hardened by a summer on the asphalt crew, were becoming softer, less jagged. He rubbed the soft nub of a callous beneath his middle finger over his nipple, felt his cock stiffen.

While visiting family in San Diego he'd met a man at a bar who had asked him how big his dick was and if he'd ever thought about having sex with another man. Later the man had asked him if he was interested in making some films. Wayland, drunk, had declined, saying he wasn't into that—even then, had he almost added the word yet?—but he and the man had parted on friendly terms, the man offering his card and asking Wayland to call him if he ever changed his mind. Wayland had since lost the card although sometimes now, on these dark mornings, he thought about trying to contact the man whose name he could almost remember, but not to be in films. He thought he might rather dance.

Wayland fingered a scab on the upper right side of his chest, flicked it with his nail. He had been shaving the other day, carving out his chops from the short, stiff hair that sprouted out of his face around them, when his eye was drawn to the thin layer of coarse, dark hair on his torso. He found himself wondering what he
looked like beneath all that hair. So he had shaved, holding the curls between the fingers of one hand and lifting, slicing the razor between his fingers and chest. When he was shaved clean he splashed water on his body, rinsed off the black coils still plastered to his skin, admired himself in the mirror. He was strange and white, his nipples huge and too far apart. But he liked the way the muscles in his abdomen were beginning to pronounce themselves, admired the shadows under his pecs.

A few weeks ago he had started a regimen of push-ups and sit-ups each morning, not stopping until he burned out. As he lay on his back on the matted, shag carpet in the front room of his small house, stomach burning, straining for one more rep, he thought about dancing. At some club where the music thumped like a bad headache, the kind of music he didn't listen to, couldn't stand, but him on the stage under the warm lights, shirtless and shiny with sweat. And the men faceless, only vague silhouettes, but he could feel their attention, their eyes pushing into his skin. It was what motivated him.

Wayland hit 32 and made a right without stopping, headed back towards town. He looked at the clock on the stereo console. 5:15. The Reba tape he'd brought protruded from the mouth of the tape player—a white tongue. It was lonely this time of day, with nothing to occupy you but the radio and what tape you brought, the sounds the truck made. Outside the plow scraped the ground like paper tearing, like someone sharpening a blade.

The snow seemed to be falling lighter now, more airy. Staring at the falling snow was like staring at a static television—gray dancing specks and white noise. Watching
the flakes spinning towards the truck, reflecting white in the foglights, lighting up yellow in the strobe—it drove him fucking nuts.

"219!" a voice erupted from the radio. Wayland dropped his cigarette in his lap. It rolled between his legs and slid down the seat between his crotch.

Wayland thrust his ass off the seat, trying to drive and look between his legs and grab the cigarette at the same time. He finally grasped it, fingered the small hole it had burnt in the vinyl and sat back down.

He fucking hated that—Craig's loud-ass voice farting into the quiet cab, scaring the shit out of him.

"Wayland, answer, damn it."

Wayland reached up and clicked the radio off. It wasn't like the son of a bitch had anything important to say. He probably just wanted to know where Wayland was, would tell him where to go. To be completely honest, Wayland didn't have a clue where he was supposed to be—he didn't pay attention to the fucking routes anymore.

Cruising east into town on 32 he remembered that day he had watched his wife sleeping, how his tires had slid off the highway onto the gravel shoulder and he had jerked the car back onto the road and looked at his wife, face flushed. She had opened her eyes, was stretching her arms in front of her, palms up, fingers splayed. Her typical stretching posture. He remembered how she had looked up and smiled, oblivious to what he had been thinking, her face composed once more into that mask of beauty she wore when she was awake. "Hi, Sunshine," she said.
They were the last words he ever heard his wife say. He had grabbed his jacket off
the kitchen chair and opened the screen door and his wife had said "Don't forget the
cabbage," and he had mumbled something irritably and banged out the door. He hated it
when she reminded him to do something that she had already told him four times to do.
You would think that after twenty-eight years of marriage she would have realized he
wasn't going to forget—he never forgot all the piddly shit she asked him to do. But the
funny thing about that day is that he had forgotten. After work he had got in his truck and
come straight home without giving the cabbage a second thought, and this after she had
reminded him five times—he had counted them later, the way you ran over everything in
your mind about a day like that. So it turned out his wife had known him after all.

Wayne watched the snow come down wet, was surprised to find himself
thinking about his wife. She was four-years dead now, but sometimes, plowing in the
clear morning dark, he found himself thinking about her. He guessed there wasn't
any harm in that.

Judging from the thin slush of snow on 32, Wayne figured he would be able to hit
the blue routes pretty soon, and if the snow let up at all he might be able to get to a few
residential areas before twelve. On Baltimore he made a left, was gazing absent-mindedly
out the driver's side window when he saw a face glaring back at him—his own. Old. It
always surprised him, how old he looked. It was almost funny, eating lunch with the
other drivers in the break room back at the shop. These young bucks more than half his
age. Smooth-skinned. Handsome. Some with arms as big as legs. Eating and talking
about what things men talked about—football, those damn Republicans, what girls they'd
slept with. And he always felt like one of them, adding what he could to these conversations, until he caught his face reflected darkly in the microwave door.

Wayne looked past his reflection, down to the fresh, loose snow that curled from the plow blade, slid frothy over the old snow like the wake from a boat. It was loneliest in the early morning, before the sun came up and reminded you that there was still a world, not just the snow, what dim shapes the foglights plucked from the darkness on the side of the road. You had to keep yourself occupied. After fifteen winters of plowing even AM radio lost its appeal. Still, it was all he listened to, even now that the new trucks had FM stereo, a fancy tape system and all that. The stereo was just one of the features on the new trucks that was supposed to make his job easier. The others: a spreader that ran independently of the motor so you could sand the road while plowing at slow speeds, a lift powered by hydraulics instead of chains, a blade the driver could maneuver from left to right and, of course, the strobe.

Of all the features on the new trucks—"new" he still thought of them, even though they were four years old—he could do most without the strobe. Especially when it was dark. The way the snow swirled towards the windshield, lighting up yellow, then dark, then yellow again so it almost looked like the static on a TV screen—it wasn't natural. The old trucks hadn't had strobes, only a normal bulb in a yellow plastic casing that cycled slowly, round and round, so that when the bulb completed a full cycle it wasn't the same snow you were looking at anymore. That snow was behind you by then, on the road, was smeared in the wipers like bugs.
Wayne pulled off 32 into Prairie Heights—a puzzle of three story houses, private tennis courts and backyard swimming pools. It was the only residential area the drivers were instructed to do before the blue routes were clear—in case "doctors had to get out." Also the mayor lived here.

Wayne lowered the blade and kicked on the sander, skated the truck around parked cars a third its size. He often thought he could do his job with his eyes closed, and in the winter following his wife's death he had, almost. That was the first winter they had had the trucks, and he hadn't yet learned all the tricks to keep himself from "fading out." Instead he had allowed himself to go, lulled into a trance by the hum of the new Diesel and the hot air from the heater, had driven for hours in a kind of haze.

Plowing on those dark mornings that winter he had thought about his wife, some joke they might have enjoyed together, her scrambled eggs. Some mornings he found himself thinking about that day he had come home from work to find her, the day he had forgotten the cabbage.

Climbing the front porch steps he had smelled something cooking, remembered what he had forgotten. But it was too late—they lived twenty-five minutes from the store and he sure as hell wasn't going to drive all the way back to town for a head of cabbage. They just wouldn't have slaw for dinner was all.

In the kitchen he smelled something burning—a sweet, sickly starchy smell, found a pot of cut potatoes, the water boiled out, on the stove. His wife was nowhere. Searching, he found the house empty, was about to give up and look outside when he thought of the basement, where she never went by herself with her hip the way it was. He
found her at the bottom of the stairs, her back flat on the cold concrete, as though she had simply chosen to lie down there for a spell. A thin trickle of blood, fresh, ran from one corner of her mouth. Her eyes, vacant, heavy-lidded, stared at the wall.

Her funeral four-years ago had been the last time he had seen the inside of a church, and this after having attended almost all his life. His parents had taken him to his first service at Sentinel Baptist his first week home from the hospital, had nursed him on a steady stream of hymns and gospel.

He had quit believing in his twenties, though he never considered himself an Atheist. Maybe there was a God, maybe there wasn't—it didn't seem to affect him much one way or the other.

By this time, however, he was married and his wife, who had grown up in the church, was as adamant a believer as his parents. She believed what the Bible said about the woman serving the man, and he had never had any problems with that. So he figured it wasn't too much for him to humor her by attending a single service a week.

So, fittingly, the last time he had attended a service had been with his wife, though she hadn't been able to appreciate it. After the service the congregation sang "God Be With You Till We Meet Again," and Wayne could remember the sound of the song that day, this swelling of voices he had known all his life: Big, raw-boned J.D., his gravely bass, a croaking. Mrs. Payne, who had been old when Wayne was young, wailing in her raspy alto. Skinny, wall-eyed Emma Jean, a wavering soprano like she was singing at gun point. Fat, red-headed Lucy at the piano, punching the keys loud and too quickly—for twelve years she had been playing half a beat in front of everyone else. And amid this
too-familiar cacophony a mellow tenor, belonging to Mary Ruth, unassuming, with her silvery, horned-rim glasses—a style she had worn for twenty years—and her mustache as thick and black as a man's. Mary Ruth, one day older than Wayne, who had attended the church as long as Wayne and hadn't married.

Everyone agreed: After knowing the woman for so many years, you no longer even noticed the mustache.

There had been a time, however, when he had noticed it, had found himself drawn to it—to her. It had been the summer after high school graduation—he remembered because it was the summer before he'd married his wife, who he had been courting for several years then. But his wife hadn't gone to prayer meeting this Wednesday evening. She had stayed home sick, or had gone somewhere with her mother—he couldn't remember. But he did remember that he had found himself downstairs in Fellowship Hall after the meeting, watching Mary Ruth help the women set the table for potluck. And he remembered that the spread that night—pork roast, meatballs in mushroom gravy, fresh asparagus with cream sauce, cherry tomatoes tight and fresh enough to see your face in, deviled eggs—didn't look half as nice as Mary Ruth, setting a dish of baked oysters in a vacant slot by the mashed potatoes, her thighs pressed against the table edge, her dress pulled tight over her firm back side, buttocks flexed.

After a prayer that seemed to rattle on for ages he found himself talking to her at the end of the long line, going nowhere fast. Found himself staring at the thin layer of hair on her upper lip. To his surprise she asked him if he cared to step outside, told him she could use the fresh air.
So it was they ended up outside behind the church, licking each other's faces, visible only to the field of short May corn that spanned away to the south. He ran his tongue over the short, soft hairs on her upper lip, lifted her dress and felt his way clumsily inside her panties—a different mustache. Pulled his hand out slick-fingered.

"219. Got a job for you," a voice buzzed from the radio overhead, pulling him back to the warm cab, the snow.

"Not this morning, Craig," Wayne spoke aloud, his voice sounding tinny and strange. He reached up and clicked the radio off, pulled up his sleeve and looked at his watch. 5:15. He wondered if it was getting colder. The snow coming down had turned powdery and dry, sifted like Styrofoam over the hood.

Wayne's thoughts returned to Mary Ruth, that night outside the church. He remembered how the sun had been setting behind the cemetery to the west, outlining the headstones black, making each stone seem huge and monolithic—a strange city. How they'd gone back inside and eaten.

Last week he had seen her in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly. He had just been stepping out of his truck when he saw her wheeling a cart towards the row of cars across from where he was parked. Instead of getting out he had watched as she unlocked the trunk of her new Lumina, raised the lid. Took care to arrange the bags of groceries so that nothing rolled around or spilled. A woman used to a certain way of doing things. He watched as she pushed the cart to the bin beside the light pole. She was wearing a blue coat, some sort of green pants suit. She had the same swarthy beauty she'd always had: her dark hair with only a single streak of white in the bangs, the single, thick eyebrow.
Her mustache: two patches of hair, a thin white V in the middle—an extension of the pale bridge of flesh between her nostrils. He found himself wondering what it would be like to feel that mustache, the rub of the firm bristles over his thumb.

Wayne could feel himself getting comfortable, drowsy. He rolled down the window, pulled open his coat. Shivering, he made a right onto what he thought was Route Y, found himself on a cul-de-sac instead. Was about to back up when he saw a decrepit structure nestled among the Oaks.

At least a foot of snow covered the alley in front of the home. Wayne wondered what good was power if you couldn't use it, so he squeezed the plow down the narrow lane, piled up clean snow.

Wayne plowed, sneaking glimpses at the cabin, the lone rocker on the porch. When he reached the end of the road he backed up, pulled back the lever that swung the blade to the left. Pressed the gas, swung the blade to the right. He worked the levers. The hydraulics hummed. The blade swung scythe-like, side to side.
II. TRIVERSITY

Sheffield, England; April, 1989. I stand behind a heavy-gauge, steel-wire fence as fans squeeze into the standing-room terrace of Hillsborough Stadium. Amid the flatulence and sirens and the sway of people being pressed off their feet in the crush, my eyes fall upon a man who is pressed too hard against the fence to speak. His top lip is smashed against his nose, and I can see where the fence gouges red across his gums, the blood that lies thick and black as bile on his tongue. In the last second of his life I think that some recognition dawns across his features; he's seen me before.

*   *   *
Pamplona, Spain; July, 1973. In town for the Festival of San Fermin, I awake early for the encierro. In a bar on Calle Estafeta at 7 a.m., I listen to the boasting of a fat Spaniard with a club foot who already reeks of cognac. "I've been running the bulls for 13 years," he says, "and I have yet to feel a horn in my back." Later I watch as the man, confronted by a rust-colored bull separated from the herd, hobbles toward the planks. At the last second the man turns, an apologetic expression on his face. He presses his hands toward the bull, the gesture of someone attempting to fend off a person kicking at his legs.

Mexico City, Mexico; September, 1985. Guided by the small voice of a woman chanting the Rosary, I dig down to where she lies wedged beneath a slab of concrete. The light of day filters down gray from the tons of rubble overhead. Her eyes two black buttons staring out from a chalky paste of blood and dust and tears, she grabs my hand and presses the fingers together so hard I think they might break. "Santa Maria me ayuda," the woman wails. When she dies, I place her hands over her breast and hope that when the workers find the body the next day they will know that she didn't die alone.
III. LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN

Jim didn't see the man until he swam up into his headlights—or was buoyed up, rather, like a bloated body dislodged by cannon fire, for it happened suddenly. He had only time to see white, liquid wisps of fog pouring off the body before his grill crushed into the man's hips and the man's head pounded hard once into the hood like a shot. Jim pressed the brakes and felt his car drift, becoming weightless on the packed snow. He had time to see what he thought was the body on the shoulder before the back end swung around and thumped roughly against something on the side of the road.

The car stalled. Jim gripped the wheel with gloveless, shaking hands. In the quiet night air, he could hear his wife screaming in the trunk.
After a few moments of sitting and shivering in the cold car—he had forgotten his coat—Jim composed himself enough to say a few bad words, which made him feel more like himself. He knew that Route Z was deserted this time of night—the reason he'd taken it. He would be all right if he calmed down.

Jim reached beneath the seat and pressed his fingers around the cold, oily steel of the .44. He stepped out of the car and stood shivering in the frigid air. The body was sprawled awkwardly on the shoulder, the legs twisted at a grotesque angle. Washed in the amber glow of the parking lights, the dark blood rolled out beneath it like oil.

God what a mess, Jim thought. What was left of the body was torn and steaming. There were chips of bone, like egg shell, in its hair. The man's coat—a blue-and-white plaid hunting jacket—looked familiar. Jim rolled over the body and found out why.

"Roger," Jim said with the same lack of inflection he used to greet the man at Kiwanis meetings on Friday nights. That was the problem with living in a small town, Jim considered; you were always running into someone you knew.

Roger Kill operated a furniture restoration business from a barn beside his house just up the road. But Jim wondered what was he doing out at two o'clock in the morning. Jim bent closer to the body, smelling for alcohol, but all he could detect was the stench of blood—like hot pennies—in the air.

Jim stood beside the body, wondering what to do. He could leave it here, but if someone came along and found the corpse, they might immediately initiate a search for any cars in the area with the indentation of a man's body in the grill. And if Jim had yet to
bury his wife's body when the police discovered his car at the edge of the woods or some field, he might have a hard time explaining himself.

Jim looked around. He noticed how silent it was. The fog made the world seem like a room—quiet and closed in.

Suddenly a sound, wet and gurgling, from the body. Jim started and pulled the trigger. A shot rang out loudly in the quiet air. Jim looked down and saw that he had just obliterated the man's chin, leaving a pulpy, meaty mess of bone and blood.

I guess that settles it, Jim thought.

Dragging the body back toward the Impala, Jim could hear his wife pounding her head or her knees or her legs against the trunk. She isn't going to like this, Jim thought as he walked around the driver's side to get the keys.

"It's Roger, honey," Jim said as he popped open the lid and hefted the body, using his arms and knees and elbows, into the trunk. His wife began to scream. He pressed his hand firmly over her mouth until he could find the dust rag—an old pair of his underwear—which his wife had spit out. After a few seconds he found the warm, moist cloth. He stuffed it back into his wife's mouth and closed the trunk.

He was walking around to the front of the Impala to check out the damage when he heard the drone of an engine from somewhere up the road. Jim cursed, observing the huge pool of dark blood on the shoulder, the red smears that led to his trunk. It was too late to try cover the stains now. Jim ducked into the car as he saw the pair of headlights shining through the liquid fog. He shoved the key in the ignition with numb, shaking fingers and turned it, but the car wouldn't start.
The headlights seemed to be slowing as they approached the place where Jim's car sat at an angle on the road.

Jim floored the pedal and turned the key. "Come on, you whore." The engine started, coughed once like a throat choked with phlegm, and died.

The man in the truck was signaling for Jim to roll down his window. "Hello, Jim," Duncan Adams said somberly from the front seat of his shiny red Ford pick-up. "Looks like you ran into a little trouble."

"You can say that," Jim said, trying to sound like his usual, old self. Duncan and Jim had been on the same bowling team three years in a row. "I hit a slick spot about that big pile of blood back there. I mean, I was looking at that big pool of blood and not paying attention to my driving when I hit a patch of ice and, well, here I am."

"Yeah," Duncan said meditatively. "You gotta watch the ice on these roads. Your car all right? Sounded like you were having some trouble."

"Fuel filter," Jim replied. "It'll be all right if I let it set awhile." The slow pace of the conversation was making Jim crazy. Just calm down, he told himself.

"Say, Jim, you haven't seen Roger Kill have you? I thought that was his Chevy parked back up the road a little ways. Got out and felt the hood—still warm."

_Damn._ "No," Jim said. "Probably just ran out of gas. I bet he's already got his shoes off by now. He just lives up the road."

"Yep." Duncan nodded. He was quiet awhile before he spoke. "Looks like someone done hit something." He gestured toward the road.
"What do you figure?" Jim tried to sound normal.

Duncan shrugged. "I don't know. Dog. Deer. Thought I might get out and have a look." He killed the engine.

"No need," Jim said. He tried not to sound anxious as he thought of the smears of blood that led to his trunk. "I mean, I already looked. Either whoever hit it took the carcass or whatever it was ran off."

"Well I don't think the poor bastard ran too far," Duncan laughed. He got out of his truck and closed the door. "I'm gonna go have a look."

"Shit," Jim hissed under his breath. He tucked the gun into his pants and pulled his shirt out. As he got out of the car he thought he could hear his wife squirming around in the trunk. Probably trying to work her way out from under the body.

Duncan was squatting beside the congealing pool of blood. To Jim it almost looked like it had formed a loose, wrinkly skin, like the skim of fat on bad milk. "Looks like whoever hit it dragged it this way," Duncan said. He stood and followed the smears of blood toward Jim's car. "In fact, looks like they lead all the way over to—"

There was a thump from the trunk. Duncan turned and stared at Jim in amazement—his mouth ajar, his eyes wide.

"I was . . . uh—" Jim could feel his face burning red. His breath was frozen in his throat. "It was a deer," Jim explained. "I was going to give you some of the meat—"

"I don't care about that," Duncan almost yelled in his excitement, "the son of bitch is still alive!" There were several more thumps from the trunk. "Listen! Sounds like the son of bitch is trying to kick his way out right now. Must be a big bastard to lose all
"So what are you waiting for?" Duncan near-shouted. He had plucked a cabbage-sized stone out of the snow on the side of the road and now held it in his gloved hands. "Let's put the son of a bitch out of his misery."

It didn't look like there was going to be any way around this. Jim pulled the gun out of his belt and leveled it at Duncan's chest. He wondered for a moment if it would be quicker to shoot the man in the head, or maybe the neck.

"Say Jim, what's this all about?" Duncan inquired. To Jim the man didn't look worried, only curious. He was still clutching the rock in his hands and was peering at the gun as though Jim was holding some small, dark animal he couldn't identify.

"Say Jim—" Duncan swallowed now, staring at the gun. The realization of the weapon finally seemed to be sinking in. "I don't know what you're so excited about, but maybe we can find some way around this. I know a man don't—" And just like that he was off and running, sprinting down the narrow alley between the vehicles. He moved so fast that Jim was momentarily frozen, the gun tilted stupidly downward, before his muscles launched into motion and he gave chase down the road.

By the time Jim shot out of the alley between the vehicles, the man was already disappearing into the dark. Jim knew he could close the gap without any problem—he had been an all-state halfback in high school—but he was concerned about shooting on
the run. He had never fired a hand gun before—not counting Roger—and he wasn't sure
how well he could use it. And if another car came . . . .

Jim ran as best he could with his arm extended, aiming at the dim, lurching form a
few feet in front of him. Just as he was about to pull the trigger his right foot skimmed
across a patch of ice and shot out in front of him. His ass connected hard with the
highway and the Magnum cracked hard against the pavement and skidded several feet
behind him across the road.

Jim pulled himself from the pavement and walked, bent over, back down the
highway searching for the gun. From up the road he could hear the crunch of Duncan
trudging desperately and awkwardly through the snow. He must have left the road and
was planning to climb the barbed-wire fence and take off into the field. Jim knew that if
Duncan made it into the field, the woods were only a sprint away.

For the first time since he'd pulled the gun Jim was worried that the man might
actually get away. He was about to leave the gun and take out after Duncan when his eyes
suddenly fell upon a dark object on a patch of ice on the road. He reached for it and was
rewarded when his fingers closed over steel.

Jim grabbed the gun and took off sprinting in the direction of the noises. He could
hear the loose, springy rattle of wire somewhere ahead and to the right as Duncan tried
to climb the fence. Running, he was soon able to make out a dim figure straddling
the fence. He was almost over the top. Without thinking Jim raised the gun and fired,
and was surprised when the figure dropped sideways onto the ground.
The man lay still on his back on the other side of the fence, his leg twisted up at an almost ninety-degree angle. His foot was caught between the top two wires of the fence. When Jim arrived, straining for breath, at the place where Duncan lay, it was too dark to tell if the man's eyes were open or closed. He could, however, detect thin, breathy gasps—gasp which seemed to strangely hitch—coming from the man's throat. Jim thought of asking Duncan if he was all right, then thought better of it. He lowered the gun and fired into the man's chest. The breathing stopped.

Jim found it more difficult to wrestle Duncan's body into the trunk than Roger's—Duncan was a full two inches taller and at least thirty pounds heavier. And Duncan still had most of his blood. Things hadn't gone exactly as Jim had planned in the last few minutes, but seeing his wife's expression as he shoved yet another body in on top of her gave him hope that he was still doing the right thing.

Jim moved Duncan's truck off the road and got back in the Impala. After a few minutes he got it started. He knew the car needed a new fuel filter, which he didn't think had been replaced since around 1983. After letting the engine idle for only a minute or two Jim turned the car around and pulled out west, in the direction he had first been heading, to find someplace to bury the bodies.

A couple of minutes later Jim passed Roger Kill's house and business just off the road. If Roger's wife was awake there was no sign of it. The porch light was off and all the windows were black. The only light was the arc-sodium above the barn door. Beneath the light was a sign which read, in black letters which were beginning to peel:
Jim passed beyond the reach of Roger's yard light and drove for several minutes down winding Z. He was keeping his eyes pressed to the patch of black asphalt in front of him, watching for ice, when his headlights suddenly revealed a patrol car, its lights off, lying in wait on a side road. Jim could see the painted badge which he knew would read GREENE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT on the door when he passed. Jim watched—disbelieving—in his rearview mirror as the rack of lights on the car lit up and it pulled onto the road behind him.

Jim looked at his speedometer. He was only driving 65—five miles over the speed limit. Jim knew he only had seconds to make a decision. He could pull over, or he could run. A friend had once told him that he had outrun a deputy's car in a '95 Mitsubishi Gallant with a four-cylinder engine. The Impala had a V-8. Then again, Jim's car was almost twenty years old, and American-made.

Jim thought of the gun beneath the seat, the bodies in the trunk. He could feel the cruiser's spotlight eating into the back of his head.

Jim decided to run. He pressed the gas and watched the once red speedometer needle that had faded to a dull orange hesitate a second, wavering at 65, and then lurch up to 70. Just as suddenly, however, the car began to lose power, and the speedometer dropped. "Come on you whore!" Jim screamed, pressing the gas to the floor, but the car only responded by leveling off at 55. It felt like he was driving in mud.
The cop was directly behind him, painting the interior of the Impala red and blue. Jim pulled off onto the shoulder.

Jim jumped as the cruiser's door slammed shut. He watched in his driver's side mirror as the deputy walked towards the Impala, flashlight in hand. He stiffened as he saw the silhouette of the deputy hesitate a moment at the trunk. Jim thought about reaching for the gun beneath the seat, but it was too late; the cop would see him if he bent down. He rolled down the window and waited.

"Jim?" said Deputy Bernie Thompson as he walked around to the driver's-side window and shined the light in Jim's face. "I thought that was your car."

"Hi, Bernie," Jim tried to smile, looking into the flashlight. "You're not going to throw me in the slammer, are you?"

"Nah, not Greene County's best halfback ever. The reason I stopped you was that you got a headlight out. Just thought you might wanna go somewhere next week and get that fixed. Whenever you get time, that is."

"Sure," Jim said, relieved. "Will do." Now he looked up at his old friend and smiled what felt like a genuine smile. "A real live Greene County Sheriff's Deputy. I can hardly believe my luck to know one. I can't believe you're one. Shit, you used to raise the most hell of any of us."

"Well," Bernie replied, "got to do something to put food on the table. Oh, Jim, one more thing before I forget. I noticed walking up to your car that you had some drops of blood on your fender. You didn't cut your hand, did you?"
Jim felt the grin sliding from his face. "My hand?" He laughed—a dry humorless chuckle that sounded like something caught in a fan. "Nooo. I hit a deer earlier. Jumped right out in front of my car. That's why my headlight's out. Instead of letting all that good meat go to waste I just loaded up the carcass in my trunk." He swallowed.

"I do love venison," Bernie said contemplatively, staring into the dark distance up the road. "Would you mind if I had a look?"

Jim nodded. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and dropped them on the floor, bent down to get them and slid one hand under the seat, feeling for the gun.

"Jim, I'd appreciate it if you kept both hands where I could see them." Jim looked up at the deputy, a Who me? expression on his face, but Bernie didn't smile back. His lips were grim, his jaw muscles clenched rigid as rocks. The palm of his hand rested uneasily on the handle of his .38.

Jim froze, one hand cupped around the keys on the floorboard, the other resting on the .44. He could feel the cold steel of the Magnum sucking the heat out of his palm.

Jim stuck the gun out the window and fired twice at point blank range. He heard Bernie hit the ground and waited a second for the return fire. When it didn't come he jumped out of the car and fired twice more at the body of the deputy lying on his back on the ground. As he stood and looked at the body, however, it soon became apparent that he had fired the last two shots in vain. Either the first or the second bullet—he assumed it was the second because of the recoil—had sunk into the hollow triangle at the base of Bernie's
neck. The other three bullets had been stopped by Bernie's body armor—worn beneath his shirt—which Jim had failed to notice he was wearing before.

"Unit Thirteen, respond please," an insect voice buzzed from the radio on Bernie's belt. "Unit Thirteen—Bernie, that's you."

Jim shoved the gun in his belt, grabbed his friend by the legs and dragged him affectionately off the road. Then he walked around to the driver's-side door of the Impala—still open—grabbed the keys off the floorboard and marched around to the trunk. He flung open the lid and aimed the gun at his wife's face, which squinted out fearfully, blood-smeared, between a tangle of arms and shoulders and legs. He held it there until his shoulder hurt and the gun began to shake. Still, he couldn't do it.

_You never finish anything_, his wife had told him once—or was it his mother? It was his mother, he remembered now. It had been some cloudy, Saturday afternoon when he was in high school. He had got it into his head to clean out the tool shed, and had dragged out all the hoses and broken rakes and empty oil cans and a thousand other things before he had lost interest and gone back inside to watch TV.

That was the curse of inspiration, Jim considered as he lowered the gun. You had a way of getting in over your head.

As Jim slammed the trunk lid he suddenly realized how cold he was. He was cold, not nervous, and that was the reason he couldn't keep the gun from shaking.

_Warm thoughts_, Jim reminded himself as he climbed back in the Impala and pulled back onto the road, and in two minutes he was again cruising down the black highway, the heater breathing warm air in his face.
Several days later Jim awoke in a motel room in Shamrock, Texas just after 4 a.m., thinking he could hear his wife pounding against the lid of the trunk. But that, Jim knew, was ridiculous. He was on the second floor of the Super 8 and the car was parked at least a hundred feet from the door, beside a trash-swept, chain-link fence that divided the parking lot from a steep, weedy hill that sloped down to the interstate. Besides, his wife hadn't so much as scratched a nail across the lid in the last couple of days.

Since leaving Missouri, taking roads which were sometimes little more than ruts gouged out by tractors, Jim had run into an unseasonable heat wave, even for the southern states. When he had rolled into one small town in Oklahoma for gas, the temperature on the clock of the First Savings and Loan had read 83. Since then he had been unable to get up the courage to look in the trunk.

When he slept he slept badly and when he dreamed he dreamed of people who were not his friends—faces he had never seen before—but who, in some untelling way, resembled his friends, and in these brief, hot snatches of sleep he grew to love them, these smiling, unfamiliar faces.

Tonight was the first night he had risked staying in a motel. He had parked the car where it couldn't be seen from the office window, and with his shirt inside-out to hide the blood, he had gone in and purchased the room. Once in the room he stripped and tried to wash his clothes in the sink with hotel soap, but the stains, of course, had set. He hung the clothes to dry on the rack beside the sink and slipped naked into bed.
Now he lay on his back in the quiet darkness, gazing at the triangle of pale light thrown across the ceiling from where the curtains didn't close all the way. Jim pulled the sheets from his naked body, letting himself be cold. The air conditioner was on, and the hum made a white room in his head.

After several minutes of not sleeping thirst yanked him out of bed. He made his way through the semi-darkness to the sink on the far side of the room and clicked on the light. He squinted at the army of complementary items—facial soap, a small vial of shampoo, shaving gel, a plastic cup and a disposable razor—and after several seconds of fumbling with the plastic cup, succeeded in tearing off the wrapper.

He filled the cup and swigged down the lukewarm hotel water. When he set the cup down he noticed the red beneath his fingernails. He chipped away the dried blood, sprinkling chips of red matter like rust into the pale porcelain bowl of the sink. He looked at himself in the mirror—a skeleton padded with biscuit dough that had set too long on somebody's counter, becoming yellow and stiff. Every patch of color on his body—his whiskers, the crescents under his eyes, the wiry hairs around his nipples, the purple veins in his legs—seemed stagnant and dead.

Jim stood before the mirror until his feet felt cold and numb and then turned off the light and climbed back into bed.
"Okay," I said. I picked up a chunk of brick from a pile dissolving in the yard and hurled it at the house.

Sometimes I imagine my brother dying. Not the way it appears on the Gas 'n More video surveillance cam but from inside my brother's head—what he thought, how he felt when the bullet tore through his throat.

The brick pounded against the stained siding. When this first attack met without any retaliation, I grabbed another brick from the weedy pile and sent it sailing through the
glass top of the screen door. This time my efforts were rewarded by a low-pitched, drowsy muttering and the maniacal barking of a dog inside the house.

1.3.97.00.45.57. These are the numbers in the top, left-hand corner of the screen. In the upper, right-middle of the screen, smaller, so you can tell she's several feet away, is the clerk. The fluorescents are blocked by the suspended cigarette case above the counter. I wouldn't be able to tell it was a female if I didn't know.

Eddie stood complacently on the white trash lawn. His eye was puffing purple and gray from where Scarecrow hit him earlier that day. In his hand was his lighter. I watched him flick his thumb over the wheel, creating sparks but no flame. As the sounds grew nearer the door, a smile spread across his face like sap.

"Always rob a store when a chick is working," Eddie told me once. "For this reason: chicks get stupid when they see a gun. They'll give you anything you want."

The door opened and a shaggy, matted mutt the dingy gray of an old dishrag rushed out. It crept up to Eddie, sniffed his shoes and pawed at his leg. I watched as a pink scalp covered with tufts of thin, black hair as spindly and brittle as cotton candy appeared at the door. "Goddamn it!" the man said.

*  *  *
The tape rolls for a couple of seconds before a man walks up and sets a bag of Rold Gold on the counter. I wouldn't be able to tell that it was Rold Gold except that I read it in the report. I can tell it's Eddie, though, can tell it's his smile even in the crappy black and white. My God, he smiled at her, I think. Then he pulled the gun.

"What the hellurya doing?" "Let me talk to your son." "Who—Nicky? Nicky ain't here. Damn! I'm on disability. I can't put up with this shit."

The girl stood a second before popping open the register and setting stacks of money on the counter. Eddie was right; the woman was giving him everything he wanted. Eddie just stood there, holding the gun like he was watering the lawn. It wasn't even pointed at her. Suddenly, quick movement from the top of the screen, monochrome speed.

Eddie grabbed the aluminum can beside the bag of Kingsford when the Nova pulled up in the drive. Scarecrow got out, all eyes and elbows.

Eddie was doing something to the dog. He had a hold of the matted clumps of fur at the back of its neck. A clear stream of liquid arced from the rust-spotted container in Eddie's hand, soaking the dog's fur.

Scarecrow froze. "What are you doing to my dog?" he said.

Eddie dropped the can and picked something shiny off the ground. He flicked his thumb over the lighter. The dog exploded into flames.
"Someone put out that damn mutt," Scarecrow's dad shouted drunkenly from the door. "I can't put up with this shit."

The cop had seen Eddie toss a Hi-C box out of his car at the stop light. The cop was going to write him up for littering when he entered the store.

One summer afternoon when I couldn't have been any older than five or six our mother gave Eddie and me money to get treats at the Casey's down the street from our house. Eddie ordered a grape Icee, and when I ordered the same he said "You fuckin' copycat," but in such a way that I knew he wasn't really mad.

On the way back to the house we stopped at a bridge that spanned an unnamed creek that ran through the center of town. I remember leaning against the guardrail, enjoying my Icee and watching Eddie spit at his reflection in the green water when my cup—still three-quarters full—slipped out of my hand and fell into the creek.

Looking back I'm not sure why I cried so much that day—maybe it was that sense of absolute loss you can only feel when you're five and you've lost something stupid. But I remember you would have thought I'd never have another Icee again in my life the way I cried.

And I remember my brother standing beside me, Icee in hand, regarding me with this funny, knowing grin on his lips. Of course he didn't offer me his, but he did slap me in the back of the head hard enough to make my eyes hurt. "It's just a fuckin' Icee," he said. "Get over it." And I did.
Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, in these past four days of testimony the prosecution has attempted to convince us that just before midnight on Friday, June 13, my client, Joseph Campbell, a man with no previous criminal record—indeed, without so much as a single speeding ticket in all the years he's been on the road (and how many of us wish we could say that?)—they allege that Mr. Campbell, after patronizing several drinking establishments to "work up the nerve," as the prosecution so eloquently put it, then drove to his three-story, two-and-a-half acre mansion just outside the city limits. It was there, they allege, that with supposedly enough alcohol in his blood to start his own brewery, Mr. Campbell spent several minutes in the garage in the manufacture of a
weapon that must have been to his liking—a board driven through with screws and nails—for he then allegedly entered the house and employed this weapon in the murder of his wife and three step-children. Or so the prosecution would have us believe.

I do not envy the prosecution. After all, who would want the job of proving an innocent man guilty, even if all the obvious evidence seems to point in his direction? You see, my client is not the sinister, cold-blooded killer the prosecution would have you believe he is. Rather, I feel strongly that we have proved that Mr. Campbell is a victim in his own right, a scapegoat for the prosecution—a mere convenience.

I can imagine the eyes of the prosecutors growing wide as the facts of this case became clear to them: a quadruple homicide, a frantic 911 confession, the husband/father of the victims staggering from the house as the patrol cars pulled into the yard. It is all too easy to imagine what the officers said to one another as they observed this well-dressed, blood-soaked man—a man shattered not by insanity or blood-lust, but by the sheer trauma of coming home to find his loved ones murdered.

"Look! Up there in the yard," they must have shouted. "The one covered with blood, the one cursing and waving that board over his head. He's the one."

An open-and-shut case? So the media would have us believe. And they have a right to be suspicious. I know if I had pulled up the drive that night, knowing that Mr. Campbell had called nine-one-one and confessed to murdering his wife and step-children, and then seen him outside the house, shouting obscenities and waving what was later confirmed to be the splintered remains of the murder weapon over his head—if I had been the one to pull into the drive and observe these things, I too might have had my
suspicions—after all, he had confessed to it, hadn't he? I too might have forgotten that even as he staggered about the yard, quite drunk, granted, and obviously quite disturbed, that even as he shouted at one of the officers—what was the phrase—oh yes, "I'll rip your balls off," or something of the sort—that even as he did these things, drenched in his family's blood, this man was innocent until proven guilty.

"He's obviously guilty," I'm certain the prosecutors, Mr. Gilzow and Ms. Van Blair, have said more than once to each other as they prepared for this case. "What more evidence do we need?" So they stay up late watching Leno and Letterman to see if they hear their names, and come stumbling into court the next morning with their eyes half open and their hair still wet from the shower. And then they tell us what we already know. They recite to us what they can remember from the ten o'clock news and read us the new commentary from The New York Times.

"Mr. Campbell patronized several drinking establishments, becoming increasingly more intoxicated, before returning to his house on Chestnut Road," the prosecution has argued as if reading out of a text book. "A later test showed his blood-alcohol content to be just over .2 percent, well over the legal level of intoxication." My client admits to frequenting several bars that night—although he had never drunk in his life except for a brief period after his first divorce—and he attributes this uncharacteristic decision to stress from his job and, as he mentioned himself while under oath, to certain "marital difficulties," a statement the prosecution has predictably run into the ground.

But as I've stressed more than once throughout this case, having a few drinks while pondering life's problems is not enough to convict anyone, as the prosecution
would have us believe. "The more he drank, the angrier he became," were the words Mr. Gilzow used a few minutes ago in his closing argument (an argument that lasted all of twenty-five minutes—perhaps Mr. Gilzow has somewhere he needs to be). "The defendant then drove home where he murdered his wife and children." He later stated: "The defendant has no alibi because he is guilty. Where was Mr. Campbell when his wife and children were murdered? Why in the same room, of course."

But what Mr. Gilzow has so conveniently chosen to overlook is the fact that my client has an alibi. Where was my client when his wife and children were being murdered? As we've already discussed, he was on his way home. We can talk all we want about the time it might take my client to drive from the last bar he was seen leaving to his estate, but the fact remains that the prosecution only has one witness, a bartender—a bartender—and do I need to remind you of his slovenly appearance and disorderly behavior on the stand—who says that maybe he saw my client leave the establishment at eleven-thirty, when my client himself testified under oath that he thought it was closer to twelve. This, of course, is very convenient for the prosecution, since it would leave my client plenty of time to drive home, spend a few leisurely minutes hammering nails into a board, and kill his family.

So let's just say for a minute that maybe—just maybe—my client was somehow mistaken in his assessment of the time he left the bar, and that the prosecution's sloppy bar boy just happened somehow to be correct. Must I remind the prosecution that my client testified while under oath to pulling over several times on the drive home to vomit onto the highway shoulder, and that on one of these times—so sick and weak was my
client—that he urinated in his pants, and was forced to spend several extra minutes cleaning up his own mess? So even if my client left the bar at eleven-thirty, it's obvious that even this likely faulty departure time wouldn't have given my client sufficient time to make it home, fashion a make-shift weapon and slay his family.

And for anyone who might suggest that my client is simply fabricating this story about vomiting on the shoulder and urinating in his pants, must I again direct your attention to Exhibit D, the McDonald's napkin found the day after the murders by our team of investigators. The napkin was blown against a barbed-wire fence approximately fifteen feet from the speed limit sign where my client testified he pulled over to vomit, and then urinated in his pants. As you've already seen there is a large, discolored stain on the napkin, which our expert on human secretions has testified—under oath—is most plausibly a large urine stain, or possibly baby oil.

Need I also remind the prosecution that just beside this sign where my client testified to pulling over, our team of investigators noticed two large greasy spots on the highway shoulder, most plausibly the results of my client's vomit. As my client testified, his vomit that night was not chunky. He had eaten early, around six, and admitted to only drinking alcoholic beverages the rest of the night. My client testified on the stand—and I quote—"My vomit that night was very smooth, with the color and consistency of pancake batter. I recall it had a distinctive greasy quality." And here I direct your attention to Exhibit E—photos of the greasy spots on the asphalt.

So, ladies and gentlemen, there you have it. Whereas the prosecution offers you half-baked generalities and the testimony of a probable alcoholic, we the defense offer
you tangible evidence of my client's whereabouts at the time of the murders—the stains and the napkin. Vomit and urine.

Ladies and gentlemen, this was a grotesque crime. We've seen the weapon, fashioned from a slab of cedar torn from the bottom of a bureau Mrs. Campbell inherited from her grandmother. We've seen pictures of the bodies. Again I'd like to thank your for your patience these four days, and to apologize for the failure of the air conditioner this morning, especially to those of you seated directly under the skylight. For these inconveniences, the defense apologizes. I would also, now, like to apologize for the prosecution, for their lack of preparation, their incompetence as evidenced in those individuals they've selected to testify. We've had to sit through wave after wave of fat, ugly witnesses, placed on the stand by the prosecution. These were people who had no business being in public, not to mention a courtroom.

Who can forget the so-called "forensic experts"—Mr. O'Hara, Mr. Lemus, Ms. Bell—grossly obese, all three. One has to wonder how much evidence disappears annually into their digestive systems. Remember Officer Ringwald, with his coke-bottle glasses and that ludicrous nose? And who can forget poor, wall-eyed Mrs. Mitchell, the maid, who testified that my client and Mrs. Campbell had argued "frighteningly" on numerous occasions before the crime. That's fine, but let us know which eye we're supposed to look at when you're lying to us. Hard to trust a witness who stares at the floor. And, finally, it took precious little digging for our investigators to discover that Dr. Marquez, the psychologist, was a Mexican, as we'd suspected all along.
But, in all fairness, we should look to the people who selected these individuals, the prosecution, Mr. Gilzow and Ms. Van Blair. Can we really blame them for their lack of judgment? After all, we’ve heard the rumors, we’ve seen the way they look at each other. It’s obvious they’ve had their mind on other things. Working late. Alone together in his office or hers. The way high emotion can bring people together. It is, perhaps, almost too easy to contemplate upon their sweaty copulations. Is there much foreplay? Does she swallow? Does he get her from behind?

In conclusion, I’d like to ask that you turn your attention to those individuals who are responsible for us all being here, and yet who, for the majority of this trial, have been largely ignored. Oh, the prosecution, the media, have treated them as objects. As clocks. As vessels of blood. As containers of forensic evidence, of skin and nails and hair and teeth. But they have yet, by either press or prosecution, to be treated as human, as the people they really are—were. That is, people with hopes. Hobbies. Simple pleasures. Shortcomings. These people were perhaps, like many of us, most human in their errors, and it is now these errors—briefly—that I would like to focus upon.

Adam, the youngest of the boys, had been in trouble at school. Friends of Peter, the middle child, attest that he had recently started smoking. And when police searched the room of Robert, the oldest boy—just turned sixteen—they found pornography hidden under his mattress, a magazine collection of amateur photos titled "Beaver Hunt." (He also had a half-empty pint of vodka in his closet.) Mrs. Campbell, a very attractive woman, had taken a lover.
So I leave you with the question: *Were these people who deserved to live?* Imagine if you will, the youngest, Adam, at school—he was sent to the office for exposing himself to another boy in a bathroom. Imagine him now walking up behind the boy, two years younger, who stood washing his hands in the sink. Tapping him on the shoulder. Pressing down the band of his underwear. Grinning. Peter, behind the school, the collar of his jacket flipped up around his neck, or whatever the style is nowadays. A Lucky Strike Dangling from his lips. Trying to get younger kids to smoke. A bully. Robert, the oldest, awake at two a.m. in his bedroom, beneath the covers with a flashlight, reading. In my day it was comic books. Now he is looking at "Beaver Hunt." His breath comes in shallow gasps. Looking at these naked women. Masturbating.

So, to sum things up, even if my client had killed these people—his whoring wife, his sons—what's the crime? Just four fewer people on a planet already too full. If you got a soft spot for people, that's your problem. But don't let it keep you from making the only decision you can make and retain a clean conscience.
VI. GODDESS MOTHER OF THE SNOWS

"Because it's there." —British mountaineer George Mallory before his disappearance on Everest in 1923.

"We knocked the bastard off." —New Zealander Edmund Hillary after successfully reaching the summit in 1953.

1. Monsieur Cadaver

At 27,000 feet the team passed another body, the second since setting out from the South Col before dawn. Beside the wind-ripped, aluminum skeleton of an ancient box tent stabbed in the snow, the body—forever zipped in a pale blue nylon parka—lay partially buried beneath a mound of stones. Guide Steven Keats stared at the body as he
trudged past. He could see one thin, blue leg jutting out of one corner of the mound where wind and gravity had pulled down the stones. The rusty metal jaws of a crampon were still strapped to one boot. He wondered how long the body had been there.

Since setting out from camp four Steve had felt his energy drain through him as if he were a sieve. He could feel his heart beat slow as the cold air pulled the thick blood out of his arms and legs. Sucked dry by the frigid air, his throat had become sandpaper-raw. He was now coughing with every step. He tried to hide this from the others but he knew they could tell: Andi tilting her head at *just that angle*, peering at him from behind the silvery mirror of her snow goggles, Vaughn shaking his head in contempt. Only Ross seemed oblivious to his condition, keeping his eyes fixed on the patch of ground near his feet. Steve knew he was using too much oxygen, but whenever he pulled off his mask and inhaled the cold, thin Everest air, his head felt heavy and strange.

Still, it was a nice day for a climb. When the red sun pushed over the squat, white-washed wall of peaks and clouds on the eastern horizon, the world had warmed and he hadn't felt so dead anymore. To the west he could see the jagged peak of Nuptse slicing up out of the clouds, the white, sharp teeth of the Khumbu Ice Fall, the Western Cwm. Above Nuptse, the pale ghost of a crescent moon hung high in the clear blue sky.

*Eight hours from the place on earth closest to the moon.* It was funny, Steve thought; the moon didn't look any larger at all.

French, Vaughn Allen concluded as he observed the butane gas cylinder half-glacierized in the ice and snow. He could just make out the faded black characters on the side of the
canister ("FLAMBAnte," the letters read). Vaughn could tell by the valve—a dial of black plastic, not aluminum—that the canister wasn't any older than 1990, maybe '91. **So the poor bastard's been up here seven years.** Vaughn was glad—not that the man was dead—just that he knew someone on the mountain was colder than him.

Actually, now that the sun was out it wasn't that bad. Beneath his many layers of clothes, Vaughn could actually feel himself sweat. Up here sweat was good; it was one way to tell you were still alive.

It was when you didn't sweat that you had to worry—not because it meant you were dead, although that was always a possibility, but because it might mean you had become dehydrated, in which case you soon would be dead. This high on the mountain the air took moisture any way it could get it—your eyes, your mouth, your lungs. If you didn't replace it you would end up like Monsieur Cadaver, buried beneath the rocks.

Vaughn could hear the old man coughing over his shoulder. "The old man," he called him, even though, at 46, Steve was only six years older than Vaughn. Vaughn knew the cough was also due to lack of moisture, but he wondered if that was all; the cough had a chunky, meaty quality to it that didn't sound good. The old man had really been sucking down the oxygen, too: his mask had scarcely come off his face since they'd been climbing. When he had taken it off his movements had grown sluggish and slow, until he had finally stumbled over his feet and almost slid down a steep ridge to his death (if he hadn't thrown himself on his ax to keep from sliding).

"Do you want me to take the lead?" Vaughn had shouted as the old man had pulled himself to his feet.
"Maybe just until we get to the ridge," had been the old man's panting reply. This had done little to ease Vaughn's concerns. The ridge Steve was talking about was the Southeast Ridge, a narrow shelf of rock and ice on either side of which was a sheer 4,000-foot drop offering unwary climbers a close-up view of China or Nepal. It was an option many climbers had taken advantage of in the past. If anyone was going to get the party to the top it wouldn't be Steve.

Vaughn gripped his ax as the slope grew steeper, rising up to the joint in the mountain which would climb at a nearly 60-degree angle toward the summit. Behind him he could hear the old man's raspy coughing. He took a breath and started up.

Ross Kazinsky was staring at his feet when the party passed the mound and didn't see the body. His head wrapped in so many layers of hats and hoods of polypropylene cloth, he had discovered he could listen inside. The scrape-crunch of his crampons on snow, the thrum of tendons, the hum of trembling muscles, the snap-pop of his joints and bones—all swelled to an orchestra in his head, the way the orchestra swelled in *A Day in the Life*, John Lennon's melancholy voice: *I heard the news today oh boy...*

And from somewhere another voice, calling him back outside.

"Are you coming or not?" It was the woman, turned around above him on the slope. He wouldn't have known it was her except for her smaller frame and, now that he could see them, the strands of hair pressing out of her hood around her face.

Up here, Ross thought, everyone looked the same. Padded in so many layers, the other hikers reminded him of the smooth, fat bodies of grubs. Once he'd gone camping
with his older brother and his brother had made him eat one, a grub. He'd set the worm on a curved piece of bark and set the bark in the fire. He remembered how the worm had sizzled and turned brown and curled up end to end. Wrapped in so many layers of clothes, Ross thought, everything human was erased.

The woman was staring at him now, those silvery, insect eyes, the long, black hose of her mask—a proboscis. He couldn't remember what she looked like. Only one picture came to mind: the image of her squatting, bare-assed, over a gorge.

Sometime he had stopped walking. The woman was standing before him on the slope, her hands held out from her sides—a posture that said Well?

"All right," Ross said. The woman turned around and started up. Ross could see the men several dozen feet ahead of him on the slope. The sun was a quarter of the way up in the sky, shining whitely off the ice.

Ross walked for several seconds, concentrating on his steps before the slush-whiz of his blood pushing sluggish through his veins became too loud for him to focus on anything else. It was a high-pitched, grainy sound, the chirp of night crickets in summer trees. If he closed his eyes he could hear the whisper of whiskers pushing through his face, the faint rustling of papery wings. That's the stuff, he thought.

After passing the body, Andi Hooker-Preston was unable to resist one look back over her shoulder. She hadn't been able to see the face—or the skull, as it would be now—and she was curious how a body decomposed up here, where the temperature seldom got above freezing.
Looking back, though, her eyes fell upon Ross, who had stopped walking. She called to him, asked him if he was coming and after awhile he looked up. He was wearing a pair of translucent, amber-shaded goggles—the kind of ugly, jaundiced yellow you could look through from the outside—and behind them his eyes seemed unfocused and blank, or maybe it was only his slouching posture that made them seem so. But he had been looking in her direction—right at her, into her; it seemed. Just standing there.

To Andi, there had always been something unsettling about Ross Kazinsky—no, that wasn't quite the truth. Upon meeting him he had seemed to her a man who could be described in general terms—a quiet, pleasant person who, she discovered the first few days on the mountain, preferred the solitude of his tent to the company of others. He hadn't looked like the kind of man you would expect to find climbing a mountain, who looked capable of climbing a mountain, for that matter. He was fat and wet. Some liquid—not sweat—oozed constantly through his skin, giving him the shiny, pallid appearance of damp clay, and he smelled of old car seats in a junk yard.

Now that she thought about it, she imagined her perceptions of Ross had started to change after what happened at the Western Cwm. The first week at camp two, just after sundown, Andi had walked from camp to answer a call of nature. It was squatted down near one of the crevices of the Ice Fall that she had sensed some movement out of the corner of her eye and jerked her head around to see him standing on the other side, staring at her. His eyes had locked with hers for a too-long, awkward moment in which she could hear her urine-stream slow to a trickle on the rocks beneath her, and
then she'd stood up, pulled up her pants in one fluid movement and walked back to camp. She hadn't turned around to see if he was still there.

At first the incident had only been embarrassing. But the more she thought about it, the more it had begun to bother her—the way he had just stood there, staring. She found herself wondering if he had sneaked to the other side of the crevice specifically for the purpose of watching her pee. The thought made her shudder.

It was soon after this, she thought—although not necessarily as a result of the incident—that Ross began to change, to dry out like a piece of bacon in the sun. He became dry and chalky and brittle. He began to lose weight. The shiny, doughy flesh that had padded his chin and cheeks fell away, revealing the sharper contours, the ridges and creases of his face and skull. He began to color various shades of red and brown and beige which Andi assumed was the result of frost nip and windburn and the ultra-white glare of the sun shining off the ice. He began to grow a beard.

Andi thought he might have looked OK—maybe not quite handsome but certainly OK—if it had stopped there, but whatever metamorphosis he was undergoing continued, drawing back his cheeks and his lips and his eyelids and causing his eyes and teeth to appear abnormally large. Sometimes his skin would peel, giving Andy the impression that he wasn't so much losing fat as he was only flaking away, layer by layer.

Now she was afraid to look back over her shoulder, afraid he would be standing there staring into her—analyzing her, it seemed—the way he had stared at her that night at the Ice Fall.
Soon fatigue erased any thoughts of Ross, however, and it was as if she were all alone. Even when breathing the oxygen from her tank, every step was a struggle. When she did take off her mask, the act of breathing itself robbed most of her energy. At one point she had counted her breaths—55 a minute. Almost one a second.

Still, pride kept her going. *The problems and dissensions in multinational expeditions*, wrote Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to reach Everest's summit, *pale into insignificance compared with those that can be brought about by a single woman in the party*. Andi had memorized this a year ago while training for the expedition at home in North Carolina. She had stumbled across it in a book about the success of Hillary's expedition—or John Hunt's expedition, rather, of which Hillary was a member. Also in the book was a black-and-white photograph of Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the Sherpa with whom Hillary reached the summit. In the photograph the men are walking through the snow after having reached the peak and descended safely, thick in their old, earth-colored clothes and funny old hats and glasses. Even in the picture Andi could tell the men were swaggering, full of themselves. Beneath it was the caption "Hillary and Tenzing descend the mountain after having 'knocked the bastard off.' " It was now the quote and the thought of this picture, more than anything, that kept her going.

2. The Summit Bid

God. *God*. Ross ripped off his gloves and pressed his palms to his eyes as the pain shot through his head. He watched the world turn gray and for the next few seconds that gray and the pain in his head were the only things that were real. It was a gray that
reminded him of sitting in church as a young boy, staring at the ceiling fan and thinking

*What would the world be like if there never ever ever was a God?* And this gray was the gray of that world he imagined, and it was a terrible, awful, lifeless, ashy gray.

After awhile Ross pulled away his hands and squinted up the slope through the sudden whiteness. He could see the men several dozen yards ahead of him on the slope—Vaughn hacking into a wall of ice and pulling his weight upward, reaching for some slight crevice with his hand; Steve trudging wearily behind him in the snow. A few yards farther back the woman had once again stopped walking. Her head was tilted downward, and Ross could see her sides rising and falling, even through her many layers of clothes. Seeing the woman, even in his weary state, Ross could feel blood start to flow into his penis, and this sudden warm feeling in his crotch was followed by what he recognized as an almost post-masturbatory mixture of shame and guilt.

Ross looked down, away from the woman, and saw his gloves lying in the snow. He bent down too quickly, feeling a sharp, white pain like a fist rapping on the back of his skull—a warning. He bent down more slowly and picked up the gloves.

Trudging up the mountain again his eyes drifted back to the woman: thoughts of her ass hanging over a crevice, their eyes locking, her standing up and walking away. She had walked into the mess tent the next morning where he had sat eating breakfast and reading Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*. "Good morning," she'd said, her voice steel wool, and he had got up and left, leaving his plate of fried ham and eggs behind him. He had been looking for a place to move his bowels when he had seen her. He was about to call out when she had hooked one thumb into her waistband and slid down her pants.
He had frozen, not because he had planned to watch her, but because it had been so long since he had seen a woman without her clothes: he'd forgotten how easily they could come off. And the way his penis had stiffened when he'd seen her smooth, bare flesh, the tuft of coarse, black hair between her legs (how that hair would feel on a cold night, he thought), had somehow made him an active, a willing participant in it all.

The way the entire episode had made him feel reminded him of the skeleton of some earlier, more bitter experience, like an archeologist dusting off bones. Walking back to his tent that night he had remembered what it was. Now, trudging up the slope of the tallest mountain in the world, he remembered again.

When he was 13 his father caught him masturbating. He had been lying on his bed, pants down to his knees, looking at a Penthouse he had sneaked out of his uncle's trailer. The magazine was open to a full-page color spread of a blonde woman on a lawn chair, pouring a stream of water from a garden hose over her vagina. He was about to turn the page when his father had burst suddenly into the room, for what reason Ross would never know. His father had stood in the doorway, silent, taking in the scene. "Just look at yourself," he'd said before closing the door.

Even today, 20 years later, it was amazing to Ross how the humiliation of that day made him want to lie down in the snow, to just lie there and look at the sky and not move at all. He remembered how alone he'd felt that day (he was certain that he was the only person in the history of the world to stumble upon this low-cost means of entertainment, except for maybe beggars and hobos); the self-loathing he'd felt after his father closed the door. How he had hated the women in that magazine, the blonde with the garden hose,
who had driven him to this. The awkward moments at the dinner table the next few days, his father's too-direct eyes; later, his parents in the kitchen, his mother: *I don't think Ross is feeling well. He hardly touched his beans*; his father's gruff reply: *The boy's fine.* In fact, he had touched very little food the next few days. The pleasure he took in eating repulsed him; his *drives* repulsed him. If there was one good thing about the experience it was that he had lost weight; he had been too pudgy before.

They were approaching the Southeast Ridge, that icy, narrow shelf, the series of pinnacles like the vertebrae of some vast, prehistoric reptile in the snow. Ross could see the first pinnacle, shining whitely a few hundred yards up the slope. Beyond that, more pinnacles, the Hillary Step, and finally that frozen square of ice that was the tallest land on earth, a square about the size of his kitchen at home.

*Chomolungma,* Tibetan monks called the mountain. It meant either Goddess Mother of the World, or Goddess Mother of the Snows, he couldn't remember which. Either one, Ross thought, seemed appropriate.

Andi slipped off her glove and tried to fasten her mask—her lungs pulling in the oxygen-thin air and expelling it just as quickly, pulling, expelling—but her fingers were useless. She pressed her mask against her face with both hands and when she did so her glove, which she had been holding beneath her arm, fell onto the ice and started sliding down the mountain. Andi watched it disappear over a slope. *Shit.*

With the sight of her glove disappearing down the mountain, the last of her strength left her. She sat down heavily in the snow.
"Here." Andi looked up into the grim, red-whiskered face of Ross. His lips were closed and pulled down so tight she could see the indentation of his teeth through his skin. He had taken off his glove and was holding it out to her with his bare hand.

"No . . ." Andi said, shaking her head.

Ross dropped the glove in her lap. "I'll go get the others," he said. He started off up the slope. She had put on the glove and taken her water bottle out of her coat when Steve came tromping down—still coughing—through the snow.

"How much—longer—you need?" he panted, his words coming in short bursts between gasps. Again he started coughing.

Andi shrugged, unwilling to waste her own breath on a reply that might not be heard. She leaned back in the snow and was amazed at how good it felt to lie down.

"How are you going to make it?"

Steve was quiet a long time before answering, the only sound the suck and hiss of oxygen through his mask. "I'll make it," he said.

The crunch of footsteps—Andi opened her eyes to see Vaughn standing above her. He sat down beside her in the snow.

"Don't get too comfortable," he said. "You'll never get back up."

"I'm not going," Andi said. When neither man said anything she continued. "I can't even walk ten feet. How am I supposed to make it to the top?" Both men only sat there silently, looking up at the mountain or down at the snow.

It suddenly occurred to Andi that Ross hadn't joined them. The thought seemed to occur to Steve at the same time. "Where's Kazinsky?" he asked.
Vaughn pointed his water bottle up the slope. "Up there," he said.

Andi squinted up to where Vaughn was pointing. She could see Ross, looking somewhat emaciated even beneath his thick clothes. He was on his hands and knees, his head hanging low between his shoulders. She watched as a contraction pulsed through his body and some dark liquid spilled out of his mouth and nose.

"Come on, Andi," Steve said. He nodded his head in Ross’s direction. "If that guy can make it, you can make it."

Andi shook her head. Steve's words were only words—they did nothing to motivate her; fatigue had robbed her of what motivation she had once had.

"I'm done," she said. "I'll just slow you down. I'll be lucky if I have enough energy for the walk back."

"You will," Steve said, pulling himself to his feet. It was an effort that seemed to steal most of his energy. "You can wait here till we get back, if you want. Or you can head down yourself. But be careful."

Andi was too tired too address what she thought might have been a hint of condescension in his tone. "I'll be all right," she said.

She watched as the men trudged back up the hill to where Ross was still on his hands and knees. She heard one of them say something, saw Ross shake his head and stand up. Soon all three men were once again walking away from her up the mountain, and when they disappeared over a mound of wind-blown snow that dipped down toward the ridge before starting up again, she found herself alone.
Steve unclasped the radio from his belt and pressed the transmitter. "Camp Four this is Steve Hughes. Respond please." When there was no response, Steve waited several seconds and repeated the message, but the radio remained silent.

"Use the code name," Vaughn said.

Steve hesitated and then once again pressed the transmitter. "Camp Four, this is—Red Squirrel. I need to know if you can read me. Respond please."

This time the radio crackled loudly, but it was impossible to tell what, if anything, was being said. Steve looked at the pale gray mass of clouds billowing up out of the peaks to the west.

"What do you think?" Vaughn said. Both men, staring at the clouds, didn't notice the third member of their party slip away and walk toward the edge.

"I don't know," Steve replied. "The clouds look too far away to be causing any interference. Must be something else."

"That's not what I meant. Do you think they'll give us any trouble?"

Steve was quiet a long time before answering Vaughn's question. "They'll pass under us," he said.

"Under us?" Vaughn exclaimed. "How the hell are they going to pass under us? We're standing in the fucking jet stream."

Steve stared at the clouds so long Vaughn had time to observe the reflection in Steve's glasses. "They'll pass under us."
"All right," Vaughn replied. "You're the meteorologist. But what do you say we go ahead and get going, just in case you're wrong?"

Steve shrugged and continued up the mountain, walking and reattaching the radio to his belt. Steve insisted on being in the lead again now that they were close to the top. Vaughn didn't argue. After all, this was the first time he, Vaughn, had climbed the mountain, while Steve had made it successfully to the summit four times, and led a party there two of those times. Vaughn also knew that Steve had been on the mountain the year before when eight climbers had been killed—the worst single-day death total on Everest ever. Still, Vaughn had been a little puzzled that the event had gotten such media attention—any climber knew that people had been dying on Everest for years.

Vaughn had continued to climb for several moments up the ridge before he turned around to see how Ross was doing. The altitude had been hitting the man pretty hard, as was evidenced by the vomiting, but whenever Vaughn looked back over his shoulder, he was never too far behind; he kept coming.

This time, however, Ross was nowhere to be seen. Vaughn scanned the slope and thought Well, it finally happened. The snow gods got Ross. But then he saw a patch of red behind a crop of coral-like rock on the right side of the ridge—Ross's coat. Vaughn took a few steps and could see that the man was again crouched down on his knees in the snow, dangerously close to the edge.

Vaughn continued down the mountain and stopped about five feet from where Ross was crouched about a foot from the southern edge.
"Ross," Vaughn almost whispered. "Why don't you scoot back a little?" But Ross seemed not to hear. He remained hunched over, retching silently, producing nothing but thin, yellowish strings of saliva. One of his hands was buried in the snow. The other hand—this one without a glove—was pressed against the side of his head. Vaughn looked up the mountain and saw that Steve had stopped climbing and was trudging back toward them through the snow. He looked exhausted.

"Ross, are you going to make it?" Vaughn asked. But the man only stayed crouched silently in the snow. He had stopped retching for the moment and had closed his eyes, his head tilted low.

Steve had made it back down to where Vaughn was standing. Vaughn watched as the guide crouched beside Ross near the edge and laid his hand on his back. "Ross, can you—Christ, what happened to your glove?"

Ross didn't say anything.

"Jesus, do you want to lose your hand? I can't leave you here without a glove. Listen, can you get up? Can you make it back down?"

Vaughn looked at the clouds looming over the mountain. "You going to be all right, Ross?" he asked. When Vaughn got no reply he addressed Steve. "We're going to have to get going, Steve, if we want to make it to the peak before sun down."

Steve was silent, staring down at Ross. Steve's patience—a patience that to Vaughn seemed suddenly maddeningly complacent, seemed almost artificial, seemed, almost, to border on unconcern—this blatant show of benevolence, whether real or counterfeit, suddenly began to irritate him.
"Christ, Steve," Vaughn said, "he's not the only climber on the mountain. If we
don't get going no one's going to—" He stopped when he heard Ross utter something. He
asked him what.

"I'm O.K.," Ross repeated. It sounded like his mouth was stuffed with wet sand.
"I'll be all right. Just a little—dizzy. I can make it back down." Ross began to pull himself
to his feet and after a moment or two he was standing, hands on his knees.

"Here," Vaughn said. After working for several moments he succeeded in tearing
a strip of lining from the bottom of his coat. He handed the strip to Steve. While Steve
wrapped it around Ross's hand, Vaughn worked on tearing off some more. He wasn't
cold; for the moment all he cared about was getting moving.

Steve took the other of material from Vaughn and wrapped it around Ross's hand
on top of the other. "Now keep this hand inside your coat now, O.K.? This lining will
help a little . . . ."

Ross didn't say anything. He only stood, staring into air. The way his head was
cocked, he almost seemed to be listening.

"All right, Ross," Steve continued. "We're going to get going. Remember what I
told you." Vaughn thought Ross might have nodded.

The two men started back up the mountain. Vaughn turned around only once,
several minutes later, to see Ross standing in the same place he had been standing when
they left him. "I thought we were never going to get going again," he said.

* * *
Ross stood in the place the men had left him for what seemed only a short time, listening to the Goddess Mother, when another wave of nausea pulsed through him and he dropped once more onto his knees. He could sense the edge of the world, howling beside his head, freezing his ears, his breath. It was to here that the Goddess was calling him. *Me love-uh you gringo,* she whispered. *Me love-uh you long time.*

Maybe he had heard her calling when he had stepped to the edge of the world what now seemed like hours ago, when Vaughn and Steve had started arguing about the weather. He had walked to the south side of the ridge out of no other desire than to get away from *them,* and had been surprised at how steeply, how *suddenly* the snow and ice and rock dropped away into nothing. *They should really put guardrails up here,* he thought, and was then almost jerked off the edge by a sudden, inexplicable urge to jump.

His thigh muscles twitched and he found himself teetering forward as his arms pinwheeled madly backward to keep him from falling, even though he found that he suddenly wanted to fall, wanted to take one big step off the cliff and plummet into cold nothing, the feel the frigid air rush by his face, the burst of adrenaline like ice water in his brain, to let gravity have him, knowing that he would change his mind as soon as he fell and realize what a mistake he had made, that life was, had always been worth living . . . the power to do that—to change the world—his world—*any* world . . . . But he wasn't ready. He regained his balance and stood staring dumbly over the edge.

So the Goddess had changed strategies, become seductive.

*Buy me drink,* she pouted as the wind picked up, tracing an icy nail across his cheek. *You buy me drink?* And Ross was suddenly eighteen again, in a smoke-filled bar
in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, with a twenty-year-old whore named Susan on his lap. He watched as she plucked a tiny half-lime from a small white dish with her dark fingers and squeezed the juice into the open mouth of his Tecaté. *You got a great body*, he told her (he was half drunk and couldn't think of anything better), and she did—have a nice body, that was—smooth and brown and hard, a body that reminded him of rocks and dirt (flat stones on a desert creek bed, a cobblestone walk, wet sand, shovel-packed earth) and her hair, which fell in long, lascivious layers down her back, pausing thoughtfully at the soft round curve of her buttocks, smelled of cinnamon. For five dollars (plus a buck-fifty for Dorals) she stripped to Frank Sinatra singing *New York! New York!*—her clothes sliding from her shoulders, her hips, like water—and smoked a cigarette with her pussy. Now, sitting on his lap, Ross could feel her warm, moist flesh through his jeans.

"Buy me drink," she said.

Ross signaled for the waiter, a small, dark-skinned boy who couldn't have been older than 15, and Susan ordered something in Spanish Ross couldn't understand. The boy returned immediately with a tiny wineglass containing some clear liquid that could have been water or wine. "Three dollars," he said.

Susan bent her head toward Ross, touching her lips against his and pressing her tongue into his mouth. There was no thought, no grace, in the gesture.

"Twenty for me five for the room," she said, the words evenly spaced like the syllables of one word. She traced her fingers along his leg to the V of his crotch. She squeezed him there, once. Ross grabbed her hand.
"What's wrong?" she said, moving her warm, moist lips across the side of his face, breathing hotly into his ear. "You never fucked a girl?"

When Ross didn't reply, the whore pulled her face away from his and looked him in the eye. "Are you cherry?"

"Of course not," Ross stammered. He reached for his Tecaté and knocked the can onto its side. He fumbled for it and it rolled off the table onto the floor.

"You're cherry..."

Ross sat and stared at his reflection in the mirror, tanned from days of riding across Arizona and New Mexico and Texas in his brother's convertible. His brother had already gone upstairs with another whore—had gone up, in fact, not five minutes after arriving at the bar, leaving his younger brother to fend for himself.

"Come," Susan said, grabbing Ross's hand and sliding off his lap. She began to pull him out of the chair.

"The money—I don't have the money," Ross lied.

"Come," said the whore. She anchored herself with her ankles and used both hands to pull him out of the chair. Ross stood up to avoid falling onto the floor. She used his momentum to pull him, stumbling, halfway across the room toward the stairs.

"Fresh air—" Ross said, stopping. "Let me get some fresh air." His eyes were suddenly stinging from all the smoke. He caught himself staring back at him in another mirror, this one nailed to a crude support beam in the middle of the small dance floor. The face of the man staring back at him was a dark, angry crimson, almost plum-colored. The man's eyes were watery and red; his forehead was shiny with sweat.
"There is . . . a window upstairs."

"I need to go outside," Ross said. "Please . . . just for a minute. I'll be back."

The whore let go of his hand. Ross almost stumbled backwards. "I'll wait here," she said. She smiled—two rows of shiny gold teeth.

Ross staggered outside into the dusty night. The cool air, devoid of moisture, pressed against his face like cold hands. The sky seemed suddenly too large, scattered with pale, yellow stars like crumbs of cheese. From another bar—or a nearby car—Mick Jagger was singing *Tell me what can a poor boy do? 'cept to sing for a rock 'n roll band?* Ross could suddenly feel the beer, the acid from the limes, the salt, eating a hole in his gut. He stumbled to the side of the building, his hand flat on the warm brick.

"A beer for the donkey, *Señor*?" a voice spoke from somewhere nearby. Ross looked up into the dark, whiskery nostrils of a mule. The animal brayed, revealing two rows of broad, flat, ochre-shaded teeth—eerily human. A short and fat Hispanic in shorts and no shirt stood beside the mule.

"For two dollars you can watch the donkey drink a beer," he said.

Ross stumbled along the side of the building into a patch of dusty weeds. He stood there for a long time, his hands on his knees, his tongue feeling like a slab of fat in his mouth, not wanting to be sick, knowing that he would be.

Ross thought of the whore, her smile, the two rows of shiny, terrible gold teeth—robot teeth, bear-trap teeth, can-opener teeth . . . Ross retched . . .

. . . and vomited yellow into the snow. He dropped onto his knees a foot from the edge. *I've been waiting,* the Goddess Mother whispered in his ear.
The year before Steve had been on Everest when a storm had swept suddenly over the
mountain, trapping several groups of climbers at the top. In all, eight had been killed. He
had had the good fortune of having been forced down the mountain two days before,
suffering from pulmonary edema, a swelling of the lungs that made him feel as though
someone had stuffed a blanket in his chest. He had been alone in his tent at Base Camp
when the wind had whipped up suddenly and he had felt his ears pop, and he had stepped
outside to see the peak—or not see it—hidden in a mass of gray and yellow clouds. He
remembered how eerie the mountain had looked thus decapitated, how unsettled he had
felt as he had climbed back into his tent and zipped it up against the night.

Now, a year later to the month, Steve looked out at the clouds boiling up out of
the west. The clouds looked like they might have been building, maybe even changing
color a little, from a pale, generic gray—acrylic clouds, Steve told himself, from the
brush of an amateur painter—to a darker, greasier yellow, oil-painting clouds, he thought,
the color of things in formaldehyde.

But the clouds absorbed only a small section of Steve's attention; he was more
worried about his sight. His right eye now blurred so badly it looked like everything was
smeared and running (he kept reaching his hand under his goggles and rubbing his eye
with his finger, an action that only seemed to make it worse). But now out of his left
eye—what had been his good eye—he could now see a spot like a small, round orb of ice
or Styrofoam hovering a couple of feet in front of his head. It kept floating—up and to the
left. When he tried to grab the spot in leaped onto the back of his hand. If it didn't get any
worse Steve supposed he could see well enough to get to the top, this if his lungs and his legs and his mind could hold out long enough to get him there.

They were approaching the Hillary Step, that jagged peak of rock and ice, the last—and coincidentally the most treacherous—obstacle a climber would have to conquer to reach the summit. Walking up to it, Steve was reminded of the other times he had climbed Everest—once as a member of another party, once by himself and twice as a guide. It got worse every year; he became more nervous, unsure of himself. This was partly due to his age, he assumed, but also because the other four excursions had been such a success. It was like flipping a coin and having it come up heads every time: he wondered when his luck was going to run out.

Steve waited at the step for Vaughn to catch up. He would let the other man, the younger and fitter of the two, go first to put in the fixed rope. When Steve gestured for Vaughn to go ahead, instead of taunting him about his age or condition, as Steve had expected, Vaughn had only offered a neutral "What is it about climbing these phallic symbols?" and started up.

Steve marveled at the able-bodied ease with which the other man climbed the rock. When Vaughn was most of the way up and had hammered in a couple of wedges and ice screws, Steve attached the rope to his belt and started up. He had made it about three-fourths of the way up, climbing on adrenaline only, when a stiff wind began to blow, pressing him slowly, steadily from the rock like a large, flat hand pushing into his side. It suddenly occurred to Steve how high he actually was, not only sea-level high—for what was sea-level up here but an abstraction, a notion?—but how high he was in relation
to the next highest thing that would break his fall. He didn't have to look down to visualize it, not now, most definitely not now; he had seen it when he had started up, a drop of several hundred feet into clouds. Beyond that, who knew? More clouds maybe, and sooner or later something hard to break his fall.

But he couldn't think about that now; the wind was a fist in his side. He could feel his numb fingers sliding from the ax . . . .

He let go of the ax and plunged both arms up to his shoulders in the snow. And suddenly he was the snow, for what it was worth, for he knew if the snow dislodged he would fall with it. Only he would fall faster.

He was top-heavy, awkward. He could feel his arms sliding out of the snow like nails pried from a board. And that damn wind, Steve thought. Still pushing, pissing him off. At the last second he pulled out his arm and made a grab for the ax, still lodged in the snow, but his fingers only grazed the handle and when he fell backwards the cord connecting the ax to his harness jerked it out of the snow. And he fell.

Steve felt the rope go taut like a guitar string tuned too tight, and then felt it snap, or something snap, and he was falling some more. A sudden jerking, bouncing halt as the second, the last ice screw held, and Steve could feel the shock from the fall sent rippling—via his harness—through the fat and muscle of his thighs, the small of his back. Steve heard more than felt the clink of bone and metal as the flat of the ax—which had been trailing him through the air—smashed into his skull. There was a brief moment of incomprehension in which Steve's thoughts seemed slowed, turned off; there was only the
thought, the *idea* of that weight connecting with his skull. Steve's eyes rolled back into his head as the pungent smell of wet-mowed grass filled his nose. (He was pushing a mower through his grandmother's yard, grown up to his knees since she'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's the year before. Every so often he would run over something alive, not seeing it in the grass until it was too late or not seeing it at all until it spun bleeding out of the mower. A mossy, green-and-brown bull frog with a series of bright red gashes down its side. It was missing a back leg but still attempted to jump, succeeding only in pushing its meaty body around in circles until Steve brought down the mower and ended its life. The sleek, fat body of a mole, its long, cord-like tail reminding him of a rat's. The mole was sliced open on one side of its abdomen and here the insides pushed through the skin—something wet and ochre-yellow, something a thick and meaty gray, something small and sleek and balloon-like, almost transparent (the wound was eerily bloodless). A large black snake, sliced not *quite* in two by the mower's blades—writhing, black and sinister, its blood red and shiny on the green grass.)

Steve, suspended at the end of the rope, had almost stopped swinging, only bumping lightly, patiently against the mountain from time to time, spinning slightly, turning, bumping back into it again. He was vaguely aware, on some level, that he was on a mountain (he *was* on a mountain, wasn't he?)—yes, he had been climbing, climbing—why did he think he'd been climbing stairs? But he could picture them suddenly, varnished wooden stairs, almost black, leading up from the basement of—a school? a church? *Thud-THUMP!* Someone was climbing behind him. Steve turned around and saw *her*, the girl with the boot. She was wearing a light pink dress with a matching bow on
top of her head. With one hand she held the round, wooden railing and with the other she clutched a red New Testament Bible to her chest. *Thud-THUMP!* Steve looked down at her feet and observed the huge black boot, the four-inch rubber sole, which stood out in ugly contrast to the small, shiny white shoe with a brass buckle she wore on the other foot. *Her bones break very easily—like toothpicks,* his mother had told him when Steve asked her about the boot. Steve hated the boot; it made him feel black inside.

The girl was climbing toward him. *Thud*—the sound of the white shoe tapping down on the next step—*THUMP!*—the heavy, black boot setting down heavily beside it. The girl was thin and gaunt. Her ash blonde hair hung down limply around the pale gray skin of her face. Steve could see squiggly, blue veins in her eyelids. Steve watched her climb. She was four steps away . . . now three . . . now two. Steve could hear her labored breathing, her lips parted slightly in exertion. Steve watched as his arm raised, as his pale hand, the bony knob of his wrist, snaked out of the sleeve of his brown corduroy suit and planted itself, fingers splayed, in her chest. He pushed . . .

The girl teetered backwards, her mouth an oval, her eyes wide, devoid of anything except the terror of falling, the terror of being *about to fall* . . . The red Bible fluttered bird-like from her arm and fell in a crumpled heap on the steps.

Steve's eyes focused—as well as they could with the gray spots that still clouded his vision—on the gray ice of the cliff. His head hurt. He had fallen, he assumed. Yes he thought he remembered falling now, climbing the step, plunging his arms up to the shoulders in the snow. He looked up at the rope that led from him, perhaps twelve feet
through the air before disappearing over a lip of ice and snow. He could see the silhouette of a head—Vaughn's—peering over the lip, dark against the sky.

Steve knew it was up to him to climb back up. So after a few more moments of hanging there, just hanging, hardly thinking, Steve pulled up the ax by the cord attached to his harness. When he had it in hand, he gripped the handle and buried the head in the ice with one swing. He pulled himself to the cliff and started up. As he climbed the second time, no longer scared, no longer even nervous, it suddenly occurred to him how close he was to the summit. Once over the Hillary Step, it would only be another half-hour climb—a hike really—to the top.

*The top of the world.*

Vaughn stood staring off out over the northeast side of the summit, unaware that he was smiling. In the evening light, in the shade of Everest and the mass of clouds which Vaughn had watched build higher and more ominous as he'd ascended the final slope of the summit, everything looked blue. To the north and east the peaks of smaller mountains—smaller in contrast to Everest, but taller than any other mountains in the world—sliced fin-like out of the soft, pale sea of clouds. The upper half of Chomo Lonzo glowed a slightly lighter blue than the clouds around it in the dying light. In fact Vaughn thought he could just make out the shadow of Everest falling across the other mountain, just above the place where it sunk into the clouds. (Vaughn strained his eyes in the hopes of seeing his own shadow cast on that other slope in the near distance, even going so far as to push his goggles up on his head, but the shadow was too far, the contrast too dull.)
Staring at the broad, sledge-like peak of what he assumed must be Kangchenjunga to the north, Vaughn was surprised to see a face glowering back at him from the pattern of bare rock and white snow on the other slope. The face, misshapen, though still, Vaughn thought, recognizable as human, was composed of eyes—one a bit larger and flatter than the other, but still convincing in proportion to the rest of the face—a jagged gash of black rock for a mouth and a crop of slate-gray ice for a nose which, although positioned directly below the flattened eye, provided the illusion with a feeling of depth. To the south and southwest stood the nearby summits of Lhotse and Nupste, respectively. The mountains were covered almost completely with snow and seemed very large and close, being only a couple of thousand feet shorter than Everest. The west edge of Nuptse dropped down into a bank of clouds which blanketed the icy slopes of Lingtren, Pumo Ri, the Khumbu Glacier and the Western Cwm. (Vaughn, here, could only guess which peak was which, being more familiar, by sight, with the nearer slopes of Lhotse and Nuptse to the south. Still, it was a topic of debate between the American climbers as to how to pronounce these names. In many cases Vaughn had seen the spellings of the mountains, the glaciers, on maps, but had never heard them spoken, and the few he did hear pronounced by Sherpas sounded, to his English ears, as though the tail ends of the words had been sliced off with a knife—Nup-TSE, Lho-TSE.)

The clouds which covered these peaks and glaciers, trapping the pale pink light from the west, had a strangely surrealistic quality, white-fringed around the edges, like something from a painting. The way these clouds looked reminded him of photographs or paintings of sunset scenes on the Pacific Ocean (for, although Vaughn was a native of
Utah, he had never even been as far west as California)—the way the waves, the crests, trapped the light on the surface, around the edges, before plunging back down into the deeper blue-black of the sea. It was not these clouds now, however, that captured Vaughn's attention, but the abnormal mass of purplish-black clouds that boiled up out of the northwest, these clouds that reminded Vaughn, for some reason, of cancer, of a tumor. These clouds were already taller, much taller, than Everest, and gave him the unshakable impression of something that had weight, of something that could crush him.

_Frostbite clouds_, Vaughn thought, staring at the cancerous mass. _The color of flesh frozen through to the bone._ Two years earlier Vaughn had been making a solo climb of Mount McKinley in Alaska when he had heard, not a rumble, exactly, but more of a _hissing_ and looked up the slope over a ridge of black pumice—he was above the tree line by then—to see a white cloud descending down the mountain toward him: a powder-snow avalanche.

Vaughn smashed his ax into the ice, pressing his body flat against the mountain as the light, airy snow rushed over him. At some point his ax became dislodged from the ice and he found himself being buffeted down the mountain, unable to see, hardly able to breath. At any moment he expected something—he didn't know what, a rock, a tree— to zoom up suddenly out of the white nothing and smash the life out of him. Somehow, however—miraculously, he would think later—he ended up alive and quite conscious, with no injuries other than a single chipped tooth and a cracked rib. He was buried in the snow at the edge—and he was _at the edge_, within ten feet, he estimated—of a granite
ridge which dropped sharply away into nothing. Descending the mountain he had seen he had just avoided a fall of several hundred feet into pines.

Climbing back down the mountain, Vaughn discovered, was slow going. If he inhaled too deeply a razor-sharp pain knifed through his side. Short of breath, he was forced to keep stopping to rest. Just after sundown, Vaughn was drawn to the orange glow of the fire of a Canadian couple who had just set up camp for the night. Seeing Vaughn's frostbitten face they took him into their tent and warmed his hands and feet in a pan of water heated over the fire. Pulling off his snow-filled boots (his feet hadn't even felt cold) Vaughn had observed his black-and-purple skin, more black than purple, which receded to a bruised yellow just below his ankles—this except for his right foot, which remained a lighter plum color part way up his leg. Vaughn remembered with what cold, disinterested detachment he had viewed the feet as Marge—that was the Canadian's name, the woman—had squeezed his feet into the small, round pan of water. Vaughn remembered how his weary brain had even entertained the idea that the feet he was looking at were not his feet, but the feet, somehow, of somebody else. After all, he had no feeling in the limbs. He was unable, even, to wiggle his toes. And so he entertained the idea of those blue feet at the end of his legs belonging to someone else, until his feet began to thaw and the pain (a strangely burning pain, as though his damaged nerve endings could no longer tell the difference between hot and cold) began to pulse through his legs—up his spine—into his head—and the screaming began.

Now, staring at the various shades of mottled black and gray and sickly yellow and—green? Did the clouds look green where the light slunk in around the edges?
Vaughn was reminded of the way his feet had looked that day, and the weeks after, as layers of black flesh had peeled away. And not only from his feet: the skin on his cheeks and nose, the backs of his hands had fallen leprously away as well, leaving him scarred—patches on his hands and cheeks that were vaguely shinier and smoother than the rest. Remarkably, he had lost only the two smallest toes of his right foot. Now however, keeping his eyes on the clouds, Vaughn might have had all of his toes, for all he knew, or none of them; he couldn't feel anything below his knees at all.

Vaughn looked from the clouds to Steve, who, despite his coughing and the shortness of breath and the times he'd stumbled over his own feet and almost died, had somehow managed to make it to the top. The other man was standing with his goggles pushed up on his head and his mask hanging at an angle from his face. Vaughn could observe his scruffy beard, patchy with spots of gray whiskers or ice. One glove was off and he was rubbing his eyes with the fingers of his bare hand.

"Two months on this mountain," Steve said, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, "and I can't see a goddamn thing."

"You're not missing anything," Vaughn said, trying not to smile, "just a bunch of mountains. What are you complaining about anyway, Mr. I-almost-died-and-now-I'm-going-to-bitch-about-the-view? You're lucky you can see anything."

"I suppose so," Steve said. He rubbed his eyes vigorously for several seconds and then removed his hand and blinked several times. "Well, I guess this is as good as it's going to get," Steve said, slipping on his glove and sliding his goggles back down over his eyes. "I guess we should get going if we're going to make it home for supper."
And so the men started back down the mountain as the wind picked up and the oily clouds spilled over their heads and flecks of light, stinging sleet and snow began to drive sideways out of the sky. Before they had even walked five minutes it became so dark that they were forced to stop and fumble blindly through their packs for their headlamps. The torches, they soon discovered, were as good as useless, scarcely illuminating the few feet of white, driving snow before their eyes. Further down the slope Vaughn was forced to remove his goggles, which had iced over too badly to see out of, and place them in an inside coat of his parka in the hopes of melting off the ice. And so he continued down the mountain, squinting into the wind and snow and hoping that he didn't suddenly lead himself and Steve off the ridge.

Vaughn was aware of how weary he was becoming, trudging steadily, pulling his heavy boots out of the snow. Even with oxygen his legs seemed to grow heavier with every step, and his heart seemed to have to beat that much harder to pump his sluggish blood through his veins. He could feel ice crusting in his whiskers, his nostrils, his eyelashes, and every time his lids closed it seemed to take an almost conscious effort to lift them again. Once, he let them close for just a moment, having stopped walking (he thought) and he could feel his mind drifting backwards, could feel consciousness receding. He was reminded of falling asleep at the wheel, something he had done on more than one occasion: driving down a highway late at night, clumps of fat, wet snow blowing out of the darkness, against his windshield. The heater blowing hot air on his face, making his hair feel hot, his scalp. If he just let his eyes close for a minute—not a minute of course, but a second. Opening his eyes again to the deserted highway. There was no
semi bearing down upon him, no deer in the road. But the snow. That was what you had
to really watch. And the wipers, switching back and forth.

Vaughn stumbled into something. He opened his eyes—or had he even closed
them?—and stared down through the blowing snow into more white—wait, not all white;
there were contours in the snow, shadows. Then he saw how the snow sloped away to
darkness a few feet from where he stood. He looked back down to the shape—and sud-
denly something slammed into him from behind. He was knocked down hard. His lamp
slid off his head and was sent rattling over the edge of the cliff. In the dim light—for
there was only one light now, shining somewhere behind him—Vaughn felt the shape
beneath him move. Something shifted, and a hand—a mannequin's hand, a hand that
looked molded out of plastic—wrapped loosely in cloth which Vaughn recognized as the
cloth torn from the lining of his own coat, lifted out of the snow.

3. Going Home

Andi Hooker-Preston was often intrigued by the deaths of the men who had
climbed Everest before her, whose bodies were frozen in glaciers or buried beneath ice
falls within only a few miles of the place where she now sat. Andi, staring at the wraiths
of clouds which drifted overhead, holding the last of the afternoon's dying light, found
herself thinking of these men who had seemingly vanished from the mountain as though
swept away by some airy, ethereal hand. The mystery of these deaths intrigued her, the
final moments of these existences, the exact circumstances of which no one living was
certain, but moments, nonetheless, that had been experienced. Surely these men had
known, at some point, that they were going to die. But when? Was it a brooding, foreboding awareness the night before, sleeping lightly, writhing and tossing fully-clothed in their sleeping bags with the bitter, irrepressible cold pressing in on them from outside, the scream of gale-force winds rattling the fabric of the tents with a sound like a reel of film slapping against a projector—a dream, perhaps, that was only a half-dream? Or did it creep up suddenly, a fixed rope that came loose, an error in judgment? Andi thought of the pictures she'd seen in books of the men who had died, often the last pictures taken of them before they disappeared. They were pictures which always infected her with a certain contemplative sadness (whether this sadness was somehow inherent or if Andi, knowing the fate of these men, only attributed it to the photographs, she didn't know). Still, it seemed to her that these pictures held some secret, some answer.

In a fuzzy, black-and-white of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, the men are preparing to set out for their fatal climb in 1924. The men are dressed in the heavy, drab clothing of that early day, what looks to be cotton or wool. One man—it is impossible to tell if it is Mallory or Irvine—is facing the camera slightly sideways-on, his face invisible behind his round, thick goggles, his mask, staring down at the snow. In another picture, a hazy color photo of two men who vanished trying to summit the unconquered North East Ridge in 1982, the men have just set out from camp, climbing a slight, smooth rise of ice and snow. It is a picture that captures a split-second in time: one of the men is frozen in mid-stride, one leg pushed out before him, an arm held out stiffly from his side. The man is holding a coil of rope, the strands of which—for they do appear to be only strands, in
the smallness of the photo—are captured swinging towards his body in this tiny moment of frozen motion, of arrested momentum between steps.

The picture that stood out the most to Andi, however, was a picture of Mick Burke, the only fatality in a 1975 English expedition. It is a picture of the man lying on his back in the snow, clutching a double-turret, autoload camera to his chest. He is wearing a blue parka and a wool stocking cap dyed in the white, red and blue pattern of the English flag. His face is hidden behind the ashy gray of his oxygen mask and a pair of coffee-black sunglasses. Upon closer inspection, one can make out the dark shape of the photographer in the lens. In a thin patch of the man's forehead visible just between the dark glasses and a red polypropylene hood, one can see that the man's brows are furrowed in puzzlement or concern. It is a detail—the furrowed brows—which stands out from the feel of the photograph as a whole, which Andi felt was one of weary playfulness, of a half-felt humor. Andi found herself wondering what the man could have seen, could have felt in the instant before the film was exposed. The shadow of the photographer passing over the man's face, perhaps? The brows growing serious, furrowing like a stitch pulled too tightly through a cloth, the grin sliding from his face as the shutter snapped closed.

Andi looked up at the clouds, which she noticed weren't so much passing over her as around her, and wondered if maybe it was something as simple as that, the man seeing a mass of clouds over the shoulder of the photographer. She remembered from the book that the man had climbed solo to the summit while the photographer and another man, a Sherpa, had waited for him to return. A monsoon had soon blown in, however, and the
two men were forced to return to camp without him—a journal excerpt of the photographer's told how the men had barely found their way back through the darkness and blowing snow. Andi looked up at the mottled clouds, the oily darkness spilling over the icy slopes, and wondered if she could find her way down if she had to, if she could find the place where the Sherpas had left the spare oxygen canisters, the ends of the fixed ropes. For the first time in what seemed like hours she thought of Steve and Vaughn and Ross (upon stopping she had reduced her oxygen flow to a little over one liter per minute, and her thoughts had turned plodding and slow). Surely they had made it to the top by now and had started back down the mountain. Any minute, Andi thought, she would see the pale orbs of their head lamps flickering down the slope.

Ross thought he could hear talking from somewhere nearby, voices which were little more than faint, buzzing drones. The words formed shapes in his mind—rectangles, ovals, circles—depending on the tone of the word. Shapes. It had always been interesting to Ross how shapes seemed to be such an integral part of the human psyche; in any endeavor that involved or affected perception, shapes seemed to play a role. People with low vision often described things in terms of shapes. People on drugs. People who claimed to have had a near-death experience often spoke of seeing a tunnel, and what was a tunnel, Ross often argued—for this spiel was one of his favorite topics of discussion when drinking—what was a tunnel if not a circle, a shape? But it wasn't just a matter of sight, of seeing, Ross would assert—often slurring the word seeing—but of perception, of viewing things cognitively. He had once read a book of case studies by
psychologist Oliver Sachs titled *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*. The study from which the book took its name was about a man whose vision was perfect but who could only perceive things abstractly, as shapes. The epiphany came to Sachs on one occasion when he was speaking with the man and his wife; in standing to go, the man had reached over with both hands and attempted to lift his wife's head from her shoulders, having mistaken her head for his hat.

This story always provided an effective transition for Ross to discuss a collection of paintings he had once seen by a schizophrenic. The collection consisted of four paintings of a cat. In the first painting the cat appeared normal. In the second painting, representing a more advanced stage of the disorder, the cat had begun to dissipate; it was still readily recognizable as a cat, but the image had begun to devolve into a series of lines and figures. The third painting was an even more drastic network of patterns and lines, and the fourth was a grotesque entanglement of shapes and wires, vaguely cat-like, from which two alien eyes glared out from the center. It had been unsettling, Ross remembered, to observe this progression of insanity on paper, a memory which still had the power to make him shudder. It wasn't that the images in themselves were so frightening; what was frightening was that these skewed depictions were how someone actually perceived the world, a mind dissolving before his eyes. It reminded him of his grandfather, who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of eighty-three, rocking in his chair on the front porch and screaming blue-faced at his grandmother:

"YOU BITCH! I NEVER HAVE ANY FUN ANYMORE!"
Maybe that's what being crazy was, Ross thought. Not having any fun. Now what had he been thinking about?

The voices were back, or maybe they had never left. They were still only drones, faint buzzings, but Ross could make out a few of the words.

Ross!—over the scream of the wind which blew across the mountain—something mumbled, unintelligible—Ross can you hear me?

But Ross didn't want to hear. He found himself trying to remember what he had been thinking before these voices had come and kicked him out of sleep—had he been asleep? He remembered vomiting, and then lying there in the snow, feeling dreary and heady and weightless in the thin air. He remembered staring up at the sky, which had been a faded rosebud, the color of the scar from his appendectomy. But now it was dark. Maybe he had run out of oxygen—or had he even put on his mask?

He's breathing...

What?

I said he's breathing. Help me clear this ice away.

God, what had he been dreaming about? Someplace warm? God it was someplace nice. And then he had been jerked roughly out of sleep to find himself once again on this cold mountain, and he was a block of ice.

Help me roll him over.

Where's his mask?

God, there's so much shit crusted on here I can't read... He's empty.
Ross felt something pressed against his face, and after several moments he could feel his head start to clear, could feel the world around him begin to take precedence. Through the cracks of his eyelids he could see two dark shapes crouched over him. Only one of them was wearing a head lamp, and one was without a mask, was pressing the mask to Ross's face. He could not tell who it was. From the way the light was shining the face appeared to have no eyes, only black, cavernous sockets; the cheeks seemed sunken and hollow; and the places where the man's whiskers sprouted from his pores made his skin seem textured and porous. Something about the face reminded Ross of a woman he had known as a child. The woman, who had gone to his church, had been inflicted with cancer. In one memory that stood out especially to Ross the woman was hobbling to the door in the back of the sanctuary after church. She had been attractive before, but now death had made a clown of her—with her too-red wig and her painted eyebrows and her baggy clothes. Ross remembered how her wig had hung slightly askew, revealing a smooth patch of white hairless flesh behind one ear. Yet she had carried herself with a kind of dignity, her head up and her shoulders square.

"Ross!" Steve shouted. "You gotta get up. We don't have much oxygen left."

Ross could feel the oxygen making him strong again, and after a few more moments of lying there he tried to get up. It was easier than he had thought it would be. He simply rolled onto his side, pulled himself to his elbows, his knees, pushed one foot on the ground beneath him and pressed himself to his feet. He stood there for a couple of moments, once again dizzy from the exertion in the thin air. He held up his hand, the one without the glove, as a signal to the men that he would be all right, that he just needed to
stand for a minute to catch his breath. Ross looked at his hand in the dim light of the single head lamp. It was marbled blue and white from where the blood had frozen near the surface. To Ross, that hand seemed to say it all. (He took a step closer to the edge.) He had never been meant to make it to the top of the mountain, he could see that now, so much so that the idea seemed preposterous, ludicrous to him now.

*Him! On top of the world!* Ross thought. What a farce that would have been . . . like laughing in the face of God.

Ross was quiet for several seconds, listening to the roar of the wind.

*Laughing in the face of God,* Ross thought again, more soberly this time. He took one final step toward the edge. *What's wrong with that?*

At about the time Ross was stepping from the cliff, Andi realized that she was faced with a dilemma. She could wait for Steve and Vaughn and Ross, taking a chance of running out of oxygen and freezing to death in the bitter cold, figuring that with the help of the men she would be able to locate the spare oxygen canisters left by the Sherpas. But then, Andi told herself, she couldn't know with any certainty that the men would be coming any time soon, and even if they did there would be no assurance that they would find the canisters, which were probably drifted over with snow. On the other hand, there was no guarantee that she *wouldn't* be able to find the canisters by herself, even if they were buried beneath three feet of snow. She decided she didn't need to be rescued.

Preparing to set out Andi turned the valve on her canister back up to two liters per minute. She then searched blindly through her backpack for her head lamp which,
after several minutes of groping numb-fingered through her pack, she discovered was
already on her head.

Feeling somewhat stupid but relieved, she started back down the mountain. She
had only been walking carefully through the wind and snow for a few minutes, however,
when she felt herself becoming lightheaded and dropped to her knees. Andi slid her pack
from her shoulders and saw by the gauge on the canister that her tank was not yet empty.
She tried to clear the rubber mask of ice by crushing it to her face with one hand, but this
didn't seem to help. She found herself beginning to panic. She felt as though she were
breathing through a wet cloth. A faulty valve? She'd heard that some of the masks
malfonctioned when they were used in extreme conditions, but she wouldn't know how to
repair it if it was. She pulled her mask from her face just as she felt the world graying out
around her, for in her near-panic she had forgotten to pull off the mask, had failed to
realize that even then she was suffocating herself.

She soon discovered, however, by pressing her fingers up and down the length of
the corrugated rubber hose, that the problem wasn't a faulty valve but a blockage just
below the mask, caused by chips of wet ice falling into the hose. Andi turned off the
valve on her canister as she worked to clear the blockage with her numb, gloved fingers.
It was during this process that she was surprised to discover that her gloves did not
match. She wondered what had happened to her other glove and why she hadn't noticed it
before. Then she remembered the image of her own glove sliding off the cliff, Ross
giving her his. Why had he given her his glove? Why had she accepted it? She now
realized that her own clumsiness would probably cost another man his hand.
Several minutes later Andi had succeeded in clearing the blockage, which fortunately had not yet frozen into a solid chunk of ice, and had started back down the mountain, shivering uncontrollably. Twice she was knocked over by the wind, once perilously close to an icy slab of snow that dropped sharply away to darkness on the south side of the ridge, and each time Andi found that she was scarcely able to pull herself to her feet. When she found herself getting dizzy again she didn't even bother to pull off her pack to check the gauge; she just pulled off her mask and kept walking.

Where were the canisters? Had she even made it to the South Summit? It seemed like she had been walking for hours. She was suddenly struck with an odd certainty that if she dropped onto her knees and started digging she would find the canisters all around her, an oasis of life-sustaining oxygen buried in the snow.

Some part of her mind warned her, however, that if she allowed herself to indulge in this impulse she would never get back up. So she compromised. Instead of dropping to her knees and searching through the snow she simply dropped her pack off her shoulders—after all, it was so heavy—and left it and her mask behind. She had been walking forever, she reasoned; she could only be a couple of hours away from Camp Four. And who needed oxygen anyway?

Andi had only taken a few more steps since leaving her pack behind when her head lamp began to flicker, going dim, glowing brightly, and then going dim again. After a few more steps the lamp flickered brightly one last time and went out, leaving Andi in complete, closet darkness. She was surprised at how dark it was. There was no moon, no stars. Only the storm. The darkness was an incredible contrast from the pre-dawn
hours of the climb that morning—God, had it only been that morning?—when the almost-full moon had reflected brightly off the icy-mirror slopes of Everest and the mountains around it, creating a beautiful monochrome day out of the night.

But now Andi couldn't see a thing. Still, she figured she would be all right if she just kept walking in the direction she had been heading before her lamp went out. In a few minutes she would be able to see the ghosts of battery-powered lamps glowing inside the tents of Camp Four. If you were really close you could see the tiny flicker of flames from butane stoves, climbers melting snow for water. In fact, it almost looked like she could see them now—she could!

Andi thrust forward several steps, her arms in front of her as if the lights she saw were something tangible she could touch. She had taken a few more steps when she realized that she couldn't even see her hands, that the origin of whatever lights she saw was behind her eyes. She tried to stop, but by the time her mind sent the message to her tired legs it was too late. Her foot skidded across some slanted surface, and when her other foot came down there was nothing there.

Steve noticed some subtle shift in his surroundings, some slight change in the atmosphere, a brightening of the slopes around him that was not from his head lamp, and looked up to see a pie-shaped hole in the clouds through which he could see the stars. The wind was still blowing into his back, threatening to knock him face-first into the snow as it had already done once since he and Vaughn had set out from the place where Ross had jumped. But for the moment it was comforting to see that break in the clouds, that slice of
dark violet on black that seemed to once more add depth to a world that for hours now had seemed flat and two-dimensional. It reminded him that there was a sky.

Since slamming blindly into Vaughn at the place where they had found Ross on the ground, half drifted over with snow, Steve's eyesight had improved. It hadn't improved so much as that he had adapted, become accustomed to this new blindness. By cocking his head slightly to one side he discovered he could see peripherally quite effectively, could see *around* the blind spots, in a way. But even these hovering spots of gray didn't seem to block as much of his vision as they had before. He had thought that maybe his blindness had been the result of an air-borne ice crystal, since he had never had any problem with snow blindness, but now he wondered if it wasn't the effect of the sun shining brightly off all that snow and ice, and that the darkness of the night and the storm was helping to heal that somewhat.

Whatever the reason, he had been able to see too clearly when Ross had dropped off the edge, an image that played over and over again in his mind as he and Vaughn descended down the slope. Ross pulling himself to his feet, taking those two short steps closer to the edge, and then, quite simply, disappearing, stepping out and plunging straight down, his hands to his sides, like standing on the high-dive when he was young and watching the kid disappear in front of him over the edge of the board, only knowing that *that* kid was dropping into water . . . . His head lamp illuminating Ross's back—his red back pack, his blue parka, the gray mask hanging useless from his side—and then suddenly illuminating nothing, only empty darkness and blowing snow. It was an image surprisingly void of emotion. Even upon watching him jump, Steve's only emotions were
those of shock and surprise—and perhaps the vague realization that a man had just ended his life. But it didn't mean anything then; it was merely something that had happened, that neither he nor Vaughn had foreseen.

(Although upon looking back Steve cursed himself for not having foreseen something—the headaches, the excessive vomiting, all spoke of something that might have been more than mere altitude sickness: cerebral edema, perhaps, hypoxia; he should have know that Ross wasn't in his right mind.)

On the way back down the mountain that strange, emotionless scene of Ross dropping off the ridge kept replaying itself in his mind, and Steve found himself thinking of Andi. He had thought of her on and off since the storm had passed over the mountain. Would she have set off back to camp by herself yet? Would she be able to find the canisters in the darkness?

He was still thinking about Andi when he saw a dark shape a few feet ahead of him on the slope. Steve turned to Vaughn but the other man had already seen it, and was jogging ahead of him to whatever it was in the snow. When he got to the place where Vaughn was crouched he could see that it was a backpack, an oxygen mask—Andi's—which Vaughn had kneeled beside. Vaughn held up the pressure gauge from the canister so Steve could read it. It was empty.

"Where—" Vaughn started to yell, but stopped himself, realizing it was useless. Steve knew Vaughn was as clueless to where Andi's whereabouts as he was. Steve hadn't noticed how bad Vaughn looked until now. He was hunched over, his arms held tight to his body, crossed at the forearms across the groin. He was shivering badly. He
had taken off his goggles when they had iced over and was still climbing without them. Shards of grayish-white ice were crusted thickly in his brows and lashes. One of his eyes was frozen shut, and the other had a strange, glazed quality to it in the light from Steve's head lamp. Steve wondered if Vaughn's oxygen had run out.

"Vaughn! Your oxygen!" Steve tapped his own mask with one hand and pointed to Vaughn's with the other. He knew Vaughn couldn't hear him over the wind but hoped he would understand the signals. But Vaughn only turned and started down the slope, not even waiting for Steve to illuminate the way with his head lamp. The whole world's going to shit, Steve thought, and started down himself.

There is nothing like acute pain or the recognition that death is near to clear a climber's head, and in the last few minutes Andi had experienced both. After the mountain had pulled the ground out from under her feet—at least that's what it felt like—she had experienced a brief moment of weightlessness in which no part of her was touching the mountain, a brief moment in which she thought So this is what it's like, and then her foot planted in some crisp surface that might have been snow or bones and she somersaulted forward and landed unexpectedly hard with her ankle pressed into her buttocks, a searing pain shooting from her knee into her leg, but she wasn't done yet. Her lower leg, hyperextended, acted as a spring and launched her into the air once more, and when she again found the mountain beneath her, solid, she found herself sliding—slowly. Her chest pressed blindly against the mountain, her legs spread-eagled, arms extended, even her chin digging into the slope for some purchase, though she could still feel the ice slipping
beneath her like a tablecloth pulled from under a saucer, gravity tugging her slowly down like hands on the backs of her pants legs.

She pointed her toes forward, tried to dig the sharp front teeth of her crampons into the slope to stop her, but she realized with a tight, panicky feeling in her chest that her crampons were no longer strapped to her boots, that they had come off sometime during her fall.

And then, at some point in all of this, she suddenly realized that she was stopped. The ice had stopped moving beneath her—the saucer still rested on the table. At the moment there didn't seem to be any reason for it. Her feet hadn't connected with anything; she hadn't grabbed onto a crop of ice or thrust her hand into a crevice. The slope hadn't leveled out like the bottom of a slide, though what a nice prospect that would be, just to step off onto solid ground, to climb up and slide back down again if she wanted. She had simply stopped, as though gravity had gotten bored with her.

And so she was still stopped, her damaged knee throbbing rhythmically, making her head throb too. She didn't dare bend it, however, afraid that any movement might cause her to start sliding again. Her face had been gouged at some point during the fall, and she could feel blood trickling above her right eyebrow, surprisingly hot against her frozen skin.

Andi wasn't even aware that she had closed her eyes when something flickered across her eyelids, pulling her back to consciousness, the cold. She opened her eyes and looked up, saw a light that was not the moon or the stars but a light that moved, shining somewhere above her—dim at first but growing brighter. She could make out the multi-
contours of the cliff above her, the smooth slope, a ridge of boulders like a row of teeth, black against the lighter black of the sky. Judging by what she could make out of the cliff above her she must have fallen at least thirty feet, not straight down, but down across those eerie, toothy boulders, wedged into the mountain like a smile.

Andi caught some sudden movement just over that ridge of round rocks twenty feet overhead. A figure? A man? She could tell that it was a man now, seeming very ethereal, insubstantial in the darkness. The man seemed inhumanly tall, his towering form hunched against the wind. The figure seemed as if at any moment it might break apart into hundreds of oily shadows—shapes—that would slide down the boulders toward her. Ross? she wondered. And then she saw the light.

A few feet ahead Steve saw Vaughn pause by some small object and then continue on toward the extreme south side of the ridge, to where blocks of ice and boulders of shale and granite lay jumbled along the edge. He was soon close enough to see that the small object was a crampon planted in the snow, its fore-teeth pointed in the direction that Vaughn was headed. Steve watched as Vaughn leaped nimbly onto a crop of gray rock and ice and stood staring down the other side. A few moments later Steve climbed carefully up beside him and shined his torch over the edge.

At first he saw nothing, only rocks crusted with ice and beyond that a slope that angled down as smooth as the back of a shovel blade. And then he saw it, the white face staring up at him, Andi's.
She was pressed against the steep cliff, arms spread. If it wasn't for that face staring up Steve might have thought she was just another rock. He had seen slopes like the one Andi was now clinging to numerous times, slopes shorn smooth by the wind, like someone had peeled off half the mountain with a giant shovel. The cliff was so incredibly steep here that he didn't know how she had stopped herself without using her arms. It was clear from where he stood that Andi didn't want to move, or couldn't. Aside from a small gash over one eyebrow he had no way of telling if she was injured or not. They needed a rope, but the only rope they had carried was still fixed to the Hillary Step, where Steve had almost fallen. Beyond Andi it was impossible to tell where the cliff dropped away into darkness—maybe ten feet, maybe a hundred.

Steve looked to Vaughn, who seemed also to be puzzling over the problem at hand. Or was he? The other man was staring down the slope in Andi's direction, but his head was nodding—dipping down, nodding back up again as if on a spring. He seemed to be swaying on his feet. And, Steve could see now that he looked at Vaughn's face closely, that the other man's eyes were closing, fluttering back open when the lids touched, sliding closed again.

"Vaughn!" Steve shouted over the wind, but Vaughn appeared not to hear him. *Son of a bitch.* Steve grabbed the other man by the arm and tried to shake him awake. "Vaughn!"

Vaughn's eyes fluttered open. He looked to Steve like a man who has awakened disoriented in the dark of a strange hotel room. Then he seemed to come to his senses. He nodded, pointed to something below him on the slope.
Andi was sliding again. Steve watched as she raised her arms over her head, tried to dig her gloved fingers into the smooth ice. *Your ax! Where's your ice ax?* was all Steve had time to think before Andi had for the moment stopped again. In the next moment Steve found himself negotiating the huge, snow-crusted boulder in front of him. He almost lost his balance when his foot skated across a patch of black ice on the boulder, and he decided he had better stop and think or he was going to kill himself.

They couldn't start down directly toward Andi—that much was clear. The slope was too steep, the ice too smooth, and if one of them slipped they would fall right into her. Staring at the section of cliff directly to the left of Andi, however, gave Steve an idea. The slope didn't look quite as steep here and not so obscenely smooth—dark tufts of rock protruded just above the surface of the ice like stepping stones in a frozen creek. If they could climb down this section and pull Andi over somehow, then climbing back up seemed at least possible, if not easy.

In the next moment Steve made up his mind: one of the men—Vaughn, the stronger of the two—would climb down and help Andi over to the not-so-smooth section of the cliff. Then he would climb beneath her, helping her up from behind. Steve would climb down after Vaughn and help pull Andi up if she needed help. Also he would be at a good perspective to illuminate the slope with the single headlamp.

Afraid to delay any further, Steve leaned his head close to Vaughn's and explained the plans, shouting and using hand signals. Vaughn seemed to be alert again, his eyes focused on the cliff beneath him, nodding to show he understood, and in the next moment the other man was in motion, shuffling crab-like over the boulders, ass to the cliff. Once
over the boulders he spun around so that his stomach faced the cliff and continued down further. He climbed quickly and competently, and in a few seconds he had stopped a few feet above Andi and a little to the left, clinging to that not-so-smooth section where the rocks humped out of the ice. He seemed to be searching for a way to get closer, but he only hesitated a few seconds before he took his ax in hand and began smashing chunks of ice out of the cliff to use as footholds.

While Vaughn was hammering this make-shift ladder out of the ice Steve positioned himself in what he estimated to be the best location both to illuminate the cliff and to climb closer if Vaughn or Andi needed help. He was right below a lip of boulders crusted into the mountainside like a row of teeth—he would be right beneath the gum line, seemingly. The way the cliff sloped down here it could almost be the edge of some colossal throat they were clinging to—the top of a tongue, the frigid, jet-stream breeze the wind expelled from lungs. Steve found himself staring at that wall of darkness beneath Vaughn and Andi where his head lamp would illuminate no further. Again he wondered how far it was to the edge of that throat—it was impossible to tell—and beyond that how far a fall into . . . what? A stomach? No, they were particles too small to be swallowed, Steve was sure. They would be inhaled.

Steve, realizing that he had closed his eyes, made an effort to push them back open, looked down to see that Vaughn had lowered himself to the footholds he had smashed out of the mountain. He was reaching a hand toward Andi—that rock with a face—who was still plastered to the mountainside, and then he seemed to think better
of it. He pulled his hand back and with his ax started to hammer out a broader ledge around his feet for support.

Steve watched as Vaughn positioned himself sideways for a better angle to hack the ice away, watched as the crescent-shaped, metallic head of the ax smashed down, sending shards of ice flying, reflecting like tiny camera flashes in the glow of the head lamp. Steve was still watching the ax head piston down in short, smooth strokes when the ax suddenly jumped awkwardly through the air and Steve realized with a feeling like a lump of hard ice in his stomach that Vaughn was falling. The ax skidded across the mountain as Vaughn dropped, eerily fast, his elbow and shoulder hitting the mountain, bouncing him back up into the air again. Steve watched as the falling body brushed past Andi and disappeared over the edge of the cliff which, Steve could now see, was only maybe a dozen feet from the spot from which Vaughn had fallen.

Steve stood for several moments, staring dumbly at that wall of darkness where Vaughn had disappeared before he realized that Andi was slipping as well. Vaughn had only seemed to brush past her when he fell—a glancing blow—but she was again sliding, slowly, building up inertia, a kind of human sled at the crest of an icy hill. Knowing he only had seconds to act Steve dropped to one knee, began to lower himself down the mountain, but he was too slow a climber, too methodical, and Andi was already moving too fast. So he watched, helpless on one knee, peering back over his shoulder as Andi slid down the slope, white-eyed in the glare of his head lamp, and vanished over the same lip of stone that Vaughn had.
Steve stayed crouched on the narrow shelf of stone he was on for several minutes, not really thinking about anything. After awhile a decided that he had better start moving again, so he pulled himself back over the boulders that no longer resembled teeth he could see now, but only boulders, and retraced his steps away from the edge of the mountain. Walking, he soon discovered that his feet had become cinder blocks, heavy and solid, and that he had no feeling in his hands. At the place where Andi's lone crampon was lodged in the snow, Steve stopped walking, pulled off his gloves and looked at his hands—analyzed the blue flesh, the purple skin beneath the nails. His hands: the only two friends he had left now. They wouldn't let him down.

Steve stood awhile longer, staring at his hands, and then continued absent-mindedly past the crampon in the direction he had been heading before, leaving his gloves behind him.

Passing the place where Andi had dropped her backpack, her oxygen mask and tank into the snow, Steve wondered how much oxygen he had left. He began to pull off his pack to check but stopped, hardly able to believe what he saw. There was a three-inch jagged gash in the corrugated rubber hose below his mask. How long had that been there? He pulled off his pack the rest of the way and checked the pressure gauge. Empty. It had probably been empty a long time, but it wouldn't have mattered because he hadn't even been breathing the oxygen from the canister ever since that gash had been there, not suffocating because of that break in the hose—he had been breathing the thin Everest air. Now, however, he began to feel himself getting weak, light-headed. He wondered if his mask had been acting as a placebo, making him think he had been
breathing the ninety-percent-pure oxygen mix when in fact he hadn't been. Now that he knew that he was out of oxygen he was having trouble breathing again.

As dizzy as he was now, however, he was almost able to walk a full five minutes before his boot caught on something and he collapsed forward into the snow. It almost felt as if something had grabbed at his foot, had pulled him down. Crouched in the snow Steve thought of all the bodies he'd seen the three times he'd climbed the mountain, skeletons shaved clean of flesh by the elements. The dead, he suddenly realized, were all around him.

After resting a few moments Steve pulled himself to his feet, forced himself to keep going. He had only taken a few more steps however before he fell again—was tripped. He had felt it this time, fingers pinching the toe of his boot as he raised his leg to take another step. And there, sure enough, was a skeletal hand jutting out of the snow beside him, fingers splayed in a congratulatory gesture. Welcome. Beyond the hand a skull tilted sideways out of the snow as if swimming, bobbing for air.

Steve rested his eyes, experienced the shot of a screen door thrown open against the side of a double-wide trailer. Goddamnit, Stevie!—his mother's voice. Get up out of the snow! So she was here too, his dear, dead mother, the only bones up here in polyester pants and loafers. Hearing his mother's voice motivated him—he pressed himself to his feet, kept walking. He had to keep moving—people were depending on him. He turned his attention to his feet, concentrated on lifting each boot out of the snow, pushing it forward, pressing it back down again—a machine. If he did this enough times he would
make it back to camp. But he had only taken a few more steps before he once again found himself lying face-down in the snow.

This time he lay there for several minutes, comfortable for the first time in hours. It was nice down here, and bright. His head lamp reflected white off the ice and made a kind of day out of the night.

Steve let his eyes close and suddenly he was back in flat Iowa, a boy of six or seven lying on his back in the yard after a winter snowstorm. If he lay still long enough he knew that his mother, who was inside the house, would think he was dead. How sad she would feel! Seeing him lying there, frozen to death in the snow. What a shame—a boy that age—and with his whole life ahead of him too. So he was surprised when the screen door banged suddenly open and his mother was yelling at him.

"Goddamnit, Stevie! Get up out of the snow! You're going to catch pneumonia!"

So she wasn't fooled, not even for a second.

After the door banged closed Steve lay in the snow listening to the drone of cars on Broadway, the hum of a television from inside the Appleby's house next door. Somewhere—distant—a phone was ringing. He closed his eyes and the bright, white sun to the south turned his eyelids pink. Sooner or later he opened them again and was surprised at how definite everything seemed—his eyelashes, his breath clouding white in the air above him. He lay in the snow a few seconds longer, staring at the tops of the pine trees at the periphery of his vision—dark strokes of green against the clean, hard blue of the sky. He lay there, remembering his mother's harsh words and thinking how nice it was that somebody loved him. After awhile he got up and went inside.