SKINNING THE BEAST

By

Susheila Maria Khera

RECOMMENDED:

Advisory Committee Chair

Department Head

APPROVED:

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dean of the Graduate School

Date

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THESIS

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By

Susheila Maria Khera, B.A.

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Each of the main characters in these stories must deal with a personal beast which forces the character to confront a weakness, flaw, or memory. The characters must subsequently deal with the positive or negative results of the confrontation.

The process of writing these stories included experimenting with different points of view, in an attempt to make the stories as credible as possible. Time was another important element in this attempt. While some stories are better situated only in the present, others need flashbacks to substantiate the character's actions and reasoning.
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Hunting Jackrabbits

The waitress came by and poured her more coffee. Joella sipped on the weak, brown liquid, cradling the cup in both hands. She was sitting in a booth, the desert sun hot on her cheeks where it sneaked through the turned slats of the blinds. Her arms and back were cold from the air conditioning, and she held her forearm against the window for a moment. It was still morning, and the only other people in the restaurant were two women and two men several booths beyond hers. A little boy—he looked like he was about two years old—was standing on the seat between one of the couples, facing her. They were all talking and laughing and eating toast and hash browns. Joella now regretted having ordered pancakes. When her food came, she ate slowly.

She signalled the waitress and asked for more coffee. This time she drank it black. It had been a long night, and she was tired. She chewed on a piece of syrup-drenched pancake and supported her head on her propped-up arm. She hadn't slept, what with Jerome going crazy and all. Her eyes traveled from her plate to the back
wall of the restaurant, and then stopped in contact with one of the men in the couples booth. A quick smile flicked across her lips, and he nodded his head ever so slightly. She looked back down at her plate, and when she slowly looked up again several seconds later, he was still watching her. Joella stopped eating for a moment and instead rummaged through her purse, trying to look busy. When she glanced up again, he was joking with the woman across from him.

A few minutes later, the man slid out of the booth and came toward her table. He was somewhat heavyset, and she could hear his jeans scrape where the insides of his thighs rubbed as he walked. He looked down at her quickly in passing and smiled. She had just brought the coffee cup to her mouth, but lowered it for an instant and tightened her lips in response. She focused on the couples booth. The other man, who had his back to her, was joking with the two women and doting on the boy. He reached across the table and offered the child the orange garnish from his plate, fanning it out so the boy could take his slow little child bites without touching it.

Someone opened the door, and the draft lifted Joella's napkin and sent it fluttering to the floor. She was reaching down to get it when the man who had passed her a few moments ago came up from behind and picked it up for her. "This yours?" he asked, smiling and holding the napkin delicately by one corner.

"Thanks."

"No problem." He lingered for an instant, then moved around so he was facing her. "I know you from somewhere," he said, "you look real familiar." He had blue
eyes and a thin line of reddish moustache. A dark blue baseball cap shaded his forehead.

"I don't think so," said Joella.

"You weren't at the Billiard Bar last night?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," said Joella. "I'm not even old enough to drink."

"Hmm," said the man, sitting down across from her. "I know I've seen you somewhere."

"That's impossible. I just got here."

"Oh," he said. "Well, maybe it was somewhere else. Where are you from?"

"Phoenix," said Joella.

"Whew!" he said, "that's the hot country. Lots hotter than here, huh?"

Joella smiled, shrugged her shoulders and sipped her coffee.

"So what are you doing, sitting here all alone?" he asked after a slight pause.

Joella laughed slightly. "My boyfriend dumped me," she said, and looked down at her plate.

"You're kidding!" the man said. "What kind of an idiot is he?"

Joella blushed and bit the inside of her lip for an instant. "Well, actually, I dumped him."

"Now that's more like it," he said. "By the way, my name's Dirk."
"I'm Joella," she said.

"Joella, pleased to meet you." He extended his hand, and as he was shaking hers he said "Let me guess, you were named after both your parents."

"Yeah!" said Joella, laughing.

Dirk gave her hand an extra squeeze before releasing it. "So this boyfriend of yours," he asked, his eyebrows slightly raised and his eyes looking at her intently, "what's his problem?"

Joella flicked her hand as though shooing away a fly. "He's a jerk."

"What's his name?" asked Dirk.

"Jerome," said Joella. She let her temple rest on the heel of her propped up hand and fiddled nervously with her fork. "We were supposed to get married, so we decided to drive up to Vegas."

"Oh, I see," said Dirk, "you eloped, right?"

"Yeah." She looked up and huffed a little laugh. "Then he suddenly got this notion that we should go to Reno, so he just kept driving."

"Well, Reno's nice. Couldn't you have gotten married here, too?"

"I don't know," said Joella. She put down her fork and looked past Dirk at the back wall of the coffee shop. "We got kind of lost, and we were both tired," she said. She continued looking at the back wall. It was a light yellow stucco with a framed calendar picture of a different style covered wagon placed crookedly over each booth. That stupid Jerome. Everyone had warned her. "He's like, a total jerk," her friend
DeeDee had said. “He never even lets you hang around with us anymore.” This whole elopement deal had been his idea. He thought he was so hot because he was tarring roofs for ten dollars an hour. “The foreman’s talking about promoting me,” he had told her. “And then I’ll get to travel. In summer, we’ll work up in Michigan and Ohio.”

“He started drinking,” said Joella. “It’s kind of what he does a lot of.” She looked back at Dirk. “Then he started driving all crazy. Finally I just told him to let me out. I don’t need that kind of crap in my life. He just slammed on the brakes and started yelling, so I got out. The jerk started driving again while my one leg was still in the car.”

“He’s a fool,” said Dirk. “Just be glad you didn’t marry him.” He smiled warmly, “It’s his loss.”

Joella looked at him, shook her head at the memory of Jerome, and sipped more coffee.

“And now you’re sittin’ here in Reno.”

“I’m sittin’ here in Reno.” She pushed her plate away and sat back in the booth.

“Hey,” said Dirk, leaning forward slightly, “be glad you’re rid of him.”

“Yeah, right,” said Joella, rolling her eyes, “except how am I supposed to get back home now?”

“What do you mean?”
"I mean, I just got out of the car in the middle of an intersection and left him. I have about enough money for a couple of breakfasts." She twisted her lip to one side and jiggled her foot a few staccato beats.

"Can't you call somebody?"

"Oh, sure. What am I gonna say? Hey, it's me. My elopement didn't work out. Jerome was a jerk, just like you all said. Please send money. I'll be at the Reno Salvation Army."

"What about your parents?"

"Yeah, yeah. My Dad lives in Virginia with his new wife, Juniper." She rolled her eyes when she said the name.

"What about your mother?"

"Her and I don't get along."

"Why not?"

"The usual." She looked at Dirk and gave a little huff. "You know, her wanting me to always tell her what I'm doing and stuff."

"She lives in Phoenix?"

"Yesss," she hissed, "unfortunately." Joella gulped a mouthful of coffee. "I'd call a friend, but they're all, like, totally broke"

"Now, hey," said Dirk, "things can't be that bad!"

"Right!" She gulped more coffee.

"Poor little lambie," he chuckled. "All alone in the big world." He paused.
"Hey, buck up. Things'll work out!"

Joella twisted her mouth and shrugged her shoulders.

The little boy's squeals pierced the air. "Is that your son?" she asked, lifting her eyes from her hands that lay folded in her lap.

Dirk chuckled. "I wish," he said, looking right into her eyes.

Joella looked back down at her hands.

"Hey," said Dirk, leaning forward after a few seconds pause, "take a look at what's outside." He parted two of the slats, and blinding white sunlight and reflection from the paved parking lot poured in.

Joella squinted through the opening.

"See that?" asked Dirk, nodding his head towards a dark metallic green car, "hot stuff."

"Yeah. It's nice," said Joella.

"Now that's a baby for me. A '68 Ford Torino GT."

"Wow," said Joella, looking at him confused.


"A Ford?" said Joella. She laughed and said the only thing she knew about Fords. "Fix or repair daily?"

"Hey," chided Dirk, "them's fightin' words."

Joella shrugged.
"I'll tell you what," said Dirk, "we're gonna take this little puppy for a spin. You in for a ride?"

"No," said Joella, "I can't really be running around."

"Oh, come on," said Dirk, "how long could it take?" He leaned forward and lowered his head, so he was looking up at her slightly. "Come on, take a ride," he said, winking his left eye. "Besides, the girls would love to meet you." He indicated the booth where he had been sitting with a slight movement of his head.

"Well," said Joella.

"Come on, just one little ride. Say 'Hi' to the girls."

"Okay."

"Right on!" He made a clucking sound and pointed his fingers at her as though he were shooting two pistols. "Be right back," he said, getting up and patting her shoulder.

Joella watched him go over to his booth and sit back down. He joked with his friends, and amid the laughter they all got up to leave. He let them go first and brought up the rear. As he came to Joella's table, he stopped momentarily and asked her if she was ready. "Yeah," she said, and rose to follow.

Dirk's group stopped and paid at the cash register, and then went outside while Joella paid her bill. When she joined them in the parking lot, they were gathered around the driver's side of the car, talking and laughing. One of the women was leaning against the side of the car by the rear window, smoking a cigarette. Dirk was
sitting in the driver’s seat, the door closed, talking to the woman with the little boy. She held him on her hip, and his dimpled hands were reaching for the open car window and the steering wheel. “Come on,” said Dirk, “just let little champ sit on my lap for a minute and try the steering wheel.”

“Oh no!” laughed the woman. “He gets too nervous away from his mama.”

“Well, it's about time he didn't,” said Dirk, reaching out and giving the boy's foot a little tug. The woman drew back slightly and shifted the boy on her hip so he faced away from the open window.

Joella took a couple of steps in their direction and ran her finger along the side of the car in little paintbrush strokes. The other man, who was also a bit on the heavy side and had a greying moustache and grey-brown hair that stuck out from his red baseball cap, stepped aside and smiled. “Hi, I'm Mitchell,” he said, extending his hand.

“I'm Joella.” She shook his hand and nodded.

“Hey there,” said Dirk. “You ready to take your ride?” Joella nodded. She looked at the women and smiled. The one who was smoking smiled back; the other one suddenly became stern and squinted her eyes.

“Why don't you go sit in front,” said Mitchell.

Joella walked around the front of the car to the passenger side. There were no rear doors. Mitchell was right behind her, and he opened the door while she slid onto the black vinyl bench seat. It was hot, and she was glad she was wearing long pants
to protect the backs of her thighs.

Mitchell stood outside, holding the door open and talking to the ladies over the roof of the car. They were laughing again, and Joella stretched her neck to look around Dirk. He reached for the boy’s hand. “You take good care of little champ!” he said.

“Oh, nothing but!” said his mother, then she leaned down and looked at Joella. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Joella.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She laughed slightly.

“Where...”

“Ladies,” said Mitchell, interrupting her, “maybe we’ll see you again sometime!” He slid in next to Joella and slammed the door. The woman who had been leaning against the car pushed herself away and tamped out her cigarette. She stood next to her friend and waved.

Joella started and looked at Mitchell, then at Dirk. The woman with the child looked at her hard. “Where are you from?” she asked, just as Dirk turned the key and the loud and rumbling engine sprang to life. He began backing out of the parking space. “Ride ‘em easy, toots,” he called to the woman. She grimaced, then took another hard look at Joella.

“Aren’t they coming with us?” asked Joella.
"No," said Dirk. He looked down at her, laughed, and wagged his head. "I guess they was scared."

Joella bit her lip and looked out the windshield. The woman who had been smoking was fumbling in her purse. The other one was pointing at the car, saying something. In a swift, tire-squealing move Dirk turned the car around and jumped them into the middle of the busy street. Joella lost sight of the two women.

"So, where are we going?" she asked, as Dirk maneuvered the car through the traffic.

"We're just going for a little spin. I thought maybe we'd hit the highway and see if we could get up some speed."

"I don't want to go too far," said Joella.

"Don't worry. We'll get you back. Hey, it's not like you have to be somewhere."

Joella was silent. Mitchell had put on sunglasses and was so close to her, she could feel his thigh pressing against hers. Her elbow poked the side of his soft belly.

Dirk cruised down the streets that shone mirror-bright in the sun. Joella wished she had sunglasses, but made do by shading her eyes with her hand.

"Tell you what!" laughed Dirk, "don't ever get a classic without AC." He punched a button and cold air blasted into the vehicle. "You like this ride?" he asked Joella.

"Yeah, it's great."
"You bet it's great."

He continued weaving in and out of traffic, racing to hit green and amber lights.

"You can just let me off up there," said Joella, pointing to an empty parking lot.

"Let you off!" said Dirk. "Baby, you ain't seen nothin' yet!" He slapped her thigh. "No, no! You gotta see this puppy go down the highway."

Joella pressed her arms to her sides and her knees and thighs together. Soon they left behind the glittering traffic of Reno and were heading north on I-80. The road stretched before them, black and straight. The rocky, scruffy, buckskin-colored desert on either side of the road blazed in the noonday sun. Cars and trucks zoomed by.

"Hey, Mitch!" shouted Dirk, stepping on the gas and accelerating to eighty, "looks like we got us a hot one!"

Mitchell laughed and Joella could feel his insides jiggling. She tried to squeeze away, but there was no place to go. Every so often, Dirk's right elbow nudged her in the front of her ribcage as he worked the steering wheel. No one spoke. They passed by a few individual houses set off in the distance, then a small town. Remembering a warning from long ago, Joella looked at the car doors. They both had handles.

The drone of the engine and the dull roar from the air conditioning filled the
space. Now the desert lay empty and hot on either side, and the traffic had thinned. Joella thought of what she was wearing. Jeans, a white tank top, and red panties.

Those stupid red satin panties that Jerome always said he liked. She bit the inside of her lower lip.

"Whooee!" howled Dirk. "Baby, I live for this!" He sped up to 100.

Mitchell pounded the inside of the door a few times. Then he moved his left arm so it rested across the seat back. "Ride 'em hard, Dirk, ride 'em hard!" he shouted.

Joella leaned forward slightly to lose contact with Dirk's fleshy arm. She thought of her friend DeeDee. She had once gotten into a van with a complete stranger, and all they did was go out to the desert, watch the moon, drink Sangria and then he brought her home. Joella glanced up at Mitchell without moving her head. His stupid sunglasses kept her from seeing where he was looking, but he was facing straight ahead and wagging his head to some beat that was coursing through his brain.

On the other side of the divided highway, she saw a gas station and snackshop. As they passed it, she saw a flash of the blue sign on the side of the sun-bleached building. "Phone," she thought. "There's a phone." They roared by. A few moments later, she saw large green exit signs. There had to be a town nearby.

"All riight!" said Dirk, and started to slow down. Maybe they were stopping for gas. She tensed her legs. She'd have to run into the gas station and tell the attendant. Ask for the phone. Call collect. Or just call the cops. Suddenly Dirk
pulled off the highway and bumped onto a dirt road. Joella thrust her arm out and
gripped the dash with her fingers to steady herself. "Where are you going?" she yelled.

Dirk laughed. Dust billowed up around them and he turned off the air conditioning. "We're just going to take a little break," said Dirk. Mitchell snickered.

The road cut between two steep banks, then curved slightly away from the highway. Dirk stopped just behind a little hill. A cattle guard lay across the way, and beyond it the road was washed out in parts and strewn with boulders. He shut off the engine and pulled the key from the ignition. He tossed it in the air, caught it and laughed, then reached into the back seat, moved aside a coat that was lying there, and pulled out a rifle. "I'm gonna hunt a few jackrabbits."

Joella said nothing. It felt like a rope was wrapped around her throat and someone was pulling it tight.

Mitchell and Dirk both opened their doors and got out. Dirk held the key over the car roof toward Mitchell, jingled it and laughed, and then stuffed it in his pants pocket. Mitchell shook his head and held the door open for Joella. She moved her stiff legs and slowly scooted across the seat. At the door, she hesitated. Mitchell huffed, and she got out.

She could feel the heat from the granular rock and rough dirt crawling up her legs. The sharp, soapy fragrance of sagebrush welled around her, and behind her she could hear the highway rushing like a distant river. Dirk crossed the cattle guard and
stopped for a moment.

"Rabbit stew tonight," said Mitchell, rubbing his hands and following him.

Joella heard her father's voice flash through her head. Damned jackrabbits! Good for nothing. Full of ticks and tularemia. Wouldn't eat them if they were the last meat on earth. She stayed by the car, leaning against the sparkly green door. She knew the highway was right past the curve in the road. It probably wasn't even half a mile. She watched them; Dirk with the gun resting on his shoulder, Mitchell right behind him. After a few steps they turned off the road and made their way over the rocks and scruffy sagebrush. Joella sidled forward to keep them in view and leaned against the front fender. They were heading for a small draw at the bottom of the hill. A green line of bushes and small trees followed the trickle of water that ran there. She wondered about leaving.

Dirk turned around and saw her still standing by the car. "Come on!" he yelled, and gestured widely with his arm. "I'll even let you shoot!" Mitchell laughed and turned his back to her. She could see him shaking his head.

"I'm fine right here!" she yelled back.

"No, no. Come on," said Dirk, "nobody gives up a chance to go hunting jackrabbits with old Dirk." He stood there and watched her. She bit her lip and took a few hesitant steps down the road. "That's right, baby," shouted Dirk, "ain't nothin' gonna hurt you." He turned around and continued to walk down the slope. Mitchell glanced back once, then turned to follow him.
Joella crossed the cattle guard, carefully negotiating the iron bars to keep her own feet from getting caught. She stepped off the road and onto the spiny, grainy floor of the desert. Dry balls of tumbleweed and pale green cacti surrounded her. Dirk and Mitchell were bobbing among rocks and low shrubs. She squinted against the glare of the sun; sweat ran off of her eyelids.

"Hey!" yelled Dirk, turning around and looking up at her. "Come on!"

Joella took a few more steps. She could feel the heat of the ground through the thin soles of her high-top canvas tennis shoes. She saw that Dirk had unshouldered his rifle and was fiddling with it, maybe loading it. Mitchell was standing next to a sagebrush, pissing. His sunglasses caught the sun and glinted as he turned his head to look up at her. He was grinning widely.

Joella looked back at the car. Its green sparkle blinded. She took a few more steps, careful to avoid the clinging spines and prickers that were everywhere. Below, Dirk and Mitchell were talking, looking up occasionally to watch her progress. Again, she looked back at the car. She could still see its headlights and silver grill glaring in the sun. In the distance, she heard the muffled shortling of jake brakes. She remembered seeing the green exit signs just before they turned off onto the dirt road. A few more steps, and the car would be out of sight. She stopped. She saw Dirk and Mitchell talking, and then Mitchell's shoulders sagged for an instant. He shook his head and started back up the slope. Dirk aimed his gun at some distant point down at the bottom of the draw. Mitchell was coming up the hill. Joella took a step away,
and he pointed at her. Dirk had his back to them. He pulled the trigger and cracked the air with a loud bang. The sound fell around them like a fine shower.

"Oh shit," thought Joella. She thought of the snack shop, the blue phone signs. How far back was that place? Seemed like they then turned off right after they passed it. Then there was the exit, right up ahead. She watched Mitchell huffing up the hill. She backed up another step, and then she stopped thinking, just turned around and propelled herself over the rocks and small plants, over the loose and slippery soil. Her breath was coming in short, hot spurts. She couldn't draw it any deeper than the middle of her chest.

She reached the road, then bounded across the cattle guard in two steps. From below, she could hear Dirk yelling. She yanked open the car door, grabbed her purse, and ran up the road, back toward the highway. Dirk's shouts trailed behind her. Mitchell was cussing. Another shot punched the air.

The noise from the highway was getting closer. Just a few more steps, just around the corner, and she'd be there. She would run across the highway, across the divider, down to the little gas station and snack shop. Or she could run up to the exit and the town. There had to be one. Whatever was closer, that's where she'd run. 9-1-1. She'd call 9-1-1. Then she'd call home. Her mom, her dad. It wouldn't even matter if Juniper answered. She'd call. She'd be okay after she called. She was not alone in this world.
The First Cold Night

It's been a week now since I stopped and helped that drunk out of the pit. I was coming home kind of late, and it was cold, at least twenty below. That's when it starts to get real serious. Anything colder than twenty below and you better watch your step. I'd been to the auction, but there wasn't anything I was particularly interested in, except maybe a birdhouse that looked like a log cabin. But after it got to ten dollars I figured what the hell, I could make one myself with all the scraps I've got lying around the house. So I left and went to the all-night truck stop for dinner. Had the usual, plus a piece of cherry pie. I was reading Captives of the Desert, and every time I read that book I just have to keep going. Old Zane Grey knows how to tell a story. By the time I hit the highway it was pretty late.

When I've been at the truck stop, I go home through the valley by what I call the back way. The road is in pretty poor shape, all bumpy and cracked from frost heaves, so you have to drive kind of slow. But you have to do that anyways on account of the moose. They'll just step right out in front of you if they want, and you better be ready to stop. Still, it's a nice drive, especially when the aurora's out. I saw
one the other night from my house. It was the kind that hangs down like a long, green curtain.

When my wife Olive and I came up north and homesteaded, back when we were young, we were the only ones for miles around. The roads were dirt, and we hardly ever went to town. These days, there's more lights up in the hills every year, I guess on account of us being the next valley from town. People want to live out in the woods, but they still have to go to town to work. Now the roads are all paved, and of course that makes it easier. Anymore, I just like to get away. For me, one day is pretty much like the next. The mornings are okay, and then I'll have a bite at lunch, but after that it gets so I can hardly stand it. I just get up and leave. On weekends I can usually get to the auction or a hockey game, but during the week I'll go for a drive, or have pie and coffee at the truck stop and read. After a while, it's okay to go home.

Home just isn't what it used to be, now that everyone's gone. You know, Olive and I built our own place. We cleared the land, built the house, put in the garden, and raised chickens and even a cow now and then. We could take care of ourselves just fine, and me and her could fix most anything that needed fixing around the place. Every year she'd put up dozens of quart jars of carrots, beets, beans, peas and all sorts of vegetable relishes. When I finally cleaned up around the place last year, I found a couple of jars of beets from the year before. I've still got them, but I just like to look at them. Now that I'm alone, all I do is the wood. All that gardening stuff, I don't
know. It's a lot of work and I can't seem to get a move on it. Last year I threw a few potatoes in the ground, but now the garden patch is so full of weeds, you can hardly even tell it's there.

The biggest change for Olive and me was our daughter Pam. After she was born we added on the back bedroom. We'd watch her all the time, us being out in the wilderness and all. But she never got seriously sick or lost in the woods, so I guess we did okay there. By the time she was ready for school, there were enough people out here and the roads were in good enough shape that they sent a school bus out every day. Lots of times I'd just take her in myself. I was doing furnace repair and electrical, and I had plenty of jobs.

So, the other night I stopped to help this drunk. He did telephone repair, or so he said. I must have found him right after he drove into that hole, because the headlights on his truck were still on. There's a lot of mining out there; they've been doing it for about a hundred years, and so there's big, deep holes everywhere.

He must have been going at a good clip that would have sent him sailing right over the edge when he hit the big curve. I came around the bend and all I could see were his tire marks in the snowbank, and then they disappeared. "Holy moly," I thought. "What the hell!" I slowed down, and then I could see the truck down there with the lights still on.

It wouldn't take much to die out there in the cold, so I pulled over to see what I could do. I always carry a bag of extra gear, just in case. I've got a heavy coat in
there, plus some mittens and a hat. I lit a flare and put it by the curve, then I grabbed
the coat and went down. It was pretty steep and slippery going, but I made it okay.

As soon as I opened the door, look out. The place smelled like a bar in the
morning, and the guy was a smoker to boot. There was old napkins, soda cups and
french fry containers scattered across the floor and the dash, and his ashtray was half
open and full of butts. The guy was the only one in the truck, and he was lying on
the floor kind of under the glove box. He must have passed out on his way down that
steep drop. The windshield was busted and his head was bleeding, so I guess that
might have had something to do with him being knocked silly. His hand was cut too.
As soon as I woke him up, he started crying about his hand. I told him he was going
to be okay. I felt around for broken bones, I was mostly worried about his neck, but
he was fine. He just wasn't wearing much. Here it was, twenty below, and the guy's
wearing tennis shoes, a tee shirt, and some zip-up jacket that might be okay for
Arizona. I looked around from some extra gear, but all I could find was a bunch of
garbage in his truck and toolbox. I covered him with my coat and told him to sit tight
while I went to get help. In the last minute I saw that he wasn't wearing any gloves,
so I gave him mine. Brand new gloves, still smelled like leather, and I put them on
his bloody, tobacco-stained hands. What was I thinking?

It was a steep climb out of there, and I had to keep holding onto willows to
help pull me along. Then I'd have to stop and put my hands in my pockets or pull
them into my parka sleeves. That cold just stings your bare skin. As soon as I got to
my truck I turned the heater on high and warmed my hands. I knew there was a restaurant about a mile back, so when I was warm enough I turned the truck around and drove there.

Luckily it was still open. The hostess was closing out the cash register, and she let me use the phone. I told her what happened, and she kind of laughed. "That big curve throws them every time," she said. I nodded and started to dial the troopers, but about halfway through I hung up. It was hard to figure out what to tell them. The guy was in the ditch, and he wasn't hurt, but he was drunk as hell. I knew they'd ask me about drugs and alcohol. The hostess saw me staring at the back wall, and she asked me if the phone was busy. She was trying to make a joke. I told her I was thinking of what to say. "Just tell them you found a drunk driver in the ditch," she said. "That's the truth, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said, "I guess it is." I dialed again, and they said they'd have somebody out there right away.

On my way back I started to wonder what I was doing. I didn't know this guy from Adam. I guess if it hadn't been so cold, it might have been okay to go on home and call the troopers from there. But you don't just leave someone in the ditch, no matter what.

I used to think that people learned their lessons from hard blows, but anymore I have my serious doubts. Take my daughter Pam. She was one of those kids you read about, the kind the government spends all kinds of money on to rescue. All this
"just say no" business, get out of here. Who do they think they're fooling? Kids do what they want. Happens fast, too. I remember the first time she got taken to the station. She wasn't old enough to drive yet, but her friends were. They came and got her one cold night. Before we could stop her and tell her to put on some warm clothes, or at least take some with her, she was out the door wearing nothing but a little skirt and a spring jacket. Mindless, just like the guy in the ditch. Olive was sure worried. She kept frettin' that they'd slide into a snowbank or get a flat tire. I thought a minor thing like that might teach her a lesson. Of course, I didn't want her to get hurt or lose her toes, or anything like that. I just wanted her to see how easily things can go wrong.

About eleven that night the phone rings. Olive jumps up to answer it, and I can tell she's talking to a complete stranger, just by the tone of her voice. It sounded like something was wrong, too, and I started to get worried. When she came back in the room, she told me it was the city police. "Pam and her friends were picked up for drinking," she says, "and two of her friends had pot on them." I remember how sick I felt all of a sudden. The idiots had gone to the hockey game, then sat out in the parking lot drinking. Whoever was driving almost ran over some guy walking in the parking lot, and he reported their car to the police.

We had to go down to the station and get her. What a scene that was. When we came in, the receptionist was sitting behind a bullet-proof window. Wasn't none too nice, either. I told her who we were, and she buzzed the door open for us. We
went through a dark little hallway, and then we came into a bigger room that was yellow, and that’s where the kids were. The other parents hadn’t shown up yet, and I don’t know what happened once they did. I just know when Olive and I came in, Pam started crying and saying she’d learned a lesson, and her friends sat there and nodded all sympathetic. There was an officer sitting behind a desk, and he had me sign something, and then we left. At home we talked about it, but Pam just kept crying and falling down on the couch. Finally, both Olive and I had enough. We grounded her, made her do extra chores, all that stuff. It went okay for a couple of weeks, but then we were back to the same old game. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better to just leave her at the station for the night. Let her get a taste early on what life could be like.

So after I leave the restaurant and get back to the hole to rescue this guy, who do I see sitting there in the snowbank when I come around my truck? The drunk. I don’t know how, but somehow he made it out of there alone. He was only wearing his stupid jacket, but he still had on my gloves, and he was all huddled up and didn’t even recognize me. I had to remind him who I was, and then he asked me who I’d called. That kind of surprised me; I would have thought he was too far gone to think like that. I didn’t want him to get all upset and try to leave, and I figured he didn’t need to know everything. He’s the one who’s causing trouble. So I told him I called a cab. That seemed to sit pretty well, and I helped him over to my truck.

The guy must have been half frozen. As soon as he was in there, all he did
was hunch over and rock back and forth. Then I asked him where my coat was.

"Huh?" he says. So I asked him again, and he just hunched down deeper and kept rocking. What a waste of time.

I shut the door and looked down into the hole. Sure enough, there was my coat, hanging out of his truck. I didn't really have much choice, so I stumbled back down and got my coat. That's when I saw the key still in the ignition. Damn. Guys like that. He could have killed somebody. I pulled that key and was about to throw it into the willows, when for some reason I decided to keep it. Maybe I just wanted a reminder of what it all comes down to. Maybe I wanted to find him someday, give him the key, and tell him all about that night. Maybe he'd listen; maybe he'd have learned something.

Guys like that and their screwing up, their damn promises, their damn lies. Pam was always falling for them, although I don't know what the hell she saw in them. She could have done whatever she wanted, and instead she just flipped. Didn't think she needed anybody to tell her or show her. How she had a daughter like Flora is beyond me.

The last time I saw her was almost six years ago. Olive and Flora were still around, and Flora was nine. Pam gave her to us when she was one. That is, she showed up one day with this grimy little kid who cried and whined all the time and left her with us. I suppose we could have insisted that Pam take her back, or at least that Pam stay, but we knew she'd leave as soon as she could, and we figured the kid
was safest with us. Flora turned out to be a real gem.

Six years ago, that was the last time I saw Pam, and she showed up like she always did, out of the blue, all happy to be home. She had her newest boyfriend in tow, and he had his two boys with him. They and their father were wearing fatigues, and those half-starved-looking kids had snot running out of their noses. What an operation that was. Flora wouldn't even come out of her room, and Pam just couldn't understand why she didn't want to talk to her mommy.

"She doesn't see you as that," Olive told her. Well, that set Pam off and she started to cry and boo hoo about having screwed up everything.

"I've just gotta get out of here for a while," she said. Famous last words. She pulls the mister by the hand and they leave in his car. His kids watched them drive off from the living room window and never said a word. I was working on a lamp switch over by the kitchen table, and I thought maybe two kids like that would be interested in learning something. Aren't boys supposed to be interested in technical things? I called them over, but all they did was stand there by the window and stare at me. They both had these huge, blue eyes.

Their silence was getting to me, and I wondered what was going on in their heads. "Come over here," I said. "I'll show you how to fix a simple switch. Then you won't have to pay someone like me to do it." But they just kept staring. Then Olive asked them if they were hungry. Still nothing; just quiet and staring.

"I'll make you peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Do you like those?" Still
nothing. She looked at me, shrugged her shoulders, and then made a couple of sandwiches. We were starting to wonder if these kids were even alive, or if they were just some sort of mutants. Maybe they couldn't understand English, or any other language, for that matter. “Come here and wash your hands,” Olive said.

Finally, a sign of life. They went over to where she was standing by the sink, and she scrubbed those dirty paws of theirs. Then they sat down at the table and Olive asked them if they wanted some milk. One of the boys seemed to be a little older, and he looked down at his plate and nodded. His younger brother watched him and did the same. When the older one wiped his nose with the back of his hand, the other one copied him. Olive got them each a glass of milk, and they sat there eating and drinking. I kept looking up to watch them, and then I started to wonder if Pam and their father were going to come back. Maybe they'd just left these two here for Olive and me. That would have been fine all right, us raising two starved-out urchins.

“What do you kids like to do?” I finally asked them. Of course, neither of them answered. So I named a couple of games that I knew Flora liked, but they still wouldn't say anything. The games we get Flora are all kind of traditional, some would call them old-fashioned. You know, games like pick-up sticks, Old Maid, Monopoly. Maybe the kids would have been more talkative if I'd said something like Nintendo or Pac-Man. Seems like those are popular, and they say that some kids respond real well to them. Sorry, but I just can't see the logic in them. Seems like a kid ought to know what it's like to skin his knees in a ball game. Computers here,
computers there. That's why you've got kids who can't sew a button onto their shirt or
who don't know one end of a wrench from the other.

"I don't think they're used to this," says Olive.

"Used to what?" I asked.

"To having people pay attention to them." She picks up their empty plates. "I'd
give them a bath," she says, "but nowadays you never know what trouble you might
get into."

"That's a fact," I said. Especially with a couple of licked puppies like those
two. No telling what they've seen and heard.

By the time dinner rolled around, those two still hadn't said a word, not to us
and not to each other, but they'd worked up an appetite. Flora finally came out of her
room, too, and she made sure to keep a close eye on them all through the meal. Then
the younger one starts eating his mashed potatoes with his hands. That set Olive off
all right. "Good God!" she said. "Come here. You need to wash your hands, young
man." When they came back she helped him coordinate his fingers around the fork,
but as soon as he saw that his older brother was eating with a spoon, he put down the
fork and picked up his spoon in kind of a fist. They both had to wash up again after
dinner.

Later, Flora invited them into her room. I could hear her telling them about
her stuffed animals. Then they all settled down on the bed and she read them "Winnie
the Pooh." Neither of them had yet to say anything, but I thought I heard one of them
kind of laugh when Pooh gets stuck in the door. When she was about halfway through, suddenly Pam and Mr. GI Joe drive up. As soon as that front door opened, the older brother came slinking out of the bedroom. He just stood there holding one of Flora's stuffed animals real close and stared at his father, then followed him to the couch and sat down next to him and stared up at his profile. His father didn't do much better. He just sat on the couch and stared straight ahead.

"Oh, hey," said Pam when she came in. "What's going on?" She went right on through the living room and into the kitchen.

I turned back to the guy. "Don't you even know how to say 'Hi'?" I asked him. Without bothering to look at me, he says "Hi." Then he just let his mouth drop open and hang there. That did it for me. I had to get up and go to the kitchen, and there's Pam pulling the bowl of leftover mashed potatoes out of the fridge.

"You hungry?" Olive asked her.

"Oh, Mom, we don't eat a lot," said Pam, right before she sat down and started eating the mashed potatoes straight out of the bowl. After a few bites she decided she'd had enough, and so she dropped the spoon into the bowl and then set it back in the refrigerator. She sighed and kind of drifted into the living room and sat down next to Prince Charming. Pretty soon the younger boy came out and sat next to his brother. He had a stuffed animal, too. Flora watched them from the hall, kind of hiding in the shadows. Olive started doing the dishes and I cleaned up my tools.

"Nice family," I says. "A real set of winners, especially pops there. Looks like a real
provider. Can't even say 'Hi' in a stranger's house." I threw the rest of my tools into
the toolbox and slammed the lid shut. "Damn nice outfit," I said. "A fine bunch of
upstanding citizens."

"Horace," Olive says, "stop it."

"Fine, fine," I said. "Have pity on the poor." I grabbed that toolbox and
banged out the door and headed for my little shop that's right next to the house. I was
glad I didn't have to be around their empty faces. Olive wasn't none too happy about
it. They were camping out in the living room, and she ended up sitting around in the
kitchen. Not much you could do with that crew.

The next day I'm getting ready for work, and here comes Pam, all bright and
clear-eyed. Boy she looks nice when she's had a good night's rest. The rest of the
brood was still all over the floor, wrapped in their blankets and sleeping bags. "Dad,
she says, "can I go with you on your rounds?"

"Sure," I said, surprised.

"Oh, thanks!" she says. "It's been such a long time since I've done anything
fun like that." So off we went, and for a while it was just like the old days, except of
course now she was all grown up. But when she was just a kid, she used to sit there
and look out the window, read me stories, or make bracelets out of that colorful
telephone wire. I kept looking over at her, and she seemed so happy to be watching
the snow-covered hills and patches of alder. When I see her like that, I can't help but
think that she's come around. It all seems so good, and then I'll jerk the reins back
and remind myself that it's only a moment like this and years of something else.

When I got back in the truck after my first stop, Pam pulled out a thermos and asked me if I wanted hot chocolate. "Sure," I said. It kind of surprised me, but then again, it was real Pamish. So I drank the hot chocolate while I drove to the next job, and pretty soon Pam starts asking me questions about feelings and stuff. Things like "How do you feel about JD?"

"That new boyfriend of yours?"

"Yeah."

"You know what I think of guys like that."

"Why are you always so strict?" she asks. "You hardly know him."

"All I need to see are his kids, and the way he sits on the couch all night with his mouth hanging open." I looked over at her and could see she was none too pleased. "I suppose he might make a good fly catcher."

"He would not," she says. "He's okay. And his kids are like that because his ex-wife didn't know how to raise them."

"Where's she now?"

"She's in a rehab program," says Pam. "The state made her go."

Like I said, a damn fine outfit we got going here.

"JD's nice," Pam goes on. "I like him."

So there it was. I felt everything inside of me bunch up into an old rag, and I put down my empty cup and concentrated on my driving. "You do, huh?" I finally
managed to say. Then she started in with the confession stuff.

"I know I haven't been very good," she says. "I just dumped Flora on you and Mom, and I never send any money or anything, but I want to change all that."

"You don't say," was all I could manage.

"I always picture Flora and me living in a nice house in a nice neighborhood, maybe up here, but maybe somewhere else, and JD has a good job, and we visit you and Mom a lot."

"That would be nice," I said, but somehow I just couldn't see it. I wondered if the guy could even get his pants on in the morning, let alone hold down any kind of job. But if Pam wanted to dream, well, let her dream.

"Have you ever thought about living in Hawaii?" she suddenly asked.

"Can't say that I have." Olive and I went over there once, before we got Flora. Not much to shout about, and expensive as hell.

"Well," says Pam, "JD has friends over there."

"Oh." I could see the picture coming into focus.

"They said they'd help us make a fresh start."

A fresh start, a fresh start, a fresh start. I've heard that before. I had to exhale slow, slow, slow. "What are you thinking of?" I finally asked her.

"JD's friends said they could get him a job picking coffee, and that we could stay at their place till we got one of our own."

"Picking coffee, eh?" I could just see the shape of her face out of the corner
of my eye, so I knew she was looking at me. I kept looking straight ahead, trying to picture old JD picking coffee in the hot sun. We were quiet for the next mile or so, and then I asked her if she'd mind living with other people.

"Oh no," she says. "They're real laid back and have a huge house on the beach."

"They do?"

"Oh, yeah."

"What do they do?"

"I don't know. You think I ask about every detail of their lives?"

"Houses on the beach are expensive."

"Well, I guess they can afford one."

Then we drove some more without talking. I stopped at the next job, and when I got back to the truck Pam wanted to give me more hot chocolate. But by then I'd had enough and my stomach felt like a rock. So we went on, past the open fields and a few houses. I just kept waiting.

"Dad," Pam finally says, "I was wondering if you could help us a little, you know, just till we get going."

Oh yeah. I know what that means. It makes me kind of nervous and fidgety to think about it. "What kind of help are you talkin' about?" I asked her, even though I knew. And then she sighed and her voice got all soft. "It would really help us if you could loan me some money to help pay for my plane ticket."
"You're really thinking of going?" I asked, and looked out my side window.

"Oh, we're sure," she says. "We've thought about it a lot, and talked about it, too."

"Those kids going with you?"

"Yeah."

"What about Flora? Don't you think you oughta stick around and be gettin' to know your daughter here a little better?"

"She doesn't even know who I am," Pam says, suddenly sounding bitter.

"Well, there's a reason for that," I said, and I looked her square in the face. Then she slumped against the door and had to hold her head up with the heel of her hand. "I can't do everything," she quietly says.

"Who said anything about doing everything?" I really had to pull in the reins on that one. "All I'm saying is you might want to take care of your own kid first."

We didn't say much for a while, and then of course I hear this shuddering inhalation. I glanced over, and there she was, all hunched over with her face buried in her hands. I could see that one coming. "Look," I said, "you're a grown-up. You've gotta figure this out. We'll help you, but in the end it's you who's got to figure it out."

"I know," she says. "But I can't come home."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't feel right."

"What would be wrong with it?"
"I'm just too old to come back home and live with my parents. I need to do this myself."

What could I say to that? We didn't talk again till I pulled into the driveway. There, Pam reaches out and puts her hand on my arm. "I know you're mad about last night," she says. "But I just can't help it." Of course she started crying again. "The way Flora treats me. I wish she'd understand."

"It's up to you," was all I could say.

They hung around four more days. JD sat on the couch, his mouth kind of hanging open. Lucky for him it was winter and all the flies were frozen. The kids still wouldn't talk, but they followed Olive around the house and the younger one was always pointing to the kitchen and getting her to make him something to eat. Olive tried to talk with JD a couple of times, but she didn't get much response. The only thing he ever did, besides eat, was take his feet off the coffee table when she asked him to.

On the third day, Olive came out to my shop, where I was spending most of my time, and asked what was going on. "Pam just doesn't have much to say, and JP and the kids are a lost cause."

"Nice houseguests, and his name's JD."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Same thing as ever." I dribbled some oil on my honing block and started sharpening one of my chisels.
"It's not good for Flora," said Olive, and sat down on a stool. "I'm glad she's in school most of the day."

"Yup. Thank God for small favors." I kept working on that chisel, and Olive sat there and watched. "You know," I finally said, "Pam asked me for money the other day."

"When she went to work with you?"

"Yep."

"How much?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"For what?"

"Seems like she and old Army pants are fixin' to go to Hawaii, rug rats and all."

"Hawaii!" That made Olive jump and throw her hands up. "Hawaii?"

"A good place for a fresh start, wouldn't you say?" I guess I shouldn't have said it like that, because all she did was stand there and shake her head and look at the floor. Finally she asked what I did about the money.

"I told her to give us a try. I told her we could take care of her and Flora here."

"And what did she say?" Olive asked.

"She said she was too old to come back here."

"That's all?"
"And that she had to fix things herself." After I said that, Olive just paced around slowly and quietly and didn't say a word. Finally she stopped and kind of looked past me. "I feel sorry for those kids," she said.

"Creepy things," I said.

"They can't help it," she said. "I'm just glad we can help Flora like we do." She looked at me a second, and then threw her hands up a little. "Well," she said, "Pam's got to make her way in this world somehow." Then she went back to the house.

I came in a little later. Pam and her family, if you can call them that, were sitting on the couch eating popcorn. Flora was back in her room. I motioned Pam to follow me into mine and Olive's room, and I wrote out a check for her plane fare to Hawaii. She gave me a hug and promised to pay me back. "Six months," she said. "In six months I'll have it all back to you. Thank you so much!" She likes to make promises and give thanks. What I should have done was take her to the airport, buy the ticket and put her on the plane, alone. Then maybe she would have had a chance. But this way, she had the money, and the next day they all left. They said they had to go down to Washington first to get their stuff. They were going to drive to Anchorage to sell the car, bigger market they said, and then they'd fly down from there. GI Joe was at the wheel of their busted up old station wagon that kind of rolled along like an ugly boat, and his little juniors were in the back seat hanging on to those stuffed animals Flora gave them. They actually waved good-bye to her and Olive.
When they were down the driveway and out of sight, I looked at Olive. She shook her head and said, "You do what you can. You do what you can."

So this drunk that I helped last week. I went back down into the pit to get my coat, and then I climbed all the way back up to the road. I had to stop for a few seconds to catch my breath once I made it to the road, and I could see his head and shoulders silhouetted in the rear window of the cab. He was all hunched down. I went up to my door and opened it, and stepped back once I got a whiff. The guy really reeked. I got into the truck and saw that it had been about a half hour since I called the troopers. Damn. They were taking their sweet time. A couple of cars went by, and one of them stopped and the driver asked if we needed help. I told him we were fine. I turned the heat on high to warm my hands and kept watching that dark highway, waiting for the troopers. Another five minutes went by.

The drunk was starting to doze and lean over. "Hey!" I shouted at him, "stay awake!" "Oh, yeah," he says. Then he picks his head up as best he can and squints through the windshield with what he's got left for eyes.

"You got any kids?" I asked.

"Kids?" He groans and lets his head drop back down. Damn. The guy's stinking up my truck, falling asleep, and the troopers are nowhere in sight. I opened my window a few inches and let in some cold air. Good thing I had my parka with the ruff. "You would have froze to death out there if I hadn't found you," I couldn't help reminding him. All he did was moan and then shiver into that little jacket of his.
Besides Pam getting lost, the biggest blow Olive and I had was Flora dying. She had leukemia. We found out about it right after Pam left. Poor thing. She was so good about it too. Never complained, always helped out wherever she could, and even went to hockey games with me. "Just sit and watch the game, Dad," she'd say, even though I was her grandfather. "I'll be okay. I'm just going to go walking with some friends of mine." So she and a couple of friends would walk around the arena, and I'd keep one eye on the game and one eye on them. They were good kids. Then she'd have to go in for another chemo, and after she recovered from that it wasn't long till the next one. She never complained, but finally it knocked her down.

When Olive died a couple of years later, I was pretty near numb. Not much to do all alone. I'd sit around a lot, look out the window, drink cold coffee, try and read, sleep on the couch, drink more coffee. It took me almost a year to move back into the bedroom. Something about the couch was good. Who else could be there but me? I'm just now getting over it and learning to do things alone. Olive and I were partners; we always helped each other. I still talk to her, in my mind. If I have to figure something out, I'll pretend she's sitting next to me and we're talking about things. She would have stopped and helped this guy.

And there he was, trying to sleep again. "Hey!" I shouted at him, and gave him a hard push. We'd been sitting there another ten minutes, and still no troopers. I closed the window and rested my head against the rear windshield. The guy started mumbling something, and I told him to shut up. Then I asked him what he did.
"Me?" he asks.

"Yeah. What do you do?" He kind of chuckled, then slurred something about telephone repair. "So that's what you do," I said. I looked at him and asked him if he had a wife. He kind of chuckled again, and then rasped out "Ha, ha." After a second or two he slurred "Not no more." I guess he lived all alone in some cabin up in the hills. By then I'd had about enough of him. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Just the day before, Pam had called. What a deal. Takes off for Hawaii, and six years later she gives me a call. At first, all I heard was the highway behind her, then I heard her voice and she starts asking for Flora and saying she wants to wish her happy birthday. "Her birthday was last month," I said. She didn't hear me, so I had to say it again. Then she just said "Oh, right." In the background, I could hear some guy telling her to hurry it up, and then one of them covered the receiver so everything sounded all murmury. Next minute she was back.

"Let me talk to Mom and Flora!" she shouted.

Well, what could I tell her? I had to sit down. Then the guy in the background started yelling again, and Pam shouted for me to go get Olive and Flora. What could I say? Finally I said "They're gone."

"What?"

"You heard me." We didn't talk for a while, and the traffic whizzed by her, and I watched the Bohemian waxwings outside my window eat frozen cranberries off the shrubs.
"Gone?" she finally said. "Where? What are you telling me?"

"Let's get going!" the guy in the background yelled.

"Wait!" was the last thing I heard her say, before someone slammed the receiver down in its cradle. I just sat on the couch for a while, and then I had them trace the call. It was from Maryland. So there you have it. I wonder if she ever even made it to the airport.

Well, the troopers weren't in any hurry. The guy and I sat there another whole ten minutes before I finally saw their bright headlights coming from the highway. I flashed my headlights and they turned on their red and blue roof lights. "Aw, man," the drunk groaned.

The trooper swung over and pulled in behind me, and I got out to meet him and tell him what was going on. He opened the truck door and looked at the guy. "Been having some problems tonight, sir?" he asked him.

"Aw, man," was all the drunk could manage.

"Let's get you out of this gentleman's truck and move you over to the patrol car," the trooper told him. The drunk rasped something, then fumbled his way out of the truck. As the trooper escorted him to the patrol car, I remembered my gloves. Brand new gloves.


"Give the gentleman back his gloves," the trooper told the drunk, who was
swaying and looking down at his hands as though he'd never seen them before. He slowly took off the gloves and handed them over, still looking at the ground.

"Thanks," I said, and stood there while they drove away. What a waste. Nothing but a waste. I got into my truck and sat there for a minute. Then I remembered the key. I took it out of my parka pocket and tossed it into the glove box. I snapped it shut. Son-of-a-bitch. Maybe someday, maybe someday. Then I drove home. The snow was glittering and thick on the willows and spruce. "You do what you can." Olive would say that, and I'd know I'd done the right thing, no matter what.

I opened the window to let out some of the smell, and I kept thinking of Pam. This was what she got to smell, every morning, every night. Every day was another chaos of headaches and things lost or neglected. Every day, more stink. Every day, waiting for night, and every night, dreading morning. When I left today to go to town, I planned to be back earlier, just in case she got the chance to call again. But her being in Maryland, maybe coming home late was better. That way, if she called in the middle of her night, I'd still be up.

When I got home after helping that drunk, I shut off the truck and sat for a moment. I got out, and the sky was clear and full of stars. The last green traces of an aurora hung there, and the snow was silver. I could smell the smoke from my chimney, and before I went in I grabbed an armload of wood. When it's cold like this, I like to keep the fire going, maybe sit by it a while before going to bed. And I
keep a few extra armloads of wood in the house. That way the wood is warm and
dry. I like to be ready, because when it's cold, you never know what might happen.
Skinning the Beast

Jim tried again. He adjusted his sitting position and firmly gripped the paddle. Stroke, rest. Stroke, rest. Stroke, rest. Around in a circle he went. He was almost in the middle of the lake, but he'd only managed to get there by going in circles. He emptied his lungs emphatically and laid the paddle across the canoe gunwales. "I'll count to three," he said to himself, and looked across the remaining distance, to the opposite, uninhabited shore of the lake. He was trying to reach it, just to see what was there, and to practice using a canoe. He knew that behind him the kids were watching. If he turned around, they'd be sure to call out something, especially Albert, the visiting chief's grandson. Jim had already had to put up with his laughter when he almost tipped the canoe as he got in.

This was Jim's first time doing field research alone. The opportunity to work in this Ojibwa Indian community for the summer had come up, and he'd been recommended by a colleague. "Something to help you get your feet wet," the colleague had said. Jim had been here now for a month, and he still had two
more to go. He’d driven up from the States, come all the way up here, to what
he considered to be the last reach of civilization before the Bush, a village at the
end of a dirt road, and started his work.

"One," said Jim, and took a deep breath. Slowly, he let it out. "Two."
Exhale. "Three." In the dark water, the wooden paddle shone like honey. "Work
it like a rudder," he remembered his friend telling him. He tilted the paddle, but
still the canoe wanted to turn in a circle. "Damn it!" he said. He held the paddle
loosely and let it trail behind him in the water. Then the wind picked up. It hit
him from the side and started pushing him down the lake.

No one ever wanted to talk with him. He’d ask perfectly logical,
straightforward questions, and most of the time he’d just get a smile or some
vague reference. Other times, people would start talking about something else.
He was getting worried. He had come here with the specific goals of researching
and writing about the traditions and practices of the community, with an emphasis
on his own interest in traditional religious ceremonies and practices, and yet he
didn’t even know if a medicine man still existed in the village. He discovered that
his closest link to that world was through a chief who was visiting from another
community in upstate New York. After all this time, Jim felt that he was finally
starting to gather some of the information he should have gotten during the first
week of his stay.

Jim puffed his cheeks full of air and carefully glanced up at the village side
of the lake. The kids were further up on the beach, playing in the sand with their backs to him. If he paddled hard, he could make it to shore, even if it meant going in circles. "Here goes nothing," he said. He leaned his shoulders forward and plunged the paddle into the water, then tilted it. Stroke, tilt. Stroke, tilt. Around he went. As long as the kids didn't look up, he'd be okay. The wind kept pushing him. "Maybe if I alternate," he thought. He tried two left, two right, two left, two right. The canoe zig-zagged a little, and the wind still pushed it, but at least he wasn't going in a circle. "That's the trick," he said to himself. "I think I can make it now." He threw a quick glance at the beach. The kids were still playing and not paying any attention to him. "To the dock!" he said. Left, left, right, right.

It seemed to Jim as though he couldn't do anything new without that Albert suddenly showing up and smirking at him or, almost worse, just sitting and watching. Usually he was accompanied by his younger sister Lela, who did whatever her brother did.

Jim could see the dock undulating in the water that had turned gray and choppy. Behind it rose the white safety of the beach, and close to the road that led to the village was Rose's house. She was the retired school teacher. Hers was the same white-with-red-trim color scheme of the other houses that were lined up on either side of the straight road that ran through the village, but it was slightly outside the village and directly on the beach. Jim switched to the right and
stroked hard. As he swung his paddle over to the left, he saw the visiting chief come out of Rose's house. The chief was her cousin, and he and his two grandchildren were staying with her during their visit. The chief had his hands in his trouser pockets and was walking directly toward the dock. "Don't mess up," Jim breathed to himself. "Steady as she goes." He switched to the right. The chief was now on the dock, watching him. Jim was close enough to see the chief's eyes behind his glasses. He could see the faint grin cracking across his face. A few more strokes, and the creaking, rocking dock was right in front of him. He would have hit it with the bow if the chief hadn't reached out and grabbed the canoe, then pulled it around to the side.

"Thanks!" said Jim, getting out of the canoe.

"Little windy out there, eh?" the chief asked.

"Yeah!" laughed Jim.

"Maybe you need a little practice paddling."

Jim could feel him searching his face. The grin was still there, only wider.

"It's rough," said Jim.

The grin melted away and the chief nodded. They both stood on the dock for a moment, looking out over the lake and the distance that Jim had covered.

"I'll have to wait for a calmer day before I try again," said Jim.

Again, the chief nodded. Just then, a green canoe began making its way from the village to the opposite side. Two women were paddling, heading straight
across the water. "Going to set snares," said the chief, indicating them with a nod.

"Hmm," said Jim, and watched for a moment.

"Maybe they can give you some paddling lessons," said the chief, and chuckled.

"Yeah," said Jim, laughing uncertainly. He pulled the canoe along the dock and dragged it up on the beach. The chief stayed on the dock and watched the progress of the two women. Jim laid the paddle in the canoe and started back to the chief. He wanted to use this opportunity, this moment of privacy, to reconnect with him. "Excuse me," he said, "but maybe you've got some time to get together this afternoon?"

The chief said nothing for a few moments, just watched the green canoe. Then he turned to Jim. "You wanna talk some more?"

"Yeah. I thought we could continue our discussion from yesterday." Jim shuffled his feet.

"Hmm. What were we talking about yesterday?" said the chief.

"You were telling me about your father, and what a great medicine man he was." Jim jammed his hands into his pants pockets and rolled in his lips to wet them. How can he forget what we were talking about? he wondered.

The chief nodded. "Oh yes, now I remember. So, what else do you want to know?"

Jim pushed aside his agitation. "I just wanted to ask you some more
questions about what he did, and maybe what he taught you," he said.

"Come over in a little while," the chief said, and turned to go back to the house.

"A little while?" said Jim. He followed the chief up to Rose's house. "So, I'll be over in a little while?" he said.

The chief nodded.

"Maybe an hour?" said Jim.

"Maybe," said the chief.

Jim turned in the direction away from the village and went to the nurse's station, where he had a room for the summer, since there was no other place to stay in the village.

The nurse's station was just a couple of hundred feet from Rose's house. It was white with blue trim, and the first house after the completely white rectory and church. It had taken him a week just to get a table for his room so he could work there, and the nurse was very particular about his cooking and bathing habits. "No showers after seven in the evening," she said, "no visitors, and no cooking on Sunday afternoons." When he asked why, she simply said it was her house, and that was the way she preferred it. He thought about writing to the university to tell them about her peculiarities. After all, they were paying for his room. But, he didn't quite know what they could do, or what alternatives he had for living arrangements. He decided to tough it out, and made an extra effort to
avoid the nurse as much as possible, which turned out to be fairly easy. She was rarely home, nor did she seem to be in the village very much. Most days, she would drive off somewhere in her car and not return until later in the evening. On weekends, she would sit in the kitchen and read magazines.

Jim entered the house and took off his shoes, then crossed the kitchen and walked down the short hall to his room. He gathered his tape recorder, tapes, pen and pad. He glanced at the clock and drummed his fingers on the table for a moment. "Might as well," he said, and sat down to make a short journal entry. He reached into a bag of potato chips on the table, then opened up the notebook and stared at the closed door. He ate the chips he had just plucked from the bag. "Windy today," he finally wrote. "Arranged afternoon meeting with the chief. Two women canoed across the lake to set snares. The children not very respectful. Limited adult supervision throughout the day. Often are sullen and moody." He looked at the brief sentences, then reread a previous entry: "Most young and middle-aged people gone for extended periods of time; working. The major summer occupations are working at the nearby lumber mill, and leaving the area for a mine further north. Some construction. Winter: people trap, work at a mink farm in the States, continue with mining and construction work." He closed the flimsy cardstock cover and ate a few more chips. The nurse insisted that the curtains always be drawn, to keep out the dust and sand that the wind kicked up, and the blue walls exacerbated the gloom. Jim himself didn't mind the
curtains being closed, as his window faced the road and anyone passing by could look right into his room. He hadn’t made the bed yet, and some orange peels and an apple core were on his nightstand. A box of notebooks, tapes, and index cards full of information was in the corner. Jim was pleased with how full it was getting. He checked his watch again. It was still early, but he didn’t know what else to do. He decided he’d go over to Rose’s and just walk slowly.

Rose answered the door when he knocked. "Come on in!" she greeted in her friendly way. "We were just sitting down for tea." She was a thin woman with neatly combed gray hair. Her father had been a white man who married a woman from the village, and Rose had spent her childhood there. Later, her father sent her and her brother to a convent school, but afterwards Rose returned and married a man from the village. Her cheeks were covered with a fine bloom of red veins, and she wore tidy, below-the-knee-length skirts. Jim followed her across the clean-swept, bare wooden floor, into the kitchen, which overlooked the lake. The chief was sitting at the table, and so was Marie, an older woman from the village. She greeted him with a big smile and pointed to a newspaper-wrapped bundle that was resting in the sink, then said something in French. She couldn’t speak English, and it was difficult for Jim to understand her with his limited French. Rose translated for him.

"She wants you to take a fish home for dinner tonight," she said.

"Oh, merci!" said Jim.
Marie nodded, and Rose brought him a cup of tea. He sat down next to the chief and put a fresh tape into the recorder.

"You gonna use that little machine again?" the chief asked.

"It helps me remember things," said Jim.

"You write stuff down, too," he said.

"Well, yeah. It's another way I remember things."

"So what do you want to know?" the chief asked.

Jim cleared his throat. He looked at Rose and smiled, and then at Marie. She was looking at him intently, also smiling. He nodded his head. "I guess, well, I guess I'd like to start where we left off yesterday. You know, you were telling me all about your father, and how he was a medicine man."

"Oh yeah," said the chief. "He knew how to do those things." He sipped his tea and looked straight ahead, across the table.

Jim shifted uncomfortably. "What things did he do?" he asked.

Rose cleared her throat and looked over at her cousin. He continued drinking his tea, then nodded his head. "He helped a lot of people," he said.

"What did he do?" asked Jim.

Again, there was silence for a few moments. Then the chief turned to Marie and spoke to her in French. She and Rose laughed, and Rose turned to Jim. "Marie wants to tell you about the first time she saw a parade," she said.

"Oh," said Jim. "That's nice, but maybe another time. Right now, I'm..."
Marie laughed and addressed him and Rose in French. Rose started translating. "We had heard about the Depression," she said. "We didn't know what it was. We just knew that flour was getting so expensive, and it was difficult to sell our furs."

Jim sighed and clicked off his tape recorder.

"One time we went to town," Rose continued with her translation, "and there was a big crowd of people on Main Street."

The chief tapped Jim's forearm. Jim looked at him and smiled, and the chief pointed to his recorder. "How come you shut that off?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I, uh, just don't really need this information," said Jim.

"Oh," said the chief, and nodded his head. "You're going to go back to that school, and you won't know what to say."

"I've got lot's of stuff," said Jim, flapping his hand through the air.

"She's been around a long time," said the chief, indicating Marie. "She's got lots of stories to tell."

Marie had stopped talking and was watching the two men converse. She said something to Rose, and Rose nodded her head and raised her eyebrows. Then she turned to Jim. "It's a little difficult to translate everything," she said. "She's saying a lot more than I'm telling you."

"No, no, it's fine," said Jim. "I was just trying to focus more on religious beliefs."
Rose turned to Marie and spoke to her, and Marie nodded and gave Jim a look that was a mixture of understanding, disappointment, and some contempt. The chief said something to her in French, lifted his clasped hands slightly off the table, then let them drop.

"Actually," said Jim, "sure, I'd like to hear more."

"She said she can't remember what happened next," Rose translated.

Just then the screen door flew open and Albert and Lela came running in.

"Hey you kids," the chief said, "slow down."

"We're hungry," said Albert, brushing his fingers through his black and shiny hair. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and blue jeans that were too long, so that the legs were rolled up into four-inch cuffs. They both approached the table and stood by their grandfather. Lela squinted at Jim and almost smiled. She was wearing a blouse and skirt, and her dark brown hair with a tinge of caramel was held away from her face with a red plastic hairband. "Hey," said Albert, spotting the tape recorder on the table, "can I say something in that?"

"No," said Jim, "it's just for work."

"You gotta know something to talk into that," said the chief.

"Here," said Rose. She had gone over to the counter to get some crackers and jam. "Have a snack. There's tea, too."

Jim watched the kids eat for a minute, then he gathered his things together. "I think I'll go now," he said, and stood up. He turned to the chief.
"Do you think we could get together again tomorrow?" he asked.

The chief nodded.

"What time?"

"Come on by," said the chief.

Jim picked up his things. "When?" he asked.

"I'll be here," said the chief.

"Here, don't forget your fish," said Rose, and placed the newspaper bundle in his arms, so that it lay across the tape recorder and notebook.

"Thank you, merci beaucoup," said Jim, bowing slightly to Marie. She smiled and waved her hand. Rose opened the door for him, and he carefully descended the steps and walked the short distance home.

As usual, the nurse wasn't there. In the kitchen, he rummaged a pan out of the cupboard. He set it on the stove to warm while he washed the fish. It still had its head and eyeballs, and he poked at the golden orbs suspiciously. Wonder if those are edible, he thought. Carefully he laid the fish in the pan and poured oil over and around it. The heat made it sizzle, and the remaining droplets of water from the fish spat oil onto the stovetop. Jim found a lid that fit and covered it. He got a beer out of the refrigerator and a couple of slices of white bread. After checking on the fish and jabbing under it with a spatula, he went back to his room to get his journal.

He was just sitting down to eat when the nurse came in. "Phew!" she
gasped as she entered the kitchen. "What are you cooking?"

"Marie gave me a fish," said Jim.

"Marie? From the village?"

"Yeah. You want some? There's plenty."

"You trust that food they give you?" she asked.

"Why?" asked Jim, looking down at his fish. It looked okay to him, except that the eyeballs had turned white. "What's wrong with it?"

"Hmph!" said the nurse. She was slightly past middle age and comfortable in her body. All her bones had disappeared. She wore pale blue stretch slacks, and a white cardigan that was gray at the elbows and sleeve ends. Her hair was a washed-out yellow and hastily yanked back. "I go into their houses," she said. "Believe me."

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "She just caught it this morning."

"Well then, it's probably good." The nurse opened a beer and warmed herself a can of soup. "Clean up this oil when you're done, eh?" she said.

"Yeah," said Jim. "Sorry."

"And don't throw the bones in the trash. I don't need that Indian fish stinking up my house any more than it already has."

"Sure thing," said Jim. He buttered a slice of bread and opened his journal. "Met with the visiting chief, Marie and Rose," he wrote. "Understanding time is a frustrating issue," he wrote. " Tried to talk about the chief's father
(medicine man). Chief didn’t seem to understand my question and deferred to Marie; she told about the first parade she ever saw. Adults lacking commitment to the study. Interruptions constantly hamper the work process. Today, the children interrupted. No disciplinary action taken by the adults. Tried to schedule next meeting, but chief unwilling to commit to a time." He closed the notebook. "I’ll put the leftovers in the refrigerator," he said to the nurse.

"Cover them tightly!" She sat down with her bowl of soup and began eating and leafing through a magazine.

Back in his room, Jim sat down at the table and looked at the calendar in his checkbook. He was supposed to go to the cemetery tomorrow with Rose and the priest. "Right when it’s important to stay on top of the chief!" he said to himself. The chief would be leaving fairly soon, so Jim’s time with him was limited and they still hadn’t talked at length about his father. Jim put down the checkbook and stared at the blank blue wall opposite. He knew the chief made a fire on the beach most nights, and then sat there with his grandkids. He drummed his fingers on the table. Maybe I could drop by one of these evenings, he thought. We could chat. He folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling. It wouldn’t be rude to be taking a walk on the beach and just stop by to say "Hi," would it? He rested his elbows back on the table and nodded his head. He’d have to integrate the tape recorder somehow. Maybe if he had it in his bag, and timed his walk on the beach so it looked as though he were just
returning from the village, then it wouldn't seem odd that he was taking an
evening walk with a tape recorder. Or, maybe he could just have it in the bag and
record, without the chief knowing it was with him. No, not very ethical. Scratch
that plan. He'd have to think some more.

He popped a soda and sifted through some notes from the day before. He
had interviewed some women who were mending fishnets. He wanted them to
show him how to make the knots that constituted the net, but they worked too
quickly. When he took the net out of the hands of the youngest one, Pauline's
unmarried daughter, and asked her to show him, she had glanced at the others,
then giggled. Jim could see the other two women smirking as they continued
working. "Is this how I do it?" he asked, pulling the top twine over the bottom
one, in a way he thought he had seen Pauline's daughter do it. When he looked
at her for confirmation, she giggled even more. One of the other women, who
was a little older, said something in Ojibwa, and all three of them laughed
heartily. "What's so funny?" he asked, the question sliding out involuntarily.

"Your wife might go hungry if you were the fisherman," said the oldest of
the three.

Jim had put down the torn net. "I thought the women did the fishing," he
said. This set the three of them off in a new fit of giggles. He sat and watched
for a little longer, but found himself grappling for reasons to explain the women's
laughter, rather than concentrating on observing them. Whenever he did
ask a question of any of them, all they did was smile and nod. Finally, he got up
and went home.

He'd also begun interviewing an older couple that was building a birch
bark canoe, just beyond the far end of the village. "Making new contacts," he
wrote in his journal. "Observing traditional subsistence activities related to water.
Labor is divided according to gender; am ascertaining who does which tasks.
Switching gender-specific tasks seems to be highly unusual; very amusing for the
locals. Hesitancy on part of some women to share techniques of tasks not
normally performed by men. Canoe is interesting. Another opportunity for
viewing gender division of labor. Am focusing on using mornings and evenings
for transcription and writing, afternoons for the village."

The next day, the house still smelled like fish. Jim made his way out to the
kitchen. The nurse's car was in the driveway, and he assumed she was sleeping.
He opened a window and helped himself to some cold fish for a stand-up
breakfast. While he chewed the white flesh, he started the coffee water. He
wasn't meeting Rose and the priest until later that afternoon, so after he drank
his coffee, he thought he'd go to the campground a few miles down the highway,
where there was a small grocery store.

Jim left the kitchen window open and drove down the gold-colored dirt
road, past the church and the rectory, between the tall bushes, thin spruce, and
papery-barked birch that scrambled to the very edge of the road. After a few
miles he reached the highway, then headed south.

The campground was small and dirty and by another lake, but it had the closest store, gas station and telephone for miles. He parked outside the little, blue, ship-lap building and entered. The owner, who was standing behind the counter, greeted him with a nod. Jim nodded back and smiled, and scanned the chin-high shelves. They were dusty and of dark wood, and arranged to form three short aisles. A limited variety of canned goods and dry foods, plus a small selection of candies was scattered on them in small piles or stacks. A cooler in the back was stocked with milk, eggs, butter and soda. Alcohol was kept in a separate room, more like a closet, that was behind the counter and accessible only to the owner.

Jim bought some chips and soda, a few candy bars, and a big bag of marshmallows. He paid and was about to leave, when a voice called from the back of the store. "Hello Doctor!" Jim turned around, and saw Antoinette coming toward him. She was wearing her usual plaid kerchief and almost ankle-length plaid skirt, and a pair of finely beaded moosehide slippers. A paper bag was tucked under her arm. The store owner muttered something in French, and watched her with lowered eyes while he glanced over the paper that lay open on the counter. Jim was surprised to see Antoinette so far away from home this early in the day, and even more surprised that she was approaching him with a smile.
"Hi Antoinette," said Jim. He cleared his throat. "Do you need a ride?"

She nodded.

"Well, I'm going right back," said Jim. "You can come with me."

Antoinette settled into the front seat and looked out the windshield. She smelled of woodsmoke. "Today's my baking day," she laughed.

"Yeah? What do you bake?" asked Jim.

"Cinnamon rolls," she said.

"Hmm," said Jim. He glanced at her sideways and saw that the paper bag was lying in her lap. "How's your mother doing?" he asked after a few moments.

"She's good," said Antoinette.

They continued in silence. Antoinette seemed content and watched the scenery, but Jim felt edgy. He wondered what he could say. This is a golden opportunity, he thought to himself. I should ask her something that she wouldn't normally tell me. He knew he had a pad and pencil in his shirt pocket, so if she said anything important, he could always pull over and jot it down.

"Porcupine," said Antoinette, and pointed to her side of the road.

"Where?" Jim slowed down and looked, but he didn't see anything.

"Too late," said Antoinette. "He went into the bushes."

"Hmph," said Jim. He thought "Porcupine." He turned to Antoinette. "Do you ever use porcupine quills for sewing?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said, and nodded.
"How do you use them?"

"The way my grandmother showed me," she said.

"And how's that?" asked Jim, slowing down once again and scanning the side of the road for a place to pull over.

"Just for decoration." Antoinette leaned forward slightly and looked up through the windshield.

"Did you make the slippers you're wearing?"

"Yes, mm hmm." She said nothing more.

Jim accelerated and they finally reached the dirt road that led to the village. He wanted to ask something else, but he couldn't think of anything. He glanced at Antoinette, hoping for more information, but she said nothing. What is it! he thought to himself. Doesn't she have enough pride and interest in her work to tell me more about it?

As they approached the rectory, Antoinette said, "Okay, I'll get out here."

"I can take you all the way home," said Jim.

"I'm going to go say 'Hi' to the priest," she said.

Jim stopped the car and she got out. He had been surprised to see Antoinette sober. Usually she was stumbling around drunk and scowling, with her mother shuffling along behind her, tugging at her elbow or the back of her blouse, trying to get her to come home. He heaved a sigh of relief once she slammed the door shut, and drove home. He always felt uncomfortable in these
long silences that everyone seemed to live in. It was always his job to start the conversation, but no one ever wanted to continue it.

The nurse was sitting at the kitchen table in her bathrobe when he entered, drinking a glass of powdered milk and eating plain crackers. "You’ve already been to the store?" she asked.

"I got an early start," said Jim.

She sipped her milk. "How is it outside?" she asked.

"It’s fine," said Jim. "Looks like it’s going to be a warm day."

"Hmph." She munched on a cracker and opened a magazine. Jim took his purchases back to his room. He sat down to eat a candy bar and look over some notes, then picked up the marshmallows and left. "Bye," he said to the nurse as he passed through the kitchen. She waved without looking up.

Jim slowly walked down to the beach. The sun was blinding and the lake sparkled and glittered. He could see Albert and Lela playing down by the water. He looked for the chief or Rose, but saw neither. He smiled to himself and headed for the children. When they saw him, they stopped playing and looked at each other, then watched his approach. "Hi," he said when he was close enough.

"Hey," said Albert. Lela merely smiled.

"I thought you guys might like some marshmallows for one of your fires," said Jim, swallowing hard and looking down at them. He smiled shakily. Albert jutted out his lower lip, then looked down the lake and showed Jim his profile.
"Yum!" said Lela. "Thanks."

Jim held out the bag and she took it. "Are you going to have a fire tonight?" he asked.

"Probably," said Albert, looking up the beach toward Rose's house.

"Well," said Jim, "enjoy the marshmallows." He'd hoped for an invitation. Albert nodded, but still avoided eye contact. Jim put his hands in his pockets and looked past the children, studying the far shore. Today in the sunshine, it looked brighter and more inviting. "What are you playing?" he asked, turning back to the children.

"Nothing," said Albert.


"Throwing rocks," said Albert. He looked up and grinned. "My Grandpa showed us how to do that."

Lela covered her mouth and giggled.

"I see," said Jim. He inhaled through his closed teeth.

Lela whispered something in Albert's ear, and he nodded. She carefully tore open the bag, took out a marshmallow, and ate it.

"Where's your grandfather now?" asked Jim.

"Don't know," said Albert.

Again, Lela nudged him.

"Quit it!" said Albert.
The three stood there in an awkward silence for a minute, and Lela ate another marshmallow.

"Well," Jim finally said, "enjoy yourselves."

"Yeah," said Albert.

"Bye," said Lela.

He walked back up to the road. He stopped for a moment and checked his watch, and saw that he still had a couple of hours before he was supposed to meet Rose and the priest. He looked left, then right. No one was coming. Ahead of him was the dune on which stood the village museum. Before that, it had been the one-room school where Rose taught, and before that it was the Hudson's Bay trading post. Since his arrival, Jim had been wanting to go in there, but Rose, who had organized the museum and who had the keys, kept putting it off. He decided to walk up there and at least peek in the windows again, as he had done a few times previously.

Slowly he climbed the narrow trail through the labrador tea and shrubs that grew over the white sand. Halfway up he turned around. The lake surface was bejewelled with waves and sunlight, and on the far shore the white birch trunks shone. He swept his gaze to the nurse's station, and saw that her car was gone. He wondered where she went. Sometimes she left with a bag of medical supplies, and he assumed she was going to another village. Lots of times, however, she drove off with just her purse and returned hours later. In the morning, her eyes
would be bloodshot and her disposition grumpy. "Hmm," snorted Jim, and continued his climb.

The building was a split-pea soup color, and a sandbox and large swingset remained as evidence of its past use. As Jim passed by the swingset, he tapped one of the A-frame legs. He walked up to the only window in the building, which was here on the lake side, and cupped his hands around his face to peer into the darkish space. Long tables covered with blue cloth were lined up against the walls and down the center of the room. There wasn't enough light for him to see what was across, but the table directly in front of him was covered with what looked like tools made of bone, stone, wood, iron, feathers and leather.

"Hey, Doctor Jim," he heard Albert call from behind. "What're you doing?"

"Hi Albert," said Jim, turning around. "I'm just looking." He hated the fact that he suddenly felt snoopy and guilty.

"Can't you get in?" Albert strode to the door and jiggled the knob. "It's locked."

"I know. Only Rose has the keys."

Albert said nothing and stood next to Jim. He, too, cupped his hands around his face and looked inside. "I've seen everything in there," he said.

"Really?" said Jim. "When?"

"A while ago."
"Did your Aunt Rose take you in there?"

"Yup."

"Can we get in there?" asked Lela, coming up from behind.

"Nope," said Albert. "It's locked. Come on, let's go play on the swings."

Lela took a quick peek inside the window, then ran after her brother to get on the swings. Jim took one more look at the table by the window, then left.

"Bye!" called Lela. Jim waved, and Albert looked the other way.

Back in his room, Jim ate another candy bar and gathered his equipment. He slung the camera bag over his shoulder, and stashed the pad and pencil in the back hip pocket of his brown corduroys. He checked his watch. He still had a good bit of time, but maybe he could chat a little with the priest before they left.

Father Mulligan was younger than Jim and had come to the village about two years ago. When he answered the door, he smiled widely and invited Jim to come in. "You're early!" he said.

"Yeah," said Jim. "I hope it isn't an inconvenience."

"Not at all. We'll have some tea." Father Mulligan led the way to the kitchen and put on the kettle. "I had a nice visit with Antoinette this morning," he said. "She said you gave her a ride back from the campground store."

"Yeah. I thought I'd help her out a little."

"That was nice. She said she was going to bring you some of her cinnamon rolls later on."
"Oh, nice," said Jim. He shifted in his seat and looked out the window, across the big field that surrounded the church. Beyond it glittered the lake. He cleared his throat. "I was, uh, actually surprised to see her sober," he said.

The priest nodded sadly. "She goes up and down, and since I've been here, she's been mostly down." He poured the boiling water into the kettle. "Still, she somehow finds it within herself to bake." He brought the pot and some cups to the table. "I was worried when I saw her coming here with that brown bag," he said.

"Yeah, I wondered what was in there," said Jim.

"Four packages of butter." The priest laughed. He sat down and waited a few minutes for the tea to steep. "Have you ever been to Antoinette's house?" he asked.

"No," said Jim.

The priest nodded and looked out the window. They were both quiet. The only sounds came from the tick-tocking of the kitchen clock and the wind rustling around the rectory.

Jim shifted again. "What's the cemetery like?" he asked.

The priest thought a moment. "It's very quiet," he finally said.

"Oh," said Jim, and watched the priest pour the tea. "But, is it more traditional, or is it a conventional, Catholic cemetery?"

"It's an interesting mix," said the priest. "You'll see."
"Hmm." Jim sipped his tea and drummed his fingers on the table. The priest looked at him curiously. Jim swallowed hard. "Do you know if there's a traditional medicine man around here?" he asked.

"Here, in the village?"

"Yeah."

"There is."

"Really?" Jim could feel the heat of excitement rise to his cheeks. "No one ever told me before!"

"Well," said the priest, "it's kept very quiet."

"How do you feel about it?"

The priest studied his hands, which lay flat on the table. Then he glanced out the window. "Here comes Rose," he said. He got up to open the door, and came back with her.

They walked down the road, three abreast, in the opposite direction of the village and made small talk. Jim listened impatiently, and burned for a gap to ask more about the local medicine man. Every time he thought he could ask, Rose or the priest would start on another topic, and he'd have to direct his attention to that. About a quarter mile from the rectory, they turned onto a smaller dirt road that led through the woods. The muggy heat that lay contained by the green plants enfolded them, and a stillness seemed to drop from the upper canopy. They stopped talking and continually switched sides, to avoid muddy spots or
bunches of tall, wet grass. The sun filtered through the trees like shimmery water and insects buzzed in the underbrush. "Wow, it's really far back!" said Jim. Rose said nothing, and the priest merely nodded.

"You know, you could help people with your work," the priest said after a pause. "A lot of the past, and the history of this village, is in danger of disappearing forever."

"Are you going to write a book?" asked Rose.

"Right now," said Jim, "I'm just doing research. Of course, I'll be writing articles about certain aspects of the community." He said nothing for a few steps. "I can send you copies of the articles," he offered.

The priest turned down one corner of his mouth and glanced at Rose. She shrugged her shoulders.

After several more minutes, they came to a clearing surrounded by a new split-rail fence. A small gate was built into it, and the priest approached it and lifted the latch to open it.

"Father Mulligan and some men from the village designed and built this fence in the spring," said Rose, turning to Jim. "We're lucky to have someone like him in the community."

"Nice work," said Jim. He rubbed one of the peeled rails that was as white as the inside of a broiled chicken breast, and clucked his tongue. "How long does it take to learn how to do this?" he asked.
The priest smiled, and for a few moments he was quiet. "A lifetime," he finally said, and followed Rose through the gate.

Jim dropped his hand from the rail and surveyed the fence. He followed them into the cemetery, and once more looked at the enclosing fence. "A lifetime," he said, and chuckled. "I get you."

"Do you?" asked the priest.

Jim nodded. "Yeah," he said, his voice betraying a hint of squeak.

"The best takes time, right?" the priest said.

"Right," said Jim. "And time is the hobgoblin of small minds, or something like that." He chuckled. The priest looked confused.

"We have so many young people here," said Rose. They were standing between neatly raked and weeded dirt mounds, each graced with a white cross and usually a tribute of plastic flowers. Occasionally, a red votive candle sat extinguished, until the next visit.

"It's a tragedy," said the priest.

"What happens to them?" asked Jim.

Rose shrugged her shoulders. "Car accidents, logging accidents, drinking," she said.

"Lots of accidents," said the priest. He walked past a few mounds and stopped in front of one that was smaller than the others and overgrown with weeds. "This one here," he said, "happened the year before I got here."
"What's the story?" asked Jim.

"It's what happens when kids are left alone," the priest said, and studied the little white cross that was leaning to one side. "This is a two-year-old girl," he continued. "Her older brother, who was really just a young kid himself, was outside with some friends, and was supposed to be watching her."

"She got hit by a car?" asked Jim.

The priest shook his head. "Her brother and his friends were sniffing gas from a coffee can," he said.

"Oh, Jesus," said Jim. "Sorry, sorry. I mean, is that a big problem around here?"

"It's a problem," said the priest. "This little one thought the boys were drinking out of the can," he said. "At least, that's how the story goes. After the boys were through sniffing, they left the can and went somewhere else, and then she came over and drank from it."

Rose stood quietly by, shaking her head. Jim shuddered and walked to the next grave. "That's horrible," he said. The three of them were silent for a few moments and looked at the mound.

"Is there anything in particular you want to see here?" the priest asked Jim.

"I just wanted to get a general idea," said Jim. Then, "You did say, back at the rectory, that there is a medicine man here in the village."
"That's right," said the priest, and glanced at Rose.

"Interesting," said Jim. "Is there one buried here?" he asked.

Both Rose and the priest were silent for a moment. Then Rose said, "His grave is down there."

"Where?" asked Jim.

"Straight ahead, next to the one with the blue flowers."

"Ah," said Jim. He looked at the unexceptional mound. "It looks like all the others."

"Mmm hmm," said Rose.

"Interesting," he said again. He left the two and went to the grave, circled it, snapped some pictures, and returned. "I don't really see anything different about it." Rose and the priest nodded.

As they walked back to the main road, they were quiet. Blackflies and mosquitoes buzzed around their faces and burrowed in their hair. In the distance, they heard a car rumble by on the main road. When they were closer, another one passed. A fine shower of dust filtered through the foliage. Jim breathed a sigh of relief once they were back on the main road. In its openness there was daylight, and the bugs were not as plentiful. "Rose," he said, "maybe one of these days you could let me into the museum."

"Of course, I keep forgetting," she said. "Come over on Wednesday."

At the rectory, Rose continued home while Jim lingered. "Tell me," he
said, as soon as she was out of earshot, "how do you really feel about the medicine man? You know, you being in the position you’re in and all."

The priest looked over at him and studied his face, so that Jim had to look down. Finally he said, "My policy is to let people choose what they want to believe. Certain historical things, I'm not very proud of, others I am. In my own way, I do what I can to help." They stood for a moment in silence.

Jim cleared his throat. "So, where in the village does the medicine man live?" he asked.

The priest looked at him with that same interrogating intensity as before. When he spoke, his voice had a knifeblade sharp quality to it. "I know you want to go see him," he said. "But, you can’t." He paused, and when Jim moved to speak, he raised his hand for silence. "Not even everyone in the community feels comfortable around him," he said. "This is a very private matter, and you have to be invited." Jim nodded, but in his mind he was sorting through faces, trying to imagine which one might be the medicine man.

The nurse's car was in the driveway when Jim returned, but she wasn’t in the kitchen. He presumed she was in her room. He stopped in the kitchen and helped himself to some more leftover, cold fish, that he again ate with his hands straight out of the container. Back in his room, he wanted to wait until dark, then go down to the beach and see if the chief was there. Jim had decided to simply ask the chief if he could sit there and tape their conversation.
When Jim walked down to the beach, it was empty. Looking up at Rose’s house, he could see the chief, his grandchildren, Rose, and her husband, sitting in the kitchen, eating supper. He watched them for a few minutes and wondered if he should just go knock on the door and ask to talk with the chief. He walked toward the steps, then hesitated. Maybe I should just go home, he thought. All that noise from all those people. What could we possibly talk about? He hung his head and walked home. Before he turned up the driveway, he looked back. Framed in the open doorway was Albert, blowing soap bubbles.

Jim checked the beach the next few evenings, but the chief was never there. During the day, Jim was busy in the village. He wanted to approach the chief more often, but was intimidated. He stopped at Marie’s a few times, although it was difficult to communicate, and at other houses as well. He spent many hours making sketches and taking photographs of the canoe construction. Isaac and Lina, who were building it, had spent the last few days cutting and steambending the ribs. Now, they were boiling and cleaning the spruce roots that would lash everything together. Every day, when Jim went to the canoe building site, he had to pass by Antoinette’s red house with white trim at the very end of the village. All the windows were broken, and the front door and frame were scorched. An old sofa rested on the porch, and her two red dogs always came bounding out whenever he passed by, and barked and snarled at him. He would pick up a large rock and throw it at them when they ventured too close, and they
would quickly retreat to the house. It always seemed hollow and abandoned.

Almost a week had passed since Jim gave Antoinette a ride home, and he hadn't seen her since. He was coming back from the canoe site one afternoon, and had just passed her house, when Father Mulligan approached him from the opposite direction. "Been working hard?" the priest asked, and shook Jim's hand.

"I've been watching them build the canoe down there."

"Oh, isn’t that something else?" the priest asked. "I wish some young people would learn it."

"It looks quite difficult," said Jim.

"They could learn it," said the priest. "You headed home?" he asked.

"I am," said Jim.

"Why don't you take a minute," said the priest, "and visit Antoinette with me?"

"Right now?"

"Come on, we won’t stay long. She’s baking again."

"Well, sure." Reluctantly, he turned around and walked to Antoinette’s house with the priest. They mounted the steps to the porch and knocked on the scorched wooden door that had also been kicked hard. Jim noticed a crude chalk drawing of a naked woman on the side of the house. From inside came the sound of shuffling footsteps, and Antoinette’s mother opened the door.

"Hello!" she exclaimed when she saw the priest. He clasped her hands in
his, and she stood aside to let him pass. Jim nodded his head in greeting and followed the priest into the kitchen. The floor was swept clean, and the stove was polished white. On one half of the kitchen table were boxes of cereal, noodles and powdered milk, a sack of flour, and cans of peas and carrots. Two chairs with yellow cushions were on either side of the table. The room smelled like soup and baking, and Antoinette was standing at the far end of the kitchen table over a board sprinkled with flour, kneading dough with her brown, white-dusted hands. She smiled when she saw the priest, and Jim noticed a swollen, red crescent under her eye. "Coming by for some rolls?" she asked, and laughed.

"You know me," said the priest. He sat down, and motioned for Jim to do the same. Antoinette's mother had retreated to a stuffed chair in the corner.

"I never did bring you some rolls," said Antoinette, turning to Jim.

"He can eat some now," said the priest. Then he turned around and started talking to Antoinette's mother in Ojibwa. She laughed at something he said, and Antoinette joined in the conversation. Jim smiled weakly and wondered what they were talking about. Antoinette opened the oven and pulled out a baking sheet with rolls on it. She lifted them off and set them on a plate, which she put on the table in front of Jim and the priest.

"Have some," she said to Jim, then returned to the board and started twisting a new batch. She rejoined the conversation between her mother and the priest. Jim watched them talk, then looked around the room. Cinnamon smell
mingled with yeast from the dough rising in a bowl on the counter, next to the oven. The pot of soup on the stove boiled and bubbled. Four white, enamel plates with red trim were stacked on one of the shelves. A tall coffee pot, also enamelled, but in a speckled gray, rested on the counter. A calendar from a store in town hung by the door. Jim wondered if the nurse had ever been inside this house. He reached for a roll and broke off a piece. Steam curled out.

Later, as Jim and the priest walked home together on the main road that led through the village, they stopped here and there to chat with people they met, or who were sitting on their porches. The priest would speak with them in English, French or Ojibwa, depending on what they spoke. They would tell him bits of news, and he would inquire about their health or what they were doing. Children would want him to tell them a joke or a riddle. Jim walked close to the priest and smiled at people. Many still avoided eye contact with him while they laughed and shook the priest's hand. It was the first time Jim had lingered on any of these porches. Usually, people would disappear into their houses when they saw him approaching.

"Has Rose taken you into the museum yet?" the priest asked Jim as they walked along.

"She said I should come by on Wednesday," said Jim.

"That's right. Good. You'll enjoy it." They continued homewards with idle talk.
When Jim entered the kitchen, the nurse and a man were sitting at the table. He was wearing a light brown button-up shirt, with a small design woven into it with a darker brown thread, and his brown hair was carefully combed. His chin and cheeks were shaved painfully clean. A bottle of Scotch stood between them, and they each had a glass with a drink and some ice in it. "Hello, Jim," said the nurse. "This is my brother Emil." Emil stood up and they shook hands.

"So you’re the guy from the university, eh?" Emil asked.

"I am," said Jim.

"Come join us."

"Thanks, but I’ve got some work to do."

"He’s a busy man," said the nurse. "Always listening to them tapes."

"You’re here to study these people?" Emil asked.

"I’m doing research," said Jim. "You know, interviewing people, taking photos." He paused. "Things like that."

"Bah," said Emil, sitting down. "If you ask me, they’ve lost it. They used to be a smart people." He glanced at his sister. "They knew all about the woods and nature. But now, forget it. They just want free money and drink."

Jim cleared his throat. "I think that’s a bit of an overgeneralization," he said. "A lot of people work."

"Yeah, yeah," interjected the nurse. "Believe me, I’ve been working here and in other villages for almost ten years. It’s always the same." She rolled her
"Why don't you leave?" asked Jim.

She made a face. "What? And lose all my retirement?"

"It's the same all over," said Emil. He leaned forward to address his sister.

"You remember Marc?"

"Oh yes." She nodded and gave a little laugh, then sipped from her glass.

"You know, he spent some years up north, working at a mine."

"Yeah?"

"One time when he came home, I asked him what it was like. He said it was okay for the money, but not much else. 'Nothing but Indians,' he said. So I asked him, 'What do you do up there for women?' He laughed, and said, 'Oh, those Indian gals are fine, as long you get them to cut their toenails and fingernails before they come to bed.'" He slapped the table and leaned back and laughed, and the nurse gripped her glass tightly and also laughed. Jim could feel himself turning red. The nurse looked up at him.

"Go do your work," she said, and waved her hand dismissively. "You'll see soon enough."

"Yeah," said Jim, "thanks." He walked to his room, shaking his head. Behind him, he heard Emil say, "You've got a handsome boarder like that and you still go to town. You looking for trouble?"

Jim hurriedly closed the door to his room, but pressed his ear against it to
listen for the nurse's response. He thought he heard her say, "He's too odd for me."

"Why, because he looks like he bathes?" Emil laughed. "Some of those guys you brought home..."

"Oh shut up!" snapped the nurse.

Jim shuddered.

Emil was gone when Jim came to the kitchen the next morning. The nurse was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and eating a soft-boiled egg. "My brother surprised me," she said. "Usually he calls before he visits. But, I guess he and his wife are having problems again, so he just jumped in the car and drove up."

"I guess that happens," said Jim, opening the refrigerator.

"That woman doesn't know what she wants." She sniffed and dug a spoonful of yolk out of the upright egg before her. "Well, it was nice, seeing my brother."

"I'm glad I could meet him," Jim said into the refrigerator, and rolled his eyes.

"By the way," said the nurse, "do something about that fish. It's not pleasant to have it in the fridge."

"It's covered," offered Jim.

"I can still smell it whenever I open the door."

"Okay, I'll do something about it," he said. He scooped some onto a plate
and ate it for breakfast with toast. He kept his eyes on his food, but every so often he could see the nurse looking at his meal and wrinkling her nose. He thought of Emil's remark regarding his looks, and what the nurse might want to do with him, and the fish dropped to his stomach like a stone.

He spent the rest of the day in the village, and later that evening he sat down in his room to catch up on his journal entries. "Visited the cemetery," he wrote. "Many accidents. Viewed shaman's grave; no distinguishing characteristics. Am sensing that the community would like this aspect of its culture to be lost. The priest is a vehicle for community cohesion. Built a fence around the cemetery with community members last spring. Observed during my walk through the village with him that almost everyone is very receptive to him; confide health and family matters in him." He tapped the blunt end of his pen on the table. "Said the fence took a lifetime," he wrote. "Perhaps this reflects the pace at which tasks are accomplished. Commitments and appointments are impossible to establish. People are also lacking in communication skills and insist on a stubborn silence. Lack passion for their culture, and are unwilling to share what have retained. Asked one of the women in the village where the medicine man lived; shrugged her shoulders and walked away." He reread what he had written, then continued. "Work continuing on birch bark canoe. Excellent opportunity for viewing use of materials gathered from the environment. Couple more communicative, willing to answer questions. Time to completion indefinite.
Priest wants young people to get involved. Don’t think is feasible. Seems would have to learn basic skills first." He closed the notebook cover and stretched. Outside, it was getting dusky. He consulted his calendar. Time was running short, the days were slipping by. He picked up his bag with the tape recorder and headed for the beach, hoping for a fire. There was none. He looked up at the house, but the curtains were drawn. All he could see was the glow of the lights within. He shook his head and went back to the nurse’s station.

Mid-morning the next day he knocked at Rose’s door. When she opened it, she smiled and said, "The museum!"

"If you have time," said Jim.

"Yes, yes. Please come in." He entered, and she indicated a seat on the couch for him, then disappeared into the back. The chief was sitting in a chair across from Jim, reading the paper.

"Good morning," said the chief.

"Good morning," said Jim. They were both silent for a few moments. "I’m looking forward to seeing the museum," Jim said.

"Oh yeah," said the chief. He put down the paper and smiled. "Me too."

When they reached the top of the dune, they stopped to look out at the lake. The water was rough and the same color as the gray pan of sky above. Around them, the wind blew chilly as it whistled through the low shrubs that covered the dune and whipped up the fine sand around their feet. The chief
indicated the opposite shore with a nod of his head. "That's where you and Joe had the trapline?" he asked.

"Mm hmm," said Rose. She looked at Jim. "I was such a city girl when I came back here," she said. "You know, I'd been away at school for so long."

"You trapped over there?" asked Jim.

"My husband, Joe, he had a trapline, way over there. Oh, it would get so cold!" She laughed and shivered her shoulders. "Sometimes I would just want to stay in that tent all day and sit by the stove, but we had to go out and check the traps." She laughed again, then turned. "Come on." She led the way to the museum and unlocked the door.

Inside, dust drifted down to the dark wooden floor, and daylight filtered weakly through the window. The smoky smell of tanned hides lingered. Jim surveyed the expanse of items from his end of the room. Next to him was the table he had viewed a few times through the window. Other tables displayed moosehide slippers and gloves, beadwork, cradle boards, containers and other things made of birchbark, models of canoes and traps, old dishes used as trade goods by the HBC, photographs of people, and even a few extraordinary items, like animal pelts, and a stuffed lynx mounted on a tree limb. As Rose and the chief walked to the first table, the floorboards creaked beneath their steps. "This is nice," said Jim, moving along with them. He picked up a tossing game made out of bones, and Rose challenged him to try it.
"You have to get the little bones onto the big one," she said.

Jim tossed the string of little bones in the air and tried to get them to land on the long, pointy one to which the string was attached. They clattered onto his wrist. "Too hard for me," he said, and set the game down.

"Who made this?" asked the chief, picking up a birch bark model of a canoe. "It's nice," he added.

"Bertha's son," said Rose.

The chief held it in the palm of his hand and turned it over to examine it. "I'm going to have to have him make me one," he said. Then he waved it briefly in Jim's direction. "You been practicing your paddling?" he asked, and grinned.

"No," said Jim, shrugging his shoulders and laughing nervously. "I haven't really had the time."

The chief turned to Rose. "I think this boy needs some paddling lessons." Rose smiled and continued to the next table.

"You remember him?" she asked the chief, and picked up a photo of a man standing in front of a wall tent and wearing snowshoes.

"Oh, my," said the chief, nodding and taking the photo from Rose. He turned to Jim. "This was a great man," he said. "He was a medicine man. He helped a lot of people."

"Really?" said Jim, and reached for the photo. The chief relinquished it, and moved closer to Jim to look at it some more.
"Not many like him around," said the chief.

"Was he from here?" asked Jim.

"He was Antoinette's father," said Rose.

"Really?" said Jim. He studied the photo more closely. "What happened to him?" he asked.

"He died of TB," said Rose. "A lot of people did."

"Did your father know him?" Jim asked the chief.

He nodded, then said something to Rose in Ojibwa, and she nodded and answered.

Jim returned the photo. "What did you say?" he asked.

"We're just talking," said the chief.

"Does Antoinette know anything about traditional shamanism or religion?" asked Jim.

"Her brother did," said Rose.

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed in a logging accident," she said. "You saw his grave the other day."

"You mean the one next to the one with the blue flowers?" asked Jim.

"Yes," said Rose.

Jim nodded and looked absently at the items on the table beside him. The chief said something more to Rose in Ojibwa, and they continued around the
room, looking. Jim spoke up. "So where does whoever’s the medicine man now live?"

Rose and the chief glanced at each other, then Rose said, "He lives in the village."

"Could you take me there some time?"

"We’ll have to wait," she said. "I don’t know."

Back outside, the wind had picked up and the lake was sprinkled with whitecaps.

"So windy!" said Rose.

"Hard on the ears," said the chief. He turned to Jim. "A lot of old people can’t hear so good now. They’ve been out in the wind too much." He paused. "They go out in a canoe, the wind just blows all around them. After a while, it hurts their ears." Jim nodded. They descended the dune. At the road, Jim turned to the chief.

"Do you think you’ll be making a fire one of these nights?" he asked.

"If it’s not too windy," said the chief.

"I see," said Jim. "I’m just asking, because I’d really like to talk some more."

"Oh yeah, we can talk," said the chief.

"When?" asked Jim.

"Come by some evening." He started to follow Rose home, then turned.
"Think about paddling lessons," he said, and chuckled.

"Viewed artifacts in the museum," Jim wrote that evening in his journal.

"Chief came along. Helped clarify kinship ties." He stopped to think. He pictured the grave, the photo in the museum, Antoinette, her mother. "Real medicine man remains elusive," he wrote. "Community dynamics not conducive to investigative research; partly due to lack of cultural knowledge, partly due to protectionism." Once again, he rifled through his mental images of the men in the community that he had been introduced to. They all had ordinary occupations. "No shamanistic articles in museum," he continued. "Commitment from the chief for further interview remains impossible to obtain. Time only vaguely alluded to. I'd be honored if someone were this interested in me and my life and beliefs!"

Jim spent the next few days in the village, watching the canoe builders and trying to talk to other people. They would smile and nod, but that was all. What is the big deal! he thought. Why the big secret about who was your cousin, or how to build a bear trap? He returned to the canoe builders and asked them questions about the materials they were using, and how they were prepared. Then he took out his calendar. He opened it to the month they were in. "When will it be done?" he asked, and showed Lina the calendar so she could point out a day. She looked dumbfounded at first, then called to her husband and said something in Ojibwa. Isaac shrugged his shoulders and chuckled. Now what?
thought Jim. He put the calendar away and managed a smile.

"I can't tell you when we'll be done," said Lina. "Maybe the weather won't be so good, and we'll have to stop."

"But you'll have it done pretty soon?" asked Jim.

"We have to get more spruce roots and prepare them. You just have to keep coming around, watching," she said. "We've got to be careful and do it the right way."

The wind persisted, and the sand was starting to sift into the house through the tiny gaps between the walls and the windows, and in through the door whenever it was opened. He hadn't seen the nurse for days. When her car was in the driveway, she was in her room. Sometimes, Jim heard her stirring in there, and sometimes the radio would be playing softly. He would tiptoe down the hall and quietly make his coffee. Despite the wind, he still checked the beach every evening, but the chief was never there. He made up his mind to visit him at Rose's the next evening.

Rose's house seemed oddly quiet when Jim knocked. The wind had died, and the air was warmer than during the previous days. "What a surprise!" said Rose when she opened the door and saw Jim.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, "but I was wondering if I could come in and talk for a while."

"You mean with Albert senior?"
"Yeah." He marveled that he had never realized what the chief's name was, until now. "He said I should come by some evening."

"I'm sorry," said Rose, "but he took the kids across the lake camping."

"Really? When?"

"They canoed over there early this morning."

"Oh." Jim glanced across the dark lake. "When will they be back?"

"Sometime day after tomorrow," said Rose. "You know, they're leaving soon."

"Yeah, I know," said Jim. "That's why I'd really like to talk to him again."

Rose nodded.

"Could you tell him that?" asked Jim.

"Yes," said Rose.

"I'll come by in the evening, day after tomorrow," said Jim.

"Okay," said Rose.

"That'll be okay?"

"I understand you," said Rose. "Yes, it'll be okay."

Jim slowly descended the steps and stood by Rose's house for a few moments. He could hear the gentle lapping of the water hitting the beach, and it drew him to the dock. Sand got into his shoes and worked its way under the arch of his foot and in front of his toes as he walked. He sat down on the dock and took off his shoes to empty them. The deep indigo of the sky was still light
enough for Jim to distinguish the serrated silhouette of the treeline on the opposite shore. A glint caught Jim’s eye, and when he looked again, he could see the orange gem of a campfire across the water from him. That’s them, he thought, and wished he could somehow get over there. But there was no canoe, since the chief and the kids were using it, and if there was, he didn’t know if he would feel comfortable taking it out at night. He could ask someone in the village, maybe Isaac. But the more he thought of it, the less comfortable he became with that idea. It would mean having to walk to Isaac’s house, convince him to take him across, maybe even having to explain why he couldn’t get himself across. So he sat on the dock, which gently rocked and creaked, and watched the distant flame. He put his shoes back on and wiggled his toes. The fire seemed to be waning. Jim huffed a sigh and headed back to his room.

The nurse’s car was in the driveway, but the house was dark. Remembering what Emil had said about him as a boarder, Jim was extra careful to be quiet as he made his way down the hall. He fumbled for the doorknob, and when he turned on the light, he saw a note taped to the door. "The fish!" was all it said, in big, blocky letters made with a thick pencil.

"Oh Jesus," Jim muttered to himself. "Forgot all about it." He set his things on the table and tiptoed back to the kitchen. When he opened the refrigerator, the odor of spoiling fish greeted him. Taking a step back, he took out the container and stuffed the decaying meat into a plastic bread bag. He set
that outside next to the door, then looked at it for a moment and thought about animals. Where can I put it? he wondered, and decided on the roof of his car. It's pretty high, he thought, as he extended his arm to its full length and set the bag in the center of the car roof. I haven't seen any animals around here as tall as I am, he thought. Back inside, he scrubbed the container. He had to wash his hands three times with soap and water before the smell was gone. "What a mess!" he said to himself, and returned to his room. He sat down at the table and chewed on a stick of peppermint gum. "Watched progress of canoe. Attempted to interview several people in the village," he wrote in his journal. "Subjects unwilling to talk." He looked at what he had written, then crossed out "talk" and wrote "cooperate." He continued. "Chief has made spontaneous trip to opposite shore with children for camping. Absence of planning by main informants is further obstacle to timely and organized research. Am tempted to cross myself, but fear it may be in vain. The chief (Albert Sr.) may be unwilling to talk; children there, would interrupt." He reread his entry, then crossed out the first "talk" again, and retraced the two lines three more times. He threw down his pen.

The next morning, Jim went down to the beach with his binoculars and looked across the lake. He could see the canoe pulled up into the woods, which grew right to the water's edge, and he could see the small clearing where the chief and the two kids were camped. They had what looked like an ocher-colored pup tent. But he couldn't see any of them. He walked along the beach for a little
ways, occasionally peering through his binoculars, but he never saw any sign of life. He thought again about asking someone to take him across, even paying them, but he lacked the courage. He ambled back to the nurse's station, then remembered the bag of fish. "I better go throw that away," he thought, and decided to take the fish and other garbage to the dump, which was down the highway toward the campground.

When Jim got to his car, the bag was gone. He looked around the immediate area and under the car, but there was nothing. "Hmm," he said. He wondered if maybe the nurse had taken it to the dump, but her car was in the driveway, and all the other garbage was still in the house and the shed. Jim shrugged his shoulders and was about to enter the house, when a slight movement on the road caught his attention. Turning, he saw an older man coming from the direction of the village. He wore a plaid shirt and used a cane for support. His eyes were difficult to discern behind his thick glasses, and a gray felt hat shaded his forehead. Jim had never seen him before. "Good morning," he called. The man looked up and nodded, then continued on his way in the direction of the rectory. He watched him for a moment, and wondered if maybe he was just visiting. I'll have to find him and talk to him sometime, he thought.

Later that afternoon, Jim took another stroll to the beach. "Eureka!" he said to himself gleefully, when he saw the canoe pulled up on shore and the ocher bundle of tent lying next to it. He clutched the bag with the tape recorder a little
more tightly and skipped up the steps to Rose's house. He knocked. Inside, he heard scuffling footsteps and some whispering, then Rose opened the door. The kids stood behind her. "Hello," she said. "You're here to see Albert?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if we might talk. Just for a little bit, you know."

"Come on in," Rose said, her voice absent of color.

Jim entered the house and saw the chief sitting at the kitchen table. "Hi," said Jim, and approached him. "I hear you went camping."

"Yeah," he said. "I took the kids and showed them a little how to live in the woods."

"That's good," said Jim, and sat down. He unpacked the tape recorder and his pad, and set them on the table between himself and the chief.

"You want me to talk into that?" asked the chief, indicating the tape recorder with a nod of his chin.

"If you don't mind," said Jim. "I mean, we did agree to talk some more."

The chief looked at Jim and leaned forward. "Tell me, what are you going to do with all this stuff you're always taping and writing?"

"Well," said Jim, "I'm, uh, I'm going to write articles. Maybe it'll even be in a book." He smiled.

"You going to help us with it?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you going to say in that book?"
"Well, I'm going to talk about what I see here. I'd especially like to talk about your traditional religion." He looked at the chief. "So," he said, "can I ask you some questions?"

The chief nodded.

"I wanted to get back to what you were telling me earlier about your father," said Jim. "He was a medicine man?"

"Yes," said the chief, and motioned for Albert to come over. The boy came and stood next to him.

"What sorts of things did he do?" asked Jim.

"A lot of things," said the chief. "Parents have to teach their kids lots of things. One thing, we have to take care of what we get. If we get an animal, we have to put the bones back in the woods." He turned to Albert. "What did we do with that rabbit?"

Albert looked at his grandfather and twisted his hands together. "We cooked it over the fire," he quietly said.

"Tasted good, eh?"

Albert nodded and smiled.

"What did we do with the bones?"

"We put them back in the woods."

"That's right." The chief turned to Jim. "We always put the bones and parts we don't use back in the woods. That way, the animal can come back."
"I see," said Jim. "Even the bigger animals?"

"Yes."

"I see." A few moments of silence followed. Jim jiggled his leg and finally mustered the courage for the next question. "Did you ever participate in a healing ceremony with your father?"

"I used to go to ceremonies with him," said the chief.

"What were they like?" Jim quickly followed up.

The chief was silent. Albert had returned to the living room, and Rose and Lela were sitting on the couch, quietly playing a game of "Go Fish." The hiss of the recorder was the only sound. Jim glanced through the plastic cover to see how much tape was left. He wondered if he should just turn off the machine, which would mean a loud snap, or if he should wait and hope for the best. Finally, the chief cleared his throat and leaned forward on his elbows. "Those ceremonies," he said, "they're for Indian people."

"I understand," interrupted Jim. "But what are they like?"

"Listen good now," the chief calmly said. "When we go to a ceremony, we have to be ready for it." He paused.

Jim cleared his throat and threw another glance at the tape.

"We have to follow certain rules," said the chief.

"Like what?" asked Jim.

"It depends on the ceremony," said the chief.
"Can you give me an example?" asked Jim. He could feel a heat spreading across his forehead. Finally, they were getting somewhere!

"Oh, let's see," said the chief, and looked thoughtfully at his hands. Just then there was a knock at the door.

Rose got up and opened it. "Hello!" she said, and welcomed the priest into the house.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, then looked over and saw Jim. "Jim!" he said. "What a surprise. Hello, Albert," he said, and came over to shake the chief's hand. "I was just passing by and thought I'd drop in!"

Great! Jim thought to himself, and grimaced in what he hoped looked like a smile. He clacked off the tape recorder and put down his pencil.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you!" the priest said.

"Oh, no worry," said Jim. He glanced at the chief, but he was looking at the priest. The two started talking, and soon Rose joined them. Jim listened for a few minutes, then abruptly stood up and said he had to go. The chief smiled and waved. Jim said good-bye to the priest, and Rose escorted him to the door.

Back in his room, he tossed the bag with the tape recorder on the unmade bed and threw himself onto the chair by the table. He snatched up his journal and flung it open. "I am continually thwarted in any and all efforts to conduct any meaningful research," he wrote. "People can't seem to understand that I am here for only a limited time, in which I must fulfill certain obligations and gather
specific information. They keep pushing all sorts of meaningless stories and information at me, but no one ever wants to talk about what is really at stake."

He slapped the cover shut.

The next day, Jim was out of the house earlier than usual, and he headed straight for Rose's. When he knocked on the door, Lela opened it. "Hi," said Jim, "is your grandfather here?"

"Grandpa!" she called over her shoulder. She left the door open and ran to the kitchen. Jim stepped inside. He saw the chief, Rose and young Albert sitting at the table eating breakfast. Lela was standing by her grandfather.

"Doctor Jim's here," she said.

"Good morning!" said the chief.

"Hi," said Jim.

Rose got up and brought over another chair. She was chewing on a piece of toast. "Can I get you some coffee?" she asked, once she'd swallowed her mouthful.

"Sure," said Jim. He sat down between Rose and Albert and spooned some sugar into the cup of coffee that Rose set before him. He glanced around the table and had some toast. Young Albert tapped his arm.

"I snared a rabbit over there," he said.

"Wow!" said Jim. He looked across the lake, to where Albert was pointing, and marveled at how peaceful it was.
After breakfast, the chief and Albert went outside while Rose and Lela cleared the table and did the dishes. Jim watched them and suddenly felt helpless and useless. He reached to his pants pocket for a pad and pencil, but it was empty. He got up and walked to the window. The day was a bit hazy and a breeze was kicking up. It skimmed across the water and blew up little waves that looked like fish scales. Jim looked down at the beach and the canoe. Albert was trying to drag the folded tent up to the house. As he watched him struggle, Jim's first reaction was Hey, he's learning to be responsible! The next minute, he felt surprised by his thought. He knocked on the window, but Albert didn't hear him.

"Wait up!" Jim said, and hurried out the door. He ran down to the beach.

"Albert!" he said, "I'll give you a hand." He picked up one end of the bundle, and together they hauled it up the beach. Jim caught his breath and went back down to the canoe. Albert followed him.

"My Grandpa can show you how to paddle," said Albert.

"Oh?" said Jim. "But he's probably busy right now."

Albert shrugged his shoulders and ran back to the house. That's just like him! thought Jim. I help him, and he turns around and taunts me. He looked out across the lake, then went up to the nurse's station. He felt restless and anxious, as though he'd eaten too much sugar or had too much coffee. In his room, he paced. He opened the curtains a crack and let in some milky sunlight. He saw the nurse's note on the table, "The fish!" He crinkled it in his hand and
threw it into the corner. He sat down to review some notes, but they didn't interest him. Once again, he resumed his pacing. He stopped by the dresser and blew off a cloud of dust. A car went by, and he peered out the window to see who it was. "Bertha" he said, and let the curtain drop. He checked the clock. "Forget this," he finally said, and decided to take a walk up to the rectory. He grabbed a pad and pencil and stuffed them in his pocket, then made his way down the hall. In the kitchen, the nurse was heating some milk on the stove. She was wearing a bathrobe and had her back to him. Jim could hear her sniffling.

"Good morning," he said.

She grunted something and half turned her head.

"Feeling okay?" he asked.

"Aah," she croaked, "could be worse." She poured the warm milk into a glass. Jim was out the door before she turned around.

He walked briskly to the rectory. He wanted to sit somewhere and talk with someone. He rapped on the door, but no one answered. He can't still be asleep! he thought to himself, and knocked again. Still no answer. "Damn!" he said, and stood on the porch for a moment, looking over the field and the lake beyond. No one was ever home at a normal time, no one ever showed up when they said they would. A car roared by on the road and stirred up a cloud of dust. Jim watched it disappear in the direction of the highway. He decided to walk through the village and see how the canoe was progressing. He passed the
museum, passed the identical houses strung up on each side of the road, passed Antoinette's house, and went down to the canoe site.

No one was there. He let his arms fall to his sides. The fire they always had burning was not even smoking, and the big, black cauldron, in which they heated water for boiling spruce roots, was cold. "Must be a day off," said Jim, and snorted. He stood there for a moment, and then realized that he'd never been past this point. Up ahead, he could see where the road dropped off, then ended and became a footpath. In no mood for research, he walked down the road and followed the trail. Fading behind him were the noises of the village. The hollow cring cring of someone splitting wood, the occasional shouts and bursts of laughter, a car or two.

A commotion in the underbrush stopped him. He drew in his breath and froze. Then, to his relief, two dogs came running onto the path. The first one had a plastic bag in its teeth, and the other one was trying to get it. When the first dog saw Jim, it turned away, and this gave the second dog the opportunity to snap at the bag. It tore open, and a rotting smell drifted to Jim. Hey, he thought to himself, that's my bag of old fish! He whistled to the dogs. "Here boy!" he yelled. "Come here!" But the dogs took off, back into the woods, the first one still clamping the bag between his teeth.

Jim peered into the dull shadows between the trees, but saw only the irregular, blending pattern of trunks and leaves. "Oh well," he said, and continued...
up the trail for a little ways, then turned around. When he was almost back at
the road, he heard a scuffling in the brush off to his side. "Ah ha!" he said.
"Here boy!" he called. The rustling stopped. Jim whistled. "Come on!" he called.
There was a short snort. Jim straightened at the unfamiliar sound, and a
momentary chill shot up his spine. A wave of foulness drifted to him. "Okay," he
whispered, "keep your fish." He threw a glance over his shoulder and hurried
back to the village.

On the way home, he saw the same old man he had seen a few mornings
ago, leaving Rose's house. She, her husband, and the chief were outside, and
had just said good-bye to him. "Who's that?" Jim asked Rose.

"That was Joseph Leroi," she said.

"I just saw him the other morning for the first time," said Jim.

"He lives in the village," said Rose.

"I see," said Jim. "Well, I'd like to talk to him sometime. I'm sure he
knows a lot, being older and all."

The chief nodded, then he, Rose, and her husband went inside.

Jim watched the door close on them and wandered down to the lake. The
water was calm now, and there was only the faintest hint of a breeze. The canoe
was still on the beach, and he could see the paddles lying in the hull. Slowly he
approached it. No one was around. Why not? he thought. He set down his bag
and dragged the canoe into the water. He stepped in, and with a shaky push he
left the shore. Two strokes left, two strokes right. Left, left. Right, right. No circles this time. He smiled to himself and picked a spot on the opposite shore. Left, left. Right, right. He was getting closer. Soon he could discern the individual rocks and see the tree roots that the waves had undermined. He scanned the shore for a good place to land, and saw a short strip of marshy earth. It seemed better than the trees and rocks, and he headed straight for it and paddled the bow right on to it. "Wow!" he said, surprised at his success. He got out, and immediately sank halfway to his knees in muck. He grabbed the gunwales and pulled one foot out first, and felt around for more solid ground one step ahead. Resting on it, he pulled out the other foot, but minus the shoe. "Great," he said. He reached into the wet hole his foot had left, and felt the rim of his shoe. It took a few good tugs, but finally the earth released it, although black with mud. He shook it and washed it in the lake, and set it on a rock to dry. He took off the other shoe too, and his socks. He dipped his toes in the cold water for a moment. They were soft and pink against the dark floor of the lake.

Jim sat down on another rock and studied the distance he had just covered. Across from him, the beach gleamed white. The nurse's station and Rose's house looked like miniatures, and the museum on top of the dune almost seemed regal. He smiled and turned around, hoping to find the chief's camp. He looked across at the dock and estimated where he had seen the fire when he was sitting there
the other night. He figured it to be slightly further north, and he got up and walked in that direction. Sure enough, there was the pile of ashes surrounded by a circle of rocks. He stepped into the small, grassy clearing and looked at the pieces of kindling and firewood that remained, the cut tent spikes, the flattened area where the tent had been. Aside from that, there was nothing else to see. "Hmm," he said, and looked up at the trees. "Well, well," he said, and stretched out on the grass. He watched the sky and the tree tops waving against it. He almost dozed.

Launching the canoe from this side was a little more difficult than on the other side, and Jim now realized that landing in a marshy spot was a mistake. Working from the solid ground, he pushed the canoe backwards into the water, then held the rope and pulled it around to a rock. Carefully he got in and pushed off. He got himself headed in the right direction, then continued with his alternating strokes. The breeze remained no more than a hint, and he made good time to the dock. This time, he was even able to paddle up alongside it, then pull himself close and get out. He hauled the canoe onto the beach and turned around. The other side suddenly seemed closer and brighter, and he smiled at his accomplishment. He walked home, happy and physically tired. As he passed by Rose's, he felt someone watching him. Turning, Jim saw the chief leaning on the railing at the top of the entry landing. He was smiling slightly. "Looks like you paddled a pretty straight line there," he said.
"Yeah," said Jim, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's nice over there, eh?"

Jim nodded. He looked at the canoe, then across the lake.

"Nice and quiet," said the chief. He descended the steps, and Jim watched him walk along the road, heading for the village. For some reason, he did not feel the urge to follow him and ask questions, nor did he feel like writing about this trip in his journal. Instead, he wrote: "Canoe progressing well; have sewed together the sheets of bark with spruce roots. Isaac said launching will be soon. Said to come around; said I do, but they not always there. He said I'd learn."

Somewhat later, he wrote, "Attended Mass for the first time. Hymnal also in Ojibwa." After a few days, "Talked with priest. Offered valuable insights concerning community dynamics."

One afternoon he was in his room, organizing notes. He had the house to himself, and was even thinking about borrowing the nurse's radio for a while. He whistled softly as he sorted the index cards into various piles, according to their content. A polite knock on the front door pulled him from his work. It was Rose.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said, "but I thought you might be interested in what's happening at Nadine's."

"Come on in," said Jim, holding the door open wider. "What's happening up there?"
Rose stayed outside. "Nadine shot a bear early this morning, in
Antoinette's house."

"There was a bear in her house?"

"It's unusual for them to even come close to the village. Someone must
have left some garbage or food lying around." She paused. "They're skinning it
out, and I thought you might be interested to come and watch."

"Oh, yeah," said Jim, "I'll be right there."

From Rose's house, Jim could see the crowd up ahead, gathered on the big
field by Nadine's house. Nadine was Rose's sister-in-law and lived down the road,
just before it became the main road through the village. She was a thin, sporty
woman dressed in slacks and cotton blouses. A bandanna often covered her hair.
When he came closer, he could see Albert, Lela, and a number of other kids
playing tag. The adults were circled around the bear in a ragged crowd, and had
brought bowls and pans and other containers to take home a share of the meat.
Jim nodded a "Hello" to a woman as he approached the gathering, and she
stepped aside a little to make room for him. Pauline, an older woman wearing an
apron, her long, gray-streaked black hair pulled back in a bun, was in the middle
of the circle, skinning the bear, her knife flying between the hide and the meat.
A man stood on either side of her, watching, and when she needed something, she
would tell them. Then they would both yell toward the crowd for someone to go
get whatever it was Pauline needed. She, meanwhile, sat in the grass and quietly
worked. When she needed her knife sharpened, she would pick up her whetstone and draw the blade across it, back and forth, with a sharp scraping sound. Jim reached for his pad and wrote down the date, followed by the title, "Nadine's: bear skinning." He watched for a few moments, then wrote: "A woman, in a traditional role, is skinning the bear. Utmost concentration is needed. The men, as the traditional hunters, are standing by at this phase, and only assisting when needed."

The bear was stretched out on his back on the grass to his full length, and his forearms were slightly raised, with the pawpads facing up. Nadine came out of the crowd and stooped over the bear to inspect the claws. "You could make a necklace out of these, eh?" she said to Pauline, and smiled. Pauline nodded, and her knife kept flying. Blood trickled onto the grass and neatly changed the color of individual blades. A fine network of red veins covered the white underside of the bear's hide. Black hairs clung to the dark, garnet meat in places. Nadine rejoined the crowd near Jim, and he watched her.

"Oh, it was crazy!" he heard her tell a woman several people away from him. "I was at home, and Solange's little girl came running to my kitchen. 'Quick, come to Antoinette's!' she yelled. 'There's a bear in her kitchen!'"

"Right in the kitchen, eh?" the woman talking with Nadine asked.

"Oh yes. I've never heard of anything like it. She ran out of there screaming."
"Where was her mother?" the woman asked.

"She was visiting over at Marie's," said Nadine.

"Lucky no one got hurt."

"Oh, yes," said Nadine. "You can't have a bear running around where we live."

"Where's Antoinette now?" asked the woman. Jim saw Nadine roll her eyes. He tapped his pencil against the pad and wondered if he should write any of this down.

"Hey Nadine!" a man said, coming up to her with his hand extended. Nadine grabbed it and shook it. "Sounds like you're the big hunter in the house now!" They both laughed. "Where's that Antoinette got to?" he asked, and looked around. Jim quickly glanced around as well, but he didn't see Antoinette anywhere.

"I don't know," said Nadine, and rolled her eyes again. Jim tapped the pencil against the pad once more, then wrote down, "Traditional roles occasionally reversed. Emergency situation." He thought. "Predators in village (and vicinity) killed." He turned his attention back to the bear.

By now, half of it was skinned. Pauline's hands were smeared with blood, and long, black hairs and bits of green grass clung to them. She used the back of her wrist to push her glasses up her nose occasionally. The two men on either side of her were talking, and one of them was smoking a cigarette. Jim swallowed
hard and looked at the creature stretched before them all. He could see the muscles, the iridescent, membranous covering that held them in place, the white ligaments that connected them. As the nest of guts was exposed, knife stroke by knife stroke, a sweat started on Jim's upper lip. It was almost as though he were looking at a man lying there, naked beyond naked. A slight gust of breeze carried the rich, sour smell of innards, that were feeling air for the first time, to him. He turned away for a second, as a wave of dizziness hit him, and left the circle. He sat down in the grass and focused on breathing regularly.

"Where's the doctor?" he heard somebody say.

"Doctor Jim!" the woman he had been standing next to called.

He didn't want to answer.

"Doctor Jim!" she called again. "Somebody's looking for you."

Jim lifted his head and saw her motioning for him to get up and come over. He shook his head, but she laughed and persisted. He got up.

"Hey Doctor Jim," one of the men next to Pauline called out. He waved his hand for Jim to come closer. "Come learn how to do this. Pauline's the best skinner around." Pauline looked up at Jim and smiled.

"No, that's okay," said Jim. "I'm not good at this sort of stuff."

"Hey," the man continued, "if you really want to learn about us, you've gotta learn this kind of stuff."

"I'm fine, right here," said Jim.
"Go on," the woman next to him urged. "He's dead. He's not going to hurt you." Other people laughed at her joke.

"Look, I don't have a knife or anything," said Jim.

Pauline smiled and held an extra knife up toward him. Jim groaned.

"Come on," the man urged. "You've gotta try this at least once."

Slowly, Jim came forward and took the knife that Pauline held out to him. Its wooden grip was a little sticky from the blood she had just gotten on it. She motioned for him to come closer. "Kneel down here," she said. The kids outside the crowd kept playing tag.

"He's gonna try and skin that?" somebody behind him said.

"Pauline's going to teach him," another person said.

"Hold it like this," Pauline said, and showed him how to hold the knife. Jim adjusted his fingers and waited for the next instruction. The smell from the guts was making its way to his throat and lingering there. He tried to avoid looking at the dead animal. "Now hold it here," said Pauline, and grabbed a loose end of skin. Jim gingerly reached out and pinched a few inches of skin and black hair between his fingers. "Hold it tight," she said, "don't let it get away." He gripped harder.

"Pull it," she said. He pulled, and his fingers slid off the mass. He thought he heard someone behind him make a joke.

"Hold it real tight and pull," Pauline said. "Just grab a handful."
"Hold it real tight and pull," Pauline said. "Just grab a handful."

Jim swallowed hard, and a taste of guts went to his stomach. He grabbed a handful and held on, then pulled.

"Now work your knife under, like this," said Pauline, and deftly separated the skin from the meat. "Go ahead," she said.

Jim pulled hard on the handful of skin and made a swipe with his knife. An area of skin came loose.

"Keep doing it," Pauline said, "and be careful. You don't want to cut the hide." She watched him for a minute, then turned and continued with her own work.

Jim adjusted his kneeling position and made another swipe. If he focused on each move, he could see the white membrane that needed to be cut. He sliced again. The knife was getting slippery in his hand. He readjusted his other hand to grab a new handful of skin. Pull, swipe. Pull, swipe. He was starting to wonder why he had hesitated to try this.

"That doctor's going to be a hunter!" one of the men next to Pauline said, and laughed a little. Jim looked up and held his knife like a victory sword, pointing to the sky. He returned to his task. Pull, swipe. Pull, swipe. He wiped his hand on his pants to dry it a little, then grabbed a fresh handful of skin. Pull, swipe. How big an area could he do at a time? Pull, swipe. An extra big swipe.

Something was not right. He looked down at his thumb. A big, white gash
ran from the top knuckle, all the way down to where the thumb joined his hand, and almost the full way around the base. Jim looked closer, and the gash filled in with bright blood, which began flowing all over his hand and onto the meat. He dropped the knife and clamped the flensing hand over the other one.

"You cut yourself, doctor?" one of the men asked.

"I'm okay," said Jim through gritted teeth. He could feel the blood pulsing out of the wound and the increasing intensity of the burning pain.

"You better go see that nurse," the other one said.

"I'll be fine," said Jim. He couldn't imagine the nurse doing anything to help him. He stood up and left the bear's side. He wanted to sit somewhere alone, where he could groan and rock and curse, but the woman he had been standing next to at first was immediately at his side.

"That's a bad cut," she said. "You've got to take care of it. Come on, I'll walk you down to the nurse."

"I don't want to see her," said Jim, grinding his molars.

"Let me see that," said Rose, coming over from where she had been standing.

Jim slowly released his thumb from his other hand and held it up for her to see. It was covered with blood.

"Keep your hand up," she said. "Let's go to my house and fix you up."

Jim stood up and, holding his thumb, walked next to Rose, his cut hand
elevated. "Hey!" Albert called, leaving the game of tag and running to Jim. He handed him a white rag to wrap around the wound. Then he accompanied Jim and Rose to the house, carrying Jim's paperwork.

By the time they got to Rose's, Jim was feeling dizzy. His shirt sleeve was wet with blood, and the slice in his hand was throbbing. Rose put some towels and newspapers on the couch and the floor and had him lie down on the couch, then she worked on him. He turned the other way. "This isn't as bad as I thought it was," she said. "But you have to go get stitches."

"Where?" groaned Jim.

"The nurse can sew you up."

"Her?" Jim tried to picture the nurse examining the wound and making a professional assessment.

"Wow! Look at all that blood!" said Albert.

"Shush!" said Rose, and sent him back to the game of tag. "She could fix this," said Rose, turning back to Jim. He flinched when she doused the cut with Mercurochrome, but he didn't dare say anything. She kept working, gently washing and wrapping. "There," she said. "Now be careful."

Jim turned to look at his thumb, which was dressed in clean gauze. Underneath it, he felt the pulsating throb. "Thanks," he said, sitting up. "Where did you learn how to do this?"

Rose laughed a little.
"No, really," said Jim, "where'd you learn how to do this?"

Rose shrugged her shoulders. "You better have some tea," she said, and went into the kitchen to put on the kettle.

Jim remained on the couch and kept looking at his thumb. He tried to bend it, but the bandaging was too tight, and the little movement he could make was painful. While the water heated, Rose picked up the towels and newspapers.

Her husband came home while they were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea. "Let's see that thumb," was the first thing he said. Jim held it out to him, and Joe took it in his hand and carefully held it for examination. "Rose sure knows how to patch things up," he said.

"Yeah," said Jim, suddenly feeling weak and dizzy again. "She's a life saver." He finished his tea and let his hand rest on the table. He wanted to be home. He got up and thanked Rose.

"Keep your hand up," she said. "Even when you sleep."

Jim nodded and slowly walked home to his room. The nurse wasn't in.

By the next morning, she still hadn't returned. Jim had not slept well, waking alternately from a sudden pain in his thumb, then from dreams of dark things and blood. His mind felt fuzzy, and he helped himself to a second cup of coffee and some sort of sweet, sugary cake he had bought at the campground store a few days ago. His journal lay open in front of him. "Sliced my thumb," he wrote. "Was invited to learn about skinning, despite my reluctance. Am amazed
at how professionally Rose wrapped my wound. Community reacted with help. I believe that my ability to actively participate in the bear skinning was a contributing factor." There was a knock at the door and he got up to answer it.

"Good morning!" said Nadine, standing there fresh and pressed. "How's your thumb?"

"Fine," said Jim. "Come on in." He stepped aside and Nadine came in and sat down. He brought her a cup of coffee. "Rose fixed it up nicely," he said, and showed Nadine the bandages.

"She's good at that," she said, and admired the dressing. "I'm sorry you got hurt," she said. "You've gotta be careful with those sharp knives!"

"I guess," said Jim. He looked wistfully at his thumb. "Maybe I should just go to town and have them check it out," he said.

Nadine leaned forward. "She's not here, is she?" she quietly asked, and pointed her finger into the air of the room.

"No," said Jim.

"She's bad," said Nadine. "Always taking off."

"Yeah," said Jim, and shrugged his shoulders.

Nadine sat back up and smiled brightly. "Come over tonight," she said.

"We're having a big roast."

"Of bear?"

"Of course!" She sipped her coffee. "You should eat some of him," she
said. "It'll help your finger heal." She laughed.

"Thanks," said Jim. He cleared his throat and tried to think of an excuse to avoid going, but all he could say was, "I'll be there."

After she left, he wondered if he could perhaps feign an illness and get out of the invitation. He didn't feel much like eating something he had just seen lying around on Nadine's lawn, half skinned and full of smelly guts. "Oh me, oh my," he sighed. Just then the nurse pulled into the driveway. Jim groaned.

"Hello," she barked when she entered and saw him sitting there.

Jim raised his wounded hand and smiled.

"You got hurt?" she said.

"I did," said Jim.

"What were you doing?"

"I was helping skin a bear."

"Ah ha," she said, and pulled a chair next to him and sat down. "Give it here," she said, and motioned for him to show her the hand. He let her take it. She leaned close and carefully felt around the bandage. Jim smelled alcohol on her breath and drew back. "Who wrapped you?" the nurse asked.

"Rose."

"Well, it's a good job." She twisted the hand slightly. "I need to open it and look at it. Did she say you might need stitches?"

Jim nodded. "But I can go to town," he said. "I know you're probably
"Busy, eh?" the nurse said. "What makes you think so?" She unwrapped the white gauze. Jim focused on a spot on the wall across from him. The inner layer of the bandage was caked stiff with blood, and the nurse had to pull a little harder. Jim winced. "I see," she said. "You're sliced fairly well." She snorted. "Skinning. It's not like playing on those typewriter keys or scribbling, is it?"

Jim shook his head. He clenched his teeth and groaned as she pulled apart the wound. "You should have stitches, right away," she said. "Come into the infirmary with me. I can do them right now. Later, you know, the wound will be too old and I won't be able to help you any more."

"No, really," said Jim. "I don't want to trouble you. I'll just go to town."

"Town, town, town!" said the nurse. "It's two hours away. What's the matter, you don't trust me?"

"No, I..."

"Then come on!" She took him roughly by the upper arm and marched him through an inside door, to the clinic side of the house.

"Wait!" Jim cried, and pulled away. "I don't want you to work on me!"

"Why not? You scared it's going to hurt?"

"I'm scared because you've been drinking!" he blurted out.

"What!" The nurse dropped her hand away from him and turned red.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said in a near growl from low in
her throat. "But fine, go away. Go see the doctor in town."

It was dark by the time Jim returned. The nurse was gone again, and up the road he could faintly see the lights from Nadine's house. There was an uncomfortable pulling in his hand from the stitches, the gauze dressing was stiff, and underneath it the cut throbbed persistently. The doctor hadn't been too pleased to see the wound, and had told him he was lucky to have missed his tendon. "Another hair," he had said, "and you would have been looking at an entirely different set of circumstances." Jim felt lucky all right. He parked the car and went inside.

He looked around his room, illuminated by the harsh, naked ceiling light, and a slight disgust welled up in him. Candy bar wrappers littered the floor, more fruit carcasses had joined the original apple core and orange peel on his nightstand, and his table was littered with papers and index cards. In his memory, things had been organized. He checked the clock. He still had some time before dinner at Nadine's, and he spent it cleaning up.

"It was a shock to go to town," he wrote when he was finished cleaning. "When I first drove up here, I remember town as fairly sleepy. But traffic was overwhelming. The hospital seemed very busy, and the doctor kept me waiting, then hurried with the stitching as quickly as he could." Jim cleared his throat and thought more about the doctor. He had been young and brusque. "Have been invited to Nadine's for dinner," he continued. "Bear on the menu."
Jim felt better when he walked down the road an hour later, knowing that his room was in order. He supported his arm at the elbow to keep the hand raised, and at the same time he carried a paper bag with bread and canned peaches in it. He never knew what to bring, but these items seemed like a safe bet.

Rose, her husband Joe, the chief, Albert, Lela, and Nadine's husband were already sitting at the dinner table in the kitchen. Nadine and her daughter were still cooking, and everyone was laughing and talking. Jim could hear them as he stood outside, and he had to knock twice before Nadine's husband opened the door for him. They welcomed him, and everyone wanted to know about his trip to the hospital and whether or not his thumb still hurt. The kids wanted to see the stitches, but Rose told them that Jim couldn't take off the gauze. Then Nadine and her daughter brought the sizzling, sputtering roast to the table and a bowl of steaming, boiled potatoes. "Now you'll start to heal," said Nadine, and heaped slices of meat on Jim's plate.

"That's enough, that's enough!" he said.

"You've got to get away from that desk more often," joked Nadine's husband. Jim nodded and blushed. He looked at the dark, pungent meat on his plate and took a bite of potato. Everyone else was complimenting the roast. Jim smiled and put a forkful in his mouth. It tasted bloody and smokey and dense as forest moss, and he remembered the creature lying on Nadine's lawn, slowly
turning human as the skin was pulled away. Jim felt a slight sweat starting at his temples. He ate another forkful of meat. More potato.

"Do you like it?" asked Nadine.

"Yeah," nodded Jim, "it's great." He glanced over at her husband.

"Better than that office food you're used to," he said.

Jim nodded and ate another forkful.

"How about that plastic bag they found in its stomach?" said Nadine's daughter.

"Learning to be a garbage bear," said Joe. "Got to watch out."

Jim looked up, and his eyes met the chief's. He flushed, and the chief's eyes seemed to twinkle. "One time," the chief said, "we went fishing." He looked down at young Albert. "You remember that time we were coming home from your uncle's, and we saw that nice creek by the highway?"

Albert nodded.

"I do!" said Lela. "I got to get an ice cream after."

"I thought, 'Now there's a nice hole!' And, sure enough, phht!" He flashed his hand in front of him, and his fingers closed around an imaginary lure. "He was a fighter to pull in, wasn't he?" he said, and again looked down at Albert, who nodded. "So we get him out of the water, and then we go to clean him. I looked for his stomach, but all I saw there was a real hard and white lump."

"It was a chicken leg," said Albert.
"That's right. I cut at the skin, and when I peeled it back, there was a whole chicken leg in his stomach." He gripped one hand around the thumb base of the other to show how big the leg was.

"No kidding!" said Nadine's husband.

"Yeah," said the chief. "Some fisherman come along, had a chicken leg for lunch, maybe dropped it in the river by mistake before he was finished." He turned to Jim. "So you see, nothing is gone forever. He thought that chicken leg was gone forever, but it came back, maybe as a fish." They all laughed, and Jim thought of a story he'd read about a fisherman in Denmark, who caught a cod in the Baltic Sea with a diamond ring in its stomach. Later, he even found the owner.

That night, Jim lay in his bed, his injured hand propped up on a pillow, and blood pounding through his head and his heart. He kept seeing the half-skinned bear, kept smelling the guts, kept tasting the black, cooked blood that had dripped from the roast. It didn't matter whether his eyes were open or closed, the blood kept coursing. And somewhere, in the very back of his mind, he glimpsed a memory of his lost bag of spoiled fish.

In the village, people now inquired about his hand and wondered how it was healing. They wanted to know how many stitches he had, and when they were coming out. Pauline and her youngest daughter called him over to sit on the porch one day as he was passing by, and they chatted with him a little about the
litter one of their dogs had just given birth to. "You want one?" the daughter asked, and held up the milk-bellied puppy, its eyes still closed.

"No!" said Jim.

She laughed.

He was still observing the birch bark canoe construction. The seams had been sealed with black, shiny pitch, the gunwales were lashed on with spruce roots, and another man was carving the paddles. "Feel a greater acceptance in the community since my wounding," Jim wrote in his journal. "Misery loves company."

He stopped and reread his last sentence, and wondered why he had written it. Who did he think was miserable? Who did he think needed company? He got up and paced a little. His hand was feeling better. The stitches were due to come out in a few more days. He sat back down and crossed out his last statement. "Canoe almost finished," he finally wrote. "Have asked about the launch date. Isaac keeps saying I need to learn. Difficult to get a definite answer."

The air was getting more chilly as the days went by, and the gray sky carried with it the fresh and slightly metallic smell of the impending snow. The chief and the grandchildren had left. Jim felt at a loss for a few days. He checked his research plan and project outline, and saw that what he was doing was completely different from what he had intended. It worried him. One day, he
noticed a great commotion behind the museum. He could hear someone talking through a megaphone, a crowd responding, and lots of cheering. Curious, Jim climbed the dune and walked around to the other side of the building.

Everyone from the village seemed to be there. The kids were milling around on the field, while the adults were scattered in small groups around the perimeter of the crowd, or lounged against the wall of the museum. A white pickup truck was backed onto the field from the road that ran past it, and a man, a woman with a large hat, and another man were standing in the bed. One of the men was shouting into a megaphone, while the other man and the woman each had a large sack of candy, and every so often they would reach into their sacks and throw handfuls of sweets into the crowd. Jim came closer and watched as bubble gum and fireballs were tossed and the children scrambled to pick them up.

"Quite the show," Father Mulligan said. Jim had come to stand next to him. "I hate this," he said, and rolled his eyes.

"Who are they?" asked Jim.

"Some sort of Evangelists," said the priest. "They come here every year and have a big hot dog feed, then do this dog and pony show for the kids. Later on tonight, they'll have singing and preaching down in the village."

"Do people like this?" asked Jim.

"I don't know," said the priest, "but it's a show, and they come." They both stood there and watched the candy rain down over the crowd. "He sends us all
cards at Christmas," the priest continued. "It's usually a photo of him and his wife."

"Is that her?" asked Jim, and indicated the woman in the truck.

The priest nodded.

Jim looked around at the adults. They seemed to be talking mostly amongst themselves, not paying much attention to the trio in the back of the truck and the crowd of children. Every so often, one or the other person would yell something to the man with the megaphone, maybe telling him he wasn't paying enough attention to a certain side of the crowd, or maybe telling him his candy was cheap. People would laugh, and the trio on the truck would carry on as though nothing had been said.

Jim turned to ask the priest something, when he saw that he was quietly talking to that old man, Joseph Leroi. "He's right here," said the priest, and turned to Jim. Joseph smiled and nodded. "Show him your hand," said the priest. Jim extended the hand that had been cut. He no longer protected it with a bandage and the stitches had come out, but the stitch line was still red and a little tender.

"Oh," said Joseph, taking it in his dry hand and nodding. He turned Jim's hand slightly and nodded some more. "You kept this clean?" he finally asked.

"Yeah," said Jim, confused by the question.

"Mm hmm," said Joseph, and let Jim have it back. "Looks like a nice,
straight line," he said, and laughed slightly. The priest nodded, and Jim looked
down at his hand and thought, "Of course it's a straight line. I had a doctor do
it." He fingered the stitchmarks gingerly, then put his hand in his pocket and
turned his attention back to the three in the truck. Joseph moved on.

"That was quite a compliment," the priest said, once Joseph was gone.

"How so?" asked Jim.

"Well," said the priest, opening his arms outward and slightly upward and
shaking his head. "That was Joseph Leroi, the medicine man. He just spoke to
you!"

"Who, him?" asked Jim. He stretched his neck to watch the retreating
figure of the old man as he made his way back to the village, the cane thumping
beside him with every step. "That's the medicine man?"

The priest looked at him and smiled. "Did you think he'd be walking
around in an animal pelt?"

"Well, uh, no," said Jim, still watching Joseph walk down the road. "I just
thought that, well, I don't know."

"Maybe you thought you'd feel some sort of power in his presence?"

"No! I mean, yeah, I guess so." Jim felt both sheepish and eager.

"Well, my friend," said the priest, and good-naturedly jostled him by the
shoulder, "I hope you weren't disappointed."

"No. No, of course not," said Jim. He looked back down at his hand, then
traced over the stitch line with his pointer and index fingers. "Where does he live?" he asked.

"In the village," said the priest. "You know that." Just then, a commotion at the other end of the field caught their attention.

It was Antoinette, stumbling toward the crowd, loudly shouting her mumblings, her mother shuffling behind her and tugging at her elbow whenever she could get close enough to reach it. The trio in the truck paid them no heed and continued with their game of shouting and rewarding. Antoinette approached the crowd and pushed a man. He scowled at her and waved his hand, telling her to get away. Jim could see her mother apologizing. Two other men were leaning against the museum, watching her and laughing. One of them shouted something to her, and she turned around and made her way toward them, her brow furrowed and her mouth and face wet and red. Jim was about to ask Father Mulligan what he thought was really wrong with Antoinette, but he had turned away and was hurrying toward her.

"Ah, he's a dedicated soul," Jim heard the nurse suddenly say beside him. She must have just arrived. Jim hadn't seen her or spoken with her since the day he refused to let her stitch him up. She was always either gone or in her room. When he looked at her now, she seemed pasty-faced, and her eyes were slightly puffed and pulled down by the weight of the dark circles beneath them. "Look at him," she said, "always caring so much for these people." She shook her head.
were still taunting her, but when they saw the priest they stopped. One of them said something, and the priest shook his head and waved his hand. Antoinette’s mother turned to Father Mulligan and started talking to him. He took Antoinette by the arm and led her away from the crowd, toward a picnic table. Her mother followed and talked, and every now and then the priest would turn around and acknowledge her.

"It’s almost too hard to watch," said the nurse. "Just look at that!"

"I don’t quite understand her," said Jim. "So often she’s like this, and sometimes she seems perfectly happy."

"What’s there to understand," said the nurse, folding her arms across her chest and watching the priest help Antoinette sit down at the table. "The savages."

Jim started and turned to her.

"Yes, yes," said the nurse. "Just look at her. You’d think that after she lost her children, she would have quit drinking. But not an animal like that."

"What do you mean?" asked Jim.

"She had a little girl," said the nurse, "and of course she neglected her." She snorted. "Died from drinking gasoline."

"That was her girl?" asked Jim, and he turned to look more closely at Antoinette.

"Oh yes," said the nurse. "She had a boy too."
"Oh yes," said the nurse. "She had a boy too."

Jim thought of the story he'd heard, and pictured the boys by the side of the house, sniffing gas.

"The child welfare people were going to take him away and put him in foster care." She surveyed the crowd of children and jutted her chin toward them. "They should take all of them and give them to decent families. Look at how dirty they are."

"I don't know," said Jim.

"I know," said the nurse. "I know, because I have to work with them." She looked back at Antoinette. "Her boy drowned before the child welfare people could get him," she said. "He's probably better off where he is now."

"That's terrible!" said Jim. "And how can you say that? He was just a kid."

"Maybe the younger, the better. They would have put him with a good family, but in the end he might just have come back here, and then what?"

"Well," said Jim.

"Nothing," said the nurse. "There's nothing here." She shook her head.

"She was in foster care for a while."

"Antoinette?" asked Jim.

"Yes, yes. Who else. Then she came back here, and now look." She licked her lips. "Well, I'm going back home."

Jim watched her leave. Just then, a girl running for a piece of candy
bumped into her.

"Get out of my way!" the nurse angrily cried, and pushed the child so she fell over. The girl looked up, momentarily stunned, then jumped to her feet and ran back to the crowd. "No manners," Jim heard the nurse hiss. "No manners at all!"

He watched the priest help Antoinette. They were no longer at the table, but were walking down the road toward the village. Jim presumed he was taking Antoinette home. He heaved a sigh and let his arms drop to his sides. He kept thinking about Antoinette. Her stumblings, her black eye, her good days, her father and brother. He looked to see where the nurse was, but she had disappeared down the other side of the dune. He wanted to tell her something, not just ask her or listen to her. He looked back to Antoinette. She, too, was gone.

The many faces and the noise were beginning to exhaust him. He turned and followed the nurse down the dune, but she was so far ahead that she didn't notice him. At the house, he walked by her in the kitchen without saying a word. He sat down in his room and opened his journal. "What have I missed? Nothing is as it seems," he wrote. "Finally met the medicine man; very ordinary. Father Mulligan had to tell me who he was. Learned the girl who drank gasoline was Antoinette's daughter. Antoinette is a medicine man's daughter; brother was one too." At a loss of what to write next, he closed the journal and left the house.
He drove away from the village, toward a dirt road he had been wanting to 
explore since he arrived, but somehow he had never found the time. He’d heard 
it led to another lake. He craved darkness and quiet.

Past the rectory, past the road to the cemetery Jim drove, followed by a 
cloud of dust. The dirt road was just a mile or so before the highway intersection. 
He turned onto it, and immediately slowed to a crawl. Less than a hundred feet 
from where it branched off the main dirt road, it was deeply rutted and muddy 
and sloped steeply downhill. Jim wondered how wise it was to drive, but it was 
too late now to stop and turn around. He lurched and jostled downhill, and a few 
times he thought for sure he was going to get stuck. Finally, the road leveled off 
and the ground became somewhat firmer. He drove slowly through the somber 
woods, the tall trees obscuring the sky, the thick undergrowth scratching at the 
sides of his car. He looked at the odometer and saw that in actual miles, he 
hadn’t gone very far. He wondered how much further the lake was, and whether 
or not he’d be able to make it back up the hill. He couldn’t recall seeing a tow 
truck at the campground. Then, up ahead, he saw a dull glint of water and the 
light of a forest opening. The road suddenly ended in a large turnaround and 
boat launch, and Jim heaved a sigh of relief and circled once, so his car faced 
homewards. He almost felt like saying thank-you, but he wasn’t quite sure whom 
he should thank. So he smiled and patted the dashboard.

Mosquitoes and blackflies swarmed around his face as soon as he stepped
out of the car, and he could hear the hum of tens of thousands more of their kind coming from the underbrush. He reached into the car and smeared bug repellant on his face and hands and ears, and then took his camera and walked toward the lake.

It looked fairly small, but its shape was curved, so it might have continued much further, beyond what Jim could see. The water was dark and still, and reflected the gray sky and the jagged, black line of trees that surrounded it. Jim oriented himself, and determined that the lake curved toward the west. He decided to explore a little, just to see what was around the bend. A narrow, muddy trail hugged the shore. Jim smiled. He glanced around once more, looked at his car, looked up at the sky, over to the trees on the opposite shore. It was gray and quiet, except for the steady insect hum from the underbrush. He stepped onto the trail and felt his shoes fill with the black water that oozed out of the mud. "Oh well," he said, and continued.

Despite the trail, the walk was difficult and slow. He almost lost his shoes several times in the mud, and small branches slapped sharply against his cheeks and across his eyes and forehead, or else became tangled in his hair. Insects found a way into his clothing and bit and stung him on his back and chest. He was becoming irritated and angry. "Never again," he muttered to himself and continued, only because the bend was so close. He saw a beaver lodge on the opposite shore with a beaver heading toward it, its nearly-submerged, glossy head
followed by a gentle wake. Jim poised his camera to take a picture and clicked. The beaver continued its swim, and then something must have alarmed the animal, because with a slap of its tail, it was gone.

After a few more minutes of tedious walking, Jim reached the bend. Ahead of him, the lake stretched for what seemed the same distance that he had just come. He looked behind him, and saw the last tip of the boat launch road. There was no wind, and the dull-colored light of late afternoon blurred the distinction between darkness and shadows. Then, ever so quietly, the trees stirred, and a slight breeze whispered out of the forest behind him. A rotting odor trailed along with it. "Phew," said Jim, and peered into the darkness. He took a couple of steps into the woods, and the odor increased. Something told him to return to the car, but his curiosity propelled him forward. He fought his way through the bushes and branches, then came upon what looked like a rudimentary trail. He followed it a few steps, and the smell intensified. He turned around, but the lake was lost from his sight. He pushed forward a few more steps, and stopped short. Hanging directly in front of him were the remains of a bear, being picked clean by flies. For a moment, Jim froze. The insect hum began to press in around him and grow louder, and then he heard heavy steps in the underbrush toward the west and a thick branch snapping. Without waiting, he turned and ran back in the direction of the car, fighting his way through brush and trees with thrashing arms and swift legs, his head ducking this way and that to
protect his eyes and face. Turning around every so often, he saw nothing, but he maintained his frenzied pace. At the boat launch, he charged to the car, jumped in, and locked the doors. He started it while he caught his breath, and then roared up the road.

Ahead of him was the big hill he’d have to climb to make it to the main road. He geared down and stepped on the gas. Up he went, jostling in the ruts so that his head was jerked from side to side and he could hardly see where he was going. He was halfway up when one of the tires slid into a soft hole and could do no more than spin with a high-pitched whine. "Not now!" cried Jim, and floored the gas pedal. The whine grew louder and turned angry, and the car only moved slightly sideways, deeper into the hole. He tried again, this time telling himself to be calm and only gently coaxing the gas, but it was too late. He was stuck.

He left the engine running and sat in the car, thinking of what to do next. He could back down and try another run, but that might not work. At least here, he was halfway up the hill. He didn’t have a shovel, so digging was out of the question. He could try putting some branches under the tire, but he had no saw. He wondered if he could somehow push the car free, and decided to have a look. Carefully he opened the door and stepped out, then leaned it closed, so that the latch did not engage. He circled the car and saw that the rear driver’s side tire was covered halfway in a muddy hole. He knew he’d never get it out of there
alone. "Damn," he said, and kicked the tire. He looked around. The insect hum persisted, but the forest was growing darker. He locked the car and started walking.

He walked quickly and focused on the ground. Several times he thought he heard panting behind him, but when he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, there was nothing. At the main road, he heaved a sigh of relief, then hurried toward the village. By now it was early evening, and night was swallowing the dusk. Headlights approached from behind, passed, and then the car stopped.

"Jim!" a familiar voice called, a hint of impatience tingeing its tone.

"Oh, thank God!" Jim whispered to himself, and ran to Father Mulligan's car. He jumped in. "You don't know how glad I am to see you!" he said, breathlessly.

"What are you doing out here?" the priest asked, popping the car back into "D."

"I got stuck back there on the dirt road to the other lake."

"That road!" He shook his head. "That's a rough one. A greenhorn like you might want to consider taking along a guide when you go bushwhacking like that."

"Yeah, well, I just needed to get away," said Jim. He looked out at the darkened landscape. He thought of Antoinette, and then her mother. He thought of the steam that curled out of the fresh cinnamon roll when he sat in their
kitchen. "I think, if I just have a little help, I can get the car out of there," he said.

Father Mulligan nodded. "We'll see what we can do tomorrow."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. As Jim walked home from the rectory, he had insisted the priest let him out there, he could hear the distant strains of loud music coming from the village, where the Evangelists were conducting their evening meeting. There was singing, accompanied by a deep bass pounding.

The next morning, the nurse rapped at his door. "Wake up!" she called, and rasped out a cough. "Your friends are here to see you!"

"What?" Jim rolled over in bed and looked at the clock. "Eleven-thirty!" he said to himself. He couldn't understand how he had slept so late.

"Your friends are here to see you!" she called again, then returned to her own room and slammed the door.

Jim jumped out of bed and peered down the hallway. He recognized two men from the village, standing outside the kitchen door. He quickly got dressed.

"You need help with your car?" one of the men asked Jim when he opened the door.

"Oh yeah, thanks, I'll be right there!" He rushed back to his room and got his keys.

"We're supposed to meet Father Mulligan at the rectory," the other man said.
"Great," said Jim, "great. Thanks a lot." They walked to the rectory, and from there drove with the priest to the dirt road. He parked on the main road, and they walked down to Jim's car. In the company of the other three, Jim lost the fear he had felt the previous evening.

"What were you doing down here?" the first man asked him when he saw his car.

"Just, you know, exploring," said Jim, embarrassed by the sight of his little vehicle held captive by the mud. He unlocked the car, and then he helped the other three shovel away mud and try to lift and jostle the car free. When that didn't work, they cut and gathered spruce boughs.

"Like this, like this!" laughed one of the men, and showed Jim how to wield his little hatchet. "Don't want to get cut again," he said, and grinned.

"Yeah," said Jim, and looked down at his thumb. "Especially now that it's all healed up."

"You'll have to come out to the Bush with us some time," said the man. "We'll set up camp."

"That'd be great," said Jim, and returned his attention to the car, which they finally freed after some more pushing, shoveling, and careful application of the gas pedal. Jim roared the rest of the way up the hill, then ran back down to walk up with them.

"I hear you like that fence we made," said the first man.
"Oh, the one around the cemetery? Yeah, it's nice," said Jim.

"This one here," said the man, and indicated the priest, "he's a good one to work with."

Jim nodded.

Back at the main road, the two men returned the village with the priest, and Jim turned in the direction of the highway. He wanted to go to the campground store, he wasn’t quite sure for what. Maybe to buy a paper. He felt a bit out of sorts, as though he’d stayed up too late.

He bought a paper and a soda, then drove back to the village. A hint of the summer warmth had returned, and the day was brilliant and the colors crisp. He parked in front of the nurse’s station and sat in his car for a while, not quite sure what he wanted to do. He could transcribe, or organize notes, or do some background reading. He remembered one of the men saying, "You'll have to come out to the Bush with us sometime. We'll set up camp." Was that an invitation? Jim ran the line through his head again and again. I've been invited? he wondered each time. He tapped the newspaper in his lap.

He got out of the car and walked down the road, down to the beach, and onto the dock. It creaked and gently rocked in the waves, and around it the water glittered. Jim sat down cross-legged and laid the newspaper in his lap. The breeze rustled through it and fluttered the corners. He leaned back on his hands and closed his eyes for a moment. Water splished around the edges of the dock.
He looked down at the paper and started to read an article, but halfway through he realized that he had no idea what he had just read. He set the paper down next to him and looked across the water. He had to squint against the bright wave crests. The blue bowl of sky curved overhead. The paper rustled beside him, and an inner section escaped and fluttered into the water. Jim clapped his hands over the rest. He tried to fish out the pages from the lake, but the wind was pushing them further away. Footsteps made him turn around, and he saw that it was Rose. She came closer and stood next to him. "Hello," he said, and got up.

"Look over there," she said, and pointed to a canoe out in the lake with two people in it, rhythmically stroking their way across. "That's Lina and Isaac," she said, "in the new canoe."

"No!" said Jim, leaning forward. "Really?" He strained to see the gold-colored birch bark canoe, floating on the water, as light as a leaf. "Oh," he said, "I would have like to see them launch it."

Rose nodded. "You just have to know the time," she said.

Jim looked at her. "But no one told me," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh?" she said. "Didn't they?"
Geri was at it again. Cooing, coaxing, talking to him as though he were a baby. Gus could hear her from his chair in the living room, fussing all the way back in the bathroom. "Come here little boy," she said, "let's wash your face." He pulled the paper up higher so that its crinkling drowned out Geri. "There, there," he heard her say. "All dry and pretty. Let's comb you out." He could picture Geri dragging a comb through little Rudy's white hair. Soon they'd be out here fixing lunch. Geri would cut the cooked chicken breast in half; one part for her, one part for Rudy. She'd set hers on a separate plate and rewarm it in the microwave. Rudy's half she'd cut into bite-sized pieces, and then she'd fork each piece into her mouth and chew it. She'd gaze out the window blankly, deafly. Gus swore her forehead seemed to shrink, the temples pressing inwards. When she thought the meat was soft enough, she'd spit the bite into Rudy's dish.

"Let's go show Daddy!" he heard her whisper loudly.

They came into the living room, Rudy trotting ahead and looking back at
Geri every few seconds. She had put a blue ribbon in his hair. "Look at how pretty the little boy is," she said.

Gus lowered the paper and looked at the dog. "Hmph," he grunted. The dog looked at him, then sat down and dropped his head.

"Isn't he sweet?" Geri called out as she headed back to the bathroom.

"Very," said Gus. He kept looking at the dog, who didn't seem to know whether he should wait with Gus, or follow Geri to the bathroom. Gus clucked his tongue. "Come here old dog," he said. He leaned over and tapped the floor with his fingers. He chuckled. The dog turned his head to avert eye contact. "Come here, little shit," Gus said quietly. Rudy winced and looked back at the closed bathroom door. "Toughen up old fella," said Gus. "She'll be outta there soon enough." The dog was getting fidgety. Gus reached over and pulled out the ribbon. "How come you never chase squirrels?" he asked. Rudy looked at him, then jumped up and trotted to the bathroom door. He sat down in front of it and looked back at Gus. No matter his expression, Gus always thought the dog looked slightly cross-eyed. "Chase your ball," he said, tossing Rudy's tennis ball across the floor. Rudy watched it roll into the far corner, then looked up at the door and whined. "It's a ball!" said Gus. "Chase it." The dog did nothing. Gus shook his head, picked up the paper, and settled back into his chair. The dog squeaked and jumped, raking the bathroom door with his foreclaws.
They bought Rudy, a purebred something-or-other with papers, soon after they retired. He was cute back then, inquisitive and lively. In those days, Geri was still more active, too, but then she started in with all her pampering and fussing. The dog would want to run, but Geri would put him on a leash. He'd want to roll in the dirt, but Geri would scoop him up and carry him. He would steal ham wrappers from the garbage, and Geri would scold him and feed him cooked chicken breast. One time, Rudy licked his privates a little too long next to the breakfast table, and Geri blushed and clapped her hands sharply. "That's enough!" she said, then scrubbed his face with a wash cloth.

"Gus, honey," said Geri, coming out of the bathroom and almost tripping over the dog. "Oh, there you are, little boy," she said, stooping for a moment to pet him. "Gus honey, do you want a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch?"

"No," he said from behind the paper.

"Why not? I'll make it for you."

"I don't want you to make me a grilled cheese sandwich."

"Then how about peanut butter and jelly?"

"No."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Gus, you always have lunch. Let me make you something."
He lowered the paper and looked at Geri, who was fiddling with her hair and had her back to him. "I told you, I want nothing."

Geri turned around. "Oh, I know you, Gus Miller. Five minutes after I'm done, you'll be in there making yourself a lunch and leaving me another mess to clean."

"I clean up after myself," said Gus.

Geri shook her head, then went into the laundry room to start the dryer. Its gentle swish with the occasionally clacking zipper formed a constant background harmony to all other household sounds. She returned and went to the kitchen to fix herself and Rudy some lunch.

Gus retreated far into the paper. He couldn't stand to watch her prepare food. He was glad they never had guests. He heard her open a jar and tink its side with a knife. He sank further into his chair and the letters to the editor. This revulsion started deep in his stomach, even deeper; somewhere below his bladder. With each passing year, it became more intense. Something about Geri's dampish hands that handled the dog, that hung from her soft arms with their toilet paper skin. He did not enjoy brushing up against them.

Gus had a cabin that his mother had left him, and he kept it after he and his first wife, Arlene, split. They weren't much more than kids when they got married, and he was working as a forklift operator while she was a checkout girl
at the superstore. After a few years, he got a steady, full-time job at the
lumberyard, and she worked her way up to assistant manager. Then his father got
sick and moved in with them, and all he ever did was pick on Arlene. She was
always overcooking or oversalting the food, washing the sheets with soap that
made him sneeze, wearing cheap make-up, or running around too much with her
friends. Plenty of evenings, Gus would come home to a poisonous silence, the
two of them in separate camps and each of them wanting him as an ally. Now, he
often regretted having chosen his father over his wife, but back then it had
seemed like he was being fair. After all, his father was the one who was sick, not
Arlene. She was supposed to be helping him. And all those things he said to her,
no, he wasn’t being serious. He was just cranky from being sick and in so much
pain. "That so?" Arlene would respond, nodding her head all the time.

"Yeah," Gus would say, his shoulders aching from another day of sorting
through lumber piles and loading 2x4’s and 4x6’s, bales of insulation, bundles of
asphalt shingles, even kitchen cabinets and the occasional sink. "Be patient with
him," he would add.

"You think so?" Arlene would ask, and nod some more.

"How was your day?" Gus asked her once, shortly before she left.

"Well," she said, "your father’s still alive. Go figure."

The last Gus heard, she had left the state and was working as a
saleswoman at a luxury car dealership.
When his father finally died a couple of years later, Gus was in no mood for romance. What he wanted most was peace and quiet, and he started going to the cabin every chance he had. He’d take long walks in the woods, canoe, and fish. Usually he released what he caught. They were just too pretty to barbarize with a whack on the head and a tablespoon of butter in the frying pan. But sometimes he’d keep them, and then he’d have a fish dinner on the porch, looking out over the water. When he was inside, he favored an old kerosene lamp over electricity, and for some reason he often found himself reading books he’d enjoyed as a child.

When he and Geri met, Gus was still working at the lumberyard, but by now he was out of the weather and away from the boards and planks and sheets of plywood, and instead was selling doors, windows, asphalt shingles by the roof, and sheetrock by the house from behind a keyboard at the contractor sales counter. Geri had a job as an insurance claims agent at the hospital. They met at a diabetes fundraiser walk-a-thon.

The girls up in accounting were always roping the guys into one of these events. It seemed like twice a year, at least, they’d be doing some kind of weekend walk-a-thon, tel-a-thon, or rock-a-thon. Gus would try to get out of them, but since he was one of the few guys without a family, it was always hard for him to come up with a decent excuse. This particular walk-a-thon had been especially difficult to avoid. The gals in accounting had promised five people
from the lumberyard, and it was up to Gus to be the fifth guy. "Lots of cute girls from the hospital!" Amy, one of the girls, teased.

"I'm not looking for a woman," said Gus.

"I know you're looking to fall in love," chided Amy.

"Oh yeah?" said Gus, trying to remember if he had ever said anything like that to Amy. Finally, she cajoled him into going.

Geri had organized the hospital's participation in the event, so of course she had been to all the preliminary meetings with Amy, who introduced them while they were walking. Geri was kind of cute and plumpish, and she made dumb jokes with Amy. Gus liked how easy it seemed to be around her, and he called her after the walk-a-thon to go to a movie. They did the whole dinner and dating thing, and then started spending weekends at the cabin. They were both in their thirties, both beyond the dream of kids, but getting married still seemed like the right thing to do. That was over twenty years ago. The first ten years were easy enough, even kind of fun. They'd go to work, have lunch, catch a movie on weekends, go on little vacations, and of course, go to the cabin. But as they got closer to retirement, things started to change little by little. Geri joined a couple of clubs, and Gus became more interested in just retreating to the cabin every chance he could. A few times he even went up there alone. Around the house, Geri started watching more T.V. and wearing her ripped sweatpants, in contrast to the tidy slacks she used to wear. Gus also found her housekeeping to be falling
behind and her dinners to be unimaginative, but when he brought it up she would remind him that he could cook and clean too.

Geri stuffed her usual six bags and a cooler for the trip, plus Rudy’s pillow and special sleeping basket. Gus packed his suitcase and shaving kit, the newspaper, and two books. He had also bought himself a fishing license for the first time in years, and he laid the regulations on top of his pile of literature. For lunch, he assembled a small pouch of crackers and cheese, half a package of baloney, and one can of 7-Up. Geri had a cooked chicken breast with sliced carrots and celery for herself and Rudy, and a jar of wheatberry juice. She liked having the newest healthy thing. Gus drove, and Rudy sat in the front seat between them. It was hot, and Gus had turned on the air conditioning. "Maybe the fruit stand will be open," said Geri as they rolled down the street.

The fruit stand was about halfway between home and the cabin, and if it was open they always stopped for cherries, fresh apple juice, and sometimes peaches. Geri liked it because the fruit came from the owner’s family farm. Gus liked it because the owner wore shorts and halter tops. He usually chatted with her while she weighed the fruit, and Geri would stand there and interrupt to talk about Rudy while she cradled him in her arms.

"Maybe," said Gus.

"Oh darn!" Geri exclaimed. "I forgot my recipe for cherry pie. I told them
last time I'd bring it. "She paused for a moment. "You don't even eat that
anymore, do you?" she asked.

"Mm hmm," said Gus.

"What? I didn't hear you."

"That's right. I no longer eat your cherry pie," said Gus, looking out the
window and away from Geri.

"I don't know why," said Geri, clicking on the radio. A call-in talk show
was on. "That's such a good recipe. Of course, I substitute raw sugar for the
white sugar. They say raw sugar is so much better. It just doesn't go through all
those processes that white sugar does. I wish they could invent something that
does away with sugar altogether; don't you Gus?"

"Mm hmm." He changed the station to oldies rock. He liked testing her
degree of attention like this. At home, he sometimes changed the channel while
she was watching T.V., then counted the seconds to see how long it took her to
say something. Other times, he'd open the window after she closed it, or close
the curtains after she opened them. That was always a good one to get her going,
but even that was getting old. Sometimes she'd accuse him of being petty. But,
more and more the dog took precedence, and Geri would rush to him to fuss over
him and spoil him some more.

"Of course, some people don't even use any sugar in the filling, just honey.
But I don't like it as much. It tastes a little too strong for me. And I don't find
the consistency is as good when I use honey as a sweetener. Same with coffee. I
taste too much of the honey when I put it in my coffee, that is, when I have
coffee. Do you miss having coffee?" She glanced out the window. "What! Did
you change the station? I was listening to that!" She switched it back.

"Mm hmm." Gus pushed the button, so the selector landed between two
stations.

"Why did you do that?" said Geri, and snapped it back to her station.

"I was looking for something decent!" said Gus, and jumped from one
station to the next, one, two three.

"But it was just static!"

"Really?" Gus turned off the radio.

"Oh, little Ru-Ru," cooed Geri. "Are you cold? Here, let's fix you up."

She reached into the back seat, pulled out her cardigan, and wrapped it around
the dog. Gus glanced down at him, and Rudy looked up sheepishly.

"Hey, little shit-shit," breathed Gus.

"What?" said Geri.

"Ship shape."

"What's ship shape?"

"Life."

"You don't make any sense." Geri looked out the window and commented
on the buildings and cars they were passing. "There's the fruit stand!" she
suddenly cried out. "Oh no! It's closed!"

"Them's the breaks," said Gus. They drove by, and in the side mirror he thought he glimpsed a pair of freckled legs in cut-offs, piling crates in back of the stand.

"I like their apples so much," said Geri. "Especially for pie. But, of course, you don't eat my pie anyways. Why is that Gus? Why?" She looked out the window, waiting for his answer.

"Just lost my taste," said Gus.

"You eat pie when we go out."

"Mm hmm."

"Oh, isn't he awful?" she said to Rudy. "Isn't Daddy awful?" The dog looked at her, then at Gus. Gus winked at him.

The cabin had its usual, faintly musty smell. Geri went inside with Rudy.

"Gus, I need the cooler," she said. "It's too heavy for me to carry. And bring the dog biscuits too." Gus set them on the counter, and Geri busied herself with Rudy's food. Gus went back outside for the remaining luggage.

Gus sliced some baloney into the pan and threw a couple of eggs over it. Geri ate her half of the chicken breast with some bread and butter, and the other half went to Rudy. After dinner, she took Rudy into the bathroom to wash him while Gus settled down to read the paper. He could hear her back there, cooing and baby-babbling. He rustled to the classifieds, but the noise wasn't enough to
drown out her chirping. "The little shit-shits," he whispered. He put down the paper, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

The first time he and Geri came up here, she kept repeating "Lovely!" She paddled the canoe, she fished, she walked in the woods. It seemed as though she couldn't learn enough. "Gus, what kind of tree is that?"

"Aspen."

"Gus, what's that bird call?"

"That's a chickadee."

"Oh, how wonderful. Gus, what's that animal?"

"Where?" he asked, peering upwards in the direction of her pointing finger.

"Up there, in the tree."

"Oh that? A squirrel."

"How cute!"

"Don't you know what a squirrel is?" he asked.

"Of course I do, but I couldn't see anything. All I could see were some branches moving."

She cooked nice meals, and little by little she replaced the old cabin furnishings with newer ones. Then, about a year before they retired, Geri stopped going outside, unless it was to take Rudy for a walk. Gus didn't even notice right away, until one day, sitting on the porch and thinking of taking the canoe out to
go fishing, he realized that they hadn't done anything like that together for months.

"Hey Ger," he said, coming inside.

"What?" She was sitting on the couch, leafing through a catalog.

"Let's go fishing."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

"No." She glanced up from her catalog and gave a half smile. "Maybe tomorrow."

"What's wrong with now?"

"I'm just more comfortable in here," she said.

"But it's a nice evening."

"I'm sorry Gus, but I'm just more comfortable in here. Besides, I don't like the bugs."

"Bugs?" He shook his head and went outside. There were no bugs. He jingled the coins in his pocket, then sat down and watched the darkening dusk. Later, she said, "I've seen the nature around here. It's pretty to look at, but there isn't much to do in it." Her lack of interest in the outdoors was contagious, and Gus found himself opting for the easy chair, the lamp, the paper, a book. Sitting on the porch and looking was as far as he would motivate himself.
Geri’s tippy-tap footsteps, followed by Rudy’s clicking paws, brought Gus upright. Geri and Rudy sat down on the couch, and Geri spread out her manicure kit and started painting her nails a sparkly pink. Rudy snoozed next to her. Gus started on one of his books, and occasionally he would glance over at his wife and then their dog. Out here, he always tried to cultivate the rebellious side of Rudy. He would take him outside, sometimes at Geri’s request, and try to get him to run. "Come on big fella," he’d coax, and finally the dog would jump off the deck. "Good boy!" he’d call. "Come on, let’s go play!" Gus would start running, slowly, all the while calling to Rudy and clapping his hands. Finally, Rudy would follow him, his ears flapping up and down, and Gus would think that this time he would finally do it. This time, he would get past the deck, and then they’d be off and running. "Come on!" he’d call, and the dog would come charging around the deck. But then he’d reach the side steps, and almost in a panic, would veer up them and sit in front of the door, waiting for Geri. "Sissy," Gus would quietly say, and go off for a walk on his own. When he came back, the dog would already be inside, and then bark at Gus when he came in the door. "Shut up," Gus would say in response to the shrill "arf arfs."

"Don’t talk to Ru-Ru that way!" Geri would admonish.

The next night, Gus pulled out the fishing regulations. He wondered if anything had changed since he last went fishing, whenever that was. Geri had just
rolled her hair in curlers, and she got up with a sigh to do the dishes. Gus shifted his feet to let her pass. He leafed through the regulations. It would be nice to go out the next day, before dinner. That way it would still be light, and if he caught anything he could fry it up and eat it right away. Rudy stretched and hopped off the couch to follow Geri. Gus stuck out his foot to stop him, but he easily jumped over the obstacle. Gus watched the little dog scurry into the kitchen.

"And I'll take you," he thought as he looked at Rudy. "Time to get you away from all this fussing, all this 'Ru-Ru this' and 'Ru-Ru that' business."

"Gus!" called Geri. "I still have to take Rudy out for his walk."

"Hmm." He went back to reading the fishing regulations.

Geri continued washing and stacking, and a few moments later she called out again. "Gus, Rudy still needs to go outside."

"Hmm." He kept reading.

"Gus, are you going to take Rudy outside?" Geri called.

"I thought you were."

"You know I'm scared of the bears. Gus, take him outside. He needs to go out." Some years ago, a bear had wandered through their property. Ever since then, it was Gus's job to take Rudy out after dark.

"In a minute." Gus turned to the centerfold, which displayed colored pictures of the regional fishes.

"Gus," said Geri, "take Rudy outside. He needs to go out."
"Okay, I'm going," said Gus, throwing down the regulations and getting up.

"Come here dog," he called.

"Take a light," said Geri. "Watch him. Don't let the bears get him." The dog jingled across the room to Gus, knowing that Mama never took him out at night. Gus opened the door and swept the yard with the beam of his flashlight, then headed out the door.

The delicate splish-splish of the lakewater against the rocks was peaceful, and Gus switched off the light and walked toward the beach. Rudy lagged behind, sniffing the ground. Gus let him do as he pleased and stepped onto the slightly rocking dock. The open surface of the water was lighter than the lawn, and the moon reflected off the ripples. Across the lake, someone had lit a bonfire, but all the other houses were dark and quiet. He missed being out on this water, just like he missed being out in the woods, smelling the damp soil and decaying tree matter. He looked up at the moon, so prominent out here. It was too easy to while away the hours inside, to forget the comfort of fresh air, the sounds of clattering branches and things rustling in the grass. He inhaled deeply.

Behind him, the door opened.

"Gus!" called Geri. "Where's Rudy?"

"He's here," said Gus, turning around.

"Where? Why don't you have your light on? Rudy!"

Gus heard the jingle of the dog's tags as he scampered across the dark
lawn and onto the deck. "Oh, little boy, little boy!" said Geri. "Come inside before the bear gets you!" She closed the door and Gus turned back to the open water. Fresh trout for dinner. He knelt down to dip his hand in the water. It was cold, and when he held his wet hand up to his nose he could smell aquatic plants and fish. He laid down on his stomach and held his face just inches from the black, glistening surface. He let the tip of his nose touch, then his forehead, and then his whole face. He could feel the cold creeping up to his ears and the chilled blood running down the back of his neck. When he was almost out of air, he lifted his head and rolled onto his back. Driplets of cold water flowed off his face and he looked at the stars. The Dipper, Cassiopeia, Orion’s Belt. His familiar guides. Year after year they hung there, faithfully, always the same.

The dock undulated gently. A chill went through Gus, down from his head. He got up and went to the house. Midway he stopped. He marvelled at the yellow living room light, how friendly it looked. How easy and simple.

Geri had to go to the small nearby town the next morning for groceries and errands. She left Rudy with Gus. "Make sure he goes outside," she said. "He has to go outside every so often."

"I know," said Gus. He continued reading his book while he waited for her to leave.

"Mommy will be back soon," she said to the dog. Rudy squeaked and ran to the door after she closed it.
"Hey dog," said Gus, "she's gone." The dog whimpered and sank onto the braided mat. Gus put down his book and dropped onto all fours. "I'm gonna get you!" he said, slowly approaching the dog. "Better run, cause I'm gonna get you!" The dog whined and squeezed himself closer to the door. Gus continued, stalking like a panther. "Little cross-eyes, you haven't got a chance!" Just before he reached the trembling white bundle, Gus leaped up. Rudy barked sharply and ran to his basket behind the magazine holder. "Come on!" said Gus, "let's go outside and play!" He opened the door and the dog came running. He followed Gus off the deck and to the shed.

"Hey," said Gus, turning to the dog, "let's go fishing!" The dog looked up at him, then looked back at the cabin. "Your mama's not home," said Gus. The dog whined a little, then turned and ran to the house. He scampered up the steps and sat in front of the door. "I'll make a dog out of you yet!" called Gus, and entered the shed.

Cobwebs criss-crossed in front of the fly-spotted window, and he could smell the musty odor of mice. The red wood-and-canvas canoe was exactly where he had left it after the last time he used it, the paddles and life jacket carelessly tossed inside. He propped the extra paddle in the corner and dragged the canoe into the sunlight and down to the beach. He used the bailing sponge to wipe off the dust. He returned to the shed for his fishing gear. From the box on the shelf he selected a few lures. He had to start somewhere.
When Geri came home, Gus was back inside reading. "Hi," she said. "Gus, I need help unloading the groceries." Rudy squealed, uttered high-pitched barks, wagged his tail and jumped up and down. "Rudy!" she exclaimed. "Did you go tinkle?" Rudy's excitement mounted, and his whole back half wagged along with his stumpy tail. "Did he tinkle?" she asked Gus.

"I don't know," he said.

"Did you go tinkle?" she asked the dog one more time. The dog looked confused and ran toward the door. "What did you do while I was gone?" she asked Gus.

"I got the canoe out."

"The canoe? Why?"

"I'm going to go fishing."

"Fishing! Why do you want to go fishing?"

"To catch a fish."

"You won't catch any fish," she said, and picked up the dog's bowl. "My poor baby's hungry!" she said to Rudy.

Gus went out to get the groceries. As he was coming back, he saw Geri walking with Rudy. Every time he scampered ahead a few steps, she would call to him, "Rudy, come back! Stay by Mommy!" The dog would return, his short legs pumping to cover ground. Gus felt sorry for him.

He went inside and stashed the bread in the cupboard and the milk in the
fridge. He would take Rudy fishing. The dog needed a little dirt under his nails, a little slime in his fur. He pictured them fishing the lake, dusk settling over the land, a slight mist rising from the water as night cooled the air. The sky would be that darkening blue and delicate purple, and Venus would shine brightly. Gus tore open a bag of chips and leaned against the counter to eat some.

Geri and Rudy entered the house. "Oh, Gus," said Geri, "I tried to wash the windshield while I was driving home, but the car was out of fluid. You need to put some more in."

"Mm hmm."

"Why are you eating those chips? It's almost dinner time."

"They're good."

"Well, they're for lunch. Have some crackers instead."

"I like the chips."

"I told you, they're for lunch!"

"Good." He continued to eat them while Geri scurried about the kitchen and tidied up. When he was through eating, he rolled up the open end of the bag and put it in the cupboard. "I think I'll take Rudy fishing," he said.

"What? When?" asked Geri, turning around.

"Whenever I go."

"You can't!"

"Why not?"
"He's not used to it."

"He'll do fine."

"No! I absolutely forbid it."

"Whatever," said Gus, and went out on the deck. The water below was velvety flat, and he could tell that the evening would be warm. Rudy had followed him, perhaps thinking that it was already time for his evening walk.

"Rudy!" called Geri, "come in here!" Rudy ran inside, and both he and Geri went into the bathroom. Gus shook his head.

A little later, before dinner, they were all three in the living room. Geri was sitting on one end of the couch, reading a magazine and fiddling with her hair. Rudy was next to her, half asleep with his head on her lap, and Gus was in his chair with the paper. He lowered it and looked at them. "Does Rudy need to go out?" he asked.

"Now?" asked Geri.

"Yeah."

"I don't know." She turned to the dog. "Do you need to go outside little boy?" Rudy wagged his tail.

"Come on," said Gus, and folded the paper. "Let's go."

The dog lifted his head lazily, then let it fall back on Geri's lap.

"Go with Daddy," she coaxed. "You need to go outside and tinkle." She patted the dog. "Thank you, Gus."
"Come here," said Gus, pulling on his boots. The dog jumped from the couch and ran to Gus, then looked back at Geri.

"Go with Daddy," she encouraged.

Gus opened the door and they went outside. "I finally got you, you little rascal!" he said, bending down and affectionately scratching Rudy behind the ears. "Good boy," he said. "You and me, we're a team."

The dog walked with him to the pine tree, which was as far as Geri ever took him, then stopped and looked back at the house. "Come on now," said Gus, "don't wimp out on me!" He picked up the dog and carried him to the canoe, then set him down on the wicker seat in the bow. In one smooth movement, he himself stepped into the canoe with his right leg and pushed off from shore with the left one. He settled into a kneeling position and started paddling toward the middle of the lake. He was out of practice, and progress was slow at first. "Hey dog," he said, "what do you say?" The sun was getting ready to set, and the tops of the trees were outlined against blue and orange clouds.

Rudy stood unsteadily on his seat and whimpered. He looked back at Gus. "Poor thing," said Gus. "It's got you all confused." The dog dug his claws into the woven cane and started a steady whining. "We're fine!" said Gus. Rudy looked at him, then at the cabin. Gus kept paddling. They were some 100 feet or more from the shore. "We'll go back," he said, "but first, we've gotta catch us a nice big fish for dinner. I'll even let you have the tail. Best potato chip in the world!"
Behind them, Gus heard the cabin door open. The dog let out a shrill bark.

"Gus! My God!" he heard Geri scream. The dog started barking in a feverish pitch.

"Quiet!" commanded Gus, but Rudy paid him no heed.

"Come back here!" called Geri, "he’s not used to that!" Rudy jumped off his seat and ran to Gus on wobbly legs that almost tripped over the canoe ribs.

"Settle down," said Gus, "show her what you’re made of." The dog stood up on his hind legs and leaned his forepaws against the gunwales. He yapped loudly and piercingly. "Quiet!" Gus commanded once again.

"Come back here!" Geri yelled from the shore.

Gus turned around. "We’re fine!" he shouted.

"Bring my baby back!"

"Nothing’s going to happen. We’re just going fishing for a short while."

"Come back!" Geri shrieked. She started for the water and waded in up to her knees, but the cold drove her back. "Rudy!" she cried. "Don’t worry! Mommy’s right here! Gus! Bring him back!" The dog yapped continuously.

With his hind legs he was furiously scratching at the inside of the canoe, trying to hoist himself up and over the edge.

"Settle down," said Gus. "We’ll be back before she knows it."

"You can’t do this!" she cried, this time from the end of the dock. The dog barked and scrambled. Gus laid down his paddle and reached for Rudy.
"Come here doggie," he said, "just have a seat and relax." He wanted to bring the dog closer and have him sit by his knees. He reached for the dog's middle. Rudy was watching Geri and barking, and when Gus put his right hand under his ribcage, he turned around and snapped at it. A trickle of blood snuck from the base of Gus's thumb. "You little cretin!" Gus snarled. He shook his hand in an effort to get rid of the pain. Rudy kept scrambling and barking and whining. "Here," said Gus, "you wanna join your mama? Here, go join her." He put his hand under the dog's hind haunches and scooped him overboard.

"What are you doing?" Geri cried hysterically.

Rudy splashed and went under for a moment, then resurfaced with a head of matted hair. He was paddling crazily, going in circles, not knowing if he should obey the screaming figure on the dock or seek redemption in the canoe. The hair on his back and legs floated around him like a silvery seaweed. "Go swim to your mama," said Gus. "Look, she's over there." The dog continued to swim in circles.

"Take him in!" screamed Geri. "It's too far for him!" She was running back and forth on the dock. The dog continued his circles.

"There's your mama," said Gus. "Go swim to her." The dog wheezed and coughed. Gus looked up at Geri, who was now some 150 feet away. Despite the dusk and the distance, he could still see her face, sense the confusion in her eyes. He looked down at the dog. His head was low in the water. "Quit pretending," scoffed Gus.
"Bring back my dog or I'm calling the police!" yelled Geri.

"Go swim to your mama." The dog came closer to the canoe. Gus could hear his nails scratching at the curved side. He looked up and called to Geri.

"He's not going your way! He wants to stay with me!"

"Bring him back! He can't swim! It's too far!"

Gus kept looking at Geri and the cabin behind her. She was dressed in some loose pink terrycloth dress. The color shone against the green lawn, the dark woods, the golden logs of the cabin. She was running back and forth, from the end of the dock to the shore, knee-deep into the water, back to the end of the dock. She was calling for her baby, her little boy, her Ru-Ru. "Mommy's right here!" she cried. Rudy was lapping water as he swam in circles, as he scratched against the side of the canoe. His snout was halfway under water.

"Good boy," said Gus. "You're a good swimmer." He watched the dog paddling through the darkening water. A slight mist began to rise as the evening air cooled.

"Bring back my baby!" he heard Geri shriek in the distance.

"He's doing fine," Gus muttered to himself. He held his hand over Rudy's head and snapped his fingers. The dog tried to yap, then slowly started swimming toward Geri's voice on the shore. Gus picked up his paddle and pushed the canoe forward two strokes, heading toward the beach. Now the dog was slightly behind him, swimming to catch up. Gus stopped and cast his line. The filament
landed on the water, then sank. Gus turned around to watch the dog. "Good boy!" he said, when the animal caught up. "Come on, once more!" He paddled ahead two more strokes. Rudy's little white head followed.

"How can you do this?" Geri begged. Once more, she ran knee-deep into the water. Then she plunged, full body. She screeched.

"Shut up," Gus said under his breath, and watched her turn back, the cold gripping at her vitals. He reeled in and cast again. "Hey dog," he said over this shoulder, and paddled ahead another two strokes. The dog coughed. Gus watched the wake of the fishing line as it lightly trailed by the side of the canoe. He turned the other way to look for Rudy. He could see him, bobbing up and down. "Good boy!" he said. Rudy sputtered, but he kept coming. Gus opened his tackle box and sorted through the lures.

Next to him, Rudy gasped. "Good boy," said Gus absently, still rummaging among the lures and lead sinkers. Then he heard gulping. Gus started and looked down. The little white head had sunk. It glowed dimly under the water. The ears floated upwards like two stunted wings. "Rudy!" he called, and reached deep to grab them. He pulled the limp creature into the boat. On shore, Geri was screaming. "Hey, little fellow," he said. "Come on. Game's over. We'll go back now." He shook the little dog, but it remained limp. "Cough it up and let's get going," said Gus, and shook Rudy some more. The dog's eyes were rolled up and only halfway open. Gus could feel a heat spreading from his chest to the tip
of his tongue. His heart pounded and made his hands shake. "Cough it up," he whispered. He held the dog upside down and shook him. A pink tongue rolled out of its mouth and hung there. Gus pressed his ear to the dog's chest. It was silent.

He looked up. Geri was still on the beach, her hands pressed against her ears. Gus's mouth dropped open when he saw her. He wanted to say something to her, tell her she had spoiled the dog, or admit that it was all his fault, or suggest that they could always get another dog, but his mouth just hung there, open and empty, and he held Rudy's dripping body and stared. Geri turned and ran into the cabin. She slammed the door, and he could see her yanking the curtains across the windows. Around him, the shore was darkening to a jagged silhouette against the deep blue and gentle mauve sky. He laid the dog at his knees and tried to pump the water out of his chest, but Rudy only stayed limp and drenched. "I'm sorry," said Gus. "I let you get away little fella. I'm sorry." He took off his sweatshirt and wrapped it around the dog, leaving its head exposed. There was always that chance, maybe, that one last chance. Gus reeled in his line. Slowly he paddled back to shore.

Everything seemed ugly and colorless. Even the peaceful blup-blup of his paddle breaking the flat surface of the water seemed transformed into a hiss. He pulled the canoe onto the beach and carefully picked up the dog. He thought he felt a front leg twitch, but it was only the lifeless limb shifting when he lifted the
dead animal. "I'm so sorry, little fella," he said again, and slowly walked up to the house.

He stood at the front door for a moment, not knowing how to enter. He felt like he should knock, but then Geri opened it. She looked at them both. Her eyes were red. He thought she might start screaming, but all she said was "Go away. Go away and stay away. You can't come into my house anymore." She took the bundle out of Gus's arms, then quietly closed the door and clicked the deadbolt in place.

Gus hung his head. He sat down on the deck stairs and looked out toward the lake. Inside, he could hear Geri scuffling around in her slippers and rattling papers. He wanted to feel sorry for her, but instead he only felt an irritation with her sounds mounting within him. She coughed. The thought that she might be getting sick from jumping in the water suddenly delighted him. Gus sprang up. He knocked on the door, then pounded. "Let me in!" he yelled. "It was an accident!"

"Get out!" Geri called back.

"I'm telling you, it was an accident." It was quiet inside, then he heard footsteps, and then the lights went out. "Open up!" he demanded, but no one answered. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled into the corner of the door and the jamb. "He was my dog too, you know!" He stopped for breath. "I didn't want him to die either." But no one answered. Gus bit his lower lip.
He jiggled the doorknob, and then he kicked the door. The window rattled.

"Open up!" he demanded one more time, then slammed his fist against the wooden window frame. It splintered, and glass shattered into the house. Gus withdrew, momentarily ashamed of his behavior. He examined the fleshy side of his hand for cuts, but there was nothing. He stepped back up to the door and shouted into the dark house. "This is my cabin!" No one answered. "Mine! You hear me?" Still, no answer. "You can stay in there tonight, but I'll be back tomorrow morning. Do you hear?" Nothing.

Slowly, he turned and walked down to the dock. The grass was wet with evening dew. He looked back at the cabin once more. It was dark, and the curtains hung still. It seemed far away. He grabbed a paddle and shoved off. The bow cut the water, and around him were the concentrically widening rings, here and there, where a fish had broken the surface to snatch a fly.